Increasing Participation in Democratic Institutions Through Decentralization: Empowering Women and Scheduled Castes and Tribes Through Panchayat Raj in Rural India

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In the past decade good governance and decentralization have become two of the main development pillars, relied on by both international development agencies and the authorities in developing countries in the quest for successful development. In India steps have been taken to increase the participation of the weaker sections of society in new arrangements for decentralized local decision-making through rules of reservation. This article discloses the potential and the pitfalls of increasing participation through decentralization by analyzing the Indian Panchayat Raj system. It is shown how technocratic regulations are not sufficient to ensure genuine empowerment for all in democratic decision-making. The question whether decentralization can be justified as one of the main means to development remains to be resolved.

Introduction

One of the most recent trends in the field of democratic development is increasing local participation in decision-making through decentralization. Development practitioners, scientists, and governments have focused on bringing people in the developing countries into the centre of development by making them actors in the development process through increased participation. Whether the aim of development is economic, social, or both, decentralization has become a major tool especially within the framework of 'good governance'. Increasing democratic participation in local decision-making through decentralization is supposed to enhance transparency, accountability and the effectiveness of development, and at the same time

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bring power to the people. In this sense participation and decentralization have become new faces of development pursued by both developing states and other organizations.

One of the main critiques of the modernistic development discourse is the lack of recognition of the diversity in and between the developing countries, the neglect of context. This article examines whether the growing awareness of context has reached the decentralization debate. Analysis is conducted into the potentials and pitfalls of the strategy of increasing participation through decentralization. After an overview discussion of decentralization and good governance, a case study from rural India is presented in order to assess whether decentralization can catalyze increased democratic participation for all and help empower the weaker sections of society to become agents of their own development.

India was chosen as a case since the Indian state in theory has initiated very decentralized arrangements that take account of several contextual factors, through rules of reservation for the weaker sections of society, and because decentralization is implemented through the traditional Panchayat Raj institutions. The case is inspired by Crook and Manor’s extensive work on decentralization including India. However, in order to assess the impact on the weaker sections of society more qualitative methods have been used. Although the findings of just one case study cannot justify a general conclusion on decentralization everywhere, it can serve to illustrate the complexity of decentralization and some of the problems and possibilities of decentralization in a specific context. The article will show that participation for all through decentralization can only be achieved through genuine devolution of power in a context-specific set of arrangements.

**Governance, Decentralization and Participation**

In the beginning of the 1990s most development analysts and practitioners faced with the poverty and disempowerment that accompanied the modernistic development discourse turned away from an emphasis on macro-economic growth as the only means to successful development. The focus shifted to a more people-centred development with emphasis laid upon the involvement of people in their own development. Increased involvement means more democracy. An increase of power entails a change in the governmental structure of society and an increase in the role of civil society in development. Consequently, the way people are governed and the way they participate in the governance of their own life and society has become the new cardinal point of development.
As McCarney et al. state, 'governance offers a new way of thinking about development'. Governance, in theory, goes beyond government and includes some of the less formal power structures that affect the lives of ordinary people. It turns our attention to the differences of power structures, how they exercise influence and how they are influenced by the subjects of development.

This leads on to the role of civil society in good governance. How is political performance in civil society to be improved? People are not only ruled by the state and the formal power structures in civil society, for they are also heavily influenced by informal power structures such as family networks and the local elite. Thus it is not possible to promote good governance in the same way good government is promoted. While governance can be influenced in the interface between civil society and the state, the 'buzzwords' now clinging to the definition of good governance, like accountability, transparency, and legitimacy, are most readily attached to the state. The promotion of an accountable and transparent civil society is not so easy and may even be impossible. What is possible however, is to optimize the state so that it encourages a closer interaction with civil society. The state can promote strong governance by letting citizens into the decision-making process. It can try to upgrade governance by supporting citizens, non-governmental organizations and community groups by strengthening their power through involvement in decision-making. Through such empowerment governance can help the citizens become agents of their own development. This involves increased participation in decision-making, which can be achieved through the rebirth of one of the 'new' faces of development, namely decentralization.

Decentralization is seen by both international development agencies (IDAs) and governments of developing countries as a means of achieving increased participation and good governance. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Expert Group on Aid Evaluation describes decentralization as a means of promoting participatory development and good governance. As stated in its 'Synthesis Report': 'Decentralization, it is believed, might promote efficiency, equity and political participation'. The UNDP also sees decentralization as a way of enabling people 'to participate more directly in governance processes and can help empower people previously excluded from decision-making'.

This positive notion of decentralization, however, does not always translate into expectations of increased participation for all. Decentralization refers to an economic and/or political distribution of power
downwards. It is therefore not enough to focus merely on technical and administrative issues. Distribution of resources, political or economic, will never be apolitical. In every country there will exist diversity in relation to wealth, gender, caste/class, ethnicity, and so on that will influence power structures and the actors’ room for manoeuvre. Any transfer of the points of power to lower levels will have political consequences for civil society. As Conyers says, ‘Any decentralization of the responsibility for planning and/or implementation alters the “balance of power” in the sense that it changes the extent to which particular individuals, groups or organizations influence both what is planned and what actually happens – and therefore the extent to which they benefit from “development”.’

