

**Decentralised Development: State Practices from  
India's Watershed Development Programme**

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## Abstract

Decentralisation is now central in the theorisation and practice of contemporary government. Within the contemporary mainstream discourse, decentralisation is projected as a policy move to localise as well as reduce the domain of state intervention. This discourse is supported by the new institutionalist, communitarian and New Political Economy (NPE) theories. However, the concept of decentralisation, as underpinned by these theories, rests on highly questionable assumptions regarding the relationships between individuals, communities, markets and states. In the process of defining decentralisation simplistically, as 'less of state', the critical relationship between decentralisation and the state remains ill theorised. This is the principal problem addressed in the thesis. The particular context of study is India.

The recent restructuring of the national Watershed Development Programme (NWDP), in 1994, encompasses the key issues confronting decentralisation in India today. The major elements of such policy reform embody familiar tensions between planning, politics and participation. Moreover, they appear to skirt panchayat reform, which has been long contested. In general, the 1994 watershed guidelines mirror the broader Indian development strategy, and bear a strong thrust towards viewing development apolitically. This is of consequence given the postcolonial context of development as the principal basis of state power in India.

Based on empirical research in two Indian states, Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, the thesis reveals a strong association between the extent to which development can be depoliticised, and the political context of decentralisation in each state. This context is informed by the contingent relationship between panchayat reform, bureaucratic reorganisation and participatory watershed development. The analysis shows how different actors engaged in programme implementation interpret the guidelines, and their development discourse, differently. In the process, they adapt ruling development ideas according to their own interests and institutional histories. The thesis argues that these are influenced by the prevailing political context of decentralisation.

The principal conclusions thus establish the important relationship between decentralisation and the state. First, decentralisation can vitally impact the use of the development discourse as the basis for state power. Moreover, decentralisation increases the interface of the development discourse with regional and local actors, who shape the discourse further in innumerable new ways. Second, decentralisation reveals and enhances the disaggregated nature of the Indian state. The blurred boundaries between 'official', 'local' and 'popular' power contribute both to the fluidity of decentralisation processes, as well as their positive potential for change. Far from being 'less of state', as dominant theoretical positions might conclude, the thesis shows that decentralisation augments the many dimensions of the state, its power, authority, effectiveness and accessibility.

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## Thesis Layout

This thesis is in two main parts. The first part poses decentralisation as the principal conceptual problem to be studied, explains the historical context of decentralisation in India, delineates the specific domain of the national Watershed Development Programme (NWDP), in which decentralisation will be considered, and discusses the methodology used for research. The second part presents contrasts in the implementation of NWDP in two states, Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, and draws upon the political context of decentralisation in each to analyse the difference. The conclusion considers the significance of these issues, both for the theory and practice of decentralisation.

Part 1 comprises three chapters. The introductory chapter critically discusses the theoretical underpinnings of the decentralisation concept, and presents an alternative analytical framework within which decentralisation issues will be studied. Chapter 2 considers decentralisation in the context of India's political history, and draws attention to the issues underlying the recent emphasis on decentralisation in the 1990s. Chapter 3 examines the evolution of the watershed development sector in India, and argues that the recent restructuring of the National Watershed Development Programme (NWDP) embodies key issues concerning decentralisation in India today. This chapter ends with a note on the nature, structure and methodology of the empirical research.

Part 2 contains four chapters. Chapter 4 argues that the national watershed guidelines (1994) articulate a discourse of 'depoliticisation' to rationalise and explain the constitution of watershed committees in contrast to panchayats. It demonstrates that the political and institutional conditions of decentralisation in Kurnool in Andhra Pradesh are conducive to this discourse, and presents case study evidence from two project villages to illustrate how this discourse unfolds in practice. Chapter 5 makes the case that the implementation strategy devised by the Kurnool Watershed Office further reproduces such discourse. It shows how its strategy rests on an array of methods, designed to procure consent for the participatory project, within a larger framework of technocratic planning. Further, it analyses the factors that contribute to differences in the way this strategy unfolds in the two project villages. The two chapters, 4 and 5, together demonstrate KWO's interpretation of the national guidelines, and its implications for the nature of decentralisation in Andhra Pradesh.

Chapter 6 presents the contrasting conditions of implementation of NWDP in Dewas district in Madhya Pradesh. It argues that pro-active measures for decentralisation through panchayat bodies in the state, do not allow the Dewas district bureaucracy to implement this development

programme through a discourse of depoliticisation. It further highlights the political nature of programme implementation, through an analysis of the factors underlying a project 'success' story. Chapter 7 discusses the experiences of an NGO engaged in watershed development in the tribal areas of Dewas district. It examines the political and institutional conditions in which this NGO is able to interpret the national guidelines' provisions for participatory development, in order to facilitate change and initiate popular mobilisation. The issues it raises are analysed to understand NGO power in decentralised development. Thus, Chapters 6 and 7 expose two different sides of the decentralisation initiatives presently underway in Madhya Pradesh.

These issues are summarised in the conclusion. Their significance is regarded to explore how decentralisation impacts the use of the development discourse in India. The conclusion underscores that crosscutting initiatives for decentralisation, simultaneously unfolding in the country, greatly increase the opportunities for political assertion, contest and struggle. It shows how this phenomenon works to the overall advantage of the state. Finally, the thesis proves the central role of the state in defining the nature of decentralisation, and contributes to theorising the relationship between decentralisation and the state.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction: Decentralisation Ontology

#### 1. Introduction

Decentralisation is now central in the theorisation and practice of contemporary government. Many see it as an icon of hope for redress from political and economic 'unfreedom', even oppression, perpetuated by centralised states. At the very least, the idea of decentralisation infiltrates a variety of political and institutional policy initiatives, including democratisation, participatory development and effective governance<sup>1</sup>. The widespread use of decentralisation as a desirable policy constituent establishes it as a dominant international discourse<sup>2</sup>.

In this introductory chapter, I will first critically analyse the principal lines of reasoning that contribute to the contemporary mainstream decentralisation discourse. I will trace the theoretical evolution of the major ideas, concerning individual, market, community and state, which comprise the foundation of decentralisation policies. The objective is to show how the decentralisation discourse is couched in a language that repudiates the authority and presence of the state.

Second, I will argue that the term 'decentralisation' shares a common conceptual basis with contemporary development discourse. 'Development', now imbibes ideas of community and market, both of which are also central to the decentralisation discourse. I will further argue that decentralisation policies involve prescriptions through which ruling development ideas can be accommodated within the existing frameworks of states. The 'participatory development project' is the most significant proof of decentralisation's tryst with development. This understanding considerably weakens the proposition that decentralisation necessarily involves a reduced role of the state, or indeed, is 'less of state'.

Finally, the chapter demonstrates that the decentralisation discourse is based on a dichotomous view of state versus civil society. It draws from scholarly criticisms to argue that this dichotomy is untenable in developing countries, especially those with a colonial past, and undermines the critical issues of state-society interrelations that characterise the conditions and experiences of decentralisation in many countries. It presents an alternative theoretical perspective of state and society, to discuss decentralisation issues in developing nations. This

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<sup>1</sup> 'Governance', a widely used term with no one definition, is used here to describe the sum of processes that influence the manner in which the state fulfils its responsibilities towards its citizens, both through effective and accountable performance of its functions, as well as providing the overall framework within which private market forces and voluntary initiatives can work complementarily. Refer to <http://magnet.undp.org/policy/> and <http://www.worldbank.org/html/extdr/gc/governance/governance.htm> for similar definitions of governance, adopted by the United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank respectively. Governance has been critiqued as an overarching term that obscures the neo-liberal agenda in the third world (Williams and Young 1994, Young unpublished).

draws from analytical constructs of state and civil society proposed by the Italian Marxist thinker and political activist, Antonio Gramsci, following major interventions proposed by later Gramscian scholars. The chapter concludes by proposing an analytical framework within which practices of decentralisation and development, evidenced in the field study, will be studied.

## **2. The concept of Decentralisation: Theoretical underpinnings**

The principal theoretical underpinnings of the decentralisation concept are drawn from debates over the relationship between the individual and the state<sup>3</sup>, essential to political as well as economic theory. The starting point of many of these debates in this regard is a view of the individual as 'autonomous', 'self-interested' and 'rational'. I refer here mainly to the liberal and rational choice traditions of thought<sup>4</sup>, both of which make individualist presuppositions. Both schools, albeit in separate ways, have developed detailed conceptualisations regarding the role of the state, with considerable internal diversity. The initial justification for the state and its role has, in turn, inspired at least three distinctive theoretical positions: communitarian theory, new institutionalist theory and public choice theory. The basic premise of the individual as the starting point of analysis is common to all. These positions, I argue, contain important prescriptions for decentralisation as popularly understood today.

### **2.1 Liberalism and justification of the state**

The issue of individual freedom, and the conditions in which it is best secured, lies at the heart of liberal thinking. The first signs of transition from 'commitment to the absolutist state' (of Machiavellian character) to the 'struggle of liberalism against tyranny' appeared with Thomas Hobbes in the sixteenth century<sup>5</sup>. In Hobbes' view, the state of nature as 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short' would come to an end only with the creation of the all-powerful state or the Leviathan<sup>6</sup>. In this formulation, the state remained a key proposition concerning the conditions of social and political life, though not without contest. In the seventeenth century, John Locke attempted to impose constitutional limits on the state's authority<sup>7</sup>. Later theorists within the liberal tradition such as John Rawls and Ronald Nozick constructed their respective treatise in highly individualistic terms<sup>8</sup>. A view of the individual as 'autonomous', where self-determination or the individual ability to decide upon the way to live, is the only means of respecting individuals as 'fully moral human beings', has dominated liberal

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<sup>2</sup> I use 'discourse' here to mean a system of thought and activity that creates forms of social consciousness, produces meaning and shapes the representation and perception of actualities (Barnes and Duncan 1992, Escobar 1995a, Peet and Watts 1996)

<sup>3</sup> See Plamenatz (1963) for a useful exposition.

<sup>4</sup> Rational Choice theories emphasise the individual as a 'rational' being, with an 'inviolable' judgement of her own welfare. See Bates (1995), Levi et al (1990)

<sup>5</sup> Held (1984), p 31

<sup>6</sup> Hobbes (1968), as edited by C.B. Macpherson

<sup>7</sup> Locke (1963), as edited by P. Laslett

<sup>8</sup> Rawls (1971), Nozick (1974)

philosophy<sup>9</sup>. In this context, liberals have continuously attempted to limit the role of the state, through the definition of a private sphere, free from state interference or control.

## **2.2 The communitarian response to liberal individualism**

In the late 1970s, liberal individualists were confronted with a powerful critique from communitarians like Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor<sup>10</sup>, who believed that the 'only way to understand human behaviour is to refer to individuals in their social, cultural or historical contexts' or indeed the 'community' of which they are a part (Avineri and De-Shalit 2001: 2-5). They attacked the liberal view of the self as false. Liberals think in terms of the 'priority of the self over its aims', which means individuals are free to decide the ends they want to pursue, and the life they want to lead, qualified simply as the 'good life' (Avineri and De-Shalit, 2001:2-3). Instead, communitarians proposed the significance of community as a 'unity' with its intrinsic value, in which all members regard the 'common good' as their own (Avineri and De-Shalit 2001: 4, Sandel 2001).

Communitarians argue that choosing a common conception of life requires a shared inquiry. In communitarian theory, the state is deemed to be the 'proper arena' and the context for such inquiry (Kymlicka 1990: 219). Liberals in contrast, adhere to a view of the 'neutral state' that 'does not justify its actions on the basis of the intrinsic superiority or inferiority of conceptions' (Kymlicka 1990: 206)<sup>11</sup>. Liberal individualists and communitarians thus disagree over the proper role of the state. Liberals claim to recognise the importance of the social context by acknowledging social relations, but make a distinction between the social and the political (Kymlicka 1990). The 'political' in liberal theory is thus identified with the state, which is strictly differentiated from the 'social' or civil society. Communitarians do not accept this distinction, focusing, instead, on the role of the state in order to enhance the life of the individual in the community.

Critics consider that while communitarian theory is critical of liberal individualism, it uses 'the historical memory, or vestigial practical capacities of community relationships in a critical engagement with individualist liberalism, rather than through a direct sociological engagement with the power of non-individualist sociability'<sup>12</sup>

## **2.3 Rational Choice School and justification of the state**

Theorists within the rational choice school have considered the question of individual freedom in the Hobbesian tradition of exploring interrelationships of anarchy, freedom and the state. Anarchy was understood by James Buchanan, as an 'ideal society, where no man coerces

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<sup>9</sup> Kymlicka (1990), p 198

<sup>10</sup> MacIntyre (1981), Taylor (1979)

<sup>11</sup> Liberals have attempted to solve the dilemma of pluralism, i.e., the dilemma that plural and competing views of the 'good life' exist, and the means through which these can be reconciled, without infringing on the autonomous individual, through the neutral state idea. In addition, liberalism address this dilemma, through the assumption of universality of its own values (Avineri and De-shalit 2001, Gray 2000, Young unpublished).

one another'<sup>13</sup>. However, Buchanan himself discarded the proposition that anarchy can explain the construction of a modern social order as utopia. He relies on a view of 'man as rule-maker', who would 'explicitly and deliberately impose constraints on himself in order to channel his own expedient behaviour towards rationally selected norms' (1975:92). Using the precepts of rational individualism<sup>14</sup>, Buchanan explained the necessary emergence of a state, first through a constitutional and then a post-constitutional contract<sup>15</sup>. In doing so, he admitted, much like Hobbes, that the 'rational rule maker makes the trade off between liberty and planned efficiency' (1975:94).

The voluntary decision by rational individuals to form a contract to establish a state, in order to meet common requirements such as national defence and social order, was soon used to propose a solution to the 'collective action problem'. In 1971, Mancur Olson argued that 'even if all individuals in a large group are rational and self-interested, and would gain, if as a group they acted voluntarily, to achieve their common or group interest, they will still not voluntarily act to achieve that common or group interest'<sup>16</sup>. Olson emphasised the significance of 'selective incentives', to support his case that large organisations must offer some attraction 'distinct from the public good itself'<sup>17</sup>, which would lead individuals to bear the burden of maintaining the organisation. He then argued that a free riding problem cannot theoretically exist in the state, even if goods provided by it are non-excludable in nature, because the state possesses the distinguishing attribute of possessing the legitimate authority to coerce should the need arise. Further, in Olson's formulation, the state is an 'all-inclusive entity' and individuals cannot opt out of its membership, unlike other organisations.

In 1968, three years before Olson published his general thesis regarding collective choice problems, Garrett Hardin considered these questions in an influential essay titled 'The Tragedy of the Commons', in the specific context of common property, using the metaphor of a 'pasture open to all'<sup>18</sup>. In Hardin's formulation, individual rational action based on self-interest under conditions of geometric population growth, threatens a common resource with irreversible degradation. Hardin's two solutions were absolute privatisation or absolute state control.

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<sup>12</sup> Kaviraj (2001: 304)

<sup>13</sup> Buchanan (1975), p 92

<sup>14</sup> The notion of the rational individual has found wider acceptability with its economic correlates being defined by Pareto optimality that respects the 'inviolability of the individual's judgement of his or her own welfare', Bates (1995).

<sup>15</sup> In Buchanan's formulation, the constitutional and the post-constitutional contracts lead to the establishment of the 'protective' and 'productive' states respectively. The sole task of the protective state is to ensure that the terms of the initial contractual agreement are honoured, and the rights of individuals agreed on this contract are protected. In comparison, the productive state acts as the means for facilitating and implementing complex exchanges required for the provision of jointly consumed goods and services among citizens, each of whom enters the contractual or exchange process with rights assigned in the more fundamental legal structure. For more details, see Buchanan (1975), p 34-106.

<sup>16</sup> Olson (1971)

<sup>17</sup> A good or a service is a public good if it is to some degree indivisible, non-excludable and non-rival in consumption (Buchanan 1968).

<sup>18</sup> Hardin (1968)

Using their respective philosophies therefore, Hobbes, Buchanan, Olson and Hardin justified state formation, as the only means that could provide order and security to rational individuals.

## 2.4 New Institutionalism

Parallel to these conceptual developments regarding state formation, was the growth of interest among rational choice theorists in explanations for the emergence and transformation of institutions, specifically the link between individual agency and structural transformation. This led to the rise of 'new' institutionalism (NI), which sought to put forth an elaborate theory of institutions in order to extend neo-classical economic theory<sup>19</sup>. The principles of new institutionalism provoked interest in interpreting further a 'contractarian' understanding of the state, as the product of the conscious decisions of rational individuals, as advanced by Hobbes, Buchanan and Hardin.

The core of institutional theory is as follows. Institutions are the rules of the game in society, or more formally, are the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction<sup>20</sup>. The definition of institutions as rules is central to NI<sup>21</sup>. Douglas North, among its principal architects, emphasised that institutions reduce uncertainty in human exchange, which arises in the first place on account of the 'incomplete information and limited mental capacity by which to process information', and renders high the costs of transacting<sup>22</sup>. At the heart of NI is an attempt to modify the instrumental rationality assumption of neoclassical economics that is inadequate in a world of 'ideas, ideologies and imperfect markets' (North 1995). The crucial inference here is that even though institutions are inherently constraining, rational individuals would be better off with them than without. Commentators on NI make a distinction between the individual level at which institutions impose constraints on behaviour, and the 'community' level, where institutions are 'liberating rather than constraining', because people follow rules that they have devised<sup>23</sup>.

Even as they sought to clarify relationships between individual rationality and collective action, the principles of NI engendered in turn a collective choice paradox, labelled as a 'second' order of rationality problem<sup>24</sup>. If institutions were intended to reduce uncertainty in

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<sup>19</sup> This school of thought is called 'new' institutionalism because it signifies renewed interest in the investigation of institutions that despite a 'long and distinguished history', suffered decades of neglect as 'behaviouralism entered centre stage' (Levi et al 1990: 11).

<sup>20</sup> North (1995), p 17

<sup>21</sup> Ruttan and Hayami define institutions as 'rules of a society or of organisations that facilitate coordination among people by helping them form expectations which each person can reasonably hold in dealing with others', (1984: 204). Runge defines institutions as 'public systems of rules that specify certain forms of action as permissible, others as forbidden, and provide for certain penalties and defences, which channel the behaviour of people with respect to each other, providing assurance by setting the rules of the game', (1984b as cited in Sinha 1990: 14). For other significant definitions of institutions as rules, see Thomson (1981).

<sup>22</sup> North held that the costs of transacting arise because information is costly and asymmetrically held by the parties to exchange. Ronald Coase made the 'crucial connection' between institutions, transaction costs and neo-classical theory (1937), p 386-405.

<sup>23</sup> Clague (1997), p17

<sup>24</sup> Elster (1979)

human interaction, then would their creation itself not be subject to a collective choice dilemma, of the sort proposed by Olson<sup>25</sup>. This issue bore implications for contractarian perspectives of state formation. The formulation that the state, formed through voluntary contract, is the only remedy to collective choice paradoxes could no longer stand as true. Criticisms of the rational choice school have also led to fresh thinking regarding the usefulness of 'descriptive' approaches within this tradition, which assume that individuals are rational actors whose choices and their outcomes can be predicted (Levi et al 1990: 4).

## 2.5 The 'communitarian' response to the collective choice problem

With the state discredited, the 'fresh' collective choice paradox that arose evoked a counter response from within rational choice theory. The key political proposition offered by the contesting view is that in the absence of the state, cooperative behaviour is as much a possibility among rational individuals as is conflictual behaviour. Michael Taylor, a leading proponent of this view, projected the 'community' *instead* of the state as the solution to the collective choice problem<sup>26</sup>. Taylor ascribed three key characteristics to collectivities for them to qualify as 'community', which would then create conditions where individuals would find it rational to cooperate. First, commonality of beliefs and values that are shared, articulated and systematised; second, direct inter-personal relations that are unmediated by external agencies such as representatives or bureaucrats, or for that matter any institutions that belong to the state; and third, reciprocity, a term used to cover a range of arrangements, relations and exchanges, including mutual aid.

Taylor, like Hobbes and Olson, modified the Prisoners' Dilemma (PD) game, which is fundamentally non-cooperative<sup>27</sup>. He objected to their respective formulations that project the individual dilemma of how much to contribute to the provision of a public good, as a one-off concern. Taylor argued that if the game were to be reflective of a 'real-life' situation, and be 'iterated' or played repeatedly, players' decisions to cooperate or not, would be made in knowledge of other people's choices in previous games. With the introduction of the 'dynamic' element of time, and therefore of an 'interdependent' situation, most collective action would involve some 'conditional cooperation', as at the minimum, an individual would not cooperate, if nobody else did<sup>28</sup>. He then concluded that the solution to fundamental collective action problems could come from within the community, instead of the state.

Further, in Taylor's view, 'conditional' cooperation is possible within communities because they have at their disposal a wide array of sanctions to monitor individual behaviour. These are both positive and negative, and 'highly effective' in maintaining social order (1982). Power

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<sup>25</sup> Bates (1988), p 387-401

<sup>26</sup> Taylor (1982, 1987, 1988, 1989)

<sup>27</sup> The choice problem, of whether or not to cooperate, lies at the heart of rational choice theory, and 'it has been widely asserted that individual preferences in public goods interactions and in collective action problems generally are those of a Prisoners' Dilemma game' (Taylor 1987: 13-14).

is the ability to affect the incentives facing others so that it becomes rational for them to pursue a certain course of action (Taylor 1982). Consequently, Taylor objected to the identification of power as use of explicit threat or sanction, which in turn limits it to the state and its institutions.

Taylor's theoretical framework rests on preconditions of community. In addition, he introduced the concept of 'political entrepreneurs' to justify state action where conditions of community, though existent, are weak. This explained the role of the state in situations of revolutionary peasant collective action, such as the French, Chinese and Russian occurrences (Taylor 1988, 1989). Taylor generalised that in such cases, political entrepreneurs can assist in organising collective action by facilitating conditional cooperation.

## **2.6 Community based solutions for collective action**

Taylor's interventions regarding the community and not the state as the remedy for collective action problems led to further debate among concerned theorists<sup>29</sup>. This debate mainly concerned the role of the state. Taylor believed that 'centralised solutions to collective action are typified by the state, whereas decentralised solutions characterise the community' (1987:23). However, his notion of 'political entrepreneurs' allowed for a modification in this dichotomous view. In fact, it led to a benign view of the state, which facilitates collective action by prescribing conditions whereby communities are able to develop institutions endogenously.

This 'benign' view of the state is ambivalent, even contradictory. The initial position advanced by communitarian theorists like Taylor necessarily identifies the state as a coercive instrument, and one that impinges on individual freedom. The reasons why such a state would help in facilitating collective action aimed at gaining autonomy, remain unexplained. Elinor Ostrom, from within the new institutionalist school, criticised Taylor on the issue of 'continued cooperation', once the terms for conditional cooperation had been met (1986, 1990). She introduced a notion of 'nested dilemmas' that act continually to alter the structure of incentives around rational individuals. These dilemmas result in 'non-conformance' by a 'group of principals' to a system of rules, unless a system of mutual monitoring that can ensure credible commitments by all individuals over a period of time and also punish non-conformity, exists. In her opinion, acceptable explanations are to be found in theories of the firm and of the state because the entrepreneur or the ruler makes credible commitments to punish anyone who does not follow the rules of the game (Ostrom 1990: 42). No such explanations exist within communitarian theory as proposed by Taylor.

Ostrom's position is similar to Taylor's, as she too prescribed theoretic conditions that would qualify collectivities as communities. In sharp contrast however, she recognised that individual

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<sup>28</sup> Hechter (1987) comments that repeated plays of the game could produce multiple equilibriums, not all of which can solve collective action problems.

<sup>29</sup> Ostrom (1986, 1990), Swaney (1990)

behaviour or rationality, within a community, can be influenced by factors external to the constituted community<sup>30</sup>. Even so, other critics of this new institutionalist and communitarian position consider that Ostrom, as much as Taylor, does not go beyond the 'benign' state form. Subir Sinha, in a detailed critique, argued the following, 'Posed as an alternative to statist and market based solutions to the "tragedy framework"<sup>31</sup>, Ostrom's formulation hides two paradoxes regarding the role of the state. Local institutional innovation seems impossible until resource users and the state are involved in one or both of two sorts of relationships, either of autonomy or recognised independence', (Sinha 1990: Conclusion, p 7). In his own work, Sinha critiqued theorists of endogenous institutional change, for 'being pre-occupied with collective action, they have neglected to read from the same examples the potentially adversarial relations between state actors and rural resource users' (1990: 33). The enabling role of the state cannot be taken for granted, as communitarian theorists like Taylor do, and that the state is not a singular, neutral entity must be recognised.

Not all NI and communitarian theorists have confined their arguments to cooperative behaviour among communities alone. Victor Magagna (1991) recognised that conflict was ingrained in communities. Locating his arguments in the context of agrarian communities, Magagna contended that conflict was inevitable in situations of scarcity, and a balance of cooperation and conflict marks all communities.

The argument would take a different turn were it to be regarded that state action need not be either adversarial or benignly enabling. Within the basic premises of new institutionalist and communitarian theory, the question of whether there are situations, in which it is in the state's interest to foster collective action among communities, has not been clearly addressed.

## **2.7 Public Choice Theory: Rent seeking and the state as 'predatory'**

In contrast to NI and communitarian theories, public choice theory developed a strikingly different response to the collective action problem and the role of the state. Public choice theory specifically focuses on the consequences of the 'state' solution to collective choice dilemmas affecting rational individuals.

James Buchanan, among its earliest proponents, used his notions of the 'protective' and 'productive' state to explain how the inability to abide by the distinction between the two, leads both to individual alienation as well as government excesses (1975, pp 34-106) The protective state that acts as enforcing agent of the initial contract, necessarily steps into the arena of 'collective decisions concerning the financing and provision of collective consumption goods'. This foray into the arena of the productive state, places the former, the protective

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<sup>30</sup> Ostrom introduces notions of 'working rules' that exist in the operational context of the community, and 'collective choice' and 'constitutional rules' that are formulated in 'arenas' different from the community (1990: 51). These rules act in tandem to influence individual behaviour.

<sup>31</sup> Sinha (1990) is referring here to Garrett Hardin's famous 'Tragedy of the Commons' framework.

state, in a conceptually superior position. Further, precisely because the 'government' is and must be external to the parties in contract, unhappiness and violation must occur, and the individual feels alienated from the protective state.

Governmental excesses are thus a core outcome of public choice analysis. The alienation suffered by individuals at the hands of the external enforcer state, is exacerbated when those managing the state depart from the rules defined in the contract, either to aggrandise personal power or to promote subjectively chosen moral or ethical objectives or both. This is defined in public choice theory as rent seeking behaviour, which not only impinges on individual freedom, but also causes the waste of social resources<sup>32</sup>. With the conception of the state as rent seeking, the state derived a negative connotation.

Public choice theory considers that as long as government action is restricted largely, if not entirely, to protecting individual rights and enforcing private contracts, the market process dominates economic behaviour, and ensures that rents will be dissipated by the force of 'competitive entry'. Excessive government regulation of economic activities is seen as creating artificial or arbitrary scarcity or both<sup>33</sup>. Such scarcity implies the potential emergence of rents, which lead to rent seeking activities<sup>34</sup>. In view of this, public choice recommends a reduction in the direct involvement of government in economic decision-making.

This is the conceptual basis of the New Political Economy (NPE). This school depicts the individual as a 'rational utility maximiser', both in the 'political as well as the economic market'<sup>35</sup>. Moreover, since the state is constituted as predatory, NPE theorists regard the government to 'intrinsically be a less desirable means for satisfying individual wants, save for essential public goods' (Self 1993:4). They consider that markets allocate resources better than the state, and in order to achieve economic growth, it is better to rely on free market forces than on state intervention<sup>36</sup>. NPE in addition considers that a smoothly functioning set of markets exists.

Based on this reasoning, NPE theorists advocate policies of economic liberalisation, which mainly aim to increase the space for private economic action. The emphasis is on minimal state action with regard to economic activities, save when it is to facilitate macroeconomic activity. Parallels can be drawn between respective new institutionalist-communitarian and NPE attempts to minimise state action. While the former prescribes a reduced role for the

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<sup>32</sup> The term 'rent' was first used by Krueger (1974), Buchanan (1980)

<sup>33</sup> Licenses, quotas, permits, authorisations, approvals, franchise assignments are some instances of excessive government regulation.

<sup>34</sup> Bhagwati (1982) identifies DUP activities that lead to similar 'distortions'.

<sup>35</sup> Mueller (1979) distinguishes between 'political man', concerned with his public interest, and 'economic man' concerned with his private interest; Self (1993) comments that later theorists of public choice, like Buchanan and Tullock, rejected this dichotomy. They reasoned that if the individual still remained the same person, then what will change are the constraints and rules under which he operates, which will be critical for the rational calculation of his private interest.

<sup>36</sup> Nonneman (1996), Srinivasan (1985), and Colclough and Manor (1991)

state in solving collective action problems in a constituted 'locality', the latter recommends minimal state role for economic decision-making at the level of the entire 'polity'. A view of the state as predatory eliminates room for more interesting explanations concerning the role of the state in economic liberalisation<sup>37</sup>.

## **2.8 The centralised rent-seeking state: Economic arguments for decentralisation**

The unprecedented rise of centralised states after the Second World War, served as the essential historical context for the NPE view of the rent seeking state. The economic boom of the 1950s, the sustained operation of new social welfare systems, and the imperatives of colonial development in Asia and Africa, affirmed the 'efficacy of centralised, commandist approaches to governance'<sup>38</sup>. The Musgraves (1976) argued that a centralised government was best situated to generate and maintain high levels of output and employment as also perform equity enhancing functions<sup>39</sup>. Centralised governments, better than sub-national governments, could resolve problems such as varying levels of debt in communities, or unequal distributive policies pursued by different regions<sup>40</sup>.

This approach generated matching criticisms, which were in effect economic arguments for decentralisation. Using the general neoclassical assumption that individuals are the best judges of their own preferences, NPE theorists contended that local governments are better able to address preferences of local communities than central governments, thereby improving resource allocation (Mackintosh and Roy 1999: 6-12)<sup>41</sup>. Also, if public goods of local relevance were provided centrally, local beneficiaries would 'free ride' on the benefits of expenditures partially financed elsewhere (Olson 1971). In contrast, if these goods were provided locally, and financed by local taxes, tax payers would have to decide whether to finance the benefits they enjoy, leading to decline in free riding.

The predominance of NPE's versions of the rent seeking state, displaced Musgraves' approach to the centralised state, and supplanted it with a much more individualist and market based analysis. Economic arguments for decentralisation assumed new implications (Mackintosh and Roy 1999:13). In Musgraves' perspective, when certain public goods are provided by the collective, i.e., the government, losses in consumer choice that occur are compensated by other benefits. These benefits are measured in terms of the stabilisation, allocation and distribution functions of a government. In the NPE, as the view of the state itself is a detrimental one, these 'losses' are never compensated. The discussion assumes an

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<sup>37</sup> Refer to Amsden (1989, 1990), Evans, Skocpol and Rueschmeyer (1985), Kahler (1990), Martinussen (1998), Wade (1990), Weiss and Hobson (1995) for discussions of the role of the state in economic liberalisation.

<sup>38</sup> Manor (1999), p 16

<sup>39</sup> Mackintosh and Roy (1999), p 6

<sup>40</sup> The pursuit of unequal distributive policies by different regions can result in increased national inequality, because 'people with similar preferences will tend to move into the same community, causing some communities to be enriched and others to be impoverished'. This proposition was first postulated by Tiebout (1956) and is known as the 'Tiebout effect' (Mackintosh and Roy 1999: 7).

additional dimension, as NPE theorists consider that the government 'left to itself **will** expand, to the detriment of the individual' (Mackintosh and Roy 1999:16). Given this postulate, the NPE approach favours decentralisation, as with the latter, the individual is regarded as able to exercise control over these expansionist tendencies better, than in the case of a central government.

In this school of thought, 'decentralised' decision-making works best if individuals' preferences are 'homogenous', i.e., if they work like 'clubs'<sup>42</sup>. The argument goes that the 'smaller the club', 'the less is lost by way of the distortion of consumer preferences', and different clubs can coordinate with one another to achieve 'desired outcomes' that are not available in each member club. It is only when 'coordination costs' are high that clubs could 'pay' into a super-club, which in this context, is the central government. The justification of local governments through the theory of clubs is therefore based on the idea that the optimal society is one where self-governing individuals exchange goods and services in the market place (Mackintosh and Roy 1999).

The clubbing together of decentralisation with economic liberalisation by the World Bank is clearly derived from this theoretical tradition<sup>43</sup>. It therefore becomes analytically irrelevant 'whether decentralisation occurs from the public to the private, or from the central to the local' (Mackintosh and Roy 1999:16). Such reasoning then becomes the basis for market-based forms of decentralisation, allowing state functions to be carried out by the private sector, irrespective of whether this means market agencies or non-governmental organisations (NGOs), cooperatives and other private and voluntary associations<sup>44</sup>. What results is a crude view of the role of the state as minimal, or simply as 'downsized', with very complex implications for the state's accountability to its citizens.

## **2.9 Decentralisation: Individual, market, community and state**

The three responses to liberal and rational choice theories, i.e. communitarian theory, new institutionalist theory and public choice theory, have developed separate conceptualisations of the relationship between individual and state<sup>45</sup>. These theoretical responses contain clear prescriptions for decentralisation as popularly understood today. This section offers a critical review of these prescriptions and their implications.

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<sup>41</sup> Oates (1972); According to his decentralisation theorem, as long as it does not cost more for local governments to provide a public good than it does for the central government, it follows that it is better for that good to be provided locally.

<sup>42</sup> A 'club' is defined as an institution that supplies public goods to all its members. Further, to become members of a club, 'credentials' are required (Pauly 1967, p 10 as cited in Mackintosh and Roy 1999).

<sup>43</sup> The World Bank views that the rationale for decentralisation is 'similar' to the rationale for 'liberalisation, privatisation and other market reforms' (1997:120-121).

<sup>44</sup> Refer to Mackintosh and Roy (1999) for an excellent exposition of the different kinds of centre-local and public-private partnerships that exist, under the common banner of 'economic decentralisation'.

<sup>45</sup> I make a distinction between communitarian theorists like Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor, who critiqued liberal individualism, and emphasised the role of the state in enhancing the life of the individual in the community, and

Two distinct views of decentralisation emerge from these theorisations. The first is a 'communitarian' view of decentralisation that celebrates the inherently 'capable' local. The second is an NPE view of decentralisation that attacks the inherently corrupt and sub-optimal state. Within both these traditions, decentralisation provides answers to perplexing problems such as the dangers to individual freedom, paradoxes of collective action and wasteful social excesses as a result of government rule. Positively viewed, decentralisation potentially provides opportunities for meaningful social existence and efficient government.

There are serious problems with this formulation. The first is that each of these theoretical positions takes the individual as the starting point of analysis. The economic characteristics of the individual agent are 'assumed to be universal, underneath the superficial variety of culturally conditioned behaviour' (Williams and Young 1994: 97). Discussions of collective action therefore wholly ignore cultural differences<sup>46</sup>. Tom Young challenges the basic premise of individualist theories and considers that liberal assumptions of universality of its own values, 'allows it to obscure and even deny, its own historical place and effects'<sup>47</sup>.

The second problem concerns the theorisation of community, as also its relationship with the state. Both NI and communitarian theorists like Ostrom and Taylor ascribe definite characteristics to collectivities in order for these to qualify as communities. This may lead to expectations of 'community-like behaviour' that is unsubstantiated in reality<sup>48</sup>. Besides, the relationship between community and state has been projected either as benign or adversarial. Further, it does not adequately regard the possibility that it may be in the state's interest to rely on communities for finding solutions to their own problems.

These ideas have significant implications for contemporary notions of community-based development, which draw on the communitarian approach to decentralisation, valorising the local community, while denying its specificity. Critical interventions have highlighted the complexities in state-community relationships, particularly the nature of state power as asserted through 'community control'<sup>49</sup>. In a detailed study, Mosse shows how current interest in the community-based management of tanks in a village in Tamil Nadu in south India, finds historical parallels in the 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial state. He argues that the idea of traditional tank management based on principles of community enables the assertion of the state's administrative control over minor irrigation, while limiting its obligations. 'Community control in this sense was not the inverse of the extension of state power, but a necessary corollary to it' (1997a: 262) and by inference, it was in the state's advantage to preserve and propagate

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theorists like Michael Taylor, who used the basic principles of rational choice to project the community instead of the state, as a solution to the collective action problem. All future references to 'communitarian theorists' are to the latter.

<sup>46</sup> Mosse (2003a) makes this point forcefully in relation to dominant definitions of common property resources in economic and political science literature.

<sup>47</sup> Young (Unpublished), p 7

<sup>48</sup> Mosse alludes to this in his critique of NI theory as a 'predictive and generalising' theory of the economic and institutional conditions for collective action (2003a: 274).

<sup>49</sup> Mosse (1997a, 1997b, 1999), Sundar (2000)

ideas of community. Sundar (2000) shows, in the context of the Joint Forestry Management (JFM) programme in India, how successive governments from the early-mid 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards have informally abrogated their powers in favour of village management. Their observations reinforce the superiority of a theorisation of state and community as mutually constitutive partner concepts, over one that proposes a simplistic dichotomy between the two.

Further, the presumption by NI and communitarian theory that communities are innately capable of self-sufficient cooperative behaviour is simplistic. It is based on examples of 'successful, long enduring arrangements of cooperative and sustainable resource use' to generalise conditions which may not hold in all cases (Sinha 1990: 34). Besides, it utterly disregards the complexity of problems that communities are expected to resolve. These problems cannot be viewed as internal to the communities in question, and are linked to the 'external' by a chain of factors such as technology and markets and recognition of private property rights by the state (Sinha 1990: 25-28). Equally relevant is Mosse's observation that 'farmers themselves do not perceive community management institutions as autonomous village institutions' (1997a: 279). The perception of community as self-sufficient indicates basic unwillingness in typical programme approaches to address local problems in a wider regional context.

The third problem concerns theorisation of the relationship between the individual and the state. NPE theorists consider that decentralisation to lower levels of the state, would check the state's intrinsic corrupt tendencies through greater representation of the preferences of rational individuals. However, this argument for decentralisation to an 'appropriate' level of government does not hold because 'if all governments act as Leviathan, then the case for decentralised provisioning is extremely weak'<sup>50</sup>. Moreover, the entire range of individual interactions with the state is disregarded for just one aspect, i.e., containing rent-seeking tendencies. Over attention to rent seeking has resulted in an impoverished view of the state as predatory. There is little consideration of other essential facets of the state, like its public interest, political obligation to citizens, and indeed, issues of 'legitimation crises' that may occur when citizens who are disillusioned with the credibility of the state are simultaneously dependent on its resources<sup>51</sup>.

This marginalist view of individual-state interaction raises a seminal debate in decentralisation today. The justification for decentralisation within the highly individualist NPE effectively substitutes 'citizen' for 'consumer'. It recommends forms of accountability that are far 'weaker' than 'conventional political' accountability, which has an electoral basis (Roy 1999). This has been called the 'downgrading' of accountability, where equation of citizen rights with customer rights implies that citizens are left with 'consumer entitlements' of exchange in the market

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<sup>50</sup> Roy (1999: 32)

<sup>51</sup> Pateman (1985), Habermas (1975)

place, but not rights<sup>52</sup>. Not only is the citizenry assumed to be 'politically homogenous', it also becomes correspondingly 'apolitical', following the substitution of citizen for consumer.

The fourth problem concerns NPE's conceptualisation of the market as an arena where 'special interests', that lead to rent seeking activities by the state, are typically absent. Mackintosh and Roy (1999: 2-18) have identified at least six forms of public-private partnerships, which exist as a result of NPE prescriptions for decentralisation through market-based reforms. The contract has a predominant position in these arrangements, and symbolises the neutral, efficient and apolitical market<sup>53</sup>. Contract theorists dispute this vehemently by pointing out that a contract is not an abstract, formalistic mechanism, but involves difficulties over transparency and information, and also development of relationships beyond its formal terms<sup>54</sup>. As the contract is influenced by the social context in which it is introduced, its results will be 'influenced by the distribution of power and the way that interests and incentives are affected by market processes' (Walsh and Deakin 1996:40). NPE prescriptions to 'slim' the state through market based forms of decentralisation do not 'abolish the influence of special interests upon political decisions, and simply change the interests which are to be favoured'<sup>55</sup>.

Thus, the rational choice tradition advocates decentralisation as a means of enhancing individual freedom by reducing, as also localising, the domain for state intervention. NI, Communitarian and NPE theories of decentralisation largely inform its use as a policy tool by international development organisations, country governments and NGOs. While these theoretical traditions are potent and influential, they are also limited by their views of individual, market, community and state, and the postulated interlinkages between these. In particular, they produce an impoverished view of the state, and do not theorise the role of the state in decentralisation adequately. This, I consider, is an insufficient approach for an appropriate study of decentralisation. The next section briefly discusses a major critical response to take on the rational choice interpretation of decentralisation, and highlights other issues that inform the need for an alternative understanding.

### **3. The 'Political Settlement' Approach**

During the last decade, an alternative theorisation has emerged in criticism of individualist prescriptions for decentralisation. In contrast to rational choice approaches that formulate decentralisation as a prescription or solution, this view interprets it as a process that has a potential bearing on the extent to which the state is able to fulfil its given objectives of 'public policy'. Also, unlike rational choice approaches where the state is ill defined and a constant

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<sup>52</sup> Wood (1997), p 81, Day and Klein (1987), and Weir and Hall (1994)

<sup>53</sup> The New Public Management, pioneered in the UK in the 1980s, symbolised the most popular among the public-private partnerships advocated by NPE. A key feature of NPM was the attempt to separate economic decision-making and the control over resources from the actual provision of services through contracting. Refer to Minogue et al (1998), Walsh and Deakin (1996), Walsh et al (1997).

<sup>54</sup> Stinchcombe and Heimer (1985), Macneil (1980)

<sup>55</sup> Self (1993), p 215

attempt to minimise its role underlies the process of its definition, this theorisation starts with an unambiguous view of the state.

Rathin Roy (1999), a principal exponent of this view adopts a 'rights based' view of the state, where the state 'a set of institutions is vested with the supreme coercive power to protect and legitimate rights with the purpose of attaining public policy objectives', and rights are 'politically defended claims over assets and resource flows' (1999: 35). The 'political settlement' in turn is a 'collective balance of power arrangement that enables the definition of a structure of rights, which in turn, allows for the pursuance by the state, of a set of public policy objectives, without further reference to the ontology of rights definition and the articulation process' (Roy 1999: 35). This conceptualisation of state is accompanied by an essential notion of its 'autonomy' from competing claims of dominant political and economic groups within the domain the state governs. Roy considers that it is the 'political settlement' that defines state autonomy. Decentralisation therefore, is viewed as essentially a 'political phenomenon', and one that can be understood in accordance with the existing 'political settlement'. Unlike individualist theories, decentralisation is viewed analytically and not normatively within this approach.

The notion of a 'political settlement' was proposed by Mushtaq Khan (1989, 1995) to advance beyond theories of new institutionalism that sought to explain emergence and variations in institutions or institutional change. Khan's principal thesis is as follows: Institutions, that reduce uncertainty in human exchange are devised to reduce transaction costs, but state intervention, produces rent seeking that increase transaction costs. However, the analysis cannot end here, as property rights, present everywhere, involve rent seeking, since 'people would spend resources trying to maintain or change them' (1995: 74). State intervention can also pose institutions as capable of 'changing incentives or enabling, coordinating, and monitoring' that can actually reduce transaction costs. Besides, a contractarian understanding of institutions within NI is limited to a language of rational individualism. It disregards the critical possibility that 'divergent' interests may contest institutional change. Following its overemphasis on the costs of organising collective action for institution formation, Khan argues that these theories disregard the costs of social contest over either maintenance or change in property rights, which he calls the 'real costs of change' (1995: 75-80). All institutional change, in Khan's view, involves 'losers' who might resist such change politically because 'compensation is not offered, or if offered, not accepted' (1995: 81). Moreover, Khan advances ahistorical models of NI, and states that social costs of contests over rights that accompany institutional change tend to vary in differing contexts.

Roy's definition of the state as a 'set of institutions vested with the supreme coercive power to protect and legitimate rights' follows this emphasis. The conditions under which the state would be able to follow or achieve its public policy objectives, without any further references

to the rights issue, therefore becomes the central concern. These conditions precisely are viewed as the political settlement. Roy (1999) argues that decentralisation can result in one of two possible outcomes. Decentralisation can alter the set of possible outcomes of public policy objectives by allowing a different political settlement, or alternately can inhibit the achievement of a public policy objective by generating political settlement that is incompatible with what these objectives can achieve. Thus, decentralisation as a policy tool of the state can also act as a catalyst for the political settlement to change<sup>56</sup>.

The 'political settlement' approach to decentralisation constitutes a clear advance over interpretations that arise from individualist theories. Its main strength lies in the fact it adopts a view of state functioning as a dynamic political process, where different interests compete and contest at different levels of articulation. Their objective is to gain access to the 'set of institutions' defined as the state, in order to preserve their property rights. This is comparable with liberal theory where private ownership of property (or indeed, the means of production), the 'key source of contemporary power, is ostensibly depoliticised, and treated as if it were not a proper subject of politics' (Held 1984: 52). The understanding that decentralisation policies of the state are not divorced from the ongoing contests to strike a balance in the definition of a 'structure of rights', firmly locates it in the context of political conditions in which it is formulated and implemented. The explanatory scope of this approach includes the effects that decentralisation may have, which individualist prescriptions normatively allude to, but do not always consider.

However, there are difficulties, and these concern the manner in which seminal terms have been conceptualised. First, the state: although the 'political settlement' approach does not restrict itself to class based analysis, it is articulated within the broad idiom of Marxist theory, especially, Poulantzas' structuralist Marxism with its basic postulate of 'relative autonomy' as a characteristic of the state. Roy's (1999) succinct turn of phrase about state autonomy being a 'function of the prevailing political and economic balance within the domain the state governs' can be compared with traditional Marxist explanations of 'capitalist rationality' by rooting it in the consciousness of the 'ruling class'<sup>57</sup>, whose very definition encompasses rigid ideas of political and economic domination of a group of people, that remains stable over a period of time. The former postulation is therefore vulnerable to some of the principal criticisms that have arisen of the latter<sup>58</sup>.

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<sup>56</sup> Roy (1999) explains this in a detailed analysis. In the first case, when the political settlement is such that it is articulated centrally by a dominant set of interests, and public policy objectives of the state involve including other regional interests, decentralisation, by allowing the creation of multiple levels of contest and collaboration, enables these regional interests to be encompassed in the 'public policy decision-making process'. The political settlement in this instance would have been widened with minimal political contestation, and institutional change, in political settlement terms, would be fully explained. In the second case, when public policy objectives involve the centralised vesting of rights, such objectives may be defeated because decentralisation has generated a plural political settlement, articulated in terms of local regional interests, which resist centralised repositioning of bargaining rights.

<sup>57</sup> Block (1977)

<sup>58</sup> Refer to Block (1977) for an interesting critique of traditional Marxist explanations (both instrumentalist and structuralist or what he calls 'functionalist'). Block's main proposition is that rationality cannot be seen as a function or

Foremost among these is the lack of clarification about the manner in which these 'dominant' interests are represented in the state apparatus. It is not clear for instance, how state 'autonomy' as referred to by Roy, translates into a description of what the 'set of institutions' called the state are comprised of, and how 'autonomous' interests of these institutions correlate with dominant interests, and what precisely are the driving forces of government rationality. Moreover, state autonomy in the 'political settlement' formulation paradoxically, refers to a singular and uniform view of government rationality (that formulates and pursues public policy objectives), while developing a sophisticated view of multiple levels of political contestation. Thus, for the state to be able to follow its public policy objectives, an intensive interaction between divergent interests must occur at various levels, and equilibrium must be reached; but a potential consideration of conflicting interests that may inform the formulation of such objectives themselves, is lost within the mires of an unspecified 'autonomy'.

In his application of this approach however, Roy (1999) comes close to correlating multiple interests with the formulation of public policy objectives, as he considers that decentralisation can 'enable regional interests to be *encompassed* within the public decision-making process', or alternatively defeat public policy objectives that attempt to interfere with the existing distribution of rights, if an earlier set of decentralisation policies have already created multiple levels of contest and claim. If this is the case, then proponents of the 'political settlement' approach need to clarify further the meaning of state 'autonomy' that they espouse.

Second, the 'real costs of change' that arise from social contestation over property rights form the basis of the 'political settlement' approach, as institutional change provoked by state intervention, involves losers, who would offer political resistance, but 'compensation is either not offered or if offered, is not accepted' (Khan 1995: 81). Despite the centrality of resistance to this formulation, it is not clear precisely how this term is conceptualised. What precisely are the fields of resistance, and would all 'losers' resist or need 'side-payments'<sup>59</sup>? It follows therefore that if the 'costs' of change are derived from the extent of resistance, which cannot be easily quantified, then much of the political settlement analysis becomes empirically unverifiable. This is particularly true for the 'balance of power' proposition that directly rests on equilibrium derived from contest, costs and compensation between groups.

Third, this critique of the 'balance of power' arrangement has a bearing on the explanatory power claimed by 'political settlement' approaches. The distinctive dynamism of interests that this approach begins with is however disregarded once this 'balance' is arrived at, and a post-balance stability becomes the overriding context in which the state can act 'autonomously'. Although the 'political settlement' approach itself does not explicitly theorise on whether the

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consciousness of any one group, and is the outcome of conflicts among three sets of agents: the capitalist class, managers of the state apparatus, and the working class.

<sup>59</sup> Scott's (1985, 1990) pioneering work challenges static ideas of domination and resistance, as clearly identified actions within the public domain.

articulation of social contestation is *only* in accordance with this balance, or political settlement, there is the danger of rigidly predictive explanations of social change being rooted within it.

On balance, the political settlement approach includes interesting and relevant elements for analysis. It emphasises dynamic contests to preserve property rights as the principal basis of politics and consequently, political power. By viewing decentralisation analytically as a phenomenon grounded within the political imperatives of the state, it effectively discredits the basic propositions of NI, communitarian and NPE theories of decentralisation, which are both apolitical and without a sense of history.

#### **4. Tryst with development**

Decentralisation, underpinned by NI, communitarian and NPE theories, shares a common conceptual basis with contemporary development discourse. This, I will argue, has strengthened the universal appeal of decentralisation, and firmly secured decentralisation as a dominant international discourse.

##### **4.1 The resilience of development ideology**

The belief that contemporary development ideology emerged in the late 1940s, with US President Harry Truman's announcement of a 'programme of development' for the 'less economically accomplished' countries of the world through capitalist expansion, is now firmly rooted in critical imagination about development<sup>60</sup>. An eminent dissenting voice is that development as a modern idea is in fact rooted in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe<sup>61</sup>. It arose to counter 'chaos' resulting from ideas of progress as advanced by the Enlightenment thinkers, who proposed 'unlimited improvement through unaided human effort' (Cowen and Shenton 1995: 31). Development, in contrast had intentionality, design and purpose. This has had the primary effect of privileging the agency of the 'developer' with respect to the subject to be 'developed'. The 'making of the Third World', to use Escobar's term, laid the basis for systematic interventions in societies in various parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America in the name of development. Its practitioners have consistently used development as a 'catch-all' phrase to denote a range of solutions over the decades, as also an ideological consensus in its total meaning.

The intellectual history of development is tightly interwoven with the meandering courses of global capitalist expansion<sup>62</sup>. There have been two major phases in development discourse in the post war era, coinciding with the construction and reconstruction of capitalism. The first is of international Keynesianism and state mediated capitalism until the 1970s and second, of the neo liberal, de-regulated capitalism, which emerged during the 1970s and continues to

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<sup>60</sup> Escobar (1995a)

<sup>61</sup> Cowen and Shenton (1995)

<sup>62</sup> Escobar (1995a), Kamat (2002a), Moore (1995)

dominate international development discourse today. This stage marks the general acceptability of the market, instead of the state as an agency for development.

These stages reveal a consistent resilience within development ideology, which has 'successfully' averted crises and reinvented itself continuously. Although development's advertised goals of modernisation have not been reached, whether by the state or the market, 'we are still within the era of modernisation, despite its perpetual postponement' (Moore 1985: 14, 28). Since the late 1980s, a number of studies have systematically exposed development's essentially biased representation of socio-cultural reality<sup>63</sup>. Some of them, especially Escobar, pursue the idea of a post-development era, through an attempt at the construction of 'new' narratives (1995b). While I think this is important, a pursuit of meanings of post-development, counter hegemonic in purpose to development, would be defeated if they were not to be accompanied by attempts at examining the effects that various practices of development continue to have.

Successive reinterpretations of development ideologies have made it possible for development to be combined with various international discourses that have been dominant at the time. For our purposes, development ideology, especially in its second phase, was modified to reflect growing sympathies for economic liberalisation and decentralisation in influential quarters. The following part proposes to discuss the principal elements of this transformation.

#### **4.2 Decentralisation and Development: A mutually constitutive relationship**

By the late 1970s, three trends gained ground simultaneously. First, powerful elements of the official development apparatus decried the role of the state in economic decision-making, perceiving it as innately corrupt and rent seeking. Second, the market, with its projected intrinsic virtues of individual freedom and efficient exchange, was broadly perceived as the converse of the corrupt state. Third, increased interest in the role of 'indigenous' and 'customary' institutions, in successfully regulating their own affairs, brought the 'community' into sharp focus among practitioners of international development<sup>64</sup>. This was complemented by studies that showed large increases in rural population combined with environmental improvements and agricultural productivity (Woodhouse et al 2000). Together, these challenged neo-Malthusian fears regarding growing population pressures and inadequate food production, that contributed to the internationalisation of the US food/technology model and the adoption of 'productivist strategies' by developing countries in the decades following the 1940s<sup>65</sup>.

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<sup>63</sup> Escobar (1984, 1991, 1992, 1995a, 1995b), Esteva and Prakash (1998), Gupta (1998), Ludden (1992), Murray-Li (1999), Sachs (1999) to name a few.

<sup>64</sup> Woodhouse et al (2000)

<sup>65</sup> Goodman and Redclift (1991), p 133-136

The convergence of all three trends has had tremendous bearing on international development policy formulation in recent decades. In concept as much as in practice, the reinforcement of market and community has become a defining feature of the reinterpretation of development. Development in these guises appears as the alter ego of decentralisation, especially as visualised by new institutionalist, communitarian and NPE theories. Drawing on common conceptual grounds, development, like decentralisation, seems versatile in its capability. It promises to create conditions for the fulfilment of individual freedom, promote cooperative behaviour among rational individuals in self-sufficient communities and improve efficiency in provision of goods and services.

Both market and community, as they have evolved within contemporary development ideology, are depicted in isolation of the broader context of the state. This reflects the overpowering influence of individualist approaches, especially neo-liberalism and NPE, where the entire conception of the state is unhelpfully tagged as 'minimal' government. However, given the inevitability of the modern state, and the realisation that the state is always 'integral to the determination of a country's economic destiny', development practitioners have been compelled to adopt 'consensual' approaches to development (Weiss and Hobson 1995). In essence, this involved the articulation of market-based and community-based development in a pragmatic language.

The previous sections discussed how decentralisation, as envisioned in individualist theories, is formulated as a normative prescription. However, these prescriptions are not just abstract. They prescribe clear grounds of action and recommend instruments of policy. It is through decentralisation then, that ruling development ideas can be effectively translated into concrete strategies for government, both by official state agencies and by the non-governmental sector. Greater roles for local government and/or increased involvement of market agencies are advocated in order to enhance efficiency in government action. A wide-ranging emphasis on 'community', as the site for decision-making in state-led development programmes, is placed to facilitate community-based development.

Concrete initiatives for decentralisation, therefore, are reflected in policies for the reorganisation of relations between various levels of government, and for greater involvement of market and 'community-based' organisations. Decentralisation thus goes hand in hand with the proliferation of a 'plural, institutional landscape' combining state institutions or public sector bodies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) of different types, and the commercial/private sector<sup>66</sup>. Thus, contemporary decentralisation policies contain a fairly watered down version of the 'anti-state' sentiment that their theoretical bases convey.

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<sup>66</sup> Evans (1996), Ostrom (1996), Woodhouse et al (2000)

In these conditions, the question of why states would find it in their interest to foster community-based or market-based development is no longer posed in the same way. Decentralised development embodies a viable solution for states to remain within the international configuration of development<sup>67</sup>. In addition of course, there may be a host of domestic factors that contribute to demands for decentralisation or, alternately, to the impediments in its way.

### 4.3 Participatory Development

The idea of popular participation in development has gained widespread currency with critiques of centralised development. Grassroots activists, social movements, academics and intellectuals have together contributed to the demand for greater 'participation' of local people in development planning and decision-making. This demand has followed the critique of biases in the practice of contemporary international development, construed as an oppressive and unequal set of 'top-down' relations. This critique had two parts, (a) broadly against the larger paradigm of north-centric development relations that constructs the 'south' and the southern peoples as oppressed (Escobar 1991) and (b), in opposition to the hierarchical and bureaucratic implementation that has characterised development projects worldwide. In both these respects, participatory development espouses the cause of the 'local'. As a result of the centrality of the local to participatory discourse, decentralisation offers a form and language that is apposite to participatory development.

Participation, both as idea and practice, draws from a number of theoretical sources. The resulting mix has proved to be particularly attractive to the international bandwagon supporting decentralised development. The following section summarises the principal theoretical bases of participation, in order to capture the range of ideas that it encompasses.

Liberalism's influence on this discourse is seminal as participation espouses 'autonomous' individuals for whom self-determination is what makes life meaningful (Kymlicka 1990: 198). The idea of limits upon legally sanctioned political power gripped liberal democrats like Jeremy Bentham, James Mill, and J.S Mill, who associated 'liberal democracy with a political apparatus that would ensure the accountability of the governors to the governed' (Held 1984: 42, Macpherson 1973). Participation in 'political life', whether through voting or involvement through other means was regarded by liberal democrats as absolutely essential in creating a direct interest in government. Western ideas of participation through representative democracy include 'pluralism', notably developed by Robert Dahl, who emphasised fair

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<sup>67</sup> What I call the 'anti-state' sentiment has also been described as the 'hollowing out of the nation-state' to capture the transformation from state led to market led approaches (Jessop 1994). Rankin (2001) through a study of micro credit programmes in Nepal, considers that globalisation with its component of neo-liberal strategies, does not mean 'less' of state. She argues, much the same as I do in case of decentralisation, that the widespread adoption of globalisation is contingent on the respective interpretation of the concept by states, and more importantly, states need to adopt 'new approaches' (i.e. globalisation) 'if they wish to survive, let alone compete, in an increasingly globalised world' (2001: 21).

competition among organised group interests, which alone would secure the democratic character of a regime. Dahl calls this 'polyarchy' or 'rule by the many'<sup>68</sup>.

Contemporary ideas of participation also draw significantly on the community as the 'social repository' of solidarity and popular self-management or direct democracy. This theoretical tradition dates to Jean Jacques Rousseau, who was critical of the liberal democratic notion that 'democracy is the name for a particular kind of state which can only be held accountable to the citizenry once in a while' (Held 1984: 50). For Rousseau these communes were 'societies organised in bodies not too big, so that they can be governed, and not too small so that they can have their own life'<sup>69</sup>. Rousseau's ideas, some writers argue, had a direct bearing on the Marxist tradition<sup>70</sup>.

Rousseau's ideas of direct democracy are easily combined with some key propositions of communitarian thinkers within the new institutionalist tradition. These concern the projected ability of 'communities' to develop their 'own' institutions, whether entirely endogenously or with some 'support' from sources 'external' to the community, and the consequent ascription of 'community-like' characteristics to collectivities.

The idea of participation, with its substantive emphasis on ordinary people rather than 'faraway experts' making their own life decisions, also draws on populism, which in general celebrates 'the virtue that resides in simple people, who are in the overwhelming majority, and in their collective traditions'<sup>71</sup>. Populism in its broadest sense, implies not a broadly defined development strategy, but also a particular type of politics, authority structure and ideology in which an effort is made to manufacture a collective "popular" will and an ordinary subject (Laclau 1977 as cited in Peet and Watts 1996: 26). The distinctive feature of populism is that it lends itself to historical continuity. It is not inimical to adaptations to local practices and ideologies, as for instance, to the specificities of nationalism and socialism that exist in different contexts.

In certain contexts of development, especially concerning education and literacy, contemporary ideas of participation draw strength from the radical notions of Paulo Freire<sup>72</sup>. Freire essentially sought to 'liberate' people through empowerment, for which he saw education as an essential tool. Freire (1972) made the case that in order to liberate people by education, human agency must challenge the existence of power structures through 'empowerment'. Empowerment refers to 'a process by the dominated classes who seek their own freedom from domination' (Freire and Shor 1987). Freire visualised participation as one

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<sup>68</sup> Dahl (1956, p 133, 1971)

<sup>69</sup> Rousseau (1968)

<sup>70</sup> One of Marxism's key starting points was the consideration that 'class societies, as well as the state, constituted transitional historical entities, doomed to be replaced by a communal order based on the 'self-government' of producers' (Alfonso 1997: 177).

<sup>71</sup> Wiles (1969), p 166, Laclau (1977), Peet and Watts (1996)

of the ways through which such empowerment could occur, as for instance, in non-formal educational projects, which the 'oppressed' could carry out empowering themselves in the process.

In this wide spectrum of powerful ideas, 'participation' captures, both concepts of direct democracy and 'radical democratic projects'<sup>73</sup>. Participation, at least philosophically, has become synonymous with political notions as empowerment, contest of domination, and the broadening and deepening of democracy. These aspects contribute to the universal appeal of participation. The appeal holds true as much for mainstream development agencies like the World Bank as for oppositional social movements that reject western ideas of development. Thus, governments, donor agencies, and NGOs have all inducted participation into their development practice. Participation has been the subject of intensive research undertaken by eminent institutions, in both developed and less developed countries. As a result, participatory development has become the 'new orthodoxy'<sup>74</sup>.

The birth of the participatory development project is the most visible sign of this phenomenon. It represents the translation of abstract ideas informing participation, variously interpreted, into tangible actions within an achievable time frame. However, the proposition of participatory project as a universal type is unacceptable, as its very existence frequently precludes any examination of the effects that participatory practices may have. Besides, participatory projects, while attempting to embody a universal or self-explanatory idiom, are not able to, as they are implemented in a diversity of cultural contexts. This ensures the impossibility of homogeneity in participatory development practices.

Participatory development projects are fast becoming an integral aspect of decentralised development. Contained in this single formulation, are multiple ideas of 'individual', 'local', and 'community', i.e., all the elements cardinal to influential discourses of decentralisation and development. The participatory project is indeed, the most significant proof of decentralisation's consequential tryst with development. Decentralisation, with its prescriptions for reorganisation and creation of 'appropriate' agencies, is a useful partner concept for participation, as participation is an idea whose utility for development discourses lies in its potential to formulate agencies out of ordinary people.

## **5. Typologies of Decentralisation**

Typologies of decentralisation are typically based on two criteria: one, the nature and extent of power being 'transferred' and two, the nature and description of the institution to which power is being transferred. The starting point of most typologies is 'administrative' decentralisation, which aims to redistribute authority, responsibility and financial resources for

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<sup>72</sup> Freire (1972), Freire and Shor (1987)

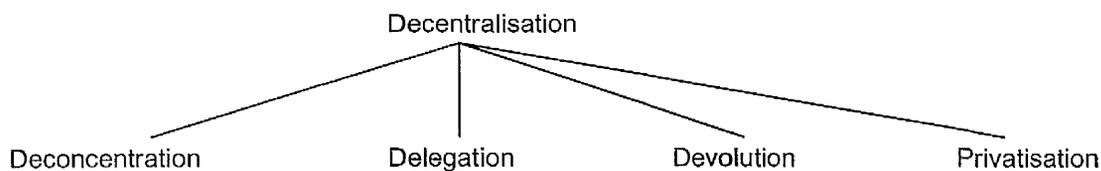
<sup>73</sup> Starkloff (1996), Tornquist and Tharakan (1996)

<sup>74</sup> Stirrat (1996), p 67

providing public services among different levels of the government<sup>75</sup>. Depending on the nature of the 'decentralised unit', administrative decentralisation is further categorised into two types, *deconcentration and delegation*.

Rondinelli and Nellis (1986), whose typology is most in use by influential neo-liberal organisations like the World Bank, regard deconcentration to be the 'weakest' form of administrative decentralisation, because it only redistributes decision-making authority and financial and management responsibilities among the different levels of the central government<sup>76</sup>. In comparison, through delegation, central governments transfer decision-making and the administration of public functions to semi-autonomous organisations not wholly controlled by the central government, but ultimately accountable to it. However, units to which powers are either 'deconcentrated' or 'delegated' cannot determine policies that affect their position within the broader decision-making structure. They can only take decisions on subjects transferred to them.

**Figure 1**  
**Rondinelli and Nellis' Typology of Decentralisation**



Source: Rondinelli and Nellis (1986)

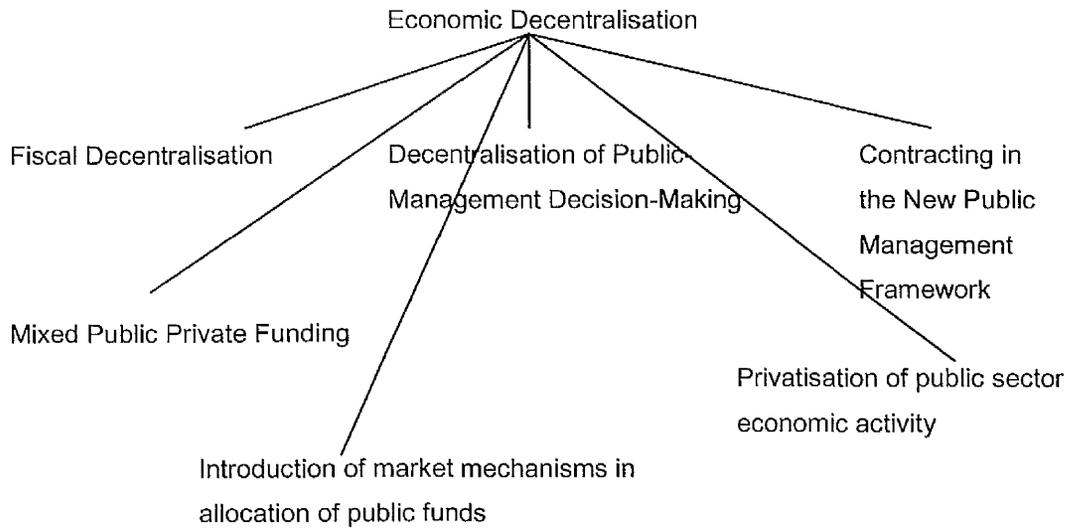
The second type is fiscal and economic decentralisation. The World Bank's World Development Report, 1997, was a landmark in the epistemological development of the decentralisation concept, as it stated that the rationale for decentralisation is 'similar' to the rationale for 'liberalisation, privatisation and other market reforms' (1997:120-121). The Bank's position reflected Rondinelli and Nellis' influential classification of 1986, where decentralisation on fiscal and economic grounds is simplistically equated with privatisation. In later years, the Bank, in its online sourcebook, specified that fiscal decentralisation could take many forms. Lower levels of government may be empowered to raise revenue through a range of methods including self-financing or cost recovery through user charges, co-financing or co-production arrangements, and the levying of property or sales tax or indirect charges. Mackintosh and Roy observe that there are six different types of economic decentralisation, of which privatisation is only one form (1999, p 2)

<sup>75</sup> Administrative decentralisation forms an important aspect of 'territorial decentralisation', as powers may be transferred to local governments situated in different territories within the country (Rondinelli and Nellis 1986).

