

Abstract

Compared to most other states in India, Tamil Nadu is noted for widespread provision of education, primary health care, nutrition support, rural roads, electricity, water and other public services. These services are typically well planned and tend to work well. I examine what determines Tamil Nadu's performance. I argue that widespread and decentralized collective action for public services plays a critical role in it but such collective action is a new phenomenon, dating back to the seventies. I also argue that normative challenges by major social movements, changing influences of various social groups and raising individual capabilities among common people played an instrumental role in enabling such collective action that ultimately had an impact on public services.

UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC SERVICES IN TAMIL NADU

An Institutional Perspective

By

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Social Sciences
in the Maxwell School of Syracuse University

DECEMBER 2010

Approved

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Date

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Acknowledgements

Five fun-filled years are coming an end as I get to the end of my doctoral programme. I learned a lot, met interesting people, travelled to new places, partied hard and had a wonderful experience overall. It happened with the support and generosity of hundreds of people. Let me start with those who shaped my work most without the expectation of gaining anything: my discussants during the fieldwork. I had formal interviews with fifty people who spent one to twelve hours each sharing their knowledge, time, books and other resources. If that were not enough, most of them also fed me sumptuous food, which went a long way in keeping me happy.

Kaliyan and his family were my neighbours for many months and they played a major role in shaping my understanding of how things worked in the region. They also served as friends and gracious hosts without whose support my stay at Villupuram would have been much less enriching. Pari-

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

malan deserves special thanks for his long discussions and also for fundamentally changing the questions I went to the field with. Manohar, Marti and Ravi became the fulcrum of my friends-circle and my evenings would have been boring without them.

Writers Prathiba Jeyachandran and Ravikumar (also an MLA) helped me clarify the relationship between Dalit activism and social change. Gautham Sannah and Kudiarasan took this a step further. Many members of CPI (M) served as my discussants and I would like to thank K. Balakrishnan, Chandra Athreya, Geeta, Mani, N R Ramasamy, Venkatesh Athreya and T R Vishwanathan. My work would have been impossible without the help of many officials, Panchayat presidents and Panchayat level workers. The support of the District Collector, Director of District Rural Development Authority, Superintendent of Police, and other officials at the Block offices and Collector's office of Villupuram is gratefully acknowledged.

A large number of Panchayat assistants and Makkal Nala Panialars shared their experiences with me, and provided the most valuable insights on how the government functions at the grassroots. These insights are critical to my work. Their hard work on the ground also makes possible the admirable delivery of public services in Tamil Nadu. I would have liked to

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

enlist the names of all my discussants, but for their safety and owing to the constraints I agreed to with the Institutional Review Board of Syracuse University, I am unable to provide a more extensive list here.

I owe much intellectual debts to my committee, my teachers and fellow students. My Chair, John Burdick is a great teacher and an incredibly supportive advisor. He kept me on track, provided me the space I wanted and coordinated with others on my behalf. More than anything else, he guided me while giving me the intellectual space to do the kind of work I wanted. I was lucky to be enrolled in the highly sought after classes offered by Chandra Mohanty and Jackie Orr. These were among the first social science classes I took outside economics and their excellent teaching widened my academic horizons. While I did not manage to take a class with Shubo Basu, I had the benefit of long conversations with him. Many of these were on social and political topics of the day, and never once have I left without learning something new. I appreciate the commitment each of them gave my project, and the effort they made to get into my shoes and to offer me critical reviews that helped me see what I was unable to see in my drafts. If I become a teacher one day, I hope I would emulate them. John Harriss at Simon-Fraser University was one of my readers. To

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

say the least, he has been quick and sharp. I also benefitted from the long years of his scholarship on Tamil Nadu. I am sure that a lot of graduate students will understand me when I say that the committee reads drafts that I would not have been happy to read myself. My long tenuous drafts were returned with astonishing speed accompanied by detailed comments. I thank you all for being my teachers, readers, critics and supporters.

I was fortunate to get the support of a number of teachers at Maxwell. I would like to acknowledge Alasdair Roberts, Elizabeth Cohen and Mark Rupert who proved to be wonderful supervisors, and excellent people to start my teaching life with. Susan Wadley has been supportive in a number of ways from preparing me for upcoming conferences to ensuring that I have financial support at school. She also created the space for me to offer a course on South Asian politics, which was a wonderful experience. My thanks to her for all her support.

Vernon Green, the Programme Director has been a source of support from the time I decided to apply all the way till I graduated. Among other things, the timely support he offered during fieldwork enabled me to start my research immediately after coursework. The other pillar of the programme is Mary, and the most common statement in the grad bay about

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

her is *what would we do without her?* I fully subscribe to that statement and would like to thank her superb efficiency and her friendship over five and a half years.

No work is complete without the support of friends and family. I have had the fortune of having the most supportive parents who have supported me in the pursuit of my ideas. I got the space and the support to explore all through my life, without which, it would have been difficult to take many a roads not taken. Many family members have offered support through the years, and I would like to especially thank Bhuvana Athai, Chinni Perima, Mala Athai and Mangala Chitti for their extended support to me and my family.

My friends from my Undergraduate years at St. Joseph's college and from my school years ensured that I have the required social support. Ram, Balki and Vijay went on to provide financial assistance to help me get to Syracuse, and they were always there in my moments of doubt.

My friends from the Right to Food Campaign years laid the foundation for this work. Among them, I owe huge debts to Jean Drze, Kavita Srivatsava, Harsh Mander, Aruna Roy, S R Sankaran and N C Saxena. I have admired them for their social commitment and for their understanding

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

of the Indian society. My work at Syracuse would have been deeply compromised if they had not shared their knowledge with me. Other friends, notably Reetika, read my draft and offered detailed comments, to which I am grateful.

When I landed first in the US my immigration officer asked me if I really wanted to go to Syracuse. 'It is very cold up there', he warned me. Little did he know that I would bask in the warmth of friends! Bertha, Payal and other seniors ensured that I take the best courses and prepare for the research seamlessly. My peers at the Social Science Programme are among the best that one could have gone to school with: I would especially like to thank Bandita, Chris, Dana, Diane, Lindsey, Marie-Lou, Saheli and Umut for sustained companionship and support. Little conversations with others in the corridor including Asli and Prof. Loader typically made my day. Fellow students of the South Asian region including Emera and Ian have been wonderful discussion partners and friends.

Life and work would have been dull without social life. Apart from people mentioned above, many wonderful housemates made my life a pleasure; among them Sripathy, Vikram and Vipul are special. Friends like Bernie, Melody, Mimi, Nidhi, Sachin, Steph, Tatha and Todd have been wonderful

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

hosts during my stay at Syracuse. During trips outside, cousins including Archana, Ravi, Usha and Viji have been fantastic hosts and supporters.

A very special friend entered my life merely a year ago but has managed to take a rather dominant role in my life. Kristin has by now served as my editor, discussant, friend, host, and my most enthusiastic cheer-leader. Kristin, her family, and her friends have offered valuable support over the last year.

The list can go on, but the dissertation has to start. No acknowledgement can serve as a true and complete list of all the intellectual and social debts that one owes - but I hope that I have conveyed adequately that this work was not done in a vacuum. Every page of writing to follow owes a debt to someone, and I am mindful that this is a social product that has only been compiled by me. Thank you.

Chapter 1

Introduction and approach

Abstract

This chapter presents an overview of my research question and my approach to investigation. I sought to understand how the government of Tamil Nadu developed the commitment to providing basic public services extensively. This, of course, would have been shaped by political, social, economic and other historical factors. I have chosen a method of investigation that could help me get a holistic understanding of the factors that affected this development.

My trip to Hirapur village in southern Madhya Pradesh in June 2003 was

15 Jan 2006

I should not have trusted my ethnography professor. She convinced me today that good academic writing should make the researcher visible. By subscribing to this, I have created an existential crisis for myself: Who am I?

I would like to write about my fondness for butterscotch ice cream and denim kurta, or that my grandmother asks me to get married every time I speak to her. Unfortunately, in academic writing these are interesting but irrelevant details. I asked myself what could be relevant and one rule of the thumb comes to mind: I should write only about those things that will influence the reader in how they understand my understanding. It has to have the potential of giving them some ‘Ah ha moments’ of discovering for themselves new information on the information I share with them. They should be able to say things like, “Ah ha, he could have missed seeing this being a Brahmin boy”; “it is unlikely that an official discussed these things with an ex-activist”, etc. A good introduction will make my reader a co-investigator in my project.

PS: I now have the rule, but the question remains: who am I?

among those journeys that challenged my world views¹. I got on the narrow train with its steam engine giving it the look of a toy train; instead of sitting inside the coach, I decided to climb to the top like many others, just in time for the train to leave. In a little while we passed through sandy ravines with deep gorges passing through them and the greenery surrounding it made the place look beautiful. I was at Hirapur as a member of a team to examine the situation of hunger in the region, and as the journey started, it was difficult to believe that there could be so much hunger and misery in such

¹ This section was written on the basis of my field notes collected during this period as a part of an investigation team on behalf of the Commissioners appointed by the Supreme Court of India in the right to food litigation. A summary of the report can be found in (Saxena, 2003)

a beautiful place. As the train pulled along I saw cattle roaming far from villages; people who once owned them had let them wander away, unable to feed them and unable to watch them starve to death. There were a few in flesh and blood, but mostly I saw dry skeletons littered everywhere, as a marker of the desperation lurking behind the beautiful landscape.

At Hirapur we talked to people about what kind of government programs were being implemented in their village. We learned that a few relief works were started briefly to provide employment, but they were closed even while its inhabitants hardly had any store of grain. We were then led from house to house, and we were given a long wooden stick to check if there was any grain in the storage bins, only to feel the empty floor again and again. At least six children had died in the drought of diseases that that they would have survived had not been better nourished. Most children looked visibly malnourished and seemed incapable of surviving even a mild bout of illness. The State government had decided not to spend any money on school feeding, leaving it to the Panchayats². Since most Panchayats spent less than half-a-rupee on a child a day, children often got just boiled wheat

²Panchayats are village level governments comprising of elected members. It can also refer to the informal judicial body of the village or of a caste, but in this work the word is used to refer to elected governments, unless mentioned otherwise.

with some salt, and as one of my former teachers put it, *the impoverished children enjoyed even that*³.

The most cruel impact of drought was on the elderly people. Destitution was widespread and many old people had to live on the charity of hungry people. At least three elderly people had died in the last year accompanied by severe hunger in that hamlet. We met Gyan Bai, wife of the late Hira, when she was preparing her breakfast. The food consisted of a paste of leaves she collected from the forest; a clear sign that she had no food to eat. She ground the leaves and mixed them with water for food. She used to receive state pensions, which had stopped abruptly the year before, without any reason.

Our hosts insisted that we go to the bank of the canal to meet the old man who was sick. We were led to a row of ramshackle huts that could at most provide some shade from the sun for a part of the day. A frail skeleton of an old man named Duria was sitting inside on a cot. He was too sick even to move from his bed. Like many of the elderly destitute, he too lives on occasional charity. We did not ask Duria what he does for food. A

³ In a conversation with Jean Drèze during summer 2003. I should add here that Jean has also written about this experience in news articles that were published during the drought.

terribly dusty plate that had not been used for a long time spoke its own eloquent tale.

Like Gyan Bai, Duria used to get a pension that had stopped a while ago. He was too weak to recount how far back this had happened. His son Pappu explained there was no way for him to help his father since he and his children themselves were going hungry. Amidst all this, Duria was not an angry man. He calmly told us that the people of the village were starving and they should be provided employment in the next few months. For himself, he just asked for an injection to cure his illness. He did not ever murmur a complaint about his starvation and complete destitution. He calmly awaited whatever will come to him.

I was convinced that a lot could be done to alleviate such widespread misery. Improving school feeding, providing reliable pensions and ensuring employment are well within the state government's financial capacity; unfortunately they were not political priorities. Most families in Hirapur had received just 20 days of work in wage employment programmes that year, which was hardly adequate to sustain a family in those months. Low budgets to prevent hunger were further eroded by endemic corruption. We verified official accounts of three employment projects, and all three were

fudged. The dealer of the ration shop that was supposed to distribute subsidised grains and a few other necessities was mercilessly swindling even the poorest of the poor. We met many pensioners who were regularly cheated of up to two-thirds of their measly pensions, and even those who knew that they were being cheated could not complain for the fear of losing what little they got.

On my way back from Hirapur I started thinking about Tamil Nadu (TN) and my perception about my home state underwent a sea change. Some years ago I had thought of Tamil Nadu as a populist government *pandering* to people with useless schemes to get votes. I guess I was acting like a middle-class boy who always took basic necessities of life for granted, and so I did not understand the importance of school feeding, childcare, subsidised grains and other programmes. The same class background made me devalue these services, since they did not meet my standards. As a result, I was an enthusiastic supporter for winding up these services that were a useless *fiscal strain* caused by a populist government. But watching a landscape littered with dead cattle from the top of the ‘toy train’ forced me to re-evaluate my world views.

I was working at that time with the Right to Food Campaign (RFC)

in India that was campaigning for greater involvement of the state in addressing hunger⁴. As a part of this work, I travelled to many parts of India during these years and was struck by the regional disparities in how governments functioned – and for whom it worked. RFC’s first major campaign was on school feeding and I was surprised by how resistant most state governments were to spend on an issue like this⁵. The resistance for childcare for children under six was even higher. In contrast to these states, TN provided these services extensively, and had started doing so decades before the intervention of the Supreme Court.

The villages I visited in TN typically had water facilities, schools, childcare centres, health facilities, all-weather roads, street lights, electricity access, fair price shops, school feeding centres, and an assortment of other entitlements including old age pensions, maternity benefits, and programmes for farmers. Anyone who is acquainted with public services in India will of course know that these programmes are commonly found across the country, and in fact, many of them are centrally sponsored programmes. Tamil

⁴ For an overview of the campaign see (Dréze *et al.*, 2006; Vivek & Florencio, Forthcoming; Vivek *et al.*, 2007b; Vivek *et al.*, 2007a; Khera, 2006a; Dréze *et al.*, 2005; Citizens’ Initiative for the Rights of Children Under Six, 2006)

⁵ The Supreme Court of India made school feeding a legal right of children in public schools and had directed all state governments to initiate it by June 2002. Despite the directive from the court, there was continuous resistance from most state governments and school feeding finally materialized in all states only by June 2006.

Nadu's distinction lies in the extant and quality of its services.

Let me first discuss the extant of services. Almost every child in the state (i.e. 99.53%) has access to a school in Tamil Nadu within one kilometre (Goyal, 2006). Almost all children attend school in the 6-10 age group and there is no gender disparity in Tamil Nadu for this group (International Institute for Population Studies & Macro International, 2008), despite weak laws for compulsory schooling. Every child in a government school gets school feeding, uniforms, textbooks and stationery, without the distinction of class, caste or gender. There are of course some special incentives such as bicycles for girl children who enrol in higher secondary school.

Similarly in the field of health, 98% of all women surveyed in the most recent round of National Family Health Survey (NFHS-III) got ante-natal care (ANC) from a health professional, including 84% from a doctor. ANC was thus almost universal among women, though educated-richer and urban women tended to get care from doctors rather than trained nurses with some disparity. In terms of ANC, Tamil Nadu ranked the highest among all states in NFHS - III, and the all-India average was 52%. During ANC, 9 out of 10 women received all the mandated services needed to monitor their pregnancy in which too Tamil Nadu ranked among the best in India. 88%

of all births took place in a health facility, and in this Tamil Nadu ranked only 3rd in the country overall. 92% of women received post natal care, and 87% of them within the first two days as recommended (International Institute for Population Studies & Macro International, 2008).

NFHS-III also reports that Tamil Nadu had the highest proportion of children who were fully immunised against six critical diseases: polio, diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, tuberculosis and measles. 97% of children lived in an area covered by a childcare centre, 94% of households had an improved water source and 89% of houses had electricity connections.

One of the largest surveys on India's public services done by Public Affairs Centre (PAC) found that more than 90% of all rural households had a "ration card" that is essential to access the Public Distribution System⁶. The PAC survey also found that 90% of the people used the ration shop in the last month or two, and in terms of reliability TN scored much higher than all other states with 73% of the respondents finding the services reliable compared to 51% for the nearest rival, Andhra Pradesh. The national average was 23% (Paul *et al.*, 2006, 87).

Tamil Nadu does not distinguish between populations that live below

⁶For an overview of all services surveyed see table 1.1

or above poverty line in providing access to the Public Distribution System. Following the recommendations of the World Bank, the Government of India (GoI) decided in 1997 to make the PDS “targeted” and available only to those families identified as living below the poverty line. Given the widely acknowledged unreliability of identifying poor families, and determining what poverty is, this move has remained controversial since then. Following the GoI directive, the Government of Tamil Nadu (GoTN) decided to introduce targeting but removed it within one week following a spate of protests (Ratnam, 2003). GoTN now spends a considerable amount of money to cover families that are deemed to be above poverty line by the GoI. In doing so, TN is perhaps the only state in India today that has a universal PDS.

One of the most striking elements of Tamil Nadu’s commitment to provide public services is its commitment to do so almost universally. This can be seen from the fact that over 90% of the population is able to access education, health, childcare, PDS, and other public services as illustrated above. Such a commitment is not easy, since it is costly as well as administratively challenging as the government tries to reach underserved populations in remote areas. This is also a strong indicator of its commitment to people’s

Table 1.1: Top performers in public services

STATE	WTR	HLT	TPT	PDS	EDU	OVERALL
Andhra Pradesh	7	16	4	2	4	5
Karnataka	2	6	3	3	3	3
Kerala	13	7	7	5	8	6
Tamil Nadu	1	4	2	1	1	1
Maharashtra	5	2	5	4	4	4

WTR = Water; HLT = Health; TPT = Transport; EDU = Education.

Source: (Paul *et al.*, 2006, 93)

well-being.

The quality of public services is another notable feature in Tamil Nadu. Let me illustrate it by comparing health, education and childcare services in Tamil Nadu and elsewhere. Across India, childcare for children under six is provided under the rubric of one programme - the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). ICDS was started in 1975 as a national programme to address young children's health, preschool education, and nutritional needs under one roof, called the Anganwadi. The programme is mainly sponsored by the GoI and it is implemented by the states. Since this is a national programme governed by common programme guidelines, it has a common and comparable framework across the country.

The first impressive feature of Tamil Nadu's commitment to child welfare is the rapid expansion of the programme beyond the provisions of the GoI.

Using funding from the World Bank, the ICDS system was supplemented by a parallel programme called the Tamil Nadu Integrated Nutrition Project (TINP). TINP supported more centres than the ICDS itself in the nineties. After the World Bank funding ended in two phases, the centres were integrated with the ICDS programme, thus providing a substantially larger coverage of child care network in the state than was originally envisaged by the GoI.

Qualitative differences between Tamil Nadu and other states could be found in a number of aspects including infrastructure, regularity, range of services, training of workers, regularity of wage payments, and the quality of health, education, and nutrition delivered in the Anganwadi. Many of these are captured in the table below in a large comparative study of ICDS across six Indian states (see Table 1.2).

Table 1.2: Tamil Nadu is different: Facilities in ICDS centres

FACILITIES	TN	NORTH^(a)
Own building	88	18
Kitchen	85	30
Storage facilities	88	58
Medicine kit	81	22
Toilet	44	17
Average opening hours per day	6.5	3.5
% children who attend regularly (b)		
Age 0-3	59	20
Age 3-6	87	56
% mothers who report that:		
Pre-school education takes place	89	47
Motivation of the worker is high	67	39
Worker ever visited them at home	58	22
% women who had PNC (d)	100	55
% children who are fully immunized (c)	71	41
Avg months since training	6	30
% workers who have not been paid (e)	0	22

(a) Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh

(b) Among those enrolled at the local Anganwadi; responses from mothers.

(c) Based on assessment of investigators.

(d) Among those who delivered a baby during the preceding 12 months.

(e) Workers who have not been paid in the last three months before the survey.

Source: (Citizens' Initiative for the Rights of Children Under Six, 2006)

Tamil Nadu ICDS had also initiated a system of training workers to identify disabilities in children at early stages to give them appropriate stimulations to use the plastic nature of children's brain in early stages so that some of the disabilities could be overcome. The programme was in the nascent stages during my fieldwork, but the difference between Tamil Nadu and other states in this respect was remarkable.

Similarly, in the case of healthcare, apart from ensuring that there is a

PHC or a Sub-centre available at a short distance, a variety of basic measures and creative ideas have gone into making the health system effective⁷. Tamil Nadu has a strong cadre of nurses who are well trained and take the health system where it is needed; in fact, TN has one of the highest ratios of nurses per doctor in India. Almost half the doctors in the public health system are women, without which women's access to healthcare would be seriously compromised. Further, a large proportion of doctors are from lower castes⁸, which makes the health system more accessible to most people (Goyal, 2006; Drèze & Sen, 2002; Visaria, 2000). Apart from this, specialised training in many universities is available only to doctors serving in the public health system, so that their expertise is available more widely.

In order to ensure the timely supply of medicines in the healthcare centres (which is so fundamental yet sorely missing in many states), TN started a pharmaceutical corporation that procures drugs and distributes them centrally. This experiment was highly successful and even doctors in rural areas rarely complained of running out of medicines. These and other innovations have made the health system dynamic and responsive to health issues and emergencies like the Tsunami efficiently.

⁷For a detailed account of the system see (Gupta *et al.*, 2009)

⁸I use this term to discuss Dalits, tribal people and the backward caste people.

While the primary healthcare system has grown gradually since independence, the system was rapidly expanded after M.G. Ramachandran (MGR) became the Chief Minister in 1977. The cumulative impact of health and other services has been remarkable, with life expectancy increasing by nearly 20 years from 49.6 in 1971 to 67 for men and 69.8 for women in 2001. Between 1971 and 2005 infant mortality reduced from 113 to 30. Similar achievements have been made in the field of maternal mortality and various debilitating diseases. Tamil Nadu has also managed to reverse the rapid expansion of HIV infection, and its health system played a critical role in ensuring that the state did not suffer from major epidemics like the plague, chikangunia, swine flu, and other epidemics that affected even well-managed states of India. All these have been achieved despite the fact that the state spends less than the national average in health expenditure (Gupta *et al.*, 2009).

For most of my readers, systems to ensure regular availability of drugs, presence of doctors, availability of women doctors, etc. may not look like spectacular achievements. Indeed, these are not spectacular. But, the unfortunate fact in India is that even such basic facilities that most of my readers will take for granted are not available for an unacceptably large

number of people. In this context, Tamil Nadu's achievements, and those of other states like Kerala, are remarkable.

Delivering health, education, childcare and other needs that we are talking about is a complex task that has to take into account social, physical, technological, economic, geographic and other considerations. For a system to function well, it has to be dynamic and has to evolve in response to needs on the ground. I was first exposed to the dynamism and adaptability of the system when I met a senior official dealing with the Public Distribution System in Tamil Nadu (Ratnam, 2003), who explained in detail the various problems the department had encountered over the years and what measures were taken to tackle them.

Over the years, issues such as physical access, problems in measurement, corruption through ghost cardholders, illegal switching of better quality goods for worse during transport, corruption by private ration shop dealers, and other issues were taken up and creative ideas were tried to address them. For example, TN tried a major experiment with the PDS in the late 1990s by issuing coupons to ration-card holders to get their food and other entitlements. Normally, a card holder is supposed to take her card to the shop to get her entitlements. The shopkeeper is expected to verify the card,

and issue the goods after making entries in her records and in the ration card. Since it is difficult to cross-verify each ration card, it was easy for the shopkeeper to write false entries in the registers with people who did not collect their rations.

Cardholders also complained that ration dealers denied them their supplies, which could potentially be pilfered. Further, a large volume of ‘bogus cards’ were issued that were used for corruption. In order to address these problems, GoTN decided to issue coupons each year to cardholders. Shopkeepers were expected to collect a signed copy of the coupon when anyone was offered her entitlement, and this was the basis for reimbursement to the shopkeeper.

The introduction of coupon system made it unprofitable to deny card holders their entitlement, thus making it more likely that dealers would deliver the entitlement. Coupons were distributed not through the Public Distribution System, but through a network of school teachers and other public servants making it difficult to create bogus coupons within a well-established system. The government also announced that those who did not get the coupons in the previous year will not be eligible to get it in the following year, but following protests this was quickly withdrawn. Finally,

responding to complaints that poorer people are unable to buy their entitlements for a month in one installment, each month's entitlements were issued in multiple small coupons.

Such ideas are based on a simple understanding of the situation and none of this, of course, is out of the ordinary. Unfortunately, simple and ordinary ideas that could easily be introduced are often not done in the government, and this makes government run facilities dysfunctional and poorly organised. Tamil Nadu's performance raises questions on what drives the system to be responsive to people's needs and how it developed the political and administrative commitment to deliver services effectively to **common people**⁹.

I felt that these programmes made a huge difference to people's lives and appreciated the state government's role in financing and implementing them well. I was also puzzled by the fact that while some states like Tamil Nadu and Kerala were going a long way in providing these public services,

⁹**Important note on vocabulary:** I use the term "common people" in this dissertation to indicate the poor, women, Dalits, and others who have traditionally suffered from oppressive social conditions. They constitute the majority of the population, and so the label, "common people" is appropriate. In using this, I recognise that there are other sections of the population such as Tribal people in Tamil Nadu who are severely marginalized and tend to be left out of the system even today. While "common people" are not the most marginalised, they suffered from oppressive conditions traditionally, and they are the main subject of this work.

others were impervious to protests demanding them. The puzzle of why Tamil Nadu was so much more responsive to its people in providing basic public services became the question of my dissertation.

1.1 The question

What explains Tamil Nadu's commitment to provide public services almost universally to all social groups is the central question of this dissertation. As it happens in many qualitative works, this question went through twists and turns before taking this particular shape. Initially, I thought that I should be able to get significant insights by looking at one major programme of the government and trying to understand various dynamics that determine its implementation, and I selected the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) for this purpose. NREGA was legislated in 2005 and I was keenly involved in the legislative process; thus I knew its objectives, regulations and the politics around it reasonably well. Further, it is a wage employment programme typically used by the poorest of people and by a large proportion of women. I hoped that it would help me uncover political engagement of common people, which is central to my question. Finally,

since it was a new programme, it was being shaped and I hoped that the dynamics of the programme's implementation would be more visible at this stage.

Tamil Nadu's neighbour, Kerala, has been long celebrated for its success with healthcare, education and other social sector programmes. In comparison, Tamil Nadu has received attention only recently in the literature. One reason for this is that the most impressive expansion of public services happened in the state only after the 1970s. There has been some literature since then analyzing the provision of public services. Three prominent explanations of Tamil Nadu's commitment have been: populist leadership, the success of backward caste groups in securing political power, and extensive public action at the grassroots for public services. The first two focus on leadership and the third looks at the grassroots action.