When decentralization is treated only as a means and not as an end in itself, important societal consequences are bound to be overlooked. Decentralization is often seen as a policy tool used to improve the provision and maintenance of public services in developing states. The problem is when decentralization is seen as an instrument whose main task is to obtain economic growth independent of the political or social context. An administrative instrument is used to reach what in reality is a political goal, since development is invariably political. As Leftwich argues, ‘for at any point in any development sequence what is crucially at issue is how resources are to be used and distributed in new ways and the inevitable disputes arising from calculations about who will win and who will lose as a result’. And so if the capability of the state is central to providing a viable institutional framework for development, and if decentralization is the means to achieve a greater state capability, then decentralization must be political. But, decentralization is not the same as development; it is a means through which it is possible to increase the opportunities of development.

There are no universal solutions to participatory-friendly decentralization. To take participation seriously means abandoning the structural models of modernization. Because of their structural determinism they exclude on a priori grounds the ways social actors interact and negotiate the outcomes of various developing processes and reduce the actors to products of the current structure. It is important to recognize that every actor is capable and knowledgeable and has a certain room for manoeuvre, and that it is through this room for manoeuvre that the actor will be able to participate. The duality is in focus. Structures do influence the behaviour of actors. The changes in structure are channelled through the life-worlds of individuals or affected groups and eventually produce new consequences. The results are found within the room for manoeuvre created by the interactions amongst the affected actors.
Increased democratic participation through decentralization involves a shift in power among the different actors. An increase in power of the participants through a change in structure cannot, however, only be facilitated by the state, but is a mixture of formal rules and regulations and informal cultural bonds. These formal rules and informal bonds consist of discourses, institutions, actors, and a flow of events. Power is socially constructed through the norms, linguistics, and habits that are reproduced every day. However, seen in a development context, power is also very dependent upon resources and can be increased as actors expand their pool of resources. Being able to use the formal power that has been provided depends on how much resources an actor can utilize. More specifically, it takes time, energy, and, at times, informal power such as status, networks, or the ‘right’ gender to be able to participate and to utilize formal power. In other words it usually takes some form of empowerment to be able to participate.

Thus the focus of our analysis of how to increase levels of participation through decentralization should be the potential increase in actors' room for manoeuvre. The level of potential participation is, thus, measurable in terms of the possibilities offered by the change in structure created by different actors. As the case study below will show, decentralization without proper recognition of the specific sociological setting of civil-society is not enough if the aim is to achieve development through the empowerment of the weaker sections of society, which in India includes women and the Scheduled Castes and Tribes.

The Indian Context

India is one of the developing countries that has chosen to involve its citizens more actively in their own development through increased decentralization. It is currently the world’s second most populous country with an estimated one billion people. It is on all fronts a mixed population with six different religions and more than 13 different languages. The diversity underscores the enormous challenge of expanding democracy through decentralization.

In spite of the economic advances India has made since independence, the country is still one of the poorest in the world not only in economic terms but also socially. Approximately 410 million people live in a state of absolute poverty. The poverty is unequally distributed among the different groups of society and is very dependent on the citizens' social status and geographical location. Among the least favoured sections of Indian society are women and the Scheduled Castes and Tribes.
India is infamous for the caste system in practice among the 82 per cent of the population that are Hindus. There are four main caste categories (varnas) namely Brahmns, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Sudra. In addition, there is however, a fifth category that entails the people not included in any of the above, but who are still Hindus. These are the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes. The caste divide is especially prominent in the rural areas, where the members of the dominant castes control the majority of resources and are responsible for organizing local festivals and religious activities, as well as taking judicial decisions. Overall, the Scheduled Castes and Tribes are generally the lowest ranking groups. For centuries they have been suppressed by the higher castes, and generally have the lowest incomes and the worst health conditions. The problem is also one of low self-esteem. The disadvantaged castes are aware of their low status, as are the privileged castes, and these attitudes seem to be unbreakable as your birth determines your caste for life. These circumstances make empowerment through decentralization especially challenging.

Women are even more disadvantaged in India than Scheduled Castes and Tribes. For the majority of Indian families the parents of a girl will have to pay a considerable dowry when their daughter is married. Dowry, a gift given to the groom and his parents, is often the equivalent of several years of income. It is therefore rather costly to raise girls, while boys on the other hand can be seen as an investment and a secure pension. Consequently, the male members of the family receive the most education, the best nutrition and health care. The boys are better equipped for survival. As a consequence, the mortality rate of females exceed those of males up to the late twenties, which is highly irregular when compared to most other countries outside South Asia. The effect shows up in the male/female ratio: in 1991 for example there were 927 women per 1000 men in India. There seems to be convergence in this ratio among the different castes and, to a certain degree among the major religious groups, which very clearly indicates that the poor conditions of women are a general social construction. Women probably live under the poorest conditions, in all most disadvantaged groups in Indian society, and the feature is most noticeable in the rural areas.

From the above it could be argued that all these different parts of society must be brought to participate in the decision-making processes, if democracy is to offer something for everyone. Empowerment of the weaker sections of society is needed in order to lessen the inequalities. In a country where social biases are so prominent, it is important to have a decision-making structure that promotes increased participation by the weak.
Panchayat Raj

India is the world’s largest democracy, and it has a long tradition of
democratic rule compared to most other developing countries. It is a
parliamentary, multi-party and federal state.

Since independence in 1947, there have been several attempts to
increase local participation through decentralization, every time it has been
through the use of the traditional Panchayats. Panchayat means assembly of
five and is the name of the traditional self-governing village councils, which
wielded judicial and police powers in the local village in pre-colonial times.
They were elevated to sacred positions through religious beliefs and
customs, from which their authority emanated. In the past, however, they
were rarely representative of the village as a whole, but were usually
dominated by male Brahmans or other upper castes. The Scheduled Castes
and Tribes generally had no say in these councils.