<sup>76</sup> World Bank, 'Online Source Book For Decentralisation and Local Government', [http://www.ciesin.org/decentralization/Entryway/english\\_contents.html](http://www.ciesin.org/decentralization/Entryway/english_contents.html), OECD (1997)

**Figure 2**

**Mackintosh and Roy's Typology of Economic Decentralisation**



Source: Mackintosh and Roy (1999)

The third type is what goes under the name of 'political' or 'democratic' decentralisation, also 'devolution' (World Bank, Manor 1999, Rondinelli and Nellis 1986 respectively). Its key feature is the transfer of power from higher levels of government, both elected institutions and central bureaucracies, to local elected representatives of the people. Rondinelli and Nellis (1986) refer to 'devolution' as the 'creation or strengthening, financially or legally, of sub-national units of government, whose activities are substantially outside the control of the central government'. It is regarded to be the most extensive form of decentralisation among its advocates, as it evokes the basic principles of citizenship and democracy. The inclusion of community based participatory development initiatives within this category forms the subject of a raging debate in decentralisation today<sup>77</sup>. Democratic decentralisation to elected local bodies rests on the premise of citizenship, whereas community based institutions derive their legitimacy from notions of community.

The chief problem with this typology is that it has a limited use beyond providing a functional description of decentralisation types. While the language it uses is convenient for easy depiction, there is the danger that these types be used as self-explanatory and universal in their connotation. For example, the insertion of a single term as 'democratic' to qualify decentralisation in a development project plan would at once change the way in which the project is perceived. Another problem is that it does not include space for historical or political

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<sup>77</sup> Manor (1999), Baumann (1999)

variations that form the critical context in which decentralisation 'types' appear. This impoverishment of language results in the crudeness in description.

## 6. Decentralised Development: State and Civil Society

The main theoretical underpinnings of contemporary discourses of decentralisation and development have been discussed. NI, communitarian and NPE theories of decentralisation emphasise the community and market respectively, while repudiating, albeit figuratively, the presence and authority of the state. Further, as decentralisation is prescribed to improve state functioning, a powerful link is drawn between decentralisation and civil society. 'Decentralised' solutions from the community and the market are located within 'civil society'.

The term 'civil society' constitutes powerful imagery for domestic public space, and 'to all those who invoke it, civil society incarnates a desire to recover for society powers- economic, social, expressive- believed to have been illegitimately usurped by states'<sup>78</sup>. Throughout the developing countries of Asia and Africa, private enterprises, voluntary organisations, universities, church and denominational associations, trade unions and professional organisations, are being identified as the various constituents of civil society.

The problem in this formulation lies in the projection of the civil society as a substantive entity, identifiable and distinguishable from the state. Decentralisation discourses, in their use of civil society, project an adversarial relationship between civil society and state<sup>79</sup>. The historical evolution of civil society is firmly rooted in the 'western' theoretical tradition<sup>80</sup>. From modern contract theorists like Hobbes and Locke, who defined civil society through its contrast with 'natural society' or 'state of nature', to Hegel who used civil society and state as different 'public' ideas in contrast to the 'private' domain of the family, civil society in western political theorising, has been defined in opposition to several antonyms (Kaviraj 2001, Khilnani 2001).

Civil society has also been understood within the sociological tradition, in contrast to the community<sup>81</sup>. Ferdinand Tonnies elaborated the clearest and starkest distinction between the two<sup>82</sup>. 'Gemeinschaft' or community, was to be understood as a real organism; whereas 'Gesellschaft' or 'aggregate by convention or law of nature' was to be understood as a multitude of natural and artificial individuals, the wills and spheres of whom are in many relations with and to one another, and remain nevertheless independent of one another and devoid of mutual familiar relationships' (Tonnies 1955: 55 as cited in Kaviraj 2001: 305). With the progression of modernity, there has been a general move from gemeinschaft towards

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<sup>78</sup> Khilnani (2001: 12), Jenkins (2001)

<sup>79</sup> Ideas of complementarity between state and civil society, such as through institutional partnerships between government and private and voluntary organisations, represent the more practical aspect of this relationship.

<sup>80</sup> Khilnani (2001) and Kaviraj (2001) use this expression to describe political theorising in Britain, Western Europe and North America. I retain this meaning in my usage.

<sup>81</sup> Marx who was fundamentally critical of the separation between civil society and state, referred to the 'ironic dissonance between the "bourgeois" and the "citizen" influenced by the Hegelian distinction between partial or selfish interest and commitment to a collective interest of the entire community' (Kaviraj 2001: 303)

gesellschaft, 'because of the gradual tendency to replace communal relations of trust with contractual ones' (Kaviraj 2001: 305).

### 6.1 Limitations in 'western' perspectives

Although these intellectual developments regarding civil society occurred in the specific context of western states, the principal points of this dichotomy, especially the posited contrast with the state, are now being adopted universally. The civil society, regardless of whether it exists or of its specific nature, is used to embody 'people's dissatisfactions' about the performances of local states. In view of this, scholars have challenged the application of a dichotomous view of state-civil society relationships in the postcolonial states of the developing world.

The first major issue raised by these scholars is that modern political practices were introduced in these societies as a result of the intermeshing influences of colonialism, capitalism and liberalism, instead of the sole universalising force of capital (Kaviraj 2001, Khilnani 2001). The establishment of colonial power in the societies of Asia and Africa involved the establishment of a state as 'close to the modern kind as possible' (Kaviraj 2001: 308). However, many of these societies did not have an individualist tradition that was seminal to western societies. Social norms (as for instance the hierarchical caste system in India) were far more important for individual conduct than the political authority of the state. Further, in these societies, 'a central difficulty facing the possibility of civil society was the presence of identitarian solidarities of a sub-national character' (Khilnani 2001: 28). This culture had a 'conception of society distinct from its political structure, precisely because of the relatively marginal existence of the state in relation to the primarily legislative function of producing binding norms for society' (Kaviraj 2001: 308). Therefore, in these contexts, where the state was frequently 'marginal' to the society and did not represent centralised political power, western definitions of civil society as an aggregate of social forces against the state are not entirely applicable.

In postcolonial societies of Asia and Africa moreover, the first instance of a modern state was experienced during the colonial period. Colonial states were driven by an ideology of sovereign power that resulted in the creation of elaborate state apparatuses, comprising both the bureaucracy and the military. Modernisation that accompanied the colonial-capitalist project provoked attempts on part of the state apparatus to create a civil society<sup>83</sup>. In India for instance, the institution of state as 'an impersonal regime of relations' was accompanied by the introduction of a 'complete vocabulary of liberal rights in the economic and social fields'<sup>84</sup>.

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<sup>82</sup> Tonnies (1955)

<sup>83</sup> See Kaviraj (2001), pp 313-318, for a gripping account of why it was 'convenient' for native elites to accept and advocate, an idea of civil society as distinct from the 'legitimate province' of the state. Young (unpublished) writes that post-independence African states were run by people 'who looked to essentially Western visions of modernity and progress', p 9.

<sup>84</sup> Kaviraj (1991) p 79

This process essentially involved the 'making sense' of society in a western idiom. This however resulted in a situation where the society had to be subject to the state, rather than the other way around (Kaviraj 1991: 80).

Yet, a fundamental problem remains and this concerns the relative absence of a common language of politics. Civil society 'presupposes a conception of politics that embodies a common sense of its purposes, a sense of what it is that individuals and groups are competing for, of why they have associated and agreed to compete and disagree' (Khilnani 2001: 26). In sub-Saharan Africa for instance, there are 'deeply divided beliefs regarding the point of politics', and the 'possibility of civil society is endangered'<sup>85</sup>. In India, the problem is more to do with the absence of a 'common conceptual frame' (Khilnani 2001: 27). During the colonial period, the nationalist elite quickly lapped up the language of civil society, using recourse to ideas of a liberal public sphere through newspapers and public associations. However in following decades, a 'common conceptual map' for the whole country could not be created. The increasing disunity between 'elite' and 'vernacular' discourses of politics, and the subsequent identification of the former with the view of the state, are regarded as factors responsible for the lack of clarity regarding the existence and theorisation of an 'Indian' civil society (Kaviraj 1991, 2001, Chatterjee 1988).

Colonialism and its demise brought upon tremendous requirements for newly independent states. Unlike the west, demands to ensure security, legitimation through modern democratic practices and welfare of their citizens, were 'lodged simultaneously and not sequentially' (Khilnani 2001: 31). These pressures have often proved unbearable, ranging from crises of expectations as in India or more severely, a complete breakdown even of minimal political order, as in Africa. In these contexts, civil society has, and is being, looked towards for solutions through democratisation and decentralisation.

The reassertion of civil society arising from disillusionment with the state, calls for 'people to gather up all resources of sociability to form their own collective projects against the states' (Kaviraj 2001: 319). Yet, anti-state arguments do not distinguish between the kinds of social organisations that constitute civil society, i.e., whether they are the *gemeinschaft* or the *gesellschaft* ones, thereby disregarding the enormous differences in implications between the two. In the first case, civil society would simply mean the 'rest of society and would include potentially powerful communal collectivities', and in the second, it would mean a substantially smaller segment of social associations and groups, whose 'collective power against the state' is 'negligible in some third world societies' (Kaviraj 2001: 319). This lack of distinction leads to a further lack of conceptual clarity regarding the kind of collective projects being called upon to counter the state.

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<sup>85</sup> Bayart (1986) as cited in Khilnani (2001: 26-27)

Precisely because of the historical context of evolution of civil society in newly independent developing states, civil society is neither a substantive entity, nor can it be uniformly understood as an aggregate of social forces bestowed with a limiting power against the state. Khilnani comments, 'In the task of developing viable and durable democratic politics in the South, the idea of civil society is hardly a self-sufficing one, let alone a fundamental "key"' (2001: 32). There are, nonetheless, increasing individual instances of popular social mobilisation and groups actively critical of official state power in developing countries like India. In Kaviraj's view, these developments have spun 'a crisis of theory rather than the state, since the state and the politics around it are becoming increasingly important in the life of society, but it is doing things for which no precedents are found in western theory or history' (2001: 316-317). There is an increasingly perceived need among these societies to influence and constantly interact with the state. While these are not emblematic of a clearly defined civil society, they do however indicate growing vibrancy in the democratic culture of a nation.

The widespread popularity of decentralisation in developing countries shows that decentralisation's advocates are not only ivory tower intellectuals who engage with the state-civil society dichotomy at an abstract plane. They include government functionaries, development practitioners, local politicians and popular 'grassroots' workers. This signifies that the dichotomy between state and civil society, which captures the essence of dominant decentralisation and development discourses, is articulated and kept alive through practices that are intelligible to its advocates at varied levels and contexts of operation.

## 6.2 Gramsci and his critics

I propose that a modified Gramscian approach contains analytical constructs of state and civil society that are useful for understanding decentralisation issues, especially of decentralised development, in postcolonial developing countries. Italian Marxist thinker and political activist Antonio Gramsci revolutionised Marxist thinking when he relocated civil society at the level of superstructure, along with the state<sup>86</sup>. Gramsci's essential contribution to existing Marxist thought was to show that the ruling class did not achieve stability of regime over the dominated classes through coercive means alone, but also by ensuring the consent of these dominated classes<sup>87</sup>. He emphasised therefore the ruling class's ideological domination over the dominated classes, in addition to its material domination that has always been at the centre of Marxist theorising. Gramsci, according to some scholars, was responsible for bringing 'democracy back into Marxism'<sup>88</sup>.

In Gramsci's initial characterisation, state or political society is counterposed to civil society, and the ruling class rules through supremacy in both arenas through coercive domination and hegemony respectively. In the ultimate Gramscian framework, 'state and civil society are

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<sup>86</sup> Bobbio (1987)

<sup>87</sup> Gramsci (1971)

<sup>88</sup> Hoffman (1984), p 4

merged into a larger suzerain unity, and its supremacy is a function of its hegemony protected by the armour of coercion<sup>89</sup>. The principal usefulness of Gramsci's views, as an overarching theoretical framework for my investigation, lies in rejecting conceptions of state and civil society as two distinct empirical realities. A Gramscian framework is therefore in fundamental disagreement with liberal-democratic and rational choice views of the state. These views subscribe to a state-civil society dichotomy, although there are important differences in approach<sup>90</sup>. Gramsci's theorisations on the other hand, allow 'a dialectical relationship between the forms of governance and the economic and social institutions of civil society'<sup>91</sup>.

Gramsci's works however, presented as jottings in his 'Prison Notebooks', have been variously interpreted. Hegemony, a key Gramscian concept, is particularly contentious<sup>92</sup>. Gramsci's ideas regarding hegemony have been applied and contested in a variety of different contexts. In what follows, I present a summary of the three principal issues of debate: hegemony as ideological domination, the cohesiveness of a hegemonic ideology, and the implications of a breach in hegemony.

The first is the issue of hegemony as ideological domination. For scholars like James Scott (1985), hegemony is simply the name that Gramsci gave to the process of ideological domination exercised by the ruling class over the dominated classes<sup>93</sup>. This interpretation of hegemony led to doubts about the impenetrability and irrevocability of such domination. Scott put forth the seminal countering view, arguing effectively that the concept of hegemony 'ignores the extent to which most subordinate classes are able, on the basis of their daily material experience, to penetrate and demystify the prevailing ideology' (1985: 317).

Scott's work directly contradicts interpretations offered by Chantal Mouffe and Christine Buci-Glucksmann. Mouffe (1979) resists the equation of hegemony with the imposition of a dominant ideology. She emphasises that hegemony is 'not to be found in an instrumental class alliance between classes' and argues instead that it involves the creation of a 'higher synthesis' or a 'collective will' (Mouffe 1979: 184). Buci-Glucksmann (1982) argues further along these lines. In her view, Gramsci made a clear distinction between 'active' and 'passive'

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<sup>89</sup> Gramsci (1971), p 12; see Anderson (1976-77), p 22 for a useful elaboration on three stages of Gramsci's theorisations regarding the relationship between state and civil society.

<sup>90</sup> A view of state, as 'a form of public power separate from both the ruler and the ruled, and constituting the supreme political authority within a certain defined boundary' is central to the liberal democratic conception (Skinner cited in Held 1989, p 12). In the rational choice approach however, there is no discernible notion of the state's public interest, as no distinction is made between the private interests of 'those who comprise the state and its machinery, i.e., civil servants and legislators', and their exercise of public power, a phenomenon known as rent-seeking (Mackintosh and Roy 1999). However, both these traditions present theoretical arguments as to why and how the state should be limited, and resort to a theorisation of civil society, variously interpreted, as the antithesis of the state.

<sup>91</sup> Kamat (2002a), p 33

<sup>92</sup> Anderson (1977) writes that the word 'hegemony' was first used by the Bolsheviks to refer to the domination the proletariat must establish over the peasantry to defeat the enemies of the revolution. Gramsci later extended the use of hegemony to understand the practices of the ruling classes in general.

<sup>93</sup> Scott fully recognises the complexity of Gramsci's thinking, 'At times he (Gramsci) appears to imply that hegemony is an active belief in the legitimacy and superiority of the ruling group; at other times, he implies that the acceptance is a more passive act in which the main features of the social order are merely accepted as given' (1985: 316).

consent, where active consent is consent that is 'expansive and not repressive'<sup>94</sup>. Buci-Glucksmann's reading of Gramsci thus presents a view of hegemony as 'the index of democracy', of 'collective political will that is both national and popular' (1982: 119). She distinguishes this from passive consent, where hegemony is achieved not by popular will, but by state domination. She cites Gramsci's theorisations of the 'passive revolution', which relied on the absence of real popular initiative even if certain popular demands were satisfied in small doses, legally, in a reformist way from above and by means of the state.

Scott's critique injects a sharp dissonance in interpretations of Gramscian ideas of consent creation that distinguish between 'active' and 'passive' consent, while attributing an image of national, popular will to the former<sup>95</sup>. Through a notion of 'routine compliance', he makes the case that although 'the function of the dominant ideology may be largely to secure the cohesion of the dominant class, conformity of the subordinate classes rested primarily on their knowledge that any other course is impractical, or dangerous or both' (1985: 320). He underscores 'deviant interpretations' of the dominant ideology by subordinate classes. They are free to flout the 'dominant' ideology within 'private' social spaces, while remaining constrained in their acts owing to the material reality of domination. These spaces are what Scott calls the sites of 'safe discourse' or 'hidden transcripts' where even symbolic compliance is not necessary.

Scott's work has provoked a number of scholarly exercises that pose hegemony not as a 'finished and monolithic ideological formation, but as a problematic, contested, political process of domination and struggle'<sup>96</sup>. Readings of hegemony that encompass consent and coercion have been extended to include the dialectics of resistance<sup>97</sup>. It has been said in Gramsci's favour that he, more than his interpreters, 'well understood the fragility of hegemony' (Roseberry 1994: 358). Gramsci did not prescribe a simplistic view of hegemony. Instead, he distinctly envisioned the positions of the 'elite and the subaltern as conscious historical subjects inhabiting autonomous cultural domains' within the hegemony process (Chatterjee 1988: PE 26). The process of hegemony therefore encompasses complexities such as the presence of elements of collaboration (by the subalterns) outside a homogenous space accessible to elite persuasion, and the need for elites to appropriate these elements of collaboration in order to preserve their hegemonic power. According to Roseberry, Gramsci did not assume that 'subaltern groups are captured or immobilised by some sort of ideological consensus', and that 'active or passive affiliations are placed within a dynamic range of actions' (1994: 359). This led to a Gramscian conception of politics as 'fundamentally contingent, fundamentally open-ended'<sup>98</sup>.

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<sup>94</sup> Mouffe (1979), Buci-Glucksmann (1982)

<sup>95</sup> See Buci-Glucksmann (1982)

<sup>96</sup> Roseberry (1994), p 358

<sup>97</sup> Significant inroads have been made in this direction. Besides Scott (1985, 1990), see Abrams (1988), Joseph and Nugent (1994), Roseberry (1994) and Sayer (1994).

<sup>98</sup> Hall (1991), p 124

The 'impenetrability' of hegemony as a dominant ideology by subordinate classes, has been challenged from a slightly different perspective as well. In the Indian context for example, Kaviraj (1984, 1997) discusses the duality of elite and vernacular universes, which makes it impossible for the elite to secure ideological domination or hegemony as described by Gramsci and his interpreters. He writes that the Indian nationalist leadership and the Nehruvian state failed to create 'common sense legitimacy' on account of its cultural and linguistic isolation from the masses<sup>99</sup>.

The second is the cohesiveness of a hegemonic ideology. Gramsci posited that the 'historical unity of the ruling classes is realised in the state' and 'the subaltern classes, by definition are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a "state"' (1971: 52). The related idea that the ruling class, united through its realisation of the state, also produces a cohesive hegemonic ideology has come under attack. Scott, using the same set of arguments described earlier, finds it implicit in the formulation of 'hegemonic ideology', that it is the 'sole creation of an elite, whereas in fact it is always the creation of prior struggle and compromises that are continually being tested and modified' (1985: 336). In this line of argument, Roseberry makes an attempt at a more acceptable definition of hegemony, not as a 'shared ideology, but as a common material and meaningful framework for living through, talking about and acting upon social orders characterised through domination' (1994: 361).

The hegemony-as-ruling ideology thesis can also be located within the general character of Marxist explanations of capitalist rationality. Such rationality is rooted in the consciousness of the ruling class, universalised as the general interest of the subordinate classes, as mediated through the authority of the state. Fred Block (1977) put forward an important voice of dissent in this formulation. Block's main proposition is that rationality cannot be seen as a function or consciousness of any one group, and is the outcome of conflicts among three sets of agents: the capitalist class, managers of the state apparatus, and the working class. In this line of reasoning, the attribution of a homogenised purpose and intentionality to the state is unacceptable. Successive studies seem to suggest that 'in practice, state functionaries at different levels, often, even normally, pursue competing agendas at cross purposes with each other' (Fuller and Harriss 2001: 3).

The third concerns the possible implications of a breach of hegemony. If it were accepted that hegemony is neither impenetrable nor cohesive, then the implications on the 'stability' of the regime would need to be examined as well. Here, I find it useful to discuss this matter in relation to 'legitimation', broadly understood as a process through which a belief in the basic credibility of the state is created<sup>100</sup>. The writings of Jurgen Habermas are central to a discussion of this concept<sup>101</sup>. Like Gramsci who shifted the focus of his ideas to understand

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<sup>99</sup> Kaviraj (1984), as cited in Fuller and Harriss (2001), p 8

<sup>100</sup> Held (1984a: 37, 1984b: 88)

<sup>101</sup> Habermas (1975, 1984)

the mechanisms of bourgeois rule over the working class in a stabilised capitalist society, Habermas locates his ideas about the crisis of legitimacy or the 'legitimation crisis' in the context of advanced capitalism.

Habermas essentially argues that the modern capitalist state attempts to justify accumulation in the interests of one class (the ruling class) through various manoeuvres in 'loyalty-creation'. However, it fails to do as these manoeuvres are more easily detected, following the increased penetration of the state in almost every aspect of social life, and the resulting 'dissolution of the liberal public sphere' (Held 1989: 79). This results in a legitimation crisis, as key elements of bourgeois ideology necessary for enhancing productivity are in danger of being eroded, following increasing disillusionment with the credibility of the state (Habermas 1984). The state's regulation of the erstwhile public sphere, along with its responsibility for productivity, precipitates a crisis displacement of sorts. Responsibility for severe economic problems as well as managing social conflict is displaced onto the state. His entire analytical framework thus hinges on an essential social integration with ethico-normative structures, failing which there is a legitimation crisis.

Habermas expresses concerns similar to Gramsci, though with important differences. The key similarity lies in the recognition accorded by both thinkers, to the need for projection of universal interest in order that particular interests may be more effectively promoted. Gramsci advanced his ideas to understand how hegemony is secured, through active consent, emphasising the key role played by the intellectual and moral leadership. Habermas emphasises the state's need to secure mass loyalty in order to continue and promote its capitalist accumulation in favour of one class. Such mass loyalty involved compliance with laws and rules that were in accordance with the principles of justice, equality and freedom. The difference however lies in that Gramsci did not seriously engage with the possibilities of collapse of a hegemonic order. Gramsci's ideas on Passive Revolution confirm that he was interested in cases where bourgeois hegemony would be secured in 'non-classical' ways (Chatterjee 1988). Habermas however considers precisely the situations of collapse of the state's legitimacy.

Habermas' critics accept his theory of crisis displacement (normative alienation as displaced onto the state), but do not think that this will necessarily lead to a crisis in legitimacy. David Held (1984b) has argued that it is crucial to preserve at all levels of social theory the distinction between dominant normative prescriptions, i.e., those involved in procuring legitimacy, and the frames of meaning and motives of people in society. Held contends that Habermas blurs this distinction by insisting on mass loyalty. Clearly, some groups have to be normatively integrated into the governing political culture to ensure a society's reproduction, but what matters most is not the moral approval of a majority of society's members.

Held, using an approach similar to Scott's discussed previously, argues that stability of a regime is related to 'the decentring or fragmentation of culture, the atomisation of people's experience of the social world' (1984b: 89). Fragmentation acts as a barrier to the systematic conception of the structure of social practices and possibilities. The political order is acknowledged not because it is regarded worthy, but because of the adoption of an instrumental attitude towards it. Compliance comprises pragmatic acquiescence to existing institutions. Thus, a common conclusion that scholars such as Held and Scott would come to is as follows. A regime does not need strongly shared normative ideals for its production or stability, and is therefore not permanently vulnerable to disintegration or revolution.

### 6.3 A modified Gramscian approach

These discussions offer the important insight that hegemony or its absence, is no longer being regarded as capable of producing 'big' outcomes, such as upholding states, securing the rule of dominant classes or alternately, causing regimes to collapse. However, critiques of Gramsci's original propositions have not led to the demise of the concept of hegemony. Instead, they have opened up new areas of application of hegemony. Drawing on previous discussions regarding developing states, especially those with a colonial past, it could be argued that later interpretations of Gramscian hegemony are particularly relevant in these countries, for at least three reasons.

One, state-society interrelationships in these countries are typically not the product of unambiguous dominance by a coherent ruling class. Two, newly independent states frequently resort to coercive measures as part of their rule, following the creation of massive state apparatuses, comprising the bureaucracy, police and military, during colonial times. Third, the society itself constitutes an array of crosscutting identities and loyalties, and there are wide chasms between elite and more regional, vernacular discourses. The following part describes new approaches to Gramscian hegemony that have emerged in recent years, and formulates the core analytical framework adopted for this thesis.

Hegemony has been posed as an 'empirical question', a project to be realised<sup>102</sup>. In this tradition, it is regarded as an assertion that has no predictable or permanent outcomes<sup>103</sup>. Hegemony is at best the attempt at 'temporary universalisation' that may or may not succeed<sup>104</sup>. Roseberry comments that analyses of hegemony are best understood as 'projects' rather than 'achievements' (1994: 365). These works pay particular attention to the processes that underlie the nature of accomplishment of such projects to assert hegemony. They address the question of how rule is accomplished and of the compromises integral to rule in a variety of empirical contexts.

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<sup>102</sup> Scott (1994), foreword

<sup>103</sup> Murray-Li (1999), Roseberry (1994), Sayer (1994)

<sup>104</sup> The term was used by Cox to describe the meaning of hegemony, where a 'particular power structure is conceived not as domination, but as the necessary order of nature' (1982: 38).

Hegemony has also been understood as a ' "moving equilibrium" maintained by the provisional alliance of particular social classes to win and shape consent from a dominated majority'<sup>105</sup>. Agrawal considers that it is not a universal or given social control, and has to be won, sustained and reproduced (1998: 51-52). Agrawal views hegemony as a process with greater stability than the 'hegemony as project' approach described earlier. Yet, he is emphatic that hegemony has no determinate outcomes, and the 'hegemonic alliance' may be continuously challenged and needs therefore to be defended.

Using a strikingly distinctive approach, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) have offered an influential reading of Gramsci's ideas of hegemony. In their view, Gramsci represents an important advance over Marxist class-based analysis, often deterministic in its economism. The constitution of hegemony moreover, through a process of 'articulation', implies that relations of domination are somewhat more open ended and contingent upon various elements of the 'social' than class-based approaches are willing to consider. Articulation, as a social scientific construct, refers to 'any practice that establishes a relation among elements such that their identity is modified by the articulatory practice' (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 105).

The authors in their own thesis, build on Gramsci's ideas of hegemony to theorise a 'hegemonic formation', which centres on and is the product of multiple social relations, rather than class relations alone. Mouffe conceptualises a 'hegemonic formation' as 'an ensemble of relatively stable social forms... in which different social relations react reciprocally, either to provide each other with mutual conditions of existence, or at least to neutralise the potentially destructive effects of certain social relations on the reproduction of other such relations' (1988: 30). Further, all hegemonic formations on account of encompassing relations of subordination are the potential sources of 'antagonism' and struggle'. Relations of subordination become oppressive upon transformation into sites of antagonisms (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 154). Antagonism is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition of struggle. In this formulation, the conditions that explain the transformation of subordination into antagonism and struggle represent the principal concern to be addressed.

Following their emphasis on the 'social whole' and crosscutting subjectivities, Laclau and Mouffe draw attention to the logic of equivalence. Inspired by Alexis De Tocqueville, Mouffe argues that 'as soon as the principle of equality is admitted in one domain, the eventual questioning of all possible forms of inequality is an ineluctable consequence' (1988: 94). Further, 'people struggle for equality not because of some ontological postulate, but because they have been constructed as subjects from a democratic tradition that puts those values at the centre of social life' (1988: 95)<sup>106</sup>.

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<sup>105</sup> Agrawal (1998), p 51

<sup>106</sup> Laclau and Mouffe offer the case of feminism as evidence. They argue that while women's subordination had existed for so long, it was only at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that subordination gave rise to a women's movement. With the democratic revolutions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the assertion that 'all men are equal' appeared for the first time.

This account reveals the breadth of applications of hegemony since Gramsci's original propositions. In my thesis, I propose to use hegemony and its related bank of ideas in understanding dominance and rule, not in an absolute and impenetrable sense, but in innumerable and frequently disjointed ways. I hope to show that actual practices of decentralisation seem to recreate the conditions, in which attempts at securing and preserving hegemony continue to be made, by a number of actors at different levels. The interpretation and use of the development discourse by actors involved in decentralisation processes are, metaphorically speaking, their tools for securing hegemony. The integral aspect of this analytical framework is that it does not view hegemony as a finished product with predictable outcomes. Rather, it seeks to examine the nature of such attempts, particularly the changes they provoke in local and regional power relations.

This approach is particularly suitable to my investigation, as I will address issues of decentralised development as embodied in participatory development projects. Earlier in the chapter, I argued how the important theoretical convergence of decentralisation, participation and contemporary notions of development led to the popularity of participatory practice in decentralised development. The 'participatory development project' represents the concrete manifestation of these abstract ideas. Development practitioners frequently, and erroneously, treat it as a self-explanatory term. However, these projects are implemented by a range of actors in a wide variety of social, political and cultural contexts. My investigation would focus on the agency of these actors. I propose to examine the nature of changes that they instigate through their practices of decentralised development. I also intend to analyse the factors and conditions that contribute to differences in respective agencies.

This approach would expose and delineate the innumerable links between the theorisation and practices of decentralised development. It would deepen our understanding of the factors that prompt decentralisation's advocates in local contexts to adopt reigning discourses. It would offer insights into the potential for change contained in unfolding practices of decentralisation, and decentralised development. It would illustrate the complex issues of state-society interrelations that characterise these practices and their effects. It would further reveal the plurality of actors and processes constituting the state.

Finally, while I do not accept either a view of the state as a singular entity or a rigid dichotomy between state and civil society, especially in developing countries with a colonial past, I consider it useful to retain the analytical significance of the state. Studies that dismiss 'absolute' views of hegemony as a unified and cohesive ruling ideology that allows states to govern, are frequently prone to *also* entirely reject the notion of the state. Taking the cue from Phil Abrams' (1988) influential proposition that the state is merely a construct or an

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"Men' is ambiguous because it refers both to women and men, so women found themselves contradictorily interpellated' (Mouffe 1988: 95).

'ideological project', some theorists have rapidly taken to dismissing the state itself along with rejecting any presuppositions of its hegemony (Sayer 1994)<sup>107</sup>. This I think is a mistake as the state, or whatever is perceived as the state, remains a predominant element in discourses of decentralisation and development. These perceptions shape popular imagination and influence the formulation of practice. In this thesis, I aim to show how the state remains the principal point of reference for actors engaged in practices of decentralised development.

In the following chapter, I will attempt to discuss these theoretical concerns within the context of decentralisation and development issues in India, where this thesis is located.

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<sup>107</sup> A more acceptable formulation along these lines is presented by Mitchell (1991), who argues that 'the state is not to be analysed as a structure, but as a "structural effect", that is, as the effect of practices that make state structures appear to exist' (as cited in Fuller and Harriss 2001: 4).

## Chapter 2 Decentralisation and Development in India

### 1. Introduction

This thesis is set in India. It examines issues arising from policies and practices to be found in this country. The concerns that arise from this analysis however, are more generic in nature. India's decentralisation experience is noteworthy as it is hard to define or classify. This difficulty reflects limitations in existing theoretical explanations of decentralisation. In India moreover, decentralisation has followed a trajectory that is inextricably linked with development in its successive interpretations. It therefore combines elements from powerful and shifting international discourses of development, with aspects of internal development strategies that have arisen from the politico-historical variables pertaining to this country alone.

The fact that decentralisation in India, shares a mutually constitutive relationship with development, makes it an appropriate case for examining the theoretical questions I have raised in the previous chapter. Although the issues included in the following discussion are wide ranging, there is no attempt to be exhaustive in coverage. The intention is to provide an overview of the major debates that inform contemporary readings of decentralisation in India, and to unpack the nature of the principal decentralisation initiatives undertaken by the Indian state.

### 2. Conceptualisation of the Indian state

The state has been the subject of much theorising in work on post-colonial nations like India. It has been understood as 'overdeveloped', as in the context of India and Pakistan<sup>1</sup>, or alternately 'enfeebled', as in sub-Saharan African states<sup>2</sup>. Others like Joel Migdal have attempted to understand state power in postcolonial states in terms of 'fragmented social structures that have made effective state control difficult'<sup>3</sup>. Despite this attempted characterisation, some scholars take the view that there is in fact 'no developed theory of the character of the postcolonial state' (Kamat 2002a: 34). This view essentially challenges the use of the 'post-colonial state' as a neat construct, or category. I would consider that there is some truth in the observation that postcolonial states, despite their apparent commonality of contexts, have important differences, and in this sense, the use of a 'postcolonial' type is problematic. My understanding of the Indian state therefore, acknowledges the specificity of Indian postcolonial conditions.

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<sup>1</sup> Alavi (1973)'s position has been contested by Sudipta Kaviraj (1988: 2441, footnote 9) who believes that on account of the specific conditions of development of the post-colonial state apparatus, especially with respect to its relationship with capital, the Indian state cannot simply be described as 'overdeveloped'. Alavi had argued that given the colonial and neo-colonial background, the third world state was 'overdeveloped' in relation to the socio-economic structure of the countries themselves.

<sup>2</sup> Azarya and Chazan (1987), Leys (1976)

<sup>3</sup> Migdal (1988)

My concluding remarks in Chapter 1, regarding the analytical significance of the state, apply to the Indian context. Several recent studies have shown how the Indian state, despite being 'far from supremely effective, is today at the very centre of Indian political imagination'<sup>4</sup>. In this thesis, the state is visualised, as Ferguson (1990) puts it, not as 'a single entity that has power', but as a set of institutions, i.e., political leadership, bureaucracy, legislative bodies, police, planning apparatus, that act as the most important points of references for all power relations. This understanding owes itself to Michel Foucault's important contribution regarding the state as the principle 'referent' of all power relations (Foucault 1983). The term 'state power' in this thesis, aims therefore to encapsulate continuous fluidities in the way this power is articulated, especially through the actions and relative positions of different actors and institutions.

### **3. Development and centralisation in the colonial and postcolonial Indian state**

The notion that the 'development discourse' serves as a basis for modern state power is a well developed one. This is largely because development, 'as an idea and a regime of programmes, applications and personnel' has assumed the 'label of "ideology" in its total meaning' (Kamat 2002a: 1). Development ideology prescribes a conception of the world in all manifestations of 'individual and collective' life, a conception so 'naturalising' as to be described as 'hegemony' in its absolute sense. The hegemonic potential of the development ideology lies in its combination of economic, social, intellectual and moral aims over society at large, in the same sense of the 'unison of aims' that Gramsci considered the ruling class projected, in order to 'justify and maintain its dominance, with the active consent of those over whom it rules' (Gramsci 1971: 57, 247)<sup>5</sup>.

Development is also necessarily integrated with the global capitalist project, and its constituent ideas have moulded according to successive phases in the evolution of world capitalism (Escobar 1984, Moore 1995, Kamat 2002a). Far from coming to an impasse as some scholars argue<sup>6</sup>, the accompanying agenda of capitalist economic growth ensures that development continues to remain the most vital project of nation states and international bodies (Kamat 2002a). Ferguson further qualifies the development-as-capitalist project formulation, on the grounds that capitalist expansion can only operate through a 'set of complex social and cultural structures', which may produce 'unrecognisable transformations of the original intention' (1990: 231).

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<sup>4</sup> Khilnani (1998) as cited in Fuller and Harriss (2001); others like Gupta (1998), Fuller and Harriss (2001), Kaviraj (1997) share this broad view.

<sup>5</sup> Hegemony has been interpreted as the '*temporary* universalisation of a particular power structure conceived not as domination, but as the necessary order of nature' (Cox 1982: 38) (*italics mine*). This interpretation confirms Gramsci's insight that 'the more authentically hegemonic an ideology really is, the more it leaves opposing classes the possibility of organising against it' (Kamat 2002a: 2).

<sup>6</sup> Contributors to Sachs (1995) (ed.), *The Development Dictionary*, pursue the notion of 'post-development'.

### 3.1 Development and state power in the colonial period

Contemporary development discourse is an equal legacy of colonialism, which is 'replete with the assumption that the realisation of potential lies in mature capitalism'<sup>7</sup>. In India, the 'development regime' in place today, finds its earliest origins in the colonial government of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>8</sup>. The colonial era in India was in fact the period, when the clearest link between development in its contemporary sense and state power was made.

India at independence had a level of 'stateness' and 'administrative capacity' that exceeded most other developing countries, a result of nearly 350 years of Mughal and British rule<sup>9</sup>. Centuries of commercialisation and market trade had engendered a large volume of 'specialists' that measured and recorded the rules and values of exchange. Several scholars have argued that the basis of the colonial state lay in this codification of information about the Indian economy, a practice that had never been followed seriously by Indian rulers earlier<sup>10</sup>. The 'erasure of localism' in India's transactional environment accompanied the emergence of 'the cultural reality of India as a systematic unity' (Ludden 1992: 258).

These ongoing changes with respect to measurements of value, commercial exchanges, and codification reflected the attempt to create an independent domain called the 'economy', apparently separated from 'morality, politics and culture'<sup>11</sup>. These practices were not in themselves essentially colonial (Ludden 1992: 258). Instead, they were defining features of the consolidation of capitalism, and the commodification of land and labour, a process that Karl Polanyi (1957) refers to as the 'disembeddedness' of the economy from society<sup>12</sup>. Escobar depicts this as the 'invention' of the economy, and locates its roots in European history (1999: 134). This 'invention' prepared the ground for pragmatic economic policies where 'development' is constituted as progress.

The emergence of Indian economic nationalism at this time, early 19<sup>th</sup> century, signifies the crucial link between state power and development that would ultimately reflect in state strategies adopted at the time of independence<sup>13</sup>. Although they backed a radically different content of development from that pursued by the colonial regime, Indian economic nationalists were more or less 'unanimous' in advocating an 'active and central role' for the state in the process of economic

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<sup>7</sup> Ludden (1992), p 247

<sup>8</sup> Here I rely on David Ludden's definition of a development regime as 'an institutionalised configuration of power within a state system ideologically committed to progress that draws its material sustenance from the conduct of development' (1992: 252).

<sup>9</sup> Rudolph and Rudolph (1987), p 1

<sup>10</sup> Bayly (1988), Frykenburg (1965), Ludden (1992)

<sup>11</sup> Escobar (1999), p 134

<sup>12</sup> As cited in Escobar (1999: 134)

<sup>13</sup> Chandra (1966, 1999), Chatterjee (1986), Sarkar (1989), Ludden (1992)

development' (Chandra 1999: 107). This trend entrenched state centrality in development and also reproduced official power derived from codification.

The critique resulted in an ideological thrust towards indigenous development. This was matched with the rise of a small, but 'strong and indigenous capitalist class with an independent economic and financial base', which was not 'integrated with foreign capital in a subordinated position even when the Indian economy as a whole was' (Chandra 1999: 97). While reposing their faith in this capitalist class, economic nationalists were of the view that the state would adequately make up for the lack of indigenous capital. Indian capitalism, appropriately described as 'late capitalism', thus required the state as a 'historical precondition'<sup>14</sup>. As the colonial era drew to a close, the cross currents of an anti-colonial national movement and the need for an independent state apparatus to pursue a specifically 'Indian development' coincided.

### 3.2 Development planning in independent India

During the 1940s, the principal nationalist argument against the colonial state was that it had been perpetuating an exploitative rule that would impede India's future development. At independence therefore, the necessity of self-government for national development was what constituted the 'rationality of the new state'<sup>15</sup>. The newly independent Indian state set about a massive programme of state directed capitalist development. Development planning was the most important instrument adopted for this purpose.

The National Planning Committee (NPC) of 1938, formed under the auspices of the Indian National Congress, was the first real exercise in the idea of 'national planning'. NPC intimately reflected the belief that development was state policy, which could be directed by those in charge through a system of planning. The political leadership of the time upheld the view that planning would be conducted by a 'body of experts'<sup>16</sup>, and its activity was one of the technical evaluation of alternative policies and the determination of choices on "scientific" grounds' (Chatterjee 1997: 84). This notion of technical evaluation fit in well with a 'technocratic' perception of development. Development, restricted to the 'invented economy' could therefore be pursued as a matter of technical expertise through planning.

The initiation of development planning in India confirms centuries of application of scientific and technical knowledge to the public domain, embodying the belief that 'social change can be engineered and directed at will' (Escobar 1992: 132). The emergence of these discourses

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<sup>14</sup> Kaviraj (1988), p 2429

<sup>15</sup> Chatterjee (1997), p 86

<sup>16</sup> 'To me the spirit of cooperation of the members of the Planning Committee was particularly soothing and gratifying, for I found a pleasant contrast to the squabbles and conflicts of politics' (Nehru 1946, pp 405) as cited in Chatterjee (1997: 84).

followed the growth of western modernity and reinterpretation of the classical liberal doctrine. Here, state intervention in the 'inviolable' private sphere is justified through technocratic intervention. Planning discourses that uphold this sort of technocratic intervention have thus become closely identified with expert power. In India, development planning buttressed the authority of a handful of technical experts and an involved political leadership at the Centre<sup>17</sup>. Contemporary readings of the 'depoliticisation' of development are largely derived from this technical treatment of development, of which planning is a central constituent (Ferguson 1990, Kamat 2002a).

Expert power through planning had a special significance in India, as it was enacted in the name of development, an ideology from which the newly independent Indian state derived direction as well as legitimacy. Further, such legitimacy lay in the specific constitution of development as a process affecting the whole of society' (Chatterjee 1997: 87). This understanding arises from 'universalisation', or the projection of particular interests as general, where the civil society is precisely the domain 'for the play of the particular and the accidental' working as it is through contracts and the market (Chatterjee 1997: 87). Planning therefore, as a process that directs development, automatically translated into that which enables the pursuit of 'universal' goals, above the 'particular' interests of civil society, and above representative politics.

The essential orientation of the Indian exercise in planning lies in the attempt to operate 'outside' an imaginary exclusive domain of politics. Politics here is constituted almost purely of representative interest seeking, a field clearly 'distinguishable' and 'detachable' from the economy. This formulation reproduces the essential liberal tenet regarding the separation between 'public' and 'private', broadly re-conceptualised as a dichotomy between state and civil society, or indeed politics and economy<sup>18</sup>. It is problematic not only because the planning process was deeply embedded in the political modalities of the times, but also because planning, as the cold application of scientific knowledge, attempts to pose 'neutral' 'economic' solutions to 'political' problems (Chatterjee 1997, pp 97-99). The invention not only of an independent economy, but also of economic unity for the nation, through development and the planning process, comprised the basic foundations of a centralised Indian state.

#### **4. Political consensus for centralisation: Varying interpretations**

The centralisation process described here had unmistakable links with the development ideology. However, within the vast literature on India's political economy, there is no one explanation for this process. Three distinct interpretations of the causes and implications of centralisation and

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<sup>17</sup> Also used as Central Government.

<sup>18</sup> Pateman (1987)

state power in the aftermath of independence have been offered. These can be broadly clubbed under the Marxist, liberal-pluralist and New Political Economy (NPE) paradigms<sup>19</sup>.

#### 4.1 Marxist interpretations

Marxist interpretations of centralisation and state power at independence are rooted in state-society relations, especially state-class relations. Within Marxism, there has been a 'gradual shift from the early Marxist view of the state as "executive committee" or agent of the dominant class (Miliband is a classic exponent), to one of relative autonomy as in Poulantzas' structuralist Marxism, to one of near-total autonomy in specific conjunctures as in Skocpol and Evans' (Sridharan 1993a: 5)<sup>20</sup>. This shift has had a bearing on Marxist interpretations of state formulation and power in India.

Early Marxist theorisations of the state as 'instrument' or 'agent' of the dominant class have largely been rejected in the Indian case<sup>21</sup>. This view stems from three characteristics ascribed to Indian capitalism and capitalist classes. First, leading Marxist scholars agree there is no single 'dominant' capitalist class in India (Byres 1997, Chatterjee 1997 and Kaviraj 1988). Besides, capitalist classes were inchoate at independence. Further, pre-capitalist forms of accumulation, such as old feudal systems of production, have been a cardinal aspect of the Indian economy then as much as now. Second, following the coexistence of forms of capital and pre-capital, the transition to capitalism in India, has not been a linear process, where capital simply 'annihilates its other, i.e., pre-capital'<sup>22</sup>. Third, the state itself was a historical pre-condition for this transition to capitalism, as capitalist classes were not well formed and lacked indigenous capital (Kaviraj 1988: 2429). A view of the role of the state as 'instrumentalist' is not easily reconciled with these features.

Instead, these Marxist scholars have attempted to understand the Indian capitalist transition in terms of a Gramscian 'passive revolution'. Gramsci was interested precisely in those cases of capitalist transition where bourgeois hegemony was secured in a 'non-classical' way. He talked of the passive revolution, where 'new claimants to power, lacking the full strength to launch a full scale assault on the old dominant classes, opt for a path in which the demands of a new society are satisfied by small doses, legally, in a reformist manner' (Chatterjee 1997: 94). Gramsci developed a complex view of the hegemony process as one, where the elite had to, or could,

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<sup>19</sup> Sridharan (1993a) introduced this typology to classify the scholarship on India's Political Economy.

<sup>20</sup> Miliband (1973), Evans, Skocpol and Rueschmeyer (1985), Skocpol (1979) and Poulantzas (1978)

<sup>21</sup> Kaviraj (1988), Chatterjee (1997) and Byres (1997) fall in this category.

<sup>22</sup> Sanyal (1988), p PE 27. This 'linear' transition broadly refers to a 'paradigmatic' or model form of a bourgeois revolution, which Gramsci for instance takes to be that of Jacobinism, even though this 'classical' form of bourgeois hegemony has hardly been observed in societies where the capitalist transition has occurred (Chatterjee 1988: 95).

'appropriate' elements of subaltern consciousness that were not accessible to it by virtue of existing in a different cultural place (Chatterjee 1988).

In India, described as 'late capitalism', the transition to capitalism occurred without the 'unnecessary rigours' of an industrial transition (Chatterjee 1997: 92). The political history of capitalist democracy had progressed far, and a universal conception of the social whole under capitalist democracy with its constituent (liberal) element of welfare was in place. In this interpretation, development planning was precisely the instrument available to the newly independent capitalist state to ensure that the rate of accumulation required for capitalist advancement would occur, more so because planning could operate outside the 'exclusive' domain of politics. Thus, planning would ensure the necessary accumulation that the domain of representative politics could not.

Thus, Marxist scholars highlight the fundamental choice exercised by the leadership of the new Indian state in favour of a capitalist strategy of economic growth, through a deliberate order of economic planning. Centralisation of state power was fundamentally contingent on development, necessarily, capitalist development. However, a distinction is made between the centrality of development to state power after independence, and the 'ability' of the state to direct a process of economic development as witnessed in subsequent decades. The following principal explanations have been offered in this regard.

Pranab Bardhan (1984) asserts that the Indian state is rather 'weak' in shaping the economy. In his view, India's political sociology is composed of three proprietary classes (industry, rich peasantry and professionals), which comprise a conflict ridden, heterogeneous, dominant coalition, as their economic interests do not coincide, and each of these classes competes for the control of state power within its democratic framework. The state is understood as relatively autonomous. Its personnel are a proprietary class in themselves, 'based on their possession of human capital in the form of education and by way of de facto possession of public capital assets' (Sridharan 1993a: 8-9)<sup>23</sup>. Therefore, when Bardhan states that 'the autonomy of the Indian state is reflected more often in its regulatory and patronage dispensing role than in a developmental role' (1992:323), he is referring precisely to the 'failure' of the state in achieving stated objectives of economic development, due to the 'contradictions inherent in its locus in state-society relations' (Roy 1998: 345).

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<sup>23</sup> It is here in his later work (1992), that Bardhan modifies his Marxist theorisation by incorporating insights from neo classical political economy. Bardhan's later emphasis on state policy as the result of conflicts in the 'dominant class coalitions' is a departure from the traditional Marxist model of dominant class rule in the direction of liberal-pluralist interest group theory (Sridharan 1993a, p 8, Roy 1998, p 352).

Sudipta Kaviraj refers to this failure as a deep 'structural' crisis of the Indian state that has arisen out of the 'entrenchment of the social form' (1988: 2429). The crisis arises not from the 'failures of the social form, but its successes', and cannot therefore be overcome by a change in political leadership (1988: 2441). Kaviraj explains that while (political) demands on the state have grown exponentially since independence on account of increased mobilisation, the state's resources to cope with these has remained static. This results in a structural crisis, which 'marginalises the question of economic development', alongside the enormous growth of state resources and advantage distribution or patronage (1988: 2441).

Traditional Marxist accounts of the 'ruling coalition' have therefore suffered in India, as these project the bureaucratic elite as being too 'straightforwardly subordinate to the power of the bourgeoisie', and understand what is a 'basically *coalitional* and bargaining relationship as a purely *instrumental* one' (Kaviraj 1988: 2431, italics in original). Kaviraj therefore makes the case that the Gramscian 'hegemony model' does not apply to the Indian case in a simple, unproblematic form. In his view, the Indian capitalist class, in its various components, 'exercises its control over society neither through a moral-cultural hegemony of the Gramscian type, nor a simple coercive strategy on the lines of the satellite states of the third world' (1988: 2430). It does so by a 'coalitional strategy carried out partly through the state directed process of economic growth, and partly through the allocational necessities indicated by the bourgeois democratic political system' (1988: 2430). In his formulation, Kaviraj too admits to a state, manned by a powerful bureaucratic elite, which is 'relatively autonomous' of the interests of the dominant coalition.

The relative autonomy issue holds an interesting explanation for the issue of the centralisation of state power and development. Marxist accounts such as those offered by Bardhan, Byres, Chatterjee and Kaviraj, highlight the historical preconditions that led to the centralisation of state power at independence. The existing social form created a capitalism that was both chaotic and refractory, and it was the state that fulfilled the perennial perceived need for singular central authority. Its relative autonomy at the time, from the uncoordinated demands of coexisting forms of capital and pre-capital, allowed the political leadership and bureaucratic elite at the helm to exercise a clear choice in favour of capitalist development and development planning. The process of planning, dominated as it was by a bureaucratic-technocratic attitude, attempted to project a state that was capable of steering a coherent plan for economic development, despite, and above, multiple political interests and demands. Subsequent decades have thrown up the 'violent' strains in this arrangement, resulting in what Kaviraj calls a crisis of structure, where even a Gramscian 'passive revolution' did not succeed, precisely because of this 'late, backward, increasingly unreformist capitalist order' (1988: 2431).

For Chatterjee, the attempt by the state to pose planning as a 'rational' solution to the 'irrational demands' of politics (1997: 100-102), is itself an integral part of the 'passive revolution logic' of capital juxtaposed within a representative democratic political system. Capital's foremost need herein is the projection of an economic unity, which the entire political process conducted by the state must endorse through a consensus. This process gives rise to 'numerous ambiguities in the legitimation process' (1997: 99). While on the one hand, such ambiguities are articulated through interest groups and other forms of representational politics, given the democratic political form of the Indian state, the overriding framework of the planning process that coheres and preserves this economic unity remain unquestioned.

Centralisation therefore, in Marxist terms, has been largely inadequate in terms of providing a social form capable of a two way process of state responses and class demands. The liberal-pluralist interpretation arrives at similar conclusions using different explanatory tools.

#### **4.2 The liberal-pluralist interpretation**

Liberal pluralist interpretations of centralisation and state power at independence and in subsequent decades focus on formal political institutions of the Indian state, such as political parties, the bureaucracy, legislatures, police, judiciary and the electoral process. Liberals regard the democratic state as 'class neutral and an open arena for essentially unbiased competition for power through elections' (Sridharan 1993a: 2). Therefore, liberal-pluralists have looked towards the political form of India's democratic system to explain the state's growing incapacity to promote economic development, and to simultaneously accommodate diverse interests<sup>24</sup>.

The beginnings of this imminent contradiction between democratic politics and economic development lay in the mix of ideas that influenced the constitution of the formal state apparatus at independence. Indian nationalism was overwhelmed by Gandhi's 'traditional' critique challenging the whole of western modernity, as well as Nehru's conviction that communist regimes were able to achieve both higher rates of growth and equitable distribution within a short span of time, although this would be at the cost of sacrificing political liberties<sup>25</sup>. Resolving these standpoints involved striking a balance between the 'incommensurable' values of democracy and economic growth. At the heart of the debate between democracy and development, lies the concern that democracy brings 'political and economic life' too close together for 'sober, long term' calculations in development decisions (Kaviraj 1996: 122).

At independence however, a balance seemed to have been struck between the political form of a democracy and the economic goals that constitute development. India was to be a liberal

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<sup>24</sup> Brass (2002), Frankel (1978), Kohli (1990), Rudolph and Rudolph (1987)

<sup>25</sup> Kaviraj (1996)

democratic nation, where civil and political liberties of its citizens would be sanctified by the constitution; goals of development on the other hand, both in the sense of redistribution as well as growth, would be achieved through a process of economic planning<sup>26</sup>. Yet, differences between Gandhian and Nehruvian conceptions of development, with their respective emphasis on village-based agrarian life and economic modernisation, created a disharmony of sorts between India's political and economic form. The village was accepted as basic governmental or electoral unit, but not as a self-contained economic unit<sup>27</sup>. Different logics were used to formulate political and economic identities of the village.

Liberal pluralists have spoken in detail of the 'political consensus' for centralisation at independence that would eventually engender the contradictions between democratic politics and economic planning. The Rudolphs (1987) have offered a classic liberal diagnosis. The move to centralise power was rooted in the 'institutions and expectations created by 350 years of Mughal and British sub-continental rule' (1987: 1). The need to legitimise independent government over the diverse political formations that comprised India followed soon after. This required a 'pluralist' support base, which in turn produced the need for essentially 'centrist' ideologies, ranging from secularism, to socialism and democracy as well as the creation of a 'mixed' economy<sup>28</sup>.

Part of the political consensus that prompted centralisation was the understanding that the 'goals of social transformation would be pursued outside the arena of party politics' (Frankel 1978: 23). The 'rational instrument' of planning embodied the victory of Nehruvian strategies in favour of a state centred reformist strategy of capitalist development. A development strategy that would consistently segregate accommodative politics from institutional change was launched thereafter. The problems implicit in this strategy surfaced quickly. Nehru's reformist motives aroused suspicion among the socialists within the party, who left, and cracks appeared in the Congress's monolithic and consensual approach. This affected Nehru's reformist agenda adversely, as state party units became increasingly 'recalcitrant and conservative' (Kaviraj 1988: 2432).

Centralisation had not occurred after defeating local power structures, and the Nehru led political leadership refrained from launching a direct attack on the propertied classes, through means such as serious and complete land reform. Further, as the ruling elite launched a plan for heavy industrialisation, agrarian reorganisation was compromised and there was a massive growth of the bureaucracy. This was the emergence of the 'weak-strong' state that grew in size, but not in capacity (Rudolph and Rudolph 1987). Further, the twin policies of heavy industrialisation and

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<sup>26</sup> Indian National Congress (1954), *Resolutions on Economic Policy and Programme*, p 20, as cited in Frankel (1978: 18)

<sup>27</sup> Nehru (1946: 512), as cited in Frankel (1978: 17)

<sup>28</sup> The Rudolphs (1987) have systematically argued that the conditions that have maintained centrism in national politics are long term and enduring, but not without challenge (pp 19-59).

insufficient agrarian reorganisation produced economic outcomes that could not be justified politically<sup>29</sup>. Simultaneously, Gandhian and socialist intellectuals inside the Congress became increasingly discontented at the lackadaisical implementation of measures for *zamindari* abolition. During the early 1960s, propertied classes rapidly mobilised support, dominating village panchayats, and enlarging their role as intermediaries<sup>30</sup>.

By 1964, the entire planning process was in 'jeopardy' (Frankel 1978: 237). Even as planning became increasingly irrelevant as much to Indian politics as to the future of India's economy, it faithfully continued to respond to political constraints. The Congress, appeared ready to make significant concessions to agitating regional farmers' groups, justified, unsurprisingly, as a technical solution to the food problem in the form of the ensuing 'Green Revolution' of the late 1960s-early 1970s.

Liberal-pluralists have therefore understood centralisation of the Indian state in terms of a political consensus that was mainly articulated through the parliamentary democratic system and a monolithic political party that pursued centralising ideologies. The breakdown of this consensus has resulted in the transformation of the Indian political economy into an 'elaborate network of patronage and subsidies', 'deteriorating' mechanisms of conflict management, and ultimately, the growing inability of the state to meet its stated goals of economic development (Bardhan 1992: 325, Toye 1993: 136). John Toye (1981), in the specific context of Indian fiscal policy, has offered a significant liberal-pluralist explanation. Toye seeks to ascribe 'a specific political economy goal to the Indian state: mimetic nationalism, or the replication of the "modern" *material de guerre* of the advanced nations' (Toye 1981 as cited in Roy 1998: 351). This involved an accumulation policy used to finance a mimetic industrialisation drive in a heavily protected economy. Toye concludes that this policy (1960-70) was not successful; 'a weak fiscal system caused a slowdown in accumulation, resulting in a decline in public investment, thus negating the modernisation imperative underlying mimetic nationalism' (Roy 1998: 251).

Although development policies were attempted 'outside' a so-called arena of party based and representational politics, these have faithfully mirrored the political constraints of the time. These have simultaneously reproduced the political dominance of the powerful propertied classes and interest groups, though the precise nature and composition of this group was never constant. Yet, such consequences have not endangered the democratic form. On the contrary, democracy 'is a

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<sup>29</sup> These included problems of resource mobilisation, price fluctuations in essential commodities, fast cost-push inflation, agricultural productivity and differences between the Centre and local Congress units regarding the method of co-operatisation (See Frankel 1978, pp 123-128 for details).

<sup>30</sup> Panchayats are local village bodies, which were granted constitutional recognition in 1993. Village panchayats constitute the lowest rung of a three-tier panchayat system.

government that makes dominance strictly impermanent and generally random<sup>31</sup>. The lure of resetting political equations through the electoral process is a powerful one. Thus, even as liberal-pluralists consider that the state's present dilemma lies in the basic lack of reconciliation between democratic politics and economic development, it is precisely the democratic form that continues to provide a suitable cover to mask these contradictions<sup>32</sup>.

#### 4.3 New Political Economy Interpretation

New Political Economy (NPE) interpretations of centralisation and state power at independence in India lie in the basic premise regarding the nature of the state as 'predatory'. NPE takes the neo-classical assumption of 'rationally optimising individuals' as its methodological starting point (Sridharan 1993a: 3). In essence, NPE theorists suggest markets allocate resources better than the state, and in order to achieve economic growth, it is better to rely on free market forces than on state intervention<sup>33</sup>. Excessive government regulation of economic activities is seen as creating artificial or arbitrary scarcity or both. Such scarcity implies the potential emergence of rents, which lead to rent seeking activities<sup>34</sup>, that are detrimental for economic growth. In view of this, NPE arrives at 'powerful political-fiscal prescriptions' for the reduction of government intervention in economic activity (Roy 1998: 354).

The origins of NPE's view of the state lay in the liberal-pluralist view of the state as a 'passive agent for whose control interest groups compete' (Sridharan 1993a: 3). However, since the 1970s, with the application of NPE to developing countries, there emerged a distinctive theory of the state as 'an autonomous unitary actor, or more complexly, interest group, with its own interests as distinct from those of any social classes or interest groups, and equally prone to rational optimising behaviour' (Sridharan 1993a: 4). This state was simplistically classified as predatory, or rent seeking. NPE thus left very little theoretical room for any view of the state other than predatory or its diametrical opposite, minimalist.

The NPE view of centralisation and state power therefore is purely in terms of state led accumulation and an interventionist fiscal policy. This has evoked two principal critiques (Roy 1998: 353). First was the notion that state-led accumulation entailed the creation of inefficient public enterprises. The second was the rent-seeking argument that fiscal intervention led to a variety of 'unproductive current expenditures' as a result of interest group activity<sup>35</sup>. The entire span of India's political economy is thus viewed purely in terms of how 'India's trade and

<sup>31</sup> Przeworski (1991) as cited in Kaviraj (1996: 129)

<sup>32</sup> See Kaviraj (1996) for an excellent exposition of democracy's paradoxes.

<sup>33</sup> Colclough and Manor (1991), Nonneman (1996), Srinivasan (1985)

<sup>34</sup> Bhagwati (1982)

<sup>35</sup> In the Indian context, these views were articulated in the work of Roy (1989), Lal (1988), Bhagwati (1982, 1991) and Srinivasan (1991).



industrialisation policies had produced the general set of economic distortions' (Toye 1993: 120-121). Toye comments that three different policies, i.e., first, state promoted industrialisation, second, over valued exchange rate as the instrument of state protection of industry and third, a bureaucratically discretionary method of restricting imports and sanctioning investment in industry, were simply 'lumped together as a single syndrome of "dirigisme" or "interventionism" (1993: 121).

These critiques gained ground in the 1980s, and India was labelled a 'rent seeking society'. Krueger's concepts and terminology were extended to India, 'without her own self-restraint with regard to political conclusions'<sup>36</sup>. The NPE solution is simple, a 'reduction in the domain of state activity, marked both by a decrease in distortionary tax rates and by a reduction in government expenditure' (Roy 1998: 354). These ideas met with powerful endorsement from the Bank and the Fund. In the 1990s in India, the argument for reducing rent seeking has been coupled with economic liberalisation. State intervention and its reduction are constituted unproblematically.

#### **4.4 A backdrop to decentralisation**

The above theoretical explanations are agreed that centralisation of state power in India had an obvious relationship with the development ideology. The political consensus for centralisation primarily arose from recognition and articulation of this relationship. The use of development as an instrument of centralisation, especially through planning, was the fountainhead of contradictions that would soon emerge in Indian polity and development strategy. These contradictions were of two sorts.

The first arose from the simple inability of the state to achieve the development goals it had set for itself. The second lay in the more complex relationship between these failures and the systematic decline of the Congress monolith. Roughly after Nehru's death in 1964, there were rising regional pressures for power, both in terms of gaining control of the centralised state apparatus, as well as for greater powers to states themselves. In addition to the growth of regional parties, there was also the rise of organised interest groups, 'demand' groups and social movements. These events form the immediate backdrop to understanding the experience of decentralisation in India.

The initial forces that prompted centralisation at independence have lost their original meaning, there is a changed political scenario, and decentralisation policies are being actively formulated in

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<sup>36</sup> The term 'rent' was first used by Krueger (1974). Toye comments that 'it would have been more exact to label India as a society with a rent-seeking government; since on neo-classical assumptions about economic motivation, all individuals will be rent seekers' (1993: 122).

the 1990s. Whether these happenings have had a bearing on the way in which development is being understood, or indeed strategised, by planners, seems to be a matter of deep import.

## **5. 'Decentring' politics and development**

The following section discusses the complex events since 1964, the year of Nehru's death, under two themes. The first concerns the unfolding relationship between this 'conceptual centre' and the growing regionalisation of Indian politics. The second concerns the parallel theme of development strategies pursued by the Centre during these years. There cannot be any clear-cut demarcation between these themes, and the discussion focuses precisely on the inter linkages in three main periods, 1964-1977, 1977-1989 and the 1990s.

### **5.1 1964-1977**

The period between 1964 and 1977 marked a crucial phase in Indian politics. There were changes in political leadership and economic strategy. Moreover, increased centralisation of power was accompanied by ineffective state performance as well as the growth in dissenting political voices.

In the years after Nehru's death, it was clear that the centralised planning apparatus had been extremely fortuitous for the steady growth of a 'regional bourgeoisie' in various localities throughout India. Benefits of the green revolution of the 1960s were concentrated in irrigated areas and mostly accessible to upwardly mobile agriculturists, famously called the 'bullock capitalists', who were able to replace large landowners in the agrarian power configuration (Rudolphs 1987). With Indira Gandhi's coming to power, feeble attempts at radical reorganisation of land by the Nehru regime were replaced by the fierce pursuit of legitimacy in the electoral domain to produce ambitious policies for poverty eradication.

Excessive personalisation naturally engendered the centralisation of power, albeit of a decidedly different sort than previous decades. During this time, Mrs Gandhi initiated the systematic weakening of Congress party leadership in various states through out the country<sup>37</sup>. Yet, this sort of centralisation could neither conceal the inabilities of the central government to deliver economic goods, nor prevent political fragmentation of the monolithic Congress party. Mrs Gandhi disregarded the Planning Commission's objections to the initiation of so many central government schemes, and conflicting political and economic agendas paralysed the planning process. At the same time, significant regional opposition was building up against the Congress, following a split in the party in 1969. The Congress was no longer the dominant party in at least three states, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. Besides, radical and frequently violent

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<sup>37</sup> Patronage politics between Mrs Gandhi and her sycophantic loyalists has been captured in detail elsewhere. See Kaviraj (1986)

revolutionary action (Naxalites in West Bengal) heralded a new phase of extra parliamentary political mobilisation<sup>38</sup>.

Between 1972 and 1975, there was a dramatic expansion in the breath and depth of politics in India. The politics of defection and counter defection paralysed Congress governments in various states, and popular agitation following disenchantment with Congress rule grew<sup>39</sup>. Political dissent however received a highly authoritarian response from the Centre. In 1975, Mrs Gandhi imposed a national emergency that lasted for two years, during which all civil liberties were suspended and centre-state relations were in a crisis. This year marked blatant centralisation despite 'decentring' politics throughout India.

The emergency years revealed the hollowness of centralisation through ineffective implementation both of growth and distribution policies. Planning suffered a massive setback, and was reduced to merely 'short-term accounting' (Kaviraj 1988: 2438). Yet, planning discourses remained unquestioned. In the meanwhile, solid differentiations in caste and class formed the basis of local power structures in the Indian countryside. The creation of vertical political ties by the Congress's consensual politics implied that intermediaries, drawn from dominant landowning castes, were the only links that the rural poor had with the wider politico-electoral process<sup>40</sup>. The entrenchment of land owning groups in local panchayats, which had few powers to begin with, ensured that these would remain moribund for years to come (Frankel 1978, p 551). Further, centre-state relations reached an all-time low. In November 1976, Mrs Gandhi's government enacted the 42<sup>nd</sup> constitutional amendment that greatly expanded the powers of the parliament and central government. Centralisation, development, planning and politics thus shared uneasy relationships so far.

## 5.2 1977-1989

The period between 1977-1989 witnessed the end of single-party dominance, a conspicuous rise in regional politics and a gradual shift towards pro-liberalisation economic policies. Besides, during this period, two separate initiatives were taken for decentralisation, for panchayat reform and relaxing central controls over states.

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<sup>38</sup> Refer to Isaac and Frank (2000), Rudolphs (1987), Tornquist and Tharakan (1996), Webster (1992) for a more detailed consideration of these issues.

<sup>39</sup> Examples are the JP movement in Bihar and popular unrest in Gujarat. Jayaprakash Narayan, popularly known as JP, dedicated his life to spearheading the *bhoodan* movement in Bihar that aimed to redistribute land (Frankel 1978).

<sup>40</sup> Frankel (1978), Rudolphs (1987), Sheth (1975). Jenkins (1995), writing nearly 20 years later, observes that the increasing awareness of the Indian electorate has resulted in the declining clout of 'socio-political intermediaries', and this has resulted in the 'decreasing ability of (national and state level politicians) to build electoral support by means of drawing vote controlling social elites into transactional alliances' (1995: 11).

After the emergency, the Congress lost the elections of 1977, and the Janata Party was voted into power at the Centre. The Janata regime signified a watershed in Indian politics so far. It represented regional interests in a nation wide coalition, its socialist constituents advocated agrarian interests, and finally, its leaders, notably JP, were firmly rooted in pro-poor mass mobilisation in different localities of India. However, it was soon apparent that there was nothing to distinguish the Janata government from the Congress regime, as Janata leaders did not attempt party reorganisation from below, and vertical political ties continued. They also viewed their stint in power as a time for personal vendetta (Kaviraj 1988). By 1981, the Congress and Mrs Gandhi were back in power.

While in power, the Janata government made some half-hearted attempts at decentralisation. It instituted the Ashok Mehta Committee in 1978 to review the state of the country's panchayats, but this committee considered it beyond its charge to inquire into centre-state relations<sup>41</sup>. Interestingly enough, five years later, the Sarkaria Commission instituted by Mrs Gandhi to review centre-state relations, did not concern itself with panchayat reform either. Further, in its report (1988), the commission emphasised that the working of the constitution 'leaves much to be desired', but did not make any recommendations that would translate into the fundamental restructuring of centre-state relations or the nature of Indian federalism (Frankel 1978).