In the lens of populism, the extension of public services is seen as the result of the political styles of certain leaders (typically Chief Ministerial or Prime Ministerial candidates), who seek to create mass appeal using an anti-elite rhetoric, thus creating a base of common people as voters in order to secure power. This image is consolidated by the extension of public services to the non-elite. While it is easy to understand the analytic temptation

of using populism to understand public services, it is my contention that populism is inadequate to understand near-universal commitments, such as one can find in Tamil Nadu.

The term populism is used loosely to describe actions of such a varied scale that it loses analytical vigour. For example, leaders such as MGR, Indira Gandhi, and a number of others have been termed “populist” in the Indian context. While Indira Gandhi did introduce massive programmes, it did not have the same reach as those initiated by MGR. Unless such differences are merely accidental, it is useful to analytically distinguish the two and have different frameworks to understand how they came about. One reason to do so is that despite the use of an anti-elite rhetoric, when programs are extended only to a small section of a population, they often tend to be appropriated by the elite. The fact that common people who are vulnerable and tend to be excluded from such services are actually able to access services in Tamil Nadu is of analytical significance, and must be taken into account.

Secondly, populism focuses entirely on the leadership of political parties as an explanation to why such services are provided extensively. Many of the villages I went to had schools well before India’s independence. De-

spite the proximity of schools, girl children and ex-Untouchables were not allowed to access the schools. If we have to understand today how girl children and children of ex-Untouchables are able to access schools without discrimination, we have to take into account the social transformations, and merely looking at the political compulsions and rhetoric of Chief Ministerial or Prime Ministerial candidates will not be adequate. We need instead a framework of understanding that takes into account social, and other factors while explaining the provision of public services. Similarly, political parties that tried to roll back services have been forced to reinstate them quickly due to public pressure. Such pressure is not captured well by the framework of populism.

Further, populism is inadequate to explain quality, reliability, creativity and other qualitative aspects of public services in which TN is sharply distinguished. While populism may be able to explain why greater budgetary resources are provided in some states, it fails to explain why some states take far more effort and interest to make programmes highly functional. Let me illustrate this by taking up the training programme in ICDS.

One of Tamil Nadu's most remarkable innovations in ICDS is its Block Level Training System (BLT). There is a national budget for training work-

ers and helpers in ICDS. Each worker is supposed to be trained once at the beginning, and subsequently for 15 days in every two years. In most states there are one or a few centralised locations where training is conducted. Recognising that rural women, who function as workers in the childcare system, face social restrictionis on traveling to the state capital for 15 days continuously, Tamil Nadu decentralised the training at the block level, so that women could travel for training from their home on a daily basis. Training was also split into one week in every year, so that even the travel to the block headquarters will not be seen as a burden. A training team has been created in every block with one woman who is a health specialist, one education specialist, and one nutritionist. After training the workers, the training team tours childcare centres for the rest of the year to get regular feedback and to improve the training system. All this has been accomplished with the same centrally provided budget available to every state.

Since every politician has an incentive to provide better services at the same cost, the question of why politicians in some states are more committed to improving the nature of services compared to others is an important one to ask. But this question cannot be answered adequately within the

framework of populism. Explaining why some governments are forced to deliver, especially to those who are vulnerable to be left behind, is critical to understanding Tamil Nadu's performance; and such explanations can complement the analysis made through the lens of populism.

Apart from populism, the fact that backward castes got political power and have sustained it since 1967 has been used to explain Tamil Nadu's performance. In contrast to Tamil Nadu, the recent success of backward castes in North Indian states including Bihar and Uttar Pradesh have not resulted in similar priorities for public services. In a similar fashion, the Kerala's education and health programmes have been explained by the influence of communists with their lower class base. This explanation by itself is unconvincing, since Communists have been far more dominant in West Bengal where Left Parties¹⁰ have been unchallenged since the seventies, and West Bengal has a poor record of delivering public services. The fact that political parties with non-elites as the main base of support capture political power cannot be insignificant in explaining the widespread provision of public services, but it is insufficient as a stand alone explanation.

In a different approach as to why services work, Sen and Drèze focus on

¹⁰ "Left Parties" is a term commonly used to refer to CPI(M), CPI, and other parties with a strong Leftist orientation.

public action at the grassroots. They argue that public action in the form of people's engagement with the government to demand services plays a critical role in how well services are provided. But public action depends on the freedoms that agents enjoy. They point out that in states where women enjoy greater status and freedom of mobility, schools tend to function better. Women take an interest in the education of their children more than men do and where women have the freedom of mobility and high status, they are able to visit schools often and engage with teachers and officials. This enables the system to respond to various needs in the schooling system and improves schools on the whole.

Following their argument, I too take the position that public action can play major role in determining the nature of public services in a region. While I subscribe to this argument, their works do not adequately answer why some regions, including Tamil Nadu, developed a higher level of public action than others. In my opinion, this is because of the fact that their works on India do not have an extensive analysis of politics, power relations, and institutions. From personal interactions with one of the authors, I am keenly aware that they understand the factors I mentioned above, and the framework of freedoms they use is also broad enough to account for them.

While the framework is broad enough to account for politics, power or institutions, it does not contain the vocabulary to analyse these factors and how changes in them can affect the provision of public services. For example, while they would agree that power relations matter to the context of freedoms, they offer limited theoretical resources to understand power itself and how power relations can change in a society.

All three explanations I discussed above throw some light on Tamil Nadu's performance; that cannot be denied. But the explanations are parsimonious and they allow for more extensive analysis by taking into account a wider range of historical factors. Given the complexity of the question, I do not think that there are either unique or definitive answers to it. Instead of starting from theoretical possibilities, I started my inquiry by being open to a variety of explanations based on prior academic works, and discussions with people who engage with the system on the ground. Based on this, I offer my theoretical framework for understanding Tamil Nadu's performance.

1.2 Approach

While my journeys to different regions were raising questions in my mind, I was also ‘travelling’ across intellectual landscapes. My parents were involved in an export oriented business and the positive experiences of business people with liberalisation in the early 1990s made me appreciate such policies. In that milieu, I had grown critical of extensive state involvement in the economy and started seeing public services as a waste that has to be eliminated. This was strengthened by what I learned at the Delhi School of Economics. As a student of economics, I learned to look at the social world, human behaviour, and policies in certain ways. But the confidence in my knowledge was shaken by my experiences with the campaign. RFC made me think of issues like caste, gender, politics, violence and other issues for which I was intellectually unprepared. The campaign was a great meeting place, and I met sociologists, political scientists, Gandhians, communists, feminists, and others with a wide range of ideas. I found each perspective useful and exciting in some ways but inadequate by themselves to understand my experiences. This restlessness led me to choose a multidisciplinary programme for my Ph.D., confirming in the process my mother’s long held view that I was incapable of being disciplined.

At the Maxwell School I took a number of courses including sociological theories, transnational feminism, collective action theories, poverty law, theories of citizenship and institutional economics. I also engaged a number of works by sociologists, economists, and political scientists working on India. Reading across the disciplinary landscape was an exciting experience and it provided me with new insights into past experiences, while my experiences raised questions, evaluated, and probed the materials I had read over the years. This troubled marriage between experiences and perspectives is key to understanding my approach in investigating my question.

I found that those various theories and perspectives provided me with the resources to understand the world, discern what is relevant, understand what processes are at work and what kind of impact they have. When my Dalit landlady told me many years ago that she was becoming a vegetarian, it had just a culinary meaning to me. But subsequently when I read M N Srinivas' work on *Sanskritisation*, where he pointed out that many lower castes try to acquire higher status by adopting Brahminical customs including vegetarianism, my knowledge of her culinary switch obtained a social meaning. As my theoretical understandings became richer, more experiences became meaningful. Since this is true systematically, I sought to

expand my conceptual horizons as an integral part of my research method.

The fact that we can wilfully expand our horizons has been underestimated in social science research methods. This may be because of the dominance of Objectivity Vs. Subjectivity debates that have resulted in perspectives being viewed as ‘biases’ (and so bad for science) rather than as ‘resources’ (and so indispensable to science)¹¹. Further, many philosophers of method have taken perspectives as a given, ignoring the possibility of wilfully acquiring at least some perspectives. I do not claim that any perspective can be wilfully gained with effort. For example, it may not be possible for middle-class Brahmin boys to get perspectives of poor African-American women easily given the huge gaps in day-to-day experiences that the two are likely to have. While some perspectives may be impossible to acquire entirely, it is fairly possible for a researcher to engage with different disciplines and schools of thought in order to expand one’s conceptual horizons.

While perspectives play an important role in shaping how we under-

¹¹ In similar vein, perspectives have been seen like a “mood” or a frame of mind. In keeping with this approach, one journal mandates that, “Abstracts should be written in the present tense and in the third person (This article deals with ...) or passive (... is discussed and rejected)”. Of course, at the stage of writing, one could mechanically find all “I”s and replace them in the third person. Without adding value intellectually, such practices confer power and authority in the peculiar context of the academia today.

stand our experiences, our experiences also shape our perspectives. Piaget points out that our experiences (including things we learn, hear about, etc.) can cause a dissonance in our perceptive frameworks and thus encourage us to reconceptualise. All learning, including scientific learning happens thorough a recursive process involving interactions between perceptions and experiences:

“Any knowledge, no matter how novel, is never a first, totally independent of previous knowledge. It is only a reorganisation, adjustment, correction or addition with respect to existing knowledge. Even experimental data unknown up to a certain time must be integrated with existing knowledge. But this does not happen by itself. It takes an effort of assimilation and accommodation, which determines the internal coherence of the subject” (Piaget & Garcia, 1988, 25).

By assimilation Piaget refers to the process by which we take into account new information that does not easily fit previous understandings or theories, and by accommodation he talks of the process by which we recalibrate our perspectives and theories in order to accommodate new information. Piaget’s approach underscores the point that observations are not entirely subservient to one’s perspectives, and that dissonances to one’s per-

spectives through observations provide a major avenue for learning. Kuhn has argued that such changes in perspectives (or “paradigms” as he calls it) lie behind many scientific revolutions, and thus have a major role to play in scientific knowledge (Kuhn, 1970). This applies, of course, to knowledge in general. The claim that perspectives influence our understandings and observations, along with Piaget’s claim that observations can lead to a modification of our perspectives provides an important background to my approach in my investigation.

My academic preparation by taking courses from multiple disciplines influenced my observations on the field, and provided the initial basis for preparing my unstructured questionnaire. This enabled me to have conversations with my interviewees covering a large range of issues. The interviews in turn generated questions on my perspectives, and led me to do further reading on new topics. This work is a product of this recursive process of accommodating insights from literature and fieldwork.

The implication of this continued interaction between perspectives and observations can be illustrated by contrasting it with other empirical approaches. In approaches like hypotheses testing, a researcher takes one well defined theoretical framework and carefully assesses if the theory is valid for

the issue in question. This assumes that a reasonable framework is already available that could be taken up for testing, and is of little help in generating an understanding if one is not available already. On the other end of the spectrum are methods like Grounded Theory, which demands that investigators carefully observe the views of the respondents and come up with a theoretical framework based on understandings of the discussants (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz & Emerson, 2001). While this can help to generate new understandings, it gives no legitimate role to the understandings of the investigator herself. Feminists have consistently argued that the perspectives of researchers influence the research even with so-called objective methods¹². By taking this into account, feminist philosophers of method have advocated that good research writing should try and expose the subjectivities of the researcher as much as possible. While this can help the reader to understand the perspectives of the investigator and thus account for some subjective influences, it still does not give a legitimate role for her perspectives.

I have taken the Piagetian position that extended interaction between our observations and perspectives can help develop a reasonable under-

¹²For some examples see (Flammang, 1997; Reinharz & Davidman, 1992)

standing of issues with which we are concerned¹³. Starting with a broad perspective can help us to see the world in a more sophisticated light, and exposure to diverse information can challenge our perspectives and force us to accommodate observations that do not conform to narrow patterns. This in turn will help to develop better understandings. Broad perspectives and experiences together help create what I call a well-travelled understanding, which is the key goal of this dissertation.

In the following section, I will delineate the specific steps I took up to explore my question during my fieldwork. The year-long fieldwork provided me with the most important set of observations that have informed my understanding. In the next chapter, I will discuss the conceptual background of my work in detail.

Fieldwork

I did my fieldwork in the Villupuram district of Tamil Nadu for one year between July 2007 and July 2008. Villupuram is the largest district in the state and is considered a relatively backward state in terms of its industrialisation. I chose the district for logistical reasons, and for the opportunistic

¹³for a discussion of Piaget's epistemological approach see, (Vuyk, 1980)

reason that a major social audit was about to be conducted in the district when I planned to start my fieldwork. A social audit involves people from outside the government auditing government expenditures on a selected project to find out if there has been corruption, and to get an idea of how projects are being implemented. The social audit in Villupuram in July-Aug 2007 was organised on a mass scale involving the verification of NREGA projects of the previous year in 25 Panchayats, and was initiated by the Central Employment Guarantee Council appointed by the Prime Minister of India. As a result, over one hundred officials as well as activists from the region participated in the audit, and that enabled me to be introduced to a large number of people within one week that I could not have imagined doing independently over many months. This introduction helped me save months of introductory work and enabled me to have discussions with a larger number of people, while also securing access to the administration that otherwise would have taken more time.

In order to get a broad perspective about what influences the way things work in the Tamil context, I wanted to converse with people who deal with the government from a variety of positions. These people included lower and higher officials, politicians, Panchayat representatives, activists and people

who benefit from the provision of public services. I also sought to have diversity among castes and gender for my discussions. It became clear in my first few weeks in the field that there have been many important political and social changes in Tamil Nadu that were important to understand (I have discussed them in detail in the following chapters). In order to get a picture of these changes, I decided to interview people who were engaged in political or social issues for many years. Since I prioritised interviewing people with a long engagement in politics, many of my discussants were aged fifty or older, including a few who were politically active in the region even before India's independence in 1947. They included some founding members of the Communist party in the district¹⁴, a few pioneers of the Dravidian movement in my block, and several retired government officials who had seen the government change over the years from inside.

Diversity in age, gender, caste, positions (within government, parties, etc.) and nature of engagement with the government were among my main guidelines in selecting my discussants. The actual selection of my interviewees was based on the snowball technique of asking my discussants for names of people that I should meet in order to pursue my question. As

¹⁴ Villupuram was carved out of the larger South Arcot District in 1993.

it happens with those who do fieldwork, I got names even without much prompting. The list of people I was advised to meet included: Dalit activists, communists, workers of major political parties, people who were engaged in the Dravidian movement, retired government servants, officials who had served in a variety of positions, Panchayat presidents and many village level activists who had taken up collective action for various public services for their village.

Since I spent a year in the region, I was able to spend a considerable amount of time with each of these groups. But as in any research work, I missed some sets of people that I would have liked to cover. Critical among them are representatives of Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), one of the most important political parties of this region that is based on the dominant caste of the region, the Vanniyars. This is a major gap in my work since Vanniyars have an impressive history of mobilising socially and politically in the region. Some of this was covered with secondary literature, and many of my respondents were from this caste themselves. That said, by missing this group, I am likely to have missed an important part of the picture.

Secondly, though I went to the field with the express intention of paying attention to women's engagement with the government, women turned out

to be less than 10% of my discussants. In hindsight, this happened in a number of ways. The snowball system of selecting my discussants inevitably went through a social filter of who is “important”, and this tends to men. When I did insist on identifying women activists or officials, I was able to get names, but I insisted on this rarely. It took a conscious effort on my part to include women discussants but the excitement of fieldwork and the ever-growing list of people to talk to and meetings to attend made me lose track of this gap in my discussions. Paying closer attention to women’s engagement with the government would have been particularly insightful for two reasons: first, it is widely acknowledged that women are a major political constituency in Tamil Nadu and that politicians try to appeal to women voters. Second, women engage with public services like childcare, education, water, etc. and women’s political voice can have a significant impact on these issues. These are important perspectives that will not be represented in this work¹⁵.

The fieldwork consisted of interviews & discussions, participating in activities with my discussants and archival work. This included forty-nine

¹⁵Analysis of gender relations, of course, does not depend on just having women interviewees. A lot could be said based on the discussions with men as well. Based on my focus, I did not pay attention to gender issues in this draft, but the rich materials from the fieldwork will certainly merit a gendered analysis as I extend this project later.

in-depth interviews that lasted between one to twelve hours¹⁶ each, and these were conducted after I had reasonably acquainted myself with my interviewees. I also spent a considerable amount of time in government offices, mainly at the Collector's office of Villupuram and one Block Development Office. The collector is the main administrator in charge of the district who has all the government departments reporting to her ultimately. The Block Development Office¹⁷ (block office, in short) is one of the main implementing offices for rural programmes and thus offers a good vantage point for understanding administrative issues at that scale. Most blocks are comprised of around forty Panchayats in Villupuram district, and they are the main link between the administration and Panchayat representatives. Attending block office meetings gave me an introduction to all the Panchayat presidents of the block and every Panchayat worker; and I was regularly invited to Panchayat offices and to projects that were being implemented by them.

I lived at the district headquarters for four months and subsequently at the block headquarters for the rest of my stay. This enabled me to attend

¹⁶ The longer interviews were done over many months with the idea of getting a deep understanding of my interviewees' work and perspectives.

¹⁷ This is popularly referred to as the Panchayat Union Office in Tamil Nadu.

weekly meetings between officials and Panchayats and to continue my visits to the collector's office. Apart from administrative events, I participated actively in a number of protests, party meetings and social gatherings. I lived next to one of my key discussants and had a number of casual encounters with others since I lived in the area for many months.

The formal interviews were typically preceded by an extensive interaction with my discussants, sometimes over several weeks, and this was the case with two-thirds of my in-depth formal interviews. The discussions were guided by an informal questionnaire where I introduced the questions I was investigating to my discussants. I also discussed several possible explanations that I have encountered in the literature or in my discussions with others. This format enabled my discussants to bring new perspectives that I might have missed, to confirm or to contest the perspectives I offered, and to add to my information on the perspectives I discussed with them. This process enabled me to understand how widely shared certain understandings were, and also to assimilate new perspectives on my question.

Whenever any discussant offered a new perspective or information that I thought was important in understanding my question, I introduced that angle in discussions I had with others subsequently. This process of snow-

balling perspectives meant that the nature of my questions changed over a period of time, getting richer and more complex as the year went along. I also did a series of interviews with two key discussants, one of whom was a Communist activist and the other a Dalit activist. Both of them had been active in a small region within the district in mobilising for public services. The process of repeated interviews with these two discussants enabled me to discuss an entire range of issues with them, and this helped me in building an integrated picture that turned out to be insightful. I have presented one of their accounts in chapter 6.

Apart from formal interviews, discussions and participating in events, I also did some archival research at the Roja Muthaiah library, the Madras Archives and at the police station at the block headquarters. Police stations maintain detailed files on each Panchayat and these often contain details about major protests in the region. I used them to get a picture of movements in these villages. The records provided a list of major conflicts in these villages going back to the 1930s. But these did not cover a number of caste and other conflicts that did not involve any violence or a curfew, and thus provides only a partial picture of conflicts in the region. The library and the archives were useful in getting information about the political

situation in the 1970s and before.

A note on “generalisation”

As I argued above, the selection of my discussants was based mainly out of the desire to have a rich set of perspectives about how the government works. This made me choose a manageably small location and to focus on the interaction of a variety of actors. But the purpose of my work is to examine how public services function in Tamil Nadu and not solely in one district or one block where I did most of my work. This raises the question of how I apply the insights from my fieldwork to a larger region that I did not observe directly.

A common method in the social sciences is to use “sampling” wherein the researcher expects to find the larger dynamics to be reflected in the carefully selected sample. Studying the sample is expected to reveal the general tendencies, and thus the results can be “generalised”. I cannot claim that Villupuram is a representative district or for that matter that my discussants are representative. Further, I did not have a standardized set of questions that I can carefully analyze across my respondents on which I can use a battery of statistical or logical tests to arrive at my generalisations.

I cannot, thus, claim that my observations can be generalised to the entire state.

The purpose of my fieldwork was not to provide a representative set of issues, but to examine those events and dynamics that could have had a powerful impact in shaping the delivery of public services. For example I identified some factors that were important in Villupuram including: expansion of democratic space, mobilisation by Dalits, political competition, expansion of education & employment opportunities and reservation of jobs. Some of these, like political competition, are state level tendencies that affected the Villupuram district and I have made a cautious extension of such insights beyond the immediate region that I observed directly. Towards the end of my fieldwork, I discussed some of these insights with officials and activists who have engaged with issues across the state to see if these claims could be extended. Finally, I have tried to substantiate my claims by consulting literature on each of my claims.

Using these I have selected a set of claims that I feel are likely to have a widespread impact on the delivery of public services across Tamil Nadu. While this is not foolproof, I have taken this approach with the view that it is likely to generate useful insights. Further, I see the production of knowl-

edge as a social process and a continuous one. The claims I will make in this work will be available for contestation, and thus untenable generalisations can be challenged and modified in the future, and this process will help in generating better informed knowledge. Such a process can make works like this valuable, and thus contribute to the social production of knowledge¹⁸. In other words, I have not followed rigorous methods of producing claims that could be called “externally valid”. Instead I have taken the route of cautious extensions of my claims as transparently as possible so that my claims can be conTESTED and modified socially. In doing this, I am in good company of social scientists including the likes of Max Weber and Karl Marx who made succinct claims on large social phenomena based on “samples” which most advisors of social science doctoral candidates will reject today!

One may ask why one should settle for a method that is not rigorously valid in pursuing such a question. The problem with technically rigorous

¹⁸ I wish to contrast this with approaches to “validity” that focus on how an individual work was produced without looking at the role they play in the social production of knowledge. While notions of validity are highly useful, they should not be used as the sole test of usefulness of knowledge produced by an individual. Even works that are not strictly valid (in a sense that they have not followed rigorous procedures to accurately represent the social world) can be useful in raising questions and debate that are crucial when knowledge is seen as socially produced. The social process of debating ideas brings in a lot more information and this has the potential in studies of the society to compensate for not having representative samples in an individual work.

methods in the social sciences is that they make such tremendous demands on the nature of data and the theoretical framework that it becomes impossible to take up a complex social question. For example, it would be difficult to find statistically rigorous data on historical questions that are relevant in order to understand my issue. Even if reliable data is available, it is not easy to use it with a complex theoretical approach that emphasises a multiplicity of perspectives. For this and other reasons, it is often necessary to go beyond technically rigorous methods in order to investigate many important questions.

1.3 Strengths and compromises

My “journeys” have affected this dissertation in three important ways that the reader should be aware of. **Firstly**, they made me value the provision of public services, and this is distinct from many other schools of thought in the social sciences. For example, there are those who devalue these services since they prefer a small government and the dominance of the market system. And there are others who see such services as mere painkillers that sustain terrible structural conditions. When a theorist starts from such a

perspective and explains why such services are extensively provided in some place, they will tend to look mainly for ‘negative’ conditions in a society that lead to it, and the stories they will tell will be based on a selection of historical facts that will sustain their argument. In a similar vein, the fact that I value public services will have an impact on my story.

Secondly, these experiences convinced me that no singular theoretical framework was adequate to understand the social world. This made it impossible for me to ‘locate myself in a theory’ or to take up hypotheses testing based on some given theory as my favoured approach. Since I did not find any theoretical framework within which I could locate myself, I was confronted with the need to build my own conceptual approach along with an investigation into the question. In order to do this I have sought to bring a number of theoretical approaches together by selecting a vocabulary that could be used more widely and by accommodating these theories so that they can relate to each other.

And **thirdly**, I started valuing analysis that are ‘well travelled’ in terms of the perspectives they use and in their ability to take into account a wide variety of relevant historical information. This became the most important quality that I wanted my analysis to have, and so I have tried to get an

idea of as many political, social, economic and other dynamics that have been shaping the region as possible. Such an interconnected view comes at a cost. Given that the social world is highly interconnected, any issue we take up to examine will involve a large number of factors that have influenced it. The volume of information we have to account for increases even more with a question like mine that cannot be answered without delving into deep historical roots. Inevitably, any study has its limitations, and these limitations are all the more acute for an individual graduate student. We have to work with a narrow base of information to make large inferences, and this requires the researcher to make different kinds of compromises in choosing what kind of information with which we will work. Many students choose to work with narrow but well-defined basis of information where the data is very clear and has been carefully gathered. While this has its obvious merits, I find this approach somewhat limiting, partly because the world is highly interconnected and I find it difficult to make large inferences with a narrow base of information.

I have decided to make a different kind of compromise, that is to have a broad base of information, but one that has not been collected with as much care. There is a problem in my research in terms of its informational basis,

but I hope that incorrect claims will be corrected in the social process of knowledge generation through criticisms, and the supplementation of information by other scholars. In other words, I have opted to make some compromises on technically sound methods for achieving external-validity in order to get a well-travelled analysis. I have tried to present the process of my research and my subjectivities extensively, and I hope that this will help the reader to make careful assessments of my analysis, and to use insights generated in this work cautiously.

In the next chapter I will look at the conceptual frameworks that I consulted throughout the study and present a framework for understanding my question.

May 2007

It is time to confront what doctoral students seem to hate the most: The IRB. They will reject your application at least once; I was advised by at least two knowledgeable professors. It is a way of showing that they are there, I was warned. I saw the application form earlier today and the questions go on forever! I have no idea how I am going to fill some of them. I called the IRB office for some clarifications, and was pleasantly surprised that the staff was courteous. Frankly, I did not expect this.

I have decided to do what it will take to make the board clear my application: I will make my respondents anonymous, with fake names for them, present fake names of villages and do what it takes to make them invisible. The IRB scares me.

May 2010

I feel like beating myself with my chappals. It was so stupid of me to declare to the IRB that I will not reveal any name. Most of my respondents are going to be upset that their names were faked. Having gone through the IRB hoop, I have to present fake names, and remove personal references as far as possible. The IRB was not as bad as it sounded at the beginning; I committed a costly mistake.

Chapter 2

Institutions and development

Abstract

In this chapter I put together a framework of understanding based on relevant works of other scholars and insights from the field-work, and in a sense it represents the culmination of my work. I first discuss how I understand development, and why the provision of public services could be understood from the development perspective. I then argue that institutions are key determinants of long term performance, and construct a framework of understanding what institutions are, how they affect development and how they change. In the process, I argue that collective action plays a critical role in

institutional change, and that understanding the nature of collective action in a society can provide insights into what kind of institutions will be created therein.