In 1992 the National Parliament (Lok Sabha) followed the global trend
of decentralization and passed the 73rd Amendment, reinstating the
Panchayats in rural India. Power was to be placed in the hands of the people.
In theory, the amendment takes into consideration some of the main aspects
discussed above, since it is relatively context-specific. It is based on the
traditional structure of Panchayats and thus transfers power to an institution
that, in theory, is traditionally respected and holds the required legitimacy
amongst the local population. Secondly, it acknowledges the caste and
gender bias in the country and has invoked a paragraph which proclaims
that one third of the seats throughout the structure should be reserved for
women and that a number of seats should be reserved for Scheduled Castes
and Tribes.20

The structure has three tiers: Grama Panchayat (one for every five to ten
villages), Taluk Panchayat (sub-regional level, five to 15 Grama
Panchayats) and Zilla Panchayat (district level). Members are elected for
each level. There is, however, also a fourth tier: Grama Sabha (village
meeting), which is held twice a year where the villagers can confront the
local Panchayat members and proclaim their satisfaction or dissatisfaction
with the work of the Panchayat and bring forward suggestions and ideas.

The field research was conducted in the state of Karnataka which was
the first state to ratify the new amendment to the constitution with the
Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act of 1993. This was no coincidence, since the
State of Karnataka has one of the most impressive traditions of
decentralization in India. Since 1902 there have been several attempts by
the state government to implement decentralization through the Panchayats.
The latest and most bold example was from 1987–92. The advantage of this prior experience with decentralization is that the people of rural Karnataka were used to this self-governing system when the amendment was introduced. The weaker sections of society were already involved in the decision-making, due to reservation. A new breed of experienced local politicians was already in place since 1993. Of all the states in India, Karnataka should therefore have the best qualifications and preconditions for a successful decentralization six years after the passing of the 73rd Amendment.

The key question then is whether the 73rd amendment can or has provided a decentralized set-up that actually promotes equal participation of all groups in society in local decision-making.

The following data collection took place in the rural Kolar district in the State of Karnataka in southern India. Six main villages were selected of four different sizes and geographical locations. A total of 130 villagers were involved in the survey through focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews, of which approximately 17 per cent were women (the researcher being male made interviewing rural Indian women complicated). 21 Panchayat members were interviewed of which 12 were women. A number of academics, bureaucrats, and personnel from non-governmental organizations also participated in the survey. The methods used were semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, social mapping, and participant observation.

**Decentralization in Practice**

Generally the experiences from India have been very good compared to other developing countries. The overall satisfaction with the system and the participatory level has been very impressive, but it seems to have had little effect on the weaker sections of society – women and Scheduled Castes and Tribes – as was found through research in Karnataka.

**Gender and Participation**

Several indications point to a divide in the responsibility between the work and life of men and women in rural Karnataka. The majority of women’s life-world forms around the private sphere while the majority of men’s life-world forms around the public sphere.

One of the women encountered was a 38 year old woman from a higher caste (Vaishya). She came to the village of Nangli 16 years earlier when she was married to her husband. Before she moved to Nangli she finished high
school in the state capital of Bangalore. Now she primarily looks after the house. She is generally very pleased with the Grama Panchayat system, although she has never attended a Grama Sabha or taken any active part in the political process. According to her, the problem is that if she starts to participate more actively she will be breaking the tradition in the village, and the other villagers will look at her with disrespect. In the beginning she found it very difficult to cope with these bonds, being used to the more liberated lifestyle of Bangalore. But the requirement to respect her husband and her family-in-law, so they do not lose face, is overriding.

Another woman encountered was a 20 year old Muslim. She was married two years earlier, which was also when she was brought to her new home. Ever since that day she has never left her home. She has never heard about the Panchayats, and she does not know if her husband attends any such meetings. She claims to be very bored with her life and looks very much forward to becoming a mother so that she will have a child to attend to.

The two stories above describe the lives and the constraints on female mobility of two of the women interviewed. These constraints were very outspoken among the women encountered in the research. Most respondents in the villages were of the opinion that Panchayat work was primarily men’s work. During focus group discussions separately with both men and women there seemed to be a consensus when it came to defining male and female responsibilities. The domestic work was the responsibility of the women, while the public, and thus political, sphere was the men’s prerogative. Women who did not follow this tradition were seen as being ‘loose’.

These findings were also reflected in the statistics. A total of 58 per cent of the women did not know the chairman of the Grama Panchayat, while the figure for men was only 12 per cent. Only one woman interviewed knew the Zilla Panchayat chairman (she was a relative of his), and only one woman interviewed knew the chief state minister. These figures clearly indicate the difference in knowledge about the political system between men and women. It illustrates how little room there is for the political sphere in the life-worlds of female villagers. What is more important is the level of active participation. Only one woman had ever attended a Grama Sabha compared to 63 three per cent of the men interviewed. Furthermore, none of the women in this research had ever held a meeting or taken part in a protest.