During these years moreover, there was a steady rise of regionalism in the country. Capitalist development since independence had increased the economic power of two regionally conscious groups, the rich farmers and regional bourgeois interests. Strong regional parties, espousing cross cutting regional, caste and class affiliations were in the process of emerging across India (Rudolph 1987). The Congress adjusted itself accordingly to accommodate these regionalisms. Congress hospitality to regionalism was manifest in the way it played one regionalism against the other and absorbed regional leaders. For this reason, 'regional demands for greater political and economic autonomy from the Centre cannot solely be viewed as unfeasible pressures from opposition parties' (Kaviraj 1988: 2440). Congress's manoeuvres contributed significantly to the lack of serious intent for decentralisation.

Rajiv Gandhi's tenure, beginning in 1984, marked a clear shift to a technocratic, modernist vision of development. By the mid-1980s, conditions were ripe for a government shift towards liberalisation on account of the growing strength of influential big business groups, as well as the high-income consumption strata and the middle classes<sup>42</sup>. Pro-reform responses of the Rajiv

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<sup>41</sup> Namboodiripad (1978), as cited in Isaac and Frank (2000: 18)

<sup>42</sup> Baru (1985), Jenkins (1995), Kohli (1989), Patnaik (1986)

government were not the first of their kind<sup>43</sup>. The policy changes of the 1980s following the 1981 IMF loan, only reiterated the increasing irrelevance of planning as the operative framework within which economic growth occurred. Yet, pro-market liberalisation discourses could not possibly resolve contradictions engendered by the planning process for two reasons. First, the same class configurations, socio-economic inequalities and absence of structural change that resulted in 'government failures' would generate distortions in the functioning of markets as well; and second, the planning discourse was never officially abandoned, either in the 1980s, or the 1990s, when a more full fledged programme for economic liberalisation was undertaken.

By the end of 1989, liberalisation policies, however halting, had shaken up the regional bourgeoisie and middle classes all over the country, although concentrated in urban and semi-urban areas. They were unsure of their political alliances, as the Congress was no longer the only political option. Successive state assembly elections confirmed that national and state level voting patterns were not always congruous, signifying the emergence of a 'dual political universe' (Rudolphs 1987). The Hindu right wing Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP, having made substantial advances in regions across India, was striving to acquire national political appeal in order to challenge the Congress.

### 5.3 1990s-

As much as unfulfilled, yet irreversible, regionalisms marked the political terrain of the 1990s, a 'full fledged' programme for economic liberalisation was the highpoint of the government's economic policies in the last decade. In 1993, the government also enacted the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> constitutional amendments, which granted constitutional recognition to elected urban and rural local bodies. In policy terms, these acts were the boldest steps taken in favour of decentralisation since independence, and have affirmed decentralisation as an official priority of the Indian state.

In 1991, the Congress government approached the IMF for an immediate stand-by loan, and implemented a two-stage devaluation of the rupee by almost 20%. These steps committed the country to economic liberalisation. In later years, the conservative BJP government, despite continued opposition from its pro-*swadeshi* loyalists, has fastidiously adhered to the policies of economic liberalisation. Analyses of the effects of this strategy, its successes and failures are available elsewhere<sup>44</sup>. The relevant point here is that akin to other Indian development strategies pursued since independence, liberalisation policies of the 1990s (or indeed earlier, apropos

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<sup>43</sup> Ghosh (1998) delineates four 'episodes' of liberalisation in India, of which at least two had occurred and the third had been initiated by the time Rajiv Gandhi came to power. Reforms during Rajiv Gandhi's tenure have been described as 'halting or piecemeal' primarily due to the presence of anti-liberalisation lobbies, comprising leftists as well as conservative nationalists (Kochanek 1992).

<sup>44</sup> Chandrashekhar and Ghosh (1993), Ghosh (1998), Patnaik and Chandrashekhar (1995), Patnaik (1986,1994), Roy (1997) and Vieux and Petras (1996)

Ghosh 1998) have 'effectively been predicated on no major institutional change such as land reform or other types of asset or income distribution' (Ghosh 1998: 329). Liberalisation policies of the current day reproduce inequalities and benefit dominant groups just as much as the interventionist policies from the planning era.

While liberalisation policies have reduced a range of government economic controls, these have not had an absolute bearing on centre-state fiscal relations. States are able to enhance their autonomy from the Centre by directly negotiating with donors and investors, and these parties have in turn found increased room for manoeuvre through direct negotiations with states. However, this cannot be equated with a general increase in financial autonomy for the states. Greater bargaining powers for the states is directly related their political strength at the Centre owing to increasing coalitional governments, rather than any sweeping structural changes<sup>45</sup>.

## **6. Decentralisation initiatives in India: Conditions and experiences**

These successive phases in Indian political economy demonstrate that changing relationships between the Centre and the growing regional basis of political articulation have not translated into a fundamental change in the format of centralised development planning. The conditions that led to dissonances between planned development and the political framework of democracy have remained largely unaltered despite the growing decentring of Indian politics. The planning process has been discredited, but retained, and structural reform has continued to elude the planners. Yet, unlike previous decades, the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendments indicate decentralisation is now firmly established as an official priority of the Indian state.

The following part examines successive decentralisation initiatives undertaken by the Indian state in detail. The main objective here is to discuss the possible implications of recent reform in favour of decentralisation, given the conditions and experiences of previous initiatives.

### **6.1 Decentralisation initiatives by the colonial state: Local bodies before 1947**

In the colonial era, the imperial government's strategies to entrench colonial power began at the point where there was no systematic unity called India. Stories of centralisation of colonial power have accordingly focused on the linkages between localities within the country and larger processes of production, exchange, administration and politics<sup>46</sup>.

The creation of local bodies in British India is best viewed as a constituent of these integrative processes. Effective rule required the constant extraction of financial resources, which in turn depended on Indian collaborators. The British government was content to create a level of locality

<sup>45</sup> See Chandrashekhar and Ghosh (2000) and Chaubey (2003)

<sup>46</sup> Ludden (1992), Frykenberg (1965), Seal (1973), Washbrook (1973)

that was accessible to it through local intermediaries alone. By 1857 however, the British were increasingly concerned about the stability of their rule, and ideas of devising a system of representation crept in (Seal 1973, p 12). Major successive reforms included the Indian Councils Act 1861, Morley-Minto Reforms in 1909, Montague Chelmsford reforms in 1919 and the Government of India Act in 1935<sup>47</sup>.

Local bodies in British India, especially the village panchayats, were at best 'modest representative bodies', with few financial powers or functions (Seal 1973, Isaac and Frank 2000). However, together their importance for the British lay not as much in facilitating energetic local administration, as in providing a 'representative, and later, an elective veneer to the superior councils which they (the British) were now developing' (Seal 1973: 13). Reforms from 1909 onwards concentrated on extending the links between higher and lower councils.

Leading Indian politicians however, quickly lost interest in the insular nature of such local self-government. This was revived only when local bodies 'came to be tied more firmly to the structure of rule above' (Seal 1973: 12) <sup>48</sup>. Further, the colonial government created categories like 'landholders in the United Provinces' or 'Indian princes' to organise representation. Thus, local political interests became aware of the acute need to organise nationally. From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, there was a steady rise of Indian associations, which eventually gave rise to the Indian National Congress, the Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha. The common feature of all these was the claim that they represented 'All-India' interests, and local grievances had to articulate themselves in spaces within larger campaigns.

The national movement for independence, and later, the Congress party espoused nationalist and consensual ideologies. Further, as discourses of economic development through national planning dominated political imagination, ideas of 'locality' were pushed into second place.

## **6.2 Decentralisation initiatives after 1947**

As a political concession to Gandhians at independence, the Constituent Assembly placed the idea of village self-government in the non-justiciable Directive Principles of State Policy. As a result, the central and state governments were not constitutionally obliged to empower village panchayats or to institutionalise linkages between village panchayats and representative bodies at higher levels. Moreover, inherited local bodies from colonial times were not vibrant, strong entities that demanded the Assembly's attention (Isaac and Frank 2000). Moreover, there was no uniformity in local body formation in various parts of India, and frequently, existing local bodies

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<sup>47</sup> For details, see Isaac and Frank (2000), p 16-17, Seal (1973), p 12-14

<sup>48</sup> Mathews comments that despite a number of legislative measures enacting 'local government' between 1882 and 1948, villages covered had only a limited number of functions (1995), p 29.

derived from traditional caste or tribe affiliations, rather than directives by the modern state. For all these reasons, the newly independent Indian state did not pursue the idea of local government seriously.

### **6.2.1 Community Development Programme, 1952**

The Community Development Programme (CDP), launched by Nehru in 1952, as part of the first plan, was easily independent India's first decentralisation initiative. With distinct Gandhian influences, its keywords were 'community development' and 'rural extension'. The whole country was divided into more than 35,000 community development blocks, through which plan funds were to be utilised in an integrated manner for rural development, with the primary objective of increasing food production. Indeed, CDP is an example of an essentially growth oriented strategy that was given a decentralised flavour to create the semblance of basic socio-economic reform.

Although the programme had important economic objectives, its formulators emphasised that it was interested in more than just material objectives, in the development of the human being and of social organisation in general<sup>49</sup>. CDP rested on the convergence between liberal and new institutionalist ideas that are by now an integral part of the intellectual history of development, i.e., the postulate that autonomous individuals would respond rationally to constructive or benign inputs from the state and act collectively. The primary programme agent, a state functionary called the Village Level Worker or VLW, was posed as a mere 'catalyst' in the development of the community. CDP was in effect a 'community management' initiative of the state. It can be viewed as part of a larger tradition of the expediency of community-management for the state, prevalent even in colonial times, enabling the state 'to abdicate serious responsibility without abdicating overall control' (Mosse 1997a, Sundar 2000).

### **6.2.2 Panchayat initiatives and related mobilisation: 1950s-1970s**

By 1956, a deep pessimism set into the CDP<sup>50</sup>. In 1957, the government instituted the Balwantrai Mehta Committee to review CDP projects and National Extension Services. This committee concluded that the absence of vigorous local bodies had contributed to CDP's dismal performance. Panchayats then re-entered the agenda of the Indian state. Among the committee's most influential recommendations was the adoption of a three-tier structure for Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs). The middle tier of PRIs was designed to be coterminous with community development blocks.

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<sup>49</sup> Sinha (1999)

<sup>50</sup> The CDP stressed 41 objectives. Project evaluation revealed that less than 1% of the project villages had covered more than 25 objectives in their plans, while 25% of the villages had covered between 15 and 24 items.

As the first official move towards recognising the need for local elected bodies since independence, the constitution of the Balwantrao Mehta Committee was extremely significant. The committee made policy recommendations for restructuring panchayats. However, these recommendations were procedural in nature, and in the absence of adequate structural reform, would do little to prevent the domination of local bodies by the propertied classes.

The intervening years between 1957 and the late 1970s saw the near disappearance of decentralisation as an articulated state objective<sup>51</sup>. The emergency in 1975 showed that centralisation of state power was not at odds with the entrenchment of local power structures that would severely obstruct the fulfilment of growth and distribution policies. The Ashok Mehta Committee in 1978, made proposals for panchayat reform, without any link with broader reforms for centre-state relations or structural reform<sup>52</sup>. In the years after the Green Revolution, local elite groups were acutely aware of their long-term interests and in a position to dominate village panchayats<sup>53</sup>. Since the 1960s, panchayats had also become modes for the political mobilisation of vote blocks for many parties, and were thus deeply implicated in 'clientelistic' politics.

In the absence of constitutional backing, the Ashok Mehta Committee's recommendations were received very differently among states depending on their bureaucratic culture and political environment. The committee recommended the creation of a two-tier panchayat system, though there was sufficient scope for innovation in organisation structure<sup>54</sup>. Its recommendations were taken seriously by a number of states, particularly Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, West Bengal and Jammu and Kashmir, giving rise to what are popularly called 'second generation' panchayats. Others like Bihar, Orissa and Tamil Nadu did not accord importance to implementation<sup>55</sup>.

By the late 1970s, the nature of decentralisation to panchayats in the country was becoming clearly discernible. On the one hand, panchayats were becoming associated with state level party politics, through a process of vertical mobilisation that led to locally dominant groups promoting party goals, especially through the creation of vote banks. On the other, they were being treated as local implementers of development schemes, formulated by central and state governments. This was also the time for rapid expansion of lower-level bureaucracies following the initiation of several centrally funded programmes for agricultural extension and poverty eradication in the 1970s. As a result, panchayat bodies, which, in theory, bore the potential to pose an effective challenge to the prevailing 'top-down' politico-bureaucratic culture, became the objects of political

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<sup>51</sup> Refer to Mathews (1995, pp 8-13), for an account of panchayat related developments in the immediate period after 1957.

<sup>52</sup> Namboodiripad (1978)

<sup>53</sup> Desai (1987), Jena (1991) among others.

<sup>54</sup> Refer to Jena (1991) for a comparison among four different 'models' that emerged during these years.

<sup>55</sup> Refer to Mathews (1995) for details.

and bureaucratic hostility. This has contributed substantially to the disinclination to treat panchayats as units of representative democratic government in their own right (Mathews 1995, Isaac and Frank 2000, Jain 1985).

Further, panchayat related initiatives had been nearly divorced from broader attempts at reforming centre-state relations. EMS Namboodiripad, veteran communist leader remarked in a dissent note to the Ashok Mehta Committee, 'I am afraid that the ghost of an earlier idea that PRIs should be completely divorced from all regulatory functions, and made to confine themselves only to development functions is haunting my colleagues' (1978). These issues were adequately reflected in patterns of financial devolution to panchayat bodies, with panchayats not being given adequate grants or powers for taxation<sup>56</sup>. As a result, panchayats remained primarily 'developmental' in orientation

While central efforts at decentralisation were mostly inadequate for strengthening panchayat bodies, some state level initiatives were more successful. The cases of West Bengal and Kerala reinforce the importance of linking decentralisation to local bodies with matching initiatives for structural reform and political mobilisation. The ruling CPI (M) in West Bengal, late 1970s onwards, launched a definite policy of using panchayat raj bodies as vehicles of structural reorganisation of land based relations and held panchayat elections on a direct party basis (Kohli 1987, Webster 1992). The Kerala experience was different because panchayat reform was part of a much broader process of popular mobilisation complemented by active initiatives by the Left Democratic Front (LDF) government for financial devolution and decentralised planning.

The growing regional basis of political mobilisation, as in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka besides West Bengal and Kerala, drew panchayats into a more dynamic relationship with party politics at the state level. Regional variations in state level responses to panchayats thus reflected changing political equations between the parties in power at the Centre and those in some states, as 'oppositional' parties to the Congress were ready to initiate panchayat related changes that would help them consolidate their growing political base<sup>57</sup>.

### **6.2.3 Unsystematic demands and responses for decentralisation**

This refractory and disparate nature of regionalism together with the continuing centralised form of the state apparatus, bore a clear consequence for the possible trajectory that decentralisation

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<sup>56</sup> Rajaraman et al (1996), Oommen and Datta (1995), Vyasulu (2001)

<sup>57</sup> In Andhra Pradesh, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) recognised the potential of panchayat raj institutions to acquire the political support of the middle peasantry, and to challenge the dominance of the Congress machinery. In Karnataka, the panchayat reforms of the early 1980s gave effective power to district level bodies such as the Zilla Parishads, and the District Rural Development Authority. However, the leadership at this level was captured by members of the Vokkalinga and Lingayat castes that had been fighting for domination within the Janata Party, which was in power at the state (Ray and Kampatia 1987 as cited in Baumann et al 2000).

would take in the next few years. Regional political articulations have translated into numerous pressures, but no coherent or systematic 'demand', for decentralisation. Chances of linking regional demands for greater powers with systematic decentralisation, both from the centre to states and then to local bodies have been progressively weakened.

The basic model of centralised economic planning has not been altered, and subsequent attempts to decentralise planning are not related clearly with the overall process of national planning. There have been three main attempts to decentralise planning: in 1969, the Planning Commission issued 'Guidelines for the Formulation of District Plans'; in 1978, the Report of the Working Group on Block Level Planning emphasised block level planning in the interest of integrating the many poverty alleviation programmes; and in 1984, the CH Hanumantha Rao Committee, shifted the focus back to district level planning.

Despite these policy reviews, district level planning was the closest that the planning process came to decentralisation, and even here, the district plan was rarely more than 'an aggregation of departmental schemes'<sup>58</sup>. The only exceptions to this pattern were some minor innovations introduced by governments in Maharashtra, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir, and more recently Madhya Pradesh. Experiences in decentralised planning in Kerala, West Bengal and Karnataka, were clearly in the minority<sup>59</sup>.

For most parts of India, the 1980s witnessed a stasis in developments related to decentralisation. The Sarkaria Commission (1983-1988) rested on the shibboleths of a Congress Party that desperately tried to achieve a new equilibrium in changed conditions of national and regional 'political universes'<sup>60</sup>. Its recommendations for reforming the nature of Indian federalism lacked both political will and intent. A year later, the 64th amendment bill that sought to incorporate important changes in panchayat reform was defeated in the Rajya Sabha<sup>61</sup>. It was defeated following staunch opposition from regional political interests, on grounds that the central government was trying to 'bypass' state governments and link itself directly to local panchayat bodies. These trends can also be understood as (a foiled) attempt on behalf of the ruling Congress party, to undercut the strengthening local political base of opposition parties in power in various states.

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<sup>58</sup> Rao (1994) as cited in Isaac and Frank (2000: 24)

<sup>59</sup> See Isaac and Frank (2000), pp 25-33 for more details.

<sup>60</sup> Here, I borrow a phrase used by the Rudolphs (1987) to describe the separation of national and regional voting patterns in the 1980s.

<sup>61</sup> The Rajya Sabha is the 'upper' house in the Indian Parliament. Its members are elected on a 6 yearly basis.

#### 6.2.4 Decentralisation in the 1990s

In this chequered context of uneven, unsystematic and insufficient decentralisation initiatives in India, the 1990s were a decade of bold and definitive moves in favour of decentralisation. 1993 was a landmark year, as panchayats and urban local bodies were granted constitutional recognition for the first time. The significance of the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments lies precisely in their attempt to end the vulnerability of panchayat bodies to highly variable regional political conditions. Prima facie, it was an unequivocal statement that panchayats could not be neglected or ignored by state governments, which now had a mandatory responsibility of enacting basic provisions laid down by these amendments.

The most important provision is the creation of a uniform three-tier system for PRIs for a standard five-year term throughout the country. Moreover, re-elections are mandatory within six months, in the event of dissolution. This feature has been introduced to guarantee the basic existence of panchayat bodies, and to do away with regional variations in structure that had emerged in the years after the Ashok Mehta Committee. These amendments prescribe a policy of affirmative reservations for the disadvantaged SC/ST community and Other Backward Classes (OBCs), as proportional to their population, as well as for women on a standard one-third basis. It is also compulsory for state governments to institute state finance commissions to decide on revenue sharing among local bodies, a measure instituted expressly to alleviate the state of the country's cash strapped panchayats<sup>62</sup>.

Neo-liberal institutions, especially the Bank and the Fund, have been quick to link these developments with the larger liberalisation policies being adopted in the country. Prescriptions for decentralisation in a broader framework of liberalisation have followed the equation of state intervention with centralisation. Western neo-liberal institutions discovered herein a powerful economic rationale for decentralisation: individuals are the best judges of their own preferences, and lower levels of governments are more sensitive to individual preferences than higher levels<sup>63</sup>. In India too, NPE theorists would like to ascribe a broad causality to critiques of state interventionism in order to explain the adoption of decentralisation policies in the 1990s. A deeper reading of the kind of decentralisation that ensued might suggest that NPE interpretations encompass conjecture rather than any rigorous causal explanation.

Other explanations for the state's pro-decentralisation stand in the 1990s have followed as well. Gandhian groups in the country view these bold policies as the result of critiques of centralised state led development, and demands for empowering local bodies, by popular groups (NGOs and

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<sup>62</sup> For a fuller account of the provisions of the 73rd amendment, see Baumann (1999), Isaac and Frank (2000), Lekha (1997), Rajaraman et al (1996), Shaheena (1999).

<sup>63</sup> Refer to Mackintosh and Roy (1999), Musgraves (1976), Oates (1972) for the economic arguments for decentralisation.

social action groups) and social movements (like the Narmada Bachao Andolan in Madhya Pradesh and the Chipko movement in the Garhwal hills) that the state had to concede (Sinha 1999). They do not regard decentralisation of powers through the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendments as an exclusively state project.

It could be argued that these constitutional amendments reflect a mixture of influences, and come at a time when international discourses of decentralisation have acquired considerable popularity amongst development practitioners in developing countries. The particular moment of reform, as 1993 in India, also shows the importance of domestic political factors that combined with international influences to result in the emergence of such state policy. These range from increasing regionalisation of Indian politics, pioneering and successful attempts by states like Kerala and West Bengal to empower local bodies, and the rise in voluntary initiatives of a wide variety in different contexts throughout India. Yet, this multiplicity of influences does not lead us to infer either that there was a consensual and coherent process of policy formation or that the emerging policies equally satisfy state governments, donor agencies and voluntary organisations interested in decentralisation<sup>64</sup>.

Post 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment experiences have varied widely in states, testifying the spectrum of responses that the amendment received in different political contexts. Although constitutional recognition implied that the fate of panchayat bodies would no longer be determined by the political compulsions of different state governments, state legislatures have the final discretion regarding the extent to which panchayats are empowered. According to Article 243 (G) of the constitution, the State Legislature may 'by law endow the panchayats with such power and authority, as may be necessary to enable them to function as institutions of self-government, and such law may contain provisions for the devolution of powers and responsibilities upon panchayats at the appropriate level, with respect to the preparation of plans for economic development, and the implementation of schemes'. The 11th schedule contains a list of 29 subjects that may be transferred to panchayats by state legislatures.

Although these amendments signify the intent to strengthen panchayats as institutions of local self-government, this has not yet translated into practice in adequate measure. Given the history of politico-bureaucratic resistance to panchayats, state governments, i.e., political leadership and bureaucracies together, have tended to keep panchayats away from regulatory and resource generating functions that would empower panchayats as governments in their own right. The familiar practice of streamlining implementation of development programmes through these

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<sup>64</sup> For example, provisions for a three-tier panchayat system were not received well by Kerala, as the state had already devised panchayat structures in tune with other state-specific innovations like decentralised planning.

bodies, without simultaneous integration with development planning, continues in most states of the country.

However, as much as there are instances of states that have lagged behind in implementing panchayat reform, the last decade has equally witnessed the emergence of many new 'pro-panchayat' states. The political leadership in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan for instance, has taken significant interest in evolving policies for an active panchayat system<sup>65</sup>. The creation of *Zilla Sarkar* (District Government) in Madhya Pradesh warrants particular mention. The *Zilla Sarkar* embodies the effort to create a composite tier of local government, which is elected and enjoys a popular mandate, and is endowed with powers of decision-making that are both developmental and regulatory in nature<sup>66</sup>. In Rajasthan, the state government has been proactive in holding panchayat elections according to the latest acts<sup>67</sup>. The state has also taken a leap forward in decentralisation and transparent governance by passing the Right to Information Bill, mostly due to the concerted efforts and activism of the *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathna*, an organisation of peasants and workers.

Finally, the 1990s also witnessed the initiation of several other experiments for decentralisation, both by the central and state governments. These are not directly related to panchayat raj institutions. The common element in these experiments is the emphasis on community-based development programmes. The central government is restructuring a number of large-scale nationally implemented development programmes in order to incorporate principles of participatory decision-making at the local level. Examples of these are the National Watershed Development Programme and Joint Forestry Management Programme. State governments, notably Andhra Pradesh, have undertaken a number of different measures for decentralisation such as the promotion of village based self-help groups, in the last decade.

The initiation of decentralisation initiatives that do not involve panchayats directly has been criticised as the latest attempt by politicians and bureaucrats to deprive constitutionally mandated local bodies of their due share of power<sup>68</sup>. While this may be true in certain contexts, non-panchayat related decentralisation initiatives ought to be viewed more practically, and within the broader context of India's political history. As this brief discussion has shown, panchayat reform has never been a one-point decentralisation agenda of the Indian state, and has successively been accompanied by other initiatives like the CDP or numerous efforts for decentralised planning. If anything, the main issue concerning official decentralisation initiatives is that they

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<sup>65</sup> Manor (2001), Behar (1999, 2000, 2001, 2003), Behar and Kumar (2002)

<sup>66</sup> Behar (1999), Minocha (1999)

<sup>67</sup> Dubey and Padalia (2002)

<sup>68</sup> Baumann (1999), Baumann et al (2000)

have been frequently disjointed. Therefore, the continuation of several, different initiatives for decentralisation in the 1990s come as no surprise. Yet, the latest decentralisation initiatives are different from those in earlier decades because constitutional recognition to panchayat bodies signifies serious political intent lacking previously. Besides, as Chapter 1 showed, decentralisation is an integral element of contemporary development discourse, and therefore, accompanies most development programmes. In essence, decentralisation, with its complexities and imperfections, is an irrevocable process in India.

Therefore, although the Indian decentralisation experience has been marked by uneasy relationships between development planning, structural change and new forms of decentralised politics, it is impossible to predict the many courses that decentralisation might take. There is a compelling need to study the nature of changes that are in the process of unfolding. This thesis is an attempt in this direction. The following chapter takes on from this point. It provides a detailed description and analysis of the policy framework for decentralisation in a particular development sector in India.

## Chapter 3

### The Watershed Development Programme in India: Aspects of Decentralisation

#### 1. Introduction

This thesis explores the subject of decentralisation in a particular development sector, that of watershed development. Watershed development (WSD), previously understood by implementers worldwide as a soil and water conservation programme, is now being projected by the entire range of development agents, i.e. governments, donors and NGOs, as a comprehensive 'programme' for rural development<sup>1</sup>. In India, this transition has a special significance. Successive stages in the reinterpretation of watershed development closely mirror national debates on development, which in turn reflect prevailing dominant international discourses of development. An analysis of the evolution of the 'watershed development' approach in India potentially offers a keen insight into the issues that constitute decentralised development in this country. Such analysis is the subject of this chapter

Within this sector, my research focuses on the national Watershed Development Programme (NWDP), the country's largest watershed based development intervention. The clearest indication of the so-called transition came in 1994, when this programme was reinvented from among existing elements and became the sole charge of the central government's Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD). MoRD then issued new 'policy guidelines' for the watershed sector. These guidelines are important because in effect, they declare the watershed programme as a 'participatory development programme', while also laying down a new structure, a new method of working and multiple, complex objectives. This chapter in addition, seeks to make meaning of these changes given the broader issues concerning decentralised development in India today. It concludes with notes on the nature, structure and methodology of the empirical research that is presented in the following chapters.

#### 2. A brief history in India

Watershed Development in India today reflects a global transition from soil and water conservation works to comprehensive rural livelihood programmes on a watershed basis. In the following section, I will attempt to provide a broad overview of the principal stages in this transition. These stages encompass a spectrum of issues, ranging from environmental degradation to nation building and local resource development.

##### 2.1 Soil and conservation works during the colonial period

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, colonial regimes in India and Africa regarded erosion as both costly and damaging. In response, state intervention nearly always embodied the view that erosion occurs

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<sup>1</sup> Farrington et al (1999), Hinchcliffe et al (2000), Sinha (2002), Turton (2000), Woodhouse et al (2000)

because 'farmers are poor managers of soil and water' (Hinchcliffe et al 1999:2). This view echoed dominant narratives of global environmental change that attributed environmental degradation to demographic pressure, and later poverty<sup>2</sup>. Sophisticated indigenous understandings of local environments were not recognised within these dominant narratives<sup>3</sup>. Powerful parallel technology developments, as among agricultural authorities in the USA starting in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, influenced the formulation of a definite 'top-down' soil and water conservation (SWC) strategy with complex multiple objectives of checking degradation and also increasing productivity. The latter was particularly significant during the colonial period, following bulk exports of agricultural and mineral raw materials from the colonies on which the colonial economy flourished<sup>4</sup>.

The essential principle of this strategy was a 'transfer of technology paradigm', in which technologies were developed by scientists and 'extended' to an 'eager' population<sup>5</sup>. This technological response was articulated through a process of planning, which was not local, and involved central official planning authorities devising blueprints on which large-scale projects were to be based. There was no question of planners discussing the suitability of the method being adopted with the farmers themselves<sup>6</sup>. SWC at this time therefore, was a matter of scientific and policy response of the state, in line with prevailing principles of applied environmental science.

As a result, conservation itself became an important area for colonial state intervention in the 1930s<sup>7</sup>. In India, the Royal Commission on Agriculture (1928) had recognised soil conservation as a problem of special importance, and had noted work already in progress<sup>8</sup>. The Bombay Land Improvement Scheme Act of 1942 was a prominent instance of a regional initiative at this time. The Famine Enquiry Commission of 1945 later indicated that the large-scale experiments conducted in Bombay had produced results sufficient to warrant replication on a wider scale (Hinchcliffe et al 1999: 5-6).

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<sup>2</sup> The link between poverty and environmental degradation is the subject of an enduring debate in development. 'Conventional wisdom' that poverty causes environmental degradation has been challenged by environmental scholars more recently, and subsequently, the reverse causal link is being established. The Rio Summit in 1992 arrived at the view that 'effective environmental management' can reduce rural poverty as well as conserve the natural resource base. The neo-Malthusian perspective on demographic pressure has also been contested along with these later critiques. Refer to Blaikie and Brookfield (1987), De Janvry and Garcia (1992), Leach and Mearns (1996), Woodhouse et al (2000)

<sup>3</sup> Peet and Watts (1996), p 4

<sup>4</sup> For descriptions of how processes of agricultural commercialisation for export were introduced by colonial governments in India and Africa, refer to Bharadwaj (1985) and Woodhouse et al (2000) respectively. For a succinct analysis of the role of the colonial state in irrigation development that accompanied commercialisation of agriculture, see Vaidyanathan (1999)

<sup>5</sup> Mazzucato and Niemeijer (2000), p 834

<sup>6</sup> Hinchcliffe et al (1999), Farrington et al (1999), Pretty (1995a), Pretty and Shah (1994), Kerr and Sanghi (1992).

<sup>7</sup> In India, this was true for respect to forestry as well. Sivaramakrishnan writes, 'The rhetoric of conservancy espoused the "environmental" tones of watershed management, species conservation and wildlife protection; but it also expressed the strident political-economic realities of territorial expansion, the establishment of British rule in strategic regions, and laying down infrastructure for administering empire' (2000: 70).

<sup>8</sup> The earliest accounts show that in 1888, nearly 1200 hectares of ravines in Uttar Pradesh were treated with conservation measures to protect the adjoining town of Etawah from water erosion (PRAI 1963).

## 2.2 Early soil and water conservation works

After independence, soil and water conservation works- forerunners to contemporary watershed development<sup>9</sup>- were largely treatment works in the catchments of river valley projects to reduce the siltation of reservoirs. The agriculture strategy concentrated on higher food production, which led to a thrust towards developing irrigated lower river basins. As a result, catchments were seriously neglected leading to premature siltation of riverbeds, tanks and reservoirs. The first major government response, the RVP or Soil Conservation Works in the Catchments of River Valley Projects Scheme, was launched in 1962-63, and still continues in the catchments of many reservoirs. However, continuing high proportions of siltation led to the need for prioritisation of 'ravenous' or deep ravine watersheds, in order to address the problem of land degradation. A national policy on ravenous watersheds was declared in 1967, and ravine reclamation projects in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Gujarat were started. Later during the 6<sup>th</sup> five-year plan (1992-1997), the government also started another scheme called Integrated Watershed Management in the Catchments of Flood Prone Rivers (FPR). More recently, the 9<sup>th</sup> plan (1997-2002) merged FPR and RVP together. The Ministry of Agriculture (MOA), Government of India (GOI), implements these schemes.

India's first soil and water conservation efforts were concentrated in over silted and degraded lands. These areas however, were not perceived by the state as lucrative from the point of view of agricultural production, a primary national imperative of the newly independent Indian state. In this period of 'post-independence developmentalism' moreover<sup>10</sup>, agricultural productivity was accorded a higher priority than checking environmental degradation<sup>11</sup>. No significant correlation was made between SWC and agricultural productivity, contributing to its relative insignificance in the agricultural strategy of the following decades.

## 2.3 The Green Revolution

The food crisis of the mid 1960s marked a turning point in Indian agricultural policy<sup>12</sup>. The central government responded with the introduction of a New Agricultural Strategy (NAS). This essentially growth oriented programme was to be concentrated on better endowed, higher productivity areas thus continuing an experiment that had been initiated in the early 1960s. The NAS heralded India's famous 'Green Revolution' which revolutionised irrigated agriculture in the country, brought about self-sufficiency in food grains and also changed the face of inter-regional disparities.

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<sup>9</sup> A watershed roughly refers to land area between a drainage divide. I will come to more aspects of this definition in a following section.

<sup>10</sup> Gupta (1998)

<sup>11</sup> In the 1960s and 70s, several newly independent African countries also experienced reductions in attempts at environmental conservation, as these were 'subordinated to imperatives of agricultural production' (Woodhouse et al 2000: 9).

<sup>12</sup> Mohan Rao (1995, 1997), Vaidyanathan (1994)

There seem to be three principal reasons for the adoption of this strategy. First, by the late 1960s, India was confronted with the pressures of having accepted food aid (PL 480) from a US dominated food regime. The regime that came into existence following the internationalisation of US technology/policy model after the Second World War had disastrous consequences for agrarian structures and food supply in Third World nations<sup>13</sup>. Not only were countries like India filled with a false sense of food security, they were also pressured by America to acquiesce to its agricultural policies, curb population and depreciate currency (Frankel 1978: 246-292). Food sufficiency thus became articulated as a matter of national sovereignty. Second, in this international context, central planning agents were influenced by neo-Malthusian fears about growing population pressures and inadequate food production (Gupta 1998: 60-62). Finally, launching a 'technical' strategy to spur intensive cultivation suited the ruling Congress party domestically as well. It was able to make concessions to agitating farmers' groups in the 1970s (Frankel 1978: 237).

The Green Revolution marked the 'productivist shift' in Indian agriculture in no uncertain terms<sup>14</sup>. This, as I outline below, had significant implications for the subsequent transformation of the soil and water conservation sector, particularly with respect to recognition of its potential for agricultural productivity.

#### **2.4 Implications of the Green Revolution: Neglect of India's dryland sector**

This productivist shift had a single dominant objective- - to increase agricultural yields in order to raise the country's food production. It called for a shift from major and medium irrigation works, which had been the focus of the first and second plans, to minor irrigation. The emphasis on irrigated areas in pursuit of productivity led to neglect of the country's dryland areas. Drylands are 'areas where agriculture is rainfed, depending mainly on the rains for soil moisture supply'<sup>15</sup>, and occupy nearly 52% of the total geographical area. The planning process mirrored the higher priority accorded to irrigation and flood control, compared with SWC that is typically concentrated in the drylands. By the late 1980s, 'the amount allocated for irrigation and flood control projects in the 7<sup>th</sup> plan was nearly 22 times the amount envisaged for soil and water conservation; in the 3<sup>rd</sup> plan, the amount was only 9 times the amount spent on the latter' (Vaidyanath 1994: 49). Thus, the relative importance of irrigated areas over drylands has if anything increased over time.

Disregarding the potential of rainfed agriculture in effect undermined the productivist strategies of the Green Revolution. Independent analyses that followed confirmed that dryland areas were

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<sup>13</sup> Goodman and Redclift (1991), p133-166

<sup>14</sup> I borrow this term from Goodman and Redclift (1991).

<sup>15</sup> Shah et al (1998:121). The authors emphasise that this definition must capture the 'vulnerability arising from low and undependable rainfall and the absence of adequate supplements to this meagre rain'. Conditions of intensity of rainfall are important, as are the temperature and soil conditions of the area. Rainfed areas simply can include areas with very high rainfall, and in India, at least 30% of rainfed areas fall within such high rainfall regimes (World Bank 1988 as cited in Shah et al 1998). Dry regions are usually found concentrated within specific climates, such as deserts, arid and semi-arid tropics etc.

extremely important from the point of view of increasing food security, and that it had been unrealistic to rely on irrigated areas alone, for meeting the country's food needs. This is especially so as the rate of expansion of irrigated area has undergone a global decline since the mid 1970s<sup>16</sup>. In India, the average annual growth rate of irrigated area peaked in the 1970s and declined in the 1980s (from 3.2% in 1970-73 to 1980-83, it plunged to 2.23% between 1980-83 to 1988-90)<sup>17</sup>. Using this data, Shah et al (1998) have offered an interesting projection of irrigation potential and the estimated irrigated area in India between 1991-2006. Further, they have identified 177 dryland districts in 25 states to conduct their analysis<sup>18</sup>. They conclude that the challenge of food security cannot be maintained without emphasising agriculture in dryland areas, which 'represent a great slack in the economy, with a great growth potential' (1998:106).

Yet, while not reflected in mainstream planning, it would be incorrect to infer that dryland needs were not recognised at all by the central government, during the Green Revolution and even after. State scientific institutions responded to the inadequacies of the Green Revolution, by initiating research in dryland agriculture. The Central Soil and Water Conservation Research and Training Institute (CSWRTI) and Central Research Institute for Dryland Agriculture (CRIDA), affiliated to the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR)<sup>19</sup> have the specific mandate to promote research in dryland farming in India. In 1970, CRIDA together with ICAR launched the All-India Coordinated Research Project for Dryland Agriculture (AICRPDA) in 22 centres in different agro-climatic regions throughout the country. In 1972, the International Crop Research Centre for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) was established in Hyderabad. Many other scientific institutions, especially state level agricultural universities have also undertaken significant initiatives in dryland agricultural research<sup>20</sup>.

## 2.5 Consequent recognition of India's drylands and the 'Watershed' Approach

By the 1980s, international factors made it difficult for India to continue neglecting its drylands for a number of reasons. This was the decade of structural adjustment and international lending. In India too, following the 1981 IMF loan, the Congress government under Rajiv Gandhi had adopted explicit moves towards liberalisation. Neo-Malthusian environment paradigms continued to dominate international development agencies. Prolonged droughts in Africa through the 1970s and 1980s were largely interpreted as 'increased poverty and recurrent famine' on account of

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<sup>16</sup> The global rate of expansion of irrigated area, which was 1% per annum in the early 1960s, peaked between 1972 and 1975, at a rate of 2.3 % per annum, after which it has steadily declined, falling to below 1% in the late 1980s (Food and Agricultural Organisation Study, 1990 as cited in Shah et al 1998). FAO estimates that to meet future food requirements in developing countries, irrigated area is required to grow at 2.25% per annum between 1982/84-2000. Shah et al comment that 'since actual rates are not even half of this figure and are declining, it is clear that the necessary rise in output cannot be achieved through increased in irrigated area' (1998:105).

<sup>17</sup> Data as cited by Shah et al (1998: 105); the original sources are Bhalla and Tyagi (1989) and the Directorate for Economics and Statistics (1993).

<sup>18</sup> See Shah et al (1998), pp 106-109 for details.

<sup>19</sup> ICAR is an autonomous body under the Department of Agricultural Research and Education (DARE), Ministry of Agriculture. It acts as the apex organisation at the national level to promote science and technology programmes in agricultural research and education.

<sup>20</sup> Sinha (2002)

'declining productivity of the biophysical resource base generated by population pressure on fragile ecologies'<sup>21</sup>. Further, these paradigms viewed governments as incompetent and predatory. These unfolding debates about the contested relationships between poverty, population, productivity and degradation, became the new context in which dryland related policies were formulated in India.

For the first time in 1985, the 7<sup>th</sup> plan document of GOI officially recorded the government's admission of neglect of the country's drylands. It stated that decades of neglect had led to dryland areas being caught in a vicious circle of high risk, low investment, poor technology and low production. This situation was the result of an agricultural strategy that had concentrated on irrigated lands and confined soil and conservation works to over silted and degraded lands. Further, it had not taken adequate measures to address the state of remaining lands, which although cultivable were erosion prone as well. It was amply clear that issues of agricultural productivity and degradation of biophysical resources could no longer be compartmentalised.

In 1994, GOI instituted a High Level Committee on Wastelands Development, called the Dharia Committee, to analyse the results from the latest Land Use Survey. Its empirical findings, presented the following year, compelled a rethinking of the existing soil and water conservation strategy.

The Land Use Survey had revealed the following scenario. Out of the total land area of 329 million hectares (mha), 79.5 mha are in the clear category of wastelands, and 95.5 mha while still considered to be productive, suffer from degradation. The land that falls in this latter category is also within the total agricultural land area of 142.2 mha. This implies that nearly 2/3rds of India's agricultural lands (95.5/142.2 mha) are degraded to some extent or the other.

These figures led the committee to arrive at the following inferences. It noted that efforts at preventing soil erosion in India had been unsatisfactory and wasteful of money. It strongly disapproved of the restriction of soil conservation efforts to the reclamation of over-silted lands. It advised that as wastelands had gone out of production, the protection of erosion prone lands was of utmost importance. This meant that 95.5 mha of 'degraded lands' required urgent attention, without which, they too were in danger of being converted into wastelands. The committee also estimated that nearly 50% of the wastelands were non-forest wastelands, which if treated properly could be made fertile again. Further, the committee cautioned against complacency about good agricultural lands, as these, presently under a dosage of multiple cropping, irrigation, heavy pesticides and fertilizers could be depleted over the long run. Besides, these lands were

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<sup>21</sup> Cleaver and Schreiber (1994) as cited in Woodhouse et al (2000: 11); the authors comment that alternative interpretations that linked Sahelian destitution to patterns of commoditisation were in a minority.

also in danger of being diverted into non-agricultural uses that are socially unproductive, such as farmhouses for the new rich<sup>22</sup>.

Moreover, these 'good lands' estimated to be about 89 mha, comprised nearly 39 mha of forests that warranted particular yet integrated treatment. A major problem with the existing soil and water conservation approach was the absence of a comprehensive approach that treated the three biophysical resources, land, water and forests, in an interrelated way. This followed rigid compartmentalisation between the departments that concern these different resources. For example, all forestlands are the responsibility of the Ministry of Forests, which does not deal with general issues of land and water.

There were other problems too. As the existing SWC approach mainly concentrated on the conception and planning of reservoirs alone, it did not look at the multiple uses of water in totality. In the attempt to ensure that maximum water and minimum silt go down to the reservoir, most efforts were concentrated on building 'heading type engineering structures that break the velocity of water, and then guide the silt flowing downstream to ultimately reach the reservoir'<sup>23</sup>. As a result, benefits were marginal to poor people, who typically owned land along the ridgeline. In contrast, rich people who owned land in the lower reaches of the drainage divide or watershed received greater benefits.

In addition, the degradation of village common lands posed a serious problem throughout the country<sup>24</sup>. The causes of such degradation are widely disputed. The first issue is that of state ownership and control of the commons. Emphasis on state control over common property followed Hardin's famous thesis regarding 'the tragedy of the commons' (Hardin 1968). In Hardin's pessimistic formulation, individual rational action based on self-interest under conditions of geometric population growth threatens a common resource with irreversible degradation. More recently however, Hardin's framework has been challenged, and critics argue that 'it is precisely the assertion of state ownership which has eroded traditional common property'<sup>25</sup>.

The second issue is the relationship between poverty and degradation of common areas. Degradation of common land area has been attributed to 'overexploitation' of fuel and fodder by poor persons, as they tend to be more dependant on these resources than the rich, who have access to privately owned resources<sup>26</sup>. This causality reveals neo-Malthusian anxieties of population pressure and the continuing dominance of the 'poverty-causes-degradation' paradigm

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<sup>22</sup> Per capita availability of agricultural lands, which stood at 0.48 ha in 1951, is expected to go down to 0.14 hectares in 2000 (Dharia Committee Report 1995). The percentage of the Indian population dependent on land has not declined commensurately, and agriculture remains the primary occupation for more than two thirds of all Indians.

<sup>23</sup> (DFID et al 2000:4)

<sup>24</sup> Jodha (1986), Blair (1996)

<sup>25</sup> Gadgil and Guha (1992) as cited in Mosse (2003a: 14)

<sup>26</sup> Farrington et al 1999, foreword

mentioned earlier. Thus, while poor people were held responsible for depleting commonly owned resources, there was an inadequate consideration of the factors explaining such dependence. For example, the correlation between degradation of the commons and general low cropland productivity due to runoff was conspicuously missing in government policies regarding SWC (Farrington et al 1999).

The Dharia Committee's recommendations can be summarised in two main points. First, SWC efforts should not be confined to reclamation of over silted reservoirs, but to all lands, whether already degraded or currently in good shape, in order to prevent further deterioration and depletion. This signifies state recognition of the need to address issues of degradation in relation to those of productivity. Second, a reorientation in focus requires an integrated approach to biophysical resource conservation on the basis of a micro watershed.

A watershed quite simply is all the land and water area, which contribute runoff to a common point. The term 'watershed' above any point on a defined drainage channel is used to denote all the land and water areas that drain through that point<sup>27</sup>. A small watershed of a few hectares that drains into a small stream forms a part of a larger watershed, which in turn forms part of an even larger watershed, until the combined watersheds may become a major river basin draining millions of square kilometres of land. In effect, anywhere that one lives is part of a watershed, usually classified as micro, milli or macro in size<sup>28</sup>. The committee's recommendations marked the potential transformation of the 'watershed' from a 'geo-hydrological divide to 'integrated watershed development' (WSD), comprising complex development objectives. These include checking degradation, integrating land use, improving on-site (and thereby total national) productivity and also alleviating poverty.

The normalisation of a microwatershed as a 'rational unit' of planning for integrated conservation, management and development of land, water and forest resources has followed abundantly. This is reflected in the literature, 'It (choice of watershed as a unit of planning) is *natural* because it allows planners to focus on all the effects of downhill runoff in a given area, and to plan accordingly for it' (Tideman 1998:7, emphasis added). Contemporary WSD approaches emphasise on-site soil and water conservation, surface water harvesting and afforestation. In India, support for the watershed as a planning unit has come from many quarters, including practicing donor agencies, NGOs and GOI.

Thus, true to the international context, productivity concerns influenced the evolution of the watershed approach for integrated resource development in India. This facilitated in turn a greater

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<sup>27</sup> Tideman (1998), p7

<sup>28</sup> In India, a micro watershed is generally defined as falling in the range of 500–1000 hectares; a milli-watershed comprises a number of micro watersheds, and covers about 5000 ha; and, a macro watershed is equivalent to a river basin, and may encompass many thousands of hectares (Farrington et al 1999:5-6)

recognition of the productive potential of India's drylands by the central government. In 1990, the central government's Ministry of Agriculture launched the National Watershed Programme for Rainfed Areas or NWDPRA, aiming to develop integrated farming systems on a watershed basis. A parliamentary committee (1992) emphasised WSD as the 'cornerstone' of a 'holistic approach' to regional imbalance in water availability, agricultural and water sustainability, recharging aquifers and controlling soil erosion. The articulation of dryland productivity through WSD is now also reflected in the mainstream planning process. Indeed, the current emphasis on WSD is part of a 25-year Perspective Plan for Sustainable Rainfed Agriculture under the 9<sup>th</sup> Plan<sup>29</sup>.

## **2.6 Contemporary interpretations of development: Decentralisation, community based development and local participation**

Since the 1990s, 'alternative paradigms' have emerged in opposition to ruling ideas of neo-Malthusian disaster and its related aspects such as 'limits to growth' and 'pressures of deprivation'<sup>30</sup>. These are now themselves in the process of constituting the dominant development discourses of today. The fairly rapid transformation of ideas speaks of their attractiveness to influential international institutions, and development practitioners, both governments and NGOs. In this most recent stage of WSD history in India, I will try to correlate wider transformations in the development discourse with contemporary policy making in this sector.

In the last decade, a number of studies challenged warnings of a neo-Malthusian disaster by showing large increases in rural population combined with environmental improvements and agricultural productivity (Woodhouse et al 2000). Interest has since 'centred on the role of "indigenous", "customary", or "traditional" (hence "local") institutions in regulating access to, and use of, natural resources' (Woodhouse et al 2000: 13). This has had the important effect of recognising local authority over resource access and use. Decentralisation in land and water management has therefore become a resonant theme within critical literature in the 1990s. It has a key place in the linked agendas of poverty alleviation and environment conservation, central to Agenda 21 and Convention to Combat Desertification (CCD) of the United Nations Commission for Environment and Development, first formulated in 1992 at Rio, and subsequently ratified in 1997.

Decentralisation, subsequently, in the sphere of land and water resource management, has come to constitute a powerful discourse. Among its principal effects is a sweeping endorsement of the wider process of 'righting' of 'peoples or indigenous' knowledges, previously disparaged within

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<sup>29</sup> Sinha (2002)

<sup>30</sup> Meadows (1972), Blaikie and Brookfield (1987) respectively

the 'technology transfer' paradigm<sup>31</sup>. The idea that the "community's" knowledge is sufficient to manage its own environment, with respect to resource access, use and conservation, as also raising agricultural productivity, then follows. This has influenced the burgeoning of 'community based natural resource management' (CBNRM) approaches, especially now in the watershed development sector<sup>32</sup>. In turn, community based development approaches have rapidly melted in the broader decentralisation crucible. This important policy convergence reveals the significance of communitarianism as a theoretical basis of popular notions of decentralisation<sup>33</sup>.

Thus, the promotion of community responsibility and initiative is 'commonly accompanied by proposals for decentralisation within state structures as a means to more effective environmental management' (Woodhouse et al 2000: 16). Decentralisation of powers to local government bodies and increasingly, locally based NGOs, as 'facilitators' of community-based development, has therefore become an important component of CBNRM programmes. Indeed, decentralised 'community-based' development frequently rests on a 'plural institutional landscape' (Evans 1996, Ostrom 1996, Woodhouse et al 2000).

Privileging of the 'indigenous' and 'customary', has thus led to the centrality of the 'local' and 'community' in contemporary discourses of decentralisation. At the same time, references within government decentralisation discourses to the 'customary' are less explicit, 'presumably subsumed under "grassroots" or "community-based" organisations, in contrast to the weight of the "customary" in proposals for local or community-based natural resource management' (Woodhouse et al 2000: 17). In a similar sense, notions of popular participation have even gone beyond those of the 'community' itself, in order to substantiate ideas of the 'local' in decentralised development. The 'community based' part of participatory development has been gradually excised in 'development-speak'<sup>34</sup>, indicating not the redundancy of 'community' in this formulation, but its obvious indispensability. The resulting mix, between participation, community development and decentralisation, has proved to be particularly attractive to the international supporters of decentralised development.

In India, support for community-based approaches in natural resource management has also come from what has been described as a 'new traditionalist discourse' in Indian environmental thinking<sup>35</sup>. The pre-colonial past is characterised as a time when village communities managed environmental resources in a sustainable manner. Further, the intervention of the state, 'particularly the colonial state's assertion of proprietary rights over commons is judged as the

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<sup>31</sup> Western conceptions of modernity rest on a universal and universalising conception of knowledge. These have been widely challenged by the related ideas of cultural diversity, a universal capacity for awareness of identity, and following these, multiple claims to knowledge (Ferguson 1990, Grillo and Stirrat 1997, Hobart 1993, Long and Long 1992).

<sup>32</sup> Uphoff (1998)

<sup>33</sup> See Chapter 1 for details.

<sup>34</sup> I borrow this term from Williams (1985) as cited in Ferguson (1990: 259).

<sup>35</sup> CSE (1985), Gadgil and Guha (1992), Sinha et al (1998), referred to in Mosse (2003a), p 8-10

principal force behind the demise of village traditions of sustainable resource use' (Mosse 2003a: 9). This discourse ardently promotes the state-community dichotomy, and consequently, the demand for the 'revival' of community traditions or institutions in natural resource management has gripped the imagination of contemporary development practitioners, critical of the state's centralised development practices (Mosse 2003a)<sup>36</sup>.

By the 1980s, a variety of influences concerning decentralisation, community development and local participation were apparent in WSD in India, especially within the non-governmental sector. A number of individual initiatives, such as Anna Hazare's highly successful water harvesting endeavour in Ralegaon in Maharashtra and Parasu Ram Misra's efforts for rejuvenating drought prone areas in Sukhomajri in Haryana, adopted a community based participatory approach to watershed development<sup>37</sup>. There were also increasing instances of NGOs evincing interest and ingenuity in embracing the watershed approach amongst local communities that they worked with. MYRADA in Karnataka, the Rayalseema Development Trust in Andhra Pradesh and Samaj Pragati Sahyog in Madhya Pradesh are prominent instances of NGOs engaged in WSD in India. By the early 1990s, German KFW and World Bank funded projects were titled 'Integrated Watershed Development Projects', and espoused implementation through participatory decision-making. Chipko, the environmental social movement in the Garhwal hills, demonstrated affinity with 'people's knowledges' and 'people power', elements common both to oppositional social movements, and to populism<sup>38</sup>. The scene was ready for transformation in state policy regarding WSD.

### **3. The transposing of Watershed Development into a 'Rural Development Programme' in India**

The clearest indications of official transition in the WSD sector, from a soil and water conservation strategy to a 'rural development programme', came through the transfer of governmental mandate for WSD from the central Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) to the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD). The transfer was as symbolic as it was substantive. It was symbolic of the state's recognition of the breadth of objectives that watershed development has now come to signify. It was substantive because this shift paved the way for wide ranging policy changes, especially with respect to incorporating a 'participatory focus' for the programme. Such programmatic perspective reflects growing international as well as domestic endorsement of the significance of the 'community' and therefore the 'local' in natural resource access, use and conservation. Drawing from my previous discussion on the articulation of these recent discourses

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<sup>36</sup> Mosse argues that there is the need to 'qualify images of autonomous villages and stable resource management', and presents his compelling study of tank irrigation systems in Tamil Nadu, where 'the history of community' gives way to a 'history of statecraft' (2003a: 11).

<sup>37</sup> 'The Anna Hazare Homepage' at <http://www.cfar.umd.edu/~venu/ANNA/>

<sup>38</sup> Rangan (2000), Ghai and Vivian (1992)

however, it would seem that 'participation' and 'empowerment' of rural actors within communities was set to 'take place in a framework that they themselves did not design' (Sinha 2002).

### 3.1 Programmatic/Bureaucratic reorganisation

In the first few decades after independence, it was the Ministry of Agriculture that was vested with the responsibility for soil and water conservation in the country. MoA implemented India's first soil and water conservation schemes, and continues to implement three major schemes for this purpose<sup>39</sup>. More recently in 1990, MoA launched the National Watershed Development Programme for Rainfed Areas (NWDPA) as the country's premier dryland farming scheme on a watershed basis. 1993 and 1994 were important years in this last stage of WSD history in India, as consequential recommendations were made for programmatic and bureaucratic reorganisation.

In 1993, the Central Government constituted the CH Hanumantha Rao Committee (HRC) to review the working of the Drought Prone Areas Programme (DPAP) and the Desert Development Programme (DDP)<sup>40</sup>. It advocated that a number of other ongoing schemes with related objectives such as soil and water conservation, wastelands development and drought proofing be coalesced together along with DPAP and DDP, and be implemented under a 'common approach', i.e., the watershed approach.

Following its suggestions, DPAP, DDP, and the Integrated Wastelands Development Programme (IWDP) were to be implemented on a mutually exclusive basis. Also, recommendations were made for earmarking 50% of funds for treatment on a watershed basis from two major employment generation schemes, the Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS) and the Jawahar Gram Samridhi Yojana (JGSY). This would ensure that the same areas would not be treated twice, and avoid earlier excesses due to uncoordinated pursuit of similar development schemes. In effect therefore, all these schemes went on to constitute a consolidated national Watershed Development Programme, funded and implemented by MoRD in nearly 25 states of the country<sup>41</sup>. The birth of NWDP as India's largest 'rural development programme' has paved the way for the state to claim more than would have been possible with the confinement of watershed development to the Agriculture Ministry.

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<sup>39</sup> RVP, FPR and the Centrally Sponsored Scheme for the Reclamation of Alkali Soils.

<sup>40</sup> DPAP started as a Rural Works Programme (RWP) in 1971. Over time, RWP gradually focused on area development for drought proofing through land and water resource development, eliminating activities such as the construction of rural roads, from its agenda. By the late 1980s, the DPAP became almost exclusively a WSD programme. DDP was launched in 1978 and aimed to mitigate the adverse effects of desertification and restore the ecological balance of the area. DPAP and DDP were existing schemes within MoRD, previously called the Ministry of Rural Areas and Employment

<sup>41</sup> This consolidated national watershed development programme is the sum of various constituent schemes as governed by the Common Guidelines of 1994. In this thesis, MoRD's watershed programme under the common guidelines will be referred to as 'NWDP', and not to any constituent scheme separately.

A year later, in 1994, the Dharia Committee issued recommendations for integrated land use, which in effect complemented the HRC's suggestions for streamlining official programmatic initiative in the WSD sector. The Committee proposed that there ought to be a single body that is vested with the powers to address conservation issues in *all* types of land, which would be called the Department of Land Resources (DoLR). This was ultimately formed in 1999.

Thus, DoLR is vested with the responsibility for watershed development in all types of land—waste, degraded, drought prone or purely vulnerable. However, the distinction between forested and non-forested lands continues. Watershed based development in forested lands is still the responsibility of the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF). Similarly, MoA deals with soil and conservation programmes in problem lands, ravines as well as erosion prone agricultural lands. Despite these divisions in responsibility, a greater institutional unity that is congruous with the objectives of integrated land use has been achieved<sup>42</sup>.

### **3.2 The new policy guidelines: Explaining multiple objectives**

In 1994, MoRD issued the recommendations of the Hanumantha Rao Committee as 'Common Guidelines' for NWDP. The guidelines embody official state policy restructuring in this sector, and articulate watershed development as a rural development programme with a wide range of objectives. These objectives reflect current perceptions of the watershed, as the basis for an integrated approach to biophysical resource conservation and development, both in national and international arenas.

MoRD's guidelines list three principal sets of objectives for NWDP. First, to promote the 'economic development' of the village 'community' which is directly or indirectly dependent on the watershed, through optimum integrated use of its biophysical and human resources (through employment generation). Second, to encourage the 'restoration of ecological balance' through 'easy and affordable technological solutions and institutional arrangements that make use of local technical knowledge and available materials' and 'sustained, community action for the operation and maintenance of assets created'. Third, to improve the 'economic and social condition' of the 'resource poor' and the 'disadvantaged sections of the watershed community' such as the assetless and women through more 'equitable distribution' of the benefits of land and water resources development and greater access to 'income generating activities' (MoRD 1994, p 5-6).

The community is central to both the language and spirit of the new guidelines. Moreover, there is the attempt to enunciate national concerns at the level of community. Raising agricultural productivity for example, is a national objective that provided a key impetus in the evolution of the

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<sup>42</sup> Gaps in coordination continue. There has been no talk of coordination between NWDPR and MoRD implemented schemes. This has the potential to cause major disparities and unevenness at the ground level, where different programmes can govern adjoining blocks (sub-district level administrative units).

watershed sector in India. However, it is not articulated as such by the guidelines, and is expressed, instead, as the need for economic development through optimum resource use in the village community. Economic generation is similarly a crucial national objective. The emphasis on employment opportunities through project works stems from the recognition that nearly 50% of the rural workforce of the country is located in the dry districts<sup>43</sup>. These shifts in articulation are in keeping with the larger evolution of international development discourses, from centralised 'nation-state' conceptions of development to 'de-centred' and 'downscaled' ideas of local and community level development.

Further, the guidelines use a notion of community as an isolated entity detached from wider political and economic linkages. The guidelines espouse pro-poor objectives, but these are not explicitly integrated with cardinal poverty related issues such as unequal power relations or changing socio-political dynamics in rural areas. Factors like land ownership, caste and patriarchal relations that commonly stratify communities are not adequately emphasised. Instead, as will be described shortly, the ability of communities to uniformly engage in cooperative behaviour and develop their own institutions, like the watershed committee, is exaggeratedly depicted. This portrayal stems from ideas of community as pristine and timeless entities. The lack of a sense of history further marginalises the relationship of local actors with the state-government officials, political party leaders, police- and also markets.

These aspects reveal influences of new institutionalist and communitarian theories. These theories focus on characteristics that allow communities to engage in cooperative behaviour to address collective action problems. Their influence, indeed predominance, on agency discourse about the social science of community, is for three main reasons (Mosse 2003a). First, they provide development agencies with a 'predictive and generalising theory of the institutional conditions for collective action'; second, they largely preserve the image of the community as 'separate and distinct from the state'; and third, they 'manage to isolate village level resource management from its wider political relationships and historical context' (Mosse 2003a: 274).

Finally, the guidelines express concerns about the restoration of ecological balance through community action. This objective echoes wider concerns regarding environmental degradation, and the matching affirmation of 'indigenous' and 'community based' knowledge. They encourage the use of locally available materials and knowledge. Yet, as the following parts will discuss, aspects of project design, such as an action plan, create spaces for the domination of expert technical power in the implementation process.

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<sup>43</sup> 1991 Census of India as cited in Shah et al (1998: 127).

### 3.3 Proposed structure and working procedures

The guidelines have laid down a detailed institutional structure for the revised programme. They aim to make the programme's structure amenable to participatory practices in local level decision-making. The following section describes this structure and provides a broad overview of the envisaged working procedure.

**Table 1 Revised Structure of NWDP, Common Guidelines, MoRD 1994**

<u>Implementing Body</u>	<u>Advisory Body</u>	<u>Level</u>
Department of Land Resources (Ministry of Rural Development)		Centre
Department of Rural Development	State Watershed Programme Implementation and Review Committee (SWPIRC)	State
District Rural Development Agency (DRDA) or Zilla Parishad (ZP)	District Watershed Advisory Committee (DWAC)	District
Project Implement Agency (PIA) (Government Officer/NGO/Cooperative etc.)		Microwatershed
Watershed Development Team (WDT)		Microwatershed
Watershed Committee (WC)	Gram Panchayat (GP)	Village

Source: Adapted from Guidelines for Watershed Development, Ministry of Rural Development, 1994

#### 3.3.1 Structure

The guidelines prescribe a uniform structure for programme implementation throughout the country. Individual states can improvise changes without tampering with essential aspects of

reorganisation. The new administrative structure is modelled on a typical line department in the government. The Department for Rural Development in each state is the parent department for the WSD programme. The State Watershed Programme Implementation and Review Committee (SWPIRC) is an advisory body comprising departmental heads and directors of relevant technical institutions and NGOs involved in WSD in the state.

Most rural development programmes in India are implemented through District Rural Development Agencies (DRDAs) in every district. In 1995, MoRD issued instructions to state governments to merge DRDAs with Zilla Panchayats (ZPs) as a step towards decentralising powers to panchayat institutions<sup>44</sup>. Only some states like Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka have effected this merger and functions performed by DRDAs have been transferred to ZPs. Thus, the watershed programme in a state is implemented either by the DRDA or the ZP at the district level, depending on its particular status of the ZP-DRDA merger.

The programme is implemented through Project Implementing Agencies (PIAs) that are responsible for 'planning, coordinating and supervising the formulation and implementation' of the projects in selected villages' (MoRD 1994: 17). PIAs work through a four member Watershed Development Team, which is multidisciplinary, though individual arrangements may vary between states<sup>45</sup>. The guidelines have made a clear provision for the involvement of NGOs, voluntary associations, banks, and other private and commercial organisations as PIAs for micro watershed projects.

The core executive body for each project is a watershed committee (WC) constituted at the village. The guidelines prescribe that this committee should be appointed by the larger collective of all residents in the watershed area, termed as a 'Watershed Association' (WA). The process of committee formation has to be consensual and not through competitive elections. Prior to the formation of the committee, the PIA is responsible for initiating the formation of user and self-help groups in the village<sup>46</sup>. The committee elects a Chairman from among its members, and appoints a Watershed Secretary, who is a 'full-time' paid employee of the association. The guidelines thus emphasise collective action by the community in facilitating these local institutions. Seats are reserved for the SC/ST community and for women, in tune with the state's affirmative reservations policies for disadvantaged sections.

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<sup>44</sup> There are indications that despite this pro-panchayat move, GOI does not intend to do away with the basic structure of the DRDA. It specifies that 'DRDAs will maintain their separate identity, but will function under the chairmanship of the ZP'. Besides, in states where the DRDA does not have a separate identity, a 'separate cell should be created in the ZP, which maintains a separate identity and separate accounts, so that the accounts are capable of being audited separately' (GoI 1999: 1-4)

<sup>45</sup> These members are usually experts in the fields of agriculture, irrigation, forestry and 'social mobilisation'. The social mobiliser is responsible for facilitating the formation of user and self-help groups.

<sup>46</sup> While user groups (UGs) are typically composed of landholders, self-help groups comprise the landless (SHGs).

### 3.3.1.1. Key aspects of structure

The involvement of NGOs as PIAs and the formation of village WCs as the heart of local decision-making, are key aspects of the attempt to make programme structure amenable to participatory decision-making. NGOs are well known for their positive roles in promoting 'social mobilisation' and participation. Decentralisation within the programme is thus not confined to intra-governmental redistribution of powers. As for the constitution of WCs, the guidelines aim to create exclusive local programme bodies, as facilitating forums for participatory methods of working in villages. Their formation represents a significant new trend in the conduct of decentralised development in India<sup>47</sup>. The second reason for constituting such committees is that local management of watershed resources presents a complex challenge. Programme planners perceive the need for the development of institutions like the WC to govern the use of private and common resources<sup>48</sup>.

Decentralisation of powers to the district tier of the programme is the most important aspect of bureaucratic reorganisation. The DRDA/ZP is the principal administrative tier of the programme and is in charge of implementation (MoRD 1994:12). It is responsible both for the selection of watershed areas, and of PIAs. The district is meant to select these areas on the basis of a strict set of criteria usually devised at the state level. These typically include biophysical factors such as evapo-transpiration rate, rainfall, drinking water scarcity and status of groundwater as well as sociological factors such as the percentage of SC/ST population, illiterates and agricultural labourers. Other factors can be considerations of contiguity of watershed areas and the preponderance of common lands. PIAs are selected from among a wide pool of institutional types laid down by the guidelines, including government line departments, agricultural universities, cooperatives, and banks, apart from NGOs (MoRD 1994: 12). The district has considerable discretion in the matter.

A direct link has been established between the central government and the district programme body, especially with respect to the funding pattern. Funds for the programme flow directly from MoRD to the DRDA or ZP, and the state government only releases a matching grant to the latter<sup>49</sup>. Once received by the district level authority, money for works is transferred directly to the account held by the WC<sup>50</sup>. This direct transfer of finances is a measure of financial decentralisation. As a result of this provision, a strong basis for the claim that the WC is not a nominal body has been laid. Yet, it is the district that retains controls over money, and has discretionary powers to innovate provisions for financial stringency. The district Collector usually

<sup>47</sup> Other participatory development programmes like Joint Forestry Management Programmes (JFM) work through village based JFM committees.

<sup>48</sup> Turton (2000)

<sup>49</sup> Centre-state ratios for principal schemes funding the WSDP are as follows- DPAP (75:25), DDP (75:25 for hot arid non-sandy areas, and 100% centrally funded for hot sandy, and cold arid areas), IWDP (100% centrally funded), EAS (75:25) and JGSY (80:20).

<sup>50</sup> Money for works comprises 80% of total finances, and the remaining 20% have been earmarked for administration (10%), 'community organisation' (6%) and training (4%) respectively.

has final powers of administrative sanction<sup>51</sup>. District level government officers, from relevant departments like minor irrigation and agriculture, have powers of technical sanction for different sectors within a watershed project.

Panchayat institutions have been accorded an advisory role at the district, where the nucleus of programme decision-making is located. The District Watershed Advisory Committee (DWAC) mainly comprises elected representatives to the Zilla Panchayat. In theory, the district programme body is meant to consult DWAC on policy matters. In practice, district authorities have the discretion to determine the extent of DWAC's involvement in the watershed programme. This is usually dependent on the broader political stance towards panchayat bodies adopted by the concerned state government. The gram panchayat has a more substantial role than ZP representatives. In fact, the guidelines require that resolutions must be obtained from the gram panchayat before the commencement of the watershed project as well as regarding public contributions and the maintenance of common assets created during the programme. In institutional terms, the assumption is that gram panchayats, while not implementing the project directly would assume a cooperative role<sup>52</sup>.