July 2009

Me: *Here's the plan. I will start with a laundry list of useful theories in the first chapter. In each of the following chapters I will point out how my observations challenge these theories and modify them part by part. The final chapter will be on my theory. Since my point is to build a theoretical understanding, this is the most logical way of arranging my chapters.*

Advisor: *Is your plan to set forth in accretive fashion your evolving theoretical model? This will be hard to do, because you are asking the reader to hear you out but also that the model as it stands here will also very likely be further "tweaked" in the very next chapter. That is a hard intellectual "place" to ask the reader to occupy. Normally you would set forth the major ways that your empirical data reframed your theory at the end of the dissertation.*

Me: *Thank you for the advice, but I feel that this is the most logical way of arranging my chapters given my approach.*

November 2009

I am trying to write my last chapter and I am not sure if the reader will remember the introduction I gave to these theories 200 pages ago, or how I tweaked it 120 pages ago... and I will bore them by repeating it all. I wish I could just avoid any theoretical discussion at first, but that will make it impossible for the readers to understand where I am going. I guess I'll have to take the advisor's suggestions and just put the theory chapter in the beginning. I don't like doing this, but...

My main theoretical claim is that *when inequalities of freedoms reduce in a society or when the substantive freedoms of people expand, the society is more likely to put in place institutions that are conducive to development.* Institutions have a long-term

impact on performance, and so reduction in inequalities in a society can have a substantial impact on development in the long-term. I will argue that Tamil Nadu's commitment to people's well-being is a result of institutional changes that happened in-turn due to expanding set of substantive freedoms and a reduction in political and social inequalities across castes, gender and classes.

The rest of this chapter will be devoted to elaborating the framework by which I arrive at the theoretical claim, and I will call this the institutions and development framework (ID Framework). Since my focus is development, I start with a discussion of what I mean by development. Following the discussion on development, I have an elaborate discussion on institutions including the definition of institutions, factors of institutional change, the relationship between institutions and development and finally a brief comparison with other institutional approaches.

This theoretical framework is constructed by borrowing from different disciplines. It is not uncommon that similar ideas are expressed using different vocabulary across disciplines, and one of my challenges in doing this transdisciplinary work was to create a vocabulary to express my ideas. Similarities apart, there are major differences in assumptions of hu-

man behaviour, philosophical basis that underlie theories, unit of focus, and other factors that make it challenging to use insights from one set of theories/discipline along with others. One of my main theoretical contributions in this work is to create a vocabulary and a framework of understanding that is capable of bringing together insights from these disparate frameworks in one place¹.

2.1 Development as freedoms

My understanding of what development means comes directly from the work of Amartya Sen, especially his book *Development as freedoms* (Sen, 1999). Development as freedoms is an approach to evaluate human well-being in which development is seen as the degree to which people are able to live a life they value by doing things or becoming things that they value. The freedom to pursue what ones values depends both on individual capabilities (economic, social, physical, etc.) and institutional arrangements. The approach values *ends* like being free from hunger, illiteracy or violence as well as *means* like the freedom to participate in markets or political

¹ In doing this, I am conscious that I will do disservice to some of the theoretical/political projects of the authors I borrow ideas from. This is intended.

decision-making. By placing emphasis on outcomes and processes, it combines notions of positive and negative liberties within it².

Sen argues that there can be a broad social consensus in each society on certain things as being fundamental to a person's well-being³. He calls these as *substantive freedoms*. Substantive freedoms will vary across societies and overtime, and there is no philosophical basis of arriving at a set of substantive freedoms that must necessarily be true in a society. Such freedoms can be identified only by broad public deliberation on what is considered important for people's well-being in a society, and there is no way to ensure that any set of substantive freedoms that have been arrived at are perfectly reflective of people's aspirations within the society. This problem is not unique to the development as freedoms approach; any approach to evaluating human well-being will have to confront this. The advantage of this approach is that the process of identifying substantive freedoms is made explicit so that it is amenable to debate and change.

Once a set of substantive freedoms are identified, a society could be evaluated based on how far people are able to achieve these. Such an approach

²For a discussion see (Berlin, 1969; Mill & Rapaport, 1978; Anderson, 2003)

³Despite the fact that individual preferences vary, Sen argues that it is possible to arrive at a broad social consensus on what is important in a society for well-being.

is used in Human Development Reports that evaluate factors such as infant mortality, maternal mortality, life expectancy, freedom from violence, literacy and morbidity, along with per capita incomes, in order to evaluate development.

Sen argues that in evaluating a society, one should take into account both outcomes as well as processes. For example, it is possible that extreme poverty and hunger coexists with perfect formal democracies. If one focused only on procedural aspects such as elections, one would argue that a society is doing well even if the outcome of such a formal process involves extreme poverty and hunger. On the other hand if one evaluates only outcomes, it is possible to ignore that high incomes, life expectancy, and other valuable outcomes coexist with dictatorships, unfreedoms for women, etc.

Development lies in enhancing individual capabilities or changing institutional arrangements such that most people in the society have the freedom to attain at least the substantive freedoms. This is the philosophical basis by which I determine what a good government is or what are normatively good conditions that can lead to development. Sen's work and those of his close collaborators like Jean Dréze have focussed on the substantial role that public services play in enhancing human well-being (Dréze, 2004; Dréze &

Goyal, 2003; Drèze & Sen, 2002; Drèze & Sen, 1997; Drèze & Sen, 1989).

The value I attach to public services comes directly from these works, and from my engagement various campaigns for such services. This value basis has analytical implications for my work, on which I will take a few moments.

Under the late Chief Minister M G Ramachandran (popularly called MGR), there was a substantial expansion of school feeding, child care, health, and other services in Tamil Nadu. MGR was widely criticised for being a “populist”⁴, and social scientists from different perspectives argued against such measures. Some argued that it reduces *economic growth* (by reducing “investment”), others argued that it does not address *structural problems*, etc. These analysts searched for explanations on what in the Tamil society or polity enabled such “bad policies” to be followed. For example, MSS Pandian argued (Pandian, 1992) that MGR expanded a number of popular schemes but these do not address structural issues and enquires how common people can support a Chief Minister who acts against their own interests. He attributes this to the successful appropriation of popular symbols of resistance by MGR through his movies. These endeared him to the masses, but MGR appropriated these symbols in a “perverse way”

⁴For example see (Pratap, 2003)

(Pandian, 1992, 140) by removing the revolutionary spirit of these symbols.

A negative approach to public services is not restricted to Tamil Nadu. For example, writing about food subsidies and other measures in Sri Lanka, Jaywardena (Jaywardena, 2004) uses words like *dirigiste*, *political opportunism*, *paralyzing growth*, *market failures*, *populist*, and even *villain of the piece* to describe them. He goes on to focus on “problems” like populism and electoral pressures⁵, and how they prevent economic technocrats from devising “good policies” that would promote economic growth. Jaywardena evaluates human well-being mainly in terms of overall economic growth, and thus finds the provision of public services a hindrance to investment and growth. Pandian on the other hand values ‘structural reforms’ including land re-distribution, and thus finds public services inadequate to the ends he values. Though they start in different ends both authors look for problems in society that enabled the prioritising public services.

By valuing such public services, I tend to look for the features in the Tamil society that could explain why the government followed “good policies”, as I understand it. My story, like that of others, will be a partial

⁵The author even advises technocrats to implement unpopular policies as soon as elections are over, so that such “reforms” are not on the top of public mind during elections.

one – and this is structured by a different set of values I attach to public services. While I attach importance to public services, I recognise that this is not the only way to enhancing human well-being. For example, states like West Bengal have taken up extensive land reforms but have relatively neglected public services, and my philosophical framework recognises that such policies too contribute to enhancing well-being.

The discussion so far has looked at how I understand what development *is*. In the next section, I will look at Sen's discussion on what drives development.

The central force of development

Apart from providing a philosophical basis for understanding development, Sen also makes an empirical claim that freedoms are the means of development. For example, good health is a valuable goal in itself, and at the same time a person who is normally healthy is also capable of pursuing employment and other opportunities more effectively. In advancing freedoms, human agency is constrained by people's capabilities as well as social arrangements, economic opportunities, political and other contexts in which people live. Thus, the principal means of development would be to enhance

people's substantive freedoms that will enable them to pursue their own well-being, and those of others, more effectively. It follows from this that there is a two way relationship between institutions and agency: when an institutional change increases freedoms, it will make agency more effective and when agency is more effective, it has a greater impact ability to bring about favourable institutional changes in turn.

Any event or arrangement that enhances the substantive freedoms is thus *intrinsically* valuable for its own sake, but it will also have an *instrumental* value since it determines how effective a person can be in the pursuit of well-being. *This instrumental logic provides the link between the development as freedoms approach and institutions.* Despite the fact that institutions are an important component of Sen's work, he does not theorise institutions, how they come into being, or how they change. These questions are critical to my understanding of how development came to be prioritised in Tamil Nadu. In order to pursue my question, I have used works of institutional theorists to build an institutional understanding that is lacking in Sen's work. I turn to that next.

2.2 Defining institutions

The term institution is used in describing a wide array of things including culture, social class, religious bodies, caste, parliaments, judiciary, bureaucracy, markets, etc. The common feature that institutional theorists focus on is that all of them relate to some patterns of human behaviour, almost as if it were a rule. Formalised rules play a major role in governing some institutions like the bureaucracy, while other institutions such as culture are based on rules that are widely understood but often not formally defined. It is thus common in the institutional literature to distinguish between formal and informal rules.

March and Olsen describe institutions as “collections of interrelated rules and routines that define appropriate actions in terms of roles and situations” (Peters, 2005, 29). They emphasise on routines that are often a result of rules, norms and understandings. Their definition comes close to the popular understanding of the word *institutionalizing*: that is to make something a formalised routine. By drawing attention to *roles* they point out that a different set of rules may apply to people playing different roles (e.g. the CEO, labourer and board member of a corporation). Instead of roles, I will use the term *status* in this work since it highlights hierarchy

better than the term *role*. This is analytically useful since changes in hierarchy and status are major forms of institutional change and this term is capable of capturing such changes. Further, status is more conducive to accounting for identities such as caste and gender, which is useful in institutional analysis.

By drawing attention to *situations*, they point out that the rules of governance may be different from one situation to another. We can use the term *space* instead of situations to denote what kinds of rules apply in certain spaces compared to others. This terminology makes it easier to borrow the insights of social geographers who look at how institutional changes can happen by the reorganisation of physical and social space.

The fundamental role of institutions is to regulate human actions. Such regulation has to be based on ideas of what kinds of actions are desirable (so that such actions can be encouraged) and what are not (so that they can be discouraged). I call the social understandings of what actions are (un)desirable as *norms*. These come from laws, religions, economic theories, and other spheres. Norms are ultimately embedded in *rules* that are detailed dos and don'ts that regulate our activities. By rules I refer to laws⁶,

⁶Laws can be both a source of norms and a form of rule at the same time. Constitutions, for example, are a major source of norms that the laws following it are supposed

government orders, constitutions, memos, conventions, treaties, traditions, religious codes, and all other forms by which detailed regulation of what to do and what not to do are created.

The way I use norms overlaps with the way many institutional theorists use the term rules, but I prefer to distinguish the use of two terms. I use the term “rule” to indicate the ultimate guideline of dos and don’ts, and the term “norm” as a broader concept that affects how a number of different rules are formed. For example, the norm that every child must get at least basic education can translate into specific rules such as the government should provide a school within walking distance of every neighbourhood, each school should have separate toilets for girl children⁷, every parent has an obligation to send their children to school, there should be scholarships for children from poor families, etc. Rules are based on a close tactical understanding of the situation so that such norms can be translated into action. I will demonstrate in the next chapter how this distinction can be analytically useful.

Rules are typically shaped by a number of different norms together.

to delineate.

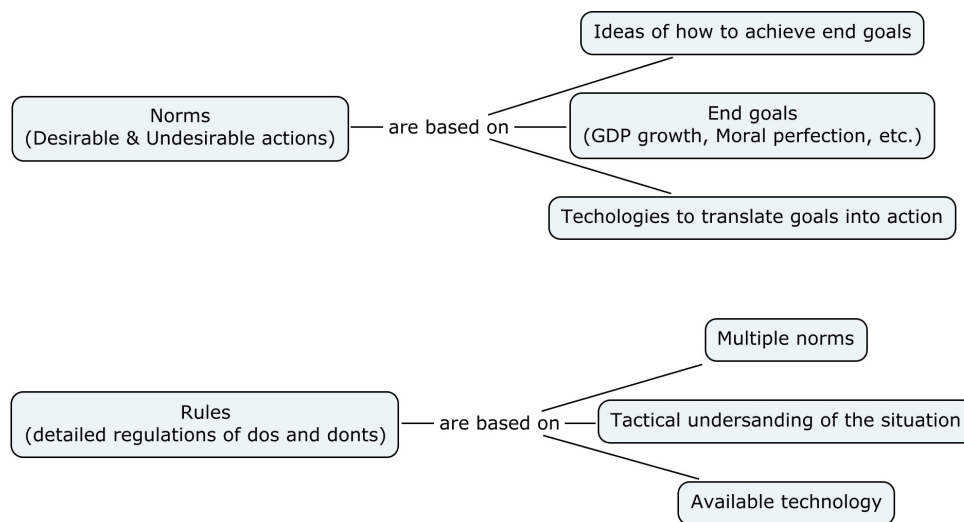
⁷Absence of separate toilets for girl children is identified as an important cause that prevents many parents in India from sending their girl child to school

This is another reason why the distinction between norms and rules can be analytically useful. For example, a rule that women cannot be employed in factories beyond 6 pm can come out of the norm that employers must not harass their women workers, as well as the norm that women must not be outside the home beyond daytime.

Norms are created in order to help the society achieve *collective goals* such as prosperity, safety, morality (according to some vision of it), economic opportunities, good working conditions, etc. Norms are based on understandings of what kinds of actions will lead to the desired goals. There may be varied *understandings* of how a goal can be best achieved, and these can be radically different. For example, the Mercantilist and Neo-liberal norms relating to free imports are diametrically opposed, though both seek to increase the prosperity of a country. Overall, one could say that norms are created out of *a combination of end-goals (e.g. justice, wealth, moral purity, well-being, GDP growth, etc), ideas about how to achieve them, and of course the practical means of achieving them*. Thus, a change in the nature of goals, understandings or practical technologies for regulating human behaviour can all result in a normative change.

To carry on with the story, norms need not be inclusive in a sense that

the collective goals they promote could represent the aspirations of only a small section of the society. Seen from the development as freedoms perspective, norms are conducive to development if they reflect the substantive priorities of the broadest sections of the society, and are based on ideas that can effectively deliver the substantive priorities.



Constructive approach to creating norms

I take a constructivist approach to how the norms are created. Broadly, this approach argues that no norm is “given”, and norms are constructed in the society in the process of human interaction. This approach takes into account human understandings and a diversity of motivations that go into creating different sets of norms. For example, ideas such as justice, eco-

conomic efficiency, exploitation, appropriate gender roles, racist supremacy, and what not have been influential in creating normative frameworks of the social world that we live in. This approach to institutions differs in from functionalist and instrumental approaches, which argue that institutions exist mainly to enhance economic efficiency or to serve the material interests of the elite (Chang *et al.*, 2005). The constructive approach takes into account material motivations, but also gives importance to other motivations and ideas that shape normative structures.

Since the constructivist approach gives space for multiple priorities and goals, there should be some process by which collective goals could be formed. Similarly, in recognising that there is no given way of achieving a collective goal, the process of creating shared understandings of how to achieve collective goals is critical.

Shared understandings and creation of collective goals happen through the process of collective deliberation. The deliberative process can create ideas about what kind of institutions can be created in the given social context such that collective goals can be achieved. Such discussions make creative ideas for institutional design possible. Further, since discussions are likely to account for the local context, institutions created through the

deliberative process can be different across societies even if they seek to achieve the same collective goals.

The deliberative process is bound to be unequal in a sense that a large number of people may not be able to participate in the process of deliberation and in collectively shaping the nature of norms and rules. The normative framework is naturally affected by the extent of participation by various members in a society and the degree to which people are able to express ideas and explore options collectively, and an inclusive discussion can take into account the goals of the widest section of the population. As mentioned before, collective goals created in an inclusive process is most likely to reflect the substantive priorities of the widest sections of the population, and thus be most conducive to development. Apart from creating widely shared collective goals, inclusive deliberation is also important for creating effective institutions. Inclusive deliberation will take into account the widest possible contextual information and thus create institutions that are likely to be effective.

I have argued so far that in order to understand norms we should take into account various collective priorities, understandings of how they could be achieved, processes of collective deliberation, status, identity, spaces

where various norms apply and technologies for achieving collective goals. A change in any of these aspects could lead to a change in norms. Having an understanding of all these factors can thus be helpful in understanding institutional change, to which I will return later in this chapter.

We have had an elaborate discussion of norms so far, but norms by themselves do not make institutions. Norms are merely conceptions of what kinds of actions are (un)desirable. For this to materialise into action, there should be some influence that back these norms. I turn to a discussion of influences next.

Influences

In his definition of institutions, Douglass North draws attention to “enforcement”, which in my view is essential to an institutional understanding. Norms will be ineffective unless there is some way of influencing human actions, and this is where North’s attention to enforcement is critical for an institutional understanding. But North’s use of the term enforcement synonymous to *sanctions* (rewards and punishments). While sanctions are an important form of influencing human actions, they are not the sole means of influence. Perhaps the most important way of influencing actions is to

get people's acceptance for a norm, so that they comply to it voluntarily. In this work, I use the term *influence* in a broader sense referring to all forms of influences that are brought to bear on agents to comply with a norm. These include violence, rewards, punishments, ostracisation, shaping people's understandings, availability of infrastructure to enable various activities, patronage, discipline, creating moral pressure, propaganda, creating 'common sense', etc.

The myriad forms of influences can be conveniently summarised as **sanctions, social arrangements and subjectivity**. Sanctions refer to rewards and punishments meted out for obeying or violating rules. These can take the form of material incentives, incarceration, ostracisation, physical punishments, etc. Generally sanctions increase people's freedoms in certain ways (while following the rules) and reduce freedoms (for violating them). One way of looking at sanctions is to say that they constrain people's actions, and this form of influence is widely recognised in the institutional literature. Rules here are seen as boundaries that specify what people cannot do, and if people violate boundaries they can be punished in a variety of ways. In the process, institutions create an incentive structure for the society where certain actions are rewarded and others punished.

The institutions-as-constraints view, with a focus on sanctions as the main form of influence, is particularly appealing when human actions are seen as narrowly rational and selfish. In this view, the selfish person can be regulated mainly by affecting the costs and benefits of her actions. Other approaches to institutions focus on subjectivities and capabilities as the primary influences on action.

Our ability to do most things we wish to do depends on the availability of suitable social arrangements. To get education, we use schools and universities; to travel we need roads and vehicles; to interact with others, we use a complex communication infrastructure, and the examples can go on and on. Social arrangements are not restricted to physical infrastructure. For example, elections can be considered a social arrangement to enable broad participation of people in governance. Arrangements thus combine a set of tangible and intangible factors that enable either individuals or groups to perform various activities. Since social arrangements affect most of our activities, the way in which they are structured can have a remarkable influence on our freedoms. Social arrangements are often created in order to sustain normative frameworks. For example, a widespread schooling infrastructure could be created in order to fulfil the norm of universal schooling.

The *institutions-as-enabling* view focuses on people's capabilities, and underscores the idea that as isolated individuals we will be capable of carrying out a very small range of activities, and our "capabilities" depend on social arrangements.

Social arrangements are not put in place only to enhance freedoms; they can also be put in place to reduce certain freedoms. For example, under the leadership of Robert Moses, low overpasses were built over the road to Jones Beach in New York so that poor people and African Americans who mainly used buses at that time would not be able to access the beach. In the Indian context, Myron Weiner argued (Weiner, 1991) convincingly that universal elementary education was not pursued in India due to the attitude of the higher caste people who did not value the extension of education to the lower caste people. Thanks to this, schooling infrastructure and other arrangements were not created extensively in most parts of India. There are strong norms about what men, women, "*Negroes*"⁸, poor people, and others should do in different societies and these can be enforced effectively by the regulation of social arrangements in subtle ways, and this is more

⁸I have used this pejorative term only to recall how social arrangements are deliberately created to curtail the freedoms of a section of the population. I do not mean disrespect to the community by invoking this term.

powerful than the use of sanctions. Social arrangements can be structured to enable or constrain social groups in the same ways that sanctions do, and are often used in conjunction with each other. To say the least, a group that threatens to flog girls for going to school is not likely to provide extensive schooling infrastructure for girl children.

And finally, an important form of influence is affecting people's subjectivities. People can be nudged towards doing certain things by their own volition. This can be achieved by creating identities, fears, desires, morals, common sense, expert advice, and in other ways. Normative frameworks often have subjective influence that is powerful, and thus are able to sustain themselves without the need for sanctions or other influences. Such an influence is referred to in the literature as the *constitutive* influence of institutions. Apart from that, institutions can systematically influence people's subjectivities through their organisational resources such as universities, media, religious institutions and other bodies that have a control over symbolic resources.

Since subjectivity plays an important role in sustaining institutions, a change in subjectivities can result in an institutional change. Many social movements have tried to change the frameworks of understanding, morals

and identities through which they sought to change the institutional framework on the whole. I will offer some examples in the following chapters.

Bases of influence

Sanctions, subjectivities, and social arrangements can be called “ideal types”, i.e. analytically distinct types of influences that may not be found in their purest form in practice. In practice, most sources of influence combine the use of these three ideal types. For example, the influence of landed people can come from their material wealth (i.e. the ability to reward and punish), control over space (through which they can determine social arrangements), control of religious, cultural and other symbolic resources (that can influence subjectivities), etc. Ideal types are analytically useful to understand institutional change, but are not useful for making empirical observations about the structure of influence in a society. For empirical purposes, we need to identify some form of influence that is observable. Further, I have not paid attention to the distribution influence across different social groups so far. This is critical to institutional understanding since social groups may support different norms based on their aspirations, understandings and val-

ues⁹. When the distribution of influence changes some norms may lose their influence while others may gain influence, resulting in an institutional change. Distribution can also differ across societies or overtime. This dynamic nature of influence means that it is not possible to understand the structure of influences in any society without paying careful attention to the nature of influences in that particular society at that particular point in time.

One approach that is amenable to the dynamic nature of influence is to look at the *bases of influence* and their distribution across social groups. I borrow this approach from the seminal work of the sociologist André Béteille (Béteille, 1996). In this work published first in 1965, Béteille analyzed the structural changes in Tanjore district of Tamil Nadu, and he argued that the major sources of power in the Tamil society were changing rapidly, as well as the distribution of these sources of influence across various caste groups.

⁹ This raises a tricky question on whether all members of a social group will support the same set of norms. This is tricky because the term social group in itself is vaguely defined in this work. One way of defining a social group would be on the basis of those who support a common set of norms. From this perspective, the question of whether members of the social group support different norms becomes tautological. That of course is not the only way to define a social group. Economic status, location, race, class and a number of other identities can also be used to define a social group. Within such groups there are bound to be normative differences. In this work, I assume that there are some dominant norms that each social group supports, while allowing for the possibility for this to change over time. The idea of dominance allows for dissenting ideas, while allowing me to argue that each social group broadly supports some set of norms.

In this approach, we identify various aspects in a society that confers influence systematically. Ownership of land, wealth, holding political offices, administrative positions, belonging to social networks, proximity to those in positions of power, status, belonging to a certain caste/gender/race, and a number of other features can be easily identified to confer influence in society. The bases of influence can vary across societies and can easily change over time. For example, membership in political parties was not a significant base of influence two centuries ago in India, but is a major base of influence today. By understanding the major bases of influence, how they are distributed and how they change over time, we can gain significant insights about institutions and institutional change. Unlike ideal types, these are observable and thus are amenable to empirical enquiries.

The definition

Having discussed the role of norms and influences, we are in a position to define institutions:

There are two broad elements to all institutions: a set of norms that outline what actions are acceptable and what are not. Such norms are rarely universal, and normative frameworks typically include some notion of iden-

tity and status around which norms are defined. Typically, greater freedoms are allowed for people with a higher status. Norms can have an impact only when it is backed by some form of influence that can regulate people's actions in ways that are consistent with the norm. A set of closely related norms and associated influences that support these norms could be called an institution.

The fundamental task of an institution is to regulate human actions, which could be done by constraining, enabling or subjectively influencing people to act according to the norm. Ultimately, institutions regulate actions through their impact on human agency. In the process of regulating actions, institutions affect human agency by reducing certain freedoms and by enhancing others. The impact of this depends on the capabilities of agents as well; in other words: freedoms are a function of capabilities and institutions. While human agency is affected by institutions, agency is also the fundamental force of institutional change. There is thus a complex interrelationship between norms, influences, agency and freedoms.

2.3 Institutional change

I have characterised institutions as a combination of norms and influences, and by extension one could say that there is an institutional change when there is either a change in norms or associated influences. The challenge of identifying the causes of institutional change can now be reframed in terms of what causes a change in norms or associated influences. I believe that there is no unified theory that could explain all forms of normative changes and changes in influences. Most often institutional changes are a product of many changes arising out of diverse causes. In the absence of one grand theory that can explain how all these changes happen, one could rely on a number of different theoretical frameworks that explain different changes.

As I argued earlier in this chapter, I look at human agency as the most critical factor in institutional change. Since institutions are collective ventures, agency in the form of collective action is the most important force behind institutional change. Given this background, I have relied extensively on collective action theories in order to understand institutional change in Tamil Nadu. Since collective action is a broad term, there are theoretical resources to understand it in most social science disciplines, giving us ready-made resources to for a well-travelled analysis. I have relied in partic-

ular on resource mobilisation theories, political opportunity literature and literature on framing in collective action. Instead of elaborating all of them in this chapter, I will take them up in the chapters to follow and relate them to the broad conceptual framework I have outlined here. While these resources take us a considerable distance, they do not collectively provide comprehensive understanding of every aspect of institutional change, and there are bound to be unexplained issues that I have to contend with.

Since it is practically impossible to get into the root cause of every change, I have taken a number of changes as given. For example, I have taken for granted that democratic institutions evolved in India and it had a major impact on the structure of influences without getting into the question of why democratic institutions evolved. Similarly, I have taken into account factors such as dense urbanisation, colonisation, spread of education through missionary activities, and a number of other factors that had a bearing on the structure of influences in my region. In other cases, I have gone into greater depth into why certain changes took place by relying on various theoretical frameworks.