Women themselves were often more eager to hinder the participation of their own gender in the public sphere than men. This became clear during interviews with some of the female villagers, who explained how their mother-in-laws would scold them if they were too active outside the
household, since this could create a bad reputation. Controls on mobility are often imposed by women on their own daughters, sisters, daughters-in-law and other female relatives. In a survey conducted by the National Institute of Advanced Studies of more than 2,000 respondents, it is very clear that women reproduce the repressive social structure within which they live, to a degree, which makes them more subordinate than if it were only the men who limited their mobility.31 47 per cent of the women did not feel that they should have more decision-making power in community affairs than they already have, compared to 39 per cent of the men. And 85 per cent of the women felt that men should be treated with more respect than women, compared to only 65 per cent of the men. Thus, women are themselves promoting their own subordination and limiting their own participation in local decision-making. Women are to a large degree reproducing the social structures which keep them out of active participation.

What is important to take into account is the role of the family in rural India. According to some of the interviewed, at most Grama Sabhas one member from each household or family will attend. And the members of the family all rest assured with this person’s attendance, who in most cases would be the eldest male member. It is generally not only women who do not attend Grama Sabha, some families also find it disrespectful if a younger brother or son attends the Grama Sabha, if one of his elder relatives is already present. There is respect and comfort related to the participation of an elder relative in the village decision-making. However, young men debate and discuss issues even though they do not attend Grama Sabha, and are willing to comment on Panchayat decisions, which was never the case among the women interviewed.

The research also revealed that most women do not know what has been decided at the Grama Sabha, and their husbands hardly ever discuss the Grama Sabha issues with them, thus, excluding them from even passive participation. So, even though most people seemed content with this arranged gender bias in the public and private sphere, ignorance about what actually happens in the public sphere makes the women disadvantaged in local decision-making. It leaves them without influence and often without information about issues which are particularly relevant to their life-worlds, such as water and sanitation. Does the Panchayat system actually reproduce these conditions?

Recognizing the subordination of women in the public sphere in rural India, the government has ensured through the constitution that a third of the seats in the different Panchayats are reserved for women. There can be little doubt that reservation was needed if the number of women in the
Panchayats was not to be extremely modest. None of the women encountered in the survey were elected outside of reservation. But has this reservation worked as intended?

As one female Taluk Panchayat member stated: ‘Every time men speak ten sentences, women speak one’. The quotation gives a very clear picture of the gender balance in the Panchayats. During the field research, very active women as well as women excluded from the decision-making process were encountered. The first encounter with a female Panchayat member was in the first village visited. After the introduction with the village elders and the Grama Panchayat member, she stood up and greeted us for coming all the way from Denmark and taking an interest in their way of life. What she said was fairly simple, but the fact that she stood up in a very male-dominated meeting and spoke on her own initiative is very unusual. Presumably, this self-confidence was a result of her experience as a Grama Panchayat member. In the other meetings attended with villagers and Grama Panchayat members the picture was somewhat different: the women were situated in the back of the room and only spoke when they were directly invited to do so. In one of the meetings the men who came late even walked straight past the women and sat directly in front of them.

67 per cent of the female Grama Panchayat members interviewed said that they never talked at Grama Panchayat meetings. In one instance, a female Panchayat member told how she attended each meeting after having been instructed by her husband what to say. Another female member mentioned how she was sent for by the chairman at the end of each meeting so that she could sign the necessary papers, and then return to her domestic work. A third female member once asked for a light bulb for her street, because it had gone out. She found that they did not listen to her and she then decided to keep quiet during the next couple of meetings. She had not attended the last three to four meetings. ‘Only few women attend’, as she said, ‘they stay at home because the male members do not listen to them’. The problem also lies in the relatively little respect the male members have for the female members. Although most male members are of the opinion that reservation is a good idea, there is some reluctance towards active female participation. As one member stated: ‘I think that the reservation for women is good so they can be kept informed about what is going on’. It was obvious that the male members do not mind the female company, but genuine participation in the local decision-making is not always wanted.

Three women, however, stated that they do indeed speak out at Grama Panchayat meetings, and that the men listen to them. During one focus group discussion with some Grama Panchayat members one of the two
women present was very active, and did not seem to feel any constraint from the presence of several men. There does seem to be a connection between the level of a woman's participation and her level of education. Including one illiterate, most of the women who felt discouraged from participating actively in the Grama Panchayat debate had received an education lower than middle level school, indicating that increased education could help promote increased participation.

It was not only at the Grama Panchayat level that there was a relatively low level of active female participation. At the Taluk level there was a severe example of how the reservation rules can be twisted. A female Taluk Panchayat member, who should have been interviewed alone, eventually turned up with her brother. Even though it was explained that the interview was with her and not her brother, she claimed that her brother was more aware and that he could answer the questions much better than she could. The little information gained from her made it clear that she had almost no knowledge about what happened at the Taluk Panchayat meetings and that her brother would attend the meetings instead of her, even though she was the officially elected representative. Even at the Zilla Panchayat level, one female member claimed that the men would occasionally tell the women to keep quiet, and both members interviewed stated that the female members would be the least participatory in the debate.

At all three levels it was very common that the men would escort their wives to the meetings, and occasionally advise them on what to do. Some women expressed appreciation with the advice in an area were they had very little knowledge, and furthermore their husband's escort is often appreciated if the women have to travel to a new and distant village to get to the Panchayat office and conduct meetings with other men. However, the problem is that the women are the ones entrusted with the job by the voters and not their husbands or brothers, which does create a problem of accountability if the husband makes the decisions.

Another barrier to female participation in the Panchayats is the time constraint. Some of the female Grama Panchayat members have more than five children at different ages to attend to, and if none of them are girls they will usually have to do all the laundry, cleaning, and cooking themselves. This makes it very difficult to attend Panchayat meetings, which can take several hours, especially if they take place in another village. Most men agree to the fact that their wife is a member as long as it does not affect her domestic work too much.