Despite their advisory role, panchayat institutions have not been given the principal responsibility for implementing watershed development. This is the subject of the latest debate in decentralised development in India. Chapter 2 showed how despite numerous initiatives, panchayat institutions have not, with a few exceptions, been empowered with a view to creating a uniform tier of local government throughout the country. In most states, panchayats continue to be treated as local implementers of development programmes funded and executed by government authorities at higher levels. The creation of WCs, as parallel local bodies, is being widely viewed as the latest device to deflect powers away from panchayat institutions.

There are two sides to this controversy. Defenders of democratic decentralisation through panchayats argue that WSD is among the 29 subjects mentioned in the 11<sup>th</sup> schedule of the constitution, which may be transferred to PRIs by state legislatures (Baumann 1999, Baumann et al 2000). They consider the creation of WCs as unjustified, unnecessary and a step against empowering panchayats. Others dismiss the above view as 'panchayat purism'<sup>53</sup>. They believe that while panchayats are the legally recognised institutions for local government, they are not appropriate as direct implementers of the watershed programme. Among the main reasons cited are that the panchayat is too 'big' for watershed development programmes, and also that the panchayat has many other responsibilities that would prevent it from according exclusive

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<sup>51</sup> The Collector is the head of administration of a district in India. Her functions include the maintenance of law and order, revenue collection as also developmental functions for the district.

<sup>52</sup> The guidelines even provide for the possibility of panchayats as PIAs, though this is not practice in most states. Rajasthan is a notable exception.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with BN Yugandhar, ex-secretary MoRD, Gol, April 2000. Yugandhar had a key role in formulating the guidelines of 1994.

attention to the watershed programme (Baumann 1999: 215). The fear that gram panchayats would divert large sums of watershed money into other activities like the construction of roads is less openly articulated<sup>54</sup>. However, all these ideas have together translated into a general administrative bias against the involvement of panchayat bodies in watershed development.

### 3.3.2 Working

The guidelines prescribe detailed instructions for the methods of decentralised decision-making to be followed by programme units at different levels. Following the emphasis on popular participation, the guidelines contain a ready blueprint for how a model watershed committee ought to function. The following section introduces the principal elements of state policy for participatory watershed development in India.

Each watershed development project is implemented on the basis of a four-year action plan, which proposes measures upon careful consideration of the topography of the microwatershed. Their objective is land and water resource management within the watershed. There are usually three points of emphasis- on-farm soil and water conservation and surface water harvesting that primarily involve the construction of structures on land, and afforestation through planting of trees.

The guidelines envision that the action plan would be prepared not in government offices, but in the village by the watershed committee, through a 'participatory and gradual' process involving deliberations with user and self-help groups, which may extend until the end of the first project year. This provision allows policy makers to claim successfully that the programme subscribes to a philosophy of decentralised planning. However, the action plan is a modern document, complete with sector wise targets and financial estimates. It is an exercise both in technical and financial planning intelligible to expertise and requires skills that immediately put project officials at an advantage over local residents of the watershed.

It is primarily through the action plan that the government expects persons living in watershed areas to have a say in the implementation of the project. The guidelines also lay down a number of methods for 'collective decision-making and participation', such as regular public meetings, that it expects the watershed committee to adopt. There is a provision for creating a 'Watershed Development Fund' (WDF) through 'voluntary contributions' of cash or labour, to be used by the community for post-project maintenance.

The Project Implementing Agency (PIA) and its Watershed Development Team (WDT) are the critical links between the village watershed committee and the rest of the project structure. Yet,

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<sup>54</sup> Nearly 2 million rupees are released for a single micro-watershed project to a WC over the 4 year project duration.. Gram panchayats typically receive between 50,000-2,00,000 rupees per year for various activities, though figures vary according to size. Another irksome point for panchayats is that the watershed secretary is paid a remuneration of 1000 rupees per month, whereas the panchayat secretary gets half that amount.

while charting a course for participatory decision-making, the guidelines are cautious in maintaining that the PIA is not a substitute for the watershed committee, which is portrayed as the real node of decision-making. District authorities in charge of the programme can monitor the activities of PIAs within their general powers of implementation.

### **3.4 Summary of issues**

This chapter had set out to analyse the evolution of the watershed development approach in India in the broader context of decentralised development in this country. The following section summarises its principal conclusions. The issues they raise serve as important leads for further investigation.

First, the nature of transformation within the watershed development sector in India both mirrors and reinforces, a broader international shift from 'national' or 'nationalistic' to 'community-level' and 'decentralised' conceptions of development. The chapter has shown how consecutive emphases on issues such as dryland agricultural productivity, food security, ecological degradation and ultimately 'rural development', all within the changing watershed sector, could be correlated with prevailing interpretations of development that were dominant at the time. In this respect, the watershed development sector today embodies the essence of decentralisation in India. Indeed, the microwatershed is a critical site where notions of popular planning, community initiative and local decision-making interface.

Following the parallel evolution of the watershed sector and dominant development discourses, key national concerns regarding development are enunciated through this sector. The need for increasing agricultural productivity, generating employment and checking ecological degradation are essential objectives of watershed development. The National Watershed Development Programme has all the elements of a 'catch-all' rural development programme. It captures therefore the pressing political imperatives of the state.

Second, the main elements of policy reform of the watershed programme offer important insights into the nature of decentralisation presently unfolding in India. In particular, five such elements warrant mention.

The creation of exclusive village watershed committees, that would facilitate participatory decision-making and govern local resource management, is the first aspect of policy reform in favour of decentralisation in NWDP. This approach reflects a well known theme in community based natural resource management or CBNRM, where the main decentralisation problem is 'to establish "self governing non-state" regulatory institutions that build on coherence within local

communities'<sup>55</sup>. The innovation of village watershed committees is an important element in the attempt by official development planners to decentralise NWDP. These committees are projected as community institutions, and the cardinal role played by project staff in their formation is systematically under emphasised.

The effort to facilitate participatory methods of decision-making has engendered support for NGOs as programme implementers. The guidelines recommend the involvement of NGOs as PIAs. This has considerably strengthened the image of the NGO as an agent apposite for promoting participatory development. NGO involvement in the watershed programme potentially diversifies the resources available to government planners and implementers. Yet, an indiscriminate emphasis on NGOs as 'agents' of participation may disregard significant differences between organisations that constitute this broad category. Nevertheless, as programme restructuring of NWDP amply reveals, programme planners are able to obtain a decentralisation label for development programmes by encouraging NGO-government partnerships.

In addition to creating local institutions and involving NGOs, the guidelines also contain an intricate blueprint for how participation must be enacted. The conscious crafting of participatory practice by planners is an equally significant element of decentralised development in NWDP. This framework conceives of participation through the inventions of institutions and procedure, rather than popular mobilisation or structural change. Yet, the guidelines do not preclude implementing agencies for initiating local mobilisation beyond what is envisaged by the participatory blueprint.

A notion of community as a 'self-sufficient entity' is the basis for participatory watershed development as envisioned by the guidelines. Issues pertaining to the community are not correlated with wider political and economic linkages, or with unequal power relations. This is compounded with a "planners'" view of the watershed, as a series of issues amenable to technical treatment within a framework of planning. Both these factors act in tandem to 'depoliticise' the watershed, in the same sense as Ferguson described the 'depoliticisation' of poverty in Lesotho by development agents or experts, who 'uncompromisingly reduced the problem of poverty to a technical problem, and compromised technical solutions to the sufferings of powerless and oppressed people' (1990: 256).

There is the attempt to distance decision-making for the watershed programme from elected bodies, both at the district and the village, the two principal levels of implementation. In India, elected panchayat bodies are frequently integrated with mainstream party politics, and are

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<sup>55</sup> Hulme and Woodhouse (2000: 227)

characterised by contest, violence as also factionalism<sup>56</sup>. They consequently strike a discordant note in the picture of community, as a self-sufficient and cooperative entity, that the programme's planners idealise. Moreover, a historical rivalry between the bureaucracy and elected representatives in India, which characterised decades of impotence of panchayat bodies, is deeply embedded in the development culture of this country.

In the present format of the programme, 'expert power' through planning directly intermingles with 'pristine community initiatives' through participatory methods. Figuratively, there is no space for elected bodies, or indeed the kind of political mobilisation, representation and democratic culture that they are capable of. As a result, the guidelines espouse community development in an economic sense, but do not articulate political mobilisation as an explicit objective of the programme. They do not clearly visualise the emergence of any political process, such as representation in formal political bodies or integration with other initiatives for the rights of disadvantaged groups, as an outcome of participatory decision making for the watershed programme.

Recent restructuring in the programme aims to promote decentralised development through the watershed sector. More generally, it indicates a powerful trend in the nature of decentralisation in India today. The emphasis on institutional innovation (local committees) and diversification (NGOs), procedural reform (participatory blueprint), distancing from elected local bodies, technical and planning oriented treatment of complex local issues and inadequate recognition of the broader politico-economic linkages of a local community- all these aspects bear a special meaning given the history of decentralisation in this country. In parts, they also show the powerful influence of international discourses of decentralisation and development on development planners in India.

Chapter 2 showed how decentralisation in India has been fraught with difficult and contentious political issues, particularly with respect to federal reforms, empowerment of panchayats and the centralised apparatus for development planning. Aspects of policy reform of the watershed programme embody tensions between planning, politics and participation, some of which were witnessed even in earlier attempts at decentralisation. The centrality of the action plan to the participatory watershed project illustrates how development planning, the prime basis of centralised state power in India, is being articulated in a new terrain of local level decision-making. The insular treatment of community, isolated from larger political linkages, reveals the attempt to confine participation within the watershed to a single action plan. Moreover, this procedural conception of participation is matched with the inadequate recognition of local power

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<sup>56</sup> In Indian politics, the term 'faction' has been used to denote a 'vertical' organisation that typically comprises members from different castes, who are held by 'transactional' ties to a leader (Hardiman 1982, p 199)

relations. This ensures that while watershed development policies are loaded with ideas of equity and redistribution, they do not address them fully.

Although it reinforces some of the problems associated with decentralisation and development, policy reform in NWDP is an important landmark in official efforts for decentralisation. It represents a definite attempt to decentralise development through bureaucratic reorganisation, local institutional innovation, NGO involvement in project implementation and procedural reform. It is among the pioneer endeavours to decentralise a nationally implemented development programme. Equally significant is the fact that such restructuring coincides with a number of other initiatives for decentralisation, especially the steps taken by some state governments following the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> constitutional amendments. There is a pressing need to study the implications of such policy reform on the ground, especially in order to understand the potential for change contained in such reform.

#### **4. Field research: Nature, structure, and methodology**

##### **4.1 Rationale and structure of field research**

My field research examines the practices of decentralised development through the implementation of the National Watershed Development Programme. In particular, it considers the nature of processes that such practices initiate and the effects they produce.

Recent policy reform in NWDP has laid out a possible trajectory for decentralised development in India. Yet, the new policy framework is in the form of a set of guidelines, which are therefore, open to interpretation by a range of implementers through out the country. Given the heterogeneity in experiences of decentralisation among different states in the country, it is likely that such interpretations be contrasting in nature. It is for this reason that my field research is conducted in two different states in India. The point of a two state study is to understand whether possible differences in contemporary political conditions, especially with relation to decentralisation, bear an influence on the interpretation of the watershed guidelines and their consequent implementation.

Within the administrative form devised by the guidelines, significant administrative and financial powers have been decentralised to the district. The district thus plays a critical part in the interpretation of watershed guidelines within each state. My field research is therefore based on one district each in both states selected for investigation. It examines the nature of procedures and implementing mechanisms devised by the district.

The programme itself is implemented through village level microwatershed projects. Further, institutional diversification within the programme occurs essentially for project implementation,

and NGOs, cooperatives and banks are engaged as Project Implementing Agencies (PIAs). NGOs, in the broadest sense of the term, are the most popular among all the various voluntary and commercial organisations engaged as PIAs. My fieldwork is based in two projects in each district, one implemented by a government organisation and the second by an NGO. It aims to examine whether differences in participatory practices in these projects, can be correlated with differences in interpretation between government officers and NGOs. It also addresses the important question of the potential of NGOs as agents of decentralised development in India.

The fieldwork is concentrated at the villages where these projects are implemented. At this level, the aim is to investigate the nature of formation of the village watershed committee, the methods of decision-making adopted and the outcomes of the watershed project. In particular, it examines the impact of local power relations on participatory decision-making for the project, and conversely, the effect that project practices have on prevailing power dynamics. The overall aim of fieldwork is to correlate village level findings with the decentralised practices initiated by implementing agencies and district level authorities. The choice of two villages per district allows for further comparison between two different contexts of local power relations and their impact on project implementation.

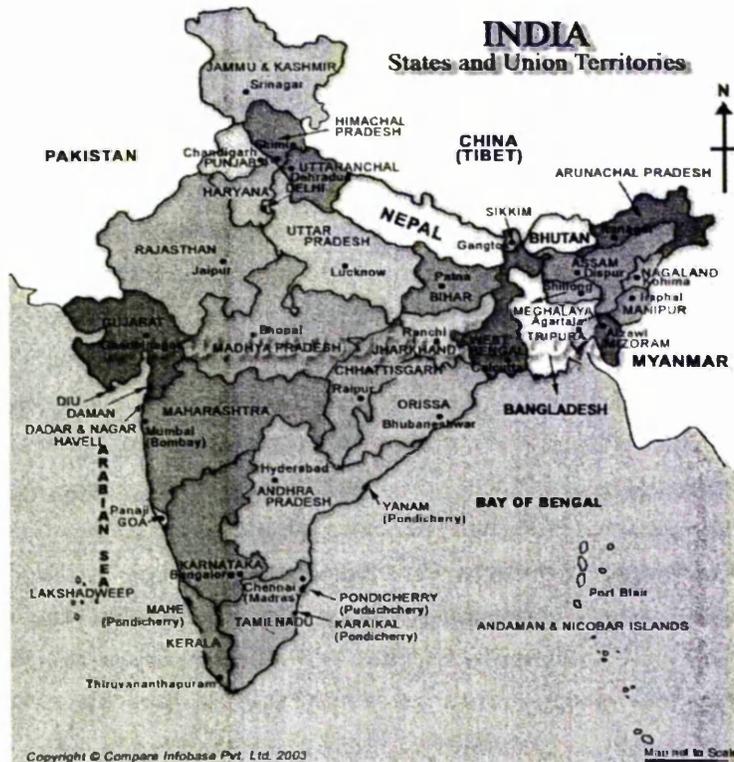
In my introductory chapter, I had discussed the significance of the participatory development project in contemporary practices of decentralised development. My fieldwork is conducted in the context of these participatory projects, which serve as the essential basis within which implementing agencies and local actors interact. It is in its framework that attempts for securing and preserving hegemony by a range of actors, through the use of discourses of decentralisation and participatory development, are likely to be made. The structure and focus of my fieldwork would thus complement my theoretical concerns. I am interested in understanding how hegemony and its related ideas are useful in explaining dominance, rule and the potential for change in local power relations, within the terrain of a participatory development project. Moreover, applications of hegemony in this thesis, take into account previous debates on the inapplicability of the Gramscian 'hegemony' model in the Indian case in a simple or unproblematic way. Thus, critiques of Gramsci's original propositions discussed in Chapter 1 might be particularly useful in understanding the complex and disaggregated dynamics that characterise state-society relations in India.

#### **4.2 Reasons for selection of sites**

This study is located in the states of Andhra Pradesh (AP) and Madhya Pradesh (MP). These states were selected for two main reasons. First, the current political leadership in both these states have undertaken separate initiatives for decentralisation, and there are important differences in approach. Briefly put, these differences concern the significance of panchayat empowerment after the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment, compared with other initiatives for decentralisation like

community based development programmes. Second, both states have large dryland areas, and have therefore accorded a high priority to the recently revised National Watershed Development Programme. Both states have innovated procedures, mechanisms and institutions for implementing the new watershed guidelines. For these reasons, AP and MP present dynamic political environments for decentralised development.

**Map 1: Location of Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh in India**



Source: [www.mapsofindia.com](http://www.mapsofindia.com)

Andhra Pradesh was among the few states embracing a favourable political climate towards panchayats soon after independence<sup>57</sup>. However, after a nearly continuous period of Congress rule until the 1980s, panchayats in the state were widely dominated by local Congress supporters. When the Telugu Desam Party, a regional political party headed by NT Rama Rao, came to power in the early 1980s, panchayats were systematically weakened to destroy the local Congress party base. In the post-73<sup>rd</sup> amendment period, important pro-panchayat steps like the merger between DRDAs and ZPs have not yet been taken. Panchayat elections have not been held regularly either.

<sup>57</sup> Johnson (2003), Shiviah et al (1986), Raghavulu and Narayana (1999)

However, the TDP government in power at the state has taken a number of decentralisation initiatives 'outside' the panchayat system. These consist of bureaucratic reorganisation, community based development programmes (including progressive devolution of powers to local Water Users' Association for Participatory Irrigation Management<sup>58</sup>, and the largest women's self-help group programme in the country), and the Janmabhoomi- a government initiated process for transparent governance, increased accountability of government functionaries and social mobilisation<sup>59</sup>.

Madhya Pradesh, especially since the early 1990s, has been among the forerunners of panchayat reform and empowerment in the country. It was the first state to hold panchayat elections after the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment. It is among the handful of states in the country to have merged DRDAs with Zilla Panchayats. In addition, the Congress government of MP, in power since 1992, has integrated the existing bureaucratised development process with zilla, janpad and gram panchayats, at the district, block and village levels respectively, through the creation of *Zilla Sarkar* or District Government<sup>60</sup>. Further, the state government is constantly innovating new laws for panchayat bodies. The latest in line is the Gram Swaraj Act of 2001, which transferred powers from the elected panchayat to the gram sabha, the collective of all adults (who are registered voters) in the panchayat, with the belief that power must be in the hands of the people, and not their representatives<sup>61</sup>.

The study focuses on programme implementation in Kurnool and Dewas districts of Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh respectively. Both districts are located within the drylands in these states. Kurnool, in western Andhra Pradesh, is part of the Rayalseema region, distinctive on account of its rugged, dry upland terrain. Rayalseema lies in the hinterland of the eastern coastal strip, which is fertile and irrigated. The western parts of the district however, are drier and less productive than the eastern part, which is irrigated by the Kurnool-Cuddapah canal. Dewas, located in south western Madhya Pradesh, is a part of the Malwa plateau, and partly constitutes a portion of the Narmada valley. The Malwa uplands comprise fertile black cotton soils, and benefit from a long tradition of irrigated cultivation and industrialisation. The valley portion however is less fertile, and agriculture is predominantly rainfed. Both districts are thus characterised by contrasts within a broader dryland context<sup>62</sup>.

The microwatershed projects that inform this thesis are set in four villages in Kurnool and Dewas districts. These villages were chosen as they were sites for implementation of government and NGO implemented projects, that were either recently completed, or in their final year of

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<sup>58</sup> Raju et al (2000)

<sup>59</sup> Manor (2000), Mooij (2000)

<sup>60</sup> Behar (1999), Minocha (1999)

<sup>61</sup> Behar (2000, 2001, 2003), Behar and Kumar (2002) Manor (2001)

<sup>62</sup> Kurnool and Dewas have been identified as 'dryland' districts by Shah et al (1998)

implementation. In Kurnool, both Lilapuram and Malligundu lie in the western rainfed part of the district, where the watershed programme is more intensively implemented. In Dewas, Kishangarh lies in the relatively fertile upland portion of the district, whereas Neelpura is located in the less prosperous valley area<sup>63</sup>. None of the four villages are excessively remote, and can be accessed easily from the main road. This convenience of access was ensured to facilitate field visits.

### **4.3 Methodology**

As research was conducted at a number of levels, the research methodology comprises a mix of methods. Three main approaches have been used: literature reviews of secondary and primary material, semi-structured interviews of concerned actors, and finally, village level fieldwork that involves a range of methods.

Secondary literature reviewed mainly covered the Indian political economy since independence. Special emphasis was placed on the history of decentralisation in India, and the evolution of the watershed development sector in this country. Secondary literature reviews were conducted to understand the political histories of MP and AP. These sources typically included books, articles in journals and unpublished research articles and dissertations in libraries accessed during the period of research.

A variety of primary sources were also used. Government publications, including documents, maps and gazetteers were relied on for information regarding places, ranging from the district and block to the village. Primary documents used at the village level consisted of land records, village police records that contain accounts of village histories from a crime perspective and village agricultural records showing broad cropping trends. In addition, all watershed project documents comprising action plans, financial records and evaluation reports, were extensively used. Relevant panchayat documents, including financial records as well as action plans, were also used.

Village level documents, especially land records and police records, were read with the aid of verification by a number of village residents. Both these were fraught with biases, although of different sorts. Land ownership is a controversial issue, and a variety of issues have constrained its proper documentation. Among the most important is the attempt to register land plots under different members of a single household in order to escape the total ceiling imposed on ownership. This leads to deceptive land records, where a number of members from the same household appear as holders of small and marginal plots, and a large consolidated ownership goes unnoticed.

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<sup>63</sup> Names of all four villages have been changed to protect their identity.

I tried to address this problem by intensive corroboration of the land records with the Village Agricultural Officer or *patwari*, as known in AP and MP respectively, in the presence of several other persons in the village, taking care to include those from different castes and categories of land ownership. This created a setting where false records and claims were detected, though frequently, noisy disagreements also occurred. While most records in the land lists used are precise and true, the possibility of a few errors remains. Land records are the most controversial and unwieldy of primary documents, and have consistently presented challenges to researchers.

All landholdings referred to are 'consolidated landholdings', which for the purposes of this study, I have defined as the total number of acres that are under a single ownership, and are being cultivated jointly, under the aegis of the head of a household, and the benefits of the consolidated agriculture accrue to all families, that are part of the household. This will necessarily include the sum of all land holdings that may be registered under different *pattas*, as long as the *pattadars* are members of this household, and derive the benefits of agriculture from that land<sup>64</sup>. The notion of consolidated landholdings attempts to overcome errors in reporting landownership and joint cultivation. It relies extensively on village level knowledge to verify official documentation.

Police records are difficult to read for different reasons. These records are useful sources of a village's recent history. Officers from the local *thana* or police station, write short descriptions of the village every year, detailing tensions among its residents and mentioning individuals who need to be 'watched'. These records reveal issues and aspects of a village's life that might be difficult to obtain during fieldwork. These are particularly useful as the starting points of investigation. However, the records themselves embody dynamic relationships between officers and villagers, and highlight the linkages that influence perceptions of the former. Caste is typically a crucial determinant, as officers from 'higher' castes have been known to write unfavourable accounts of individuals from 'lower' castes. The following chapter will present an overview of the principal debates on caste in India.

In addition to secondary and primary documents, personal interviews conducted with a range of concerned actors offer a substantial source of information and critical opinion informing this thesis<sup>65</sup>. Interviews conducted at the national, state and district levels were mainly of semi-structured type. Persons interviewed included government officials, political leaders, NGO personnel, journalists and academicians. In most cases, the subject of the interview was explained in advance, though questions were rarely handed out prior to the interview. Interviews were recorded using a dictaphone after obtaining permission, and these were transcribed later.

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<sup>64</sup> A *patta* is a land deed and a *pattadar* is the individual whose name in which the land deed has been effected.

<sup>65</sup> Names of people interviewed have been changed, with the exception of those who did not object to being identified and major public figures.

Village level fieldwork involved a range of methods. I spent an average of 6 weeks in each of the four villages studied. I required the services of an interpreter in the villages of AP, as I do not speak Telugu. This was not the case in Madhya Pradesh, as I am fluent in Hindi. In order to avoid local perceptions of bias to the extent possible, I decided not to choose an interpreter from the concerned village or even its neighbouring villages. I chose a college student from Kurnool town, and took care to ensure that her 'native' village was in another part of the district to that being studied<sup>66</sup>.

The initial period of interaction in each village was spent in informal conversations with persons, where I tried to explain my background and the purpose of my visit<sup>67</sup>. This was usually a crucial period, when mutual impressions were formed, and some persons were more forthcoming and frank than others. As days passed by, these dynamics evolved considerably, and many more persons in the village were willing to interact with me.

Unstructured conversations with people, both individually and in groups, were the mainstay of my village level fieldwork. These 'interviews' occurred both randomly and spontaneously. After the first few weeks however, I was able to discern the broad pattern of daily schedules of men and women, and approached people accordingly. Group discussions were the second main source of information. I relied on group discussions to obtain information about aspects of village life, but equally, to perceive intra-personal dynamics among members present. Group discussions served as useful venues for triangulation, where information received earlier could be publicly verified and responses evoked. Issues arising from these discussions frequently served as excellent leads for further investigation.

I mostly refrained from using my dictaphone to record interviews in the village, after realising that it created discomfiture. Sometimes, the sight of a recording machine evoked an urge to perform amongst the audience, leading to exaggerated, and frequently, misleading claims. While this was useful to capture on occasions, at others, it was a source of distraction. I was able to take notes on paper, though there were times when I would record interviews in memory, and transcribe these later. Working with an interpreter proved to be easier than imagined, and most villagers were extremely supportive. As conversations with villagers were conducted informally and in an unstructured manner, responses received were usually long narratives and oral histories. These often yielded insights into issues that were not being directly discussed.

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<sup>66</sup> I consciously decided to choose a woman interpreter, mainly for convenience of travel and stay together. When I arrived in the villages, I also discovered that working intimately with another woman, met with approval from village residents, and almost certainly evoked greater trust among village women.

<sup>67</sup> I did not stay in the villages for most parts of my research, and travelled daily from a neighbouring town, though several overnight stays also occurred whenever necessary.

In addition to unstructured interviews and group discussions that supplied qualitative information, I also conducted a household survey in each village. This survey was designed to understand and record any change in rural livelihoods that might have accompanied the watershed project<sup>68</sup>. The survey was conducted on a pre-project and current basis, and questions mainly concerned land use, availability of water, crop yields, cropping pattern, marketable produce, labour, employment, livestock and migration. The survey was conducted amongst a random stratified sample, of 30 percent of the total households in each village. The sample was stratified according to land ownership, and comprised four categories: small, medium, large and landless. Small farmers have lands between 0-3 acres, medium farmers have lands between 3-6 acres and large farmers have lands above 6 acres. This typology was maintained in all four villages studied. In Madhya Pradesh, the land unit in use is *bigha*, and this was converted into acres for uniformity. The total number of respondents in each category within the sample is directly proportional to the total number of persons in that category in the universe (village). This ensured that the sample would accurately reflect the composition of land ownership within the village.

Respondents were contacted individually, and their answers were entirely based on memory. I conducted the survey with the help of field enumerators selected from within the villages. I also verified answers reported on each survey form through discussions with groups of farmers. Most respondents in the sample were male, as men are heads of households. In this respect, the survey embodies a potential gender bias. I tried to overcome this limitation by obtaining information about livelihoods from women in separate group discussions.

These surveys supplied quantitative information, but I have used their findings in conjunction with qualitative information gathered through interviews. These have been presented as broad trends in the following chapters. Their value lies in offering precise insights into the many ways in which existing resource relations in each village impacts the unfolding of the watershed project.

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<sup>68</sup> 'Livelihoods' is used here to denote the comprehensive range of options available to each household for income generation and survival. These mainly include agriculture, but also other non-land based activities such as livestock rearing.

## Chapter 4

### Depoliticisation and Local Institution Building

#### 1. Introduction

Chapter 3 discussed the principal elements of recent restructuring aimed to constitute NWDP as a 'participatory' development programme. The most important among these is the creation of watershed committees, local bodies presumed to be more suitable for the task of facilitating participatory decision-making, than the existing panchayats. This single measure has provoked debates regarding the seriousness of decentralisation of powers to panchayats, despite their constitutional recognition in 1993. These debates centre on the most frequently raised question regarding decentralisation in India today- if decentralisation is not really about the strengthening of local government through panchayats, then what is it? On examining the nature of decentralisation initiatives that have unfolded in India, I came to the following hypothesis. The watershed committee signifies the attempt to 'decentralise' development, through institutional reorganisation of an official development programme, along with the design and constitution of a local body, deemed by planners as 'appropriate' for the purpose<sup>1</sup>. It represents therefore an unambiguous course of action available to development planners, keen to adopt a decentralised agenda, without engaging in panchayat reform that is both long contested and more difficult to achieve.

This chapter aims to show how the attempt by planners to create a 'new' institution, ostensibly apposite for participatory development, unfolds in practice. It draws on fieldwork in Kurnool district in Andhra Pradesh. There are two aspects to the case being made here. First, the national watershed guidelines articulate a discourse of 'depoliticisation' to rationalise and explain the constitution of watershed committees in contrast to panchayats. In Kurnool, this discourse takes on strikingly regional forms, adapting itself to the particular political economy of the region of which the district is a part. Second, a number of local factors, variable at the village level, influence the extent to which this discourse succeeds at all. On the whole, this chapter suggests that the creation of watershed committees can be analysed as an element of Indian development strategies that have consistently tended to frame development issues 'apolitically'.

#### 2. Depoliticisation and Development

In the last decade or more, 'depoliticisation' has become a familiar theme among scholars critical of the development process (Escobar 1999, Ferguson 1990, Kamat 2002a). The 'depoliticisation' of development principally arises from a theorisation of development as a wholly economic

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this thesis, I use the term 'official' to denote that which broadly symbolises the authority of the state, variously perceived. In this case, it may mean that NWDP, the development programme in question, apart from being government funded and controlled, is the Indian state's principal rural development intervention today.

activity. Chapter 2 described how the 'invention' of the economy, as a domain independent from 'politics, morality and culture' prepared the ground for pragmatic economic policies where 'development' is constituted as progress (Escobar 1999). It also demonstrated that this conception of development was favourable to the emergence of planning discourses. Further, these discourses uphold technocratic intervention for development, and have thus become closely identified with expert power.

Contemporary readings of the depoliticisation of development are largely derived from this technical treatment of development, of which planning is a central constituent. Ferguson (1990) seminally contributed to this concept, through his study of a World Bank funded development project in Lesotho. Through an analysis of project practices, Ferguson made the powerful case that a ' "development" project can end up performing extremely sensitive political operations involving the entrenchment and expansion of institutional state power almost invisibly, under cover of a neutral, technical mission to which no one can object', while reducing at the same time, the complex problem of poverty to a 'technical problem' amenable to technical treatment by planners (1990: 256). Ferguson is inspired by Michel Foucault's conceptualisation of 'governmentality' or rationality of government, as the emergence of a distinctive, modern form of power that 'resides in the things it manages'<sup>2</sup>. It refers therefore to power 'which seeks to govern or regulate the conditions in which people live', and is concentrated in the apparatus we have come to call 'the state' (Foucault 1991, Gordon 1991, Murray-Li 1999). Development, as Ferguson shows, provides the rationale for expansion of state power as bureaucratic power, and simultaneously masks such expansion by posing political problems as technical issues amenable to expert intervention by planners.

Ferguson's analysis has sparked off a number of creative studies. In this tradition, Kamat (2002a) describes the many guises of the depoliticisation discourse in her study of a grassroots organisation in western India. She illustrates how the state uses the law as a tool to exclude all that is not 'harmonious' from the ambit of development. She interprets this as the attempt to minimise radical action, which questions the fundamentally unequal bases of the state, and is by definition conflictual. Simultaneously, development, artificially equated with the economy, is pursued as a matter of technical intervention<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Foucault (1991), Gordon (1991). Foucault recognised the emergence of the 'economy' as a 'level of reality and field of intervention' in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Following this was the emergence of the population as a specific field of intervention, and an object of 'government techniques'. With these developments, Foucault argues, government was no longer about sovereignty or the 'administrative apparatuses of the territorial monarchies', but the 'management of population through specific interventions in the economy'. These developments allowed 'the constitution of a savoir of government that is absolutely inseparable from that of a knowledge of all the processes related to population in its larger sense, i.e., what we call the economy' (Foucault 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Refer to Kamat (2002a), particularly Chapter 3 on a 'Discourse of Depoliticisation', for more details.

Chapter 2 showed that the essential orientation of the Indian exercise in planning lies in the attempt to operate 'outside' an imaginary exclusive domain of politics. Development planning buttressed the authority of a handful of technical experts and an involved political leadership. Moreover, planning was viewed as an exercise that directed development, and automatically translated into that which enables the pursuit of 'universal' goals, 'above' the particular interests of representative politics (Chatterjee 1988). The chapter described how this approach engendered serious contradictions between planning and politics, and resulted in the increasing inability of the Indian state to realise its own stated goals of development.

Despite the patent problems associated with depoliticisation, Indian development strategies have continued to formulate development issues 'apolitically'. Chapter 3 argued that basic elements of depoliticisation are present in the national watershed guidelines as well. This chapter makes the case that conditions particular to Andhra Pradesh and Kurnool are congenial for the fullest expression of these elements.

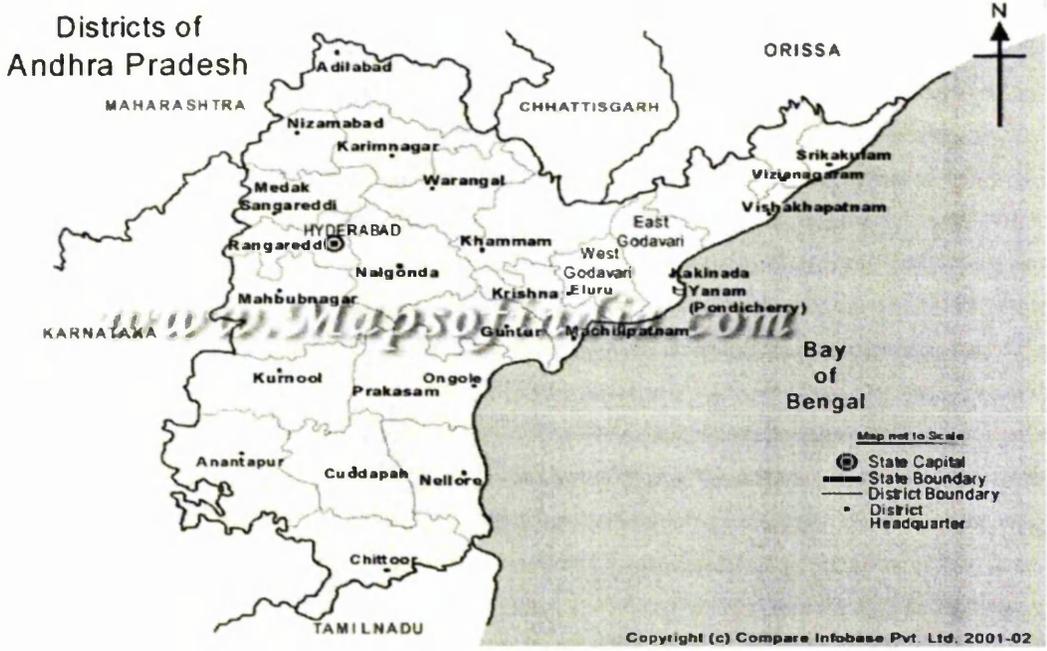
### **3. Kurnool Watershed Office (KWO)**

Kurnool district is a part of the Rayalseema region of Andhra Pradesh. The state is divided into three parts on the basis of its topography- Rayalseema along the western and southwestern strip, Telangana in the north and coastal Andhra Pradesh towards the east<sup>4</sup>. Rayalseema is distinctive on account of its rugged, dry upland terrain and lies in the hinterland of the coastal strip, which is fertile and irrigated. Villages in Rayalseema characteristically practice rainfed agriculture, as annual rainfall is hazardously low and intermittent. In Kurnool, one among its four constituting districts, agriculture and allied activities account for 75.17% of occupation<sup>5</sup>. The western parts of the district however are drier and less fertile than the eastern part, which is irrigated by the Kurnool-Cuddapah canal. The general progression of contrasts in fertility and availability of water towards the eastern parts of the state contexts the political economy of Kurnool, as also Rayalseema. Seasonal migration from the western to the eastern parts of the district, as well as other coastal districts, is the most significant aspect of the agricultural cycle here. For all these reasons, Kurnool is an appropriate setting for the state's watershed development intervention.

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<sup>4</sup> Refer to Map 2 on the following page

**Map 2: Districts of Andhra Pradesh**



Source: [www.mapsofindia.com](http://www.mapsofindia.com)

The state government of Andhra Pradesh implements NWDP, though with some important innovations in structure. These are departures from the national programme structure (see Chapter 3), and I have italicised them in the following table. The remaining elements are identical to the structure proposed by the national guidelines.

**Table 2**  
**WSD Programme structure, Andhra Pradesh**

<u>Implementing Body</u>	<u>Advisory Body</u>	<u>Level</u>
Department of Rural Development	State Watershed Programme Implementation and Review Committee (SWPIRC)	State
<i>Watershed Project Office</i>	District Watershed Advisory Committee (DWAC) <i>Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT)</i>	District

<sup>5</sup> Anantapur, Cuddapah and Chittoor are the other districts in Rayalseema.

<u>Implementing Body</u>	<u>Advisory Body</u>	<u>Level</u>
Project Implementing Agency (PIA) (Government Officer/NGO/Cooperative etc.)		Microwatershed
Watershed Development Team (WDT)		Microwatershed
Watershed Committee (WC)	Gram Panchayat (GP)	Village

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Source: Department of Rural Development, Government of Andhra Pradesh

Unlike remaining states in India that implement NWDP either through DRDAs or ZPs, the state government has created a separate district project office to implement the watershed programme. The DRDA, which in AP, has not yet been merged with the ZP, is the sole body routing all rural development programmes implemented either by the central or state government. The District Project Office is thus able to concentrate exclusively on the watershed programme. I will refer to the Kurnool district watershed office as KWO.

The administrative head of the programme is the Project Officer, who works along with a Multi-disciplinary team (MDT) to advise on technical matters, and a team of Project Implementing Agencies (PIAs), consisting either of government officers or NGOs for individual microwatershed projects. PIAs are assisted in implementation by a four member interdisciplinary Watershed Development Team (WDT). MDT is a state level innovation, particular to AP alone, and the main functions of its members are to co-ordinate and supervise watershed activities, in accordance with their disciplinary strengths.

The Project Director, along with the MDT, is vested with critical powers of decision-making. All junior project officers, including the PIA and WDT members report to the MDT, and ultimately, the Project Director. WDT members work exclusively and full time on projects entrusted to them, constituting the 'face' of the project and operating in close proximity to the villagers. The WDT is also responsible for organising project paperwork required by the senior management at KWO. It exists however at the lowest end of the project administrative hierarchy, and hence can be removed by the PIA, or at the behest of senior officers in KWO, at their will. It is their dispensable

status that predisposes the WDT members towards compliance with project conditions more as formality than in substance.

Thus, the programme has a regular bureaucratic structure, complete with internal dynamics of monitoring and reporting. The decentralisation of administrative and financial powers from the central government to the district, has led to the redefinition of the district as the principal locus of decision-making for the programme.

#### **4. KWO: A 'planners' project**

Chapter 3 showed that the guidelines emphasise a 'planners' approach to the watershed programme. This is apparent in the procedures devised for the selection of watershed areas, captured through dry terms like 'biophysical' factors, such as evapo-transpiration rate and degradation identified through hi-tech remote sensing, and 'sociological' factors like percentage of SC/STs and illiterates. These factors ostensibly connote neutrality in selection. Thus, selection criteria become an essential complement of the planning process. Neutrality is then juxtaposed with 'unbiased' expert power.

The adoption of selection criteria is an integral part of planned development interventions. In Kurnool, this has contributed to a particular brand of 'depoliticisation'. KWO claims that it has been able to expunge decision-making on 'political' grounds, interpreted here specifically as the erratic interests of individuals to serve their short-term electoral gains. It claims to adhere to selection criteria fastidiously, and does not involve elected representatives from the Zilla Panchayat in the selection process. Impartial expert power is contrasted with arbitrary political influences and a virtue is made of 'depoliticisation'.

In practice, this means that the District Watershed Advisory Committee (DWAC), mainly comprising elected representatives from the Zilla Panchayat, performs a perfunctory role in programme decision-making. KWO, principally its Project Director, is responsible for selection both of watershed areas and of programme personnel. The project office has drawn up a 'priority' list of all villages in the state in each of the 54 mandals of Kurnool district to aid the selection process<sup>6</sup>. KWO similarly avoids appointing PIAs at the behest of elected representatives and political leaders in DWAC, and the entire authority for appointment rests with the Project Director<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> A mandal is a sub-district tier of administration, particular to Andhra Pradesh. A mandal is smaller than a block, which is the sub-district unit in the rest of the country.

<sup>7</sup> The guidelines require that district authorities select PIAs. While they mention a range of institutional types that are eligible to act as PIAs, they do not list precise selection criteria. KWO's Project Director has devised his own set of criteria, particularly for prospective NGO PIAs, stressing aspects such as age of the organisation, experience in field of work and demonstrated competence in handling finances.

Thus, the creation of non-elected watershed committees for project implementation, instead of elected gram panchayats, finds abundant endorsement within KWO. Panchayats are perceived here as 'political' bodies, akin to the Zilla Panchayat, or indeed, state legislatures and the national parliament. There is an implicit reading of 'politics', solely in terms of the formal political processes of representation of the Indian state. These processes enable constitutionally recognised representative bodies to be constituted through electoral contest. In a sense, this is a liberal-democratic view of politics as demonstrated and organised interest seeking within a competitive public sphere (Held 1984, Macpherson 1973). It appears that a link is being made by KWO, between competitive interest seeking (or politics), and 'irrational' short-term electoral interests, reducing politics to a pejorative notion. The two are then constituted as unsuitable for development, which supposedly needs 'rational', 'unbiased', 'technical' and hence 'apolitical' intervention.

The recent political history of Andhra Pradesh offers insights into why this reasoning works well at the level of discourse in Kurnool. In the early 1980s, Congress rule in the state gave way to a new regional party, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) headed by NT Rama Rao. Rao wanted to improve his party's strength at the grassroots by 'capturing' panchayat bodies that had been dominated by local Congress supporters. Through a range of measures that included capturing the positions of Zilla Panchayat chairmen, Rao systematically created a political climate, where panchayats were clearly subordinated to party interests<sup>8</sup>.

Rao's political successor, both as party leader and as Andhra Pradesh's Chief Minister, Chandrababu Naidu, has continued this trend. In the period after the 73<sup>rd</sup> constitutional amendment, important pro-panchayat steps like the merger between DRDAs and ZPs have not yet been taken. The state government has still to empower District Planning Committees (DPCs), which were created by the Constitution (Article 243-ZD) to integrate urban and local planning, but continue to lie as defunct bodies in most states of the country. The principal development agency at the district is the District Development and Review Committee (DDRC), chaired by a state cabinet minister. Panchayat elections have not been convened regularly<sup>9</sup>.

In addition, Naidu has actively promoted development initiatives that do not involve the panchayats directly. A prominent instance is Participatory Irrigation Management, through locally constituted Water Users' Associations (WUAs), promoted by the Department of Minor Irrigation. Naidu's government keenly encourages thrift and credit groups (T&C) groups for women in

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<sup>8</sup> Raghavulu and Narayana (1999)

<sup>9</sup> In AP, panchayat elections to be convened in 2000 were delayed almost by a year.

villages throughout the state<sup>10</sup>. In addition, Naidu places great emphasis on bureaucratic reorganisation, technical efficiency and transparency in governance. In 1997, he launched the Janmabhoomi, conceptualised as a process of 'social mobilisation' that aimed to extend democracy beyond the 'confines' of representative institutions, and make the government more accountable and transparent<sup>11</sup>.

In its present form, Janmabhoomi basically involves periodic visits by mandal level officers to neighbouring villages. Their visits have two main aims. First, presentation of details of government programmes being executed in the village in order to promote 'transparency' and disbursement of loans and grants to beneficiaries in the presence of a village assembly. Second, receiving grievances articulated directly by people against the government. In addition, provision has been made for a Janmabhoomi fund, which together with 'community contributions', can be used to build schools, roads, or any other infrastructure required by the village<sup>12</sup>. More recently, in the last two years, the Janmabhoomi 'think-tank' in Hyderabad, has devised intricate village level institutional mechanisms, separate from the panchayat, with the aim of initiating community development plans (CDPs) through the Janmabhoomi.

Naidu's programme planners thus rely heavily on the 'community' idea to formulate this sort of intervention. The emphasis on grassroots planning is particularly reminiscent of Nehru's CDP launched in the 1950s. However, compared with the general mood that favoured nationalist ideas of development then, Naidu's articulations regarding 'community' come at a time when there is a much wider endorsement of its usage, both internationally and in India. Moreover, Naidu has put the entire weight of his official authority on the Janmabhoomi, transforming it into his biggest political project to claim important objectives such as transparency and accountability.

In practice, the Janmabhoomi enables a fairly efficient down-to-up reporting mechanism. However, the lack of finances hinders the state government from being able to respond to all the complaints received, despite the emphasis on community contributions. By 2001, the year I conducted fieldwork in Kurnool, popular discontent with the 14<sup>th</sup> Janmabhoomi round was perceptible. Allegations that the Janmabhoomi is a subterfuge for local TDP supporters, to gain privileged access to 'Janmabhoomi' works through contracting, widely abound in rural areas<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> T&C groups in the state are the carry over of what used to be the DWCRA groups, managed under the centrally initiated Development of Woman and Child Welfare Scheme. DWCRA has been recently integrated with SGSY or Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana that aims at establishing a large number of micro-enterprises in rural areas. In addition to SGSY funds, the state government also releases money under a specially created 'Women's fund' since 1998.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with M. Tirupathaiiah, Assistant Director, Andhra Pradesh Academy for Rural Development, November 2000

<sup>12</sup> Money for the Janmabhoomi fund, previously called the *shramdaan* fund, is drawn from almost all the ongoing schemes of the state government, and additionally, from a GOI yearly allocation under the head of decentralised planning. All public contributions received that are not yet tied to any specific community work, are meant to be transferred to the Janmabhoomi fund maintained at the district level with the District Collector.

<sup>13</sup> Conversations with local journalists, Veldurthi mandal, Kurnool, January 2001; Field notes, Malligundu and Lilapuram

Despite this disillusionment, Naidu's Janmabhoomi is cleverly drafted and cuts across party lines. These rounds are conducted everywhere, even in areas dominated by opposition parties. Opposition party leaders rarely boycott Janmabhoomi proceedings, using it as a forum to challenge the government, in the process lending it greater legitimacy.

Thus, larger political conditions in Andhra Pradesh favour intimate governmental (bureaucratic) involvement in community-based development programmes. These have contributed to the creation of an independent district level bureaucracy like KWO to improvise procedures for the watershed development programme. The following case studies will illustrate further, how these conditions have proved to be extremely conducive to the domination of 'apolitical' planning discourses in KWO's approach.

## **5. Project villages in Kurnool**

Project villages Lilapuram and Malligundu, are both located in Veldurthi mandal of Kurnool district, along a national highway. Malligundu is closer to Kurnool town than Lilapuram. They are typical Rayalseema villages, sharing features, vital in character to the region. Their local character, as I will describe, can be situated within the larger politics of Rayalseema.

### **5.1 Factors of stratification: Inter-relatedness of caste, land and labour**

Villages in the dry Kurnool uplands are mixed caste villages, and Lilapuram and Malligundu are its prototypes. Caste occupies a central position among the factors that shape power relations in these villages. There is a vast body of scholarship on the meaning and significance of caste in India. The following part summarises the principal issues of debate. This discussion will serve as the essential context in which subsequent caste issues will be addressed in this thesis.

The concept of a 'dominant' caste has long served as the principal bone of contention among scholars. Noted anthropologist MN Srinivas first proposed the concept of the 'dominant' caste in 1955 in the following terms- 'A caste is said to be "dominant" when it preponderates numerically over the other castes, and when it also wields preponderant economic and political power. A large and powerful caste group can more easily be dominant if its position in the local caste hierarchy is not too low'<sup>14</sup>. Dumont (1970) challenges this formulation. He considers that ownership or the possession of superior rights in land, and not strength in numbers, is the sole source of dominance, since landowners are able to obtain the services of the landless through patron-client relations<sup>15</sup>. Dube (1968) argues that numerical strength of a caste, is a necessary

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<sup>14</sup> Srinivas (1955), p 18

<sup>15</sup> The term 'patron-client' relations, in use among social scientists studying Indian society and politics, signifies the range of relationships between the landholder (patron) and a network of clients, 'such as tenants, employees and debtors, who are dependant on him in one way or another (Hardiman 1982, p 199). See for instance, Washbrook (1973) for descriptions of patron-client relationships in the Madras Presidency in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

though not sufficient condition of its dominance, and emphasises that dominance is contingent on the presence of unity within the caste.

In a later response to these challenges, Srinivas argued that with the exception of situations of 'ritual pre-eminence' derived from a 'high' position within the *varna* hierarchy drawn from early Hindu texts (as for example, when a small number of Brahmins owns a large quantity of village land), the forces of 'secularisation and democracy since independence have been so strong that power moves inexorably in favour of numbers' (1994: 8). However, he also qualified this argument, 'since castes which are dominant today are both numerically strong and own a substantial quantity of local land, they are clearly the most powerful section of the rural population in India' (1994: 8).

These exchanges illustrate contesting views on what constitutes dominance. But none of these questions the validity of the concept of a dominant caste. An alternate view of dominant castes as a steady feature of the 'past', but one that is steadily waning, is now gaining ground. Mendelsohn (2002) argues that Srinivas identified the dominant caste phenomenon in the 1950s, when it was at the point of 'disintegration', for which he provides three reasons. First, following the introduction of land reforms, albeit uneven, the power of landholders has fallen since the 1950s, and therefore, land ownership does not constitute dominance in the same way as it did earlier. Second, the village as a unit is much better integrated with larger political and economic units within the state, compared with pre-British and British times, following which 'the quality of dominance possible earlier is not replicable now'. Third, the 'maturing' of the competitive electoral process based on individual adult franchise, works in direct opposition to the idea of dominant castes especially through land ownership (Mandelsohn 2002: 200-4).

In addition, the 'dominant caste' thesis does not stand in face of other theorisations by scholars regarding the increased 'illegitimacy' of 'relational' or 'hierarchical' values in the 'public' domain<sup>16</sup>. Dumont's propositions regarding a highly structured Indian society on the basis of the *varna* hierarchy were attacked on two major grounds. One, Dumont projects a timeless view of Indian villages, and two, that he constantly privileges uniformity over diversity<sup>17</sup>. Yet, these dissenting scholars acknowledge that Dumont simultaneously laid the basis for a more 'acceptable' thesis of 'modern change' as 'substantialisation' (Fuller 1996: 11). This notion sought to identify the 'transition from structure to substance' or the substitution of 'competition' for 'interdependence' between hierarchically ranked castes (Dumont 1970: 226). In essence, 'substantialisation' means that at the ideological level, each caste becomes like a collective individual with its own distinctive culture and a 'way of life' (Fuller 1996: 12). Drawing from these ideas, Beteille (1996), Dirks

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<sup>16</sup> Beteille (1996), Dirks (1996), Fuller (1996)

(1996) and Fuller (1996) have argued, using ethnographic evidence, that a hierarchical view of caste is becoming increasingly difficult to defend in the 'public' domain. There are of course significant differences in emphasis between their accounts.

This brief review illustrates how caste dominance is being understood in different parts of India. The most important point for my analysis here is simply that a rigid view of a single 'dominant' caste, drawn from original theorisations by Srinivas and later Dumont, does not hold. This is as much because of shifts in the nature of the bases of domination (land ownership or numerical strength) as the ways in which relations of domination and subordination (public-private articulations) can be articulated. I would add from my own fieldwork that there continue to be local conditions that ensure the relative dominance of a particular caste over a period of time. At the same time, I accept the point about acknowledging contemporary political and social developments that undermine articulations of domination, as might have been possible within a rigid hierarchical context.

### 5.1.1 Lilapuram

Lilapuram is a moderately sized village, with an approximate population of 2500. Here, as in most other villages in Andhra, it is usually enough to ask for descriptions of caste affiliation in three neat categories- OC for other castes, BC for backward castes and SC, an older and more familiar term, short for scheduled castes<sup>18</sup>. In Lilapuram, OCs are mainly the Reddys, Vaishyas and a handful of Muslim families. The BCs are in majority<sup>19</sup>, and the village has a small population of SCs, known simply as Harijans.

Caste relations in Lilapuram reflect the principal links between caste and politics illustrative of Rayalseema. Reddy 'domination'<sup>20</sup> in the region, through important positions in government and politics, is perhaps the most typical caste feature of the region<sup>21</sup>. In general, Reddys in Rayalseema draw upon their relatively 'high' caste status and ownership of large land holdings as the principal bases of local (village level) power, as their numerical strength varies significantly between villages. The principal political parties in the state, i.e., Congress and TDP, both have Reddy support bases with local variations, and there is no clear caste-party identification.

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<sup>17</sup> Fuller and Spencer (1990), Fuller (1996)

<sup>18</sup> Castes in Indian politics are broadly grouped into these three categories. OCs commonly comprise the 'higher' castes in the traditional Hindu caste hierarchy. SCs are the lowest in the caste rung, and have suffered centuries of discrimination. BCs, including various castes and sub-castes that lie in between OCs and SCs, have gained in importance with post Mandal reservation policies of the 1990s, which allowed for 'affirmative action' in their favour.

<sup>19</sup> There are at least seven different backward castes (BCs) here. These are the Pinjaris, Vaddes, Boyas, Chakalis, Mangalis and Kamaris.

<sup>20</sup> I use 'domination' to refer to a relatively stable and hierarchical exercise of power. It is in this sense, an aspect of power relations.

In Lilapuram, Reddys control the reins of local village power, and use their caste position in effective conjunction with large-scale ownership of land in the village. The distribution of land ownership in the village is severely stratified<sup>22</sup>. A handful of farmers, all Reddys, control the agricultural economy in the village through land ownership<sup>23</sup>. Vaishyas here are relatively prosperous, having diversified their incomes from agriculture to other petty businesses within the village. However, typically, they do not represent a threat to the Reddys in Lilapuram<sup>24</sup>. Most BCs in the village own medium and small landholdings, and in addition to working on their lands, work as wage labourers on the lands of Reddys and other large landholders. The SCs, a majority of whom are landless, are treated as untouchables. They do not share drinking water facilities with other castes in the village, and their houses are constructed in a cluster, separate from the rest.

Reddys are not the largest caste in Lilapuram, but they have a relatively 'high' position in the Hindu caste hierarchy, and are the largest landowners here. In addition, large Reddy farmers also have the best access to water, as they have individual wells. This allows them privilege of access to *rabi* or winter cropping, which is practically absent in the region, as agriculture being primarily rainfed is limited to the *kharif* or rainy agricultural season<sup>25</sup>.

All cultivated land in the village is privately owned, and there is no significant common land area within the watershed. Poor people meet their fuel and firewood needs from the adjoining hills and reserved forests respectively<sup>26</sup>. There are few common sources of water in the village. These are, a *cheruvu* or tank which stores water seasonally<sup>27</sup>, the *lothu-vagu*, a free flowing channel of water that cuts through village lands and retains water only in the rainy months, and five *kuntas* (small ponds), water from which barely suffices for occasional paddy cultivation by a few farmers with adjoining lands. As a result, single crop agriculture in the rainfed *kharif* season is the majority

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Wade's study of Kotapalle village in Kurnool district highlights this phenomenon and draws from other literature on the subject that confirm this trend. See Wade (1994), p 31-32.

<sup>22</sup> For the purposes of this study, small farmers have lands between 0-3 acres, medium farmers have lands between 3-6 acres and large farmers have lands above 6 acres. This will remain the typology throughout. Also, all landholdings referred to are 'consolidated landholdings'. See notes on methodology in Chapter 3 for more details.

<sup>23</sup> Of the 290 consolidated landholdings listed in the latest VAO (Village Agricultural Officer) records, 89 are above 6 acres, and at least 30 of these are big farmers with total landholdings of 30 or more acres. 96 farmers are in the middle category and have lands between 3 and 6 acres. There are 70 small farmers with landholdings under 3 acres. Many of these are negligibly landed, with barely an acre or less of land. There are roughly 35 landless families in the village.

<sup>24</sup> Wade (1994) writes of Reddys in Kurnool, 'A Reddy informant said of the few Vaishya merchants, some of whom are reputed to be wealthy, 'They just make money and keep quiet', p54.

<sup>25</sup> *Kharif* and *Rabi* are the two major agricultural seasons in India, where *Kharif* denotes the rainy or monsoon season and *Rabi*, the post-monsoon or winter season.

<sup>26</sup> A reserved forest of 697 hectares borders Lilapuram on its eastern side. It is directly under the control of the Forest Department. Grazing of animals in the forest area was never a common practice because villagers prefer to graze their herds of cows, sheep and goats on the nearby hillocks. Unregulated access to the forest was stopped in 1997 with the formation of a Van Suraksha Samiti or a VSS in the village, under the state forest department's Joint Forest Management initiative.

<sup>27</sup> The *cheruvu* has 80 users who own lands in its ayacut. In 1997, with the state government's Participatory Irrigation Management initiative, these users were constituted into a WUA to manage the *cheruvu's* resources collectively. The eldest son of the largest Reddy landowner in Lilapuram has been appointed the President. The association's activities include appointing a watchman to regulate the flow of water in the rainy months, and collecting the water tax that goes to the department.

practice. Groundnut is the principal *kharif* crop, and a few farmers raise it as an irrigated crop in the *rabi* season.

Agriculture is the predominant occupation in Lilapuram. The 9 km long road to the village, dusty and undulating, is still *kachha* (impermanent). Apart from minor opportunities for stone cutting around the village, there is a dearth of alternative employment nearby. As a result of Lilapuram's interior location and the difficulties that accompany outward travel, wage labourers are discouraged to journey outside the village, on a daily basis, to find alternative farm or non-farm employment. The relative absence of accessible alternative employment options exposes small and medium farmers to wage related exploitations.

Large Reddy landholders are the largest employers of wage labour in Lilapuram<sup>28</sup>. Moreover, it is custom for landowners here to supervise wage relations directly, unlike in the 'well-watered eastern plains of the state...where abundant rainfall and irrigation made cultivation operations sufficiently routine to be left in the hands of low status labourers, while the landowners could detach themselves from the direct management of agriculture' (Wade 1990: 23). There are no uniform methods of wage payment, which ranges from fixed wage rates in cash for certain kinds of operations to payment in kind for others. Other varying, personal and less regularised methods of payment are also in use, as generations of BC families tend to be employed by the same Reddy family. Group contracting, where a landowner hires a group of labourers for a fixed sum, without determining hours of work, is a common form of wage practice. Prevailing wage rates for agriculture in Lilapuram are less than the government prescribed minimum wage. Although BC households engaged in wage labour are aware that this is the case<sup>29</sup>, the village has no known history of labourers organising to demand an increase in wage rates. All this indicates the presence of close relations between Reddy landowners and specific BC households.

Wage relations do not, however, fully explain interactions between members from Reddy, BC and SC households. Following practices of social ostracism, it is common for members from SC households not to find significant employment on village lands. This affects them adversely, as SCs in Lilapuram are typically landless, or in possession of marginal landholdings. Further, between the months of January and May, agriculture comes to a complete halt and dryland villages like Lilapuram offer no employment. In contrast, agriculture through canal irrigation continues in the eastern parts of Kurnool district (the Kurnool-Cuddapah canal) and the coastal plains of the state (Nagarjuna Sagar Project). These areas are highly fertile, and irrigated

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<sup>28</sup> All crops grown in Lilapuram are labour intensive. Apart from groundnut, which is the principal crop, crops like red gram, castor and cotton that farmers grow, require labour for sowing, weeding and harvesting.

<sup>29</sup> Conversations with several members of BC households, both men and women, confirmed this (Field notes, Lilapuram, March 2001).

agriculture in the *rabi* season continues at least until March, with large-scale cultivation of cotton, chillies, tobacco, paddy and jowar seeds. There is a shortfall of local wage labourers. As a result, thousands of workers from dry, western parts of the state migrate seasonally.

SCs in Lilapuram, deprived of wage employment in the village, are the worst affected, and are regularly driven to distress migration. Rural-rural migration from the western parts of the state to its coastal areas is the principal form of migration in the region. A few families from Lilapuram have also migrated permanently to neighbouring towns like Veldurthi and Kurnool for employment, and this phenomenon is not restricted to any one caste.

Gender based relations in Lilapuram vary between castes. Women from the 'higher' Reddy caste do not interact greatly with men or women from the other castes. This is mostly because Reddy women belong to large landowning families, where they may not be required to work on fields, or conduct any 'public' dealings with 'lower' caste individuals, as these are largely left to men. In addition, notions of Reddy pride also account for stereotypical roles for women 'indoors', even when the family may not be as economically prosperous. In comparison, women from the Backward and Scheduled Castes do not lead 'private' lives, as they have to work outside their homes to supplement the family's income.

Thus, Reddys have a much higher claim to a 'dominant' position in Lilapuram than any other caste. This translates into effective control over the agricultural economy of Lilapuram due to the absence of alternative sources of non-farm employment. Most importantly, caste hierarchies are nowhere close to being illegitimate publicly, as practices of untouchability and social ostracism against the SCs are both unconcealed and unambiguous.

### **5.1.2 Malligundu**

Relations of caste, land and labour assume a strikingly different pattern in Malligundu. Malligundu is a small, poor, dry village, with a mixed caste composition. In this village, with approximately 2000 residents, BCs mainly comprising the Boyas, are in majority, followed by the Reddys and Vaishyas that are second largest in number. There are a handful of SC families in this village. No one caste can claim economic dominance by virtue of land ownership in Malligundu<sup>30</sup>. The handful of landless families belongs to the SCs.

Moreover, even large farmers possess huge tracts of dry land, and only 8-10 large farmers in the village derive the combined advantages of large landholding and irrigation. There are no common

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<sup>30</sup> Of the 340 consolidated landholdings listed in the VAO records, 237 landholdings are in the small category (of under 3 acres), 72 are medium farmers holding between 3 and 6 acres of land, and only 31 farmers have land more than 6 acres in size. There are 30 landless families in the village.

water sources in Malligundu, and agriculture is primarily rainfed. The land in Malligundu is primarily of the black cotton soil type. High clay content in the soil makes well digging, particularly of the *kachha* or temporary variety difficult. Poor people cannot afford to have cement walls or stone pitching for their wells, without which a dug-well is almost sure to give way, especially in the rainy season. The small area of common land (7 hectares out of a total land area of 886 hectares) is badly eroded and gullied, and hence, useless even for grazing or meeting the firewood needs of the population. Besides, this land area is tightly encircled by private property on all sides. This has led to encroachment by private landholders and further restriction of free access. Most villagers attend to their fuel and firewood needs from the neighbouring Dastagiri and Venkateswara hills.

The homogeneity of economic deprivation and suffering in Malligundu acts as an effective counter to the caste hierarchy. In addition to being prone to the vagaries of dry, subsistence agriculture, all villagers also suffer from an acute shortage of drinking water, as underground water in Malligundu is contaminated with fluoride. Malligundu is extremely resource poor, without the few common water resources of Lilapuram even, and there are no canals, tanks or ponds that farmers can avail water from. A thin channel of water that separates Malligundu from its big neighbour, Magarpalli, serves as an occasional resort. However, this is no solution to the water problem, as access to the channel is a matter of serious contention between the residents of Malligundu and Magarpalli. Water crisis, particularly for irrigation, is exacerbated by the lack of electricity. There are massive power shortages, and an entire portion of village agricultural lands, called Lachappakunta, has no electricity supply to date. Malligundu received its first power connection in 1955.

In Malligundu, the absence of large farmers, along with intensive cross hiring, and the availability of accessible alternative employment in nearby Kurnool town, insures against exploitative wage relations. Its farmers however suffer due to acute indebtedness and extortion at the hands of private moneylenders operating from outside the village<sup>31</sup>. No official figures are available that determine its extent, but oral interactions with farmers confirmed this.

Malligundu is deeply locked into the migration cycle of Rayalseema and practically the entire village is deserted during lean agricultural months. Unlike Lilapuram, migration is not restricted to any one section of the village. Economic homogeneity that has softened an otherwise rigid caste hierarchy in Malligundu impacts gender relations as well. Women from all castes, with the exception of a few Reddy households that own large landholdings, are regularly engaged as

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<sup>31</sup> The Bank manager, State Bank of India (SBI), Veldurthi Branch, reported that very few individuals from Malligundu have asked for loans at the branch. SBI has special rural operations, whereby it grants crop loans and loans for allied activities, which are usually low interest, short-term loans.

labourers on each other's fields. This creates the basis for several informal relationships among women that are not restricted to caste barriers.

The relative sameness in economic condition partly explains the absence of Reddy domination within the village, a feature commonly observed in Rayalseema. Reddy domination has also been checkmated due to potential challenge from the Boyas, which despite their 'inferior' status in the caste hierarchy, are well known in the region for their 'proclivity' to aggression and violence. Economically powerful Reddys do not have access to political power in the village, which is vested almost entirely in the hands of one man, a Boya, called Chandra Mohan Naidu.

## **5.2 Politics and the panchayat**

There is perhaps a defining feature of local political conditions in Rayalseema. Villages here are commonly characterised by 'factions'. This term has a particular regional meaning that is rather different from its popular use in the study of Indian politics<sup>32</sup>. In Rayalseema, 'factionalism' is the term used broadly to describe groupism and conflict. Faction based contests are often anchored in caste rivalries, although caste factors can be compounded by others, such as family disputes over property, or access to controlling the local village panchayat. Factions refer to groups typically loyal to a single leader, but there is usually no instance of vertical organisation cutting across caste networks. Rayalseema has a high crime rate, a major percentage of which is owed to petty quarrels and fights leading to murders. This village level feuding is not necessarily linked to political parties or identities, yet it is common for faction leaders to espouse political affiliation to some party or the other. It is common for villages to have two or more factions, though such divisions need not encompass the entire village population. KWO borrows the term 'faction-village' liberally, using it to identify 'problem-villages'. Project officers do not describe either Lilapuram or Malligundu as 'problem-villages'.

Faction based contests, wherever they exist, are frequently reflected in panchayat elections. These elections in turn, have been irregularly held, following the lack of enthusiasm on part of the state government to galvanise panchayats into fully functioning elected local bodies. Village panchayats in Rayalseema therefore, as in fact in many other parts of India, have been staffed and headed by locally dominant individuals, with little change. Besides, unanimity in panchayat elections continues to be promoted by state governments across India<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> The term 'faction' has been used to denote a 'vertical' organisation that typically comprises members from different castes, who are held by 'transactional' ties to a leader (Hardiman 1982, p 199). Factions, writes Hardiman, in addition to cutting through castes, are in theory, supposed to link high caste patrons to low caste clients. A faction is thus contrasted to class as a form of social organization.

<sup>33</sup> The Government of AP offers cash rewards to gram panchayats that elect their sarpanches unanimously and without contest.

### 5.2.1 Lilapuram

Until 1985, Lilapuram was 'united' under a single Reddy family led by Viraj Mohan Reddy, the largest landowner and also the head or sarpanch of the village panchayat. In this year, two of VMR's cousins, Harekrishna Reddy and Gangadhar Reddy contested him in panchayat elections, but lost. At present, VMR's nephew Vishnu Reddy manages panchayat affairs, as his mother is the sarpanch<sup>34</sup>.

This divide within the dominant Reddy family has not translated into a clear rift within the rest of the population, though either group has its supporters from among the BCs<sup>35</sup>. Besides, Gangadhar Reddy and Harekrishna Reddy are prominent landholders and well respected. Publicly, the Reddys maintain a cordial relationship, addressing each other as *Anna* (brother) and agreeing to sit together on common forums if required. Ordinary individuals in the village do not easily admit to any rift between the two Reddy families, preferring to address them equally venerably as *pedda-manshis* (respectable elders), and approaching them to mediate even in their personal matters.

Reddy brothers on either side of the divide, profess 'distinct' political identities, projecting their mutual distancing to be an outcome of principled political differences rather than petty personal bickering. The village has been a stronghold of the Congress party since independence. In the last fifteen years however, coinciding with the first contested election to the village panchayat, Gangadhar Reddy and his brother, have changed their loyalties to TDP. Mirroring a statewide trend, the district as a whole has been transformed into a TDP stronghold in the last decade. Veldurthi mandal however, is an exception, and is one of two mandals in Kurnool district that does not have a single TDP representative. Whatever the scene politically, party affiliation at this level, is no more than a sort of branding, and local supporters do not usually attend party meetings. Yet, despite being fairly tenuous at most times, party political links assume a sharp identity during elections. In Lilapuram too, the 'dignified' equation among members of the two Reddy families has been known to give way during high points of electoral tension<sup>36</sup>.