2.4 Other institutional approaches

Institutional approaches have become important in various social science disciplines in the last few decades, and there are many different approaches to looking at institutions. In this section I will offer brief comparisons with other institutional approaches that have a bearing on my work, and these include Historical Institutionalism (HI) represented by works of scholars like Theada Skocpol and Kathleen Thelen, and New Institutional Economics (NIE) represented by works of people like Douglass North, Acemoglu, and Platteau. There are of course many other approaches to institutions including normative institutionalism by March and Olson, “old institutionalism” by Thorstein Veblen and James Buchanan, sociological institutionalism, etc¹⁰. It is possible that each of these approaches have some bearing on my work, but as it is inevitable with transdisciplinary work, I have not had the opportunity to engage with all literatures that may have a bearing on the issues of my interest. I refer here to to bodies of institutional literature that I have referred to at a reasonable length. Let me start with NIE.

The most critical feature that is common between my approach and NIE relates to how institutions affect performance. In NIE, rules and their

¹⁰For a review of various institutionalisms see (Peters, 2005)

enforcement are seen as constraints on human behaviour, and these set the incentive structure for individual behaviour within the society. The incentive structure alters the behaviour of individuals, and thus determines outcomes in the society. My claim that norms and influences (rather than enforcement) have an impact on performance by affecting human agency is based on a modification of the NIE framework. The main change I have made here is to acknowledge social arrangements and subjectivities as forms of influences apart from sanctions that is acknowledged in the NIE literature. This expansion helps us understand many more sources of institutional change, as I will illustrate in the chapters to follow.

NIE has been used to study the differences in performances of economies. Institutional economists have argued that these differences could be understood by looking at institutions that have been put in place in these countries. While I also focus on institutions to explain the performance of Tamil Nadu, there are significant differences between my approach and that of NIE. First of all, NIE focuses mainly on overall economic growth, whereas my focus is on development. With its focus on overall economic growth, NIE mainly asks what conditions would lead to most productive investments and thus growth.

One of the key arguments of NIE is that entrepreneurs will not choose to invest if they are uncertain about returns to investment, which could have significant impact on overall economic growth. Such uncertainties could arise due to insecurity of property rights, uncertain tax regimes, free riders who could appropriate the benefits without sharing the costs, etc¹¹. Various models have been developed to explain how such conditions could arise, many of which have been discussed by Acemoglu in *Introduction to modern economic growth* (Acemoglu, 2008). Most of these models focus on how the entrepreneurs could be exploited by a powerful group codenamed “elite” or at times by workers, thus limiting the investment that could be made in the economy. In these models, exploitation is done typically by imposing taxes or transferring property, and in the process introducing uncertainties for the entrepreneurs. Acemoglu argues that while his examples use taxes and transfer of resources, other forms of redistribution could also be substituted in these models. While there are many variations of this model, the fundamental aspect of focusing on investment and concomitant growth is common across most models of NIE.

¹¹Acemoglu provides a comprehensive overview of theoretical models and empirical work in (Acemoglu, 2008). Elinor Ostrom provides an excellent discussion of the free rider issue and its significance to institutional analysis (Ostrom, 1990; Ostrom *et al.*, 1993).

The main driver of economic growth in NIE is the unshackling of investments. The main driver of development, in my case, is the unshackling of human agency by expanding freedoms. NIE is considerably different from my approach since I focus on development rather than economic growth, and I consider human agency and not investments as the fundamental force of development. Further, NIE generally does not pay attention to distributional consequences, and even when income distribution is taken into account, it is mainly for instrumental reasons to show how it would have an impact on institutions and is rarely used in measuring people's well-being¹². In my approach, development cannot be evaluated without paying close attention to the distribution of well-being.

Most models of NIE look at institutions from “functional perspective”, which is perhaps neatly summed by Elinor Ostrom who argued that her main challenge is to understand how a group of individuals who are in an interdependent situation can organise and govern themselves in order to obtain continuing joint benefits when all face temptations to free ride, shirk, or otherwise act opportunistically. Thus theories of the firm (where

¹²For example, Engerman and Acemoglu have argued in their respective works that economic inequalities could lead to bad institutions. Inequalities are bad here since they lead to bad institutions, and the framework does not pass value judgements otherwise.

the entrepreneur negotiates a series of contracts) and theories of the state (where the ruler plays the role of the entrepreneur in creating rules) and issues such as trust, monitoring, rewards and punishments become central to the study of institutions (Ostrom, 1990). While there is some reference to the state, the main focus is on contracts, and thus on markets. The focus on institutions from this perspective is to identify what role it plays in enabling individuals to coordinate, especially when the “transaction costs” of coordination can be high.

Issues such as trust, opportunism, sanctions or ability to monitor matter for a study of institutions, but do not offer a complete picture of the institutional dynamics. While any analytical framework is bound to have its conceptual limitations, the framework of NIE is so limited that an analysis using this framework can lead to gross distortions of how the social world is represented. For example, Kripa Freitas who analysed caste in India argued that the system evolved since it enables the easy enforcement of contracts (Freitas, 2006). Even if that is one aspect of caste, looking at the system without even acknowledging the role of power, the severe unfreedoms that it imposes on a large section of the population, the dynamic nature of the system, and other features of caste can only lead to a misplaced perception

of caste.

With its focus on contracts and voluntary transactions, a dominant proportion of works in NIE do not pay attention to power¹³ (Harriss, 2002). Like in any subfield, there are some exceptions to this trend. Authors like Acemoglu and Sokoloff have discussed the distribution of power and the impact it can have on institutions. For example, Acemoglu discusses how his basic institutional models could be affected when the configuration of power changes between the elite non-workers, entrepreneurs and workers (the three categories of agents in the theoretical models he discusses). Similarly, Acemoglu's empirical work has acknowledged relationships of power in different societies, and their impact on economic outcomes through institutions (Acemoglu, 2008; Acemoglu, 2005; Acemoglu *et al.*, 2001; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2006). Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson (AJR) have argued that European soldiers put in place institutions that were extractive in some colonies, and built "good institutions" in others based on the colonial conditions. For example, in densely populated colonies that were economically advanced, it made sense for the colonial masters to extract what was being produced. In sparsely populated colonies, extraction could not happen

¹³This is despite the fact that market relations are mediated by power relations, and that "enforcement" and sanctions that NIE deals with depend on power.

without increasing the levels of production, and this required them to put in place institutions that promoted investment.

The AJR team also argued that in colonies where soldiers faced adverse conditions through the disease environment, they tended to create institutions that were extractive so that they could make a quick buck and get out without waiting for their investments to give long-term returns. AJR and others have also argued that in areas where the production of rice or sugarcane was possible, and in areas that were rich in natural resources, the stake that the elite had in ensuring the domination of others was high. All these are important studies that take into account the inequalities of power and domination in a society.

Some economists have gone further than just looking at the impact of power on individual investments. For example, Engerman and Sokoloff have argued that societies that started with greater equality in wealth and ‘human capital’ institutionalised universal adult franchise and universal elementary education earlier. To quote them, “[i]n societies that began with greater equality in wealth and human capital or homogeneity among the population, the elites were either less able or less inclined to institutionalize rules, laws, and other government policies that grossly advantaged them, and

thus the institutions that evolved tended to provide more equal treatment and opportunities, thereby contributing to the persistence of the relatively high degree of equality” (Engerman & Sokoloff, 2002)¹⁴. They make a convincing case that the in the new world, expansion towards universal suffrage depended on the inequalities that were originally there in these societies in terms of ‘factor endowments’. Some of this was influenced by the nature of production – particularly of sugarcane – that tended to be highly labour intensive and unequal.

These authors make the point that sharp inequalities in the distribution of power in a society can lead to poor institutions, which is akin to my argument. While there is an acknowledgement of power in these works, the way power is theorised leaves much to be desired. For example, the society is typically divided into a few well-defined monolithic groups. The instruments of power (taxation, and other forms of redistribution) are narrowly restrictive, and the sole means of influencing individuals is the use of sanctions. Thanks to these approaches, the overall specification of power dynamics is exceedingly restrictive. Changes in identities, normative challenges, modifications of ideas and understandings, development of new forms of control,

¹⁴ For similar arguments see also (Engerman & Sokoloff, 2004; Engerman & Sokoloff, 2001; Engerman *et al.*, 2005))

etc. have institutional implications in my approach, but generally do not find a space in NIE. These studies also do not have any discussion of resistance to power, and implicitly assume that the elite normally have the ability to impose their scheme of things. While this is not a logical necessity, this has been the approach of institutional economists in practice.

I believe that my approach to power and influence is considerably broader than what one finds in NIE in at least five ways: (1) I account for social arrangements and subjectivity as ideal types of influence apart from sanctions that are the sole source of power in NIE. This makes it possible for power and resistance to be played out in much richer ways. (2) The bases of influence approach I adopt allows for the possibility of power dynamics arising from numerous sources, going much beyond material resources and control of state power, which are the main specifications used in NIE. (3) The bases of influence approach also demands attention to the context, which is different from the demand for abstraction that is common in NIE. Abstraction and contextualisation have different advantages, and they tend to work on a different informational basis, which has strong analytical implications. (4) The agents in NIE are typically selfish, calculating,

ideologically-identical (and neo-classical¹⁵) disconnected individuals with common understandings, each of whom will spare no activity to maximise their material status. The agents in my case have multiple motivations and they are affected by ideologies, norms, connections, capabilities, and in general lead a much richer social life. I do not assume that agents are exclusively selfish, or that agents “maximise” in every given opportunity (which combined with the equilibrium approach leaves little analytical room for changes from within). (5) NIE deals with restricted identities in practice. The most common identities are entrepreneurs, elite, workers, ethno-linguistic groups, religious groups, those who were colonised by different imperial countries. While there is a slightly richer set of identities across the works, most individual works deal with even narrower set of identities. For example, it is almost impossible to find works that deal with ethno-linguistic fractionalisation that looks at elite/worker division within ethnicities. The restricted specification of social groups in NIE in general allows for highly restricted social or political dynamics. In my opinion, such restrictions arise mainly out of the desire of institutional economists to use mathematical models

¹⁵It is inconceivable within the NIE framework for an agent to believe that the abolishing of private property is the best way of advancing development, unless it is assumed that the agent belongs to a narrow section of the elite who would be able to corner the benefits of abolishing of private property.

that are not yet amenable to accounting for complex and highly varied behaviour. The approach I use allows for individuals to belong to multiple social groups, for identities to change and for groups to morph. The use of prose rather than mathematics makes it possible to account for much greater complexities. All these put together create a significant difference between how I deal with power and influence compared to NIE.

To sum up, my approach differs from that of NIE in the way I deal with the dynamics of power influence, the nature of my agents, the way social groups are specified, the philosophical basis of well-being including, in paying attention to distributional issues, and in focusing on human agency rather than investment as the fundamental dynamic force in the social world. In saying this, I am conscious that this is a summarised characterisation of the field that sports hundreds of impressive works, and that this summary is not capable of representing the immense variety within the large field. Let me turn to historical institutionalism next.

My introduction to historical institutionalism happened mainly after I finished my fieldwork. Even subsequently, my reading of the literature has not been extensive enough for me to make confident summary characterisations of the field. This problem is further compounded by the fact that

historical institutionalism was defined following the work of a number of authors with certain similar characteristics, and it did not grow starting with certain well-defined boundaries. As a result, the variations within the work are substantial, making it even more difficult to make summary characterisations. With this caveat, let me make certain overarching comparisons between my approach and historical institutionalism.

Thelen and Sven (Thelen & Sven, 1992) argue that historical institutionalism focuses on long-term processes with keen attention to the political, social and economic contexts in which institutions are shaped. It does not generally take into account one variable such as class, relative prices, etc. as the dominant factor through which history could be reasonably explained. Instead, historical institutionalism seeks to explain the interaction between a wide variety of factors, and it also seeks to provide historically and contextually contingent explanations¹⁶. In these respects, my approach is similar to what is described by Thelen and Sven.

Unlike those who follow the NIE approach, historical institutionalists pay attention to how ideas, interests and preferences of agents are shaped, and provide them with the strong analytical and historical role. Many

¹⁶This has also been argued in (Thelen, 1999; Hall & Taylor, 1996; Peters, 2005)

historical institutionalists have also focused on the role that institutions play in shaping ideas and interests. My approach mirrors HI from the perspective that it takes into account the role of ideas, beliefs, understandings, fears and other subjective factors within an institutional analysis. That said, there are subtle differences between how these are taken into account. For example, in looking at the major shift in policy in the United Kingdom from Keynesianism to Monetarism in the 1970s, Peter Hall argues (Hall, 1992) that institutions remained constant, whereas they played a role in channelling ideas (about how the economy works). New sets of ideas about the economy coincided with a reduction in the power of trade unions, and an increase in the influence of financial institutions. These together resulted in a major change in policies, even while institutions remained the same. While I would agree with Peter Hall about the importance of taking into account ideas, interests and institutions, I would characterise the change in policies that he describes as an institutional change that happened due to a change in norms (influenced by changed understandings), and a change in influences in the form of changing influence of various interest groups. In this particular case, the differences between our approach does not have an analytical significance, but it could well have a significance in other cases.

The fundamental feature of historical institutionalism is that it assumes that rational actors create institutions at critical moments. Such decisions have a long-term impact since future decisions will be made on the basis of existing institutions; in other words, decisions are path dependent. Thus, history provides insights into current decisions and choices. Though my discussion so far has not dealt with the role of history, I consider historical understanding to be critical to all things social, and this will be reflected in my analysis to follow. But, I focus on history only because it provides insights into various social, political, and other factors that are helpful in understanding institutional dynamics. This does not depend on path dependency, which is analytically significant in historical institutionalism. Let me explain.

Path dependence in HI gives a role for institutions outside politics and economy. For example, a lot of analysis in political science happens on the basis of understanding the contours of current day politics between different competing groups based on their interests and strengths. Similarly, in the economy, market forces determine the outcomes and we can predict outcomes by looking at various demand and supply factors. Seen exclusively from this perspective, institutions do not have an analytical significance.

Introducing path dependence can give an analytical role for institutions by arguing that in order to understand outcomes, we have to go beyond power configurations or market forces, and we have to pay attention to institutions. Institutions introduce a constraint on the behavior of agents, and institutions do not quickly adapt to current configurations of power since they are sticky. Under certain circumstances (often called “critical junctures”) institutions get created, and once they are created, future decisions are path dependent on the historical decision. Thus, in order to understand current outcomes, it is essential to go back into the past and understand what kind of institutions were put in place by rational actors in certain critical junctures.

In my approach, I do not make the assumption that institutions are sticky. Instead, I look at institutions as being constantly challenged and modified. I focus on institutions because it enables me to borrow conceptual resources from multiple disciplines, as well as account for many diverse spheres of human actions. It has the versatility of looking at structural issues on one hand, and agency on the other. It also enables me to integrate insights from the development as freedoms approach that I find meaningful. These advantages make institutions a meaningful plane of analysis. My

argument thus does not take into account path dependency at all. The only reason I focus on history is because it helps in a better appreciation of the political, social, economic and other contexts within which my issue is located. From this perspective, there is a significant difference between my approach and HI.

Thelen and Sven also argue that data plays an important role in shaping the understandings of historical institutionalists. To quote them, “*Historical institutionalists lack the kind of universal toolkit and universally applicable concepts on which these more deductive [rational choice] theories are based. Rather than deducting hypothesis on the basis of global assumptions and prior to the analysis, historical institutionalists generally develop their hypothesis more inductively, in the course of interpreting the empirical material itself*” (Thelen & Sven, 1992, 12). I have argued on similar lines about my approach. Apart from the methodological significance of data helping to shape understandings, their statement also has an analytical significance for the current discussion. Historical institutionalists have dealt with a variety of different questions, and in order to analyse the issues, they bring a wide assortment of theoretical tools. These tools come from different fields, and as the authors mentioned, there is no universal toolkit from

which historical institutionalists can borrow in order to do their analysis. This automatically builds considerable differences between the conceptual approaches of various historical institutionalists. If I may add it, path dependence as a concept by itself cannot explain any phenomenon, and a scholar has to necessarily rely on other theoretical concepts to explain why certain actors made certain decisions at any point of time.

In my case, I rely extensively on the development as freedoms approach and an assortment of other conceptual resources. Using them, I have built a framework to understand the interrelationship between institutions and development. In doing this, my basket of conceptual resources is different from other baskets of resources that I have seen historical institutionalists use. Further, historical institutionalism is not particularly helpful in understanding institutional change. In my view, this is mainly due to the focus on path dependence, which can help us understand continuity but not change. In my work, I combine path dependence with the view that society is dynamic, and that dynamism can be incorporated into the framework of understanding by focussing on collective action. I thus bring an understanding into institutional change that is missing in historical institutionalism. I have pointed out some of the major contours of similarities and differ-

ences between my approach and that of historical institutionalism. But, as I mentioned before, my comparison is with a summary characterisation of a vast field, and such a comparison has its inherent limitations. Some of the similarities I have pointed out will not hold with respect to many individual works, while some works would have incorporated the differences that I have talked about. In writing a comparative note, I am conscious of these limitations. But hopefully, this discussion would have helped the reader understand the framework I use in a more nuanced fashion.

Let me add that I incorporate some of the strengths of HI with its broad focus on the context, attention to history, and providing contingent explanations of a context. By bringing insights from the works of Amartya Sen, I believe that my conceptual approach is capable of discussing the role of institutions in development, that is not available in the “universal toolkit” of HI. Similarly, while there are some similarities of my work with NIE, the framework I use builds on NIE in accounting for power in a more substantial way, and in other ways that I have outlined above. To say the least, while there is much to learn from NIE and HI, both fields did not offer me the conceptual resources to deal with development, and there was a gap in accounting for the issues raised by my discussants that had to be

bridged by looking out of the toolkits readily available in these fields.

2.5 Summary

The conceptual framework I have developed here has four broad elements: agency, capabilities, norms and influences. The complex interplay between these factors can help us understand the process of institutional change. Changes in capabilities, norms or influences have an impact on people's freedoms, and this in turn affects people's agencies and their ability to bring about institutional change. I started this research by asking how Tamil Nadu came to be committed to providing critical public services almost universally to its residents. The question that I started with can now be reframed in this language: how did a system of norms evolve in Tamil Nadu that supported the extension of substantive freedoms to its residents universally, how did these norms become influential, and what role did human agency, especially in the form of collective action, play in this process.

Summary of main arguments

Institutions

1. An institution is a set of norms and associated influences that support the norms.
2. Institutions change when there is a change in norms or influences. Norms and influences can change due to a variety of reasons.
3. Institutions have an impact on performance through human agency by regulating actions. Through this impact on human agency, institutions have a major impact on long term performance of societies.
4. While institutions affect human agency, agency especially via collective action, is one of the main sources of institutional change. Thus an understanding of how effectively people can use their agency can help us understand institutional change.

Norms

1. Norms are a set of ideas about what actions are (un)desirable and they come from religion, economic theories, cultural beliefs, etc.

2. While norms are broad understandings of what actions are (un)desirable, rules are detailed dos and don'ts prescribed through laws, codes, memos and by other means. Rules seek to enable the achievement of norms based on a close tactical understanding of the society.
3. Norms are created in order to help the society achieve collective goals such as prosperity, safety, morality (according to some vision of it), economic opportunities, good working conditions, etc.
4. Norms are based on desired end-goals, understandings of what kind of human behaviour will help us achieve these goals and practical technologies of securing such behaviour. A change in goals, understandings or technologies can thus bring about a normative change.
5. Norms are constructed in the process of human interaction, and the deliberative process plays a major role in creating institutions that could help the society achieve collective goals given the context.
6. Norms are rarely universal in a sense that they do not seek to affect the agency of all people in the same way. Most normative frameworks have some notion of identity in them, using which different sets of

actions are encouraged or discouraged for each social group identified in the norm.

7. Often identities are hierarchical in a sense that some social groups enjoy a higher status than others. In general norms provide greater substantive freedoms to those who enjoy a higher status. Thus a change in status of social groups will result in an institutional change for them since they will now be governed by a different set of norms.
8. Just as norms do not apply to all groups uniformly, they are not universally applied across all spaces. A spatial change wherein norms of another space are applied to some other space will also create an institutional change.

Influences

1. Influences are various ways in which an agent can be made to act according to some norm, and there are three categories of influences: Sanctions, social arrangements and subjectivity.
2. The three ideal types of influences can be found in various bases of influence. Understanding the main bases of influence and their distri-

bution across social groups can help us understand institutions and institutional change. Bases of influence are dynamic and they change across space and over time.

3. Changes in the bases of influence and their distribution across social groups are major sources of institutional change. When the distribution of influence changes, new norms may gain more support while dominant norms may lose some influence – thus resulting in institutional change.

Agency, capability and institutions

1. People use their agency to pursue various freedoms. The effectiveness with which people pursue their agency depends on their freedoms in turn. Freedoms are determined by individual capabilities as well as the institutional context. A change in capabilities or institutions (i.e. norms or influences) can have an impact on human agency. In general, agents could be more effective when they enjoy greater freedoms.
2. Changes in freedoms that various social groups have can give us an insight into institutional change. When the substantive freedoms of a group increase, their ability to influence institutions also tends to in-

crease, and thus they will be better able to create institutional changes to suit the norms they value.

Institutions & development

1. Development consists of expanding the substantive freedoms enjoyed by the people in the society. One could consider a society more developed when the set of substantive freedoms enjoyed by people increases or when the number of people who enjoy substantive freedoms increases.
2. Institutions have a critical impact on the long-term development of societies.
3. The central force of development is human agency, and people are able to use their agency more effectively when their freedoms increase. Since institutions affect development, agency is also used to demand institutional changes to suit the goals that one values. The ability to demand institutional changes effectively is unequal across various social groups.
4. When most people in a society have the ability to shape institutions

based on the freedoms they value most, the society is likely to create institutions that foster development. In general, large sections of the population are unable to participate in creating institutions due to inequalities in freedoms and influences enjoyed by social groups. When inequalities reduce, more people are able to participate in creating institutions, and a society is more likely to put in place institutions that are conducive to development.

Chapter 3

Making of an institution - I

Abstract

Chapters 3 & 4 are a close study of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) from an institutional perspective. It starts with an overview on how the institutional structure of NREGA was created, how it affected outcomes, and what the impetus for institutional change were. These observations played an important role in constructing my institutional understanding, and in drawing attention to the nature of collective action in Tamil Nadu.

In this chapter I look at the context of NREGA starting with the key concerns that went into making of the law. Framers of the law

created a set of norms and influences that they hoped will lead to guaranteed employment and creation of socially useful assets. The goals of law-makers were at times divergent from those of the labourers, officials, Panchayat presidents and actors involved with NREGA directly or indirectly. Achieving these goals required different sets of norms and rules, and this created a competition between various agents for the primacy of the norms that they favoured. The context of competing goals, norms and influences lays the ground for understanding the dynamics of institutional change.

In describing my conceptual approach (see 1.2), I mentioned that one of the key purposes of my fieldwork was to shape a framework of understanding. I started with an assortment of theories that I refined by letting my field experiences interact with my theoretical understandings. Since institutions formed a critical pivot in my initial framework I chose to work on a new institution that was still being shaped actively. This would allow me to observe various dynamics that shape institutions, and thus gain insights into the process of institution making. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act legislated in 2005 presented me with a suitable opportunity to do so.

NREGA is a wage-employment programme that provides legally guaranteed employment to all families in rural areas for up to 100 days a year. Since the programme was just three years old when I started fieldwork, it was still in the formative stages. I was also closely engaged in the process that led to the legislation and in the process I had accumulated information on how the law was shaped in the initial stages. This background provided with a rich perspective that helped me observe and understand the dynamics at the field level.

From the perspective of understanding institutions, my fieldwork had two major intentions: one, to look at how institutions are shaped so that I can develop an understanding of institutional change and two, to understand how institutions shape action. I hoped to understand how institutions shape behaviour by doing fieldwork at a site where the law turns into action. Given this focus, you will find detailed descriptions of how the institutional framework of NREGA evolved and how it shaped the behaviour of officials, beneficiaries, and others concerned with the programme.

In this chapter I discuss how different sets of collective goals and understandings led to competing norms, followed by a discussion of the structure of key influences that shaped NREGA on the field. This will provide me

with the context to present a thick description of how law and action shaped each other, which I will take up in chapter 4.

3.1 Twin goals of NREGA

NREGA was legislated in 2005 following extensive mobilisation by *People's Action for Employment Guarantee* (PAEG) - a network of NGOs, Trade Unions, and other people's organisations spread across India. The demand for guaranteed employment started in the wake of a series of droughts during the years 1999-2003¹. Droughts lead to loss of livelihoods since it affects agriculture, and makes poor people vulnerable to hunger since they cannot afford to buy food. Provision of casual manual work at the minimum wage has traditionally been one of the most important measures to provide relief during droughts. During the drought of 2000-01, activists in Rajasthan started a series of protests for more extensive drought relief (Khera, 2006b; Khera, 2006a). Activists felt that getting the government to respond to poor people's needs is extremely difficult, and felt that having a legal guarantee of

¹ There have been demands for guaranteed employment in the past, but none have been this extensive. The last major campaign was during 1989-90 when V.P. Singh was the Prime Minister. Anuradha Talwar, one of the active campaigners in the 1980s informed me that the Finance Minister in this government prepared a draft EGA bill that could not be legislated since the government fell in two years when it lost its majority in the Parliament.

employment would increase people's bargaining power with the government in times of need.

The demand was inspired by the experience of the Employment Guarantee Scheme of Maharashtra that had consistently created a high volume of employment since its passage in the 1970s². At the same time, the demand for a legal guarantee was also influenced by the fact that the *rights based approach* had become popular among people's movements in India³. The demand that started in Rajasthan found support in other parts of India and the demand was carried forward in other parts of India by a large coalition of organisations initially under the banner of Right to Food Campaign (Vivek & Florencio, Forthcoming). The coalition was then broadened with the support of Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI (M)) and Communist Party of India (CPI) (henceforth to be referred by their collective name - Left Parties) and their constituent organisations in 2004, under the broadened umbrella of the PAEG.

In the 2004 general elections the Left Parties had performed well and

² For a discussion on Employment Guarantee Scheme of Maharashtra see (Dandekar, 1983; Echeverri-Gent, 1993; Herring & Edwards, 1983; Rajivan & Dev, 2001; Ravallion, 1991).

³ For an overview of these movements and how they shaped the demand for a variety of demands on issues such as housing, education, health, etc., see (Vivek, 2009).

had sixty seats in the Lok Sabha of the Parliament⁴, their best performance ever. The coalition that came to power depended on the support of the Left Parties, and the leading party of the coalition had already promised to enact NREGA in its manifesto. The government formed an advisory body called the National Advisory Council (NAC) with the president of the largest party in the coalition as chair. Two influential members of the PAEG were invited to the Council, and NAC took the lead in drafting NREGA, giving the coalition a lot of influence in drafting the normative structure of NREGA⁵.