The low level of active female participation in the decision-making in the Panchayat system questions the effectiveness of reservation.
Reservation brings women into the Panchayat office but cannot really be said to empower rural Indian women.

Of course the overall picture is not uniform. But the majority of female members encountered were not influencing the local politics in their Panchayats. Some argue that at least they get a sense of how the process functions in practice, and at the same time they can work as role models for other women, encouraging them to become participants in the political debate. In a few cases this might be the case, but the non-active female participants’ respect in their section of the village is often very low, limiting their chances of being role models for other women. Especially male villagers often bypass the female member of the Grama Panchayat and turn to another male member in order to get a problem solved, because the female member ‘is no good’ or ‘is incapable’. Twice villagers stated that they had to elect a female Panchayat member they did not assume to be qualified for the job, owing to the reservation rules, a situation they were very displeased with. Even though these statements to a certain degree are very male-biased, and are a reflection of the fact that a lot of male members of rural Indian society do not see any reason for women to become active political members in their village, there is also a genuine problem of finding qualified female Panchayat members. 67 per cent of the female Grama Panchayat members interviewed did not have more than five years of school education, and 25 per cent were without any education at all. By comparison, only 20 per cent of the male members interviewed were illiterate, whereas the other 80 per cent had more then seven years of school. Furthermore, women are more disadvantaged by their low level of education than men, because men are used to performing in the public sphere, while especially lower caste women have sometimes never left the house.

The only members encountered that did not speak Kannada, which was the primary language used at the Grama Panchayat meetings, were all women. It was also among the women that the knowledge about the Panchayat tasks and budget was very low, even at Taluk Panchayat level. There is, thus, a problem of capacity among the female Panchayat members, and the empowerment that these women have achieved is very marginal. They can even suffer as a consequence of being recognized as incapable of Panchayat work by the section of the village they represent. These female members explained that they do not attend the Grama Sabha, which they are supposed to as Grama Panchayat members, because they are harassed by the people for not achieving their demands for say electricity or providing them with houses and loans. What makes matters worse is that these women serve
more as bad examples than role models for other women. Many of these women were picked precisely because of their illiteracy, because they can be easily controlled in the Grama Panchayat. This fact was confirmed in some of the villages visited, where some female Panchayat members explained how one of the elders or the Grama Panchayat chairman had asked them to run for election, and that they were pleased to be a member and follow the advice of the chairman. Some of them only turned up to sign the necessary documents.

Had there not been any reservation for women, every section of the village would most likely be represented by a resourceful male member who could ensure that his section of the village was not overlooked in the development process. So, seen from the male point of view, democracy is impaired by the reservation system. However, such a scenario would presumably result in an exclusion of the weakest sections from the decision-making, including women. The problem is not the reservation itself, since reservation for women is necessary in a patriarchal society like rural India, if women are to have any influence at all. The problem is that in the current design, reservation is not empowering. This is true not only of the reservation of seats for women, but of the reservations for Scheduled Castes as well. However, as mentioned, women are generally more disadvantaged than men due to their lack of experience in the public sphere, and thus, even a higher caste woman is usually more subordinated in society than a male member of a Scheduled Caste.

The rules of rotation adds to the ineffectiveness of reservation. The geographical distribution of reserved seats changes after each election. A village which had a seat reserved for Scheduled Castes might in the next election be given a reservation for a woman instead, or a village which had a reservation for a woman might not have any reservations in the next election. The reason why this rule has been implemented is to ensure that every weak section in every village will get a chance to take part in the local decision-making at some point within a given period, and at the same time reservation must not forever exclude the sections that have no reservation (upper castes) from the decision-making process in villages with only one or two Grama Panchayat members. There are, however, two very negative consequences of this rule. First, there is the question of accountability towards the villagers. If a member knows that she/he will not get re-elected at the next election, because of a change in the reservation pattern, then there is not much to be gained by making great efforts to please the voters. There is no punishment to receive at the next election if the chances of re-election are slim anyway. Secondly, there is a problem of wasted
‘investment’. It takes time to learn and understand the Panchayat process, and the best members are undoubtedly the ones who have experience. But the rules of rotation prevent the weaker members of society from using their newly acquired skills in another election round. 95 per cent of the women elected for the 1993 Panchayat elections did not have any political experience, even though reservation for women in Panchayats has existed in Karnataka since 1987. Thus, the rules of rotation play a waiting game with the weaker sections of society, preventing the politically experienced women, and Scheduled Castes, from taking the Panchayat seats until the rotation has been going on for so long that a new round of female, or Scheduled Caste, reservation has adjourned.

The issue of accountability becomes even more striking in regard to the reservation of Panchayat chairmen. The chairman usually occupies the most important role in the Panchayats, calling and conducting the meetings and supervising the works. However, due to reservation, in one third of the election period the seat will be held by a woman and occasionally by a member from a Scheduled Caste or Tribe. As with other reservations, the intention is to empower the weaker sections of society. But in practice the chairman elected under reservation is often not the de facto acting chairman. In the village of Ramasagara, ten out of 12 villagers explained that they would approach the chairman if they had any problems. It transpired that the person they were referring to was the husband of the female chairman, as he was the de facto acting chairman. Besides being another example of hollow female empowerment in the Panchayat system, this also indicates a serious problem of accountability. The de facto chairman, who used to be an elected chairman before the last election, was not even an elected member of the Grama Panchayat. Consequently, he could not be excluded from the decision-making like other members by a ‘no-confidence vote’. Furthermore, the villagers could not show their dissatisfaction with him at the next election for not doing a proper job, since he was not an official Panchayat member. In this particular case however, the legitimacy of the villagers clearly rested with the de facto chairman and not with his wife. But in other instances, when the divide between chairman and acting chairman is not so clear, finding out who should be accountable for the implementation of Panchayat work becomes very difficult. The villagers find it difficult to identify who is actually responsible for the work of the Panchayat, let alone take appropriate action.