Contest to panchayat seats (11 excluding the sarpanch's post) has increased in the last 15 years. Both Reddy families nominate their respective candidates to each position. Yet, increase in contest to the panchayat does not indicate any real expansion of claim to local power beyond the Reddys. Subordinate groups comprising the BC and SC households have no real representation in the panchayat. Women, from both the dominant and subordinate castes, and from different categories of land ownership, are equally irrelevant to the panchayat beyond the constitutional

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<sup>34</sup> The sarpanch's seat was reserved for a woman.

<sup>35</sup> For example, BC families that work on the lands of one Reddy group do not work on the lands of the other.

<sup>36</sup> Lilapuram Police Records, Veldurthi Police Station

requirements of reservations. These aspects illustrate that KWO's definition of politics, solely in terms of the formal political processes of representation and contest, is limited. It squarely disregards the politics of domination and subordination that vitally influence the nature of contest.

### 5.2.2 Malligundu

Chandra Mohan Naidu, a small landholder from the Boya caste, is the sarpanch and undisputed leader of Malligundu. In this sense, leadership in Malligundu presents a remarkable exception to the usual pattern of Reddy domination that characterises villages in Rayalseema. The three biggest landholders in Malligundu are all Reddys, but none have demonstrated ambitions to acquire political power in the village, either in the panchayat or outside. Until 1995, Malligundu was a hamlet to its neighbouring village panchayat in Magarpalli, dominated typically by a powerful Reddy family. In 1988, for the first time, Naidu opposed Ragireddy from Magarpalli in the joint panchayat elections. Although he lost, he retaliated violently, drawing support from other Boya members in Malligundu. This sparked off a chain of daring murders in revenge<sup>37</sup>.

Inter-personal rivalries among leaders and village level crime activities have caused a deep-seated rift between ordinary residents of Malligundu and Magarpalli, resulting in frequent suspension of inter-village movement. As violence escalated during the years 1988-1995, it was impossible to contain the violent killings, and Malligundu was finally granted a separate panchayat in 1995.

The village now *appears* to be united, but Naidu's penchant for violence and crime are well known in the village<sup>38</sup>. Few are willing to come out and talk openly about it. In the past, he has been embroiled in petty criminal activities within Malligundu, which had resulted in some families leaving the village altogether. These activities have a broad undertone of Boya-Reddy hostility. Yet, it did not find clear expression within Malligundu, even during the years of intense conflict between Naidu and Ragireddy, who drew on their Boya and Reddy bases of support respectively. Naidu's use of violence substitutes effectively for the absence of land based power among the Boyas.

In this context, the panchayat in Malligundu is entirely manned by Naidu's henchmen. There is no question of contest or challenge to Naidu by Reddys, or the other sections of Malligundu's population, and most people prefer to stay out of his way. Unanimity, clearly of a coercive nature, has still earned Malligundu a good name in the perception of project officials.

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<sup>37</sup> 11 murders in all were recorded in the Magarpalli police records.

## 6. How the project abhors 'politics': Moment of committee formation

The formation of the watershed committee is an important moment in the life of the project. The national guidelines place significant emphasis on the procedures to be followed while constituting watershed committees. They require that these be formed consensually and without contest. They also presume watershed committees to be both conceptually and practically distinct from existing village panchayats, which are equated with politics. This is a pejorative view of politics, which as described earlier, presumably embodies particular interests, and is hence unsuitable for development. As the watershed committee is projected as the innocent alternative, the process of its formation becomes an integral element in the depoliticisation discourse that KWO wishes to extend to its practice of participatory development.

### 6.1 Procedure

KWO's officials attempt to convey the impression that the actual project is preceded by a soft phase of mutual knowing. During this phase, project officials interact with villagers, in a manner that tends to downplay local power relations. A team of officers often led by the Project Director typically arrives at a public venue in the village organising a convivial event marked by song, dance and drama to announce arrival of the watershed project and proclaim its multilateral relevance.

These are uniform procedures for project initiation, and KWO makes no exceptions for NGO PIAs. The project in Lilapuram is implemented by the Kurnool District Rural Service Organisation (KDRSO), a small NGO with 6 members<sup>39</sup>. A retired government functionary in Kurnool formed KDRSO in 1995. It survives as an organisation by receiving government money to implement development projects<sup>40</sup>. KWO does not require, or indeed, trust KDRSO to make any separate or extra efforts beyond what is prescribed, for initiating the watershed project. In fact, senior officials within KWO, primarily the Project Director, do not share the pro-NGO optimism demonstrated by the national guidelines<sup>41</sup>.

Meetings such as these are appropriately known as 'entry-point' meetings, and mark an abrupt point in the life of the village. The officers announce the watershed project, proclaiming its benefits of soil and water conservation, and explain its relevance to all, agriculturists as well as the landless, men and women. Moreover, it is the responsibility of the PIA and WDT, all of whom are essentially outsiders to the village, to initiate the constitution of such a body, and to ensure

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<sup>38</sup> Magarpalli Police records, Veldurthi Police Station

<sup>39</sup> 5 members have private occupations, and serve merely formal requirements of minimum membership, under the Indian Societies Registration Act of 1862.

<sup>40</sup> KDRSO also manages a Child Labour School in Kurnool funded by the state government's Child Labour Department.

<sup>41</sup> The Project Director, KWO, in a personal interview expressed the opinion that NGOs like KDRSO 'tend' to be far more corrupt and inefficient than government officers (Interview, Kurnool, February 2001). The Project Director has discretionary powers of selecting NGOs as PIAs.

that the watershed committee is 'free' from local elite domination in order that the project be equally accessible to all.

Project provisions devised by KWO, in line with the national guidelines, couch these ideas in apparent reasonableness. For instance, they state that the committee must be formed 'over a period of time', and be preceded by the formation of User and Self-Help Groups among the population. Once these groups have been formed, a meeting of the 'entire' village (known as the Watershed Association in project parlance) is convened, where UGs and SHGs nominate their representatives, who then constitute the watershed committee. KWO is particular about following the guidelines regarding committee membership, including the reservation of seats for SC/ST groups and women.

Implicit in this process is the notion that the entire body of a village community would form the committee 'consensually'. It would moreover, overcome its internal inequities and divisions, to agree on the composition of such a body, and equally, express such agreement in public. There is a clear attempt to project the committee, not as a representative body, akin to the panchayat; but instead as a mediating unit, between the smaller collectivities of user and self help groups and the larger village body, or watershed association.

## 6.2 Practices

The process of committee formation, conducted publicly at the outset by officers from KWO, is a matter of tremendous significance for the project. It offers the first opportunity to project officials to secure the project away from contest and fighting, typically expressed through faction-based conflict in the region. Thus, the 'depoliticisation of development' discourse encouraged by the national guidelines strikes a highly relevant chord in Kurnool, adapting itself in opposition to the political forms most commonly witnessed in the region.

In both villages, project officers from KWO started their entry point meetings with clear statements that they were not interested in dabbling with 'village politics'. In both Lilapuram and Malligundu, this proved to be the critical opportunity by which the obtaining power structures of the village were officially incorporated into the project morphology. In Lilapuram, where the covered area was fortuitously large enough to allow two committees, each rival Reddy group indeed manned a committee for itself. Vishnu Reddy, proxy sarpanch and Gangadhar Reddy from the breakaway Reddy group were designated as secretaries. In Malligundu, which too had two committees, Naidu's position in the village ensured that those selected would not act contrary to his wishes. Further, any opposition that Naidu might have faced is located *outside* Malligundu, in Magarpalli, which is a separate village with its own watershed project. Moreover, neither in Lilapuram nor in

Malligundu did regional party leaders from the Congress or TDP try to influence committee formation.

Functioning in a region where factionalism is the dominant mode, KWO is not always able to strike a balancing chord<sup>42</sup>. It is therefore not surprising that KWO meticulously avoids villages that have ongoing factional conflict. It does not include villages that are not 'united', or more importantly, appear to be so<sup>43</sup>. This practice sends a strong message to local elite groups that the project values preservation of status quo. Politics, in the negative way it is treated by project officials, is thus reduced to denote any irreconcilable conflict, and every attempt is made to skirt it in their scheme of things.

### 6.3 Effects

Within KWO's framework of depoliticisation, both Lilapuram and Malligundu appear to be successful cases. Here I would argue that in effect, project practitioners do not succeed in depoliticising their watershed projects. This is the case even if 'politics' is judged in KWO's own terms- vested interests articulated as 'un-reconciled' factional conflict frequently expressed through panchayat elections and functioning.

In effect, the project in either village did not succeed in creating a local body, i.e., the watershed committee, that would be 'equally accessible' to all sections of the village community or even appear to be so. In fact, the project that was conceived as a genetically different entity than the village panchayat ended up obtaining the same coordinates. In Lilapuram, this was clearly more apparent than might have been the case in Malligundu. Despite their emphasis on participatory methods of committee formation, it was blatantly clear from the start that project officers totally relied on village *pedda-manshis* (respectable elders), the dominant Reddys, to initiate their activities. In this respect, the project's activities appeared to be in harmony with the 'natural' order of business in Lilapuram. There was no reason then, to expect the watershed committee to function any differently from the existing village panchayat.

In Malligundu, the project claimed to have steered clear of politics. This followed the lack of explicit interference from Naidu, who did not for example, press for his Boya supporters in the village to man these committees in the same way that the Reddys did in Lilapuram. However, this seemingly consensual formation of the project needs to be assessed critically. On the face of it, the project continued uninterruptedly, not alone for the much-lauded participatory practice, but for the fact of accommodating all principal interests of Naidu, his hidden agenda however discreetly.

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<sup>42</sup> In village L'kotalla, neighbouring to Lilapuram, two factions within the village wanted to exercise control over a single watershed committee, and the project was nearly cancelled as no compromise solution could be arrived at.

<sup>43</sup> This is not formally articulated as a criterion of selection, although past instances confirm this practice.

Even after Malligundu became an independent panchayat in 1995, Naidu continued to meddle in panchayat affairs in the neighbouring Magarpalli. Local police records reveal that small scuffles have occurred between Naidu and members of the long-time rival Ragireddy family. In fact, these are factional fights aimed at getting the upper hand in controlling contract works through as many village panchayats as possible. In March 2000, Ragireddy was attacked in Magarpalli, by some of his own supporters from within the village. These dissidents turned out to be Boyas, like Naidu, although some Reddys were also in the act. As a result, the watershed committee in Magarpalli has broken up, and watershed works in the village have come to a complete halt. Ragireddy needs no convincing that Naidu has a hand in this, and explains how Naidu wants to control contract works in the panchayat and watershed project in Magarpalli as well<sup>44</sup>.

Naidu has a clear share in cuts derived through watershed works, even in Malligundu. Local project officers are aware of his position and proclivity to aggression. They would rather leave him alone, as long as he allows the project to be conducted smoothly and on time. A slightly different configuration of circumstances, with Ragireddy's family opposing Naidu within Malligundu and not in Magarpalli, might have led to a very different experience in obtaining consensus for the watershed project in Malligundu. In that event, Boya-Reddy hostility, which in Malligundu is now latent, might not have been so. The fact that Ragireddy who exercises full control over the bigger and more prosperous village of Magarpalli, with an independent panchayat, has pushed Malligundu beyond the extent of his activities, has diminished the conflict potential in the latter. This has clearly secured a smoother process of committee formation in Malligundu.

These cases present interesting differences in the articulations between local power and official authority embodied by KWO's project committees. While project officers relied on the locally dominant to initiate their activities, conversely, in both villages, locally dominant individuals and groups found the watershed committee an attractive forum. This was true even for the Reddys who are largely secure in their dominant position as high caste landholders. Naidu's interest in the project stems from his continuous search for new bases of domination. One aspect of this interest is fiscal control over the budget of the watershed project, which runs to 2 million rupees over 4 years. The budget is well publicised in support of KWO's claims that it is a "people's" project with full transparencies. The other aspect is opportunity for cultivating proximity to the government, which the project offers in interaction with district level officers from KWO. For the Reddys, this interface augments their 'traditional' sources of domination with official authority in the village. For Naidu, who wishes to distract attention from his suspect acts, and appear as a benign village leader, as opposed to a caste leader among the Boyas alone, allowing the project

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<sup>44</sup> Interview with Ragireddy, Magarpalli, January 2001

to continue without disruptions (while ensuring his interests are accommodated) seems to be a positive thing to do.

The net effect of attempted depoliticisation was that the project in either village, could proceed with its 'participatory' activities, only once locally dominant interests had been accommodated. The formation of the watershed committee is thus a critical project moment. It is at this time that project-village equations are established. These are important for the local image that the project assumes in the village, which in turn sets the ground for how credible the project discourse of participatory decision-making would be. They are also important for understanding why locally dominant individuals and groups might support a participatory project that promotes apparently oppositional discourses to their own dominance.

### **7. The demonstration of contest and consent**

A final point can be made about the expression of the depoliticisation of development discourse, through the creation of watershed committees in a non-elected 'consensual' process. Watershed committees are distinguished from panchayats on the grounds that there is no open contest during their formation. This is a particularly insubstantial basis of distinction, for two reasons. One, in both villages, contest through the articulation of competing interests through the 'public' arena of panchayat elections is restricted to the dominant groups in both villages. These dominant interests are expressly accommodated during committee formation to tailor consensus in favour of the project. Two, to infer that a general consensus for the watershed committee exists, as KWO does, simply on the basis that there is no open or explicit contest, represents a highly watered down treatment of the idea of consent.

The emphasis on the demonstration of contest, or alternately consent, in the 'public' sphere reflects liberal ideas regarding the reconciliation of competing interests in a neutral public arena. Liberalism's view of the individual as 'autonomous' has resulted in a dilemma of pluralism. The idea that autonomous individuals have competing and hence plural views of life has posed the issue of how these interests must be reconciled. The reconciliation issue underlies the seminal debate between liberals and communitarians<sup>45</sup>. Communitarians like MacIntyre (1981) and Taylor (1979) challenged liberal theory with the idea that reconciliation involves a common conception of life, which must be a shared inquiry, the appropriate context for which is the state. Liberals have responded to this challenge, and contend that they recognise the importance of the social context through the acknowledgement of social relations, but make a distinction between the social and the political (or the state), whereas communitarians do not.

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<sup>45</sup> Avineri and De-Shalit (2001), Kymlicka (1990). See Chapter 1 for more details of this debate.

Participatory projects are underlined by the quintessential liberal idea that they provide opportunities that would allow 'autonomous individuals' to deliberate freely and reconcile consensually their differing interests. The problem with KWO's approach to consensual committee formation is that it expects villages to be 'united' (preferably that they be faction-less or at least that factions have reached some mutual compromise), even before the project's deliberative mechanisms are in place.

This contradicts liberal thinking that not only recognises the diversity of interests specifically, but also provides that free deliberation involves explicit disagreement. In so far as liberal democratic institutions claim to provide successive opportunities for resolving differences, disagreement is expected to be a constant feature in human interaction. Moreover, individuals continue to participate in liberal democratic institutions, as the hope of resetting political equations in the next rung of deliberations is a powerful one (Kaviraj 1996). KWO's interpretation of participatory practice belies this rationale, and reflects a confusion arising from lack of reconciliation between the multiple theoretical traditions that influence participation<sup>46</sup>. Participatory practice that draws from liberal theory equally draws from new institutionalist and communitarian theories that emphasise the ability to develop their 'own' institutions, which would promote in turn self-sufficient and cooperative behaviour<sup>47</sup>. KWO's approach reveals an exaggerated concern with cooperative behaviour that results in an unsophisticated treatment of conflict and its resolution.

Research conducted by other scholars has shown how participatory transactions typically rely on public methods of appraisal (PRA) and decision-making. These investigations have consistently revealed the problems implicit in this<sup>48</sup>. Mosse argues that in essence the public conduct of participatory methods of information gathering masks the 'real structure of power' in the community, and create a context where the selective presentation of opinion is most likely (1994: 510). In the same vein, KWO's depoliticisation discourse of avoiding faction-based rivalries in its project committees, amounts to a precarious balance of dominant interests, which can then be described as consensus in favour of the project.

## 8. Conclusion

The argument contained in this chapter is at three levels. First, at the national level, it shows how decentralisation in the watershed development programme encourages a new form of depoliticisation of development. This is through the constitution of local programme committees

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<sup>46</sup> Refer to Chapter 1 for a discussion.

<sup>47</sup> Some communitarian theorists like Magagna (1991) have extended their arguments to recognise that conflict is ingrained in communities.

<sup>48</sup> Mosse (1994) and Scott (1990)

that development planners project as 'apolitical', by contrasting them with panchayats that supposedly embody the 'political'.

Second, at the regional level, it argues that this discourse works particularly well in Kurnool district in Andhra Pradesh. The recent political history of this state marked by the ascendant fortunes of the Telugu Desam Party shows how panchayats have been subordinated to party interests. The present Chief Minister further promotes populism in development programming combined with an emphasis on bureaucratic efficiency. These factors are conducive to the domination of 'neutral', 'planning' discourses in KWO's operations. Moreover, the high incidence of faction-based conflict in Kurnool has engendered a remarkably regional brand of depoliticisation. Depoliticisation, which in Indian development strategies has conventionally been directed at keeping 'elected' representatives 'out of' development planning, has been extended to exclude local factional fighting that may not always be political-party based, but is typically reflected in the region's panchayats.

KWO recognises that accommodating competing interests in the watershed committee is a lot easier in villages where faction based conflictual activity is minimal, and consciously seeks such villages. This practice shows how development practitioners endorse social interactions that appear to be harmonious, and try to exclude those that appear to be conflictual<sup>49</sup>. Its approach is in keeping with the intellectual history of development, as it draws from new institutional and communitarian theories that emphasise the significance of self-sufficient and cooperative behaviour among communities.

At the local level, the chapter illustrates how KWO's depoliticisation discourse is not effective, as it is paradoxically sustained through acts that are opposite to what is being claimed. Project attempts to universalise this discourse suffered in both villages, because its committees could be constituted only by accommodating the interests of those most likely to disrupt project proceedings had they been disregarded. Yet, there are important differences in the way in which locally dominant individuals interacted with project institutions in the two villages. Reddy interests were more blatantly expressed in Lilapuram than Naidu's Boya interests in Malligundu. This stems from differences in their respective status in either village. Reddys are the traditional holders of caste power in Lilapuram, whereas the Boyas in Malligundu are in the position of attempting to consolidate their domination through increasing recourse to violence under one leader.

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<sup>49</sup> Kamat (2002a) makes a similar point.

Once the critical moment of committee formation is over, the ground is laid, for how credible KWO's subsequent participatory discourses would be in these villages. Depoliticisation is intended by planners to be complementary to securing participatory development. Precisely for this reason, its success bears a crucial impact on how fully project participatory ideas, such as equal access of all individuals to the project committee, can ultimately be universalised. The fieldwork analysis presented here arrives at one main point. KWO's participatory projects did not unfold without dominant interests being accommodated at first. The second part of the analysis would address the important question of how this initial accommodation reflects in the subsequent functioning of the project. This is the subject of the following chapter.

One final point needs to be made regarding the projection of watershed committees as 'apolitical' local bodies. This chapter argues that 'apoliticality' is not a description of things, as they appear to be. It is instead, an attempt to propagate a discourse, indeed, selective meanings of politics, which does not necessarily succeed. There is a second dimension to this, the issue of whether participatory spaces created by the watershed project are at all being used for the political resolution of matters that arise from the project, in tandem with other political processes and forums that exist in the region. For example, these could be mobilisation of subordinate groups through organisational forms promoted by the project, use of the annual Janmabhoomi forum, or the involvement of political parties. The next chapter also considers whether project participatory practices actively constrain such possibilities.

## Chapter 5

### The dialectics of consent in participatory practice

#### 1. Introduction

This chapter examines the procedures of working adopted by KWO for the watershed committees in Kurnool's project villages. The principles on which such procedures are based reveal KWO's interpretation of participatory development. KWO's project strategy rests on an array of methods designed to procure consent for the project within a larger framework of technocratic planning. In effect, this signifies that the project uses consent as evidence of local participation, within a strategy that leaves its 'unbiased' or 'expert' intervention unquestioned. This strategy illustrates the innovative forms of expression of the depoliticisation discourse that KWO subscribes to. The analysis contained here therefore extends the argument made in the previous chapter.

The second part of this chapter discusses the meaning and implications of KWO's directives in the particular contexts of Lilapuram and Malligundu. It explains the interactions that occur between project officials and members from dominant as well as subordinate groups in these villages, as the project unfolds. There are moreover, important differences between the two villages in the way such interactions transpire. These are analysed to understand the factors that influence KWO's successes in securing the consent that it seeks.

The following discussion is critical to the larger argument made in this thesis. KWO's interpretation of participatory development is construed as an emphasis on the procedures of participatory decision-making. This chapter investigates whether a procedural conception of participation can potentially lead to local decision-making that is democratic, and produce equitable outcomes.

#### 2. Theorising consent

Consent, as an idea, occupies a central place in political theory. The idea itself has liberal roots, and stems from the notion that autonomous individuals assent to be part of political formations and acknowledge only those obligations that are self-imposed (Pateman 1985). Consent underlies 'contractualist' approaches to state formation. Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau have theorised consent in their respective philosophies<sup>1</sup>. In this tradition, consent limits the power of the state while protecting the rights of the individual. However, while consent has definitive liberal roots, the problem it poses has a wider relevance for social theory. This is the problem of

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<sup>1</sup> See Hindess (1996), pp 10-22

universalisation, or the projection of particular interests as universal, as mediated through the authority of the state<sup>2</sup>.

In the liberal tradition, the issue of universalisation arises in order to address the problem posed by pluralism, as the society is deeply divided over numerous individual conceptions of the 'good'<sup>3</sup>. Attempts to resolve this dilemma have been made at two levels. First, through a measure of 'objectivity and universal generalisations' (Avineri and De-Shalit 2001: 5)- this approach can be traced to classical liberal thinkers John Locke and Immanuel Kant, who in their respective philosophies, spoke of a 'rational consensus' on the values that constitute a 'good life'<sup>4</sup>. At the second level, liberals repose their faith in a 'neutral state', which 'does not justify its actions on the basis of this intrinsic superiority or inferiority of conceptions of the good life, and which does not deliberately attempt to influence people's judgements of the value of these different conceptions' (Kymlicka 1990:205).

Marxists regard universalisation in terms of the functioning of the bourgeois state. Universalisation in this sense is contingent on consent. Marxism, argue scholars like Hoffman, is based on the idea of consent, and contend that Marx realised that the 'reality of politics is such that a state cannot represent a dominant class unless this class domination is represented in an illusory form' (Hoffman 1984: 29). This simply means that a particular (class) interest is expressed as a general or universal interest by the state. The young Marx identified with what he called the 'ever new philosophy of reason', which is the basis for a rational conception of the state, as the embodiment of a universal reason (Hoffman 1984: 29). The rational state, the state as 'the great organism', which superintends the whole, has not disappeared from Marx's theory, but now stands as a 'theological notion', or an ideal masked in illusion (Hoffman 1984: 29). In Rousseau's thinking, this has been referred to as the 'fundamental paradox of modern living'<sup>5</sup>. The general interest of the community sanctifies and legitimises the 'disunity among men', and 'the general will is invoked in order to create absolute value on individual caprice' (Colletti 1972: 36-7).

Gramsci's thinking represented an essential advancement in Marxist thought. Hoffman writes of Gramsci, 'His notion of hegemony, based mainly on consent, has brought democracy back into Marxism' (1984: 4). Gramsci went beyond the coercive and negative characterisation of state power and ruling class domination; instead, he concerned himself with 'the entire complex of

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<sup>2</sup> Wood (1985) comments, 'There is no process more central to the theories of the state as this (universalisation)', p 350.

<sup>3</sup> Liberals think in terms of the 'priority of the self over its aims', which means individuals are free to decide the ends they want to pursue and the kind of life they want to lead, referred to simply as the 'good life' (Avineri and De-Shalit, 2001:3). By extension, this means that there are competing views or indeed plural conceptions of the 'good life'.

<sup>4</sup> Gray (2000), p 14. Later liberal philosophers like Rawls, Nozick, Hayek and Dworkin have drawn from Kantian political philosophy, based purely on the right, to develop a theory of justice and rights. They resort to this theory to circumvent the pluralist dilemma of varying conceptions of the good.

<sup>5</sup> Colletti (1972), p 36-7

practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules' (Gramsci 1971, pp 57, 247). The idea 'of active consent has been interpreted further by his successors. Buci-Glucksmann, in particular, argues that only passive consent could be achieved by state domination, and cites the example of a 'passive revolution'. Active consent, in her reading, was instead the 'self-organisation of the masses' with the aim of 'creating a will that is at once national and popular' (1982: 118-119). She argues therein that there is a fundamental difference in the forms and quality of consent engendered by the proletariat from that of the bourgeoisie (Buci-Glucksmann 1982: 120-121).

In his pioneering work on the interface between dominant and subordinate groups in a variety of contexts, James Scott turned Gramscian ideas of hegemony through consent on their head (1985, 1990)<sup>6</sup>. Scott argues, convincingly, that what might appear as active, willing or even enthusiastic consent on the part of subordinates is frequently only the 'public transcript', i.e., the 'self-portrait of dominant elites, as they would have themselves seen' (1990: 18, italics in original). He distinguishes the public from the 'hidden' transcript, as that which is inaccessible to the dominant elites, being 'the privileged site for non-hegemonic, contrapuntal, dissident and subversive discourse' (Scott 1990: 25)<sup>7</sup>. Subordinate groups, may for a variety of reasons, find it in their interest to make a public show of compliance while engaging in more private acts and gestures of resistance and dissidence. This show, an integral component of the public transcript, is important to dominant groups, and Scott infers that 'patterns of domination can in fact, accommodate a high level of practical resistance, so long as that resistance is not publicly and unambiguously acknowledged' (1990: 57).

Scott's incisive analysis illustrated the 'lack of consensus in social situations of dominance'<sup>8</sup>, and therefore the ineffectiveness of arguments that regard universalisation of dominant interests through consent. This analysis sparked off a number of creative attempts to apply Gramscian ideas of hegemony through consent, to understand how relations between domination and subordination are articulated. William Roseberry in particular, suggests that the concept of hegemony be used *not* to understand consent, but to understand struggle' (1994: 361). This reading of the relationship between hegemony and consent considerably undermines the nature and function of consent, as understood by other Gramscian scholars like Buci-Glucksmann. It simultaneously shows the wide spectrum of applications that Gramsci's original framework lends itself to. Roseberry concludes (while attempting to understand the relation between 'popular

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<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 1 for details.

<sup>7</sup> On the basis of this distinction, Scott distinguishes at least four types of political discourse among subordinate groups that vary according to 'how closely they conform to the official discourse and according to who comprises their audience' (1990: 18-19).

<sup>8</sup> Roseberry (1994), p 357

culture' and 'state formation' in Mexico), that analyses of hegemony or 'hegemonic process' as he prefers to call it, are useful when understood as 'projects' rather than as 'achievements' (1994: 365).

The approach advanced by Scott and Roseberry is relevant for understanding KWO's attempts to propagate its participatory discourse in project villages through consent<sup>9</sup>. The attempt itself, to borrow an idiom used by Roseberry, would constitute a 'hegemonic project' of sorts for KWO. Such a project involves complex and contingent interactions amongst actors (officers from KWO, dominant elites), audiences (comprised largely by subordinate populations), discourses (participatory discourses that claim equality among individuals and their translation into local contexts of power), and processes (participatory procedures devised by KWO, functioning of other local bodies in the village, elections).

### **3. Two parts of project strategy**

KWO's strategy for project implementation on a participatory basis can be divided into two separate parts. The first is project planning, that lists physical and financial targets in an action plan to be executed over the stipulated 4-year time frame. The second is the innovation of implementation procedures to ensure that physical and financial operations cannot be conducted without the explicit consent of concerned individuals. The following section discusses the synthesis of these parts into a broader strategy, and its possible implications.

#### **3.1 Technocratic intervention: The project action plan**

The action plan symbolises decentralised planning. The policy makers regard it to be the most progressive aspect of reform in the watershed sector. According to the national guidelines, the village watershed committee prepares the action plan by assimilating individual work plans drawn up by various user groups comprising private landholders within the watershed area. The idea is that user groups should plan for the lands they use. Planners hope this provision would ensure that individual landholders participate eagerly in the watershed project, by contributing in cash or labour, and maintaining the structures even when the project is over. In addition, the aggregate plan is to be 'presented' to the watershed association for its final consent. Village level project staff, i.e. the Watershed Development Team (WDT) has been given an 'advisory' role in the planning process. In contrast, the major responsibility for planning rests with the local people's agency in different sizes- group, committee and association.

These roles are reversed in reality. Preparation of the action plan is a complex task that not only requires an intimate knowledge of local topography but also a fair degree of technical capability.

The action plan is a modern document, complete with sector wise targets and financial estimates. It is an exercise both in technical and financial planning compatible with the project. Plan formulation requires skills that immediately put project officials at an advantage over the 'locals' they seek to empower. The action plan must be formulated at the outset, as even the first year has targets that must be met<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, for members of the watershed committee to assume any meaningful role in the process, a 'significant degree of technical capability development would need to be devolved', and by the time it may occur in any meaningful way, the action plan might have already been drafted<sup>11</sup>. In both Lilapuram and Malligundu, the action plan was formulated by WDT officers, and 'handed over' to the Secretary and Chairman of respective watershed committees.

KWO intervenes in the project through a technical, time bound, and rather inflexible action plan. Its intervention is automatically constituted as 'technocratic' and necessary for project efficiency. The idiom of technocratic project involvement is an integral part of the depoliticisation of development discourse, contributing to a technical treatment of development as if it were 'neutered' of politics. Moreover, the use of planning as an indicator of local participation works to KWO's advantage. The emphasis on local participation in formulating the action plan obscures the various ways in which KWO exercises control over its projects.

This trend is fast becoming an axiom in development practice, that 'if technology and people's participation are wedded together, then prosperity will follow' (Kamat 2002: 93). The state, as KWO in this instance, is thus able to intervene in the development process, while understating its own position, and simultaneously, exaggerating the primacy of popular participation in decision-making.

### **3.2 Making the action plan participatory: Some practical issues**

The action plan is the yardstick by which the participatory project is to be implemented. Besides, it cannot be revised once senior officers in KWO grant administrative and technical sanction. Project staff members, both at senior and junior levels, are under pressure to meet the physical and financial targets listed in the plan. KWO attempts to combine the project's target driven thrust with its recently acquired participatory orientation. It insists that no watershed structure can be constructed without the individual consent of the private landholder or the collective consent of

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<sup>9</sup> Other scholars have also contributed to this emerging school of thought. Besides Scott (1985, 1990) and Roseberry (1994), see Abrams (1988), Joseph and Nugent (1994) and Sayer (1994).

<sup>10</sup> The guidelines have laid down a ratio of expenditure for the 4 year period, and ideally, finances must be spent in the 25:40:25:10 ratio over 4 years.

<sup>11</sup> Shah (1997), p 13

the village community, depending on whether the structure is to be located on private or common lands respectively<sup>12</sup>.

Project funds are usually allocated on a yearly basis to four principal sectors: agriculture, minor irrigation, afforestation and animal husbandry. Within the framework devised by KWO however, implementing agencies find it easier to meet targets in some sectors than others. This is for a number of generic reasons that may vary in individual locations.

For example, minor irrigation (MI) sector targets are, as a norm, easier to meet than those in the agriculture sector. MI includes structures for storage like percolation tanks, and erosion control like rock filled dams, check dams and check walls. It is easier to spend project money on MI structures as construction involves material along with labour costs. The agriculture sector, in contrast, includes earthen field bunds that circle individual landholdings. These entail only labour costs, as no materials are required to be purchased.

MI sector targets are easier to meet than those in the agriculture sector for another reason as well. Storage and erosion control structures are located either on commonly owned lands or across gullies and water channels. The latter, though situated on private lands, are not perceived as such because these water bodies traverse many individual landholdings. Field bunds in contrast, are almost always built on private property. Private individuals tend to resent the erection of such structures on their lands, as much as they resist making contributions in cash or labour (*shramdaan*) to the Watershed Development Fund.

Contributions on structures raised on common lands, in principle, should be obtained on a shared basis from landholders who are most likely to benefit. This is rarely the practice however, because of the difficulties involved in assessing beneficiaries, and bringing about an agreement among them to share the cost. As a result, poor labourers who are engaged in construction works on common lands end up paying for the mandatory contribution from their wages (Shah 1997).

In addition, locals perceive some structures as more beneficial than others. This also influences how easy or difficult it is for project officers to receive consent from farmers for watershed works, both on private and common lands. For example, farmers tend to be suspicious of project arguments in favour of field bunds. Bunds are typically constructed on the lower end of the slope, encircling the field. They aim to reduce the velocity of rainwater as it flows downward, eroding topsoil with it. If a farmer has 1 acre of land (4000 square metres), a field bund would take up nearly 400 square metres. Farmers are reluctant to part with this land area. They think of field

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<sup>12</sup> Lands that are not privately owned can be described as 'common' or 'open access' depending on whether there are

bunds as unnecessary structures that result in water stagnation at the corners of their fields, causing crops to rot. In comparison, big structures like farm ponds are normally not refused by farmers because they are perceived as highly beneficial<sup>13</sup>. This suits project implementers, encouraging them to pursue construction of larger, costlier and visible structures even more doggedly. Watershed activities in the afforestation sector tend to suffer for the same reason, as they involve little labour and not too high cost of plantations. More importantly, they are carried out in common lands, which are frequently the subject of apathy<sup>14</sup>.

All these factors create tremendous pressure on the local project staff. They are tempted to overspend project money in sectors where financial targets can be met easily, with minimal difficulties in securing farmers' consent. This is difficult, because once the action plan has been approved, project management is reluctant to allow inter-sectoral transfer of funds to avoid works being concentrated in any one sector. WDT members are aware that senior management at KWO insists on target completion through popular participation. However, they equally realise that completion of sectoral targets, with or without participation, remains the overriding imperative.

The difference in emphasis between senior project management in Kurnool, and those who implement the project in villages, significantly fragments KWO's attempts to use consent as an indicator of popular participation. The local project staff is guided by a calculated assessment of 'cost' and 'consent' on a sector wise basis, instead of the holistic approach of generating a broader support for the project as a whole. Thus, institutional relationships internal to KWO reduce the effectiveness of its attempt to universalise participatory discourses in project villages.

### 3.3. Itemising participation

In order to implement watershed works through participation, the project planners at KWO have introduced a protocol to ensure that consent for the works is recorded in project documentation. These measures have been devised supposedly to help the local project staff meet physical and financial targets in a participatory manner, which is, through consent<sup>15</sup>.

According to the national guidelines, the village watershed committee effectively decides on four aspects of implementation. First, location and timing of the structures i.e., whose land it must be

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rules that govern its use.

<sup>13</sup> The imagery of 'big projects' embodying 'big benefits' is a well-known one in development. In India, the proliferation of big dams and large-scale irrigation on the one hand, and the continued neglect of small-scale water conservation on the other, is a befitting instance of this phenomenon.

<sup>14</sup> The apathy towards common property areas or resources in villages is a manifestation of power relations within the community. As dominant landholders mostly enjoy privileged access to private resources (whether of land or water), it is mainly the subordinate groups (marginal farmers, landless individuals) that depend on these so-called 'commons'. It is also typical for dominant groups to infringe upon common areas and encroach these, bringing them under private control. The rights of the disadvantaged over common areas are neither codified by law, nor regarded by dominant interests. Refer to Jodha (1986) and Blair (1996) for a comprehensive treatment of common property related issues in India.

constructed on, and what ought to be the order of works; second, preparation of estimate for each individual structure, which is approved by WDT members; third, physical execution of works by engaging labourers; and finally, selection of beneficiaries for direct disbursements, like seeds and gas stoves, under the project. Working arrangements therefore involve the following steps. The watershed committee in its meetings must deliberate on the 4-year action plan, collectively decide on the nature and location of the works to be executed, prepare financial estimates for individual items of work, and commence work by hiring of workers. Within this framework of working, KWO has introduced the following measures to integrate routine implementation of the action plan with participatory decision-making:

- Collective decision-making: KWO wants to leave nothing to chance to ensure the collective nature of the committees' working. It has initiated the practice of an 'inland letter scheme'; whereby committee secretaries must send copies of resolutions, signed by all members to the project office every month. The project office has decided that vouchers for works not listed in committee resolutions will not be accepted, and payments will be refused. It hopes that these measures will provide fewer chances to the influential elements within the watershed to appropriate works, by hijacking structures to their lands.
- Individual consent: Project officers will not approve any structure that the committee constructs on private lands, without first securing a written letter of consent or *sammati patram* from the individual landholder. Without a *sammati-patram*, the PIA and WDT would not approve its estimate and the structure cannot be raised.
- Individual contribution: The national guidelines require individual landholders to contribute towards the constructions as a token of participation. Once the decision to start work on a structure is taken, it is left to the landholder to decide whether he would like to execute the works on his own, or leave it to the watershed committee. If materials need to be bought for the structure, necessary purchases are to be made by the individual farmer. Once the work is over, the concerned WDT member performs a 'check measurement' on the structure, and prepares the final bill. The consolidated amount is then paid to the farmer in the form of a cheque to return for his investment in cash and kind. The bank then deducts 10% of the amount towards WDF at encashment<sup>16</sup>. Through this practice, KWO anticipates the contribution even before it is made. This practice may have

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<sup>15</sup> Interview, Project Director, KWO, March 2001

<sup>16</sup> The rate of contribution is 5% if the landowner is a member of the SC/ST community.

regularised contributions to WDF, but neglects voluntarism that is integral to participation, at least in theory<sup>17</sup>.

The implicit assumptions underlying these provisions, especially the last two, are that all individuals in the village are equal and free to express consent or withhold it<sup>18</sup>. KWO's approach potentially equates a male landholder with a landless woman. In the process, it disregards complex power relations that characterise the village community. This is paradoxical. It is also inconsistent with the pro-equity stance of the national policy guidelines, which specifically mention improvement of the 'social and economic conditions of the resource poor' among the principal objectives of the watershed programme.

KWO's approach to participation symbolises a wider phenomenon in the conduct of development, aptly called 'target-group' terminology (Wood 1985, Kamat 2002). 'The language of target group terminology erases the social relations that produce these conditions, and instead presents them as things' (Kamat 2002: 65). The reduction of land-based relations into labels, of 'landholder' and 'landless' in KWO's projects is an example. Although these labels seem to denote some inequality, development practitioners are not really concerned with the unequal social relations they represent. Similarly here, KWO's projects involve no further questioning of the difficult issues that these labels embody.

However, KWO cannot be held solely responsible for not addressing the complex issues of resource relations in its projects. There is no room for reorienting the programme at KWO's level. The national policy guidelines themselves, despite their radical objectives, treat the village community as an isolated entity, and do not regard community level issues in a wider political context. The formulation of the watershed programme with excessive emphasis on the procedure of participation at all levels, shows how politics itself, becomes more about the instruments rather than the substance of governance.

### **3.4 Paperwork and the project**

KWO is not content with generating abundant paperwork in its enthusiasm to pursue participatory procedures. It also regularly monitors project documentation to ensure that local project staff (WDT) and watershed committee secretaries maintain records properly. The increase in paperwork at the 'lowest level of decision-making' is the most visible aspect of the unfolding

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<sup>17</sup> The issue of 'voluntary' contributions in participatory projects is the subject of debate among scholars. KWO's approach would possibly find approval among some observers on the ground that without such procedural intervention, landlords would be able to control 'free' labour in the name of *shramdaan*.

<sup>18</sup> This view resembles the liberal view of individuals as 'autonomous' and 'rational' (Kymlicka 1990). In Chapter 1, I have argued that liberalism's influence on the participation discourse is seminal. Participatory projects are underlined by the quintessential liberal idea that they provide opportunities that would allow 'autonomous individuals' to deliberate freely.

'decentralisation' process. The secretary of the watershed committee is required to maintain a number of records, all of which are used as tools of surveillance by KWO. The first of these is a cashbook that lists receipts and expenditures of the watershed committee. The committee holds the watershed account for project work and the watershed development fund account for post-project maintenance. A bank maintains passbooks for these accounts. Details of these are required to match with those in cashbooks maintained by the watershed secretary. Moreover, when the watershed committee sends vouchers to KWO for audit purposes, then these are to be tallied with the passbooks, copies of which are to be maintained at KWO. Committee secretaries are also required to record minutes of watershed meetings and committee resolutions.

These documents are essential for the project's audit purposes, and KWO is categorical about correct and updated record keeping. It has initiated what it calls the 'Community Mobilisation Programme' or CMP to increase 'public awareness' regarding the procedures of the watershed project. A CMP is held once every month in a project village, and is attended by project staff, local committee members from the village, and also neighbouring project villages under the same PIA. Senior project staff members from KWO attend such meetings to inspect and correct project records. KWO claims that CMPs aim to increase 'project transparency'.

In practice however, a CMP session is a forum for higher-level project officers to publicly criticise WDT members and secretaries of the watershed committees for inefficient record keeping. It is a suitable venue for KWO to show to those present that it is in control<sup>19</sup>. At times, a CMP meeting becomes an occasion for great excitement in the village, as it is attended by the Project Director of KWO, who may also bring with him visitors and guests to 'show off' the project.

This public demonstration of project emphasis on paperwork and record keeping sends out a convenient message to local project managers, both WDT and those dominating the village watershed committees. They may infer that formal fulfilment of project criteria is enough to satisfy senior project management in KWO.

### **3.5 Public proceedings**

Above all, project transactions must be conducted in public in order to be participatory. Consent accorded orally or through written documents is therefore to be expressed in public. The 'public' is dominantly understood in the literal sense of public meetings, open to the 'entire village community'. Such meetings are supposed to be held in a large village space like a school hall or a temple courtyard. Committee meetings commonly take place inside the secretary or chairman's

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<sup>19</sup> A circular issued by the Project Director, KWO, to his MDT members introducing the CMP was worded in the following manner, 'I expect that you shall become the agent of change by making people aware, by *telling them what is good for them* and thus playing the role of an enabler and facilitator' (*italics added*).

house. Commonly again, committee secretaries procure project documents like *sammati-patrams* from individual landholders in smaller public settings like the verandas of their own homes.

The imagery of the neutral public space, where 'autonomous' individuals would freely gather to deliberate on issues of public interest, occupies an important place in participatory discourse. It borrows directly from the liberal democratic concept of the neutral public sphere, where competing individual interests are freely articulated, and there are recurring opportunities for reconciliation. KWO expects village residents to attend the public meetings of the watershed committee, and use these meetings as forums to express dissent or deliberate on differences. KWO's ideas regarding the potential of public proceedings for resolving differences are suspect for three reasons. They have been discussed earlier, and hence are summarised as follows.

First, public meetings tend to be inappropriate as forums for all members of the community to speak freely. Moreover, public spaces are not necessarily open to all segments of the population. A temple courtyard for instance, might be regarded as sacred ground not to be violated by the 'lower' castes. Similarly, the Scheduled Castes, treated as untouchables, may not be allowed to enter the homes of persons from 'higher' castes. In these settings, project practitioners are keen to construe the absence of dissent as consensus in favour of the project. Second, judging by KWO's initial insistence on unanimity that influenced its selection of Lilapuram and Malligundu as project villages, it is not clear whether it seriously intends its projects to engage in resolving latent differences among members of the village community. Third, KWO's projects are time bound, and target fulfilment is of utmost importance. This project framework does not really allow a delay in works on account of unresolved differences in the project village.

#### **4. Dynamics of project-village interaction**

The discussion so far offers an insight into how KWO intends to carry out its development intervention. How precisely this intervention unfolds depends on the dynamics of project-village interaction. KWO's strategy interlinks routine project procedures for execution of works with popular consent. This section discusses how its plans were 'received on the ground' in the two villages of the study<sup>20</sup>. The fieldwork indicates that there are important differences in project-village interactions in Lilapuram and Malligundu. This section will analyse the reasons for the variance.

The main issue here is whether KWO was able to succeed in its attempts to universalise participatory discourse by obtaining consent for its works, and on what terms. These attempts can

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<sup>20</sup> I borrow this expression from Murray Li (1999), p 297. She makes the case that a development intervention involves 'some complex cultural work at the interface between development projects and those they target' (1999: 298).

be understood through the analogy of how rule is accomplished in the Gramscian sense of hegemony through consent<sup>21</sup>.

#### 4.1 Lilapuram: Formal compliance and reinforcement of domination

In Lilapuram's rigidly hierarchical social fabric, KWO's participatory discourse, lauding the virtues of equitable decision-making, ought to have struck a loud and discordant note. The previous chapter showed how the crucial moment of watershed committee formation averted this possibility. It was at this time that the project fell in tune with the village power structure. The two dominant Reddy groups acquired control of a watershed committee each. All this was done under the veneer of concern for all sections of the village, especially those disadvantaged socially and economically. Outwardly at least, the façade of participatory discourse was preserved.

Apart from the watershed project that commenced in 1997, the village has only two major public operations. Both cases embody a stark expression of Reddy domination, and absolutely no attempt is made to soften this by recourse to participatory or indeed, pro-equity talk or gestures. The first is agricultural works. Big Reddy landholders engage wage labour predominantly from among BC families alone for below minimum wages. Scheduled Caste families are treated as untouchables and deprived of wage employment in the village.

The second is the village panchayat. In theory, it is a democratically elected local body vested with powers of representative decision-making. In practice, the panchayat here is neither democratic nor representative. Panchayat elections were held for the first time in 1988 and since then, contest has been restricted to the two dominant Reddy families only. Given such steady contest for leadership in Lilapuram, the panchayat is a coveted source of local authority. Similarly, representative membership of BCs, SCs and women in the panchayat is entirely notional, since the Reddys do not work in consultation with any other members. The mandatory provision of calling regular *gram sabhas* or meetings of the entire village is blatantly flouted, and no public meetings are ever called by the panchayat in Lilapuram<sup>22</sup>.

Moreover the panchayat, supposed to be the repository of wide ranging duties and functions, both regulatory and developmental in nature, restricts its functioning in practice to a few

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<sup>21</sup> Interventions by James Scott (1985, 1990) and William Roseberry (1994) have critically reshaped the application of Gramscian ideas regarding domination, hegemony and consent. Both have drawn attention to accommodation and resistance, masked by consent, in understanding how groups secure their domination. Besides, Tanya Murray Li's work on development as a project of rule in Indonesia is useful as a potential line of enquiry. Murray Li emphasises 'compromise' by development practitioners as a definite element of how 'rule' in development projects is accomplished. (1999). In extending the metaphor of rule in development projects, Murray Li (1999) draws from the larger idea of development as a principal *raison d'être* of the state. The following analysis draws on their insights.

<sup>22</sup> The state government's panchayat laws require that the panchayat call a *gram sabha* at least once every quarter, and preferably once every month.

construction related tasks<sup>23</sup>. In the last 5 years, the panchayat has only constructed cement concrete roads, undertaken some repairs of street lighting, and laid a pipeline connecting six bore wells in the Lilapuram revenue village, including its 4 hamlets. The panchayat body is supposed to frame an action plan every year and conceive ways to improve the condition of the village by generating *shramdaan* or voluntary labour. However, this method of working finds no backing from the proxy sarpanch. Vishnu Reddy dismisses the rosy idea of *shramdaan* with brusque common sense that 'poor people in the village cannot afford to work without wages, if they can spend their time earning money'<sup>24</sup>. As a result, lack of government funds is usual reason cited for poor panchayat works. *Shramdaan*, as a practice, is entirely absent in the village, even to implement works that are formally assigned to the panchayat. Keeping the village clean is one such duty, but a large pile of trash guards the entrance to Lilapuram.

There is another side to this pathetic performance by the panchayat. This is the practice of 'contractorships', vital to panchayat functioning in Rayalseema, and a prime cause for feuds among local leaders. Instead of executing the works by engaging villagers, these are entrusted to local contractors selected on the basis of tenders. This provides an opportunity to the sarpanch and the contractor to retain their 'cuts'. Local villagers are either deprived of employment on panchayat works that is rightfully theirs or paid below-minimum wages or both.

These are the circumstances in which KWO puts forward its participatory procedures. Yet, its insistence on measures like securing *sammati-patrams* (letters of consent) before commencement of work, collective decisions through committee meetings, and voluntary contributions, are alien but not unacceptable to the dominant Reddy groups. In fact, the documentation of these project participatory procedures, through an array of paperwork, was always up to the mark. Such fulfilment of participatory criteria on paper amounts to formal compliance only, not substantively different from the remaining public operations in Lilapuram. This was clearly evident in the following respects.

The practice of securing *sammati-patrams* from landholders, and signatures from committee members, as measures of their consent, was practically violated in spirit. The committee secretaries would consider it normal to start work on individual lands much before any written consent was obtained<sup>25</sup>. Besides, there were no cases of such consent ever denied by any landholder, which makes the matter suspect<sup>26</sup>. Most landholders who tendered *sammati-patrams*

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<sup>23</sup>The 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment to the Indian constitution placed 29 subjects under the supervision and control of gram panchayats, but state governments reserve the right to transfer these in phases. In Andhra Pradesh, only 10 of the listed 29 have been transferred to gram panchayats so far, and watershed development is among these.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Vishnu Reddy, 'Proxy' Sarpanch, Lilapuram, March 2001

<sup>25</sup> This emerged when I spoke to individuals on whose lands structures had been constructed. Altaf Hussain, a Muslim farmer, owning 20 acres of land said that it was not at all uncommon, given Vishnu Reddy's method of working.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with a WDT member, who requested anonymity, March 2001

were not clear about what they had agreed to. Committee secretaries could exercise the option of manipulating the text, since the majority could not read or write. Even if a fair transaction took place, and a committee secretary presented the landholder with request for a *sammati-patram*, the margin for dissent was negligible. This was inevitable as the watershed secretaries are also the principal providers of wage labour in the village. In a similar vein, committee resolutions signed by all members do not count for much. Watershed secretaries do not conduct works in joint consultation with other members, and signatures or thumbprints as the case may be, present only a semblance of collective decision-making that does not exist.

Manipulating voluntary contributions that go into the Watershed Development Fund is harder for committee secretaries. It requires a degree of active connivance of project staff, and not merely their seeming unconcern, as is probably the case with respect to other malpractices described above. In fact, a string of irregularities occur in alliance to ensure that such contribution, deemed to be voluntary, is not made at all, except on paper<sup>27</sup>.

KWO's procedures require that all works can be executed only after the committee has collectively prepared estimates for these, which are then approved by a project officer, at the level of the WDT or MDT, depending on the amount in question. It appears from the nature of project decision-making in Lilapuram, that one or two individuals appropriate the power of estimate preparation. They prepare estimates in accordance with the schedule of government rates, but these schedules frequently provide for rates for many items of work, which are not applicable to a particular project, given its nature and location. This enables the WC secretaries to misappropriate the gap between estimate and actual cost of construction, on the basis of the omnibus schedule of rates. The gap is then misused in connivance with WDT members, to show the contribution to WDF on paper as well as provide a balance that can be pocketed. For structures that cost more, senior project officers, as MDT members may also be involved in similar manipulation. As long as there is a gap between the estimate and the actual costs, individual contributions would be hard to verify<sup>28</sup>.

As a result of all these manipulations on paper, the project in Lilapuram did not perform poorly in KWO's evaluation. All participatory procedures tied with the clearance of project funds were carefully adhered to. However, neither project officers nor committee secretaries, paid attention to other aspects of participatory decision-making not linked directly with project fiscal management. The guideline that user groups, comprising landholders, should be encouraged to take up watershed works on their own lands is a glaring example of such omission. Moreover, execution

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<sup>27</sup> A WDT officer, who requested anonymity, described this to me.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Project Director, KWO, March 2001

of project works in a typically 'contract' fashion, has restricted possibilities of employment to a small segment of Lilapuram's population, mainly from the backward castes. User groups, formed at the early stages of the project, are dysfunctional for all practical purposes. The Scheduled Castes in the village, who have consistently been denied work on village agricultural operations, have similarly not been given any employment on project works. As a result, SC families from Lilapuram continue to suffer their annual cycle of migration.

The project has a reasonably good record in physical execution of works. Interestingly, project officers met with varying successes in target fulfilment in different sectors. This confirms a point made earlier in the chapter. Given KWO's simultaneous requirements of target fulfilment and recording of consent, it becomes easier for the project to spend money on sectors like minor irrigation than afforestation. From the project officer's point of view, if money is spent on 'difficult' sectors like afforestation, it can be interpreted as a sign of a high level of local community involvement. The table below shows the project's financial performance in major sectors in Lilapuram.

**Table 3**

**Financial performance 1997-2001**

(All figures in lakhs of rupees)

Sector	Target	Expenditure	Balance
Agriculture	3.78	3.627	0.153
Minor Irrigation	4.84	4.69	0.15
Afforestation	3.03	0.889	2.141
Horticulture	1.352	0.934	0.418

Source: Kurnool Watershed Office

These figures are an aggregation of expenditures over the four-year project period. They show that expenditure targets were met most effectively in the minor irrigation sector, while major under spending was in the afforestation sector. These activities, concentrated in common lands, are insignificant to rich farmers who meet their fuel and fodder needs from private lands<sup>29</sup>. As common lands in the village have deteriorated significantly over the years, poor people have taken to grazing livestock and gathering firewood from the adjoining hills and reserved forests. Project proposals for afforestation therefore did not evoke any enthusiasm among committee secretaries. Dryland horticulture, which involves direct disbursements of seeds or money for seeds from the project to individual beneficiaries, was extremely popular in Lilapuram. Farmers

<sup>29</sup> Lilapuram's common lands find no mention in the project action plan.

have flooded the project with requests for disbursements. Committee secretaries have discretionary powers regarding selection of beneficiaries.

In all these ways, the project afforded tremendous opportunities for local leaders to reinforce traditional structures of authority. Despite the emphasis on participatory decision-making in the watershed project, the Reddy landholders did not have to change their usual ways of working. Instead, the project itself granted them new lease to consolidate their existing clout.

The façade of consent in project transactions was preserved because it benefited the Reddy landholders as well as the local project staff. Project-village interaction in Lilapuram was limited to the relationship between the Watershed Development Team and the committee secretaries. At no point did the project inspire wider, village-based mobilisation that would necessarily involve greater interface between PIAs and the village population. This is important, because the project in Lilapuram was implemented by a small NGO called KDRSO, which did not have either the resources or the orientation to popularise the project further. It has been discussed how KWO makes no distinction between project villages implemented by Government or NGO PIAs. In Lilapuram therefore, project WDT represented KWO, not the NGO, and fully embodied its official authority.

A complex interplay between local power based on caste and land ownership, and state authority personified in the development project and KWO, influenced the relationship between project WDT members and the Reddys. Low salaried WDT officers have a temporary status in the village, and do not wish to challenge the high caste Reddy landholders. They are well aware that the project cannot go ahead without the cooperation of the Reddys, and therefore accept the terms on which such cooperation is offered. As for the Reddys, the project represents a valuable opportunity for proximity to government officers. They crave public recognition through 'good work' in a development project. Formal compliance with project participation criteria that also safeguards their interests appears to be an easy option.

In effect, however, such compliance meant that consent, KWO's indicator of participation, was neither sought nor received. Both WDT members and committee secretaries made no serious efforts to propagate KWO's essential discourse that its projects are participatory because they are based on popular consent. Moreover, as these participatory procedures unfolded no differently from other existing public operations in the village, the discourse itself appeared to be full of inconsistencies (see Scott 1985: 338). In participatory practice, the domain or the site where participatory transactions occur, serves as the ground where such discourses can, if at all, be propagated. Like any other aspect of rule, a development project espousing a certain ideology

or a set of convictions, attempts to popularise the ideology through tools and practices that are at hand. However, a development project essentially represents a form of temporary rule. That such rule is finite, and limited only to the duration of the project, is indeed, its best-known aspect. KWO with all its public meetings and private paperwork has a duration of about four years to universalise its discourse regarding participation.

In Lilapuram, project participatory proceedings were almost entirely confined to manipulating paperwork. The Reddys hardly ever convened public meetings for the entire village. In one stroke therefore, KWO's claim that it provides an apparatus for open and fair deliberation was wiped out. Moreover, consent was manipulated in innumerable smaller transactions, where the bare face of Reddy domination remained unmasked by participatory discourse. Thus, even the attempt at universalisation of participatory discourse in Lilapuram was neither holistic nor vigorous, but only fragmented and weak.

Lilapuram's case demonstrates the significance of compromise and accommodation in 'successful' project-village interaction, allowing the watershed project to continue without a hitch. It also shows how project officers at different levels vitally affect the execution of a participatory development project, through perceptions of their own roles and responsibilities.

#### **4.2 Malligundu: Compliance and popular mobilisation**

In striking contrast to Lilapuram, conditions in Malligundu were congenial for broad based support for the watershed project right from its inception. Like its parched land awaiting monsoon, Malligundu's poor and distressed eagerly welcomed KWO's promise of a development project with wide ranging benefits. Equally significant was the unambiguous emphasis by project officers in public meetings, on KWO's intention to conduct the project consensually. Villagers, weary of Malligundu's violent and bloody history in recent years, found this position extremely appealing. Naidu, the Boya leader with an established criminal record, did not feel threatened by this approach, mainly because of the absence of any real opposition to his interests inside the village. In such happy context, the watershed project created hope and expectations amongst the people of Malligundu.

The project officers on their part took tremendous care that these hopes were not dashed, especially in the first year. The initial period of any development project, particularly a short-term project that also attempts to be participatory, is critical. It is during this time that popular perception of a project's capability typically swerves from optimism, generated through preliminary pronouncements, to disbelief and cynicism. This is what had happened in Lilapuram.

In Malligundu however, the project staff made a judicious assessment of the village needs, and acted accordingly. The inaugural 'entry point' activities included the construction of a bus shelter, and a cement concrete road connecting the main village to a new hamlet where government houses for SC families were located. These fulfilled two long persisting village needs. In addition, the PIA, a government officer, obtained special permission from the Project Director to exceed action plan targets set up for the first year. This aimed to generate intensive employment opportunities through watershed works over summer that would put a total halt to migration, the bane of the entire village. This course of action was exceptional, given KWO's usual rigidity. It was made possible, primarily because of effective communication between the government PIA and the main project office. By the end of the third project year, sector targets both for agriculture and minor irrigation had been nearly met<sup>30</sup>.

The momentum generated by these actions, sufficiently improved the credibility of KWO's participatory discourse in Malligundu. This discourse had one principal message; the project would create a local institutional apparatus that would function in public, and be equally accessible to all. Judging by the kind of 'public space' that existed in the village in 1998 when the project started, it would have been extremely difficult, if not impossible, for project officers to propagate this discourse effectively. Malligundu was a hamlet to Magarpalli panchayat until 1995. Even after it received its own panchayat, Naidu executed panchayat works through contracts, and no public meetings were ever called. The only exception was the village meeting called by Naidu when his conflict with Ragireddy was at its peak. This too was no forum for deliberation. Naidu simply banned all villagers from crossing over the thin water channel to visit Magarpalli ever again. Villagers, irrespective of their caste affiliation, are intimidated by Naidu's violent treatment of any opposition, and did not dare disobey the diktat. These aspects of leadership and domination apart, prolonged periods of absence from the village due to migration were also responsible for public disinterest in village matters.

These factors would normally constrain KWO's chances of introducing participatory procedures of working involving collective decision-making, individual consent and voluntary contributions. In Lilapuram, each of these procedures was reduced to a façade as it clashed with the manifestation of traditional authority of the Reddys. In Malligundu however, Naidu's domination derives from violence, an unconventional resource, unlike land ownership or caste position. In consequence, he was not threatened by participatory gestures like collective decision-making or securing of *sammatti-patrams* from farmers, as these did not contradict the non-hierarchical nature of his power. He was chiefly interested in extracting cuts from the project. As long as these were assured, Naidu was prepared to refrain from disturbing the project's participatory activities.

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<sup>30</sup> Plan amounts for agriculture and minor irrigation works in Malligundu are 3.671 and 2.455 lakh rupees respectively.

Further, he like others in Malligundu believed that the watershed project could bring in benefits, and perceived it as an opportunity to sanctify his leadership, otherwise based in well-masked brute force.

Thus, popular mood in Malligundu favoured the watershed project. At this time, project WDT meticulously initiated the formation of user (UG) and self-help groups (SHG), along the lines prescribed by KWO. Unlike Lilapuram, none of these ten groups were formed on the basis of caste affiliations. Also, two among these comprise exclusively of women. The distinguishing aspect of group formation in Malligundu is that these are functional, and indeed, all groups work intimately with the watershed committee in carrying out project works<sup>31</sup>. The conduct of watershed works through UGs and SHGs has led to a work culture drastically different from that in Lilapuram.

As Naidu did not interfere in everyday project management, watershed works in Malligundu were not executed through a small group of labourers, as was the case in Lilapuram. Through repeated dialogue and instruction, project WDT members in Malligundu were able to convince watershed committee secretaries of the benefits of working through user groups. As a normal practice in Malligundu, project works were rotated amongst all ten groups. This ensured that a few individuals do not control employment opportunities, and many persons in the village, including the landless in SHGs, benefit from project employment. It is primarily through such broad based employment that the project was able to check migration effectively. Working through user groups also meant that landholders consented to having watershed works on their lands, as work was allocated to groups whose members owned lands at the site of the proposed structure. KWO's principal requirement of participatory decision-making, which is ratification of works by individual consent, was fulfilled in this manner.

Since user groups are actively engaged in project works, WDT members are also able to follow KWO's directive that all labour payments be made through group leaders by joint cheque. According to procedure, the group leader distributes wages to members depending on the quantity of individual work done. During encashment, the bank deducts the amount of 'voluntary contribution' purportedly made by the landholders for construction of the watershed structure. However, the total amount cleared by KWO for payment includes costs of material as well as of labour, and is thus linked to the estimate for construction prepared by the watershed committee, and approved by the WDT. The entire procedure, even in Malligundu, is opaque to external scrutiny. It becomes difficult to detect, whether or not committee secretaries and WDT members

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3.88 and 2.46 lakh rupees respectively were spent before the last project year (Project records, KWO).

<sup>31</sup> I verified this through a succession of separate interviews with WDT members, watershed committee secretaries, and members from each of these ten groups.

prepare high estimates at Naidu's bidding, which would ensure his cuts. Moreover, the procedure of contribution through deduction is as likely to result in hired labourers unfairly bearing the brunt of contributions, even in Malligundu, while the landholder enjoys the benefit of construction for free.

In Lilapuram, such procedural irregularities were compounded by the total absence of any substantial initiative to meet KWO's participatory measures. Ordinary residents there perceived the project with apathy. In Malligundu however, these procedural aspects have been taken over by sincere attempts at popular mobilisation. Such mobilisation has occurred primarily through project patronage of *podupulakshmi* or thrift and credit (T&C) groups for women. These groups, not strictly a part of the watershed programme, are sponsored under other central and state government schemes<sup>32</sup>. As a matter of policy, KWO promotes functioning of such groups in order to create symbiosis between earnings generated through watershed works and a saving process.

T&C groups have become extremely popular in Malligundu. In 1999, a year after the project started, the WDT member responsible for 'social mobilisation' introduced the idea of saving a rupee a day to village women<sup>33</sup>. Four groups, comprising fifteen members each, were formed during the same year. All of these now save money on a regular basis. This has also allowed them to avail of loans from the state government, which is used as a 'group revolving fund'<sup>34</sup>. Members practice internal lending effectively and defaulters are tackled through group pressure. The generation of savings along with improved access to rural banking in neighbouring Veldurthi has significantly alleviated problems of indebtedness in Malligundu.

These groups contribute in no small measure to create a vibrant image of the project in the village. In fact, thrift and credit activities have become integral to the watershed project in Malligundu. The members of T&C groups, watershed committees and senior staff at KWO share this perception equally<sup>35</sup>. KWO regards the performance of *podupulakshmi* groups as exemplary. It has requested three group leaders from Malligundu to visit other neighbouring villages, and explain the virtues of *podupu* or thrift to women at large. Taking the cue from *podupulakshmi*, at least four user groups have reorganised themselves into *yuva shakti* or groups of the young, to avail enterprise loans offered by the state government since 1996. These groups are willing to participate in *shramdaan* activities for the benefit of the village. Moreover, WDT members in

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<sup>32</sup> More details in Chapter 4.

<sup>33</sup> The four-member WDT comprises members with different specialisations. These are agriculture, minor irrigation, forestry and social mobilisation. The last post has been created following KWO's recently adopted participatory orientation.

<sup>34</sup> Under SGSY rules, when group savings reach a minimum amount of 5000 rupees, the group is eligible to receive a loan from the state government.

<sup>35</sup> Committee secretaries, while enlisting UGs and SHGs 'affiliated' to each committee always mentioned these *podupulakshmi* groups as well (Field notes, Malligundu, December 2000).

Malligundu have introduced a number of innovative measures for *shramdaan* to draw upon group energy<sup>36</sup>. As a result of *shramdaan*, project afforestation initiatives that might otherwise have been a subject of popular apathy have thrived. Trees and plantations along the village main road, and on the fringes of private landholdings, are being looked after.

The activities of nearly fifteen beneficiary groups of different types have brought about a substantial change in the character of public space in Malligundu. Three years ago, public meetings in the village, if at all, were an oddity. At present, group meetings, on the corridors of the primary school building, or under trees in the central village courtyard, are an unmistakable feature of village life. No longer would the sight of people meeting for a discussion arouse suspicion of possible opposition by Naidu or his henchmen<sup>37</sup>. Moreover, these are held irrespective of larger village meetings and regardless of whether convened by the watershed committee or the panchayat.

Project officers from KWO recognise that these meetings are important also because they are an exercise in collective deliberation and confidence building. Participatory development initiatives, such as the watershed programme or the state government's Janmabhoomi village meetings, place central emphasis on the articulation of demands or differences in public forums. Such initiatives are usually reduced to tokenism because subordinate segments, like women or Scheduled Castes, find it difficult to speak freely in the presence of village elite and senior government officials. But, women in Malligundu's *podupulakshmi* groups are now planning how they would present the demand for lavatories, a widely felt need, in the Janmabhoomi gram sabha<sup>38</sup>. This is one example of how group meetings have instilled the confidence to demand realisation of a common need among women.

Such instances of people meeting to discuss problems, or indeed voicing their opinions in a public gathering, constitute 'empowering moments' that have been emphasised as the most promising aspect of participatory development (Kamat 2002: 60). Ardent supporters of participatory development highlight that it is this 'empowering' aspect that 'makes a critical difference in development's furthering of democracy' (Chambers 1983 as cited in Kamat 2002: 60). Kamat is critical of this position, and argues that it is by resorting to such empowering moments that issues, which assume 'an iron-clad reality', are continuously skirted in participatory development projects (2002: 60).

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<sup>36</sup> The 9<sup>th</sup> day of every month is observed as *shramdaan* day. Some youth groups in addition conduct 'clean and green' activities on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Saturday of every month.

<sup>37</sup> Rangamma, a *podupulakshmi* group leader said, 'Before the project started, if two or more persons were seen talking to one another outside their homes, people would suspect that something was wrong. Now everyone would think that they are only discussing some group matter' (Field notes, Malligundu, January 2001).

<sup>38</sup> The government's Janmabhoomi round is conducted once every quarter to coincide with the quarterly gram sabha or village meeting convened by the panchayat.

From the evidence in Malligundu, it is clear that dynamic members of *podupulakshmi* groups may put forward demands for lavatories but would hesitate from speaking against Naidu<sup>39</sup>. Kamat is therefore right in her view that participatory gestures cannot effectively challenge issues of domination on their own. However, such gestures cannot be assailed in exclusion of the basic approach to development that they represent. As in the case of NWDP, the programme mentions equity objectives, but promotes a blueprint, like KWO's, where participatory development is reduced to a matter of time bound procedure. In addition, KWO is always wary of conflict situations that may upset the pace of works, and therefore places an uncritical emphasis on consensus. This further thwarts the contest of domination as an effort towards equity.