Immediately after the election, PAEG organised a series of consultations on the features that an employment guarantee law should contain and based on these consultations it produced a draft law and named it the *People's draft*. The features in the *People's draft* became the basis for bargaining with the government in the months to come. The government created the draft NREG Act by modifying the *People's draft*. After an extensive round of negotiations between the Government of India, activists and state governments, NREGA was signed into law in 2005. It was implemented in

⁴This accounts for a little over 10% of the seats in the lower house or Lok Sabha.

⁵The political process that led to the legislation is important, but is beyond the scope of this chapter. (Lakin & Ravishankar, 2006) provide a detailed overview of the politics behind employment guarantee and (Vivek & Florencio, Forthcoming) provides a detailed overview of the campaigns that led to it.

one-fourth of all districts in India to begin with, and was expanded to cover all rural districts in India in the next few years.

NREGA had two main goals: guaranteeing employment to all families residing in rural areas so that no family has to go hungry for the want of income, and creating productive assets for the community in the process. Apart from these primary goals, NREGA was shaped by government's concern to contain expenditure and an assortment of other goals.

The law contained a detailed set of norms and rules that created the field of action for officials, beneficiaries, potential contractors, and others who have an interest in the programme. While the power of the administration was expected to play a major role in enforcing these rules, the law also took into account other influences that could shape the performance of NREGA. For example, the legal guarantee of employment made it possible to access the judiciary to influence the government if it were not fulfilling its duties⁶. Collective action by potential beneficiaries and organisations allied with them was also expected to play an important role in ensuring that NREGA served its main goals. Similarly, drafters of the law anticipated that corruption will play a role in shaping how the norms are enforced. In

⁶While it is not always possible, norms can determine whether some influences have a bearing on them; this is one interesting example of it.

the following section, I look at how the administration is organised and what influences they could bring into the operation of NREGA. In the sections that follow, I will look at how NREGA performed during my fieldwork with respect to guaranteeing employment and productivity.

3.2 Basic structure of NREGA

Finances are critical for any programme to work, and guaranteeing employment across rural India cannot be done without a substantial budget, and securing such budgets for the poorest people in the country is always a challenge. Legal guarantee of employment was sought by activists to create bargaining power for the relatively powerless, and to secure them a larger budget from the government. Apart from the legal guarantee, the democratic context also creates support for substantial budgets for a programme like NREGA that could yield political dividends. But governments have limited budgets and competing demands, often from actors who are more influential than those suffering from hunger in remote rural areas. This by itself creates a tussle between the government and potential beneficiaries. This tussle was played out in the process creating the law.

The *People's Draft* proposed an unrestricted guarantee of employment wherein anyone can get as much employment as she wants. It proposed that anyone desirous of employment can apply to the government and they should be provided work within fifteen days. If employment is not provided upon application within fifteen days, then the applicant is eligible to get an unemployment allowance of at least one-third of the minimum wage.

When the law was originally proposed it was criticised by many who argued that it would lead to “unmanageable” costs; incidentally, this argument is rarely made for defense, building airports, or other expenses that are more directly relevant to the middle classes and above. The concern on finances was shared by some within the government, who sought to alter the norms to reduce expenditure. The first official draft modified the unrestricted guarantee of employment by limiting the guarantee to up to 100 days per family per year⁷. The first official draft also altered the norm that NREGA has to be implemented in all districts and gave the government the choice of implementing it in restricted areas. It also enabled the administration to include and exclude districts at its discretion, and set an

⁷ This was in consonance with the promise made in the manifesto of Congress (I) for the 2004 elections. The demand from the coalition to extend it to an unlimited guarantee was not accepted on financial grounds.

exclusive minimum wage rate for NREGA⁸. Finally, it introduced a norm that unemployment allowance would be paid only to households below the poverty line, though anyone can apply for work in NREGA⁹.

Provisions created by the ministry gave the government greater choice of actions, but in the process endangered the legal guarantee that the coalition had been working towards. In other words, people's freedom to secure employment when they needed it conflicted with government's freedom to offer employment when it chose to. Each actor involved in drafting the law sought to create a different field of action, and this became the central object of politics of NREGA. PAEG sought to restrict the government's ability to choose when to offer employment¹⁰, and the new norms proposed

⁸Without exclusive minimum wages for NREGA, state governments would be required to pay the minimum wage rate for the agricultural labourers. This provision would have enabled the government to pay even lower wages in NREGA

⁹The process of selecting some people as being below the poverty line (and thus officially "poor") has been highly controversial since the mid-1990's. The poverty line is low and thus people who would be widely identified as poor in the society are technically above the poverty line. The exercise of identifying people below the poverty line happens once in five years, and especially during droughts and other natural disasters, people who were marginally above the poverty line can become vulnerable to hunger quickly. Further, the process of identification is not foolproof and many people who are vulnerable to hunger are often not identified as poor. Activists argued that only the poorest people tend to apply for work in a wage employment programme that involves hard work at minimum wages, and thus they "self-select" themselves. Arguing that the process of self-selection is more reliable than official processes of identification, activists argued that poverty line should not be a criterion in NREGA

¹⁰In reflecting this, activists are careful to distinguish that NREGA is not a "scheme" that the government can decide to implement by its discretion; it is a "law" that *has to be* implemented.

by the government threatened the very heart of the institution proposed by the campaign. This started the process of a conflict for the primacy of the government's norms versus the norms proposed by the campaign.

The final draft that was legislated after negotiations retained the limited guarantee of up to 100 days of work per family, but removed other modifications relating to fixing minimum wages¹¹, restricted unemployment allowance, and choice of districts. The revised norms were based on a blend of goals proposed by the activists with the governments concern to limit expenditure.

There was a concern among activists that governments could reduce expenditure by effectively denying people jobs by making it costly to access work. This concern was motivated by the experience in Maharashtra where the quantum of employment was effectively reduced after a steep hike in the wage rate in 1988 (Ravallion *et al.*, 1993). Based on this experience, rules were created in order to constrain the administration from commonly used tactics that would make it difficult for the labourers to access work.

This included stipulations that work must be provided as far as possible

¹¹While the GoI did not directly determine wages in the Law, the Act had an enabling provision that permitted GoI to fix wages at a later stage. This provision was used subsequently.

within 5 kilometres of residence. When work is provided beyond that radius, people should be compensated for travel and if required be provided accommodation at the worksite. Protections were built to enable women with young children to participate in work, including provision for childcare at the worksite, and to provide accessible work for disabled people.

In wage-employment programmes in India, expenditure is classified into two broad categories: labour costs and material costs¹². Since NREGA is labour-intensive, wages account for the largest share of expenditure. NREGA contained a rule that the central government would pay the entire wage bill. Only labour intensive projects were allowed to be taken up under NREGA so that the programme would remain feasible¹³, and thus reduce political pressure to cut the program's budget. In consonance with this idea the draft recommended that at least 60% of the budget should be allocated to pay for labour, and at most 40% for materials.

Apart from the contest between the government and potential benefi-

¹²The term material costs includes all costs other than wages paid to labourers. This would include, for example, money paid for transportation.

¹³Since any person who demands work should be given work, the government has a limited influence on the number of people who get work. If the material cost per labourer is high, it will increase the total budget of the programme. Further, owners of machinery that are used to displace labourers typically tend to be more powerful than labourers, and without the restrictions on material costs, the potential to displace labour would also have been high.

ciaries, there was also a contest between the central government and state governments on financial obligations. Since NREGA was initiated by the central government, bulk of the financial obligations were met by the GoI. While the financial obligations are met mainly by the GoI, state governments are in-charge of implementing NREGA. The law contained a cleaver rule that wages will be provided by the GoI if those who demand work are provided with work, whereas unemployment allowance must be paid by the state government if work is not provided. This created an incentive for the state government to provide employment on demand.

During my fieldwork in Tamil Nadu, I found that the state government took subtle measures to discourage the use of applications for work without which people cannot claim for an unemployment allowance. There was a strong informal understanding in the administration that employment will be created but without accepting applications for work. Instead, an alternate approach was practiced that could in theory maintain the spirit of employment guarantee while discouraging applications. The administration tried to ensure that some work is open at all times in every Panchayat so that anyone who wants work can just walk to the project and get it without application. While this removed a bureaucratic layer for those who

seek work, there is effectively no legal protection of employment without a formal application¹⁴. This practice led to interesting dynamics on the field, which I will get to later in this chapter.

Another interesting aspect of the state-centre dynamics relates to the fixing of wage-rates in NREGA. While GoI pays the entire cost of wages in NREGA, it does not have any control on the wage-rates. This is because NREGA requires the government to pay the minimum wage for agricultural labourers and setting this rate is a prerogative of the state governments according to minimum wage laws that are outside the framework of NREGA. Since GoI pays the entire wage, it tried a series of manoeuvres to influence wage rates.

In the run-up to legislation, GoI tried to introduce a clause that NREGA will be based on a special minimum wage set for the programme alone. PAEG had some Trade Unions as its prominent members and they resisted the move to set special minimum wages that could be lower than the minimum wage for agricultural labourers. GoI also tried to bring a clause that there should be a uniform wage-rate for NREGA across all states. This cannot be done without the initiative of the central government, which would

¹⁴Unemployment allowance is critical to legal protection of work in NREGA. To claim this, a person has to prove that she applied for work but did not get it.

give it some influence over the wage rate. But this was not possible since minimum wages are determined by state governments by law.

One of the concerns that GoI had was that state governments could increase wage rates without much financial consequence for themselves since most state governments did employ many people based on the minimum wage for agricultural labourers. Increasing wage rates would be a popular move but the financial consequence had to be borne entirely by the centre. In keeping with this concern eight states revised their minimum wages in 2007-08. Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan almost doubled the minimum wage rate from fifty-eight rupees a day to one-hundred rupees a day (Ghildiyal, 2009). In order to prevent this, GoI started considering a “freeze” in wages at rupees one-hundred per day, and a centralized wage brought into effect while writing this dissertation.

Apart from increasing the wage-rate, state governments could also gain popularity by reducing the work that people had to do in order to earn the wage. This is effectively increasing the wage rate per unit of work. In order to prevent this, GoI gave a direction that quantum of work in NREGA should be the same as it is in the Public Works Department. I have discussed this at greater length in the section on task rates in the next

chapter.

While state governments are not required to share the wage bill, they were expected to share 25% of the material costs. This gives state governments an incentive not to spend excessively, and thus aligns the interest of the state government with that of the centre. While there was no explicit policy as far as I knew, in practice, the Government of Tamil Nadu (GoTN) took measures to minimise its share of the expenditure. GoTN did this by opting for projects like desilting lakes that could be implemented exclusively with labour so that there are no material costs. Apart from the fiscal intention officials were also conscious that if money is spent on materials it would invite the attention of private contractors. To paraphrase what I heard from one official,

once it becomes the norm that private contractors or machinery is not to be used in NREGA, people themselves will start creating pressure when they get involved. But for this to happen, it is first crucial to establish the norm that contractors and machines are not to be used in NREGA.

Whatever the intentions, it had the unexpected consequence of reducing the choice of projects that could be implemented under NREGA, which I

will illustrate later.

State government & administration

While NREGA is mainly financed by GoI it is implemented by the state governments, normally through their Ministries of Rural Development (MoRD).

These are headed by a Minister, who is an elected representative and a Secretary, who is a civil servant and a career employee. The state is subdivided into Districts which is headed by a career civil servant called the Collector.

Districts are further subdivided into Development Blocks (Blocks henceforth) that is headed by a Block Development Officer (BDO), who is also a career civil servant. Blocks are further subdivided into Panchayats that are headed by an elected official called the Panchayat president. A Panchayat could consist of one more villages and each village is divided into Wards.

Wards have representatives who are a part of the Panchayat office headed by the Panchayat president. Each Panchayat in Tamil Nadu has two paid workers who are required to do most of the administrative work of NREGA projects.

District administration

The state and central governments were mainly involved in creating policies, regulations, and financing the programme. The district administration works with the state and central governments and coordinates with the Block offices that play a critical role in implementing NREGA. District collectors can monitor, reward or punish workers within the district and thus occupy a powerful position within the district, and thus they can have a critical influence on how the norms are enforced within a district. The district office also liaised with the the public within the district, and thus serves as a link between people and the government. Apart from direct contact, there was a regular flow of complaint letters to the office directly and also through other channels like senior officials at the state, the Chief Minister's office and through senior police officials. Most advertisements relating to NREGA carried the mobile number of the district collector, which people used often especially for making complaints. The collector's office was remarkably open to women, Dalits, and other poor sections of the community¹⁵.

¹⁵The only set of people who complained to me about lack of access to the Collector were the elected Panchayat presidents. Their meetings with the collector were typically on issues of conflict between the administration and the Panchayat system, and they often felt frustrated that collectors were 'smooth' talkers who had answers that they were not

The block office

Block offices are the fundamental unit of implementation of NREGA. They have a staff of accountants, engineers, technical assistants and other clerical officers taking up different aspects of implementation of NREGA and other programs implemented in the block. This office was responsible to ensure that all the projects happen smoothly, and this involved ensuring logistics, doing the paperwork, managing every Panchayat, managing field level workers, checking corruption, ensuring timely payments and an assortment of other duties. GoTN gave block offices the duty of ensuring that some NREGA work happens in every Panchayat every week. Like the collector's office, block offices were also expected to be open to people with grievances. Typically, block offices are located in important towns of the locality, and it was easy for anyone to walk into the block office on any given day, and meet the BDO or other senior officials there in.

Most officials in the block office were direct employees of the state government. It is not unusual for block officials to be transferred between offices in the process of routine transfers, punishments, promotions or due to political pressure. It is common for BDOs to be transferred under political pressure, and thus their grievances were left unaddressed.

ical pressure, and as a result I was hardly able to meet one person who had continued in the same block for several years. Accountants and engineers too could be transferred, and it happened routinely. Most of the BDOs had started as village level officers and had grown into this position through a system of promotions, and thus they knew the system ground-up reasonably well.

All government officials were bound by “service rules” that delineated their duties, rights, rewards, punishments, appeal mechanisms and other aspects of work. It thus provided one of the critical normative structures that governed their work. The administrative system was strictly hierarchical with the collector wielding tremendous powers within the district. Outside the district, senior politicians and officials had a high degree of influence on how the system functions, as it is to be expected. Apart from those directly within the system, local party members and large contractors had regular access to officials, often with high degree of influence. The collector’s office regularly had public meetings on Mondays to which a large number of people came with their petitions, demands and grievances, and this too had a considerable influence on the actions of the officials¹⁶.

¹⁶The fact that the Collector could be approached had a considerable influence on the actions of lower officials. Thus, the Monday meetings and other channels of contact of

Governmentality and the state government

NREG Act provides the basic normative structure of the programme, and the state government takes policy decisions within the parameters of NREGA law in putting the system in place. The ultimate set of rules binding implementing agencies are issued by the state government in form of *Government Orders* (GOs). Since they are given periodically, GOs are capable of responding to the situation tactically. Further, GOs are given at the state level and so, it provides some flexibility in implementing the programme in consonance with state level institutional arrangements.

Tamil Nadu has a long and distinguished experience in organising programs in a systematic manner, and this was applied in implementing NREGA. GOs were issued for hiring new officers, assigning duties to existing officials, creating accounting formats, registers, bank accounts, and a detailed specification of responsibilities for each official. There was even one GO allotting six litres of extra petrol for jeeps since NREGA will involve extra travel for monitoring and management. The Act requires Panchayat spend at least 50% of all the money allocated under NREGA. GoTN decided that Panchayats will implement all the projects. The reason for this decision is not the higher officials with common people had an impact that goes beyond the specific meetings.

clear but some Block officials speculated that their seniors expected that the closeness of Panchayats to people will lead to lower levels of corruption (discussed further in section 4.2).

GoTN also put in a system to ensure that workers are paid within a week of finishing the cycle of work. A district official pointed out that timely payments are made people will get a greater confidence about NREGA and develop a stake in it. If people develop a stake, they will monitor it carefully and this will create a sphere of influence to implement the norms favourable to labourers, as the Act intends. The state government also created a rule that once money has been withdrawn from the bank for making payments, the Panchayat should not maintain it as cash for more than three days. On one hand this ensures that people are paid on a timely basis and on the other, it ensures that the scope for misuse of money is minimised. Following NREG Act, the government directed that payments should be made in a public area in the presence of a payment committee containing at least four members of a seven member *payment committee*. The committee was to be nominated by the Panchayat president.

There were occasions when the Panchayat president was unwilling to pay workers following some conflict in the Panchayat. For such emergencies

the government created a rule that the BDO herself can make payments directly to people bypassing the Panchayat system. This rule surprised me to begin with, but I soon realized that crisis relating to payments were not uncommon, especially if the Panchayat president is challenged when workers got low wages on the basis of task-rates. Having such enabling provisions was helpful when the village is highly polarised, thus ensure that payment of wages happen smoothly.

GOs created detailed rules on who should do what based on a close tactical understanding of the context, and thus created a field of action for various actors. But for these rules to materialise into action, they had to be sustained by some form of influence. The government brings in a number of influences including violence, ability to offer rewards & punishments, but most importantly a detailed set of micro-practices that that has been referred to in literature as *governmentality* (Ferguson *et al.*, 2005; Foucault, n.d.; Inda & governmentality Anthropologies of modernity : Foucault, 2005).

The ability of senior officials and Ministers of the state government to control activities at the grassroots in a far flung state depends on a complex set of arrangements such as creating detailed norms of behaviour

for different actors, documentation, monitoring, and assigning rewards & punishments. Paperwork is the cornerstone of such arrangements since it enables those higher in the hierarchy to follow activities that are highly decentralised. Formats were devised to enable senior officials to get monthly reports about the number of projects taken up, number of people employed, finances sanctioned, money spent and other details.

Apart from enabling centralised management, paperwork is also crucial for legal accountability. Formats were devised that required careful documentation of activities, payments and decisions. The power of senior officials to use legal sanctions depends crucially on this paperwork. Legally permitted punishments can be used when an implementing agency does not perform prescribed tasks, and so if an agent records that she violated a rule, it becomes a ground for sanctions. Since agents may record information that is consonance with rules without performing them, recorded information should be verifiable. Verifiability improves when the record of activities is complete, specific, and available on a timely basis. A number of formats, registers, and other documents were created to enable this process, a summary of documents is provided in the appendix (sec. 3.2) below.

Documentation can be changed periodically if they do not enable moni-

toring of any activity that the government is interested in. When NREGA started in 2006 the GoTN had designed job cards where the total number of days a family worked was entered on a monthly basis by village level workers. This did not mention on what days a family availed of employment, making it difficult to cross-verify this information with the families or in other registers. To make information more verifiable, job cards were redesigned in 2008 in Tamil Nadu.

The state government also instituted a system of regular monitoring by officials at different levels. Officials at the block, district and state level were expected to make random checks on a sizable proportion of projects each year. Such intense system of monitoring is usual in Tamil Nadu in most programmes including schools, school feeding, childcare system and health system. Apart from officials belonging to the department, higher officials from other departments too are involved in monitoring programmes. For example, a government doctor visiting a school will inspect school feeding and other aspects of a school. On any given week three to four senior officials may come to the project site putting intense pressure on field officials not to fudge their documents. Since NREGA is a politically high profile and contains a lot of funds, extra measures were taken for its monitoring.

Apart from creating formats for recording information, rules were created on control and distribution of information with a bearing on monitoring of official actions. The job card was to be maintained by the family so that they have a record of employment provided to them on paper. The number of workers on each day, total money allotted for a project and other broad details were to be provided on notice boards in the worksite and the muster roll was legally expected to be provided to anyone seeking to inspect it. Finally, NREGA provided the legal right for anyone to seek any document pertaining to the programme. Officials in charge are legally required to provide the requested information within one week of demand in form of certified photocopies.

Rules relating to transparency extend the power of ‘governmentality’ to those outside the government and thus have, radical implications for politics. This was recognised by the right to information movement in India led by organisations like the *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan* (MKSS).

MKSS recognised that officials would find it difficult to sustain corruption or other illegal practices if precise information about this is available to the public. MKSS took official documentation, verified them using ‘social audits’ and shared the results of such audits in public meetings. When cor-

ruption is exposed in public, the risk of punishments increases for those who were involved in the process. Documentation, laws prescribing punishments and the force required to carry out these punishments (e.g. policing) are all a part of governmental powers. But corruption often goes unpunished since officials and politicians within the government are often unwilling to use their influence to sanction their colleagues due to a variety of motivations. Social audit is a technique that extends some influence of the government to common people, and thus alters the bases of influence in their favour , and thus creates an institutional change.

Panchayat system

The administrative system in the district is complemented by a political system of village level governments called the Panchayats. In Villupuram district each block typically contained 40 to 50 Panchayats. Typically a Panchayat consists of one or a few villages for which a president is elected periodically directly by the people. Apart from electing a President, people of the Panchayat also directly elect a Vice president and people belonging to each ward also elect a member representing their ward. The President, the Vice president, and the Ward members together consists of the elected Pan-

chayat. The elected body was in charge of implementing NREGA projects and had two staff members for implementing this and all other programs of the Panchayat¹⁷.

Very few Panchayat presidents today come from families that have been traditionally dominant and could mobilise votes from the Panchayat through traditional authority. Around India's independence, most dominant families of this district came from the Reddiar caste who were rich, and owned significant proportion of the land. They were also ritually higher in the caste hierarchy. But owing to their small numbers and due to political and social movements, this group lost their dominance to Vanniyars who are numerically preponderant in this district, and are also well organised. Since the last 20 years many people of relatively low economic backgrounds, sometimes owning no land or less than 10 acres of land started competing successfully in Panchayat elections. Many of them had larger political ambitions and were members of large political parties.

Lacking traditional authority or dominant economic clout, Panchayat

¹⁷The Panchayat system itself is three-tiered and has representation at Panchayat, Block and District levels. During Panchayat elections, each voter gets multiple votes to select a Ward Member, Panchayat president, and Councilors. Councilors are representatives who will have representation at the block and district levels. In Tamil Nadu, the block and district tiers of the Panchayat system did not have much of a role in NREGA, and so I have not referred to it much in this work.

presidents cannot take their support base for granted any more. They had to rely on alternate means of influencing people to vote for them, and they did this mostly by delivering services. Political aspirants often acted as intermediaries who could be approached by common people when they wished to secure the benefit of some government scheme. The aspirants knew which officials should be approached, the procedures involved, and other factors involved in securing benefits of a variety of schemes. This made them valuable for people even if they were not in power within the Panchayat. It gave space for ambitious young men in particular to aspire for a role in politics.

Apart from their own election, aspirants also depended on the support of people so that they could transform votes to the larger parties during state or national elections. This created a system of mutual dependence where political parties needed the support of such local politicians in order to win the elections, and in turn they supported Panchayat presidents in a variety of ways. When there were local demands for projects, political parties often obliged to the demands that came through party representatives in villages. This gave them power of patronage, but this power was not absolute since their role could often be played by competitors. Parties in power had a

greater recourse to patronage resources, as can be expected. Given the intense nature of political competition within the village, presidents and other aspirants had to work hard in order to gain support, and this gave common people considerable influence in politics. The competition at the village level was also reflected in the competition at the state level between parties, and it made parties pay attention to the feedback from its village representatives.

Panchayat presidents also worked under the watchful eyes of their opponents. When corruption happens, or if only a small set of people are favoured with benefits, or when the President does something to bring down his legitimacy, his opponents would make the most of this opportunity.

While political parties depend on such local politicians to deliver them votes, parties in turn provide protection when presidents run into trouble with the law. For example, if a President is held accountable under the charge of corruption, political parties can mobilise support from local MLAs or other powerful people to contact the district officials to drop charges or to defer action. As a result, even though laws provided a strong set of incentives against corruption, and other misdemeanours, it was often difficult for officials to initiate action.

Another important concern of presidents was to make money through Panchayat resources. Most presidents spend a considerable amount of money in the process of winning support during elections. This involves campaign expenditure as well as money spent in distributing gifts to secure votes. It is commonly understood that presidents considered this money as “investment” that has to be recovered from various schemes when they hold political office. Apart from garnering resources for political support, many presidents also had to mobilise money for political parties and of course, holding political office was also seen as a way of economic mobility. These put together, created a strong incentive for Panchayat presidents to indulge in corruption in NREGA and other programs; incentives and motivations, are of course indispensable in any study of the structure of influences.

The Panchayat president perhaps faces more goals and pressures in administering NREGA than anybody else, and the legal norms did not permit some of the aspirations that the presidents had to contend with. The extra-legal norms that the other actors supported had to be accommodated given the influence such actors had over the Panchayat president. Such norms started complementing the legal-normative framework of NREGA. These included paying Ward members without their working in NREGA, and pro-

viding a share of corruption to Vice Presidents, political parties, officials and other influential people. On the one hand there is the law itself and a set of detailed guidelines issued by the State government and the district Administration. These are so detailed that they leave very little scope for the Panchayat president to improvise and to modify the program. The rules allow the Panchayat president along with the Gram Sabha¹⁸ to ascertain what works should be taken up in the Panchayat. Apart from this, there is very little direct role in decision-making for the Panchayat president. The tussle between the legal-norms and the extra-legal norms defined the politics around NREGA for the Panchayat presidents.

There was thus a complex interrelationship between common people, political parties and Panchayat presidents with each depending on the other for a set of services. While both Panchayat presidents and political parties indulged in a certain degree of corruption, there were limits to how much of it could be done since they had to depend on people for re-election. Without delivering the benefits of holding political office to people widely, it was difficult within the state to continue to hold political office due to intense political competition. As a result, people had tremendous bargaining power

¹⁸Gram Sabha is a council comprising of all the legal adults in a village.

with the political system. Managing patronage resources from the State enabled them to secure support, but in a competitive political atmosphere they had to distribute these resources in a relatively egalitarian manner.

Further, every Panchayat has a Vice president and several Ward Members that the President had to work with. Government orders required that every check signed by the President be countersigned by the Vice president, making her cooperation essential. Further, every project in the Panchayat should be based on resolutions made by elected members of the Panchayat. This requires the cooperation of the Ward Members. In many villages there were serious factions, and resolutions moved by the Panchayat president can be defeated by the other factions. This meant in one sense that the Panchayat president had to have all the other office bearers in good humour at all times. The role of the Panchayat president in implementing NREGA has to be understood within this larger democratic context.