Even though the majority of female Panchayat members do not actively participate in the decision-making, the results achieved by women who do participate, such as improved sanitation and the introduction of
kindergartens, are often ignored because the efficiency of the Panchayats is often measured in what may be called male-oriented indicators. The villagers as well as the Panchayat members always mentioned more physical results when the achievements of the Panchayats were discussed. Houses, electricity, loans, and roads were the main focus of especially the men interviewed, and these types of issues were also the aim of the projects being implemented. A lot of the women, however, mentioned water and sanitation and kindergartens as their wants and needs from the Panchayat. With women’s very marginalized role in the public sphere such female-oriented indicators get short shrift. This has two effects, first the wishes and thoughts of women are often neglected at the meetings, excluding them from improving their living standards and second, if women do articulate their wants they will not get much credit for the achievements and might still be judged to be ineffective and incapable.

On the other hand, having female Panchayat members has had some influence on the participation of other women in local decision-making. It is gradually making men more accustomed to women in the public sphere and gradually leading to a greater acceptance of female participation. But of all sections of rural Indian society, women remain the least participatory in the local decision-making. The social structure which has been shaped over decades cannot be changed overnight.

_Caste and Participation_

In India caste has very often been used as a tool of domination and suppression. It is therefore very easy to presume that participation in local decision-making is correlated to caste and that the Scheduled Castes and Tribes have great difficulty in voicing their opinion. Research in Karnataka revealed a slightly more positive picture in the Panchayat system, although in no way can this be assumed to be representative of all of rural India. Other researchers who have examined the caste situation in the least developed states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh have found that it is highly significant in explaining the local decision-making. 23

None of the Scheduled Castes or Tribes encountered in Karnataka feel that they are in any way prevented from or discouraged to participate in the local decision-making. None of them feel that being a member of a low-ranking caste constitutes any problem in relation to the Panchayat system. There are no biases between castes in relation to voting or other political activities. Nor are there any differences in relation to knowledge about the Panchayat system. In some of the villages, men from different castes would sit and have a friendly conversation in front of a small shop, which
illustrates how calm the relationship between different castes can be. However, the villages are still very segregated in physical terms. The different caste sections live among their fellow caste members or among villagers at the same caste category. The majority of the villagers interviewed go to the elders in their own caste for advice; and inter-caste marriages are still taboo. Walking around in the villages in rural Karnataka it was always easy to distinguish between areas where low and high caste people live. There is a very clear socio-economic difference.

The economic diversity became very clear when the social map of the village of Batlahavanally was drawn. Each household was drawn, but the Reddys (upper caste) who drew the map chose to draw the households of the Reddys up to ten times larger than the Scheduled Castes households. The Scheduled Castes houses in the village were undoubtedly smaller than the high caste houses, but usually in the threshold of 1:2. The higher castes who drew the map appeared to believe they were living in disproportionately larger and presumably more important houses, illustrating the social differences between these caste categories in the village. Thus, even though members of all castes in the village were eager to express caste harmony the caste hierarchy is still very apparent.

There were two cases where caste seemed to be important, namely in relation to the representation and provision of facilities from the Grama Panchayat. In the village of Beechavanahally there was a section of Scheduled Castes who lived in the outskirts of the village. Even though there was reservation for Scheduled Castes in the Grama Panchayat the seat went to the other section of Scheduled Castes in the village. The section of Scheduled Castes, living on the outskirts without any representation, felt overlooked in the decision-making process. They felt that too many of the development schemes were being implemented in the sections of the village where the representatives lived. Being a Scheduled Caste in an immigration area made it more difficult for the section to protest against this inequality, since they had a low status both as newcomers and Scheduled Castes and were therefore not regarded as a part of the village. To be accepted as a part of a rural Indian village, a person or family has to live there for at least one generation and own a house or a piece of land, and being a Scheduled Caste makes acceptance even more difficult.

The villagers in the small hamlet Janganahally that was attached to Nangli Grama Panchayat felt that they too were overlooked in relation to the development schemes. Besides having the disadvantage of being a very small village compared to the 15 times larger and thus more powerful Nangli village where the Panchayat office was situated, the hamlet had a
caste disadvantage. The villagers were all Scheduled Castes and therefore, all eligible to receive development benefits, of which they had received none within the last two years. The villager who seemed most resourceful was also their Panchayat member, but he revealed that he had no knowledge about how the Grama Panchayat worked and he had not attended the last couple of meetings because no one listened to him there. Had the representative been of high caste this would probably not have been the case, since he would have been accorded more respect. Furthermore, there is a correlation between caste and education.26 If the hamlet had consisted of villagers from higher castes, it is more likely that the educational level would have been higher and the knowledge about the rights of the hamlet in the political process would have been greater.