Within this context, I would argue that 'empowering moments' greatly influence the extent to which project participatory discourse can be universalised, or indeed, appear to be potent. It was the stark absence of any public meetings in Lilapuram that caused a significant breach in KWO's hegemonic project of participation. The SC women of the village did not for a moment believe that they could have articulated their grievances about not being given project works, in the presence of the 'high' caste committee secretaries or project officers. They do, however, voice resistance in more private and secure contexts<sup>40</sup>. In effect, they could at all times, recognise that universal interests, which the project apparatus tried to embody through a discourse of participation, favoured dominant groups in the village only.

In Malligundu too, open defiance of Naidu was not an available option. Naidu continued to implement panchayat works through contracts for pecuniary gain, and also instigated criminal activities frequently. But, simultaneously, the conduct of project works in a relatively broad based manner seemed to reduce the need for defiance. While subordinate groups in the village were aware that participatory activities alone would not curtail Naidu's general clout, they also realised that the project by and large represented the interests of all segments.

Malligundu's case illustrates the conditions in which KWO's itemised pursuit of consent, within a time bound project framework did not degenerate into a sordid story of complicity between local elite and junior project staff. There is an element of accommodation of dominant interests in Malligundu as well, but this does not restrain the local project staff from initiating participatory practices along the lines determined by KWO. Project-village interaction was not limited to committee secretaries alone. The staff members developed a variety of relationships with ordinary residents, both men and women. The local staff, under a government PIA, received

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<sup>39</sup> I was present in Malligundu on the occasion of a Janmabhoomi gram sabha in January 2001. Naidu was conspicuously absent. None of the people gathered would reveal his whereabouts. Much later, I discovered that Naidu along with fifty Boya supporters had gone to attend a court hearing (Field notes, Malligundu, January 2001).

<sup>40</sup> Angry scheduled caste women spoke of discrimination against their community by Reddy landholders while allocating project work, during their private conversations with me.

much encouragement and support from KWO. The Project Director took personal interest in Malligundu, granting special permission to the PIA to deviate from the action plan. Senior officers from KWO regularly brought visitors to this village to demonstrate the successes of project participatory initiatives. In all these respects, Malligundu and Lilapuram represent divergent ends of a spectrum of possibilities under KWO's participatory blueprint.

##### **5. Project benefits: The material basis of consent**

A key aspect of universalisation in watershed projects is the emphasis on their relevance to the entire population. Therefore, the promise of universal benefits is among the biggest selling points of such projects<sup>41</sup>. This promise translates abstract ideas of universality into a concrete set of propositions that pertain to the daily experiences of people. Whether or not promised benefits find their way to expectant individuals is easily discerned. As a result, the attempts at universalisation potentially suffer their biggest blow when the project falters on these concrete promises; alternately, they are boosted when benefits flow as initially pledged. Lilapuram and Malligundu represent these dissimilar situations respectively.

Benefits therefore represent the material basis of consent that the participatory watershed project hopes to secure. Hegemony or ideological domination cannot be maintained 'unless it makes daily experiences intelligible to the masses of people', and is therefore continually validated by everyday life<sup>42</sup>. This necessarily means that the interests of those groups over whom hegemony is to be exercised cannot be utterly disregarded, and the 'leading or dominant group must make sacrifices of an economic or corporate kind' to arrive at a compromise equilibrium (Scott 1985: 337). In Gramsci's words, 'although hegemony is ethical-political, it must also be economic' (1971: 161).

Gramsci's later challengers, notably Scott, while discarding several of his principal observations regarding hegemony through consent, extend their support on this point. Taking the issue further, Scott showed how dominant groups frequently violate the conditions of their hegemony, by exceeding their acceptable profits or shares, 'systematically dismantling the practices that previously rationalised their wealth, status and leadership' (1985: 345). Subordinate groups on their part, may defend a version of the older arrangement, as it has a 'certain legitimacy rooted in earlier practice' (1985: 347). On this premise, Scott explains why popular anger of the exploited may not be expressed against larger abstractions spanning history (capitalism for example), but spills against specific individuals who perpetuate exploitation locally. People's perceptions of their

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<sup>41</sup> Marxist scholars like Sangeeta Kamat extend their criticism of a technocratic and target-group oriented approach in development projects to the idea of project benefits. Kamat argues that while targets conceal social relations by posing them as things, benefits give things a naturally imbued value and power (2002: 65, 98).

<sup>42</sup> Przeworski (1985), p 136

socio-economic conditions are both fragmented and personalised, and relate intrinsically to what they see and experience on a daily basis.

Persons living in a watershed area can relate intimately to the promised benefits, in one way or another. A watershed development project essentially aims to conserve soil and water on-site and improve the prospects of dryland farming for all landholders. It also provides ancillary benefits like generating employment on watershed works and checking migration<sup>43</sup>. A number of non-farm based activities like the formation and development of thrift and credit groups can also be generated during a project. These benefits allow the project to be rationalised to landholders as well as landless, men and women alike. In practice however, the watershed project is a land-based programme, and ownership of land tends to be extremely unequal. Therefore, a number of generic factors, stemming from landownership and the access to water resources, inherently constrain the project's capacity to provide equitable benefits to all segments. A project would therefore have to make special efforts to live up to its image of striving towards universality. This is necessary to ensure that disadvantaged groups like small farmers, the landless and women are not disgruntled.

Likely gains from improved soil and water conservation are of two types, increase in yields of existing crops and intensification of cropping through multi-cropping and two season agriculture. In dryland villages like Lilapuram and Malligundu, agriculture is typically concentrated to one principal crop in the *kharif* or rainfed season. Groundnut is the dominant crop grown in these villages. Besides depletion of soil moisture and nutrients on account of monoculture, factors like bad rains, crash in groundnut prices, and pest attacks regularly put farmers to risk, depriving them of their major source of income. Farmers also grow small amounts of red gram and *korra* (an inferior rice like cereal) for domestic consumption. Only large farmers owning wells have the option of growing a major second crop in the *kharif* season (like castor and sunflower), and cultivating their lands (to grow winter groundnut, cotton, jowar and vamu) through irrigation during the *rabi* season.

Unlike small farmers who have little space to experiment, farmers with large landholdings are able to diversify cultivation as encouraged by the project. Watershed development improves the availability of water for agriculture by increasing the soil's moisture content. Well owners particularly benefit from such increase as water continues to be available in wells for many months after the rains. The farmers without wells also benefit, but much less as they cannot store

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<sup>43</sup> Employment generation through watershed works checks migration temporarily, and is not a lasting solution to the problem of seasonal unemployment and migration in dryland areas. Effective conservation of soil and water however may lead to significant increase in the volume of agriculture in watershed areas, and this has the potential to provide agricultural wage employment on farmland on a more sustainable basis.

water. Thus, in principle, large farmers with wells are best suited to avail the maximum benefits in a watershed project.

In view of this divergence of benefits between large and small farmers, the project started with obvious disadvantages in Lilapuram. Land ownership in Lilapuram is marked by extreme disparities, whereas in Malligundu it is relatively homogenous. In Lilapuram, visible project benefits have been limited to large farmers. Many of them have introduced new water intensive crops like drumstick, in addition to cultivating sunflower, cotton, castor and winter groundnut in larger areas. Each of these crops requires high input costs for seeds and pesticides that only large farmers can afford. Project officers actively encourage this commercialisation. Similarly, when the project introduced dryland horticulture and disbursed seeds directly to individual farmers, the idea became very popular. Soon enough however, small farmers discovered that shifting to horticulture was a risk they could ill afford. Fruit trees do not start bearing fruit for at least four years; till then, the farmer continues to make huge investments and suffer negative returns.

While a small section of the population in Lilapuram received a generous proportion of project benefits, the large majority did not experience any noticeable improvement in their material conditions. Medium and small farmers, owning dry plots of land, largely continued one-season monoculture. Moreover, common land areas were not treated, and afforestation activities were conducted half-heartedly. Reddy landholders executed watershed works through a small group of backward caste labourers, and deprived the entire Scheduled Caste population of the village of employment opportunities. The project thus failed to make any dent on migration. This led to deep disappointment and anger amidst migrant families. The project moreover was confined to the execution of works on farmland and did not initiate any non-farm based activities. Interests of the large majority of the village, which was expected to consent to project works, were therefore wholly disregarded.

The situation in Malligundu is strikingly different. As the village has a majority of small farmers without any individual access to irrigation, there was scant possibility of moulding the project in favour of large landed interests. Moreover, to its credit, the watershed project meticulously fulfilled its promises to the majority of Malligundu's population. The most visible was break in chronic migration cycles, which benefited all sections, even those who were most deeply entrenched. Project officers had carefully assessed the needs of small farmers, and were able to persuade most farmers to construct field bunds along their lands. Farmers with the smallest landholdings planted paddy along these bunds, and although the cropped area may not exceed even a part of an acre, it was enough to meet the cereal needs of the family for many months. In some cases,

farmers released land previously devoted to cultivating *korra*, for other crops. Besides, the horticulture plantations introduced by the project have become very popular in Malligundu. Project extension staff explained the special needs of fruit trees for water to all interested farmers, and not merely large landholders. Since very few individuals in the village own wells, beneficiaries (apart from the well owners) were selected on the basis of proximity of their lands to a water source. Unlike Lilapuram therefore, the majority in Malligundu enjoyed the fruits of principal agricultural innovations achieved under the project.

In addition to these changes in the agriculture sector, the project also ensured that most families in Malligundu received employment on its works. Women of this village, especially from poorer, Scheduled Caste families, were beholden to the project because of its robust promotion of thrift and credit groups. In this manner, landholders and landless, both men and women, irrespective of their caste affiliations, enjoyed the project benefits jointly as well as severally. Stray cases of discontent with the project cannot of course be ruled out.

## **6. Conclusion**

This chapter examined the meaning, effects and implications of KWO's approach to participatory project management. KWO, a district level programme body, was able to formulate this approach by exercising policy-making and administrative powers under the national guidelines. The decision of the state government of Andhra Pradesh to create an exclusive district watershed programme body facilitated the exercise of bureaucratic powers for this purpose. KWO's freedom to innovate procedures is therefore a consequence of decentralisation of the overall structure of the watershed development programme. The meaning and content of KWO's approach to participatory development discloses the following four aspects of its functioning. These aspects in turn offer an insight into the character of decentralisation and its bearing on state power.

First, KWO's approach essentially rests on its interpretation of a code of participatory development created by the national policy guidelines, which insist on local decision-making through community. The concept of community is heavily buttressed by new institutionalist and communitarian ideas of communities, as collectivities of individuals that are capable of devising their own institutions to facilitate cooperative behaviour. By extension, it implies that a community can be the agent of its own development, which leads to the emphasis on participatory decision-making by a village watershed committee. Such ideas are new for KWO, staffed by government officers who are relatively unused to the notion and practice of participatory development. KWO's approach represents the attempt to juxtapose notions of community and participation with a bureaucratic and target oriented project management. Its interpretation of participation, and of

decentralised development practice therefore, flows from its institutional character, and its history as a bureaucratic organisation, within the state's ambit.

Second, the approach accords precedence to devising procedures that would govern participation as defined by the project office. Most of these procedures are linked to the fulfilment of physical and financial targets listed in a technical action plan. KWO's participatory procedures involve individual or joint consent of village residents. However, there is the underlying effort and inclination to monitor the ways in which such consent is secured and documented. This significantly expands the space in which project officers can intervene or interfere in the participatory process. In this respect, KWO's approach embodies the power to govern or regulate individual behaviour, by posing its intervention in technical terms. Foucault conceptualised the emergence of this power as 'governmentality', and described how this caused an increasing number of social relationships to come under the auspices of state institutions (Foucault 1991).

Third, KWO's functioning curiously demonstrates that the increase in its power does not always mean a corresponding rise in its effectiveness. It shows that KWO is not a cohesive, singular entity, but a multi-layered organisation with substantial variations in perceptions amongst officers. Nearly opposite project dynamics in the villages of Lilapuram and Malligundu illustrate the critical role played by village level project staff in sustaining KWO's basic objectives, albeit in different ways.

Fourth, KWO, although not wholly cohesive, exercises clear control over all NGOs engaged as project implementing agencies. The terms of partnership between NGOs and KWO are defined by the latter. Senior project officers at KWO do not entirely share the guidelines' optimism about NGOs as appropriate agents of participatory development. In their perception, NGOs do not necessarily augment participatory processes, and are also constrained by funds and infrastructure<sup>44</sup>. The case studies validate this perception. The presence of an NGO as the PIA did not alter the approach to project implementation in Lilapuram. It did not induce relaxation of stringent monitoring by KWO. Also, it did not introduce a process of popular mobilisation that is any different from the exercises devised by the project office. Besides, local project staff owed their allegiance to KWO, and not the NGO that recruited them, as they could be summarily removed by senior project officers. KWO engages NGOs as PIAs mainly because there is a shortfall in the availability of government staff, given the rapid expanse of the watershed programme.

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<sup>44</sup> 'Regard for rules is very poor among NGOs. With government PIAs, once we give the orders, there is no deliberate attempt at violation', said the Project Director, KWO, March 2001.

In effect, KWO's approach amounted to synthesising technical objectives with participatory procedures designed to secure popular consent. The project-village dynamics critically shaped the substantiation of this approach. There was divergence between Lilapuram and Malligundu with respect to the nature and substance of consent creation and the manner of its obtaining. These contrasts emerged despite the ingratiation of dominant local interests common to both villages. It proves that the KWO blueprint for participation, which is an integral element of the depoliticisation discourse, can materialise with considerable contrariety when applied to different contexts. It proves further that KWO's participatory protocol has a spectrum of possibilities.

There is as much evidence to show that KWO's creation of consent is a façade, as there is to demonstrate that it can be substantive. The conditions of project completion in Lilapuram, with its rigid social stratification, illustrate that both project practitioners and dominant elite greatly value the 'public transcript', the preservation of a façade of consent. They do not take any extra pain to popularise project participatory discourse, and instead, stay content with formal compliance on paper. These aspects of project-village dynamics reaffirmed Reddy domination in Lilapuram, as project benefits were confined to a small segment. In Malligundu, relative economic homogeneity and Naidu's unconventional profile allowed project staff to pursue KWO's participatory blueprint meticulously. These include group formation and mobilisation unhitched to fiscal management of the project. The public transcript is important in Malligundu as well, since neither project officers nor ordinary residents can confront Naidu. But his leadership style did not thwart popular mobilisation or grudge a good majority experiencing material gain.

It is also perceived that while KWO's participatory practices are integral to the depoliticisation discourse that it subscribes to, they do not wholly preclude the use of the projects' public forums as political spaces for contest and resolution. It is nonetheless true that in-built structural features such as their rigid time schedule, together with KWO's uncritical emphasis on unanimity, counter the prospect of positive deliberations in the project forum. Project officers tend to use public meetings to present paper work and documentation to villagers to exhibit transparency in functioning. This trivialises the use of project public space, as these records are only displayed to the crowd, and not really made available for scrutiny. The presentation of records is a lengthy affair and consumes most of the time available. Moreover, public display of records, as proof of transparency, or indeed, accountability, is at best symbolic since the large majority of people in these villages cannot effectively read or write.

Gram sabhas convened by the panchayat or by the Janmabhoomi team announce reams of figures in public meetings as evidence of effective functioning. State planners, who devised these procedures, use public meetings as mechanisms of 'social audit', whereby the people are

supposed to collectively approve or disapprove the government's functioning. In fact, in several schemes implemented by the gram panchayat, as the Jawahar Gram Samriddhi Yojana (JGSY), conventional auditing has been fully replaced by social audit, leading to large-scale misappropriation of funds<sup>45</sup>.

At times however, public emphasis on correct record keeping can be empowering precisely through its symbolism. The sight of a rich Reddy watershed secretary being publicly rebuked for a record keeping error during a CMP round is empowering for a Scheduled Caste woman. It affirms her faith in the project apparatus. Malligundu's experience also shows that mobilisation of individuals, especially women, through groups, can lead to a more effective use of public forums for the articulation of grievances. These groups even purpose to present some of their demands in the Janmabhoomi gram sabha. The Janmabhoomi programme is a political process where matters presented by the aggrieved are presented to higher-level government functionaries as well as the political leadership. MLAs (Members of Legislative Assembly) or MPs (Members of Parliament) or even members of Zilla Panchayats, who are in opposition to the ruling TDP, have been known to use Janmabhoomi forums to embarrass the ruling party on grounds of dismal performance<sup>46</sup>.

It is evident that the adoption of participatory procedures by non-elected watershed committees has become an easy option for KWO. Its blueprint for participation is a further crystallisation of the elements contained in the national guidelines. But there is no legal or constitutional requirement that such procedures are debated in any elected forum before they are implemented. This significantly increases bureaucratic control over the decentralisation process. The previous chapters have shown how elected political representatives have been given only an advisory role at all levels of the watershed programme. In KWO's case, in addition, there is a highly developed discourse of depoliticisation that associates political representatives with arbitrary electoral interests and imputes to them a short-term, biased rationality. This ostensibly makes elected representatives unsuitable for broad-spectrum development decisions. The previous chapter showed that attempts at distancing watershed committees from panchayats are often meaningless, since the same individuals who dominate panchayats, are also accommodated in watershed committees. However, the attempt itself is both definite and unambiguous. The tremendous popularity of the 'non-elected local body' in effect pushes the debate on decentralisation away from panchayats. This is true at least in Andhra Pradesh where the current political leadership is disinclined to empower panchayats seriously.

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<sup>45</sup> MoRD (2000), Interview with Panchayat Executive Officer, Veldurthi, March 2001

<sup>46</sup> Conversations with local newspaper journalists, Veldurthi, March 2001

## Chapter 6

### The Politics of Watershed Development

#### 1. Introduction

This chapter is based on a case study of a watershed development project in Dewas district in Madhya Pradesh (MP), a state in central India. It argues that contemporary state-level political and institutional factors have led to an emphasis on decentralised development through the increased involvement of elected local bodies or panchayats. The Congress government of MP, in power since 1992, has taken a number of unprecedented initiatives to integrate the existing bureaucratised development process with zilla, janpad and gram panchayats at the district, block and village levels respectively. This explicit move in MP to integrate development functions of the state with political parties and leadership thus presents a striking contrast to the situation in Andhra Pradesh (AP). Since it came to power in the early 1980s, AP's ruling Telugu Desam Party (TDP) has consistently discouraged panchayat bodies, and pursued twin policies of promoting bureaucratic strengthening at the lower levels of government together with creating community based bodies in villages as forums for development programmes.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I showed how KWO substantially checked the political involvement of elected representatives in the watershed programme at the district level, but failed to effect a meaningful separation between politics and development in its project villages. Unlike KWO, Dewas district does not implement the watershed development programme through a discourse of depoliticisation. The first village to be selected for the watershed programme in Dewas was Kishangarh, a large and prosperous village in close proximity to the district headquarters. This village, primarily for its size and economic prosperity, is among the influential panchayats of the region, and since the start of the watershed programme, has also been labelled as a 'success' story in Dewas. This chapter discusses the issues that arise from the process of Kishangarh's selection as well as project implementation. It explores the relationship between Kishangarh's regional political significance, its local political character and the nature of its successes in watershed development.

#### 2. The political economy of Dewas

Dewas, located in the south west of the state, more towards the centre, is a part of the Malwa plateau, and partly constitutes a portion of the Narmada valley. All districts in Madhya Pradesh are divided into *tehsils* or blocks, which are sub-district level units of administration. Dewas has six *tehsils*, and this study is located in Tonk-Khurd *tehsil*, not very far from the district headquarters.

Map 3: Districts of Madhya Pradesh



Source: [www.mapsofindia.com](http://www.mapsofindia.com)

Dewas, like Kurnool in Andhra Pradesh is also a 'dryland' district<sup>1</sup>. Large portions of it are dry due to low and undependable rainfall. The Narmada valley divides the district into two parts, and the area above, known in Hindi as *ghaat-upar*, is generally characterised as more prosperous economically than the area below, known correspondingly as *ghaat-neeche*. The *ghaat-upar* areas constitute the fertile Malwa uplands, and benefit from a long tradition of irrigated cultivation and industrialisation, which have in turn facilitated several ancillary businesses such as dairy. Indore town lies about 50 kilometres west of Dewas, and has remained the hub of industrial and trade activities since well before the colonial times. The *ghaat-neeche* areas are relatively less fertile in comparison with the prosperous Malwa uplands.

The *ghaat-upar* region, primarily on account of its economic advantage, is the politically important area of the district. This is also because it is not an area of tribal concentration. The *ghat-neeche* part of Dewas district, comprising Bagli *tehsil*, on the other hand, has large tribal pockets<sup>2</sup>. Tribal populations, despite official pronouncements to the contrary, are among the most exploited segments in society<sup>3</sup>. Relatively speaking, tribals lack voice in formal political processes such as elections, representation in elected bodies of state, as well as in informal

<sup>1</sup> It is one of 177 dryland districts in India, identified by Shah et al (1998), pp 109-110.

<sup>2</sup> See Map 4 on p 161

ones like mass mobilisations that espouse their cause. In recent times, there has been an upsurge in social movements and grassroots organisations that stand for tribal causes in various parts of the country. There are instances of such mobilisation in Dewas as well.

The district encompasses a large mixed population. Though there are tribal pockets, as in Bagli *tehsil*, these are not exclusive and are interspersed with a non-tribal majority, tribals suffering exploitation at their hands. Tribal communities are widely characterised as 'secluded' and 'passive', though there have been significant interventions exposing such images as stereotypical (Kamat 2002a, p 69). Indian historian Sumit Sarkar has argued convincingly against the stereotype of tribal communities as living in habitual isolation<sup>4</sup>. He writes, 'Apart from some isolated and really primitive food gatherers, the tribals were and very much are a part of Indian society, as the lowest stratum of the peasantry subsisting through shifting cultivation, agricultural labour, and increasingly coolies' recruited for work in distant plantations, mines and factories' (Sarkar 1998: 44). In this respect, their situation is quite similar to that of non-tribal lower castes and their interrelationships with the higher castes. It is common for castes low down in the social hierarchy to co-exist with 'high' castes that are often economically dominant as well. As a result of this coexistence, tribals as much as the lower castes, are an integral part of the political economy of domination and exploitation.

The tribal people of Bagli *tehsil* are a migrant population, and were the original inhabitants of neighbouring Dhar district. They were relocated here at the instance of the colonial government in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, presumably to occupy large tracts of cleared forestland of the *ghaat-neeche* areas<sup>5</sup>. They, mainly of the *Bhil* and *Bhilala* tribes, settled down here in villages, which are almost wholly tribal. However, they continued to be a minority in a predominantly non-tribal *tehsil*, and district. The non-tribal neighbourhood moreover, comprises relatively prosperous cultivators; most of whom were already practising large-scale cultivation at the time migrants arrived. They had dug wells, and later, tube wells on their lands for irrigation. The new entrants by contrast were given small pieces of land by the government. Although this had the effect of eliminating landlessness, most farmers continued to practice only marginal cultivation. Besides, in tune with the general topography of the region, their lands are extremely dry, and they did not have wells to irrigate. Agriculture on their own possession was insufficient even to fulfil the meagre family needs. The only alternate employment available was wage labour on the lands of their non-tribal neighbours. Tribals have since been working as agricultural labourers, often obtaining less than minimum wages. They have also succumbed to a tortuous routine of annual migration to the Malwa uplands, where unlike *ghaat-neeche* villages, irrigated cultivation continues for the *rabi* crop as well as during the summer.

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3 The Indian constitution includes special provisions for the Scheduled Tribes, including reservations in all government appointments and educational institutions.

4 Sarkar (1989), p 44

5 Office records, Bagli *Tehsil*

In the political economy of this district, the *ghaat-upar* areas enjoy a position of advantage. They also reflect exploitative relations, but of a different kind, mostly to do with caste. Villages in the constituent *tehsils* are predominantly mixed caste, comprising 'high' as well as 'low' caste populations. The affirmative policies of reservation in favour of backward castes (BCs), adopted by the Indian state since the 1990s, are in the process of altering caste dynamics in rural and urban areas. Together with adult franchise that enables 'power to move inexorably in favour of numbers', reservation policies strengthen the numerically preponderant BC groups (Srinivas 1994: 8, Mendlesohn 2002). However, following the review of caste dominance related debates in Chapter 4, it remains that land ownership and a 'high' position in the Hindu hierarchy continue to be extremely significant as the bases of domination. All these factors therefore work in permutation and combination to influence precise local configurations of power. Moreover, despite the adoption of the reservation policy, higher castes continue to wield important positions both at lower and higher levels of important state institutions, such as the administrative services and the police.

Further, caste based politics is predominant in the region. Both the Congress and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have strong and weak pockets throughout Dewas district<sup>6</sup>. Although there are abundant local variations, BJP typically draws support from 'high' caste groups such as the Rajputs, and the Congress from amongst backward castes and Scheduled Castes (SCs). There is also a large shifting population, which constantly changes its party loyalties. It is common for caste groups in villages to support one party or another<sup>7</sup>.

### **3. Watershed programme structure and the interface with panchayats**

NWDP is an instance of a centrally sponsored government programme implemented throughout the country. Although a national framework has been laid down to govern it, there is sufficient flexibility for implementing states and districts to interpret it and devise practices. MP, like AP has amended the programme structure slightly to suit its own conditions. Moreover, the state government's policy of integrating panchayat bodies with development functions of the state also have a bearing on the structure of the watershed development programme (WSDP).

#### **3.1 Contrasts in programme structure between MP and AP**

MP's watershed programme structure when compared with that of Andhra Pradesh reflects a few similarities and many contrasts. The major similarity is that the programme in both places is essentially bureaucratic in nature. The state government of MP has created the Rajiv Gandhi Watershed Mission, a consolidated government unit separate from the Department of Rural Development (DoRD), which would coordinate all watershed programmes in the state.

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<sup>6</sup> It is quite common for the MP and MLA of a common area to belong to different parties. An instance is the Dewas constituency where the MP, Thavar Chand Singh Gehlot, is from the BJP and the MLA, Sajjan Singh Varma is from the Congress.

<sup>7</sup> Fieldwork in Tonk-Khurd *tehsil*, October 2000

Andhra Pradesh does not have a separate mission for WSD at the state level, but there are exclusive watershed offices in every district.

The contrasts are several. First, MP has merged its Zilla Panchayats with the DRDAs. It is among the earliest states in the country that has effected this merger, and earned a 'pro-panchayat' reputation in consequence. The ZP now implements all development programmes previously routed through the DRDA, including watershed development, at least in theory. Second, there is no separate watershed office at the district level, akin to KWO in AP. There are also no watershed development teams (WDTs) to assist PIAs in implementing projects in villages. Third, MP has created the *Zilla Sarkar* (District Government), which brings all matters of the state government, development as well as regulatory, under the administrative scrutiny of district level elected representatives. Compared with KWO's unambiguous stand of keeping elected representatives to the District Watershed Advisory Committee away from decision-making in WSD, the creation of *Zilla Sarkar* has greatly expanded the field of influence of elected panchayat representatives.

### 3.2 Implications for structure and functioning

These features have a number of implications for the structure and functioning of the WSDP in practice. MP's Congress government launched the Rajiv Gandhi Watershed Mission, named after the deceased leader Rajiv Gandhi, on his birthday in 1994. It followed this up with similar missions in other fields such as education and health. In effect, each of these development programmes developed a distinct political association with the Congress party. Further, the mission Director of RGM in Bhopal, usually an IAS officer, takes independent decisions for all government implemented watershed programmes in the state, untrammelled by regular bureaucratic structure. The Director has a direct channel of communication with the Chief Minister, Digvijay Singh, who is known for his 'pro-decentralisation' views. This arrangement reduces time lags in decision-making, arising otherwise from routine paperwork. The mission has the authority and space to innovate procedural codes for critical operations in the watershed programme. There are however no separate district level RGM offices.

**Table 4**

#### **Watershed Programme Structure, Madhya Pradesh**

<u>Implementing Body</u>	<u>Advisory Body</u>	<u>Level</u>
Rajiv Gandhi Mission		State
Zilla Panchayat	District Watershed Advisory Committee (DWAC)	District

<u>Implementing Body</u>	<u>Advisory Body</u>	<u>Level</u>
Project Implementing Agency (PIA) (Government Officer/NGO/Cooperative etc.)		Milli-watershed <sup>8</sup>
Government PIA (Project Officer + 1 Assistant) NGO PIA (Own personnel arrangements)		Microwatershed
Watershed Committee (WC)	Gram Panchayat (GP)	Village

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Source: Rajiv Gandhi Mission, Government of Madhya Pradesh

Following the ZP-DRDA merger, the ZP is theoretically in charge of programme implementation in the district. In addition, the District Watershed Advisory Committee (DWAC), comprising elected representatives from the Zilla Panchayat, and some representatives from voluntary and technical organisations engaged in watershed development in the district, has an advisory role especially in policy formulation. Unlike Kurnool, where concentration of administrative and policy-making powers in KWO reduced DWAC to a nominal position, in Dewas, conversely, the political and institutional conditions are favourable for the Zilla Panchayat and DWAC to perform an active role.

However, in actual functioning, matters of administrative design and innovation are usually left to the Collector, who heads the Watershed Development Team, which comprises technical staff from various related departments such as water resources, agriculture and forests. The Collector, being the head of the police, revenue and district administration of the district, accords time and attention to the watershed programme, purely as per his/her own perception of its significance. Other government officers, junior in position to the Collector, may take greater interest in programme provisions, and formulate initiatives for reform, which ultimately require the Collector's approval<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> A milli watershed covers about 5000-10000 hectares, and a microwatershed is typically in the range of 500-1000 hectares.

<sup>9</sup> This is the case in Dewas. The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Zilla Panchayat, usually an Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer in charge of administrative matters of the ZP, has taken a keen interest in the district's watershed development programme. During his tenure as CEO of ZP between 1998 and 2000, this officer initiated several important changes in district level programme procedures.

In effect therefore, the administrative responsibilities for the watershed programme continue to lie with the 'old' DRDA, and not with the ZP. Although watershed development money from the central and state governments is routed to Zilla Panchayats after the ZP-DRDA merger, in practice, only a few officers in the DRDA in Dewas coordinate the programme in the district. Indeed, the DRDA strives to retain its identity, especially by maintaining separate accounts for the programmes funded through it. This follows a specific directive by the Government of India (GoI) to that effect<sup>10</sup>. This GoI provision indicates a reluctance to do away with the DRDA structure, despite pronouncements, in favour of Zilla Panchayats, to the contrary. DRDA officers maintain accounts and collate reports submitted by project officers in charge of individual microwatershed projects, which are then sent to the main RGM office in Bhopal. They do not have powers to innovate procedures.

Each microwatershed project is implemented either by a government or NGO PIA. But unlike Kurnool where every PIA, irrespective of whether it is a government officer or an NGO, had to work through a four member WDT, village level programme arrangements in Dewas vary between government and NGO PIAs. When a government official designated as Project Officer (PO) is in charge of project implementation, he works with the assistance of individual officers, who are designated as Project Implementing Agencies (PIAs). A PO is usually assigned charge of a milli-watershed, which comprises 6-7 microwatershed projects. A PIA is in charge of 1-2 microwatersheds<sup>11</sup>. Thus, a PO supervises the work of 3-4 PIAs in the entire milli-watershed. NGOs entrusted with project implementation are free to improvise their own village level arrangements.

This implementation arrangement offers two further points of contrast with that of Kurnool. First, government project staff in Dewas are usually overburdened with responsibilities, as they hold charge of an entire milli-watershed in addition to discharging other government duties. The one-member PIAs assisting them cannot really compare with the four member WDTs available in each microwatershed project in Kurnool. Second, NGOs working in Dewas are accorded much greater space and flexibility to devise their own implementation arrangements than NGOs in Kurnool<sup>12</sup>.

The watershed programme does not remain confined to bureaucratic and administrative procedures in Madhya Pradesh. Under the new arrangements of *Zilla Sarkar*, issues related to WSDP are presented for consideration to the elected political representatives. *Zilla Sarkar* is a popular name given to District Planning Committees (DPCs) that were created by the Constitution (Article 243) to integrate urban and local planning, but in practice remain as defunct bodies in most states of the country. In 1999, the state government of MP amended the District Planning Committee Act of 1995, with the principal objective of creating a second

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<sup>10</sup> Government of India (1999), p 14

<sup>11</sup> Refer to footnote 7 for definitions of milli and microwatersheds.

<sup>12</sup> The following chapter addresses this issue in greater detail.

tier of administration in the district, second to the state level, and doing away with at least 293 divisional offices of different departments. The Act placed all departments functioning at the district level under the newly empowered DPCs. These measures have been adopted with the intention to transform DPCs as 'decision-making bodies' instead of being planning units only. Government officials describe this process of transformation as the 'de-escalation' of the authority of government to the district<sup>13</sup>.

DPCs are composed of elected representatives of ZPs and urban local bodies in 4:1 ratio, as well as of all MLAs and MPs elected from the district. Any other political appointees of the state government are also included. The Chairman is a minister of the state government, designated 'in-charge' of the district and is called *Prabhari Mantri*. The Collector is the only bureaucratic representative in the DPC, and acts as its Secretary. Other important district level officers such as the CEO of Zilla Panchayat, who is in charge of its administrative matters, have not been included. This composition suggests that a DPC is a nucleus of the political leadership within every district.

The creation of *Zilla Sarkar* is significant, but its implications need to be assessed carefully. Purely in institutional terms, this step is a major leap forward towards effective decentralisation. The *Zilla Sarkar* embodies the effort to create a composite tier of local government, which is elected and enjoys a popular mandate, and is endowed with powers of decision-making that are both developmental and regulatory in nature. The absence of such effort, previously in other states, represents the single largest failing of most decentralisation exercises undertaken in India. The present political leadership in MP has thus demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of decentralisation. The *Zilla Sarkar* or District Government would take decisions regarding issues that are basically local in character, and only those questions of public policy that cut across districts would be funneled up to government ministries at the state level.

The initialisation of *Zilla Sarkar* has definitely resulted in a substantial measure of administrative decentralisation<sup>14</sup>. However, the political leadership at the state level continues to maintain the upper hand in decision-making at the district. The appointment of ministers as Chairmen of DPCs has ensured that this tier of political leadership is not excluded from the new power arrangement devised by the Chief Minister and his aides. This move needs to be viewed as a shrewd measure that would avert likely resistance from powerful state level politicians. As discussed in Chapter 2, consistent opposition from state level political interests is among the principal factors for slow and inadequate transfer of powers to panchayat institutions. In the new arrangement, ministers at the head of DPC continue to hold the final

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with S.N. Sirohi, Secretary, Planning Department, Government of Madhya Pradesh, June 2000

<sup>14</sup> Rajendra Chaube, Public Relations Minister, remarked that 'in the last 100 days, there was a 25% decline in the number of visitors to Vallabh Bhawan (state secretariat) for getting their work done' (*National Mail*, July 20, 1999 as quoted in Behar 1999).

authority of administrative sanction for all development programmes implemented within the district<sup>15</sup>. Paradoxically, this has led to an expansion in their powers, as before the constitution of *Zilla Sarkar*, the same ministers would have had powers concerning only one department and its related schemes. The state government, perhaps in a bid to downplay this aspect of 'District Government', repeatedly emphasises that DPCs do not aim to take away the powers assigned to zilla panchayats and urban local bodies, in its many publications.

The institution of *Zilla Sarkar* has also led to a swift broadening of the interface between elected representatives and the bureaucracy in the district. In most district level administrative arrangements, the bureaucracy tends to be extremely powerful. The District Collectorate, established in colonial times still continues to be the pivot of power. The Collector embodies the sheer concentration of state authority, although the entire hierarchy of government, stretching from district headquarters to block offices, eagerly claims its share of state power. *Zilla Sarkar* represents the elected government in the district, and therefore, elected representatives have been accorded a higher position than the district bureaucracy. Zilla Panchayats did not carry the weight of state authority, until their inclusion in government as part of *Zilla Sarkar*. These developments are changing the dynamics of interaction between politicians and bureaucrats in the districts of MP<sup>16</sup>.

All these institutional arrangements signify that administrative and policy-making powers for the watershed programme are not concentrated in a single authority in Dewas, akin to KWO in Kurnool. Although administrative functions are typically performed by a handful of junior officers in the DRDA, the political and institutional environment is conducive for greater involvement both of elected representatives and senior bureaucrats like the Collector in programme implementation.

#### **4. Political appeal of the Watershed Development Programme**

Watershed development is extremely attractive to elected political representatives for two reasons. As a programme that aims to improve soil and water conservation, increase availability of water for irrigation and drinking, provide employment, and reduce migration, it has all the right elements of a 'catch-all' rural development programme. Politicians seeking power by winning elections can capture voters' imagination by proclaiming the entire range of likely benefits available through watershed development. The programme is appealing to bureaucrats as well, who find the multiplicity of objectives useful. In Madhya Pradesh, top bureaucrats believe that WSD has tremendous potential as an employment generation programme, and ought to be popularised as one<sup>17</sup>. Thus, the programme is appealing both to

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<sup>15</sup> A state government officer, requesting anonymity, remarked that this arrangement ensures that Ministers are not deprived of 'cuts' or 'profits', particularly in construction works (Bhopal, June 2000).

<sup>16</sup> An IAS officer in Dewas district candidly remarked, 'Earlier, we would not have allowed these people into our houses, and now we have to usher them into our drawing rooms and serve them tea' (Field notes, Dewas, November 2000).

<sup>17</sup> Interview with R. Gopalakrishnan, Secretary to the Chief Minister, Government of Madhya Pradesh, May 2000.

politicians and bureaucrats engaged in development administration. The second reason for appeal is the prospect that about 2 million rupees will be spent in a single microwatershed project over four years. Besides, transfer of 80% of these funds, that comprise the works component of the budget, to the village watershed committee, greatly enhances the selling point of the programme.

In view of these advantages, political aspirants are keen to initiate watershed projects in their own constituencies. It is not uncommon for the Collector and CEO of the ZP to receive requests from elected representatives for watershed projects in select constituencies. Such attempts at lobbying are frequent even in Kurnool in AP, but they are largely ignored by KWO that strictly conforms to selection criteria given in the guidelines, and does not allow the District Watershed Advisory Committee (DWAC) any say in the matter. In Dewas however, the merging of the Zilla Panchayat with the DRDA, and more so, the constitution of *Zilla Sarkar* together mask lobbying activities under the formalities of sanctioned protocol<sup>18</sup>. Moreover, the dispersion of the programme's administrative powers among the Collector, Zilla Panchayat and DRDA officers, implies that a strict adherence to the selection criteria is not always possible. In a similar vein, local NGOs try to avail of the opportunities for watershed project implementation by using political contacts to influence the district administration<sup>19</sup>. The selection of project implementation agencies is therefore another area where politicians and bureaucrats can exercise considerable discretion and power.

The political appeal of watershed development is for entirely opportunistic reasons, and politicians clamouring for watershed projects soon lose interest in them. Political leaders rarely take stock of the progress of such projects or pursue serious issues that may arise from their implementation. This is primarily because of the nature of watershed development projects, which do not yield an impression of instant gain, unlike roads or large dams for example. Project structures are typically small, low-cost and visibly unimpressive, and project results usually take a minimum of two years to appear. In the meetings of the *Zilla Sarkar*, WSD related issues are usually the subjects of keen discussion in the inception stage of projects. But soon after decisions regarding project allocation have been taken, continued interest in them is not sustained even though they remain as items for formal review<sup>20</sup>.

#### 4.1. Why Kishangarh

The watershed programme arrived in Dewas in 1995. Its comprehensive interrelated objectives and participatory orientation embodied a novelty for politicians and bureaucrats in Dewas, as this was the first composite rural development programme of its sort. Previous

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<sup>18</sup> RGM guidelines clearly mention that watershed areas are to be selected by DWAC, which mainly comprises of ZP representatives.

<sup>19</sup> A senior journalist and geo-hydrologist in Dewas, who requested anonymity, revealed that it is difficult to be selected as a PIA without political contacts and influence. He has applied to the CEO, Zilla Panchayat's office, for a PIA's position and had been waiting for nearly 2 years for a response, when I interviewed him in October 2000.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with a senior member of the Dewas Zilla Panchayat, November 2000

rural development programmes like the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) had concentrated mainly on disbursements of government subsidies linked with bank loans to beneficiaries by officers. The watershed development programme instead had been conceived differently, and rested mainly on local initiative. As a result, policy instructions for participatory watershed development from the central and state governments were formulated in an idiom that appeared unfamiliar to lower levels of political leadership and government. Simultaneously however, the programme's content and format seemed appealing. For both these aspects- of unfamiliarity on the one hand and appeal on the other- the watershed development programme started amidst an ambiguity that commonly characterises new endeavours.

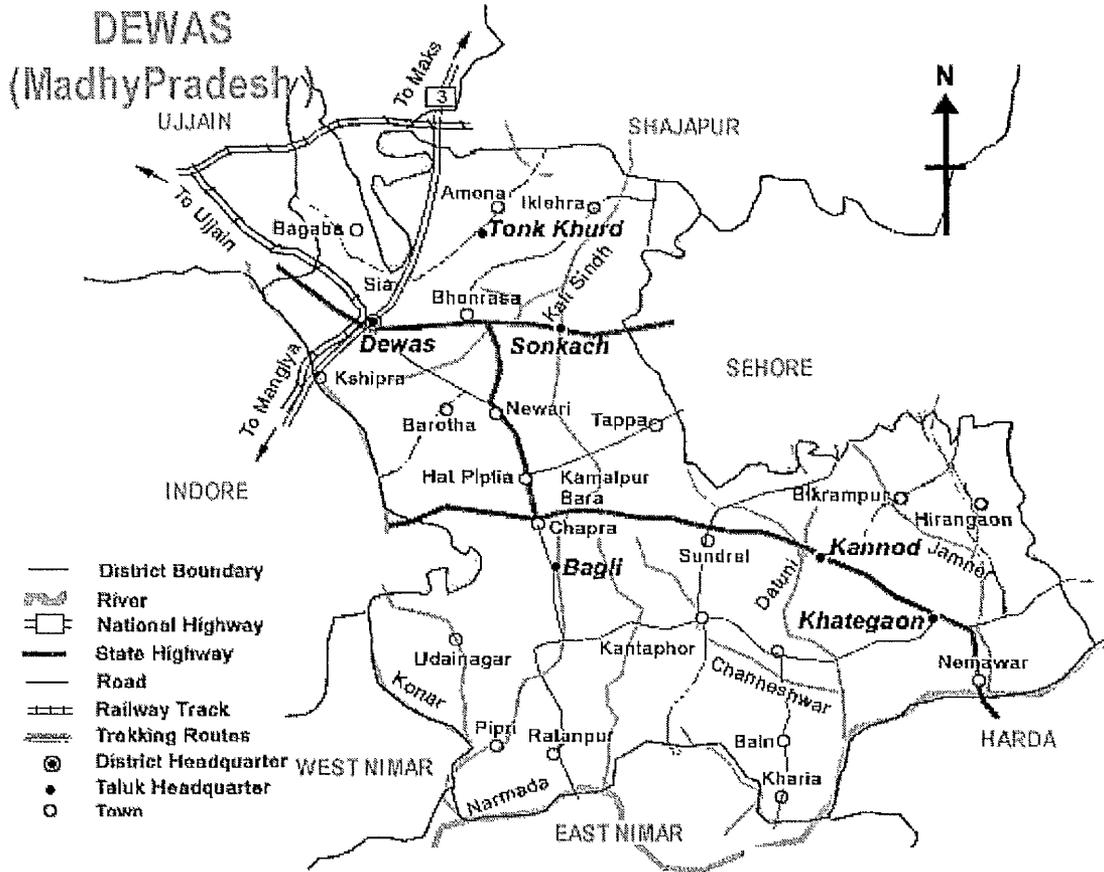
The selection of watershed areas is the first step of the implementation process. Milli-watersheds are identified using a ridge to valley approach, as advised by the national guidelines and RGM<sup>21</sup>. Budasa milli-watershed in Tonk-Khurd *tehsil* that is in close proximity to the district headquarters was the first to be selected. It comprises of seven micro-watersheds that coincide with seven villages called Budasa, Kishanpura, Pandi, Jirvai, Gallakheri, Kishangarh and Pipliyakumar. The first watershed project to be started was in Budasa itself because it is the first village along the ridgeline of this milli-watershed. However, it soon had to be disbanded, apparently following the sarpanch's refusal to allow the constitution of watershed committees, as these appeared to threaten his own position<sup>22</sup>. Project officers then chose Kishangarh to initiate a watershed project, on the ground that this was the next in sequence to Budasa along the ridge. For all effective purposes therefore, Kishangarh is the first microwatershed project to be completed in Dewas district.

The choice of Budasa milli-watershed, as opposed to any other, as the first watershed area in the district, requires careful scrutiny, because when the programme started in 1995, no clear method of selection was in place. This is despite the indication of a list of selection criteria in the guidelines. In later years, the Dewas district machinery has organised its selection mechanisms considerably, as these cannot afford to be erratic or arbitrary, given the stringent physical and financial targets of the programme. Even so, politicians continue to press for their favoured constituencies to be selected within the institutional forums of the Zilla Panchayat and the Zilla Sarkar. While a measure of bureaucratic discipline may have characterised programme implementation later, there was less of a façade to conceal political requests for selection of watershed areas in early programme days.

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<sup>21</sup> Rajiv Gandhi Mission in MP takes a milli-watershed, of 5000 to 10000 hectares, as a unit of planning, instead of a micro watershed of 500-1000 hectares, as proposed by the guidelines. The mission believes that the use of a planning unit that is too small, leads to problems in downward integration of schemes, and therefore insists on watershed planning for the entire state on a milli-watershed basis. However, it complies with the guidelines' emphasis on micro watersheds with respect to the execution of structures, and therefore each individual watershed project that is designed is a micro watershed (Government of Madhya Pradesh, 1994).

Map 4: Tehsils of Dewas District



The most important reason influencing Budasa's selection is its location in Tonk-Khurd *tehsil*. The *tehsil* includes the electoral constituency of Suren Varma, a BJP leader, who was the MLA when this programme came to the district. Varma wanted the first watershed project to be given to an important panchayat in Tonk-Khurd<sup>23</sup>. The *ghaat-upar* part of Dewas district, especially Tonk Khurd and Dewas *tehsils*, has in recent years become a BJP stronghold<sup>24</sup>. In the political economy of Dewas, *ghaat-upar* is more important than *ghaat-neeche* mainly for its economic potential, and this factor played a critical part in responding to Varma's requests. Thus, Tonk-Khurd in *ghaat-upar* was selected first, even when large parts of the district are drier, more degraded and house poorer tribal populations, as in *ghaat-neeche*. It contradicted the basic tenet of the watershed guidelines to prioritise resource poor areas in their selection criteria<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Project Officer, Budasa Milli-Watershed, Dewas, October 2000

<sup>23</sup> Interview with a journalist, who requested anonymity, Dewas, October 2000. I also tried corroborating this by talking to Suren Varma. Interestingly enough, Varma said that he may have been the MLA, but the Congress party being in power at the state, had pressed for this selection (Dewas, October 2000).

<sup>24</sup> BJP leader Thavar Singh Gehlot is presently the MP from Dewas. Other heavyweights like Phool Chand Varma and Kailash Dalmia are also from this part of Dewas.

<sup>25</sup> See Chapters 3 and 4 for more details. RGM particularly emphasises areas that suffer acute shortage of drinking water, are degraded and have large SC/ST populations for watershed development.

Kishangarh village embodies the real political appeal of the Tonk-Khurd *tehsil*. There are four clear reasons. First, it is a big and populous village, comprising nearly 4000 residents, while the average village in this region has 1000-1500 residents. The larger the size, the greater is the electoral potential. Second, it is economically prosperous, and most farmers here practice large, irrigated soybean and wheat cultivation. Third, it has an independent panchayat, which because of its size receives a greater share of panchayat funds. Funds for development schemes to be implemented through panchayats are allocated on per capita basis. Fourth, all its neighbouring villages are considerably smaller, although some of these have their own panchayats. Kishangarh's economic and numerical strength makes it the predominant panchayat in Tonk-Khurd *tehsil*. Leaders from both Congress and BJP have consistently tried to woo Kishangarh's residents over the years, and awarded its panchayat generous shares of MP and MLA discretionary funds<sup>26</sup>.

The analysis of Kishangarh's selection only highlights the political process that is in operation. There may be many other villages in Dewas district that share Kishangarh's site-specific features. The combination of Kishangarh's locational, political and economic coordinates has contributed to its appeal. But more importantly, its selection indicates that political leaders could effectively influence the programme's selection procedure. The interface between the bureaucratic structure and elected representatives at the district level has greatly facilitated this process.

## **5. Kishangarh: A stratified village**

Kishangarh is the most important panchayat in the region. There are many claimants to political and economic power within this village. It is a mixed caste village that experiences a high degree of caste-based polarisation between two large caste groups, the Rajputs and the Khatis, respectively dominant for different reasons. Besides, the panchayat itself has been contested by persons who may be politically active but are not economically dominant. Moreover, the village is marked by extreme economic disparities. There is a rich, landed majority, but also a small section of extremely poor persons, both marginal farmers and landless labourers. Kishangarh's political importance and successes in the watershed project need to be viewed in context of these complexities.

### **5.1 Caste, land and labour**

Kishangarh's population comprises 'high' caste Rajputs and Brahmins, a number of backward castes called the Khatis, Lohars, Sutars, Nais and Prajapats, Scheduled Castes and some Muslims. The Khatis are in clear majority, comprising nearly half of its 600 households. The Rajputs are the second largest in number, comprising roughly 70 households. There are

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<sup>26</sup> Both MLAs and MPs are granted discretionary funds per annum, which they can disburse according to their wishes. They are free to rotate such grants to different panchayats.

about 50 Muslim households. The rest are equally in minority, and each type has about 10-15 households each<sup>27</sup>.

Nearly three-fourths of the village's Khati population are big farmers cultivating more than 5 acres of land on average<sup>28</sup>. Their lands are mostly concentrated in downstream areas of the microwatershed, and are more fertile than the hilly rocky lands situated further upstream. Similarly, a sizeable proportion of the Rajputs, almost two-thirds of their total number, have large landholdings, although many of these are located near the hills and are not as productive as those downstream. Purely on the basis of numerical strength therefore, a greater number of large farmers in the village are Khatis.

The economic power and numerical preponderance of the Khatis act as effective reducers of their 'low' position in the caste hierarchy compared with the Rajputs and the Brahmins. This, however, cannot be interpreted as a sign of exclusive Khati dominance in Kishangarh, as the Rajputs, while smaller in number, enjoy a traditional 'high' caste status along with economic clout derived from their ownership of large landholdings. Rajputs here look upon the Khatis contemptuously, mainly because of their 'low' caste position<sup>29</sup>, and, simultaneously, express pride in their own imagined 'warrior' heritage and culture<sup>30</sup>. Their ideas are constantly fuelled by events such as the Rajput Mahasabha, annually convened in Bhopal and attended by Rajputs from all over Madhya Pradesh, as well as neighbouring states like Rajasthan. In popular impression, shared by village residents as well as government project officers, the Rajputs live life 'extravagantly', whereas the Khatis are 'hardworking' and 'austere'. This is commonly the explanation provided in the village for the steady increase in economic prosperity of the Khatis.

It is not usual for the Rajputs in Kishangarh to deride the Khatis in public, particularly following the pursuit of pro-backward class reservation policies by the government in recent years. These policies have made it increasingly difficult to sustain the traditionally hierarchical view of caste in the public domain. However, in private, they frequently express their resentment at the progress and prosperity of the Khatis<sup>31</sup>. Many Rajputs in Kishangarh also see themselves as the genuine residents of the village and regard the Khatis as outsiders<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> Sourced from the *Patwari's* records, and adapted with inputs from villagers in Kishangarh. The *Patwari* is the local land records officer. His post was created during colonial times.

<sup>28</sup> *Patwari's* records

<sup>29</sup> They claim that Khatis earned their name as they dug manure or 'khad' in Lord Krishna's time. Field notes, Kishangarh, October 2000

<sup>30</sup> These stereotypes are reflected in ethnographic accounts. Russell (1916) writing on the castes of central India describes Rajputs as 'warriors by nature' and endowed with a regal 'shaan' or splendour (Volumes II and III).

<sup>31</sup> See Dirks (1996) and Fuller (1996), for similar accounts.

<sup>32</sup> They mention that a *gadhi* or temple of the goddess Kalika Devi has been located in Kishangarh for many years. This is apparently of much religious and cultural significance to the Rajputs, and is comparable to the famous *gadhis* in Jodhpur and Udaipur. The only other *gadhi* anywhere in Madhya Pradesh is in Chittorgarh (Field notes, Kishangarh, October 2000).

The village also has Muslim and Brahmin households as well as those of backward castes, who are also engaged in agriculture. There are a few large landholders among these categories, but the majority own small and medium plots of land below 3 and 5 acres respectively. The Scheduled Castes in the village are at the bottom of the economic hierarchy, owning marginal plots of land of less than an acre or no land at all. There are no conspicuous signs of social ostracism however, and the SCs do not live separately. There are two main hamlets in Kishangarh, known as *mohallas* or colonies, one Rajput and the other Khati. The rest of the castes are interspersed throughout. Women, particularly from affluent Rajput and Khati families, do not go to the rival *mohalla*. Unlike Scheduled Caste women who need to work on fields, well-off women from the Khati, Rajput and Brahmin castes mostly stay indoors looking after household chores and occasionally go to the temple for worship.

Kishangarh has no common water resources, and the entire supply of water for irrigation comes from private wells or tube wells<sup>33</sup>. While most large farmers, especially those owning lands in downstream areas own wells, smaller farmers depend entirely on the rains for cultivation. They are therefore exposed to the vagaries of rainfed agriculture, and only cultivate small amounts of soybean or food crops like jowar, maize and toor dal (lentils) for household needs in the rainy season. Large farmers with irrigated lands cultivate soybean and wheat commercially in the *khari* and *rabi* seasons respectively. They benefit from Kishangarh's proximity to marketing facilities in the economically vibrant Malwa uplands. They are also able to cater to numerous soybean-based industries that have mushroomed in the industrial area near Indore. As a result, the village is marked by extreme economic differences between a rich majority that practices commercial cultivation and a poor minority that sticks to subsistence agriculture.

There is a huge demand for agricultural and non-agricultural labour in Kishangarh. It is common for large Khati and Rajput farmers to own over 30 acres of land, and they are the biggest employers of agricultural wage labour here<sup>34</sup>. The number of landless persons together with small farmers who can spare time to work on other fields, is commonly not enough to meet the need of the village for agricultural labour, especially during peak times, such as sowing and harvesting. The shortfall of local labour is met by employing persons from neighbouring villages. Some farmers also use tractors, a practice which reduces their need for manual labour. Wage labourers here also find employment on construction works in the village, during the lean agricultural season from late February to early June.

In this respect, Kishangarh presents an unusual dryland situation. Most dryland areas suffer due to inadequate availability of local employment, and this acts as the prime cause for chronic migration cycles. In Kishangarh by contrast, there is an excess of employment

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<sup>33</sup> The village alone has 18 electrical transformers for running motors that pump water from wells and tube wells.

<sup>34</sup> The biggest landholder in Kishangarh is a Rajput called Parmal Singh Patel who owns 100 acres of land.

opportunity and a dearth of labour. As a result, labourers are 'booked' by different landholders well in advance. Rich landowners themselves are detached from the direct management of agriculture. They use the services of a 'meth' or construction supervisor, whose responsibility it is to organise labourers for rich farmers. The institution of 'gaon meths' or village construction supervisors greatly reduces direct interface between the rich and the poor of Kishangarh. This symbolises an impersonal element in their relationship.

The village is often beset with common problems of the rich and the poor alike. The most acute problem is the contamination of drinking water by fluoride. There is also a shortage of fodder for livestock. The rich however manage to meet most of their fodder needs from private lands or through purchase. The poor have little option, as they are entirely dependant on the village commons, which have suffered degradation over the years by excessive use and inadequate care.

In Kishangarh therefore, both the Khatis and the Rajputs are dominant for different reasons. Both caste groups have land ownership. While the Khatis are larger in number, the Rajputs are also dominant due to their 'high' caste position and perceived cultural superiority. Also, while caste identities are powerful in Kishangarh, economic prosperity among these groups has simultaneously led to a greater awareness of self-interest. These private identities are outweighed by a larger caste affiliation when inter-personal conflicts between members of rival castes occur. Kishangarh has a recorded history of caste based polarisation and crime since the 1950s<sup>35</sup>.

In police view, Kishangarh is a 'crime village' and needs to be observed closely<sup>36</sup>. The nearest police station to Kishangarh is less than a quarter of an hour away in a town called Bhonrasa. Apart from caste-based clashes, there are numerous individual cases of thieving, abduction and murder in this village<sup>37</sup>. Farmers in Kishangarh and its neighbouring villages frequently suffer thefts of property such as cattle, motors, construction materials like stones and tractors. They are able to recover it only upon payment of a sum of money to a local leader or his henchmen operating in the *tehsil* area, and no police case is filed. Villagers explain that this organised crime is linked to the activities of the *kanjars*, a migrant caste that floats in and out of this area, allying with local troublemakers who abet them in stealing from the village. There is also the view that organised crime is a large-scale operation in the region, and is executed with the connivance of political heavyweights like MLAs and ministers<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> Kishangarh police records. Anecdotal evidence in the village suggests that common reasons for such clashes are non-repayment of loans and differences in religious and cultural practices among the different caste groups.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Superintendent of Police, Dewas district, October 2000

<sup>37</sup> Mayadhar Chowdhury, a Khati and presently the up-sarpanch (vice president) of the panchayat apparently committed multiple murders to get rid of opposition among the Khatis.

## 5.2 Politics and the panchayat

Although the panchayat is the symbol of local political power and influence in the region, it is not patronised by traditionally dominant persons in this village. Akshay Patel, a Rajput and the largest landowner with more than 100 acres of land, has been regarded as the village *Patel* or headman by all castes, even the Khatis, since the 1960s. Patel however was the sarpanch of the village panchayat only for one term in 1985. His leadership draws on landed power, but equally on Rajput cultural hegemony. This is propagated through constant reaffirmation of stereotypes such as Rajput splendour and chieftaincy.

Even though such hegemony has considerably declined over the years in Kishangarh, particularly because of the steady rise in the strength of the Khatis, Rajputs continue to distinguish themselves from the rest of the village through their assertion of cultural pride. After Akshay Patel's death some years ago, his son Parmal Singh Patel is still accorded the respect of a village *Patel*, though admittedly his father enjoyed greater recognition. This family continues to perform functions that are strictly the responsibility of the panchayat, like the collection of crop and electricity taxes and mediation between personal disputes. Over the years however, the Patel family's intervention in Rajput-Khati disputes has ceased to make a tangible difference. Sharper polarisations between the two caste groups and a tighter watch by the police are the main reasons for change.

The principal groups in the village are clearly divided on the basis of their political loyalties. The Rajputs support the BJP, and the Khatis are generally aligned with the Congress party, although there are exceptions. Other backward castes, Scheduled Castes, and Muslims in Kishangarh are broadly Congress supporters. The Brahmin population is divided in its support for these two parties. These affiliations have remained broadly stable over the last few decades. Kishangarh can be justly described as a two-party village.

Until the 1990s however, there was no panchayat contest on political grounds in Kishangarh. The panchayat, for nearly three decades since the 1960s, was dominated by a long personal rivalry between two individuals, Raja Ram and Jawahar Lal Vakil. Ram and Vakil held positions of sarpanch and up-sarpanch respectively on an almost continuous basis, until the reservations policy for backward castes came into effect in the early 1990s. Both these individuals are Khatis, owning 4 and 30 acres of land respectively. Both swore allegiance to the Congress Party, though in later years, Vakil switched over to the BJP.

This account of their competition shows that the Rajputs clearly disregarded the panchayat, at least until the mid-1980s. They looked up to Akshay Patel, the largest landowner in the village, for reaffirmation of their domination in Kishangarh. Although panchayat elections were

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<sup>38</sup> A journalist in Dewas, who requested anonymity, told me that Hukum Singh Karada, an MLA from Shajapur, manages such activities professionally.

periodically held in Kishangarh, contest was practically confined to Raja Ram and Jawahar Lal Vakil. Subordinate castes in the village, especially the Scheduled Castes, stayed out of panchayat politics.

In the last decade however, an important departure from this trend was witnessed in Kishangarh. Akshay Patel's declining influence and death coincided with a noticeable surge in Khati economic dominance. The Khatis also received a major boost from the pro-backward caste reservation policies. The government insisted on permanent reservations of seats in the panchayat for backward castes, in addition to seats for Scheduled Castes and women. The sarpanch's post was reserved for these castes on a rotational basis. These reservations made a big difference in the village level politics of Madhya Pradesh, as they occurred simultaneously with the empowerment of panchayats by the state government. Consequently, the panchayat in Kishangarh has grown in stature as the nucleus of village political power.

The most conspicuous effect of this change has been a greater interest in contest for panchayat positions in Kishangarh. After the adoption of the new panchayat laws, post the 73<sup>rd</sup> constitutional amendment of 1993, the state government has held two panchayat elections. Contrary to earlier indifference, candidates from both Khati and Rajput groups in Kishangarh have contested the majority of the panchayat's 13 seats. Even the posts reserved for candidates from Scheduled Castes, backward castes and women, are being contested through proxy candidature supported by the rival Khati and Rajput groups.

However, this enhanced local interest in the panchayat has still not made the process of its decision-making broad based. In this respect, the nature of the panchayat's functioning virtually reflects that of the Andhra villages of Lilapuram and Malligundu. Despite the talk of panchayat empowerment, in practice, Kishangarh's panchayat continues to be dominated by a few individuals who monopolise its decisions. In a manner similar to the Andhra villages, the sarpanch (or the up-sarpanch when the sarpanch is a dummy) controls panchayat money and its works. Most villagers here share the impression that it is easy for the sarpanch to make money while in office<sup>39</sup>.

## **6. The watershed project**

Kishangarh is well known in Dewas as a success story of watershed development. RGM officers in Bhopal, the state capital, cite Kishangarh as a flagship example. Kishangarh's achievements have been neatly encapsulated in a computerised slide show that is presented to visitors. This presentation claimed that the project has resulted in major gains in irrigated area and ground water levels, drinking water facilities through hand pumps and tube wells, and crop yields. It also stated that the project has spent its money well, and the physical and

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<sup>39</sup> Many anecdotes of misappropriation of panchayat funds were narrated to me (Field notes, Kishangarh, October 2000).

financial targets have been substantially fulfilled. In retrospect, government officers credit these successes to its initial selection as a project area. The basis of these claims is examined below.

### **6.1 Formation of watershed committees**

The government decided to form two watershed committees in Kishangarh on the ground that the microwatershed was relatively large. Given Kishangarh's recent history, this decision seemed to be prudent, as it would prevent Khati-Rajput fighting over committee membership. Committees A and B, formed on a caste basis, mostly comprised individuals from the Khati and Rajput groups respectively, and some others from the remaining caste groups in the village. A year later, these committees were coalesced into a single body by district authorities on the recommendations of the Project Officer. In the new committee, 7 out of 11 members were Rajputs, and the remaining 4 were Khatis. Surprisingly, there was no protest from the Khatis. Judging by the previous experience of caste clash, this was the first sign that the watershed project in Kishangarh would not suffer the same fate.

The Rajput majority does not seem justified by the numerical strength of this caste in the village. It indicated, moreover, that the Project Officer (PO), a Rajput himself, had influenced the committee's caste composition. The new committee also did not have any members from the Scheduled Castes and women. This violated the national guidelines to reserve seats for these disadvantaged sections.

The first committees had been formed in a public meeting amidst assurances that all caste groups would be represented. The later constitution of a single committee with its imbalanced composition in favour of the Rajputs, and the complete exclusion of SCs and women, therefore reneged on the initial promise. The PO defended his decision on the grounds that there was simply no need for two committees, since most members were too busy with their private matters. However, the new committee is not any different. Each of its members has subsidiary business concerns besides owning large chunks of land. Committee members, including the rich Khati Chairman, do not make any attempt to conceal their disinterest in the watershed project<sup>40</sup>. The Chairman's post is nominal and the secretary has real powers. The secretary is responsible for project paperwork, and is also the joint signatory along with the PO for drawing cheques. The secretary, a Rajput called Amarendra Singh, manages the bulk of project work under the overall supervision of the PO. It is significant that no user, self-help, or women's thrift groups have been formed in Kishangarh.

The process of committee formation in Kishangarh is thus remarkably different from that in Lilapuram or Malligundu. The PO's violation of the basic tenets of committee composition

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<sup>40</sup> Suresh Arya, Committee Chairman, said, 'I was extremely disinclined. But the PO persuaded me by saying that if he brought officers from RGM to inspect the project, where would they be made to sit? There was no respectable place in the village to seat government officers, other than my house.' Kishangarh, October 2000.

while reconstituting a single body could not have been possible in Kurnool in AP. KWO strictly adheres to the national guidelines and would not have allowed such manipulation by its project officers. Besides, government officers in Kurnool are compelled to at least formally adhere to the participatory mode devised by KWO. There is no such requirement in Dewas, as a result of which there are fewer instances of participatory tokenism in government implemented watershed projects. In addition, a village project team in Andhra Pradesh is stronger as it is manned by at least four persons. There is therefore more manpower to initiate the formation of local groups. In Dewas, only the PO and his assistant PIA are responsible for a number of villages, and this is indeed a serious constraint on their efforts.

## 6.2 Approach to watershed works

Unlike KWO's projects, there are no formal requirements to demonstrate evidence of participation in Dewas, either in project planning or implementation. Therefore, the approach adopted to execute watershed works in Kishangarh turned out to be explicitly functional. The sole task of the project was to construct watershed structures according to the action plan. The action plan itself was formulated by engineers with inputs from the project officer in the DRDA office in Dewas, and there was no façade of participatory planning. Moreover, the method of implementation closely resembled the usual practice of construction works in the village. Most farmers in Kishangarh rely on the services of a *gaon meth* or construction supervisor for their labour. Similarly, the watershed committee secretary engages a *meth* to organise labourers for watershed works. He also maintains essential project records like a cash book, receipts and expenditure register, voucher folder, works register and cheque register<sup>41</sup>. Committee meetings are seldom held.

Such approach to decision-making in the project indicates an attitude of unconcern on the part of the committee members. Other influential persons in the village, including Parmal Singh, the richest landowner, as well as Raja Ram and Mayadhar Chowdhury, both Khati leaders, who have been politically active in the village panchayat, are similarly disinterested in project management. However, despite this seeming indifference, the rich farmers of Kishangarh, Khati and Rajput alike, have determined the course of the project in one important respect. They have uniformly refused to allow the construction of any watershed structures on their private lands.

There are two clear reasons for this<sup>42</sup>. First, these landholders are reluctant to allow watershed structures like fieldbundling on their lands, because they are sceptical of their utility<sup>43</sup>. A basic philosophy of watershed development is that the correct balance of structures for water conservation and harvesting must be ensured within the watershed. While water

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<sup>41</sup> In fact, RGM requires nearly 17 separate records to be maintained by the committee secretary. It also has a lengthy monthly evaluation report that the PO must file at the DRDA every month. This volume of paperwork accumulates in the RGM's Bhopal office.

<sup>42</sup> Conversations with a range of farmers in Kishangarh, as well as the Project Officer.

harvesting structures include large storage devices like percolation tanks, water conservation structures are usually smaller and low cost bunds, dykes and check dams. Rich farmers in Kishangarh own private wells and tube wells, and perceive the low-cost structures as remote from their familiar agricultural practices. Second, although they are economically prosperous, these farmers, irrespective of their caste position, are unwilling to pay 10% of the cost of structures, to the Watershed Development Fund as contribution. The PO has been squarely unsuccessful in changing their attitudes.