Village level workers

Each Panchayat had “Panchayat assistant”, who is a state government employee and one other worker called the *Makkal Nala Panialar* (MNP). MNPs are an interesting lot since they were appointed originally by the DMK

government. Many MNPs were appointed due to political connections with DMK, or due to direct political work they did for the party. As a result of this, when DMK lost power, the rival party abolished the system of MNPs. Subsequently they were reappointed when DMK came back to power, and the drama continued with MNPs being dismissed *en masse* the third time before being reappointed in 2006 with DMK returning to power. Despite their political connections, most MNPs were of a reasonably humble economic background. The fact that they were paid only Rs 1,300 meant that people who are relatively well off did not take up this job. Further, many of them had continued in this low-paying job with the hope that they would be someday made “permanent employees” of the State government with better benefits. The low status of both the village level workers had a strong bearing on the implementation of NREGA and other programmes, which I will take up later in this chapter.

Most Panchayat assistants were men, and many had served at least for 20 years in this position. In reflecting the general changes in the society, greater proportion of MNPs were women, compared to assistants who were mostly appointed much earlier.

21 June 2007

I climbed the weighing machine today after two years. I pushed the scales to a familiar position and it remained upright. I nudged it gently to no avail. After considerable amount pushing the scale tilted indicating I was somewhere there – and I had grown a full 20 KGs. If have been Americanised in any way, it is this, and I seem to have put my deposits just where men in hurry always do – a pot belly.

31 July 2007

Strange things are happening to me. I reached India 15 days ago and went to a women's college in town on some work. I met the head of X department and she immediately called me "sir". I am unused to this, that too by a senior person in a hierarchical institution like a college in India. I begged her to call me Vivek. "Oh OK Professor Vivek", she said very sincerely. Earlier when I moved from place to place even a (low cost) rickshaw wala would not solicit me unless I asked for one. This time around taxi drivers (the high cost end) rush to me to know where 'sar' wants to go. I have also had an easy time in getting things done in government offices. Something seems to have changed. My friends tell me that I am just the same but for some extra weight, and I have been wondering what is happening to me.

I think I got a clue today. A Panchayat president I interviewed told me sweetly that people listen to her because she's plump. Two years and twenty KGs earlier, I would have missed the import of the statement, but now I don't. I was so thin that I was called a skeleton, stick of a coconut leaf and other colourful adjectives. Now these adjectives are gone, and I am convinced that my new status is due to my pot belly. I am ok with the status, but I am not sure if it affected my "subjects". Perhaps I should consult my ethnography professor.

Relationship between Panchayats and officials

Since Panchayat presidents are elected officials, they are not directly responsible to officials at the block office. Unlike officials who are bound by service rules, there was no regulation that stipulated a Panchayat president

to compulsorily take up any official work. Presidents were bound by the Panchayati Raj Act that gave them only political responsibilities. Section 205 of this law gave officials the ability to dismiss a Panchayat president under dire circumstances, which is of course contestable in a court of law. Apart from that, Panchayat presidents could be held accountable under criminal charges including embezzlement of funds. While these are powerful legal provisions, these did not give a significant amount of control over the activities of the Panchayat president to block officials. This created a situation where block officers were entrusted with the responsibility of implementing NREGA through the Panchayat presidents, but the presidents are not accountable to be the block officials.

The biggest challenge facing the block officials was to ensure that Panchayat presidents cooperate with them in implementing the programme. Since Panchayat presidents are elected officials, they are not directly accountable to the block officials. The state government in the meanwhile had decided that all the projects of NREGA will be implemented through Panchayats and not by the block office. This meant that the block officials had the responsibility to ensure that an NREGA project is operational in every Panchayat every week but did not have any direct authority on the

Panchayat presidents to ensure this.

Presidents on their part felt that they often felt that they were being compelled to do things that they did not choose to. Implementing NREGA requires day-to-day work that is demanding and there are both economic and political costs (more on this below) to implementing it. Seen from these perspectives NREGA was an unattractive option for Panchayat presidents, and they resented being compelled to implement NREGA, and many did not want to implement it.

Legally there was nothing that compelled Panchayats to implement NREGA, and the block office that was in-charge of implementation did not have any direct control over the Panchayat presidents. Without a legal normative structure to back them, the block officials tried to bring every possible every possible influence they had in securing the cooperation of the Panchayat presidents. These ranged from offering to cooperate on projects that the presidents wished to implement, using an implicit threat of putting spanners in the wheels of Panchayat work, to the dire threat of dismissing Panchayats that refused to implement NREGA using Section 205 of the Panchayat Act. This is the administrative context in which NREGA worked in Tamil Nadu.

Political parties & other actors

Political parties play a major role in Tamil politics, and carry a lot of clout with the administration. Politics in Tamil Nadu has been highly competitive since India's independence and political parties have a massive reach into the society. At least four to five parties are strong in most regions, and most villages have representatives of multiple-parties. Though political parties do not have any assigned role in NREGA, they have a clout with state governments that can be used to modify institutions. Parties also had a close relationship with officials, and they could bring their influence with the government to protect officials or Presidents when they get into trouble with the government. Parties could also harass officials who did not cooperate with them by transferring them, and in a number of other ways. These measures created a tenuous relationship of cooperation and conflicts between political parties, officials and Panchayat presidents.

Farmers are highly influential in the society in rural Tamil Nadu. NREGA created alternate employment for labourers and thus it gave them a bargaining power with farmers. On the other hand, NREGA could be used to maintain water infrastructure and other create other assets that could be useful for farmers; there is thus a reason to welcome such programmes.

Independent contractors were also influential with the administration and the government through their ability to raise finances for elections, that parties depend on. NREGA specifically prohibits the use of contractors in implementing its projects, and this has been followed in Tamil Nadu (more details below). During my fieldwork, there was no active lobby of contractors, as far as I knew, who were trying to influence the government on NREGA. Finally, NGOs, Trade Unions, and a number of other associations were active in the region and could influence the work of the government through representations, collective action and other methods.

Summing up

The law created the basic legal-normative structure of NREGA with two key goals of ensuring guaranteed employment and creating socially useful assets. The norms also sought to limit government expenditure, curtail corruption and allow common people to influence the selection of projects in NREGA. These goals came into conflict with the aspirations of those who wanted to make money through corruption, and get wages without working. Farmers disliked guaranteed employment at minimum wages since it created labour shortages for them, and implementing agencies disliked the management

issues that came with having a large number of labourers at once. The state government that had to pay unemployment allowance if those who demand work are not given work did not want to pay the allowance, and thus sought to alter this rule. Finally, implementing NREGA required hard work on the ground, and implementing agencies resisted the work being imposed on them. When aspirations of these actors came into conflict with the legal-normative framework, they wished a change in such norms, providing a set of competing norms.

The effectiveness of these competing norms depended on the influences they were able to muster. Any legal norm is automatically supported by a set of administrative influences, including incentives for officials prescribed in their service rules, the power to dismiss Panchayats, policing powers, and many micro-practices that I called governmentality. Labourers commanded considerable influence through democratic pressures on the Panchayat presidents in the context of political competition. Presidents and village level workers in turn had limited influence on labourers since they did not have a domineering status within the village. Ward-members, Vice-presidents had an influence over the Panchayat president, and so did political parties, officials and farmers. The President had to depend on them for patronage,

protection and for getting her work done. The services of the President from garnering votes to providing money and resources made the President important for these actors in turn.

The elaborate discussion above on the basic normative structure, competing norms and the key bases of influence has given us the context to discuss how NREGA functioned as an institution. In the following chapter, I will discuss how institutional dynamics played out on the field by focusing on the two key outcomes desired by the framers of NREGA.

Chapter appendix: Key documents in NREGA

1. **Estimates:** Technical detail of the project outlining the work involved. From this the labour, materials and finances required are calculated.
2. **Administrative Sanctions:** Permission given on the basis of technical soundness of the project permitting it to be implemented.
3. **Release orders:** Periodic orders permitting payment of wages and other expenses for projects based on their satisfactory completion.
4. **Payment register:** Register of all payments made containing details

of payment including date and purpose.

5. **Funds position register:** Contains revenue and expenditure details for each Panchayat and the amount of funds remaining with a Panchayat. This is used to provide advances required so that work is not halted for the lack of cash flow.
6. **Nominal Muster Roll (NMR):** This is the most important document in wage employment programmes. Contains details of who worked on each project and on which dates. It also contains signatures of workers on the days in which they were present. Since wages are the most important expenditure in NREGA, NMR is significant.
7. **Quick report of employment through SMS:** Field level workers were expected to send an SMS at 10.30 am to the Block office each morning with the number of men and women working that day. When any official visited the project, she could cross-check this information with a headcount. Once the SMS is sent, it was difficult to add bogus names after work since the number of workers has already been recorded.
8. **Measurement book:** Outlines the work done by each team each

week. This is the basis on which work is measured and payments made. Since these are accompanied by diagrams, it is often possible to physically verify if money was actually used to construct the project described.

9. **Work completion report:** Report given by the engineer mentioning that the work that was originally sanctioned was actually completed.
10. **Asset register:** Register of all public assets in a Panchayat. In case of NREGA it is supposed to contain photos of the project before starting and after completion. Each asset including is described in detail and a “survey number” is attached to it so that we can locate where exactly the project is supposed to have been built.
11. **Job card register:** Maintained by Panchayat with serial numbers and names of families that have been issued with a job card.
12. **Employment provided register:** Maintained weekly by the Panchayat with details of work provided to each family.
13. **Job card:** Contains entries on the number of days of employment provided. The card is supposed to be filled when people get payments

and it is maintained by the family. Entries in the job card, NMR and the job register should tally if there is no fudging.

14. **Daily report of progress:** Given to the collector with details of employment provision in each Panchayat every day. This is consolidated periodically and sent to state and central governments.

Chapter 4

Making of an institution - II

Abstract

Ensuring fall-back employment of at least 100 days an year, and producing socially useful assets were the two key goals of NREGA when it was framed. This chapter takes through an eventful year and discusses how the institutional structure of NREGA as envisaged by law underwent a change. In this process, the aspirations of common people translated into institutional change mainly by being ‘uncontrollable’, thus making the enforcement of unfavourable norms difficult, and by taking up strategic collective action.

4.1 Providing employment: The case on the ground

As discussed in section 3.1, one of the foremost goals of guaranteeing employment is to eradicate hunger by ensuring that people have employment opportunities to fall back on in times of need. Apart from eradicating hunger, the campaign sought guaranteed employment in order to help people avoid distress migration, and more generally empower landless labourers by giving them alternative source of income. Traditionally women have been major participants in such wage-employment programmes, and expanded employment opportunities could contribute to women's economic independence. Finally, the guarantee of alternative employment could increase wage labourers' bargaining power vis-a-vis farmers and other employers, thereby presumably fostering a more equitable social order.

Apart from directly contributing to people's income, those who supported the law expected that guaranteed employment would help increase market wages in agriculture and other sectors. Any such impact, supporters of the law understood, would be resented by actors forced to pay higher wages, and may lead to heightened social conflict. Those who employ

labourers tend to be politically more powerful than labourers, and could use their influence to sabotage the programme. In a context where many progressive laws are routinely violated, activists did not expect NREGA to work as on paper. Even if the law is not fully implemented, activists expected that a strong legal guarantee would improve the bargaining power of those who are less powerful (Dréze *et al.*, 2006). The draft law thus created a rule that any individual desirous of work could apply for and secure it within 15 days. While the framers of NREGA envisioned it to be a demand-driven programme, GoTN instituted a norm that some work should be open in each Panchayat every week so that anyone who seeks work can get it without any prior application. This had the advantage that people did not have to apply for work, but without applications, legal guarantee of work cannot be enforced. This provided the context for employment generation under NREGA in my district.

Implementing NREGA requires a lot of work at the field level. On a typical day when a project is implemented, the person in charge goes on the first day of the week to form teams of workers and to allot them work. There can be serious differences in this process and it may require somebody with authority to tackle them. They then had to spend a considerable amount

of time every day during the project to make sure that people who reported to work are doing at least some amount of work. Often a small set of people refuse to work and in the process demoralise everybody else who is working, creating a lot of confusion and low productivity in the process. By the end of the day, paperwork had to be done, and each week they had to be in touch with the Block office in order to settle the accounts, collect the money and to make payments. The process of payment itself can take hours together since hundreds of people work on any given week.

For the program to work, it required the organisational work to be done by someone. As mentioned above, GoTN decided that all the projects will be implemented by Panchayats, which meant that a significant amount of organisational work will have to be done by the office bearers of the Panchayat and the two village level workers. In the first year when NREGA was implemented in Villupuram district, very few projects were taken up. One block level official told me that in the first phase only Panchayat presidents who were interested in NREGA took it up and it was implemented well. The administration which was keen to have a project functioning in every Panchayat each day found this unsatisfactory and started compelling all Panchayats to start projects. Making it compulsory made a lot of re-

luctant Panchayat presidents spend their efforts in implementing what they disliked. The decision to keep a project open each day meant that there was no respite in work, leading to resentment and conflicts between the block office and presidents.

While they were given the burden of work, presidents had no monetary incentives in implement NREGA and they do not receive a salary as well. In fact, rather than being a source of income, if it is implemented properly, NREGA represented expenditure for them. Often there are expenses that have to be incurred in the process of implementing these projects that are not compensated for. For example, there is an intense system of monitoring and so there is a constant traffic of officials. Many officials expect to be “treated” with at least food, and this can get expensive over a period of time. Apart from that, they also have to spend a lot of time in troubleshooting since they’re directly in charge of implementation (I have discussed some below).

Most presidents also did not consider NREGA to be a source of patronage, or something that could get them a good name amidst voters. Instead, it represented an electoral threat for them in some important ways. The process of implementation gave rise to many conflicts that could alienate

voters. Most presidents also depended on the support of farmers who were not in favour of the programme since it created labour shortages for them. Though farmers were not numerically dominant compared to labourers, presidents typically come from the same social background, and such families can be influential in more ways than one in the village.

Given these considerations, Panchayat presidents were unwilling to implement NREGA, and certainly not on a daily basis, the norm that the state government was keen to enforce. While the block office had the duty of making sure that some work is open in every Panchayat, they did not have any direct control over Panchayats. I mentioned before that officials are bound by service rules that require them to do the work that is assigned to them by the government. Panchayat presidents, on the other hand, do not have clearly prescribed executive duties as they are elected officials. There was no provision either in NREGA or in the Panchayati Raj Act that made it mandatory for Panchayat presidents to implement the programme. Thanks to this, no sanctions were possible in law on presidents who did not want to implement NREGA. In other words, the rule that Panchayats will implement NREGA required them act in certain ways, but there was no force that could enforce or motivate them to do so. To borrow

from Michael Foucault, block officials had a limited ability to *act on the actions of Panchayat presidents*¹.

This posed a challenge for senior officials to find a way to influence Panchayat presidents to comply to their favoured norm. At one point the state government considered creating a legal provision whereby a Panchayat could be dismissed if they do not implement NREGA. The rights and duties of Panchayats are mainly regulated by the Panchayati Raj Act. Section 205 of this Act allows for dismissing the elected presidents. Using this, the state government considered an enabling legislation whereby Section 205 could be used against a Panchayat president who refuses to implement NREGA. By threatening to withdraw privileges that presidents enjoy, this rule would effectively have created an incentive to take up the work. Even though it was not legislated, the threat of using Section 205 was regularly made in block office meetings leading to heated arguments in an already contentious relationship between the two.

Apart from the threat of using Section 205, officials used a series of other subtle measures to influence presidents. While there are many conflicts in

¹Foucault characterized power as, “it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future” (Foucault, 1982, 789)

their relationship, there is also mutual dependence, and officials used this influence as far as possible in securing cooperation. Panchayats had to work with the block office in almost all the projects they took up, and presidents realised that officials could put spanners in the wheel in projects they cherish. For example officials could stop all fund-flow to a Panchayat if some account in some programme has not been completely submitted. Block officials also routinely emphasised that they are merely implementing orders of their superiors in order to secure some empathy for their situation.

Thus, though there was no specific force backing officials on NREGA, they were able to bring the considerable power they have in their overall command to influence Panchayats. I think that this principle can be extended to understand institutions at large. In other words, in order to understand how certain rules will work, we have to go beyond understanding the specific enforcement measures that are embedded in those rules. Instead, we have to understand the entire bases of influence that proponents and opponents of those rules have at their command, and examine how far they may be able to use such influences to enforce their favoured norms².

² In taking this approach, I wish to emphasize that possibility that relatively powerful actors are not able to influence certain norms.

Some presidents of course took considerable interest in implementing it, and were proud of the work they did in their villages. Despite reasons to complain, most presidents also appreciated the fact that the programme represented substantial income for some of the poorest people in their villages. Between these competing considerations, a considerable volume of employment was generated in the process, and NREGA works were taken up in most Panchayats in the district. At the same time, many presidents took the first opportunity possible to stop projects or to delay them. As a result the goal of having some work open daily was lost in this region.

The ward-wise rotation system

One of the most striking features of implementation in the district was the ward wise rotation system. Each Panchayat is divided into many Wards, typically consisting of distinct habitations. A norm was devised in Villpura that on any given week, people of one ward can work in NREGA. The next week another ward of the same Panchayat will be selected for work. In Tamil Nadu people of different castes (especially Dalits and non-Dalits) live in distinct quarters that are defined by wards. In effect, rotation of work by the ward meant that Dalits and non-Dalits do not work together

at any given point of time.

This system of rotation seems to have evolved out of many different objectives. One major factor that was influential was that too many people turned up for work when NREGA projects were started, making it difficult to implement them with a limited set of staff. One President told me jokingly that so many people reported for work when he started desilting a pond that there was only standing room inside the pond leaving no space for people to work inside. Ensuring that people belonging to only one part of the Panchayat can report to work at a time reduces the number of people who could get work. This made projects easier to manage.

A second objective was that the relationship between Dalits and the dominant Vanniyar caste in the region was tense, and having the two work side-by-side for a whole day can lead to social tensions. This claim should not be taken lightly since there is a long history of animosity between castes in the region. Under the tense atmosphere, it is not surprising that Panchayat presidents did not want to put themselves in between the conflict.

The third reason, relating to agricultural labour, is perhaps the most important but least articulated of them all. In Tamil Nadu women get between 25 and 50 rupees per day when they work as agricultural labourers.

So, if the work on employment guarantee, they can get significantly higher wages. Farmers complained that when a NREGA project is opened, everybody reports to that work and they are unable to find labourers to work in their farms. In my district, within a few months of implementation of NREGA wages went up by at least 25%, and there were reports of agricultural wages increasing in different parts of India. The increase in wages and the fact that they were not able to find labourers to work caused deep resentment among farmers who are politically powerful in Tamil Nadu.

The system of rotation ensures that farmers will be able to find labourers in the ward where people cannot report to NREGA project that week and thus, they can have an assured supply of labourers. This idea was articulated very often by middle peasants and Panchayat presidents during interviews. Interestingly, both parties would speak about this issue in a hushed voice. For example, one farmer who articulated this opinion was very clear that I should not report this conversation to anybody else in the village or else he would be in deep trouble. I believe that the same would not be the case maybe 30 or 40 years back when agricultural labourers, especially Dalits, would not be feared by the land owners. In such conditions, NREGA work could have been stopped or reduced considerably by

those with influence. Today landowners cannot take agricultural labourers for granted since the relationship between two groups has changed dramatically, and in this context a large volume of employment could still be generated even if it increased agricultural wages.

Unpredictability of work

The system of rotation and periodic stoppages of work had the consequence that availability of work was highly unpredictable for workers seeking NREGA work. The system of applications was first undermined and instead the administration tried to keep some project open every day to provide an implicit guarantee. The system of rotation effectively meant that the original idea of easy access to work was drastically cut down especially in large Panchayats. Most Panchayat had 2-4 wards and so in the larger of these a family can get work only in one week in a month. The larger Panchayats had 7 wards and so a family can expect to find work just once in seven weeks; that is if there were no other interruptions.

Work was interrupted for a variety of reasons. Since most of these works was done in open air, rainy months meant that there were a lot of interruptions to work. This represented further delays in getting work.

Panchayat presidents often used the smallest available excuse to stop work. When there were disputes relating to wages or other issues, work would be stopped till the dispute was settled. This meant additional lags in providing work. On one occasion, the State government had asked all the Panchayats to change the system of record keeping and in order to migrate to the new set of records, no work was undertaken for almost 2 months. Thanks to these breaks, work was completely unavailable for many months in a year.

Periodic interruptions to work meant that availability of work was unpredictable. This made it difficult for workers to take alternate employment when it is available and then to opt for NREGA in other months. For example, during a visit to Rajasthan I met many workers who would migrate to other states to find work and return to Rajasthan in summer or during certain festivals in order to be with their families or come back for a brief while during cultivation. The lack of predictability on when people could get work in Tamil Nadu resulted in a feature that people would rush to NREGA projects whenever it was available for their ward. One farmer mentioned that he had hired some labourers for the day and on the way to work they heard that NREGA work will be available to them that week, and all of them ran back from his field promptly!

Lack of legal guarantee

Unpredictability of work by itself means that people lost their control on when they wish to get work, as it was envisaged in the law. Even when employment was being provided, small sections of the population were denied employment on a variety of grounds. In one case, a President consistently refused to start projects in his Panchayat and some politically active youngsters forced him to open works after they took their complaint to higher officials. When work started in the Panchayat, these youngsters were denied work by the Panchayat president. In such cases, there was little protection that was available legally.

Given the highly competitive nature of politics selective denials of such sort were rare. Such actions can alienate a significant number of people, or perhaps an entire caste making re-election a difficult prospect. There were other forms of discrimination among groups, where a President could deny employment without encountering adverse social or political impact. This included denying employment to single women, aged people, disabled people, mothers with infants, and in some cases to tribal people who are numerically small and ritually inferior in Tamil Nadu. Incidentally, NREGA requires a crèche in every worksite to enable mothers with young children to

participate in work, but there was resistance to providing this from the ministry³ all the way down to Panchayat presidents. Crèches in such worksites consist just of one or two elderly women and a makeshift arrangement that requires little expenditure or preparation. Resistance to provide work to women with infants or to provide crèche facilities are unlikely to be due to expenditure or effort involved. In my assessment, it is one example of how social norms supersede laws, even when the norms do not yield concrete benefit to anyone.

A system of formal applications may have given added protection to these people in order to get work. Since no applications were being taken, there was no legal protection when someone is denied work. But due to the competitive nature of politics and people's ability to assert themselves, it was difficult to give somebody work within a Panchayat and to deny others. This by and large ensured the norm of equity in the distribution of work within any Panchayat, but provided no guarantee for getting sustained work when people wanted it.

The administration's effort to circumvent legal guarantees by discour-

³ For example, the Minister of Rural Development mentioned in a press conference that that crèches will not be provided since there are many child care centres in the state (correspondent, 2007). It is widely recognised that such centres do not provide day care to infants, and even if they did, the distant centres will make breast-feeding impossible for women working in NREGA projects.

aging applications was not unchallenged. Communist parties tend to have little support among the landed farmers in rural areas, and given that a significant proportion of their members are landless labourers, these parties had an interest in making NREGA function well. Further, Left Parties were also engaged when NREGA was being legislated and they sought to get mileage from the programme by working on it at the grassroots as well. In every training programme for party members, CPI (M) in particular, asked their representatives to inform people about the importance of applications for legal guarantees. In some cases where work was being denied consistently, the party also tried actively to present applications.

One group for example that sought to put an application was initially thwarted by the Panchayat president who refused to get the applications. Later the group decided to visit the BDO in order to present their case. The BDO too refused to get the application asking them to approach the President instead. By a coincidence the collector of the district had visited the particular block office the same day these youngsters were protesting for work. They meet the collector at the block office and demanded that their application be taken. Even the district collector asked them to go back to the Panchayat president. When people tried to put formal applications for

work they were presented with frustrations and applications were generally not accepted. Even if applications were accepted now and then, there was no system to process these applications as it was envisaged in NREG Act.

The inconsistent norms regarding applications in law and practice, was reflected in the behaviour of officials. During the introductory phase many officials visited villages to inform people about NREGA and told them about application system. On the other hand, there was also a consistent practice of discouraging or even refusing applications outright. There were also some who were committed to the system of applications and encouraged activists to organise people to use them. This, to me, is a reminder not to understand the government or officials in a monolithic light. That said, one could say that the dominant practice was that of discouraging the use of applications, and this was consistent with the interests of the state government.

High volume of employment

Despite the lack of an effective legal guarantee of work, NREGA created a high volume of employment in the district and the state overall. Many advocates of NREGA recognised from the outset that the law will not be

implemented as it is in practice, but having a legal entitlement will give people a bargaining power. Laws have a powerful impact on people's actions and decisions not just through the coercive powers of the state, but also through a cultural impact. NREGA was popularly called the *Nooru Naal Thittam* or the "100 day scheme" in Tamil Nadu, and it clearly set the expectation on how much employment should be provided. This was used by people during conflicts in securing advantage for their position.

For example, one large Panchayat with seven wards imposed a norm that only one member of a family can report to work on a given day in order to make the numbers manageable leading to intense bargaining by labourers. Paraphrasing what he hears from the labourers, the village level worker said, *"Is it your money that you are giving? It's government's money...everyone in our family will come [to work]. We are in trouble [poverty] and the government gives us 100 days of work [what is your problem with it?]. When are you going to give me the work?"*. Since the application system did not take root, labourers rarely used arguments such as *it is my right*, and there was little demand to get work at any time they sought it. Instead, there was a strong expectation that the family is owed 100 days of work in the year, and it was backed with intense arguments. In a large Panchayat with

a once in seven weeks rotation system, a labourer can get only 40 days of work and the hundred day norm cannot be fulfilled unless more than one person is permitted to work from a family at one time, hence the argument mentioned above.

By affecting people's expectations and norms, laws can have a powerful impact during such bargaining exercises. The ability of laws to influence the language of discussion, norms and expectations can be called the discursive power. While laws can have such impact, they need not always do so. In case of NREGA, the 100 day norm was advertised widely both by the government and grassroots organisations. News about NREGA was carried in newspapers and electronic media for extended periods, and in a state with high levels of media penetration, it also reached people effectively. The same cannot be said of all laws. But such discursive power cannot be taken as a substitute to other influences of the state including the power to impose fines, imprison violators of laws, etc. It is also no substitute to discipline the government itself through the use of courts or other legal means. Discursive power is best understood as one form of influence that works at times in synchrony and at times in conflict with other forms of influence.

To return to the discussion on employment, the law envisaged a norm where anyone can find employment within 15 days of demand at any time of the year, up to 100 days in a year for a family. This norm was modified considerably on the ground with the introduction of the rotation-system, selective discrimination of employment, and periodic disruptions. The normative change was brought about by the state government, officials, Panchayat presidents and farmers whose aspirations conflicted with the norms proposed by the law. While the new set of norms did not guarantee employment, labourers had sufficient clout to ensure that a high volume of employment was created and that there was equity in how it was distributed across various hamlets. I turn next to the question of productivity, the second key goal of NREGA.