For both men and women there were no signs of caste constraints among the Panchayat members. Both female and male Panchayat members from the Scheduled Castes were interviewed, and all felt that caste did not have much relevance within the Panchayat system, and with very few exceptions, such as the Grama Panchayat member from Jangalahally who was mentioned above, the male Panchayat members from the Scheduled Castes were active participants in the local decision-making. However, reservation is still needed to ensure lower castes access to the decision-making. The most obvious evidence for this is that, as with women, no Scheduled Caste or Tribe member was elected outside of reservation. Thus, it takes reservation for these castes to be elected.27

One of the explanations for this relatively low caste bias in relation to the Grama Panchayat system is the positive discrimination towards Scheduled Castes and Tribes, since independence. The government has ensured special seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in public offices, universities and colleges, and – in Karnataka since 1987 – in the political system. Through positive discrimination, members of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes have come forward and gained some respect and self-confidence. The higher castes have had to become used to dealing with Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in positions that they would not have thought possible before independence. It seems that these schemes are now beginning to work. However, the schemes have also had a very negative side. A huge part of the schemes are focusing on improving the socio-economic conditions of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes through the provision of government houses and loans. But the primary criteria of distribution is on caste and not financial background. In theory, the ones who are eligible are not supposed to have an annual income of more than 10,000 rupees (equivalent to US$233), but
in a region like the Kolar district with a yearly per capita district income of 6,223 rupees almost everyone is eligible. Furthermore, the rural economy is often based on bartering with agricultural produce. Thus it is very difficult to estimate the de facto earnings. As a consequence, it is possible to find a fairly well off Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe member who owns cattle and land but who has also been provided with both a loan and a house, and at the same time find people with almost no income who are not eligible, in the same village. For example, a male Muslim villager was interviewed who works as a wage labourer. Owing to his religious beliefs, his wife is not allowed to work. They live in a rented house and have three children that he has to provide for from the 30 rupees he earns in a day. He does not have the time to attend any Grama Sabha or become a Grama Panchayat member even if he wanted to. He is not very pleased with the beneficiary system. He has gone to the Grama Panchayat office six or seven times to claim benefits but is invariably told he is not eligible, which he finds very hard to understand.

This was not the only example encountered in the villages where the narrow criteria have created a lot of jealousy towards Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, sometimes resulting in rather condescending remarks about the Scheduled Castes and their drinking habits. The problem is that Scheduled Castes are doubly disadvantaged due to their low status and their need for special provision in order to change their situation. However, in the process the backward castes (that is, the less well off, non-Scheduled castes) seem to have been overlooked. Even though there are special funds for backward castes, they are very limited. There is therefore a need to develop a more sophisticated policy that takes account of all the social biases, especially in relation to participation rights in the democratic structure.

A reason why the Scheduled Castes and Tribes have been given as much room for manoeuvre within the Panchayat system as they have when contrasted with their low status in society in general is the fact that the Panchayats deal with a limited number of tasks, of which the distribution of benefits to lower castes are among the most important. The higher castes have no great interest in these political decisions, because they are not eligible for the funds. As one male high caste villager stated: ‘When you do not receive any benefits, you do not feel the system’. Another explanation is the heavy influence of the elders on the decisions taken in the villages.

None of the villagers interviewed had contacted the Grama Panchayat in order to solve a problem of a social or judicial nature. Such problems are resolved through consultations with the village elders. The villagers’ perception of the role of the Grama Panchayats in managing the affairs of
the village, is thus limited compared to the role of the village elders. As one villager stated: ‘Grama Panchayat is only for facilities, the rest is the village elders’. This is a consequence of the tasks the Panchayats have been given. The judicial issues officially lie with the more centralized courts and police. However, the villagers have little trust in the official structures and see it as embarrassing if they have to contact the police, which in practice means that it is the village elders among the higher castes who deal with judicial cases.

The village elders’ role in relation to the Panchayat system is also very apparent. In all the villages researched the village elders had either picked the members themselves or asked the villagers to vote for a certain member. 60 per cent of the Grama Panchayat members interviewed were related to, or were themselves a village leader. But the village elders were not only influencing the decision-making indirectly through ‘straw men’ in the Panchayats. In three of the Grama Panchayats visited, the members admitted that the elders of the villages took part in the Grama Panchayat meetings with the elected members. In the other villages visited, the chairman of the Grama Panchayat would consult the village elders after each meeting to ratify the decisions adopted with them. The elders therefore play an important role in the village administration also in relation to rural development, which is supposed to be the responsibility of the Grama Panchayat. Thus, the Panchayats ultimately serve as an institutionalization of the elders’ rule, due to the devolution of legal authority to an institution they heavily influence. So, even though the Panchayats from the government of India are seen as the pinnacle of local democracy, it is still the elders who have the de facto power in the villages. The village leaders control the villages when it comes to non-Panchayat issues as is indicated in the quotation above, and they also have a significant influence on Panchayat decisions. Another indication of this is the fact that 89 per cent of the villagers who applied for a Grama Panchayat house or loan and who were related to the traditional leaders in the village were successful in their application. This indicates that the village elders also have a significant influence on the selection and distribution of government benefits distributed through the Grama Panchayat. That underscores the importance of the traditional power structures in the villages compared to the power and importance of the Grama Panchayat.