Here again, it is possible to draw a contrast between the project villages in Dewas and Kurnool. In Kurnool, such open rejection of participatory measures like voluntary contribution would have either led to a string of manipulations by those in charge of project paperwork, or disbanding of the project. Dewas district authorities reacted differently to the events in Kishangarh. Moreover, these events occurred when the programme was still at a nascent stage. The district authorities, with the support of RGM machinery in Bhopal, took a number of innovative steps, which enabled the PO to complete the project in Kishangarh, despite local resistance on private lands.

The first step was taken by the CEO of Dewas Zilla Panchayat, who raised the upper limit of money to be spent on any individual structure from 1,00,000 to 2,00,000 rupees. Besides, there is no ceiling on the amount to be spent on any one work sector, whether agriculture, minor irrigation or afforestation. As a result, project officers are unrestrained from spending money by constructing large, expensive structures, regardless of their utility. Second, RGM officers strengthened this trend further by issuing directions to district authorities in favour of permanent structures. The justification offered is that farmers are sceptical of field bunds. Permanent structures built with cement and concrete were preferred to low-cost constructions made of mud and stones, as the former are supposedly more durable<sup>44</sup>.

In view of these perceptions, the PO in Kishangarh went about project implementation by concentrating on large permanent structures ensuring that project funds do not lapse. Moreover, the majority of these structures were raised on village common lands. As the table below will illustrate, the project, even to begin with, set high targets for works such as tank and underground dyke construction, as well as the raising of contour and cattle contour trenches, all implemented on the common land area. In some of these sectors, the project exceeded physical and financial targets by significant measure. In contrast, structures such as check dams, gabion structures and field bunding that typically fall within the category of individual lands, as they are built along the drainage line, have been underemphasised.

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<sup>43</sup> See Chapter 5 for how different types of watershed structures are typically perceived by farmers.

<sup>44</sup> DRDA, Dewas

**Table 5**

**Physical and financial achievements under Kishangarh microwatershed project**

<b>Name of work</b>	<b>Physical targets</b>	<b>Financial targets (in lakhs)</b>	<b>Physical achievements</b>	<b>Money spent (in lakhs*)</b>
Contour Trench	146262 metres	11.349	146262 metres	9.343
Gabion Structures	4	0.90	2	0.570
Earthen bunding	8975 metres	0.648	6932 metres	0.648
Rubble check dam (on the drain)	185.45 metres	1.465	6 or 46 metres	0.355
Rubble check dam (on the hill)	518.75 metres	0.441	122 or 358 metres	0.505
Percolation tank	7	7.208	8	5.74
Underground dykes	122 metres	4.274	138.60 metres	4.851
Cattle contour trench	4901 metres	1.076	22949 metres	5.494
Cleaning the area	67 hectares	1.09	24 hectares	1.410
Development of pastures	Area not specified	1.09	24 hectares	0.216
Afforestation	20,000 trees	0.538	20,000 trees	0.848
Any other works		0.86		0.895
Revolving fund for SHGs		0.424		0
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>32.61</b>		<b>30.875</b>

Source: Project records, Kishangarh Micro Watershed Project, Dewas

\* 1 lakh = 1,00,000

The table indicates that the project was able to spend most of the total money allocated. It is also clear that it did not achieve physical and financial targets for all structures, but overspent project funds on areas like percolation tanks and cattle contour trenches. Under the national guidelines, disbursement of money for the treatment of watershed area in a microwatershed

project is on a hectare wise basis. It implies that each hectare of land ought to receive equal emphasis. The concentration of watershed structures on a small portion of the entire watershed, the common land area, squarely violated the guidelines.

There were other problems too. As structures were not raised on private lands, contributions for the watershed development fund were raised by deducting the wages of labourers hired for works on common lands. There was no protest from the labourers, as the amount was deducted at source.

Thus, though a target driven approach to project works resulted in utilisation of funds, it did not result in even emphasis on all aspects of the watershed project. Moreover, in keeping with RGM's directives, the construction of large, permanent structures in Kishangarh has been perceived as creating a 'prestigious' image for the watershed mission<sup>45</sup>. The uncritical emphasis on such structures is indeed paradoxical because local planning and implementation of watershed works essentially rests on the philosophy of low-cost water conservation and storage.

### **6.3 Village commons and the politics of apathy**

There are both positive and negative aspects of concentration of watershed works in common lands in Kishangarh. On the positive side, project works resulted in concrete benefits to farmers, like increased water availability for irrigation. The negative aspect, however, is that project structures are treated with apathy by villagers and not maintained, precisely due to their location on village common lands. These aspects, especially the latter, reveal the centrality of the village's political economy to the watershed development project in Kishangarh.

Village commons in Kishangarh are located on the top of a hill nearby, which is also at the head of the ridgeline in the watershed. Given the principle of ridge to valley treatment, upstream areas are treated first. In this respect, the topography of Kishangarh microwatershed proved to be fortuitously advantageous for the project, since the project could only construct structures on common lands, which in this case are located upstream. As a result, the project did not wholly suffer due to the inability to raise structures on private lands, as these are located further downstream. Instead, the construction of water harvesting structures upstream, allowed rainwater to be stored on-site, instead of wastefully trickling down the watershed. Therefore, many farmers, especially those with neighbouring lands and also further downstream, have experienced a rise in water levels in their wells. Yet, if the entire watershed had been treated, including private lands, in a holistic fashion, then benefits presently available might have been greater.

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<sup>45</sup> Interview with officers at RGM, Bhopal, November 2000

RGM claims that the project is a huge success because there is proof of greater availability of water for irrigation. It has figures demonstrating an increase in irrigated area, number of wells and tubewells in the village, as well as food production. In addition, conversations with a cross-section of farmers revealed that many more farmers were able to grow a second crop through irrigation in the *rabi* season and increased cropped areas both in the *kharif* and *rabi* seasons. Thus, Kishangarh's rich majority were able to avail of project benefits even though they had resisted its works on their own lands. They therefore take the project for granted, on the belief that its beneficial impact has nothing to do with their own consent or the lack of it, to participate in project works.

Watershed structures raised on Kishangarh's commons are thus treated apathetically. The most significant reason is that the rich majority do not depend on the commons for anything. There is a shortage of fuel and fodder in the village, but the commons have long outlived their utility following continuous use and degradation. The rich meet the shortfall in fodder by purchase, or through plantations fringing their private lands. The commons do not represent a scarce resource, and are therefore not a field of power in the village. The poor minority, desperately need the commons to meet their fuel and fodder needs, but are not in a position to regenerate these areas. They are constrained for time, resources and organisation.

The watershed project for its part has concentrated on the common lands, but for all the wrong reasons. The type of structures raised does not really address the fuel and fodder needs of small or landless farmers in the village. Moreover, meagre attempts have been made at afforestation, and these too have suffered because of inadequate protection of the commons. Common lands are situated on a hill far away from the remaining private lands within the large watershed, and even poor people are not motivated to come here daily to maintain or guard the place. Besides, initial attempts to protect the afforested patches failed because of frequent trespassing by residents from Nandpur village that lies on the opposite side of the hill. Nandpur, despite being contiguous to Kishangarh has not been given a watershed project. Its residents therefore resent project activities atop the hill, which they perceive as their territory as well<sup>46</sup>. This has further discouraged feeble attempts at maintenance and protection of watershed structures. Local thieves have also destroyed watershed structures to steal their materials.

The concentration of watershed works on village common lands and the apathetic attitude towards their maintenance have resulted from the prevailing character of local political economy. The watershed development project moreover had a clear pro-rich orientation. The project made no attempt whatsoever to mask its priorities through the use of participatory discourse. It made no attempt to present an image of equitability, which simply does not exist.

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<sup>46</sup> Nandel's non-selection so far violates the RGM guideline that areas contiguous to one another must be taken up for treatment simultaneously. It also shows that the selection process continues to be guided by factors other than those mentioned in the selection criteria.

The poor, subordinate sections of the population were never made to believe otherwise. For them, project practices were in harmony with other, usual modes of transaction in Kishangarh. Besides, as there is a shortfall of local labour in the village, the entire population of landless and small farmers received employment on project works without any discrimination, or preference for any particular caste.

## 7. Conclusion

This chapter has achieved two major objectives. First, it appraised the issues relating to Kishangarh's selection for the watershed programme and secondly, it examined the claims of the project being a success story in watershed development. In both these respects, the discussion reveals the aspects that constitute the politics of watershed development programmes.

The choice of Kishangarh as the first watershed project in the district was governed by factors like its location in the politically and economically advantageous parts of the district, patronage by influential BJP politicians in the region, and the predominant status of its panchayat in the *tehsil* because of its size and economic prosperity. Although Kishangarh too has problems like the shortage of drinking water that qualify it for a watershed development project, there are many villages in other parts of the district which justify even more the need of development intervention by the state. The selection process thus reveals the tendency for politicians and elected representatives to view development programmes opportunistically, and for short-term electoral purpose. In contrast, in KWO's strategy for the watershed development programme, such political interests are regarded as arbitrary and unfit for development, while planning is viewed as rational and unbiased.

In Dewas, such depoliticisation could not have been possible given the interface between the political leadership at various levels and the bureaucracy that has conventionally been in charge of development planning and implementation in this country. The purpose of this comparison is not to argue that KWO's approach is better than that in Dewas, as the space for politically driven preferences exists even within tightly monitored selection criteria, but to highlight the nature of the process that is in operation<sup>47</sup>.

Watershed development is politically appealing because of its expanse of potential rural development benefits as well as transfers of large amounts of project money from higher levels of government to local watershed committees. As a result, political leaders and aspirants are able to relate to the programme as a plank for electoral gain. Besides, in the event of competing political pressures for selection, it is regional political economy that

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<sup>47</sup> In fact, the formulation of various 'neutral' criteria for selection is itself a political process, embodying the perceptions and interests of the planners, and those who influence the planning process.

typically makes the difference. Like in Dewas, Tonk-Khurd *tehsil* embodies political interests that matter within the political configuration in place in the district.

The dominance of BJP elements in this part of Dewas district, even though the ruling party in the state is the Congress, further reveals that political hegemonies are negotiated and renegotiated at a number of levels. In the specific instance of Madhya Pradesh, the transfer of significant decision-making powers to a Zilla Sarkar has increased the opportunities available to political interests at district and sub-district levels to influence development. This moreover, has been possible because of simultaneous decentralisation in the watershed development programme, which allows important decisions, like the selection of areas, to be taken by the district tier of the programme and not the state government. These crosscutting decentralisation initiatives intensify the dynamic element in politics and the political process.

The claim that Kishangarh is a success story in watershed development is the second issue examined in this chapter. RGM and district authorities assessed the project favourably because it utilised a high proportion of the budget, constructed structures according to RGM guidelines, and registered an increase in the availability of water for irrigation. There is however a sure connection between a perception of Kishangarh as a success story and the approach to watershed development espoused by programme implementers. Evidence from Kishangarh demonstrates that implementers place an uncritical emphasis on project fund utilisation. In addition, the official emphasis on raising large, permanent structures while simultaneously downplaying the importance of small, low-cost, constructions actively facilitates project expenditure, while paradoxically contradicting the philosophy of participatory watershed development. This is a philosophy of soil and water conservation through local efforts and low-costs, in order to ensure long term maintenance.

This paradoxical emphasis on big structures following a target-oriented strategy produces a pro-rich orientation on the ground. In Kishangarh, the majority of the population is rich with large landholdings and private wells. Therefore, the construction of large water harvesting and storage structures at a suitable point upstream allowed on-site storage of water, and the subsequent increase in ground water levels through horizontal percolation. Private well owners benefited from this as wells were recharged, and hold for longer periods of time. These developments have given the impression of successful watershed development. However, such an approach is not in the interests of poorer farmers who may not have their own wells or tube wells that would benefit from such recharge. Structures like field bunds are extremely important to conserve water on-site, especially so that lands without wells or tube-wells may also benefit. This dimension did not emerge in Kishangarh purely because the large majority owns irrigated lands. In villages where a large section is poor and owns small and marginal landholdings, this approach to watershed development would almost certainly increase economic disparities between the rich and the poor.

The claim that Kishangarh is a success story is made despite the self-serving attitude of its rich farmers, who did not involve themselves with the project in the slightest, and refused permission for works to be conducted on their private lands. This further reveals that popular participation or a community-based approach espoused by the programme's national planners, remained secondary in the interpretations of the state's RGM machinery or indeed, the district authorities in Dewas. In contrast, Kurnool Watershed Office in AP tried to synthesise national directives to incorporate community based participatory decision making with a target oriented project framework. Implementation arrangements in Dewas and Kurnool represent different points within a spectrum of possible interpretations of participatory development by bureaucratic organisations comprising the state's administrative machinery.

In addition to demonstrating the politics of selection and implementation, Kishangarh's experience also reveals the centrality of village politics to the watershed project. The village presents an interesting, and perhaps unusual, situation of two competing dominant caste groups that together comprise the large majority of its population. There is in effect a very small section that can be called subordinate in relation to these dominant groups. Moreover, the Khatis and Rajputs derive their dominance both from a common source of economic prosperity and separate notions of caste based power. The Rajputs continue to propagate ideas of traditional cultural superiority, whereas the Khatis are gaining in power following the state's pro-backward class policy. As a result of these balancing aspects, none of these caste groups perceives the watershed project as a way of furthering its respective caste interests. Local attitude to the project, for Khatis as much as Rajputs, is a result of individual perception rather than any caste based consideration. There is also less of a perceived need to compete for support of the subordinate sections, since both the Rajputs and the Khatis are relatively secure in their respective positions of power in the village.

The lack of insistence on participatory practices by project authorities and local power relations in Kishangarh are thus mutually complementary. For both these reasons, the watershed project in Kishangarh was not a 'hegemonic project', where participatory discourse would be propagated to advance the interest of any group in the village. This is unlike project experiences in Andhra villages of Lilapuram and Malligundu, where the attempt to popularise participatory discourse was made by project officials in active connivance with locally dominant persons and groups. Instead, the overall conduct of the project, and its interface with the local power structure of Kishangarh, are equally unmasked by participatory pretensions.

## Chapter 7

### Decentralised Development and the NGO as Agency

#### 1. Introduction

This chapter explores issues arising from the functioning of the NGO as an agency of decentralised development in India. The national watershed guidelines recommend the use of NGOs as Project Implementing Agencies (PIAs) to implement micro watershed projects on a participatory basis. This policy framework reflects a widely shared belief in the NGO, as the 'pre-eminent, if not sole organisational form that can implement the global commitment to bottom-up development', among donor agencies and governments across the world<sup>1</sup>. This is in vogue particularly since the 1980s, when critiques of development as a top down process gathered strength. NGOs have since emerged as the most popular agents of development as a bottom up and participatory process. Amidst this enthusiasm, scholars and development practitioners have variously presented NGO-led development as an alternative to existing state or market centric ideas, constituting a so-called 'third sector' in development<sup>2</sup>. NGOs have also been lauded for their positive capacities for promoting democratisation<sup>3</sup>. This uncritical emphasis has led to a proliferation of NGO activity in contemporary development practice.

In recent times however, such zeal has been tempered by evidence that NGOs do not substantially fulfil such claims of facilitating alternative development. The principal issues raised are of NGO identity, objectives, mission and legitimacy<sup>4</sup>. All these indicate that NGOs have frequently been constituted as a separate constituency both within the international development configuration and individual states. They have moreover been uniformly attributed with skills and characteristics that they may not possess. Moreover, since the last decade, official development agencies have widely adopted bottom up or participatory methods of development, usually understood as 'alternative development'<sup>5</sup>. With alternative development itself becoming a type of new orthodoxy, the boundaries between what constitutes mainstream and alternative development respectively are considerably blurred. As a result, the role of NGOs as agents of alternative development has been further discredited (Kamat 2002b).

This situation has broadly provoked two responses. The first view continues to espouse faith in the possibility of alternative development through NGOs, but advocates greater complementarity between NGOs and the state. In this view, NGOs ought not to seek autonomy from the state as well as market institutions, because they cannot initiate alternative development in isolation of

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<sup>1</sup> Kamat (2002 b), p 1

<sup>2</sup> Clark (1991), Korten (1987), Uphoff (1993)

<sup>3</sup> Carroll (1992), Friedmann (1992)

<sup>4</sup> Bebbington (1997)

<sup>5</sup> See Annis and Hakim (1988), Chambers et al (1989), Friedmann (1992) for writings on alternative development.

broader political and economic coordinates<sup>6</sup>. The second view however takes a less sanguine view of NGO capacity. It dismisses the postulate that NGOs are capable of facilitating alternative development. Kamat (2002a, 2002b), among the most vociferous advocates of this position, considers that NGOs, much like states, are vitally integrated with global capitalist relations. In her understanding, this sufficiently precludes an alternative conception of development by NGOs.

This chapter, based on the experiences of an NGO in the tribal pockets of Dewas district in Madhya Pradesh, readdresses key aspects of the role of NGOs in development in India. Fieldwork evidence presented here suggests that the realities of NGO functioning cannot entirely be comprehended within the contrasting definitions of mainstream and alternative development. This is particularly true because mainstream development is generally defined as state led development in combination with the ruling development discourse. Alternative development, broadly summarised, is regarded as development on principles different from those 'prescribed' or legitimised by the state. Both these definitions espouse a view of the state as a single entity.

This chapter has three objectives. The first is to show that NGOs working as PIAs have opportunities to interpret the guidelines' provisions for participatory development differently from government organisations examined earlier. The chapter will also show that regional political conditions bear an impact on such opportunities. The second is to illustrate the multiplicity of actors and processes that constitute the state. The third is to examine the broader implications of NGO power as observed through this case study, for the future of decentralised development in India.

## **2. NGOs and the Indian state**

NGOs have frequently been depicted in a unified manner in development literature. The point that this causes 'ambiguity and conflict' about the role of the grassroots sector, has been made forcefully (Kamat 2002a, Bebbington and Farrington 1993). A brief history of NGOs in India reveals that a wide range of voluntary initiatives have existed since independence. It shows that NGO is a catch-all term that does not capture differences among these initiatives adequately.

Many indigenous voluntary organisations for socio-religious reform arose in the late colonial period<sup>7</sup>. Voluntary organisations espousing Gandhian ideals of local and voluntary action for development were involved in a variety of works. In fact, voluntary organisations found explicit mention in the first five-year plan. Moreover, the Community Development Programme (CDP) in 1952 was the first instance of an official proposal to involve local people in development. However, these initiatives could not predominate following the formulation of centralised development strategies after independence.

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<sup>6</sup> Sanyal (1997)

The problems of centralised development planning were evident in the following decades. The highly iniquitous consequences of the development revolutions (post the 1965 agricultural Green Revolution, and the 1970 White Revolution for increasing milk production and marketing) engendered radical outbursts against state action. Naxalites and other Maoist groups struggled to highlight the issues of poor and landless peasants. The *Sarvodaya* movement, a form of Gandhian socialism, led by Vinoba Bhave and Jayaprakash Narayan (JP), reached its peak between the early and mid-1970s. The principal focus of this movement was *Bhoodan* or voluntary redistribution of land. Narayan also organised radicalised students into the *Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini* or 'Student and Youth Struggle Army', and called upon them to organise the rural and low caste poor against the tyranny of the landed, upper and bureaucratic classes.

The state came down with a heavy hand on all these radical initiatives. Mrs Gandhi's government declared a national emergency in 1975 and jailed naxalites, maoists, students and any other agitators against the state. By the 1970s, many NGOs in India had started receiving foreign funding from international donors. International NGOs like CARE and OXFAM had also started working in India. In 1976, the state passed the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), which required that all foreign money to voluntary organisations be routed through and cleared by the Home Ministry<sup>8</sup>. This Act was perceived as a sign of state control over NGOs receiving foreign funds<sup>9</sup>.

Yet, the state did not indiscriminately suppress all NGOs during this period. It continued to support welfare oriented NGOs and NGOs that did not challenge its development strategies<sup>10</sup>. In fact, the third plan (1961-1965) reiterated the importance of NGOs in the successful implementation of development plans.

The coming to power of the Janata Party in 1977 was clearly the turning point in the history of state-NGO relationships in India. The party comprised thousands of *Sarvodaya* workers who had rallied around JP against the Congress government, as well as older generation Gandhians, who advocated a greater role for NGOs in development. Some factions of this party may have also promoted NGOs for partisan gains, like the Jana Sangh Party (Sen 1999: 339). The Janata government undertook greater initiatives than its predecessor to encourage voluntary work in the 'countryside' as part of its rural improvement programme. It was at this time that GoI instituted CAPART (Council for Promotion of Participatory Action and Rural Technology) to provide technical and financial assistance to voluntary organisations and workers. As a result, a large number of NGOs mushroomed to avail of new opportunities for development.

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<sup>7</sup> Sen (1999), p 331

<sup>8</sup> This followed a public disclosure by the Asia Foundation, a US based agency, that it was funded by the US Central Intelligence Agency. This caused public outrage (Sen 1999, p 338).

<sup>9</sup> Fernandes (1986), Kamat (2002a)

<sup>10</sup> Franda (1983), Kothari (1986)

At this time, large numbers of voluntary activists, especially Left supporters of the Naxalite movement, the CPI-ML and Maoist groups, were released from imprisonment. While they did not wish to return either to their fragmented movements or to radical party politics, they were motivated to resuming political work in some form (Kamat 2002a: 16-17). This led to a steady burgeoning of independent groups, committed to work among the rural and urban poor, and mostly not linked with any formal, political party. Many scholars have called such groups social action groups or non-party political formations<sup>11</sup>.

By the 1980s, the NGO universe in India had grown substantially. These ranged from welfare oriented NGOs to those formed by international NGOs, social action groups, NGOs formed with government support for development work, development research organisations or think tanks and smaller Community Based Organisations or CBOs<sup>12</sup>. There are other voluntary initiatives as well that are typically not described as NGOs. These include issue based lobby groups such as large farmers organisations, and mass movements like the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA). The NBA in particular is a striking example of a new social movement that comprises development NGOs, GROs, activists and intellectuals, all of whom have come together to oppose the Narmada Valley Project.

This brief discussion indicates that a large variety of voluntary initiatives have existed in India since independence and even earlier. Many of these are clubbed under the term NGO. Attempts have been made to classify NGOs in India using characteristics such as size, composition, origin, source of funding or ideological orientation<sup>13</sup>. Despite these taxonomies, terms like NGO, CBO, GSO (Grassroots Support Organisation), MSO (Membership Support Organisations) and also CSO (Civil Society Organisation) are used without further qualification by donor agencies, government officials and scholars in India<sup>14</sup>.

The discussion also shows that NGOs continue to share a range of relationships with state institutions and actors at different levels. NGO activity in development, mostly as implementers of development programmes, whether state or foreign funded, has generally been received favourably. State willingness to involve NGOs in development and relief work has grown since independence. Simultaneously, NGOs that have adopted a politically sensitive or confrontationist stand against state policies, institutions or actors have typically been disassociated with the

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<sup>11</sup> Kamat 2002a, Kothari 1986, Lewis 1991, Sen 1999

<sup>12</sup> The records of the Home Ministry showed nearly 12,000 NGOs receiving foreign funding in 1988 (Kamat 2002a: 19). There are thousands others that do not depend on foreign money. CAPART itself funds more than 17,000 NGOs for development work (capart.nic.in)

<sup>13</sup> Robinson et al (1993), Garain (1994)

<sup>14</sup> An MSO is staffed by members who belong to the locality. A GSO may perform functions similar to an MSO, but typically does not comprise of the beneficiaries it intends to serve (Carroll 1992). CSO is used to denote a whole range of voluntary organisations.

state's development programmes, and occasionally been repressed. The 7th plan document of the Government of India even defined NGOs as 'politically neutral development organisations that would help the government in its rural development programmes'<sup>15</sup>. This stance stems from viewing development as an activity or set of relations that is divorced from politics. It is therefore an integral element of the depoliticisation of development discourse that has dominated Indian development strategies since independence. Finally, NGOs have also come together to form issue-based networks and agitate against fundamental issues within the state's development strategy<sup>16</sup>.

The case study presented here explores one dimension of NGO-state relationships further. It shows how this NGO was able to combine development work regarded as legitimate by the state with practices resisting state action in development in general. Besides, this seemingly dual stance was itself unreal, as resistance and conformity were interwoven with one another in subtle ways. The NGO's beginnings in resistance and eventual involvement with development programmes have contributed equally to its local power and standing. The chapter thus draws on this NGO's experience to analyse the potential and implications of NGO power, as much for decentralised development as for popular mobilisation.

The evidence from this case presents itself as a story with actors, dates and events. Unlike previous chapters, this chapter adopts a narrative style to retain the detail and sequence of events that form the substance of this case. The story is told in three parts. The first is the early period in the NGO's life history, its formation and initial experiences. The second is the period during which the NGO acquired a local base and became involved with government funded watershed development projects in the area. The third, most recent period describes the changes in the nature of the NGO since its conception and the increase in the range of its activities.

### **3. Early period: 1992-1995**

#### **3.1 *Samaj Pragati Sahyog*: Conception of an organisation**

In 1992, a small group of eight friends arrived in Bagli *tehsil*, in the *ghaat-neeche* part of Dewas district in Madhya Pradesh (MP). They were outsiders to Dewas, in the sense that none had resided or worked in this district earlier. A majority of them had previously met and interacted at the Jawahar Lal Nehru University in Delhi, known for its left-oriented political thinking. All group members are from 'high' castes, most come from middle class families and a few from more affluent backgrounds with important political connections. Nearly all had fulltime academic careers before they decided to start work that allowed them to engage more directly in pursuit of their beliefs.

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<sup>15</sup> Government of India, 1985 as cited in Sen (1999: 342)

<sup>16</sup> For example, an NGO called the South Indian Federation of Fishworkers' Societies (SIFFS) cannot be seen as separate from the Fishworkers' Movement.

They believe that large areas within the country have been disregarded continuously by the state. Long periods of socio-economic and political marginalisation have not been conducive to popular mobilisation. As a result, local residents have little or no awareness of their own rights. For all these reasons, this group was keen to work in areas of tribal concentration, as these usually bear a long history of neglect. Group members wanted to build a 'people's organisation' that would engage in grassroots work and advocacy. Their aim would be to 'form a critical mass within policy making in a reasonable span of time, so that marginalised tribal areas would get the benefit of increased state intervention and public investment'<sup>17</sup>. The group also knew that it specifically wanted to promote local natural resource management. This, they believed, would offer a lasting solution to resource poverty, a chronic problem in tribal areas, and reduce economic disparities with other parts of the country. The overarching aim would be to increase local awareness of the laws of the state and constitutionally prescribed rights.

Group members chose Bagli *tehsil*, as its tribal areas have long suffered such politico-economic marginalisation and resource degradation. The *ghaat-neeche* areas, where Bagli is located, are economically disadvantaged compared with the rest of the district located in the fertile Malwa uplands or the *ghaat-upar* areas. Bagli moreover, is a part of the central Indian drylands, and experiences intense shortage of water. Political representatives from Bagli have not been particularly influential in district level politics, where representatives from prosperous upland *tehsils* have dominated. This is true for the state level as well.

The Congress party ruled Madhya Pradesh until 1977. After the emergency, a wave of disenchantment with the Congress gave way to several non-Congress leaderships in various states, including MP. Kailash Joshi, the MLA from Bagli constituency for eight successive terms, became Chief Minister of the state. Joshi belonged to the Jana Sangh, which was a part of the rival Janata Party. However, Joshi was at the helm only briefly. His leadership was challenged by younger leaders from the Sangh, and in 1979, Sunderlal Patwa replaced him as Chief Minister<sup>18</sup>. The Janata Party government collapsed in 1980, giving way to almost 10 years of Congress rule in MP. This situation was altered only briefly in 1990 with the election of the BJP. However, the Centre dismissed this BJP government in 1992 when the Babri Masjid was demolished, and fresh elections were ordered. The Congress has been in power ever since. Shyam Holani from the Congress has been the MLA of Bagli *tehsil* since 1992.

This account of MP's political history shows that the party in power at the state has not represented Bagli, until recently. This is with the brief exception of Joshi's tenure as Chief Minister. Political chronology apart, Bagli *tehsil* has not been influential in state politics due to its tribal concentrations and economic backwardness. In addition, until the early 1990s, there were

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with a group member, Bagli, August 2000

no instances of tribal mobilisation or political grouping in Bagli<sup>19</sup>. Besides, unlike other tribal concentrated areas of MP, like Jhabua in the west or Bastar (now a part of the newly created state of Chattisgarh) in the south, there were also no NGOs engaged in development or grassroots work of any sort among the tribals in Bagli.

Bagli's history of political and economic marginalisation, the inadequacy of official as well as NGO initiatives here and the lack of popular mobilisation amongst its tribal people, all made it an appropriate destination for group members. They soon decided to register as an NGO under the Indian Societies Registration Act, 1862. They called their organisation *Samaj Pragati Sahyog* (SPS), or 'Support for Social Progress' when translated from Hindi. Once registered, SPS set up office, with basic infrastructure in the *tehsil* headquarters, and one of its founding members was designated its Secretary. Initially, its resources depended entirely on the personal savings of its members and it had no employees either. Its founding members were socially and professionally distinct from the local population. Based on its composition and objectives, SPS can be described as a Grassroots Support Organisation. In later years, SPS acquired a large local following.

### 3.2 Initial days in Bagli

Bagli has a few scattered government offices, the police station, a small hospital and a lively market place frequented by people from neighbouring villages. In a relatively short span of time, group members rented homes in Bagli and signposted their residential area as *Samaj Pragati Sahyog*. This attracted much local attention and curiosity. Unlike other NGOs in the district, SPS was not there to implement any specific development programme or project. The local MLA, Shyam Holani, as well as other elected representatives to the Bagli Janpad Panchayat, were therefore particularly inquisitive about SPS's motives. SPS's activities during these initial days only sharpened their suspicions. Its eight members roamed the many tribal villages in Bagli's neighbourhood on motorcycles or buses, trying to initiate conversations with villagers. Their attempts to earn familiarity in the *ghaat-neeche* area were not received well by local officials and politicians, all non-tribals, who felt threatened by this sudden encroachment on their domain.

### 3.3 The villages of *ghaat-neeche*

During their initial visits to the *ghaat-neeche* villages, members from SPS came frequently to Neelpura, a small village that lies closest to the main road. Like most others in this 97-village belt, Neelpura is predominantly a tribal village, comprising the migrant *Bhilala* and *Korku* tribes. As described in the previous chapter, these tribes migrated here in the early 20th century from neighbouring Dhar district, and occupied large tracts of cleared forestland in the *ghaat-neeche*

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<sup>18</sup> The Jana Sangh was a precursor to the BJP, which emerged in the mid 1980s.

<sup>19</sup> A radical tribal movement called the *Adivasi Mukti Sangathana* that fights for the forest rights of the tribal people in Bagli, has acquired momentum in the last decade.

areas<sup>20</sup>. This gradual inflow appears to have driven most original residents of this region, called the *gaolis* or cattle herders, to the Malwa uplands over the last few decades, where business was better.

Although the *ghaat-neeche* villages are concentrated with tribal populations, there is a minority non-tribal population in most villages and at least 14 villages in this area are entirely non-tribal<sup>21</sup>. The larger non-tribal villages in the area, like Bhimpura, are mainly populated by 'high' castes with a very small population of Scheduled Castes. The non-tribal minority largely practices irrigated cultivation. Most tribal migrants work as wage labourers on the lands of their non-tribal neighbours to supplement their marginal, subsistence agriculture. The tribal population here has also succumbed to a tortuous yearly routine of seasonal migration to the Malwa uplands, where irrigated cultivation continues in the *rabi* season as well as during summer.

The tribal villages of *ghaat-neeche*, as SPS discovered, lead a fairly segregated existence despite their shared identity. For example, there is no tribal leader that commands encompassing local popularity or a common supra-village tribal body. Panchayats are the only local bodies present in the region. When SPS arrived in Bagli in 1992, the 73rd constitutional amendment had still to be enacted. At this time, it was common for one large village to have a panchayat with nearly 7-8 hamlet villages. After the state government reorganised panchayats in 1990, many tribal hamlets became parts of panchayats that included large non-tribal villages. As a result, these tribal villages and hamlets were reduced to a minority within a predominantly non-tribal panchayat. Neelpura is an example of this phenomenon, as it is a part of Bhimpura panchayat. Moreover, these bodies were largely defunct, and like elsewhere in the country before the amendment, no regular elections were held. It was common for the *Patel* or village headman to act as sarpanch<sup>22</sup>. Other members or *panches* were hardly aware of their own position. The panchayat did not function as a collective body, and rarely convened a *gram sabha* for the entire village<sup>23</sup>.

In 1992, SPS had no inkling of the changes that were imminent. In the years to follow, the Congress government of MP would be among the first in India to adopt the 73rd amendment, and order fresh elections to panchayats at all levels. These policy initiatives would be conducive to greater local interest in panchayats, as well as other grassroots activity, such as that initiated by SPS. Simultaneously, SPS's emergence signifies an identifiable surge of interest among

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<sup>20</sup> There is historical evidence of agricultural practices among tribal communities by clearing patches of forestland. Hardiman (1984) for instance writes about *Bhil*, *Konkanas* and *Warli* tribes in western Maharashtra, mentioning that they engaged in subsistence agriculture in cleared patches of forest slopes.

<sup>21</sup> Census Records, Bagli, 1991

<sup>22</sup> Conversations with some elders in the village revealed that the *Patel* performed a range of functions. He mediated disputes, performed religious duties, and collected taxes on behalf of the government. The *Patwari* or land records officer visited his house, and important village decisions were made here. It was common for the *Patel* and *Patwari* to select *panches* and form the panchayat.

<sup>23</sup> Conversations with villagers in Neelpura and members of SPS

voluntary forces to claim a greater stake in the public domain. The formulation of decentralisation policies of the state derives ideological impetus from growing voluntary initiatives like SPS. For example, the presence of several isolated NGO initiatives for watershed development has contributed to the explicit involvement of NGOs as PIAs by the national watershed guidelines<sup>24</sup>. This is regarded as a measure of decentralisation.

### 3.4 Early days in Neelpura

In its early days, SPS was in search of an introduction to Neelpura. This was hard because its members did not arrive in any position of familiar authority, either as government officials, or the *Patwari* or as politicians campaigning for votes. They also did not have any concrete development programme or benefits to offer right away. Their attempts to talk to people in the village thus met with a lukewarm response.

During these days, SPS was able to gather quick impressions about the general character of the village, particularly its socio-economic features and internal stratification. It found that Neelpura, comprised predominantly of *Bhilala* tribals, has a fairly egalitarian society, and does not suffer from social polarisation due to caste. Migrant settlers had been given plots of land by the government nearly a century ago and land distribution too is without marked disparities. About 8 farmers have more than 6 acres of land, and only 3 out of the 100 odd households in the village are presently landless. The remaining farmers own land that varies between 1-3 acres in size. Neelpura is part of a severely arid zone. With rainwater barely enough for a single crop and the absence of alternative occupation, farmers here are equally impoverished.

There are two exceptions to this general poverty. The first is Mahbub Khan, a Muslim, and the richest landowner in the village, with more than 30 acres of land, of which 10 acres are irrigated. Mahbub is among a handful of farmers able to cultivate their land through irrigation in the winter or *rabi* season. The second is a large *Patel* family, which is relatively landed, though not as rich as Mahbub. The *Patels* are the most respected family in Neelpura. They were not very friendly with Mahbub Khan. Neither Mahbub nor the *Patels* responded to SPS's cordial overtures.

SPS found a sort of anchor in Lakhan Singh, then the sarpanch of the Neelpura-Bhimpura panchayat<sup>25</sup>. Though landless, Singh was politically well connected at the time, friendly with other sarpanches as well as politicians at the Bagli *tehsil* office. He held ambitions of contesting elections to the Janpad panchayat. Singh welcomed SPS and offered his home to its members during their visits. In his perception, according to SPS, they were city dwellers that might prove to

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<sup>24</sup> MYRADA in Karnataka and Rural Development Trust in Andhra Pradesh are examples.

<sup>25</sup> Tribals throughout the *ghaat-neeche* region have started using non-tribal names, a phenomenon that speaks of the increasing pressures of social mobilisation.

be useful in furthering his political interests<sup>26</sup>. The sarpanch's support provided SPS with an operating base in Neelpura.

### 3.5 Water conservation in Neelpura

Within months of its arrival in Neelpura, SPS earned greater familiarity amongst its residents, who began referring to as *sanstha* (Hindi for organisation). Moreover, by repeatedly asking individuals to tell them their problems, SPS had already created expectations of solutions. Conventional development practices centre on a giver-recipient relationship, and the NGO effortlessly slid into its intended role of 'developer'. It offered to dig wells on the private lands of people, and raise water conservation structures like earthen *bunds* and field ponds. People in Neelpura were extremely sceptical of its offers initially, more so when they were told that this aid would be for free. SPS's offer was reminiscent of a government initiative some years ago. They recount bitterly how after making similar promises, government officers had returned, extorting villagers to pay up<sup>27</sup>.

Water conservation in these dryland areas is a significant development objective of the state. SPS soon received funds from the Government of India (GOI) under different central government schemes for its proposed development work in Neelpura. In 1992, the Tribal Development Department, GOI, sanctioned 10 lakh rupees for a well digging project. The next year, SPS received a project from the Department of Science and Technology, GOI, to construct ponds, field bunds, and other water conservation and harvesting structures. In 1993 and 1994, SPS received two projects from CAPART in GOI, to continue its well digging activities in Neelpura<sup>28</sup>.

The lure of water ensured that initial local scepticism regarding SPS dry quickly. Though only a handful of people agreed to let SPS work on their lands, their actions thawed initial apprehensions about the NGO in the village. By 1994, most people who were willing to have works done on their lands either had new wells or their old wells had been deepened, without any contribution from the landholders. SPS also started a hand pump repair-training programme for youth from Neelpura and other adjoining villages.

Working on the individual lands of people in this small village allowed SPS to come in close contact with their families. By the time the watershed project actually started in 1995, most people felt not only obliged to the SPS, but also extremely dependent on it, with expectations of help and

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<sup>26</sup> Singh, predictably, offered a different explanation for his friendliness to SPS. He said that he was persuaded by SPS's intentions of doing 'good work' for the village (Interview with Lakhani Singh, Neelpura, August 2000).

<sup>27</sup> In the late 1970s, the Indira Gandhi government started the 'Taccavi loans scheme'. Under this scheme, *tehsil* officers could undertake soil conservation works on people's lands. However, what they failed to convey to people in Neelpura, was that this assistance was in the form of loans, which would eventually have to be repaid. People, who were used to grants and subsidies, were taken by surprise when *tehsil* officers returned with demands for repayment, referred to as *vasooli* or extortion. This word has haunted the collective memory of the people of Neelpura ever since.

<sup>28</sup> CAPART was created by GOI specifically to extend support to the voluntary sector.

support<sup>29</sup>. In fact, by the time these projects were complete, more people in Neelpura were interested in new wells, and when they contacted the NGO, they were told that the work could be done only if they would pay. This led to some bitterness and dissatisfaction. SPS nevertheless established a range of interpersonal relationships with people here.

### **3.6 1994-1995: Confrontation, resistance and development**

By 1995, SPS had acquired a familiarity with Bagli town and the *ghaat-neeche* villages. It had obtained considerable local support in Neelpura village, and was well into implementing government funded development projects here. In course of working in Neelpura, SPS encountered several social and economic practices that were generally exploitative of tribals in this region. In the following year, a series of dramatic confrontations between SPS and locally dominant actors ensued. These actors were mainly non-tribal landholders, government officials as well as claimants to local political power such as sarpanches, representatives to the Janpad panchayat and the MLA.

#### **3.6.1 The minimum wages issue**

A sequence of events unfolded rapidly during this dramatic year. As soon as it started implementing its well-digging and water conservation projects, SPS detected that the overall wage structure in this tribal belt, particularly the payment of wages to labour employed in public works, was not in keeping with the equal minimum wage laws of the country, enacted in 1948. The biggest perpetrators of this injustice were large farmers in the region that engaged hired labour for construction works as well as sarpanches in the *ghaat-neeche* area who executed panchayat works through contractors. This was a critical moment for the NGO, which could have chosen to go along with this exploitative practice, given its infancy in the area and the nature of the backlash that it would invite. However, SPS decided otherwise, and insisted on paying minimum wages to men and women hired on its development projects. This was an unprecedented act, and upset old wage relations in the area immediately.

In one stroke, SPS had made enemies of large farmers, sarpanches and contractors in *ghaat-neeche*, all brokers of unfair wage practices in different capacities. Although some sarpanches guilty of such practice were tribal, this was predominantly an anti-tribal coalition. A minor, though not insignificant detail in this story is the alienation that SPS suffered in its own little base, Neelpura. It had affronted its only ally, sarpanch Lakhan Singh as well as Mahbub Khan, the richest farmer in Neelpura. Simultaneously however, the pro-poor implications of this move slowly made sense to the larger tribal population in the area. With this incident, *ghaat-neeche* had suddenly been thrown into public scrutiny, causing other, more powerful stakeholders at higher levels, to take notice of SPS.

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<sup>29</sup> Members of SPS recounted how villagers from Neelpura would come to them with pleas for help in personal matters

### 3.6.2 Land Records Camp

During SPS's early interactions with these tribal villages, it came to light that land records in the entire *ghaat-neeche* area had not been updated in keeping with the Madhya Pradesh Land Revenue Code of 1950. In principle, this nullified the effect of land reform legislation of the country. Malpractices like not regularising land records and keeping information, such as correct rates for land transactions, out of bounds for tribal peoples were beneficial to the entire gamut of the local revenue bureaucracy. This included both the village *patwaris* as well as the sub-divisional magistrate (SDM) of the revenue division. These functionaries, thriving on state authority, benefited monetarily from such abuses of power<sup>30</sup>. They had moreover acquired near autocratic local status by denying information that local people are constitutionally entitled to posses.

SPS decided to adopt a pro-active stand, risking tremendous opposition from the SDM and village *patwaris*. It contacted the district administration to address this issue, and proposed that a 'land records camp' ought to be organised, in the 'open', where land revenue officers from the government would register land transactions, at the correct rates. The district administration backed SPS's initiative, and in January 1995, the first camp was organised in Neelpura village. The camp turned out to be a huge success. Nearly 13,000 tribals streamed into Neelpura from all over *ghaat-neeche*. The district administration even decided to hold two additional camps to accommodate all those who had travelled far to have their land transactions updated.

This event marked the beginning of two distinct types of relationships between SPS and state actors: antagonistic with the lower levels of the district bureaucracy and friendly with senior officers from the district collectorate. The former resented SPS as it actively hurt their interests in the region. This feeling was exaggerated, as members of SPS were not the original residents of Bagli. The latter adopted a cooperative stance for two reasons. First, the issues that SPS had posed, i.e., minimum wages and land records, constituted blatant aberrations of laws enacted by the Indian state. These could not be publicly ignored by senior officers, especially in the face of such rupture in the prevailing status quo, as that instigated by SPS. The second reason for its friendly stand was simply that district level officers were members of the elite Indian Administrative Service (IAS). They could relate more closely to the English-speaking, well-educated individuals who founded SPS, than the lower levels of the district bureaucracy.

### 3.6.3 Clashing stakeholders

The land records camp represented a moral victory for SPS over the anti-tribal coalition of forces in the *ghaat-neeche* villages. Encouraged, it expanded its activities from Neelpura to other villages in the area. In the summer of 1995, it undertook the deepening of the village water tank in

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like domestic quarrels and illness. Village youth looked to SPS for employment.

Meghapalli village. Sawant Patel, the sarpanch of this village protested severely against this initiative. According to SPS, he was angry because the NGO had refused to give him a cut or commission for this repair work. SPS went ahead with the work on the ground that it had popular sanction secured through letters of support signed by other panches from the Meghapalli panchayat as well as ordinary village residents<sup>31</sup>. Patel however was influential amongst other sarpanches in the area, and he decided to mobilise them against the NGO. This was easy because the latter had already been enraged by SPS's minimum wages initiative. Lakhan Singh from Neelpura also supported Patel in this anti-SPS initiative.

More than 30 sarpanches, led by Sawant Patel, formulated a resolution to 'remove' SPS from *ghaat-neeche*. They argued that the NGO was corrupt, it bypassed panchayats in the area, and misappropriated money that rightfully belonged to the panchayats. Shyam Holani, the Congress MLA from Bagli, actively supported these sarpanches, since he too felt threatened by SPS's increasing influence in the region. Holani organised a meeting between the agitating sarpanches and the Congress Chief Minister of the state, Digvijay Singh. SPS reacted by pursuing a vigorous policy of image building as a transparent organisation that worked in popular interests. The local press further dramatised these unprecedented developments through sensational articles. The confrontation between elected representatives and an NGO attempting to work at the grassroots had reached its climax.

The state government responded by ordering the Dewas Zilla Panchayat to constitute an inquiry committee that would investigate the matter. This was a clever move by the top political leadership and senior bureaucracy. It defused the situation considerably. Sarpanches could not possibly complain against the choice of the Zilla Panchayat as investigator as it is the highest panchayat body in the district. By not ignoring the situation, the state government also publicly reaffirmed its resolve to empower panchayat institutions politically.

After talking to an assembly of villagers in the presence of the aggrieved sarpanches, and physically inspecting some of the NGO's works in the village, the committee came to its conclusions. In its report, it gave SPS a clean chit, declared these allegations as baseless, and commended the organisation for its 'good' work instead. It also 'directed' the NGO not to bypass gram panchayats, simultaneously mentioning that SPS could play an active role in increasing awareness in these local bodies. Finally, the committee assured the villagers of Neelpura that SPS would not do anything contrary to the general interests of the people here. Sarpanches gathered at this assembly, were unhappy with the verdict, but did not challenge SPS in public. This event greatly boosted SPS's image in the region. Support for its tenuous local status had come from the Zilla Panchayat, the highest elected political body in the *ghaat-neeche* area.

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<sup>30</sup> Land Revenue books, priced at 5 rupees, were sold at the rate of 5000 rupees per copy.

The incidents of 1994-95 heralded the beginning of a new position for this NGO in the region. Its opponents realised that 'the luxury of direct confrontation' against SPS was one that they could no longer afford, at least under the present circumstances<sup>32</sup>. From its 'outsider' status in the *ghaat-neeche* villages, SPS was now an ascendant power here. At this point, its power rested on its successful strategy of confrontation and resistance against sarpanches, lower level bureaucrats and the MLA, all stakeholders in an exploitative coalition against the tribal people of this region. It was successful because state officials in the highest positions of authority in Dewas district had supported SPS at crucial moments, such as the land records camp. It was equally significant that the Zilla Panchayat did not take sides with the sarpanches.

These episodes illustrate the various ways in which state actors exercise power. While state officials frequently exercised power by abusing official power, others used state power to legitimise maverick initiatives for challenging exploitative social and economic practices. In this case, such exercise of state power had the effect of strengthening the NGO's position, which did not have the benefit of official authority when it adopted a confrontationist stance.

#### **4. SPS and the Rajiv Gandhi Mission: 1995-2000**

In the summer of 1995, the Dewas district administration invited SPS to become a Project Implementing Agency (PIA) for watershed development projects in the *ghaat-neeche* villages. The Collector of Dewas district had actively supported SPS during the tumultuous events of the previous year, and was keen to involve the NGO in the Rajiv Gandhi Mission for watershed development (RGM). SPS accepted the offer. It had already been working in Neelpura and some other villages in the water conservation sector using government funds. Association with the Rajiv Gandhi Mission (RGM) would be a sure source of government money for the NGO to continue its water conservation and natural resource development activities in the region.

The appointment of SPS as PIA was particularly significant for two reasons. First, it shows that the NGO's resistance to certain types of state practices did not preclude its association with the state's watershed development programme. Equally, the receipt of government money for development work by SPS nearly from the time it arrived in Bagli *tehsil*, did not prevent this NGO from adopting a strategy of confrontation. In this respect, SPS's experience reveals that not all NGOs adopting a radical or confrontationist position against state actors evoke state hostility or repression. It also shows that there are no definite boundaries between NGOs that implement development programmes using government money and those that resist state practices. Its appointment moreover directly contradicted the depoliticisation of development discourse subscribed to by the majority of development planners in this country. For instance, by appointing

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<sup>31</sup> I was shown these letters at the SPS office in Bagli.

<sup>32</sup> Scott (1990). After this event, there were cases of private confrontations between individual sarpanches and members of SPS either in the villages or at Bagli.

SPS, a recalcitrant NGO, as PIA, the Dewas administration 'violated' an unofficial code of conduct prescribed by CAPART for NGOs working on development. CAPART has a clear record of prohibiting NGOs from engaging in 'political activity' (Kamat 2002a: 53). In Kamat's reading, the government's definition of political activity predominantly includes that which is antagonistic in nature against the state.

Second, it marked the extension of the state's watershed development intervention to the *ghaat-neeche* areas, which have impoverished natural resources, house poor tribal populations, and unlike Kishangarh in Tonk-Khurd *tehsil*, have no political godfathers. Their selection for the programme within a year of RGM's launch in the district therefore marks a special recognition. It is plausible that this may have had to do with the dynamic occurrences of the previous year, and with the fact that SPS had already proved its potential to undertake water conservation activities in these formidably dry and degraded parts. A perpetual problem with implementing development programmes in economically backward areas is that of agency, since government officers regard these as 'punishment' postings. SPS's active presence here had considerably solved this problem.

The selection of the *ghaat-neeche* areas highlights the presence of a distinct political process that translated popular mobilisation by an NGO at the grassroots into greater involvement with the state's development agenda. Clearly then, such a process coexists with others that accord priority to electorally important regions in the state's development intervention. Chapter 6 outlined the existence of the latter. This multiplicity of political processes powerfully illustrates that the state in India is a disaggregated entity. It combines many different actors, attitudes and relationships in a number of processes.

The following section tells the remarkable story of how SPS implemented the watershed development project in Neelpura. It reveals a strikingly different interpretation of the national guidelines by SPS compared with organisations like KWO in Andhra Pradesh. Its interpretation is relatively radical and conducive to changing local power relations, as opposed to a more procedural understanding that frequently results in preserving status quo.

#### **4.1 Formation of watershed committee**

The national guidelines prescribe a blueprint for the formation of the village watershed committee, through a consensual process in a public gathering a few meetings after the project commences. With SPS and Neelpura, none of these directions mattered, as the NGO was already very familiar with the village when the project started. Besides, SPS had very clear views on the constitution of the committee, contending that it was responsible for creating an 'effective' cadre of leaders, who

would be able to 'take contentious decisions that are inevitable in a land based programme like watershed development'<sup>33</sup>. This approach signified SPS's willingness to accept greater responsibility for the nature of the committee that is formed than the other PIAs described earlier. Moreover, SPS did not place an uncritical emphasis on the formal manifestation of consensus in a public event.

Two members of the main Patel family in Neelpura were selected as Chairman and Secretary of the committee. SPS justifies its choice on the grounds that both Govind Purohit and Deshraj, are well respected in the village and enjoy an honest reputation. Both Mahbub Khan and Lakhan Singh kept their distance as SPS had hurt their interests during its year of confrontation. SPS ensured that two women, both poor and landless, be a part of the committee, in order to meet the formal conditions of reservation.

The process of committee formation evoked a range of reactions in Neelpura, by now broadly divided into a pro-SPS majority and an anti-SPS minority. Some people, who had been left out of the committee, believed that SPS had selected its own supporters as members. Those who harboured a deeper resentment against the NGO considered that it was deliberately pursuing a discriminatory policy amongst families in Neelpura, in order to build a support base for itself. They believed that SPS was manipulating support for itself by offering jobs to persons from large families on its many development programmes in neighbouring villages<sup>34</sup>.

As a result of SPS's conspicuous policy of intervention, the watershed committee of Neelpura became closely identified with the NGO. This meant that those who resented the NGO did not attend its meetings. Such meetings were held either at the Chairman's home or at a storage godown constructed by SPS in the outskirts of the village. Individuals who were part of the committee acquired a new sense of importance in the village, as they were trained by SPS to oversee watershed works. SPS's entry into Neelpura had clearly reconstituted the local field of power.

SPS's approach would find favour with many eminent scholars on NGOs and grassroots development<sup>35</sup>. SPS had clearly interpreted the national guidelines for committee formation in a manner that allowed it a pro-active role. This had positive as well as negative aspects. The positive aspect was that as PIA of the project, SPS was concerned that those who were economically dominant in the village or politically connected in the region, like Mahbub Khan and Lakhan Singh in particular, could not simply dominate the watershed committee. Other residents of the village were given the opportunity to constitute this body. The negative aspect of such pro-

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<sup>33</sup> Interviews with group members, SPS, Neelpura, August 2000

<sup>34</sup> The identities of my sources have been withheld for the sake of anonymity.

active intervention was that SPS acquired the reputation of following partisan policies among some sections of the village body. Besides, by paying monthly salaries to committee members, SPS had introduced an employer-employee dimension into its relationship with the watershed committee. This would inevitably constrain the position of committee members to oppose the NGO on any issue if necessary. In any case, such an arrangement was entirely foreign to the participatory framework devised by the guidelines.

#### **4.2 Practices of decentralised working**

SPS adopted two basic principles in implementing the project through the village watershed committee in a decentralised way. First, it greatly simplified the technical jargon typically used by project officers while planning a watershed project, and trained a handful of interested committee members to design structures according to the principles of low-cost constructions. It also trained the secretary and some others in the committee to handle project money and maintain accounts. Second, it did not insist on other procedures laid down by the guidelines such as regular group meetings or recording minutes of committee meetings.

Through this approach, SPS tried to demystify state power exercised through privileged access and use of information, by making information available and intelligible to the poor tribals of Neelpura. Demystification of state power through intensive local training in resource use and increased awareness of the laws of the land is a cardinal aspect of SPS's strategy of grassroots development. It had instigated the unprecedented recording of land transactions in open camps with government support shortly after it arrived in the *ghaat-neeche* area. It had also organised a hand pump training programme for 56 trainees. The watershed project similarly is a step in this direction.

As a result of this approach, SPS did not at all insist on the formalities of planning. Once works started, SPS was not rigid about adhering to the action plan at the cost of all other considerations. For instance, despite its familiarity with Neelpura, it faced initial problems of not being able to raise field bunds on farmers' private lands due to initial apprehensions. Yet, it did not coerce them or devise a framework by which individual consent could be documented on paper without any real substance to the process of securing consent. This is in striking contrast to KWO's methods in Andhra Pradesh. The absence of a rigid power hierarchy within Neelpura, no doubt facilitated this strategy, which might have been harder in the presence of very rich landholders.

Beyond the first season of works in this 4-5 year long project, members from SPS rarely went to the work site, as they had trained committee members to supervise constructions. Powers to monitor works locally, measure and note works, handle project money, pay wages and maintain

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<sup>35</sup> Esman and Uphoff (1984) consider the merits of 'external promoters' in facilitating effective leadership in local

financial records have all been gradually transferred to villagers in Neelpura. A second level of checking and aggregation of accounts at the NGO's Bagli office is also in place. It is equally significant, that unlike the other project villages examined earlier, these roles were not concentrated in any one individual. There were a number of local people who performed these functions, in addition to the secretary. In this sense therefore, SPS acting as PIA for the RGM watershed project, had gone beyond the programme structure envisaged by the guidelines.

SPS's utter disregard for procedure was possible also due to a flexible stand adopted by the Dewas district administration. Unlike its counterpart in Kurnool, senior officers in Dewas do not monitor project implementation with comparable rigour or vigilance. This is significant, as PIAs similarly wishing to introduce an element of flexibility in project implementation in Kurnool, would have been hard pressed to do so. SPS, while implementing the watershed project on schedule, does not bother submitting unnecessarily long monthly reports required by the RGM office in Bhopal. SPS justifies its stand on the ground that it has been able to initiate a process of local decision-making in the village that is free of such formalities, and more attuned to the rhythm of village life<sup>36</sup>.

#### **4.3 Common Property Resource Agreement**

The highpoint of the Neelpura watershed project was its collective agreement to regulate the use of an open access resource, a *naala* or stream of water, the use of which had hitherto been appropriated by a small group of richer farmers, and mainly one individual, Mahbub Khan. SPS played a crucial role in facilitating this agreement, which would convert the *naala* from an open access to a common property resource that would not be dominated by the powerful in the village<sup>37</sup>. The national watershed guidelines emphasise common property resources (CPRs), and the need for proper consideration of these in the project action plan. In other projects described earlier, CPRs were usually disregarded by PIAs as the economically dominant sections of the concerned village did not depend on these for their fuel and fodder needs. The interests of the poor in improving CPRs were blatantly overlooked. SPS's approach to the *naala* issue was drastically different and ended in significantly transforming power relations with respect to resource use in Neelpura. This episode indicates that there are opportunities for PIAs like SPS to use the powers transferred by the national guidelines more fully to attain radical outcomes.

Neelpura watershed has only one main water body, a *naala* or stream of water, about 1000 meters long, which flows from the higher reaches of the watershed to the lower, cutting through

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organisations.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Secretary, SPS, Bagli 2000

<sup>37</sup> 'Common property' resources have been distinguished from 'open access' resources on the basis of rules governing their use. In contrast to 'open access' resources, 'a resource becomes common property only when a group of people who have the rights to its collective use is well defined, and the rules that govern their use of it are set out clearly and followed universally' (Chopra 1990 as cited in Sinha 1990: 12).

the heart of village lands. This entire region experiences an extreme variability in rainfall, and suffers an annual average rainfall deficit of about 300mm. As a result, water only flows in the *naala* during the rainy months. Moreover, there are more waters upstream, and by the time the *naala* reaches the lower parts of the watershed, it is reduced to a dry, gravel filled path. This is also because Neelpura watershed is more fertile in the upper reaches than in the lower parts where the underlying strata of soil is mainly limestone, and is therefore extremely porous.

While digging wells for farmers in Neelpura, SPS discovered through its conversations with people here that a highly iniquitous arrangement of *naala* water use was prevalent. A number of farmers from Neelpura and neighbouring villages, with lands upstream, had constructed underground channels (*naardas*) from the *naala* to their wells, which meant that they could draw water continuously. Some had even used electric pump sets and diesel engines to draw water from the *naala* surface. As a result, *naala* waters were being appropriated by a small group of upstream farmers, including Mahbub Khan, and those in the lower parts of the watershed had even less water to access in the *naala* than usual. With the *naala* running dry soon after the monsoons, livestock were the worst affected.

Project works included treatment of the *naala*'s catchment and impounding its flow. Under the existing arrangement, a rich, upstream minority would easily corner the benefits of these activities. SPS decided not to go ahead with project works without addressing this inequitable situation. After informal discussions with committee members and other ordinary residents, it proposed a collective village agreement to regulate *naala* waters.

The proposed agreement required all *naardas* to be blocked and all electric motors to be removed, as a first step towards the more equitable and prolonged use of *naala* waters. SPS tried to explain to farmers here that their newly deepened or excavated wells would recharge more quickly if waters flowed in the *naala*. While other farmers who had constructed *naardas* eventually agreed, Mahbub Khan already irked by SPS's minimum wages initiative, resisted this move vehemently. Unfortunately for him, the rest of the village did not support him, with the exception of Lakhan Singh who was by now a confirmed opponent of SPS. Despite his protests, the SPS went ahead with forging a written agreement on the 5<sup>th</sup> of October 1995, signed by 139 farmers, largely from Neelpura, as well as some other neighbouring villages. This is the second instance where SPS insisted on a written resolution, the first being in Meghapalli over the tank-deepening initiative. The following is a literal translation of the text of its resolution in Hindi.

It is decided by consent (*servasammati*) that nobody would ever draw water from the *naala* using a *naarda*. Those farmers who have wells will also not draw water from the *naala* using motors. Those farmers who do not have wells have agreed to draw water from the *naala* on a limited basis according to rules. After the water in the *naala* stops flowing, nobody would draw water from it, irrespective of whether they have wells or not. This water would be kept for cattle only. *All villagers agree to this resolution (italics added).*

The resolution is emphatic about the collective spirit that underlies it. All farmers including Mahbub had to block the existing *naardas* with cement, and others who had water in their wells or lands on which wells could be dug, had to remove motors from the *naala*. SPS even constructed additional wells wherever necessary, free of any contributions from the farmer. The *naala* agreement was a matter of tremendous pride for SPS, and it mediated this to the last detail. In the initial days after the agreement, enthused villagers set up a system of rotation to watch the *naala* against possible violators at night. SPS claims that the agreement benefited everyone although those with lands upstream were at a greater advantage than the rest.

Mahbub Khan moved the court against the agreement, claiming 'easementary rights' over the *naala*, under the Indian Easementary Act of 1882. Its principal clause is that it allows a single user or group of users exclusive or predominant use over a village resource, on the basis of 'long use or prescription', on the grounds that this use has been peaceable, open and uninterrupted for at least 30 years, as an easement and over a resource that is not owned by anyone in particular. SPS fought back claiming that none of these grounds were valid. It offered convincing reasons—the *naala* was actually owned by the government, which in 1993 had issued an order prohibiting villagers to refrain from its use, and Mahbub himself had claimed right of use for the last 17 years only. Mahbub was reprimanded for coming to court with 'unclean hands' and his appeal for 'easementary right' was struck down. This had the effect of upholding the *naala* agreement.

The agreement along with the verdict of the court was a huge blow to Mahbub Khan, both symbolically and materially. Lakhan Singh and other sarpanches in the area, seething from their own separate issues of discontent with SPS, supported Mahbub and sporadic outbursts of anger against SPS continued. After a few such incidents, SPS was enraged and organised a non-violent *dharna* or 'sit-in' at the entrance to Neelpura, protesting against the hostility shown by sarpanches towards its members.

This *nijbal satyagraha* (non-violent resistance) lasted four days. Sufficiently stirred after the dynamic events of the past months, villagers from Neelpura expressed their solidarity with SPS. The incident received much attention locally, and ended on the pleas of several Zilla and Janpad Panchayat members, who came to appease senior members of the SPS. A month later, in November 1995, the gram sabha of Bhimpura-Neelpura passed this resolution in a meeting.

With this act, major local opposition by Mahbub Khan and the sarpanches against the NGO had been crushed. This resolution is important in at least two ways. First, it showed a significant change in SPS's attitude, which was keen to seek an endorsement of its actions in the panchayat's gram sabha after allegations by sarpanches of overriding panchayat institutions. Second, this created a precedent in the region, as never before had such a written agreement

been attempted in public, nor had the institution of the gram sabha been taken seriously enough, for a resolution of this nature to be passed at its venue.

The *naala* episode shows SPS's role as a political agent that facilitated collective action, which changed the local field of power. The process of formulating this agreement and abiding by it introduced new political and economic behaviour by farmers from this village. Never before had an agreement such as this, been so effectively executed, in public, to result in a material transformation of existing arrangements of resource use. The entire experience also had an extremely positive impact on the working culture of panchayat institutions in the area. In a context where panchayats rarely convene gram sabhas, the Bhimpura-Neelpura panchayat had passed a resolution legitimising the *naala* agreement in a sabha. The constitutionally mandated local panchayat had approved a popular collective initiative to govern the use of a village resource that had been facilitated by an NGO working at the grassroots. This was in effect a remarkable synthesis of efforts by decentralised institutions.

Finally, the *naala* agreement revealed the possibilities of change within the existing framework of the national watershed guidelines. It reconciled the proper use of law and local rights, and altered the iniquitous use of local natural resources significantly. The guidelines moreover place great emphasis on consent and harmony in participatory decision-making. SPS emphasised consent and collective action to initiate this agreement, which transformed local power relations. In contrast, KWO's use of consent through participatory procedures greatly reinforced power relations. This also shows that there is nothing immanent about the language of consent. It can be put to very different uses by PIAs within the common framework of the guidelines.

#### **4.4 Economic benefits from the watershed project**

By the year 2000, the widespread perception of economic benefits from the watershed project anchored SPS fully in Neelpura. These gains fulfilled the cycle of expectations created in the village when the NGO had started working here. The large majority of this village experienced concrete changes in their material conditions of living after the project began. The relative absence of economic disparities among persons here is mainly responsible for the uniform impact of the watershed project. Nearly all residents of Neelpura, with the exception of a few, have very small plots of arid land. As a result, they shared the conditions that would influence their capacity to benefit from changes introduced by the project, or alternately, suffer on its account. SPS for its part took care to introduce changes in agricultural practices that were particularly suited to the topography and soil conditions of this region.

Unlike most others, the Neelpura watershed project was preceded by an intensive well-digging exercise. Nearly every landholder in the village either had a new well or a deepened old well by

1995, the year the project commenced. This meant that each landholder, being a well owner, would potentially be able to benefit from increased retention of groundwater as a result of watershed development. This intervention improves the availability of water for agriculture by increasing the soil's moisture content. Well owners particularly benefit from such increase as well-water levels rise and water stays in wells for many months after the rains are over. Those without wells also benefit, but less than well owners, as they cannot store water.

The reduction in migration on account of the sudden and rapid increase in on-site employment during the lean summer months is clearly the most visible impact of the project. Villagers unequivocally credit SPS for this welcome outcome. Before the project started, villages from Neelpura and its adjoining villages would engage in one of three activities during the long, dry summer. One, they would attempt to find work as wage labourers on the lands of a few big farmers in Neelpura and adjoining villages like Bhimpura. These farmers practice irrigated cultivation. They require labour to harvest their *rabi* crops and plant summer vegetables that are raised as the third crop of the year. Two, some people would try to supplement their income by collecting *tendu* leaves from the adjoining forest to sell to the forest department<sup>38</sup>. Three, the most common option was to migrate to the Malwa uplands to find work as casual wage labourers.

This pattern has changed drastically with the project. Most families in this 100 household village have stopped migrating to the Malwa region. Instead, they stay in the village and are employed on project construction works that are carried out during the summer. Employment on project works together with wage labour on neighbouring farmlands and *tendu* leaf collection ensure a steady stream of income for these families during the summer.

The second main set of benefits concerns changes in land use. Neelpura is part of a severely arid zone. Cultivation here is predominantly limited to the rainfed or *kharif* season, and some well owners are able to practice irrigated cultivation even during *kharif*. Very few farmers cultivate their lands at all in the winter or *rabi* season for dearth of irrigation facilities. An increase in irrigated area during the *kharif* season is indicative of greater well water recharge that prevents wells from going completely dry in the summer months. Increase in unirrigated cultivated area in the *rabi* season is equally significant as it can only occur as a result of greater retention of soil moisture after the rains. Increase in irrigated area in the *rabi* season is also an important change, as it indicates more farmers growing a winter crop in their lands which would previously remain fallow.

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<sup>38</sup> *Tendu* leaves are a minor forest produce. The forest department is meant to involve local users of the forest in their collection. Every village is supposed to have a local 'committee', which registers the names of all those who will collect leaves from the forest. At the apex of the committee is the *phad-munshi*, a local official of the forest department, who is responsible for collecting bunches (*gaddis*) of leaves from the village on a weekly basis. Wages approximate 30 rupees per 100 *gaddis*, and one family of roughly 4-5 members can usually prepare 250-300 *gaddis* a day.

The following table illustrates that the Neelpura watershed experienced each of these positive trends.

**Table 6**

**Principal changes in land use**

	1992-93 Hectares	%	1996-97 Hectares	%	1999-000 Hectares	%
<b>Kharif</b>						
Unirrigated	434.38	100	446.16	98	441.45	97
Irrigated	0	0	7.84	2	12.5	3
Total	434.38	100	454	100	453.95	100
<b>Rabi</b>						
Unirrigated	0	0	8.14	14	13.7	18
Irrigated	30.64	100	51.32	86	62.4	82
Total	30.64	100	59.64	100	76.1	100
<b>Gross cropped area</b>	465.02		513.64		530.05	

Source: Project records, *Samaj Pragati Sahyog*<sup>39</sup>

- Increase in gross cropped area from 465.02 ha in 1992-93 to 513.64 ha in 1996-97 and 530.05 in 1999-2000
- Increase in cropped area in the *kharif* season from 434.38 ha in 1992-93 to 454 ha in 1996-97 and 453.95 ha in 1999-2000. Irrigated cultivation during the rainfed *kharif* season increased from 0 ha to 12.5 ha in 8 years
- Increase in cropped area in the *rabi* season from 30.64 ha in 1992-93 to 59.64 ha in 1996-97 and 76.1 ha in 1999-2000

The third main impact of the watershed project has been the increase in cropping intensity, mainly by double or multi cropping, and the introduction of a second *rabi* crop. An equally important aspect of these changes is the swing away from food crops to non-food crops like cotton or soybean, which are easily marketed, and within food crops, the move from coarser, yet hardier cereals like *jowar* to wheat and rice.