4.2 The politics of productivity

When NREGA was drafted, norms were created with a focus on three aspects of productivity: planning, ensuring that workers do their share of work and finally, ensuring that corruption is minimised⁴. In the following

⁴ There are of course a variety of other issues that could be asked on the issue of productivity such as how is it to be measured? What counts as useful (and so productive)? Who is it productive for? Etc. These are important questions, but are beyond the scope

sections I look at how these carefully made norms structured action at the grassroots, and how subversion forced an institutional change.

Planning

Northern Tamil Nadu, where my field work was done, has an intense grid of lakes and ponds and most Panchayats have the access to at least one lake that is over 100 acres in size. These lakes are connected to each other through canals that are in turn connected to rivers and a small network of dams. Most of these lakes were built hundreds of years ago, mostly in the pre-British era and were maintained communally⁵. The system of maintenance had broken down without periodic weeding, desilting and other maintenance. Within the framework of “permissible works”, GoTN decided to focus on water related works in the first phase and almost all projects taken up during my field work pertained to maintenance of lakes and ponds. Desilting and weeding could be done exclusively with labour, and given the widespread water infrastructure, it also presented a ready-made work at a large scale. This decision of GoTN reduced the options available for Panchayats to choose other projects, and made it impossible for me to

of my study.

⁵ (Mukundan, 2005) provides an excellent introduction to the system.

observe a fuller range of dynamics of decision making⁶.

NREGA requires the Gram Sabha to identify projects to be taken up in their village. This rule is motivated by the idea that people of the village know what kind of projects they would need most, and so projects that are taken up would be socially useful⁷. Once a project is selected, the specific design is done by engineers at the block office. At its most elementary level, this system is expected to provide both social and technical inputs for a sound project.

Panchayats are required to hold a Gram Sabha at least 4 times a year on specified dates, and further meetings could be called either by the Panchayat or by the administration. The Panchayat Act has built in rules to protect deliberation and democratic decision making (e.g. quorum, representation, documentation, voting on resolutions, official responsibility, etc.). In practice, Gram Sabhas are poorly attended and are not major sites of deliberation or decision making. As a result most consultation on what

⁶ For example, some of my interviewees complained that presidents chose to lay metal roads in their communities ignoring others. Such options were limited in this case since water infrastructure existed already. The decision pertained mainly to which work to take up first, which limited the options of Panchayats considerably.

⁷ Many have argued that projects selected by the elite tend to benefit themselves and are often adverse to the interest of relatively powerless people (for People's Empowerment & Sahayog, 2007). NREGA does not have any protections against this, and I was unable to get into this aspect of selection of projects in my research.

projects to take up happens in the public sphere, outside the formal forum of Gram Sabha. Panchayats are relatively small areas with at most a few thousand residents and office bearers of the Panchayat normally reside within the Panchayat. So they have an intimate knowledge of the place and tend to have an idea of projects that are demanded by residents. Day-to-day meetings provide a mechanism for people's needs to be discussed widely and for public opinion to form on socially desirable projects. But this process does not have the protections built by Panchayat laws that could help make decisions more representative.

Scholars like Mihir Shah have argued (for People's Empowerment & Sahayog, 2007) that planning a good project takes a considerable amount of resources and deliberation. In a book on planning watershed projects, they argue that a detailed knowledge of topography, water flows, rainfall and other information should be taken into account in planning watershed projects. Since only maintenance work on existing projects were being taken up, such detailed planning was not required in Tamil Nadu while I was doing my fieldwork. But for new projects, required resources were hardly available.

Each Block was assigned a small number of engineers who spent most of

their time in supervision, taking measurements and processing payments. Productivity is measured narrowly as the quantity of work done by labourers and other aspects including quality, durability, appropriateness, design, etc. are not taken into account officially in assessing productivity of wage-employment programmes. Since labour-output was the only norm that was accounted for, engineers were accountable mainly in this dimension⁸; consequently, there was more pressure on engineers to meet this norm than other aspects of quality. The task-rate and the “task” thus became central feature of the politics of NREGA at the grassroots. Before I get to that, I will take a little diversion to discuss the dynamics around corruption.

Corruption

One of the significant factors that can affect the performance of any programme is the level of corruption. In a wage employment programme like NREGA, at least 60% of all money has to be spent on labour according to law. In practice, GoTN was spending almost the entire NREGA budget on wages and a small sum on administrative expenses. When money is being

⁸Engineers could be questioned on technical aspects including how safe construction is likely to be, but these are unlikely to come into question unless there is a disaster or an accident that brings them into public attention.

spent only on labour, the only way in which corruption can take place is by inserting fake names in the muster rolls and appropriating this among privately. Since projects are organised at the Panchayat level it is possible to verify the list of names on the muster roll with the local people and thus one can establish the level of corruption reasonably well.

A systematic effort to understand the performance of NREGA in Villupuram was done in August 2007 through a mass social audit that was initiated by the Government of India and carried out by activists from across Tamil Nadu. The audit involved getting complete set of muster rolls for projects organised over one year in 25 randomly selected Panchayats spread across five blocks of the district. The Panchayats were chosen only five days before the audit, giving implementing agencies no time to fabricate false records for the social audit. The auditors identified over 350 cases of fake entries across 25 Panchayats, and most Panchayats had some false entries. But these represented a very small proportion of the entire finances spent in these Panchayats. Unfortunately the audit was not systematic enough and tended to underestimate the level of corruption⁹. The only reasonable in-

⁹ There were allegations that some social audit teams were corrupt themselves and they suppressed the records of the regions they covered; this would result in an underestimation of corruption. Apart from that, all teams had a very large number of households to cross verify that they were not able to complete. Since the auditors were expected to record only false entries, it was not clear how many households they had covered where

dication from the audit was that at least some corruption was taking place in most Panchayats.

I was able to supplement the information in the social audit with my conversations with officials and Panchayat presidents over the course of the year, and with some cross verification I did independently through unanticipated visits to worksites. Muster rolls are available at the worksite and so during unanticipated visits, I was able to cross verify the number of people in the rolls with the number of people present. On no occasion were less than 80% of the people on the rolls present.

During my interviews with the Panchayat leaders most of them agreed that they do make some money by inserting fake names in the muster rolls, and most officials too openly or tacitly acknowledged this. A Panchayat president cleverly twisted an old Tamil poem to convey this when he said that, *water that is meant for paddy will provide moisture to the canal and to the grass along the way*. At the same time, all of them pointed out that there is an intense pressure on them from opposition parties, media, general public and other sources such that it was not easy for them to insert too many fake names. The figure that most presidents and Panchayat workers

the records were accurate.

quoted was that there will be at most 20% corruption in NREGA projects.

Unfortunately there are no reliable estimates of corruption nationally across government programs in India¹⁰. This makes it difficult to make reliable comparative statements about corruption in Tamil Nadu. But what looks certain is that corruption is not so rampant that no work was happening. Indeed a large proportion of the money was being used for the purposes it was intended for. Rajiv Gandhi, a former Prime Minister once commented that only 14% of the money that is intended for people reaches them. It could be reasonably said that the extent of corruption in Tamil Nadu was much less than what he anticipated in his statement.

The administration had instituted a set of rules that made corruption easy to spot, and thus very risky. These rules were created with a keen tactical understanding of how corruption can take place, and they were instituted to make this process difficult. One clever innovation was the SMS (text messages sent over a mobile phone) system, where the Panchayat assistant was asked to send an SMS each day at 10.30 am with the number of men and women on the worksite that day. This information is collected

¹⁰ There have been some estimates of corruption in NREGA in various states through systematic surveys by Jean Dreèze et al. Apart from NREGA, there are estimates of corruption for other programmes by Transparency International, and by other studies. TI's studies are not reliable estimates of the absolute level of corruption, though they are useful to compare corruption across regions.

by the district headquarters and is made available to any official visiting the worksite. The visitor had to only do a headcount to find out if there are fake names in the muster roll. Without the timely information gathered through the SMS, it would have been possible for implementing agency to add fictitious names at the end of the day, but the possibility of immediate cross verification made this extremely risky.

The SMS was complemented by a series of other measures, including extensive documentation that makes it easy to cross verify most activities. These documents were to be signed by Panchayat workers, presidents and by officials and they could be held accountable if any rule is violated and this comes up for scrutiny by higher officials or by the general public using the right to information. GoTN also instituted an intense monitoring system whereby each project is practically visited by at least one official each week.

Apart from official monitoring, there was also a social process of monitoring that implementing agencies were concerned about. Every President had her share of “enemies”, and other political opponents who constantly monitored the activities of the President. The mobile number of the District Collector was widely available with the public through advertisements and a President’s adversaries could call the collector for complaints with

remarkable ease, as one of them put it to me with wide approval by fellow presidents:

Today you just need to have one rupee, you can put it on the phone and dial the collector. On three occasions in my Panchayat the Vice president himself incited people to call the collector and give complaints. On all three occasions a squad came...do you know what their satisfaction is? Look at how I made you shiver [aatam kattiten] with just one rupee! They're proud of it.

When corruption happens it is widely known and in a competitive political atmosphere there is always a concern for the State government to not let things go out of hand in ways that may affect their legitimacy. The general public was active in monitoring acts of corruption and bringing them out into public discussion. People who fought and lost elections were especially active in complaining about acts of corruption in order to embarrass office bearers at every available opportunity. Every Panchayat president I met complained about this bitterly.

The concern among officials to tackle corruption was also apparent. There were routine inspections and when the collector received complaints, even orally over the telephone, he tended to respond immediately by send-

ing a team to verify what was happening. In my brief meetings with the collector I was able to witness a few such telephone calls and I also participated in one of the “raids”. This puts a lot of pressure on the officials at the field to not be excessively corrupt. Further, in every weekly meeting, block officials made it a point to repeat this message about the possibility of suspension or dismissal if there are violations of rules. Block officials also tried to invoke the possibility of officials coming from the distant state or national capital who would not be under their influence.

Any monitoring system has to be followed with action if it has to be effective. There are many cases where the MNPs and the Panchayat assistants were suspended for some violation or the other. In fact, there was an active demand by the MNPs to stop suspensions and dismissals and to replace them with less drastic punishments. Even though the district was very large and had over 1000 Panchayats, the news of any dismissal or suspension reached every government servant immediately. Dismissals were reported in newspapers and were often a part of conversation among Panchayat assistants and MNPs. Though the number of Panchayat workers who were suspended was less than 2%¹¹ of all workers in the district, this

¹¹ There are 1040 Panchayats in Villupuram district each has 2 Panchayat workers. At the beginning of my field work in Aug 2007 the association of MNPs informed me

was taken seriously, widely discussed and the low number of punishments did not result in a confidence that they can get away with anything.

The fact that sanctions were not taken lightly was reflected in the fact that every time I met either the Panchayat workers in a group, there was some talk about the use of sanctions. For example, talking about one former collector of the district, an official said *that man could not sleep unless he suspended somebody that day*, and he remarked that the system worked extremely well during that particular regime. This was true of the presidents as well, who despite their political clout do not feel entirely safe as illustrated by this: *We get very scared even if we hear that the collector is coming. Our legs start shaking, and we start feeling like the person who is making illegal alcohol. We have escaped sometimes by seeing the squad as if we were smugglers of sandalwood or gold.*

While there were undeniable pressures against corruption, there were also strong tendencies in favour of corruption. Between officials, Panchayat presidents and field level workers there was clearly a desire to use NREGA to make money for themselves. There are also periodic demands by Members of Legislative Assembly and the other senior politicians to raise finances for

that 6 workers had been suspended. There were a few more suspensions and dismissals in the year that followed.

their party. For politicians holding office, creating some space for corruption enables raising finances for their political work and personal purposes, and this is done implicitly. This involves importantly a protection from sanctions.

Local MLAs often monitored the block office closely since this office played an important role in issuing contracts that politicians use to secure the support of contractors. Officials had to cooperate with them since they have a strong influence with the State government, and can be a source of protection when required. Similarly if these politicians believe that officers are not cooperating, they can create problems by complaining on a variety of issues to the State government, often directly to the Chief Minister. These complaints are taken seriously and can cause a lot of harassment to officials, including periodic transfers.

Panchayat presidents on their part typically spend a lot of money in order to get elected. It was jokingly claimed that election expenditure is an “investment” with high returns. Since NREGA was the biggest programme that was implemented in 2007-08 in the district, there is a tendency to divert some of the project finances for their own benefit. Apart from including fake names to appropriate money for themselves, there are other extra-legal

demands that presidents have to accommodate. Vice presidents and the Ward Members often demanded that their names be included in the muster roll so that they can get wages from NREGA without doing any work. There are similar demands occasionally from friends and relatives of office bearers that are difficult to ignore. MNPs and Panchayat assistants are also added to the muster rolls. Put together these demands can add up to a sizeable proportion of those who actually worked on the ground. The block office is in-charge of distributing money to Panchayats and maintaining accounts for all projects. Many presidents complained that they were being forced to pay bribes when they came to collect checks, administrative sanctions and at many other stages of work. Many officials also expected to be treated with food when they visit the Panchayat and such expenses can add up significantly over the year.

Corruption can best be understood as a tense contest of opposing tendencies, sometimes coming from the same sources. There were strong material motivations to indulge in corruption among a powerful coalition. At the same time, there was also a strong sense of public vigilance especially at the Panchayat level, media monitoring and intense political competition that led to countervailing pressures against corruption. In focussing on material

incentives for and against corruption, I do not wish to overlook the role of moral convictions in either abstaining from corruption or in actively combating it. Especially when a person in a powerful position actively seeks to combat corruption it can have a wide ranging impact that extends well beyond the individual. Many officials had the reputation of not being corrupt themselves. There were, for example, strong indications that senior officials at the state level instituted the system of rules based on a keen desire to limit corruption¹². Many block officials felt that the Ministry decided to implement all projects through Panchayats rather than through centralised departments since that is likely to be less corrupt. The paperwork that was developed and other systems that were put in place also reflected a keen tactical understanding, and a commitment to reduce corruption.

While proactive measures were being taken seriously, the administration's use of sanctions even in relatively well established cases of corruption were insignificant. Officials were often frustrated that reports of corruption

¹² This assessment is based on feedback I got from district officials on discussions they had with the secretary. Further, the top two officials dealing with NREGA had periodic meetings with NREGA Watch Tamil Nadu, an association of organizations that was monitoring NREGA in the state. Feedback from these meetings and other meetings in which these officials participated form the basis of this assessment. The secretary discussed in detail the redesign of the job card he did himself that was superior to the older card for the purposes of monitoring. He also had sharp observations on what impact the use of banks for payment and other systems can have on corruption.

that they prepared were not followed up by their seniors. This is despite the fact that the administration has a considerable amount of legal powers to follow-up on cases of corruption¹³. Most of the suspensions and dismissals during my stay were of Panchayat workers, who are in the lowermost rung of employees. On a few occasions the BDO was suspended, and on two occasions action was taken against Panchayat presidents. The BDO and one of the Panchayat presidents were able to escape criminal sanctions using influence. Even these actions, despite the fact that they did not lead to criminal sanctions or recovery of money, were powerful since they made both workers and presidents more cautious about corruption. Many presidents told me that they were more cautious and less corrupt in NREGA since a President in their block “got into trouble”.

For corruption to work it is important for the officers and presidents to cooperate, but such collusion was tempered by the fact that corruption involved serious risks, and each party tried to pass it on to others. Further, different groups brought different concerns into implementation. Panchayat officials sought to ensure that NREGA does not upset electoral equations

¹³ For example after issuing notices relating to malpractices the head of revenue administration (the Thasildhar) can conduct a raid and seize all official materials from other offices and Panchayats bypassing the police.

in the village; engineers were concerned about measurements; block officials about timeliness of payments and other issues; etc. The diversity of goals brought their own conflicts.

When NREGA was designed the most important protection against corruption that was built into law was transparency guarantees. It was expected that if common people have access to official records, it would increase the threat of sanctions. Though people were using the right to information to secure accountability in the district¹⁴, there were no applications on NREGA that came to my notice. Despite the fact that a mass social audit was organised in the district and a large number of people were trained to use RTI, that tool was hardly used for NREGA during my stay. On a few occasions when I was approached by people on charges of corruption and when I informed them that they could establish their charges by using the RTI, they were unwilling to do so. This was because of the delicate social balance in the region where actors wanted to tread carefully; thus while they wanted to take up complaints that may scare the presidents or officials, they were unwilling to use RTI that may lead to more drastic sanctions.

¹⁴ Since these applications come to the Block office or the Collector's office, I had information that some such applications had come.

While RTI was not used, democratic pressure was used effectively by people to control corruption. Since all expenses in NREGA in Tamil Nadu in this period was on labour, corruption had the effect of ‘removing’ some labourers from work, and thus reducing productivity. I now turn to the question of how productive labourers who turned up for work were, and the politics around it.

Task rates

How hard people work when they are employed in a project has a decisive impact on productivity in any labour intensive programme. The NREGA used a norm that labourers should work dilligently for seven hours in a day, and the framers sought to build influence for this norm using the “task rate”. Unlike the daily wage which is paid to labourers irrespective of the work they did, task rate involves measuring the amount of work done and paying labourers accordingly. Task based payment builds an incentive to work harder, and thus uses a system of sanctions to influence the labourer.

The work norm of NREGA requires that task rates are fixed such that a person working diligently for seven hours in a day should be able to earn the minimum wage. Based on this, state governments are expected to devise

a *schedule of rates* that contains the rate at which each task that workers may be required to do in NREGA will be paid. Since NREGA is based on casual manual labour, most work can be assessed using physical measures. Typically work in most projects involves activities like digging, clearing shrubs, planting trees, carrying things, and other physical activities. For example, digging can be measured in terms of cubic metres, carrying can be measured in terms of lead (distance travelled horizontally per cubic feet) and lift (vertical distance or the height one has to climb), planting can be measured with the number of trees planted, and clearing based on square metres of shrubs cleared. Suppose if the minimum wage is Rs. 100 per day, and if one can reasonably expect a person working diligently to be able to dig 2 cu.m. in a day, then the rate for digging should be Rs. 50 per cubic metre.

The task rate is expected to fulfill two important norms: setting an incentive for labourers to work and ensuring that labourers get the minimum wage if they work diligently for seven hours in a day. In principle the task rate can achieve the two objectives, but there are at least three types of problems in translating the principles to a set of rules that govern behaviour:

First of all, though work is measurable in physical quantities, it is

typically difficult to measure the work done by each person individually. The practice in most parts of India is to measure the total work done by all people in a project in a week. Measuring weekly average productivity is problematic when different people do different amounts of work given their attitude and abilities (due to age, gender, health, etc.). When fake names are added this problem is especially acute since it is equivalent to paying people who did no work at all. Typically people are assigned work in the beginning of a week in small teams, and are asked to accomplish easily measurable tasks. While each team will have information about the work they accomplished, workers will not get to know the totality of work accomplished by all the teams put together, unless there is a collective effort to do so. This leaves room for confusion on why wages turned out to be low, and it is not uncommon for people to suspect that their wages were reduced due to corruption¹⁵.

Secondly, there is the problem of arriving at an appropriate schedule of rates¹⁶. It is challenging to devise task norms such that a person working

¹⁵ In order to circumvent the problem of average measurements for entire teams, some states have experimented allotting work to smaller teams of 5 to 15 people and paying each team according to the work they did. Andhra Pradesh has done this systematically, and in early 2008 experiments were initiated for small team measurements in Rajasthan.

¹⁶ Mihir Shah argues that this is one of the fundamental problems of NREGA in (Shah, 2009).

diligently will be able to earn the minimum wage for every task under every condition possible in NREGA. There were complaints in Tamil Nadu that many tasks that people had to do in NREGA were not accounted for in the schedule of rates. For example, before one could start digging it may be necessary to clear shrubs in that area, and this was not accounted for as work in some cases leading to protests. Most engineers agreed that certain tasks have impossible rates and even a skilled and hard-working person will not be able to earn the minimum wage by doing them. Faced with such unrealistic rates, it becomes imperative for the implementing agency to find creative ways of circumventing it, such as allotting difficult work by rotation on different weeks so that no team is faced with the undue burden of doing the impossible task. While such adjustments help in distributing unfair wages equally, and thus mitigate its dire consequences on a small number of people, the injustice of the act remains. Task rates are fixed commonly for each state, and it is difficult to anticipate the different conditions of work that workers will have to face in each region. Thus, even if the rate can be considered fair in one condition, it may be impossible in others.

Finally, it is practically impossible to take into account all aspects of human diversity including people's health, stature, gender, abilities, age

and biography (e.g. a hard-working fisherman may not be able to do as well in digging as agricultural labourer), and to fix rates based on these characteristics. For a Schedule of Rates to be capable of providing incentives for hard work and to guarantee the minimum wage at the same time it has to accurately account for each type of person, for each type of work under every possible condition. This is challenging and is rarely achieved.

It is not unusual that a set of rules created to fulfil the work norm creates problems even when these rules are not affected by competing norms. The messy world of reality contains features that are not accounted for by planners and designers, and they inevitably have an impact on how rules shape action on the ground. This leads to unexpected consequences and at times creates a situation where rules have to be modified if they are to be put into action¹⁷. While such adjustments are at times essential, departures from laws can technically be considered a crime and render implementing agencies vulnerable to punishment, and such criminalisation can have a far reaching impact on the system of incentives.

NREGA in Tamil Nadu was confronted with all these issues. When

¹⁷ Scott argues (Scott, 1998, 310) that such adjustments are often indispensable if any activity has to take place, and gives the example of “work-to-rule” strikes where workers bring production to a halt by sticking exactly to the rules that are prescribed to them.

the program was implemented initially, GoTN prepared a schedule of rates based on the experience of Public Works Department (PWD), where labourers work along with machines. The use of machinery enables greater productivity per person in such works, and the same cannot be extended to NREGA where the use of labour displacing machines is prohibited by law. As the result of using PWD rates, workers were paid unduly low wages, resulting in protests in different parts of Tamil Nadu. GoTN responded by increasing the rates by 60%, and once again by 60%.

The schedule prepared by the government contained less than 20 types of tasks, compared to 150 types of tasks in the neighbouring state of Andhra Pradesh. This lack of diversity in the types of tasks in the schedule meant that people could get the minimum wage easily in some works while it was impossible in others. Villupuram district had soft soil in some places and rocky soil in others, making the application of uniform rates in the schedule problematic. Finally, in Tamil Nadu, as in other parts of India, the schedule did not account for human diversity of any sort including gender, age, ability or health and expected all labourers to achieve the same outturn. These created an interesting set of dynamics on the field when it came to enforcing task rates. These together set the stage for action in NREGA projects in

Tamil Nadu.

Enforcing task rates

In order to understand what it takes to implement the task rate, let me give an idea of the day-to-day action that takes place at a project work site. Projects are typically operated in weekly cycles, and in the beginning of the project cycle, teams are formed and each team is assigned the task that they should complete in order to earn the minimum wage. Typically, the task is given such that it is easy for people to understand the amount of work that they have to do (e.g. dig 1 foot deep a day within the given area and deposit the mud in the banks of the lake, clear the shrubs in a particular area, etc.). At the end of the project cycle, a technically qualified person from the block office measures the work and calculates the total wage to be paid for the work site. Day-to-day attendance is taken in the NMR, and this provides the total person days of employment in the cycle using which the average wage to be paid to each worker per day of work is determined.

Within the project cycle, the Panchayat is responsible for day-to-day operations¹⁸. Typically, the Panchayat president and the two Panchayat

¹⁸ Projects can be implemented by other agencies within the framework of the law, but as mentioned above, GoTN decided to implement all projects using Panchayats.

workers engage in this process, assisted at times by other office bearers. Since only average wages are paid, the material incentive for each labourer to work hard is low and some arrangement is necessary to ensure that all labourers do their share of work. In other words, task rates fail to function as an effective sanction against individual labourers when the work is measured collectively. This was the foremost challenge faced by Panchayats, and presidents had to find alternate methods of influencing the labourers. This process gives an insight into the role of influences in institutions.

If there is one theme that stood out in my conversations with presidents and Panchayat workers, it is the impossibility of controlling people on the worksite. Rules required labourers to come at 9 am and leave at 4 pm, to stay at the worksite in this duration, accomplish the task, and do it according to specification. Almost every action of the labourers that the rules sought to regulate created a scope for confrontation. To put it in the words of a harassed Panchayat assistant:

“They are uncontrollable, [they] work where they feel like, don’t accept measurements, come late, [and] go early. If officials come in between to take measurements, people would be scared and would be present. Else they are uncontrollable. Even if some work, others discourage them by saying

just sign [the NMR] and you will get paid... During the work in a canal, for example, people would take the sand and drop it midway in the canal itself. When some people work, others would stand around and watch those who are working. This is demotivating for people who do the work and get the same money as those who do nothing”.

Given the low social and economic status of Panchayat workers, their attempts to regulate labourers were challenged, and workers had to be prepared for abuses and even violence. Statements like this were repeated by many Panchayat assistants and MNPs, *“I feel ashamed to tell anyone what happens [to us on the field]... people use abusive words and we wonder why we took this job”*. While presidents enjoyed a greater social status, they too had a limited ability to control people against their wishes due to democratic and other pressures on them.

Interestingly in the block I worked most, the two presidents who were most positive about their ability to influence labours were both women, and they were the only women presidents who were active in that block. While they both talked of pressures on them like others, both of them insisted that they spent a considerable amount of time on the field during projects and exhorted those who were not working to do their share. But, bringing such

moral pressure required a considerable amount of their time at the worksite, and it also required them to maintain a lot of legitimacy in order to sustain their influence. This challenge was reflected when one of them said, *“in my Panchayat as far as possible I sit right next to the work site and get the work done. 5% of people cheat, that is true - but not all. When there are 300 people 25 will cheat, this cannot be controlled and it is impossible to even find this out. We are so busy with our work that we cannot monitor it. Whether we understand people’s psychology or not, people understand the leader’s psychology [mind]. They understand how to tackle us to get what they want. It is a struggle for us to get things done”*.

Not surprisingly presidents were highly concerned about maintaining their legitimacy and status, and vehemently opposed any threats to these. For example, GoTN had a rule that some official must be present during payments and must countersign documents indicating payments were actually made. Since payments are made in all Panchayats around the same time, there is often a shortage of block office employees and on one occasion a school cook was asked to be present during payment. This made the President furious and he was joined by all presidents of the block during a meeting with officials. They argued that a person who is supervised by the

President cannot be asked to supervise the President on other occasions. Similarly every event that represented a symbolic threat to their status was strongly challenged throughout my stay.