Consequently, as long as the strongest power base in the villages is the group of village elders, among whom the higher castes dominate, there is little incentive left for the higher castes to exclude the Scheduled Castes and Tribes from the Panchayats.
The villages in rural Kolar are still highly segregated along caste lines, but this is not the same as exclusion. The lower castes do participate, not with the same influence as the higher castes, but many of them are active participants in the decision-making. It means that: ‘Some are first-class members of the village community, and others are second-class members, but all are members’.

Concluding Remarks

Social justice is the avowed objective of Panchayat Raj. Strengthening the weaker sections of society through reservation and effective devolution are the means that are used to strive after this justice. The decentralization process in Karnataka is, in theory, one of the boldest decentralization experiments in South Asia. The transfer of power downwards all the way to the Grama Panchayat level is a great leap forward in the democratization of the Republic of India. Furthermore, the process is more context specific than most other decentralization schemes initiated in other developing countries, due to its reservation policies.

Through reservation the Indian government has ensured the weaker sections of society representation in the Panchayats. However, as this article has shown the members elected under reservation are also the members who possess very few of the resources needed for political activity. Lack of capacity due to illiteracy, language barriers, inexperience or low respect among fellow villagers are some of the main problems besetting active participation in the decision-making of the majority of Panchayat members elected under reservation. Especially many female Panchayat members lack basic capabilities for working within this system. Their illiteracy, inexperience, and language barriers mean that they are not actively participating in the work of the Panchayat and are often ignored by male counterparts. Decentralization has not resulted in empowerment for these women. Although the government can claim that it has made a huge effort to empower the weaker sections of society through reservation, the research here shows that unless reservation is backed by increased education, networking, and training it will not succeed in reaching the most needy. The politicians can claim that they possess social sensitivity, by pointing to reservation schemes, but the chances are that the reservation schemes become a goal in themselves, and this does not in itself lead to genuine empowerment. The means have become an end in themselves.

Even though the whole decentralization process was created in order to devolve power to the people, it has in many places devolved power to the
rural elite. Throughout the fieldwork inquiries there were instances that pointed to the major influence the traditional leaders of the Indian villages still have on local decision-making.

In many ways the devolution of power to the rural villages in Karnataka proved to be an official legitimization of the local rural elite. The development responsibilities, which were in the hands of the state until the realization of the 73rd Amendment, have been passed on to the traditional leaders in the villages. What should have been a democratic advance has resulted in a strengthening of local autocracy and patriarchy.

What is needed is awareness of the local context and thus the informal power structures preventing people from active participation. There is still a wide gap between the democratic rhetoric of the policies and practice. As has been illustrated it is not sufficient to invoke formal positive discriminatory steps such as reservation, when the elected are not otherwise empowered to participate in their own self-governance. If genuine participation for all is truly the objective of the decentralization process, then the local context must be addressed first.

The new status supposedly afforded participants of the decentralization process, as a new face of development, is not supported by this research in Karnataka. The potential has been noted, but a neglect of context has left the weak without genuine influence. Developing country governments and development practitioners have to move beyond the generalized delegation schemes which originate from political slogans of democracy. They will have to play a more proactive role, through increased awareness of the social context. There is an unstable balance between empowerment and disempowerment of the weaker sections of society. That balance could tip towards disempowerment if context is not incorporated more into the arrangements devised for decentralization, which must promote participation by all society’s actors if the weak are not to be excluded from development.

NOTES

1. In this article development means increasing the influence actors have on their own lifeworlds, which entails an increase in access to resources and power. It entails an expansion of the possibility of participation in formal and informal decision-making. The term actor refers to groups, individuals or organizations that are capable of action and knowledgeable of such. They work with and solve problems and devise different ways of coping with their lives, within the limits of their information and resources, and agency. For elaboration see A. Giddens, The Constitution of Society (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984), A. Arce and N. Long, ‘The Dynamics of Knowledge: Interfaces between Bureaucrats and Peasants’, in A. Long


13. Ibid.


15. Poverty is difficult to define since it is not possible to set up an objective poverty indicator. Poverty is always relative. It is about living and well-being and not necessarily about possessing. Well-being is difficult to assess. At the same time it is often relevant to distinguish between different economic and social standards of living. In this article poverty will be used in relation to financial and social accessibility, which is not necessarily always the same as well-being, but which gives a general picture of the access to resources for different groups of society. Using the concept will, however, always be a balance between usability and reductionism. On this see A. Sen, ‘The Standard of Living: Lecture I, Concepts and Critiques’, in G. Hawthorne (ed.), *The Standard of Living* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); M. Rahnema, ‘Poverty’, in W. Sachs (ed.), *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power* (London and New Jersey: Zed, 1992), and L. Engberg-Pedersen, ‘Studying Poverty: Concepts and Approach’, in N. Webster (ed.), *In Search of Alternatives: Poverty, the Poor and Local Organizations*. Centre for Development Research Working Paper 98.10, Copenhagen (1998).


23. See for example Drèze and Sen, op. cit, and Kohli, op. cit.

24. The houses of the upper castes are larger and more colorfully painted than the lower castes. The roads are cleaner due to drainage and generally more refurbished than among the Scheduled Castes and Tribes sections. The houses in the Scheduled Castes sections are generally smaller and less substantial, sometimes clay cottages, except where families have been granted a new house through the government poverty-alleviation programme (standard concrete square houses of 20 square meters). More work is carried out in the streets and more women are visible, due to the fact that they have to take part in the daily work, and are therefore not restricted from leaving the home like many upper caste women.


27. Government of Karnataka, op. cit.

28. Ibid., p.304.

29. Srinivas, op. cit.

30. Ibid., p.72.