**Table 7**

**Land area devoted to food crops**

	1992-93 Hectares	1999-2000 Hectares
Jowar	213.91	195.03
Maize	6.15**	225.32
Paddy	5.98	4.05

**Table 8**

**Land area devoted to non-food crops**

	1992-93 Hectares	1999-2000 Hectares
Soybean	26.56	219.91
Unirrigated cotton	164.48	0*
Irrigated cotton	0*	52.82

<sup>39</sup> Although the project officially started in 1995, we start considering changes since 1992, the year that SPS started working here. 1996-97 has been taken as a mid-point in this eight-year period under consideration.

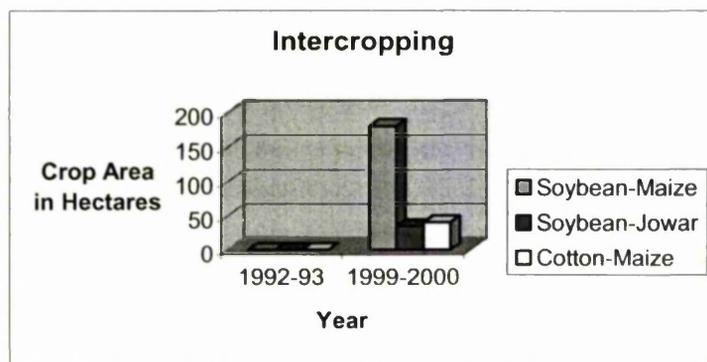
Tuar	3	3.7
Other pulses	13.30	0
Wheat	26.05	56.1
Gram	4.60	18.9

Source: Project records, *Samaj Pragati Sahyog*

(Note: Figures for jowar, maize and soybean are aggregate figures for each crop. They include common areas of intercropping. For instance, 225.32 hectares of land area devoted to maize in 1999-2000 refers to the total land devoted to the maize-soybean intercrop, part of which is 'double counted' in the total land area of 219.91 hectares on which soybean is raised. The purpose of this table however is to portray the changing significance of respective individual crops.)

Changes in cropping pattern have also meant a significant increase in intercropping, which signifies that more farmers in Neelpura cultivate land intensively as compared to pre-project years. The following project data supports this observation. Change in this respect is dramatic. While there was practically no significant intercropping in 1992, this has acquired popularity as a preferred cropping practice over project years.

Figure 3



Source: Project records, *Samaj Pragati Sahyog*

Finally, with increased water levels and better agricultural practices, most farmers in the village have benefited from higher yields (total produce per unit area cropped) from all major crops raised. This includes rainfed crops like soybean and maize in the *kharif* season, and irrigated crops like cotton and wheat, in the *kharif* and *rabi* seasons respectively.

Thus, the watershed project in Neelpura has been able to achieve its principal objectives. Water harvesting and storage structures have been built along the ridgeline. Moreover, as a result of the *naala* agreement, more water flows downstream than it did earlier, recharging wells along the *naala* for longer. The presence of many more wells in Neelpura watershed also allows most landholders in the village to conserve higher levels of groundwater. As a result of all these

factors, there is an increase in cropping area- both irrigated and unirrigated in the *kharif* as well as *rabi* seasons, improved cropping practices like multi-cropping and higher yields.

Soon after the project started, SPS initiated an 'Agriculture Development Programme' in Neelpura. It grows crops on an experimental basis on a single plot in the village with the help of local farmers. As a result of this research, SPS has taken care to introduce crop varieties that are suited to the soil conditions of Neelpura. A good example is cotton, a crop that usually requires intensive irrigation. SPS has introduced cotton varieties that are resistant to dryland conditions. This single step has ensured that small farmers with unirrigated lands are not excluded from cotton cultivation, a practice that has intensified in Neelpura since the project started. SPS's approach of supplementing watershed project implementation with dryland agricultural research distinguishes it from other PIAs examined earlier. Unlike the rest, it took measures to ensure that benefits from greater availability of water would not be restricted to a few landholders, who already owned large plots of irrigated land.

The relief from migration too is not short-lived in Neelpura. In most other projects, local people relapse into their old migration cycle as the project ends, closing all project related employment opportunities. This would not be the case here, since SPS did not stop working in the *ghaat-neeche* villages when this watershed project was complete. By 2000, it had started implementing similar projects in other villages, and launched a range of other development programmes in the *ghaat-neeche* region as well. It is likely though that not as many individuals would find employment over summer as they did during the project's lifespan. Yet, increasing evidence that SPS was there to stay in the *ghaat-neeche* would ensure that the hope of employment would remain.

#### **4.5 Influencing transparency in local panchayats**

The methods of working followed by SPS while implementing the watershed project in Neelpura had a positive effect beyond the project itself. They galvanised popular interest in the region's panchayats. These local bodies have largely been defunct, inert and undemocratic, despite a wave of pro-panchayat legislation nationally and by the government of Madhya Pradesh since 1993. SPS's insistence on the written text as a form of collective agreement as well as the open conduct of project transactions, like wage payments and record keeping, were entirely new to local imagination in Neelpura and its neighbouring villages. Over time however, these practices have set a concrete example in transparency and accountability, and one that many local people are keen to replicate in reforming the panchayat's ways of working. The following episode where panches from the Neelpura panchayat decided to confront Kartar Singh Nag, the rich, landed and non-tribal sarpanch from Bhimpura, over allegations of corruption illustrates this point well.

In the summer of 2000, the Bhimpura-Neelpura panchayat had constructed a *chaupal* or common sitting area, in Bedipura near Bhimpura. Nag had neither consulted other panches before the construction, nor had he disclosed the amount of money being spent for the purpose. In theory, each gram panchayat is collectively required to prepare an annual action plan, which is then approved by the Janpad panchayat. In practice, this plan is usually the output of a single individual, the sarpanch, who works in tandem with the panchayat auditor, a government functionary well versed with government procedures such as planning. The panchayat auditor frequently acts as the sarpanch's accomplice in manipulating records in order to retain a cut or a profit.

Shortly after the *chaupal's* construction, a handful of panches, mostly from Neelpura and a few from Bhimpura, decided to question Nag regarding the details of expenditure on the construction, and were provided with an aggregate figure of 17,500 rupees. However, these panches were convinced that the figure was exaggerated, and that Nag had made a profit in the bargain. When they demanded the details of cost and expenditure listed in the panchayat's cash records, Nag plainly refused, claiming that the panches were not authorised by law to see these records.

This practice represents the most widespread abuse of sarpanch power throughout Madhya Pradesh. It symbolises the rampant misuse of state power by concealing information about rights lawfully conferred by the state through its legislation. Yet, unlike the majority of panches in other parts of the country, the panches in Neelpura functioned in a different environment that had mainly been created by SPS's initiatives to increase local awareness of rights and the laws of the state. This handful of panches tried to gather information about their entitlements, from those associated with the watershed project in the village, and most of all from members of SPS in the Baba Amte Centre. SPS has established this centre with government aid, no more than a kilometre away from Neelpura, and uses it as a field station for its activities<sup>40</sup>.

Nag remained adamant. He claimed that the figure was not exaggerated, and asked the panches to prove otherwise. He said that they were they were free to physically supervise the construction of a similar *chaupal* in Neelkheri, a hamlet within Neelpura, and demonstrate how such a *chaupal* can be raised in less money. This is an extremely difficult proposition, and some panches were quick to spot Nag's tactics<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> This field office is named after Baba Amte, a respected social worker, who is well known in India for his personal acts of sacrifice in the cause of poor people in the tribal areas of Madhya Pradesh.

<sup>41</sup> 'Sardar is in charge of construction of the *chaupal* in Neelkheri. He knows that if anything less than 17,500 is spent, then he will be caught red-handed. He will make sure that nothing less than 17,500 are spent. In these days, is it any difficult to spend money?', said a panch from Neelpura, August 2000.

The *chaupal* issue soon became a matter of general public interest, dominating conversations in the village<sup>42</sup>. Some panches from Neelpura and Bhimpura, tried to mobilise support among other panches, and just as SPS had done several times before, initiated a signature campaign against Kartar Singh Nag. They intended to use this resolution as a no-confidence motion against Nag. They were now aware of recent state legislation that allows for a sarpanch to be recalled even in the middle of term, if 2/3rds of all panches resolved in writing to do so. Although this initiative could not be sustained, these panches were determined to raise the matter in public in the subsequent gram sabha. SPS takes tremendous pride in these developments, attributing it to its insistence on transparent functioning, and the debates on accountability that these had generated.

The *chaupal* issue had raised expectations of a lively gram sabha, and a large number of people thronged to Bhimpura on that day. Several agitating panches asked Nag to show them the panchayat's cash records in that public gathering. A heated argument followed, and Nag left the meeting along with the panchayat auditor in a huff. The gram sabha ended soon after. Though this pro-accountability initiative suffered a temporary setback, it had already marked a landmark in Neelpura's history of popular mobilisation. For the first time, tribal panches had confronted a non-tribal sarpanch in the gram sabha, an institution that is recognised by the state as the principle locus of collective local decision-making. The public enactment of this confrontation moreover registered an extremely positive impact on tribal confidence in influencing the panchayat, despite the presence of a dominant non-tribal minority.

The significance of these events was greatly enhanced as they occurred at a time when the MP state government had initiated pro-panchayat legislation, transferring powers and resources to panchayats as well as holding panchayat elections regularly<sup>43</sup>. As a result of all these factors, local interest in the panchayat has risen considerably in Neelpura. Contest to panchayat seats in the Bhimpura-Neelpura panchayat has risen fifteen-fold in the last 10 years<sup>44</sup>. The reinforcement of popular faith in the gram sabha is equally significant. In 2001, the MP government amended the Panchayat Act aiming to make a fundamental transition from 'indirect' and 'representative' democracy to 'direct democracy'. This involves the transfer of powers from the elected panchayat to the gram sabha, the collective of all adults (who are registered voters) in the panchayat, with the belief that power must be in the hands of people, and not their representatives<sup>45</sup>.

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<sup>42</sup> I was witness to animated discussions about this among men in Neelpura. Women here were relatively unconcerned with these developments.

<sup>43</sup> Behar (2000, 2001, 2003), Behar and Kumar (2002)

<sup>44</sup> All 18 seats to the Bhimpura-Neelpura panchayat were elected unanimously in 1990, 2 out of 18 were contested in the elections of 1994-95, and in the last elections of 2000, 15 out of 18 seats were contested (Janpad Panchayat Office, Bagli).

<sup>45</sup> Refer to Behar (2001) for a detailed account.

The *chaupal* episode can be viewed as the starting point of a larger process of local awareness and popular mobilisation. Given that regressive methods of working have been institutionalised in the region's panchayats for too long, this event holds the promise of imminent, if not immediate, change. The episode also shows that the positive effects of SPS's initiatives are not confined to the watershed project, but are gradually extending to other local bodies. In this respect, SPS's experience raises important questions about the potential of NGOs as agencies of decentralised development in India.

##### **5. SPS and decentralised development: 2000-**

By 2000, SPS had been working in the *ghaat-neeche* villages for 8 years. There has been a visible transformation in its physical assets and organisational structure during his period. It has now made a transition to a formal organisational structure with a designated secretary, paid staff and greater physical resources like a full-fledged field station and vehicles.

Encouraged by the *chaupal* episode and other similar incidents, SPS now envisions a bigger role for itself in the *ghaat-neeche* area. There has been a remarkable increase in its breadth of activities, beyond implementing development programmes. It intends to use the Baba Amte Centre as a base to network with grassroots resources on a national scale. Its practical operations would primarily involve training large numbers of development workers in the watershed sector<sup>46</sup>. The agenda for networking grassroots resources includes training elected representatives to panchayat bodies. SPS sees itself as an agent for decentralised development in the region. It regards that such agents are necessary if the state government's decentralisation legislation in favour of local elected bodies is to be effective at all. It views its own role as 'one of galvanising the panchayat process, both in terms of making people understand the procedures, and also to be able to carry out the functions, that are being devolved to them'<sup>47</sup>. These initiatives have been received very positively by the district administration, which has agreed to extend its support and cooperation.

In addition, SPS regularly conducts popular public meetings in the villages where it implements projects. Such meetings are called *Jan Sunvaayis*, or 'Hearings of the People'. The main idea behind this endeavour is to increase transparency in the execution of the development project in operation. A typical *Jan Sunvaayi* involves a large public gathering in the village, attended by grassroots workers of the SPS and frequently its founding members. They apprise the public of the project's progress, and also present the details of money being spent. Those present are encouraged to ask questions to SPS. Encouraged by its successes in Neelpura, SPS hopes that

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<sup>46</sup> 'There are 6 lakh villages in the country, of which 4 lakh need urgent water retention. These are situated in 1,00,000 watersheds. If you have 200 NGOs covering 50 watersheds each, you can cover this scale; for that you would need 10 Voluntary Support Organisations, who will train 20 NGOs each. In this way, we can actually make the effort to upscale this to the entire country in the next 20 years', Interview with Secretary, SPS, Bagli, 2000.

<sup>47</sup> Secretary, SPS, Bagli, 2000

this exercise would promote a culture of accountability among local bodies in the region. SPS's attempts reinforce the public meeting as the site where accountability of local functionaries and elected representatives can be ensured by direct and open questioning. This method of accountability is in tune with the idea of 'social audit' in the panchayat gram sabha promoted by the state. This term refers to a process whereby an assembly of villagers would approve or disapprove of the panchayat's functioning on the basis of information presented in the sabha. State functionaries in Dewas welcome SPS's *Jan-Sunvaayi* initiative because of this similarity in approach.

SPS's range of actions are extremely important in institutional terms, especially with respect to decentralised development. They reveal the willingness and ability of an NGO engaged in grassroots work to act as an agent strengthening local institutions. SPS's approach shows that it does not consider itself to be a rival power to panchayats. This is unlike many other NGO experiences in India, including the early part of SPS's life history, where NGOs and panchayats have been drawn into antagonistic relationships. SPS however was able to overcome the initial impasse in its association with local panchayats. Moreover, as discussed earlier, this was also possible because state actors in positions of authority did not uncritically support panchayats. Finally, the state government of Madhya Pradesh, with its pro-panchayat policies, actively supports SPS's current initiatives regarding panchayat empowerment. A common ground exists between this NGO's interpretation of decentralisation and that espoused by the state.

## **6. NGO Power and Decentralised Development**

An important aspect of the SPS case is the steady increase in its local power base. SPS's power in the *ghaat-neeche* area is derived as much from the popular support it enjoys as from the support it receives from official state agencies. Its power base therefore reveals the presence of real possibilities in convergence between popular support and government cooperation. NGO power of this sort is significant, as much for advocates of NGOs as for skeptics.

The nuances of such power would be greatly lost within a dichotomous framework of mainstream versus alternative development. The case also demonstrates the complex state-society interrelations that characterise NGO functioning, especially those like SPS that are keen to have a long term interest in a region. Equally, SPS's experience shows how popular constructions emerge of NGOs, among other voluntary organisations, as 'intermediaries between the government and the people' (Williams and Young 1994, p 87). In India, such a view is acquiring predominance, especially among donors, who are keen to engage NGOs in an array of tasks, from development to popular advocacy. This section summarises the four key aspects of NGO power in India as abstracted from SPS's experience.

The first is the power is to effect concrete changes in local power relations. Upon its entry in the *ghaat-neeche* region, SPS changed wage relations, effectively challenged an exploitative coalition of sarpanches, local revenue bureaucrats and the MLA, and facilitated a *naala* agreement that transformed power relations in Neelpura. Such power however is text oriented. This is the second aspect of its power. As the minimum wages dispute and the *naala* agreement demonstrate, SPS relied on a correct reading of the laws of the Indian state, as well as the guidelines formulated by official state planners before undertaking its radical initiatives. This aspect is particularly important, as NGOs do not have constitutional power. Therefore, there is a greater need for NGOs to justify their actions on the basis of existing laws and state policy frameworks.

The third aspect of NGO power is that it is performance oriented. In the initial period of its functioning, SPS repeatedly chose to create public events out of its confrontations. This was necessary for it in order to attract the attention of state actors and promote awareness of the issue at hand amongst local people. In contrast, state actors do not necessarily need to create public events in order to be effective. For example, the district collector could merely issue an order preventing passage through a road, and deploy police personnel to ensure obedience, without reference to a public debate. In contrast, there is no consensus or lawful validation of what power NGOs should have. As a result, NGOs frequently resort to public performance and available methods of publicity to make their point. More recently too, SPS continues to exercise power through performance in public settings. The *jan-sunvaaryi* is an appropriate instance where SPS performs its part as the champion of accountability in the presence of an assembly of people.

Finally, NGO power greatly depends on the ability of the NGO to elicit government support. This chapter has shown how senior district officials supported SPS during critical moments such as the land records camp. Besides, the opportunity to undertake other radical initiatives such as the *naala* agreement, followed only after SPS had been appointed PIA for RGM watershed projects in Neelpura village. Similarly, SPS has been able to go ahead with its plans for networking with other grassroots organisations, on the basis of financial and procedural support extended by the Government of India as well as the state government of MP.

SPS's case also illustrates that NGO power is not without limitations. For one, it can be exclusionary. During its early days in particular, SPS was an ascendant power that was by definition opposed to all other major power holders in the area. NGOs are not state actors (though they might be closely aligned with the latter), and their process of acquiring local power is typically at the cost of existing power holders. This explains why so many NGOs are frequently drawn into antagonistic relationships with panchayats or local state officials. A later synergy

between NGOs and other local actors may no doubt emerge, as it did in the case of SPS. Two, there are procedural issues involved in how power claimed by an NGO is described to others. This follows the previous point regarding the lack of any legal consensus or constitutional validation of what NGOs can do.

## 7. Conclusion

This chapter appraised the complex dynamics of interaction between an NGO, government officials, political representatives and popular forces in the tribal pockets of Dewas district. It highlighted the transformation in political and economic conditions in the *ghaat-neeche* villages since 1992, the time of its arrival here. It analysed the contribution of this NGO as an agency provoking these changes. It examined the pro-decentralisation initiatives of the state government that created an environment conducive to change. All these aspects of the case are of deep import for the nature of decentralised development that is unfolding in the country. The principal conclusions arising from this chapter are relevant both to the National Watershed Development Programme and more generally, to decentralisation in India.

First, SPS interpreted the provisions laid down by the national watershed guidelines to effect radical changes within the duration and framework of its watershed development project in Neelpura. It adopted a pro-active role as PIA, exercising its preferences in the formation of the watershed committee. It consciously pursued and facilitated the formulation of a collective agreement to regulate the inequitable use of *naala* waters. Its actions were directly responsible for the concrete transformation in power relations in Neelpura. In this sense, the watershed project provided opportunities to SPS to challenge local actors and coalitions that exploited tribal people, a process that it had started soon after its entry. Besides, SPS matched the guidelines for project implementation with additional initiatives such as dry land agricultural research. Such initiatives have had a critical role to bear in ensuring that the project produced relatively equitable outcomes in the village.

While SPS espoused an interventionist role in the above respects, it adopted a very different stance with respect to the procedural aspects of the project. After training a number of persons from the village to supervise watershed works and keep accounts, it fully devolved powers of supervision and record keeping to village committee members. It did not control or monitor the project in its daily operations, choosing to intervene only if the project encountered major obstacles in its progress, such as resistance from farmers to regulate *naala* waters, or if additional initiatives were necessary, like the introduction of crop varieties suitable to the local topography.

Both in terms of pro-active involvement in some respects and calculated detachment in others, SPS's strategy differs considerably from other PIAs examined earlier. In particular, PIAs in Kurnool in Andhra Pradesh, adopted a diametrically opposite approach of implementation. They refrained from acts that would hurt the interests of the dominant sections in the village. Yet, they crafted the project action plan to the last detail, and monitored it fastidiously. This contrast illustrates the possible differences in interpretation of the guidelines. While SPS treated the policy framework as guidelines, innovating strategies wherever necessary, other PIAs in Kurnool were compelled to follow a rigid implementation agenda, as devised by the district project office in accordance with the guidelines.

Thus, SPS's experience reveals that NGOs working as PIAs have opportunities to interpret the guidelines' provisions for participatory development differently. However, evidence presented within this thesis also guards against indiscriminate optimism about all NGOs in general. My study of an NGO PIA in Kurnool highlighted the NGO's inability to initiate participatory approaches different from the regimented methods prescribed by KWO. The specific characteristics of SPS, as an NGO committed to grassroots work over a period of time, led to its own brand of participatory development and popular mobilisation in the *ghaat-neeche* area. Moreover, the effects of SPS's initiatives are not confined to project institutions alone, and are being felt in the working of the region's panchayats. This is a sign that participatory and democratic practices initiated by the NGO would translate into popular mobilisation capable of outlasting the project itself.

Second, this chapter concludes that regional political conditions in Madhya Pradesh were instrumental in creating an environment conducive to local action and change instigated by SPS. Two aspects of contemporary politics in the state deserve particular mention. The first is the ruling party's emphasis on panchayat institutions, and the commitment to integrate locally elected representatives with official development and regulatory functions of the state government. The previous chapter detailed these initiatives for panchayat empowerment through regular elections, transfers of funds and the institution of the *Zilla Sarkar*. The second, as a corollary to these attempts, the state government does not decentralise powers to district level government functionaries at the cost of political representatives at the same level. District level functionaries like the Collector have been given a central role in new arrangements like the *Zilla Sarkar*. Yet, the creation of such institutional spaces is in itself a landmark in the involvement of elected representatives in development administration and planning.

Further, the interplay of these aspects of state politics bore an impact on the SPS experience in three ways. One, as a result of the state government's pro-panchayat overtures, local sarpanches were extremely reactive to SPS's actions in the region. To begin with, they resisted the NGO

bitterly with new confidence and accused it of attempting to erode panchayat power. In later years, panches in Neelpura and neighbouring villages took cues from SPS's functioning and exercised their rights in demanding information and accountability from corrupt sarpanches in panchayat forums. Two, the state government's emphasis on a discourse of decentralisation and local empowerment made it nearly impossible for senior state officials to ignore the developments of *ghaat-neeche* upon SPS's arrival. This led to a supportive attitude towards SPS, both during difficult periods of confrontation and in its dynamic initiatives. Three, the absence of intimate monitoring by district government officials of participatory practices in project villages, proved to be extremely favourable for SPS in pursuing innovative methods of decentralised working.

The third conclusion that the chapter arrives at concerns the multiplicity of actors and political processes that characterise the state, and consequently decentralisation. SPS elicited nearly opposite reactions from different sets of state actors. While local actors perceived it as a threat to their own vested interests and power, senior district and state level actors supported the NGO, and legitimised its acts of confrontation against exploitative practices in the region.

Also, SPS's experience together with the Kishangarh case illustrates decentralisation's wide spectrum of consequences. On the one hand, decentralisation of powers to local political representatives increased opportunities for the selection of electorally important areas of the district, like Kishangarh, for watershed development. But equally, on the other, decentralisation also opened new levels of political contest in a traditionally backward part of the district. SPS's involvement in the *ghaat-neeche* area led to its appointment as PIA, and the extension of the watershed programme to poor tribal villages here. Decentralisation therefore has the potential to contradict the apolitical uses of the development discourse that dominates development policy formulation in this country.

In the same vein, the case reveals a profusion of claims and counter-claims to hegemony in the *ghaat-neeche* area. Through its actions of exposing the corrupt, unjust and exploitative practices of local state actors, SPS had successfully challenged local perceptions of the state. In this respect, SPS represented a counter-hegemonic force. It considerably weakened the attempts by such state actors to preserve their own hegemony in the *ghaat-neeche* region. In addition, SPS's actions contributed to the making of a new hegemony process, where assertions of hegemony were accompanied by a concrete restructuring of local power relations, and SPS itself is an identifiable locus of power. Yet, the rival stand adopted by senior state actors of supporting the NGO in its pro-tribal initiatives ensured that the overall credibility of the state in the region did not suffer. These dynamics reveal that multiple claimants of hegemony interact continuously and contingently, experiencing gains or losses that are essentially fluid and prone to change. They reaffirm the nature of hegemony, not as a 'finished and monolithic ideological formation, but as a

problematic, contested, political process of domination and struggle' (Roseberry 1994: 358). This chapter shows how decentralisation greatly expands the possibilities of contested hegemonies.

Finally, this chapter draws attention to NGO power for decentralised development. It shows that NGOs, operating within appropriate political conditions, can combine responsibilities of development project implementation with radical initiatives that challenge exploitative practices legitimised by state actors or institutions. Besides, they can serve as agencies for popular mobilisation and change, both directly, through development projects that they implement, and indirectly, by inculcating a culture of democratic and participatory working amongst local bodies in the region that they work in. These aspects of NGO power are extremely relevant today, as NGOs are being integrated in many other initiatives for decentralised development throughout the country<sup>48</sup>. However, the chapter notes that NGO power cannot be discussed or utilised within an analytical dichotomy of mainstream versus alternative development. It reaffirms the profundity of state-society interrelationships that underlie NGOs as also their claims to power.

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<sup>48</sup> These include other participatory development programmes such as Joint Forestry Management. Donors like the Ford Foundation pursuing advocacy roles for institutional reform through decentralisation, work mainly through NGOs.

## Conclusion

### **Decentralised Development: State Practices from India's Watershed Development Programme**

This thesis is a study of the nature and potential of decentralisation presently unfolding in India. It considers emerging trends in decentralisation following the recent restructuring of the National Watershed Development Programme. Through this analysis, it examines contemporary debates on decentralisation in the broader context of India's political history. Further, it explores the relationship between decentralisation, the development discourse and the state. While the issues raised here are of particular import in the Indian case, they also bear upon larger theoretical and policy concerns regarding decentralisation.

In this concluding chapter, I propose to recapitulate the main theoretical propositions that informed my investigation, summarise the major issues covered and finally, discuss the principal conclusions and consider their significance.

#### **1. Main theoretical propositions**

The key issue addressed in this thesis is the theorisation of the relationship between decentralisation and the state. The theoretical underpinnings of decentralisation, in its popular usage, lie in the New Institutional (NI), Communitarian, and New Political Economy (NPE) traditions. In the NI and communitarian traditions, 'self-sufficient cooperative behaviour' within communities, variously defined, is justified as the basis for decentralisation. The relationship between community and state has been projected either as benign or adversarial. In the NPE tradition, decentralisation is justified as it checks rent-seeking tendencies of the 'inherently corrupt and sub-optimal' state. The relationship between the rational individual and the state is limited to the individual's role in countering rent seeking activities of the state. Further, the market is conceptualised as an arena where 'special interests', that lead to rent seeking activities by the state, are typically absent. In both these traditions therefore, decentralisation emerges as a move 'away' from the state, either to the community or the market. However, the relationships between individuals, communities, markets and states, as postulated here, rest on highly questionable assumptions regarding these concepts. They also produce an impoverished view of the state, with little consideration of essential facets like its public interest, political obligation to citizens, and legitimisation.

In practice however, decentralisation constitutes concrete policies for the reorganisation of relations between various levels of government, and for greater involvement of market and 'community-based' organisations. Further, the reinforcement of market and community has become a defining feature of the reinterpretation of development since the 1970s. In consequence, decentralisation enables the state to implement policies that reproduce the ruling development discourse. In fact, decentralised development embodies a viable solution for states to survive within the international development apparatus, primarily with respect to

aid. It also allows states to respond better to rising domestic pressures for local, voluntary and privately motivated action in development. This aspect accords greater centrality to the state in relation to decentralisation than supporting theories would permit.

Further, as decentralisation is prescribed to improve state functioning, a powerful link is drawn between decentralisation and civil society. Civil society constitutes powerful imagery for domestic public space with a diversity of constituents, from market agencies to community-based organisations, NGOs and trade unions. This notion of civil society as a coherent entity, identifiable and distinguishable from the state, and more importantly, the projection of an adversarial equation of the civil society with the state, underpins popular conceptions of decentralisation. The state-civil society dichotomy further reproduces the idea that decentralisation reduces the domain for state intervention.

A wide chasm exists between this notion of the state and its role in decentralisation, and the practice of decentralisation itself. This issue is particularly serious in a developing country like India, which as a result of its colonial past, is characterised by complex interrelationships between the state and society. While the colonial era established a state that was 'as close to the modern kind as possible', the society remained an array of crosscutting identities, in many ways far removed from the 'individualist tradition' that was seminal to the developed societies of the west (Kaviraj 2001: 308). Moreover, an essential aspect of state formation in the colonial era was the 'making sense of society' in a western idiom (Kaviraj 1991: 80). Equally, other aspects of the Indian state and society, such as the elaborate state apparatus, and disparities between elite and vernacular discourses, further constrain the simplistic application of mainstream decentralisation theories.

My thesis draws upon the analytical constructs of state and society proposed by Antonio Gramsci, to study decentralisation in India. At the core of the Gramscian approach is a consideration of the nature of rule, as not solely through coercion, but also through consent. The ruling class rules through its hegemony 'protected by the armour of coercion', and the 'state and civil society are merged into one suzerain unity' (Gramsci 1971: 12). Hegemony for Gramsci meant the 'moral-philosophical' leadership of a group and its ideology. Gramsci's ideas were variously criticised, primarily on the grounds that hegemony could not be equated with the ideological domination of a single group, that a hegemonic ideology was not necessarily cohesive, and most importantly, that a breach of hegemony did not always herald the collapse of the ruling order.

However, these critiques have effectively extended the concept of hegemony to new areas. Hegemony has since been used to understand the processes by which groups attempt to achieve and preserve their domination in a variety of contexts (Scott 1985, 1990, Roseberry 1994, Agrawal 1998). Such interpretations emphasise the fragility of hegemony and the indeterminacy of its outcomes. Yet, these aspects contribute to the value of the concept,

especially for studying state-society relationships in a developing country like India. India is composed of multiple identities and its state power is claimed by a striking diversity of contestants. These cannot be understood through an uncritical application of the Gramscian hegemony model (Chatterjee 1988, Kaviraj 1988, Sen 1988).

Within the analytical framework adopted in this thesis, decentralisation is viewed as a process that recreates the conditions, in which attempts at securing and preserving hegemony continue to be made by a number of actors at different levels. The idea that decentralisation involves new issues regarding the nature of rule is at the heart of this framework. As a result, both the idea and form of the state remain central to this analysis. This constitutes the principal point of departure from NI, communitarian and NPE traditions. This framework focuses on the ways in which different actors involved in decentralisation processes interpret the development discourse, in course of their attempts to secure and preserve hegemony. This thesis therefore analyses how decentralisation impacts the use of the development discourse, and its implications for the state.

## **2. Summary of investigation**

In India, decentralisation has followed a trajectory that is inextricably linked with development in its successive interpretations. Development and the planning process comprised the foundations of the centralised Indian state at independence, but soon became the fount of contradictions to follow. The state was increasingly unable to realise its development goals articulated through planning. This failure stemmed mainly from asymmetry between planned development and the growing regionalisation of Indian politics. Yet, decentralisation policies formulated since independence did not address these contradictions explicitly. Instead, these efforts remained half-hearted, unsystematic, and disjointed.

Following a mixture of international and domestic influences, the 1990s were a decade of bold and definite moves in favour of decentralisation. The advocacy of decentralisation by neo-liberal institutions like the World Bank was matched by domestic factors like the rise in voluntary initiatives by NGOs, and pioneering attempts at decentralisation by many states. Although the framework of centralised development planning remained unaltered, panchayats and urban local bodies were granted constitutional recognition in 1993. This marked the first serious step towards the constitution of local government. However, the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment was not uniformly received throughout the country, and responses varied from indifference to enthusiasm. Further, a host of other experiments for decentralisation, centring on the idea of community-based participatory development, were launched. These measures did not involve panchayats directly, leading to debates regarding the seriousness of this recent wave of decentralisation.

My investigation into the nature of decentralisation takes into account two important aspects of this complex environment. First, decentralisation in India has never been a one-point

agenda, and therefore, the continuation of several, different initiatives for decentralisation in the 1990s is not surprising. Second, decentralisation is an integral element of the contemporary development discourse, and therefore accompanies most development programmes. This thesis focuses precisely on the crosscutting nature of various decentralisation initiatives, and examines their potential for change.

The analysis is conducted through a study of pro-decentralisation reform attempted within the National Watershed Development Programme (NWDP). The evolution of the Indian watershed sector reflects a broader international shift from 'national' to 'community-level' and 'decentralised' conceptions of development. Crucial development objectives of the state, like increasing agricultural productivity, generating employment and checking ecological degradation, have been articulated at the community level. NWDP has all the elements of a 'catch-all' development programme, and captures the pressing political imperatives of the state. It thus embodies complex issues concerning decentralisation, development and the state. This is of consequence given the postcolonial context of development as the principal basis of state power in India.

Further, the national watershed guidelines (1994) prescribe measures that constitute powerful trends in decentralisation today. They emphasise bureaucratic reorganisation, local institutional innovation, involvement of NGOs as programme implementers, and most importantly, a process of participatory decision-making on a community basis. Yet, at least three aspects of the guidelines indicate persisting tensions between bureaucratic control, political mobilisation and the empowerment of panchayats.

First, the creation of watershed committees as local programme bodies, involves no legal or constitutional structuring, which could provide for a wider political debate. Instead, it essentially entails bureaucratic improvisation and consequently, control. Contrasted with panchayat reform, which has been long contested and more difficult to achieve, it represents a relatively easier option for programme planners. Second, the conception of participation, primarily, if not solely, in a constructed procedural format, indicates that project-based participation is not explicitly correlated with wider processes of popular mobilisation. Third, the attempt to distance decision-making for the watershed programme from the elected bodies arises from an old rivalry between the bureaucracy and elected representatives in India. Clearly, some of these tensions had been witnessed even in earlier attempts at decentralisation.

These difficulties arise from a deeper phenomenon in the Indian development strategy. This strategy has consistently tried to frame development issues apolitically, with the planning process attempting to mask the political constraints affecting development. In the watershed sector, two aspects produce a powerful thrust towards depoliticising the watershed, and issues of watershed development. First, the projection of community as an isolated entity,

detached from wider political and economic linkages, considerably blurs the guidelines' pro-poor objectives. In this sense, the 'social model' of participatory watershed development, distracts attention from the high politics of resource use and ownership in India. Second, this is complemented further by the centrality of the action plan for each microwatershed project. Although planning is justified as a participatory process, it warrants technical expertise, and therefore, local planning like national planning, strengthens expert power. It creates the ground for technical treatment of political issues concerning resource use in the watershed.

My thesis studies the implementation of this programme in contrasting political settings within two states, Andhra Pradesh (AP) and Madhya Pradesh (MP). It attempts to understand whether differences in implementation between Kurnool and Dewas districts can be correlated with the broader context of decentralisation in each state. It considers the impact that this environment may have for the depoliticisation of development discourse that the programme subscribes to, and its implications for the state. It examines the potential for change contained in the guidelines, given that their implementation coincides with a number of other initiatives for decentralisation.

### **3. Conclusions**

The first set of conclusions pertains to the linkages between decentralisation, depoliticisation and development, observed through my case studies. The second set includes conclusions regarding the nature of the state and hegemony in India, understood through decentralisation. Both these contribute towards the theorisation of the relationship between decentralisation and the state.

#### **3.1 Decentralisation, Depoliticisation and Development**

The exercise of state power through the 'depoliticisation' of development has been widely studied, since Ferguson's seminal contribution regarding development in Lesotho (1990). Contemporary readings of the depoliticisation of development are largely derived from the technical treatment of development, of which planning is a central constituent. Depoliticisation of development therefore, downplays the political nature of development concerns, while simultaneously posing these as technical issues amenable to expert intervention by the state. This aspect of state power is manifest in the watershed development programme in India as well. However, the thesis reveals that the depoliticisation of development discourse, contained in the new watershed guidelines, is not equally successful in all contexts. It shows moreover that the broader political environment of decentralisation vitally affects the extent to which development can be depoliticised. The thesis concludes that decentralisation affects the use of the development discourse by the state. It comes to this conclusion based on four observed factors.

First, there are stark contrasts in the watershed programme's implementation procedures between Kurnool in AP and Dewas in MP. These contrasts stem from differences in the

political context of decentralisation in each state. The current political leadership in AP favours decentralisation through community based development programmes, bureaucratic strengthening at lower levels of the government hierarchy, especially the district, and the conscious improvement of technical efficiency of government. This environment has proved to be conducive for the crystallisation of bureaucratic power at the key level of programme implementation. Further, encouraged by the recent history of subordination of panchayats to TDP interests in AP, the Kurnool Watershed Office (KWO) projects its own 'neutral expertise' favourably in contrast to 'arbitrary' interest seeking by elected political representatives. Both these aspects are conducive to the depoliticisation of development discourse. In MP, the political leadership unambiguously supports decentralisation through constitutionally elected panchayats, taking measures to integrate the development process with panchayat representatives at all levels. The political move to decentralise development administration, and integrate it with elected representatives from the Zilla Panchayat, ensures that the depoliticisation discourse finds a relatively inhospitable environment in Dewas. Although the district bureaucracy (DRDA) continues to be vested with administrative responsibilities, elected political representatives legitimately influence important aspects of the watershed programme, like the selection of watershed areas and implementing agencies.

Second, decentralisation bears an impact on the nature of bureaucratic practice, which directly affects the possibility of development being depoliticised. With the concentration of powers in KWO, a single bureaucratic authority, the chances of codification of procedures for participatory decision-making were significantly higher. Through its approach, KWO unsuspectingly created avenues by which its officers could intervene or interfere in the participatory process. Codification created an extended grid for keeping politics 'out' of the project, a framework to which field level officers could refer to while meeting project targets. In contrast, the diffusion of power among different institutions made it much harder for the district bureaucracy in Dewas to codify procedures similarly. This follows the intensification of decentralisation policies in the state through transfers of developmental and regulatory functions to elected political representatives. There are signs that this new environment checks concentration of powers in the bureaucracy, thereby reducing codification, and consequently, depoliticisation of development.

Third, district level bureaucratic orientation, shaped by decentralisation, influences, to an extent, the kind of development practice that can feasibly be adopted by NGOs. Following KWO's highly controlled implementation procedures, NGO, as much as government, PIAs are compelled to adopt a technocratic approach to participatory watershed development. Besides, its uncritical emphasis on consensus reduces the space available for accommodating any upsets in local power relations within the project framework. This is likely to constrain innovative NGOs in their development practice. In Dewas, NGOs benefit from the relative absence of codification of participatory procedures by district programme implementers, and enjoy greater freedom on the ground. Samaj Pragati Sahyog (SPS) represents a particularly

exciting case, where district level government officers extended their support to its radical initiatives, actively contradicting the depoliticisation of development discourse.

Fourth, key actors engaged in decentralisation interpret the development discourse differently. This impacts the extent to which development can be depoliticised. Moreover, their interpretations are shaped by institutional history, and equally, the prevailing political context of decentralisation. For example, differences in interpretation of the national guidelines by KWO and SPS, accounted for very different treatment of key ideas in the development discourse, such as community, participation, consent and the nature of agency intervention. These led to contrasting programme approaches as well as outcomes.

KWO adopted a normative textbook view of community as a harmonious collective, neutered of power relations, and a procedural view of participation, with formalistic emphasis on the expression of consent. It did not encourage the intervention of its own agency to alter power relations; and paradoxically, its practices had the effect of reinforcing the positions of dominant groups and individuals in project villages. This response by KWO, a regional bureaucracy, to the new guidelines, and their symbolic 'imposition' of a participatory and decentralised culture, is particularly interesting. KWO's invention of a stringent participatory blueprint embodies the attempt to transport notions of community and participation into a familiar framework of target oriented project management. Current decentralisation policies of the state government of AP, with their emphasis on bureaucratic strengthening, technical efficiency and community development, were instrumental in shaping KWO's response.

SPS instead, acted on a notion of community as a collective that is stratified by inequality, of participation without concrete change in power relations as a hollow concept, and of consent, as a tool for collective action. Besides, it viewed that its own intervention in facilitating these changes was legitimate, and mandatory, as the project's implementing agency. This approach to development arises from the institutional history of the NGO, as an organisation committed to facilitating grassroots political mobilisation in the tribal areas of India. Yet, it was the dynamic environment of decentralisation in Dewas, marked by the new confidence of panchayats institutions and changing power dynamics between the bureaucracy and elected representatives, that heightened the impact of SPS's radical actions.

Thus, decentralisation greatly increases the interface of the development discourse with regional and local actors. This creates conditions for contest and challenge within the discourse. Yet, the discourse continues to stay alive following its translation into innumerable interpretations and practices, and consistent reinvention (Moore 1995). In a different context, Mosse observes that development has become 'a part of the everyday contest of identity and social position' (2003b: 333-334). His observations are particularly relevant here, as they reaffirm the numerous ways in which decentralisation's actors come to define themselves, in and through terms that constitute development.

These aspects of the relationship between decentralisation and the development discourse expose decentralisation's nature as a political process. Yet, decentralisation is not envisioned as such by the national watershed guidelines. The policy framework espouses community development in an economic sense, but does not articulate political mobilisation as a concomitant objective. Yet, evidence from the thesis indicates that decentralisation's outcomes are political, in one way or another. Interestingly enough, this conclusion adds a new perspective to the nature of decentralisation debates in India. There are three issues of import.

One, the imagery of the 'neutral' public space widely dominates participatory discourse. Yet, public meetings tend to be inappropriate as forums for all members of a community to exercise free speech (Mosse 1994). Therefore, in effect, project public spaces tend to become paradoxically 'apolitical', where serious political issues, such as restriction of project benefits to the landed rich or discrimination against Scheduled Castes and women, can be rarely addressed. This critique applies to NWDP's projects; the theorising of community as an entity isolated from wider political relationships potentially results in the inadequacy of project mechanism, as a political space, for contest and resolution. This bears a constraining impact on the possibility of broader mobilisation through watershed development.

However, there are signs that such spaces are being used politically, despite the project's constraining framework. This is the case even in Kurnool, where KWO's officers tend to trivialise the use of project public space, by using it mainly to display records, without making such documents available for further scrutiny. In Malligundu, where project officers initiated a wider mobilisation at the village level, the emphasis on record keeping was empowering in its symbolism. This promises more effective use of public forums, like articulating grievances. SPS's experience in Neelpura further illustrates this point, and on a much larger scale. This NGO successfully facilitated the use of village public space to challenge pressing issues of exploitation in Neelpura as well as the *ghaat-neeche* region. These actions led to concrete restructuring of local power relations.

Two, case studies in the thesis demonstrate that the outcomes of decentralisation, both positive as well as negative, tend to flow laterally, shaping other decentralisation processes that may unfold simultaneously. The SPS case demonstrates that positive effects from the watershed process galvanised the panchayat's functioning in Neelpura, within the state's recent pro-panchayat environment. The converse picture is also true. In Lilapuram, the deep divide in the village panchayat based on domination, hindered democratic processes of decision-making in the watershed committee. In Kishangarh, project deliberative mechanisms did not work any differently from the panchayat.

Three, these cases reinforce that watershed committees share common contexts of working as panchayats, and are not innately capable of anything different, contrary to the discourse of

participation adopted by the guidelines. On a more positive note, they show that democratic and transparent decision-making may flow laterally from one local institution to another. This conclusion belies fractured perceptions of social reality contained in the guidelines, which prevent development planners from recognising the mutually contingent relationships shared by local institutions. This point guards against the tendency to create new local institutions amongst planners, 'usually on the presumption that the existing situation is deficient', without understanding the existing situation in detail (Uphoff 1984: 241).

All three issues illustrate that decentralisation in India is a phenomenon of crosscutting initiatives. It has the potential to promote a broader 'democratic culture', in the same sense as Laclau and Mouffe (1985, 1988) emphasise the logic of equivalence arising from the 'social whole' and 'crosscutting subjectivities'. Decentralisation is a political process, where politics itself, in the Gramscian sense, is 'fundamentally open-ended' (Hall 1991: 124). This realisation can significantly alter the focus of current decentralisation debates in India, which tend to stop at the pro and anti-panchayat divide. The issues they raise, of the legitimacy and constitutional standing of local bodies, are significant. Yet, the amalgam of decentralisation initiatives presently underway is instigating change in unprecedented ways. These need to be encompassed within the larger framework of analysis.

### **3.2 Decentralisation, State and Hegemony**

The notion that the state rules through a dominant ideology or its rationality is the function of any one group has been widely discredited (Block 1977, Jessop 1990, Kaviraj 1984, Kaviraj 1997, Roseberry 1994, Scott 1985). Jessop's definition of state reflects this concept. It speaks of the 'state, not as a singular, coherent, received entity, but rather as the emergent, unintended and complex resultant of what rival "states within the state" have done, and are doing on a complex, strategic terrain' (Jessop 1990: 9). The decentralised practices observed during the fieldwork reiterate this notion. The thesis concludes that decentralisation both reveals and enhances the disaggregated nature of the Indian state. The field study further demonstrates how this disaggregated character, works to the state's overall advantage, though it also frequently contributes to its declining effectiveness.

Decentralisation disaggregates the state in two ways. One, it creates and emphasises different types of institutions, and imbues them with state authority, irrespective of what oppositional taxonomy they fall under. Two, this process 'multiplies' perceptions of the state<sup>1</sup>, which simultaneously increases the attempts to claim, secure, preserve and contest hegemony, in a variety of contexts. Both these aspects reveal the complex and unwieldy interrelationships underlying the nature of rule, and consequently hegemony, in India. They also underscore the centrality of the state in defining the nature of decentralisation.

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<sup>1</sup> I borrow this expression from Kaviraj (1997), p 243-244.

The first point, regarding the expression of official authority through local institutions, was evidenced through the nature of responses to the watershed project. In at least two cases, local interest in the project stemmed from dominant persons keen to obtain official authority, ostensibly embodied by the project committee. This was particularly true in Lilapuram. For the Reddys, association with the project enhanced their 'traditional' basis of domination validated by official authority. In Malligundu, Naidu's interest in the project stemmed from his continuous search for new bases of domination. The critical difference between the two cases lies in the manner in which each dominant group chose to exercise its influence over the watershed committee. The Reddys, who greatly valued their traditional image as high caste landholders and wage providers, were unfamiliar with KWO's participatory protocol, and subverted it willingly. Naidu however, was content to allow these procedures to continue undisrupted, once his financial interests were secured. In the third case, Kishangarh, locally dominant groups, secure in their respective bases of domination, remained disinterested in the watershed project, despite its association with district government authorities. This shows that convergences between local power and official authority are frequent, but not necessary. In addition, the blurred boundaries between local power and official authority emerge in the context of SPS's successes as an agent of change in the *ghaat-neeche* villages. The NGO's role as a facilitating agent arose from its ability to secure popular support and elicit government support simultaneously. This synthesis is an essential element of NGO power for decentralised development.

The second point, regarding decentralisation and changing opportunities for domination and rule, is made on the following basis. The attempt to secure hegemony is not restricted alone to state bureaucracies like KWO, and the actions of SPS can also be understood as the making of a new hegemony process. Yet, there are important differences in the hegemony concept, as understood within the thesis.

For KWO, hegemony is essentially the attempt to universalise participatory discourse in the sites of implementation, within the limited duration of the development project. The case studies in its project villages, especially Lilapuram, revealed that the failure of this 'hegemonic project' did not result in any major crises for the project's stability. In this context, hegemony is mainly understood in terms of posturing and performance. Besides, not all participatory development projects attempt to universalise participatory discourse similarly. The project in Kishangarh demonstrates the reality of rule through domination unsanctified by consent. As a result of the balancing aspects of domination between the two major caste groups, there was little perceived need by either to compete for the support of subordinate sections of the village. The lack of insistence on participatory practices, or posturing, by programme authorities and local power groups in Kishangarh, was mutually complementary.

The SPS case demonstrates a more substantive notion of hegemony, which is more than posturing. Here, hegemony comes closer to the sense of a 'moving equilibrium', which has to

be 'won, sustained and reproduced' (Agrawal 1998: 51-52). Thus, while SPS 'won' a new position of power for itself, this was not a finished formation. It required constant negotiation with other important actors like government officials in order to be sustained. Finally, the element of reproduction is also present, as SPS is constantly inventing new roles for itself in the region, the latest being its attempt to galvanise local panchayats.

Further, the thesis concludes that a symbiotic link exists between the politics of participatory discourse and the economic gains from watershed development. Both Malligundu and Neelpura, where participatory discourse met with greater success, also witnessed relatively equitable impact of their material gain. In Lilapuram and Kishangarh, in contrast, project benefits were primarily concentrated amongst the rich and large farmers, and the interests of small farmers and the landless were jointly and severally disregarded. These experiences reiterate Gramsci's observation that 'although hegemony is ethical-political, it must also be economic' (1971: 161). In this case, abstract ideas of participatory watershed development with 'universal' relevance, are not successful, unless they are substantiated by concrete project benefits.

Finally, these are the experiences of hegemony that sustain the state and influence its functioning. In some cases, like KWO, the absence of institutional cohesion, among the hierarchy of officers, hampered its hegemonic project to universalise participatory discourse in its project villages. Thus, an increase in KWO's power did not necessarily mean a corresponding rise in its effectiveness. In other contexts, such disaggregatedness actually works in favour of the state. SPS for instance, represented a counter-hegemonic force to the nexus of local state officials, sarpanches and the MLA. However, the support extended by district level state officials to the NGO, in its radical pro-tribal initiative, ensured that the overall credibility of the state did not suffer in the region. Thus, decentralisation, through its profusion of processes, institutional levels and indeed, hegemonies, creates many more alternative spaces of political assertion, contest and struggle. It is within these riches that the inadequacy of the state, in achieving its own stated goals, can be masked better and continuously so. Sometimes, this is achieved through seemingly contradictory actions between different elements of the state.

In conclusion, both the idea and form of the state are central to the unfolding of decentralisation in India. Its diversity of processes, actors and institutions reveal that the state constitutes the principal point of reference for the practice of decentralisation. This thesis demonstrates how state practices for decentralisation go beyond the government/NGO distinction, and also, blur the boundaries between 'official', 'local' and 'popular' power. Moreover, decentralisation impacts the extent to which development can be depoliticised, establishing itself as an integral political process of the state. It is indeed paradoxical that far from being 'less of state', as dominant theoretical positions might conclude, decentralisation augments many dimensions of the state, its power, authority, effectiveness and accessibility.

## Appendix

### New Watershed '*Hariyali*' Guidelines, 2003: Future Implications

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2003, a revised set of common guidelines for the Ministry of Rural Development's watershed development programme came into effect. The '*Hariyali*' Guidelines seek to introduce several significant changes in the programme's structure and procedure prescribed by the previous guidelines of 1994, and a subsequently modified version in 2001<sup>1</sup>. The principal shift from the earlier policy framework seems to be regarding the nature of the role that elected panchayat institutions should assume in watershed programme implementation. This policy change has stirred new debates amidst the prevailing crosscurrents of opinions and experiences regarding appropriate local institutions for a participatory development programme like NWDP, and more generally, the nature of decentralisation unfolding in India. I will offer a brief summary of the main changes attempted, and discuss their future implications in the context of my preceding analysis.

#### Differences

The *Hariyali* Guidelines 2003 contain two principal points of departure from the previous guidelines.

First, the direct involvement of gram panchayats as project implementers in the village as opposed to specially constituted watershed committees in the previous format. There is, in fact, no mention of watershed committees in the latest government policy document<sup>2</sup>. The gram panchayat will now perform all the functions that were previously the responsibility of the watershed committee, ranging from formation of user and self-help groups to preparation of the project action plan. Funds for the project will be transferred directly from the ZP/DRDA to the gram panchayat, but will be maintained in a separate account. With the 'doing away' of watershed committees, the new guidelines do not attempt to prescribe a blueprint for village based participatory decision-making.

Second, NGOs are not to be preferred as Project Implementing Agencies (PIAs). Instead, intermediate panchayats, like Block or Mandal Panchayats, and government line departments have been accorded first and second priority as PIAs. This is in striking contrast to the previous guidelines, which emphasised the role of NGOs in facilitating participatory decision-making as PIAs.

Yet, there are important continuities in other aspects of programme structure and implementation. The district continues to be the most powerful tier in the programme's

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<sup>1</sup> The guidelines of 2001 retained the basic policy orientation of the 1994 guidelines, while introducing important changes like increasing the unit cost per hectare of land treated from Rs 4000 to 6000, and extending the duration of the project from 4 to 5 years.

<sup>2</sup> *Guidelines for Hariyali (2003)*, [www.nic.in](http://www.nic.in)

administrative hierarchy. The powers of the nodal authority, whether the ZP, DRDA or any other autonomous agency of the central or state government, have been more clearly defined, especially with relation to PIAs. The PIA works through a multidisciplinary WDT. The action plan continues to be the basis of every microwatershed project. Finally, the guidelines emphasise participatory decision-making through the involvement of user and self-help groups in project operations.

### Implications

It is possible to interpret the new *Hariyali* guidelines as a definite move towards empowering elected panchayat bodies. In recent months, fresh debates regarding the suitability of panchayat institutions for promoting participatory development have been unleashed. The core issues of contention however, are not new. Old fears about panchayat institutions being vehicles of domination and arbitrary electoral interests, as also platforms for local contractors, prevail. NGOs, clearly the losers in this policy reshuffle, are particularly piqued<sup>3</sup>. The new guidelines are being criticised for compromising the need for 'community mobilisation' in the watershed project, not just by disregarding NGOs, but also by reducing project money available for mobilisation work from 10% to 5%. There is discontent, especially in states like Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Gujarat, that the guidelines were formulated without adequate consultations<sup>4</sup>.

The changes attempted by the recent guidelines are significant because they seek to place panchayats at the centre of decentralised development. They alter a key aspect of the previous policy framework, i.e., project implementation through specially constituted watershed committees. Panchayats being assigned the lead role in implementation constitutes a major policy shift that strikes at the heart of decentralisation debates in India, which have been dominated by pro and anti panchayat perspectives.

Several factors are likely to mediate the practical implications of this policy shift. To begin with, a single policy directive cannot be expected to suddenly alter the entire range of institutional developments in the watershed development sector in India. The incorporation of non-elected watershed committees and NGOs in programme implementation by the previous guidelines reflected growing support for two ideas, one, of 'self-governing local institutions that build on coherence within local communities' (Hulme and Woodhouse 2000: 227), and two, the widespread acknowledgement of NGOs as agents apposite for participatory development<sup>5</sup>. In the intervening years between 1994 and 2003, there has been a tremendous rise in creative thinking about the role of local non-elected bodies and user groups, as well as that of NGOs in watershed development in India. Apart from MoRD's

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<sup>3</sup> MYRADA, an NGO based in Karnataka, as well as WASSAN, a network of NGOs in Andhra Pradesh, have reacted unfavourably to this aspect of the guidelines.

<sup>4</sup> National Consultation Workshop, 13th May 2003, [www.wassan.org](http://www.wassan.org)

<sup>5</sup> Chapter 3, p 85, this thesis

programme, several donor-funded initiatives and NGO networks have taken thinking on these issues further<sup>6</sup>. The existing institutional arrangements within the WSD development sector are complex, and may not fall in line with state policy in any straightforward or predictable manner. The uneven gamut of experiences following the landmark 73<sup>rd</sup> constitutional amendment further tempers enthusiasm for the pro-panchayat orientation of the new guidelines.

My analysis of the 1994 guidelines rested specifically on the premise that policies are shaped by the interpretations of actors who implement them<sup>7</sup>. My empirical research further showed that such interpretations are deeply linked with both their local and regional political contexts. Moreover, this analysis did not stop at the pro and anti panchayat divide, rather arguing that decentralisation was an outcome of crosscutting initiatives. It studied the multiple possibilities of change that accompany the simultaneous working of watershed committees, panchayats, NGOs, government officers etc. within different political contexts. This approach would be useful in understanding the implications of the new guidelines, which like earlier policies, are likely to produce varied effects and interpretations, that cannot be predetermined.

Finally, the recent change in state policy for watershed development as contained in the *Hariyali* guidelines of 2003, reaffirms a core proposition of my thesis. It powerfully demonstrates the dynamic nature of decentralisation in India. It shows that decentralisation in this country is not a one-point agenda, and is being shaped continuously by a multiplicity of initiatives and actors.

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<sup>6</sup> DFID's Andhra Pradesh Rural Livelihoods Project (APRLP) in partnership with the AP State Government, and WASSAN in Andhra Pradesh are befitting examples of this.

<sup>7</sup> Mosse (unpublished), argues against the 'instrumental view' of 'putting a policy into practice', and draws attention to development actors who strive to maintain coherent representations of policy, in the process controlling the policy through their interpretations.

## Appendix 2

### Further notes on methodology

Section 4.3 in Chapter 3 details the nature of methods used for this research. It describes the types of data that were used and explains how these were collected. In this note, I will further clarify how the data collected were analysed. In particular, I will focus on the ways in which the data gathered were interpreted to inform key issues contained in this thesis.

#### Secondary sources

Secondary sources included government publications such as district, block and village level maps, district level gazetteers, block and village level agricultural records and village land and police records. I used maps and gazetteers for broad and foundational information regarding the field site and frequently read these with the help of local government officials and residents from the area. These 'reading' sessions often led to the narration of anecdotes regarding the region<sup>1</sup>, which served as the basis for further investigation and discussion in villages. I used village level agricultural records, aggregated and maintained at the block level, for basic information regarding cropping trends in these dryland areas. I took the help of agriculture department officials to understand and clarify these records. In particular, these officials explained the precise areas covered in block and village records and identified the major crops grown in the two agricultural seasons, *kharif* and *rabi*, in the region. For three out of four project villages studied, there was no usable project level cropping data. The only exception to this was Neelpura watershed project in Dewas district as its NGO PIA, *Samaj Pragati Sahyog*, possessed detailed annual cropping data for all its project villages<sup>2</sup>. However, as this project data was on a microwatershed basis it did not coincide with available village level agricultural records. This made comparisons difficult. Nevertheless, the presence of usable project data in Neelpura, where I began my fieldwork, was helpful in designing survey questionnaires<sup>3</sup>. For example, project level cropping data served as reference points for categories of crop combinations in use in this village.

Village land and police records served a broader purpose than maps and gazetteers as they revealed the impressions that power variables as caste, landownership and official authority bear on the documentation process. I read village land records with the help of the *patwari* or Village

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<sup>1</sup> As for example, the inflow of *Bhilala* tribals from Dhar district to the *ghaat-neeche* part of Dewas district in Madhya Pradesh in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was traced on a map by block level officials in Bagli. I was given several interesting insights into this gradual process.

<sup>2</sup> It is indeed ironical that the Kurnool Watershed Office (KWO), which is obsessive about maintaining records and possesses detailed documentation of physical and financial action plans, project circulars, progress reports and other paperwork, has no usable cropping data for its project villages.

<sup>3</sup> I used the basic frame of this questionnaire in the other case studies as well, taking care to translate key questions into locally intelligible terms and points of reference.

Agricultural Officer and followed this with triangulating documentary evidence in a larger group of villagers. We were able to sort out the 'official' land lists considerably, spotting erroneous information in a large number of cases, but the possibility of a few mistakes particularly in the area of landholdings remains. Landholders, typically at the upper end of the spectrum, continue to register their holdings under the names of different family members in order to escape the ceiling imposed on ownership, because of which land-related data remains troublesome. While I was confident that we had spotted such disguised ownership in a large number of cases, I could not be certain that our 'revised' land lists were flawless. With these limitations in mind, I used the land lists to divide landholders into small, medium and large as well as landless categories. This was the basis of the village level household survey (details later).

The police records were confidential and I read these in the premises of the police station itself. A wider triangulation of these was therefore neither possible nor desirable, given the controversies this might have led to. My study of police records was in the nature of textual analysis, whereby I concentrated not only on the information contained, but also the tone of the language in which descriptions were couched. I took extensive notes in my field diary, using these to understand individual histories and interests as I interacted with villagers. These records revealed as much about the nature of the police force itself as the local conflicts they described.

I used watershed project documents both to obtain information regarding project operations (project strategy through the action plan, project progress through yearly financial and physical completion reports and project functioning through government circulars issued by the district level project office to lower level officials and NGO project implementing agencies) and to serve as the textual basis of official project discourse. I examined these documents through textual analysis and used the information to verify project claims regarding its achievements through personal interviews with local project officials and villagers (details below). This was necessary in order to understand the extent to which the project had succeeded or failed in its principal claims and moreover, to appreciate the processes underlying these achievements.

Documents obtained from *Samaj Pragati Sahyog* in Dewas (MP) included a range of records not directly concerning the watershed project itself. The NGO had meticulously maintained records of collective agreements initiated in the villages where it worked, newspaper reports covering the major episodes of confrontation with other stakeholders in the region and documents concerning an extended legal battle it had waged against a rich farmer in Neelpura village over a village common property resource. I obtained copies of these documents and scrutinised them closely through textual analysis, paying particular attention to the NGO's written responses to provocative news reports. The NGO actively used the local press as a medium to convey a wider public

message defending its stand on contentious issues and claiming a 'clean' image. It was therefore important to examine its responses in the public domain. Further, I used these documents to construct a historical chronology of the major events in this NGO's life, details of which have been presented in Chapter 7.

Finally, panchayat documents included annual physical and financial progress reports and election records, both available from the block office. I used this data mainly to obtain factual information regarding the panchayat's activities. Election records, available for the past decade or so, were used to understand the changing nature of electoral contest in the villages studied.

## **Primary sources**

### ***Interviews***

Personal interviews with a range of actors constituted the mainstay of qualitative data collected for this research. While interviews with senior government officials, NGO personnel, politicians, academicians and some journalists tended to be of a semi-structured type, the majority of interviews conducted were unstructured, informal and conversational in nature. Semi-structured interviews were usually conducted in English and Hindi (which I can speak, read and write fluently) and recorded using a dictaphone. I then transcribed these interviews and used the transcriptions as sources for direct quotations, wherever necessary. In cases where the interviewee held an official position (Project Director for example) or embodied the representative authority of an organisation (Chairman of *Samaj Pragati Sahyog*), these transcribed interviews served as the textual basis of the organisation's discourse.

Recording unstructured interviews was much harder and usually done from memory. During village level fieldwork in Kurnool, where I did not speak Telugu, I would usually relive the day's events every evening along with my interpreter while taking extensive notes. This process allowed us to reflect on actors and events in addition to transcribing. I had occasional differences in opinion with my interpreter and preferred to take note of these differences privately. In Dewas, I similarly took notes of the day's events in the evening, but did so without an interpreter's help. These field diaries have served as an important record of empirical research findings presented in the thesis.

I engaged in frequent conversations with local project officials, interviewing them on a wide variety of issues, ranging from project operations to village matters and local politics. I typically did not use my dictaphone to record such conversations. Later, I consciously avoided any note taking either, as these conversations turned out to be the sites in which local officials expressed

dissident views in confidence. At times, they offered powerful insights into the ways in which project procedures were formally complied with but actually subverted, either with or without their active cooperation. At others, they offered valuable information regarding village actors that was typically unavailable elsewhere<sup>4</sup>. I always recorded these exchanges in writing later in private. I referred to these notes to understand key issues of institutional dissonance, project-watershed committee dynamics and the nature of local domination.

Many interviews and conversations were conducted in collective settings. I always took extensive notes of these group discussions, either at the spot or later, taking care to describe intra-personal dynamics. I used these notes both to formulate points for investigation as also reference in later analysis.

### ***Household survey***

A household survey conducted in the four villages I studied supplied quantitative information regarding changes in rural livelihoods coinciding with or following from the watershed project. I designed the survey questionnaire when I was well into the first phase of my fieldwork in Neelpura village in Dewas district. I later adapted the questionnaire in the other villages, taking care to translate key questions into locally intelligible terms and points of reference. The survey was conducted on a pre-project and current basis, and questions mainly concerned land use, availability of water, crop yields, cropping pattern, marketable produce, labour, employment, livestock and migration<sup>5</sup>. Respondents were contacted individually, and their answers were entirely based on memory.

I always reviewed completed survey forms filled out by local enumerators, and verified the information received amongst groups of farmers. As re-checking every single survey form would not have been feasible, I selected forms randomly for triangulation in group settings. It was not uncommon to detect errors in reporting as the questions related to land use and mistakes arose for three main reasons: communication lags between the enumerator and the respondent, perceived insecurity and fears about revealing the right answers amongst respondents and difficulties in precision as all answers were based entirely on memory. In one village, Lilapuram, triangulation revealed that the enumerators had conducted only a few interviews and forged answers on the majority of the forms on the basis of answers received. This led to considerable disruption in fieldwork and I had to redo the entire survey with other enumerators. This episode provided me with valuable insights regarding the village.

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<sup>4</sup> This includes sensitive information like criminal histories of locally powerful individuals, which would usually not be divulged by other village residents.

<sup>5</sup> Refer to note on methodology in Chapter 3 for more details of the survey.

I entered survey results into Microsoft Excel, sorting out respondents on the basis of their landownership: large, medium, small and landless. As I had triangulated survey results in group settings, I had additional qualitative information concerning agriculture and land use for a number of survey respondents. I then annotated this extra information from my notes onto Excel. This was very useful both to confirm survey findings and also to point out possible divergences in findings. I was able to use these results to understand broad trends like the increase in multicropping in the *kharif* and *rabi* seasons, increase in yields of the principal crops raised and the types of new crops introduced. Following from the problems in corroborating whether the data collected was entirely accurate, it was difficult to arrive at precise percentages (as for example the percentage of the small farmers contacted who were able to start multicropping). Nevertheless, the survey results proved to be an excellent basis for understanding key trends in land use and cropping patterns. It was not difficult to conclude for example, that large farmers with wells in Lilapuram were able to start growing water intensive crops like cotton or drumstick, introduced by the project, whereas small farmers were not, or that numerous small farmers in Malligundu were able to grow paddy in the fringes of their lands near the field bunds constructed by the project. Each of these broad trends was fully substantiated by qualitative information collected both by project officials, and importantly, from farmers through a variety of discussions, in individual and group settings. This synthesis in qualitative and quantitative methods proved to be effective in overcoming these typical hurdles in collecting land related and agricultural data.

While discussing the issue of economic benefits provided by each watershed project, I consciously refrained from presenting my survey data in tabular form. I took this decision mainly because I was uncomfortable presenting precise percentages of farmers experiencing gains or losses, following the difficulties in ascertaining whether such percentages were indeed correct as described earlier. Instead, I chose to summarise key trends regarding cropping patterns and preferred to comment on specific aspects of the distribution of project benefits (for example, which farmers were broadly able to start raising new water intensive crops introduced by the project) that could be easily substantiated by qualitative information. Further, project level cropping data was only available in one village, i.e. Neelpura, and I have presented such data in Chapter 7.

Finally, while I collected rich ethnographic material through a range of interviews and group discussions, there was not adequate space to draw on it through abundant direct quotations. The thesis presents a number of nested comparisons for analysis and ultimately, I was constrained for space. I therefore chose to summarise the main lines of thinking of the principal actors in each case as opposed to quoting them verbatim.

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## Glossary

*Adhiniyam*- Law

*Bigha*- Locally variable unit of land measurement in use in several parts of northern and central India

*Chaupal*- Common sitting area in the outdoors

*Dharna*- Sit in or protest

*Gaddi*- Bunch

*Gadhi*- Temple

*Hariyali*- Greenery

*Kachha*- Temporary; Used to describe roads, wells etc.

*Kharif*- Rainfed cropping season in India (May-September)

*Kunta*- Small pond

*Mohalla*- Residential colony

*Naala*- Stream of water

*Naarda*- Underground channels of water

*Patta*- Land deed

*Pattadar*- Individual in whose name the land deed has been effected

*Patwari*- Village land records officer in many states of northern and central India. His post was created during colonial rule.

*Phad-Munshi*- Local official of the Forest Department in Madhya Pradesh

*Podupulakshmi*- Thrift and credit group for women in Andhra Pradesh

*Rabi*- Irrigated cropping season in India (November- February)

*Sammati-Patram*- Letter of consent

*Sanstha*- Organisation

*Satyagraha*- Resistance

*Sarvasammati*- Consent of all

*Shramdaan*- Contribution of labour

*Yuva-shakti*- Youth power