The problem of managing labourers was exacerbated by the fact that the schedule of rates was not practical for many tasks. If task rates are realistic and people finish the task assigned to them, it is easy to distinguish between teams that worked hard and those who did not. But with unrealistic task rates, many teams do not complete their tasks and when they get low wages it is difficult to distinguish how much of it was due to slacking, due to corruption and due to unrealistic task rates. Thanks to unrealistic rates, even people who worked hard often found out many days after they started working that they received much less than the minimum wage since the task rates were not realistic. Even after the State government revised it twice, the rates for some tasks continued to be impractical.

Low wages made many labourers angry and suspicious that this was a result of fake names that could have been added to the NMR. Presidents had their share of “enemies” and political opponents in general who would ensure that a discussion on these lines took place, leading to political crisis for the Panchayat president. Presidents argued that impractical task

rates brought them a “bad name” even if they had not bought “one cup of tea” with that money. Presidents and other office bearers who have no material or other benefits in ensuring productivity started campaigning for a relaxation of the task norms, and many argued for adopting daily wages rather than the task rate. When payment of low wages started resulting in periodic protests, officials started informally relaxing the task norms. NREGA was started in Villupuram in February 2006 and by the time I started fieldwork in August 2007, task rates were rarely implemented in the district. Abandoning task rates represents a major institutional change for a labour-intensive programme like NREGA. It started with the fact that implementing agencies could not muster sufficient influence for task related rules, and culminated in a major change in the task norm itself.

It is not clear how the practice of relaxing or entirely dropping the task norm came into being. What is clear though is that there was intense pressure from people, especially when the task related rules were impossible. There was also pressure from Panchayats that had to enforce the task and they had the cooperation of officials especially when they realised that the rules were impractical. Further, many officials co-operated with Panchayats in introducing fake names in NMRs, which will have the effect of reducing

average wages. If that leads to protests and to enquiries by senior officials, it can lead to trouble for all those involved in introducing fake names. It is likely that this too played a role in the development of the practice of paying wages irrespective of work. BDOs told me during conversations that they were under tremendous pressure from the State government to ensure that projects are opened in all Panchayats. They realised that this would not happen unless some of the impractical rules are relaxed, and this is not unusual in many programs¹⁹.

When tasks to be done were informally relaxed, engineers who were in charge of implementing NREGA found themselves in a fix. Since wages were officially being paid using task rates, they had to officially take measurements and record them in prescribed formats in the *Measurement Book*. Since tasks completed by people were turning out to be lower than what was required to pay the minimum wage, engineers had to fabricate false measurements to enable the payment of minimum wage. But these records could be verified by higher officials, which could result in serious punishments for

¹⁹ NREGA was started in five other districts of Tamil Nadu along with Villupuram in 2006, and during brief visits to neighbouring districts, people who worked on projects told me that they are paid according to the task rate. Since my visits were brief, it is not clear to me whether these were based on the reduced task norm or the official rates. Further, I was not able to investigate whether people in these districts could be paid the official rate since soil in these regions was looser, and so it was easier for people to accomplish the given task.

engineers. This dilemma was resolved by an informal understanding that engineers will not maintain Measurement books so that they need not fabricate measurements. Senior officials of the district were fully aware of the practice, and were perhaps involved in creating this “solution”.

I argued earlier that documentation is an important source of power for contemporary governments, and it is designed carefully to secure certain behaviour by those whom institutions seek to regulate. Subversion of rules naturally requires subverting the influence that enforces these rules. In this case, junior officials bypassed documentation and secured the cooperation of their seniors to relax tasks unofficially.

I must add here that it was not just the “rules” relating to tasks that were challenged on the field. The larger norm of seven hours of diligent work itself was challenged by many. Officials, labourers and labour activists argued that the seven hour norm was created in an industrial context and to expect agricultural labourers who work under the hot sun to do the same is unreasonable. Further, most labourers in NREGA were women who have to attend to their children, the household work and also the animals in the house. The seven-hour norm was thus criticised and so even if the perfect Schedule of Rates were devised, it would have been criticised

and challenged. This is one illustration of the need to distinguish between norms (seven-hour work) and rules (specific guidelines produced in the form of SoRs) in an institutional understanding.

Government work

When task norms were not implemented, it automatically reduced the pressure on labourers to work hard at the worksite. News that one does not have to work hard spread fast and it also attracted people to the worksite who were not used to doing any physical work. Almost every Panchayat president I met mentioned that people think of NREGA as, “a government job”, where one does not have to work in order to earn the money. One Panchayat assistant jocularly said that *young men who sat idly at home started coming to NREGA, after all, why should one sit idly at home when one can sit idly at the worksite!* In many projects very little work was done, sometimes hardly leaving a visual mark that hundreds of people had worked in that place recently. This was not uniform across Panchayats, and some Panchayats accomplished a much a greater amount of work than others²⁰.

Even when the official task rates were not enforced, officials tried peri-

²⁰ I did not have the opportunity to examine this in detail, but a combination of issues including the involvement of Panchayat presidents and attitude of labourers seems to have been influential in determining the different outcomes.

odically to impose at least a relaxed rate when they felt that productivity was very low. Since most people who turn up for work were poor, even a small reduction in wages had important consequences for them. Invariably labourers would meet the Panchayat president who is the implementing agent for these works. The pressure on the President is intense, and some would point openly that they would not vote for him again if he does not ensure the payment of full wages. Political opponents would start running a propaganda that low wages were a result of fake names inserted into the muster rolls by the President. These factors contributed to intense democratic pressure on office bearers, who would then try to influence officials to pay the full minimum wage.

The use of competing set of influences to determine which norm of work should be enforced illustrates the analytical usefulness of *bases of influence* in an institutional understanding. In this case, there are competing norms of work that are favoured by different sets of actors. Officials who sought to enforce the seven-hour norm sought to do so using the incentive built into the task-rate. But ability of sanctions to influence work was compromised by its lack of legitimacy (a subjective influence) since the task rates were often impractical, and because of corruption and other problems mentioned

above. Others who sought the daily wage norm that was not attached to the amount of work done, sought to use democratic pressure that was available to them in confronting the task norm. In the absence of the adult franchise or Panchayats, the use of democratic influence would not have been available to labourers. Similarly, if NREGA were introduced a few decades ago when Panchayat presidents were more powerful within the village, common people would not have been able to protest as effectively, or argue that they would not vote for the person in the next election if they did not get their due. In other words, a broad understanding of what kinds of influences are available to different social groups will give us far-reaching insights into what kinds of norms will prevail in a society.

To get back to the task-rate drama, labourers get to know the wage that is being paid to them only during the process of payment. On many occasions when labourers felt that wage they received was unduly low, instantaneous decision would be made to not accept their wage collectively. This is a highly strategic act that has come out of years of experience in collective bargaining in this region. If wages are not accepted, projects cannot be closed and at the same time, Panchayats are not allowed to maintain the money they withdrew for wages for more than one week. Unpaid wages like

this can create a lot of public attention, and also receive the attention of senior officials which is never desirable. This tactic brings block officials to the bargaining table immediately, and often results in an upward revision of wage rates. Despite revising wages, officials argued that it sends a message that productivity counts for payment of wages, and can have an impact on the work culture over time.

Expectations, mentality & norms

Implementing agents talked frequently about the role of cultural norms, expectations and attitudes, and how they affected enforcement of laws. For example many blamed the state government for advertising NREGA as a scheme that provided 100 days of work at Rs. 80 a day. When wages were periodically reduced presidents heard comments like, *you are not parting with your father's money; you're just passing on something the government has made for our sake*. There was an expectation at least among one section of labourers that this was "government work", which means that payments can be made without fulfilling the norms of work. This expectation led to regular quarrels between labourers and those organising NREGA on the field.

In early 2008 the secretary of Rural Development, sent a clear message to the officials that task rates cannot be relaxed on the field. A BDO recalled the secretary warning them that if increased rates were paid to labourers, that money will be recovered from them. This prompted the administration to pay according to task rates leading to protests by labourers. There was a debate among the presidents on whether a transformation of work culture can be achieved as one President put it, *you said that the Rs. 80 is being paid to everybody, and were happy about it. Now wages are starting to be paid in the task rate. Problem will start only now, you will see that. It will be a problem for everyone, all the way up to the officer. The problem will go all the way up to law [sattam varaikku pogum]*. The presidents at my block were divided into two camps of opinion when officials announced that they will implement task rates rigorously henceforth. One camp argued that having established a culture where people can get money without working, it would be impossible to change it and others argued that if it is done carefully, the culture can be changed.

Among the latter camp there was a unanimous opinion that if a new culture has to set in people's expectations have to be changed and they asked for two measures by the administration. They demanded that, at least

for the first two weeks, officials should come to the field and explain the new set of rules to people directly. Unlike presidents and Panchayat workers, officials have more authority and so will be able to impose the tougher rules without resulting in extensive arguments. Secondly, they asked for an official to come each evening to take measurements and inform people how much they have earned that day. This will help people realise quickly how much they can earn in the project when their stakes are relatively low. Instead if they get to learn only by the end of the week, their loss is significant and thus protests will be more forceful. The strategy they advocated used a combination of authority and seeking people's consent, without damaging their legitimacy with their constituency.

Even those who argued that expectations can be changed pointed out that rules have to be feasible for them to be effective. The President who had the reputation of getting a lot of work done argued consistently that the seven-hour work norm in NREGA is not feasible in this context where agricultural workers work between three to five hours a day on the field normally. As I mentioned before, the new generation is also not used to physical work since most of them have spent their adolescence in schools that demand little physical work of them. This President argued that people

who make laws often sit in air conditioned rooms in Delhi and write what they feel like, and rules they frame often do not account for the cultural norms of the place where they have to be implemented.

Implementing agents also distinguished between culture at large and attitudes of different people. For example, some presidents consistently defended the people in their villages saying that they are hard workers, but there is always a small proportion who would rebel and not do their share of work. Interestingly, some BDOs who had worked in different blocks had conceptions about the easiness or the difficulty of managing labourers in different areas. One BDO argued that in his block workers have a “communist mindset” since CPM had been active in that block for many years. As a result people tend to bargain hard and fight with officials and do not respect authority as much. In other blocks, it is easier to manage workers and to ensure greater productivity. Others talked about “hard” and “soft” people.

Most of my interviewees agreed that work culture can change for better or worse and did not see “culture” as a given. This was the case even with presidents who felt that it would difficult to enforce task rates after making daily rates the norm. While culture was seen as malleable, it cannot be

changed easily or predictably. All of them recognised that different sets of people can influence norms making it a tense contest to establish any set of norms. Factors such as authority, justice, morals, legitimacy, expectations and feasibility were invoked to explain the sources of change through which a lot of people had influence but in a disproportionate way. In any case, all of them put a premium on subjectivity as a critical form of influence, especially in a society that is not amenable to coercive forms of control.

My field work came to an end while the administration was slowly reintroducing task rates rigorously, and so I was not able to observe how the contest played out in the region and which rules prevailed. But the time I spent there provided critical insights that led me to the next stage of the inquiry. I will summarize the key insights before I move on to the next chapter.

4.3 Key insights

The most important insight from this phase of the fieldwork was that common people did have an influence in how the system worked. Institutionally speaking, norms and rules that were against the interest of common people

were subverted and challenged, making it difficult to enforce them. Apart from constant subversion that presidents and others called “uncontrollability”, there were periodic collective protests against unfavorable rules, forcing the administration to revise them. At times, such revisions were extra-legal, as in the case of using daily-wages, and at times, such revisions were incorporated into law, as in the case of substantial wage-revisions.

Collective and individual protests were the fundamental source by which common people were able to make the institutions respond to their aspirations, and to their well-being. I argued before that a society in which common people are able to participate in the determination of institutions will tend to put in place institutions that are conducive to development; since collective action is the major channel by which institutions respond to common people in Tamil Nadu, it becomes critical to understand the nature of collective action and this leads to the second major insight from from this phase of my study.

I pointed out that most of my interviewees argued that common people were not as uncontrollable only a few decades ago. Similarly, collective action for public services was not a common phenomenon before the seventies. The argument that such collective action was uncommon before

the seventies was puzzling since there were major social movements in the region before that. This argument forced me to shift away from NREGA, which was just three years old and to understand collective action for public services before and after the seventies. My hope was that understanding this change would help me understand why collective action has proliferated since then, and in the process understand what changes enabled common people to have greater influence on institutions since then.

The next two chapters will look at collective action in the region including an account of action before the 1970s and after. These will help us understand how the nature of collective action changed, and especially how common people were able to participate in action effectively.

Chapter 5

Collective action in Villupuram

Abstract

In the previous chapter I argued that collective action is an important dynamic force shaping institutions in Tamil Nadu. This chapter gives an overview of collective action in the Villupuram district of Tamil Nadu. I argue that collective action is intense and is typically organised at the village level but with support from outside. Many different groups were involved in collective action since the 1920s and they have traditionally concentrated on different unfreedoms such as economic exploitation, restrictions imposed on lower caste people and on women, and other issues on class and caste lines.

Since the 1970s there has been a convergence in the agenda of different groups with public services becoming the most important demand taken up by disparate groups. Restrictions on collective action reduced in this period making it easier to mobilise, thus increasing the intensity of protests on political, social and other issues.

In the previous chapter, I argued that Panchayat presidents, officials and politicians at a variety of levels were constantly influenced by people's pressure. Such pressure and occasional collective action over grievances played a critical role in changing the rules of NREGA and aligning it closer to the desires of common people. Collective action was of course not restricted to NREGA, and it was taken up widely on various public services. There are two interesting aspects about collective action for public services in Tamil Nadu: The first is that most collective action is widespread, inclusive¹ and decentralised in a sense that it is mostly initiated from the ground up, in villages or hamlets within them. Secondly, such collective action is a new phenomenon dating back mainly to the 1970s. Both these offer insights into how public services function in Tamil Nadu.

¹By inclusive, I do not mean that collective action tends to draw people from all social groups. This is often not the case. By inclusive, I meant that most social groups had the ability to act collectively and did so routinely.

In this chapter I will illustrate how vibrant collective action is so that I can demonstrate that collective action is a major force of change. While decentralised collective action for public services is my main focus, I will deal with collective action before the the seventies since it set the stage for seventies and beyond. But before I do so, I have to take a short detour into collective action theories and relate them to the institutions and development framework so that we have a theoretical basis to understand the relationship between collective action and institutions.

5.1 Collective action, institutions and development

There is a sizable literature on collective action looking at issues such as why it happens, effectiveness, strategies, and other features. There are three major approaches to collective action that are popular in the literature today. The **first** set known resource mobilisation theories or mobilisation structures focuses on the role that money, leadership, cultural and other resources play in enabling mobilisation. The **second**, called as political opportunity structures looks at how different political, social and institutional

contexts play a role in creating a space for action. The **third** set of theories look at the process of framing and how they have an impact on collective action.

Mobilisation structures theories (McAdam *et al.*, 1996; Giugni, 2004; Diani & McAdam, 2003; Putnam *et al.*, 1993) argue that for widely shared grievances to translate into collective action, there must exist some structures for mobilisation, and these depend on the availability of resources such as money, leadership, social networks, etc. McAdam *et al.* define mobilisation structures as, “collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilise and engage in collective action” (McAdam *et al.*, 1996, 3). In the language of the framework that I use, any structure that consistently provides a means of mobilisation could also be called a ‘base of influence’. These could be social networks, alliances with those in positions of power, access to symbolic resources, etc. When such bases of influence are available to a social group, their ability to mobilise and to be effective will increase. Thus, one way of looking at changes in collective action would be to focus on various bases of influence in a society and how the distribution of these changed across social groups.

Apart from bases of influence, individual capabilities and freedoms could

have a critical impact on collective action. Collective action literature pays a lot of attention to leaders with strategic capacity and how they have an impact on the effectiveness of action. Organising collective action demands considerable skills and people with such capabilities can make a difference to the effectiveness of organisation. Similarly intellectuals, artists, and others bring various capabilities that can make a difference in collective action. Similarly, participating in collective action often requires some level of income, physical and other capabilities to access the places of protest, to join discussions and to voice one's opinion. Thus freedoms matter for all participants of collective action including those in positions of leadership.

From the mobilisation structures perspective, a change in the nature of collective action can be traced to changes in capabilities and bases of influence. This is illustrated by the fact that the growth of many major social movements or political parties representing marginalized groups has been preceded by the growth of a middle-class or a small educated intelligentsia that provided effective leadership and representation². Similarly policies of reservation of jobs for ex-untouchables created a cadre of people that provided a base for mobilisation.

²some well known examples include (Hardgrave, 1969; Sharma, 1983; Rai, 1999).

The **political process literature** claims that collective action is shaped by the institutional context in which it is situated. This literature has drawn attention to the fact that nature of government (parliamentary, monarchy, presidential, etc.), solidarity/cleavages among the elite, and other contextual aspects matter for the effectiveness of collective action, and thus they encourage or discourage agents to use their resources for action (Tarrow *et al.*, 1996, 54). Macadam identifies four major conditions that affect collective action as: relative openness or closure of the institutionalised political system, stability or instability of the broad set of elite alignments that typically underlie a polity, presence or absence of elite allies, and the state's capacity and propensity for repression (McAdam *et al.*, 1996; Giugni, 2004). It is not difficult to understand why these factors will have a bearing on collective action.

The conditions that McAdam identifies ultimately deal with the freedom to participate in the political process for the non-elite. These freedoms are based on norms of who can participate in the decision making process, and the bases of influence around this norm i.e. allies and political competition among elite are bases of influence for the non-elite, while violence and repression are influences that the elite command to sustain the norms they

value. The fundamental insight of political opportunity literature is that one cannot understand collective action merely by looking at the resources in the hands of those with grievances, but should also take into account the institutional context of action. This mirrors the development as freedom approach in arguing that the effectiveness of human agency depends upon individual capabilities as well as the institutional context. Openness of a political system, absence of violence and freedom to associate with others have traditionally been considered important freedoms in this literature (Sen, 1999; Gasper & van Staveren, 2003; Peter, 2003; Anderson, 2003; Drèze & Sen, 2002), and given the similarity between the two frameworks, it is easy to integrate the insights of political opportunity literature into the ID framework.

With its broad focus on agency the ID framework captures a number of features affecting human agency that do not get attention in political opportunity literature. For example, one of the most powerful memories I have of rural India is that of women driving bicycles freely across villages, which would be socially prohibited in many parts of India. The social freedom to move freely is so fundamental that it can have radical implications

for women's ability to participate in collective action³. Increasing freedoms including mobility and removal of other restrictions on Dalits, women and others played a crucial role in enabling decentralised collective action in Tamil Nadu. Such freedoms are not adequately represented in the political opportunity literature.

I argued before that sanctions and social arrangements are different forms of influences that achieve the same effect. Just as lifting sanctions on women's mobility could create political opportunities for collective action, creating social arrangements such as roads, curb cuts, public transport, and other forms of communication can create political opportunities for people with disabilities, or those who live in remote areas to take up grievances effectively. For example, one of my study villages got a district capital nearby when the district was divided into two. This made it easier to meet officials, and thus easier to take up collective action. The same effect could be achieved by decentralisation of governance, which will create different sets of political opportunities for mobilisation.

³I thank Prof. John Burdick for pointing out that freedoms are not linearly linked to collective action. In fact, freedom of mobility can reduce solidarity among groups and thus reduce the ability to act collectively. One way of addressing this analytically is to say that freedoms can have an impact on other factors such as bases of influence or that an increase in one freedom may affect another adversely. In this example, increasing freedom of mobility can reduce the influence of numbers. This example illustrates the importance of differentiating between freedoms and influences.

To sum up, the ability to take up collective action effectively increase when the freedoms of a social group increases. This may happen with increasing capabilities of its members or through favourable institutional changes in the form of influences or norms. I will use this framework to explain the changes in collective action in Tamil Nadu, whereby collective action became decentralised and widespread with the participation of common people.

Resource mobilisation theories and political opportunity literature look at conditions under which collection action can happen or be effective. They do not address the question of what collective action does - or how it has an impact. For example, Tilly argues (Tilly, 2004) that collective action gains influence using four strategies: choosing a worthy cause, creating unity among a large number of people through which the power of numbers is secured, and finally gaining the commitment of a number of people who work towards the cause. The **WUNC framework** points out that worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment of members can be major bases of influence.

The literature on **framing** argues that the process of collective action involves creative use of language and cultural resources in order to identify

problems, offer alternatives, and generate support in the population for collective action and change (McAdam *et al.*, 1996; Snow & Benford, 1988; Jasper, 1997). Framing problems and offering alternatives are important aspects of collective action, especially when confronted with issues that are not already widely understood. Apart from affecting how issues are understood, framing is critical to gain support for the movement by creating messages that resonate with the members and the wider population.

The literature on framing could be expanded to include authors such as Gramsci and Chomsky. Gramsci argues that dominance is exerted by the elite by shaping people's understanding of how things work i.e. the "common sense". Challenging such common sense requires organic intellectuals who come from ranks outside the elite. Coming from the ranks of the non-elite, organic intellectuals understand the aspirations and circumstances of this group and can thus offer alternatives that suit their aspirations (Crehan, 2002). Chomsky has brought sharp focus on how issues are mediated. He has argued that widely shared aspirations that are reflected in public opinion polls diverge sharply from the coverage in mass media that reflects the values and goals of the elite. In an increasingly mass mediated society with a few corporations controlling how news reaches most people, the elite

have increasing ability to shape the agenda and understandings and thus wield disproportionate influence in a society. Chomsky also discusses the role of social movements in disrupting this process, though it is stifled in its ability to reach the wider public since corporatised mass media exerts an influence on what issues are discussed and how they are framed.

As I indicated before (see sec. 2.2), the ID framework gives central importance to the deliberative process in creating norms and rules. This includes the process of raising grievances, debating them, learning new alternatives, developing support, creating new norms and finding rules that could work. Thus an empirical enquiry of institutions can be enriched by paying attention to how issues are framed, who participates in this exercise and how these are mediated to the larger public. In fact, without paying attention to framing, it would be impossible to understand how normative frameworks change.

To sum up this discussion, collective action theories can enrich the ID framework by identifying conditions under which collective action can flourish and by pointing out ways in which collective action can create institutional change by shaping norms and influences. The ID framework is consistent with mobilisation structures theories and the political process

literature, and so the language of this framework can be used to discuss them. In saying that, I am not claiming that the ID framework anticipates all the insights generated by these theoretical frameworks. This would of course be far from true. But I do claim that it has a very broad understanding of development, and of agency that enables us to use the language to integrate insights from a wide array of theories in the social sciences. For example, McAdam's identification of state repressions and elite cleavage as factors that affect collective action cannot be anticipated using the ID framework, but it can be easily integrated into it. I will now return from my digression to discuss collective action in Villupuram.

5.2 Forms of collective action in Villupuram

The institutional landscape in the region has been shaped by five forms of collective action over the past two centuries. These are: (1) Religious movements that challenged ritual and other status (2) Mobilisations by Vanniyars, the dominant backward caste group (3) A large number of relatively independent artists, poets, orators, movie makers and others who

were culturally influential (4) Village based collective action and (5) Large scale social movements that had an impact in the region such as Nationalist, Dravidian, Communist and Dalit movements. Together, these forms of collective action had a remarkable impact in changing norms and influences, the cumulative impact of which explains the extensive provision of public services in rural Tamil Nadu today.

In the limited time I had in my fieldwork, I examined the role of Communist and Dravidian movements in some detail. I also spoke to a few Dalit leaders of the region who had significant knowledge of Dalit activism in the region. Unfortunately, I was not able to interview other caste networks including those of Vanniyars who have organised a very powerful movement in the last 100 years. In the following sections, I will offer a brief overview of Dravidian, Communist and Dalit activism in the region and discuss how the social and political changes that they brought about could have had a significant impact on the delivery of public services in Tamil Nadu today. I deal briefly with village-level collective action by communists in this chapter. I will take up village level mobilisation extensively in chapter 6.

5.3 Dravidian movement

The Dravidian movement refers to an assortment of sub-movements and organisations including the Justice Party formed in the 1920s, the Self-respect movement that started in the 1930s, the Dravidar Kazhagam (DK) that was the organisational front of the Self-respect movement and various “Dravidian” political parties that followed them, especially the DMK. With the introduction of local representation and elections to district boards in India in the 1890s, competition started growing between influential sections of the society in Madras Presidency (Markandan, 1964). This took the form of competition between Brahmins and influential Non-Brahmin leaders, leading to the formation of the Justice Party in 1920, while Brahmins dominated the Congress. With the Congress boycotting elections during the 1920s, Justice Party managed to come to power and pass a series of legislations for affirmative action (Assembly, 1947; Sadasivan, 1974; Srinivasan, 1992; Washbrook, 1976). One of the most lasting legacies of the party was the passage of the two “Communal orders” that paved the way for reservation of jobs to certain traditionally deprived castes. Despite its focus on Brahmin privilege, the Justice party consisted of kings, large landholders and urban professionals and it did not have a mass base. When Congress

decided to enter the legislature in 1935, Justice Party was routed and soon lost its significance.

In the meanwhile, a Non-Brahmin leader with mass appeal and tremendous organisational skills had left the Congress over differences on the caste issue. E V Ramaswamy (henceforth, Periyar as he was popularly called) was approached by the Justice Party that requested him to take over the organisation. Periyar converted the party into a mass based organisation focussed on caste based deprivation of freedoms. The movement was popularly referred to in many names including Self-respect movement, the Black shirts (referring to the uniform of black shirts and white *veshtis* that self-respecters wore), the godless-party (referring to their strident atheism), and the Dravidar Kazhagam (DK) based on the name of their organisational front. DK quickly became a powerful force and it appropriated the rhetoric of the Tamil Saivite movement with its trenchant critique of Brahminical forms of worship (Vaitheespara, 2009), the class critique of the early communist movement, and the idea that the original inhabitants of South India were the Dravidians who were conquered by the Aryans from the North that was put forward by Iyothee Dass⁴.

⁴For an overview of Iyottee Dasar's work, see (Omvedt, 2008).

The movement argued that Brahmins represent the Aryan oppressors and argued for unity among the Non-Brahmin [Dravidian] population to fight the Aryan-Brahmins. One impact of the movement was the formation of a coalition among the backward castes that Jaffrelot refers to as ethnization (Jaffrelot, 2003; Jaffrelot, 2000). While DK did not enter electoral politics, a dynamic young cadre of members that broke away from DK in 1949 formed the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and contested elections from 1957. DMK was a major force from 1957, and it came to power in 1967⁵. The party has since split several times, but Dravidian parties have held sway since 1967 without any significant challenge so far ⁶. In this section, I will focus mainly on the Self-respect movement and DMK and their role in political and social change in Tamil Nadu⁷.

The self-respect movement spearheaded by Periyar was among the most powerful social movements in Tamil Nadu over the last two centuries. I was naturally excited to meet people who were engaged in this movement who were living in the block I was working. There were only a dozen people in

⁵For a detailed overview of this journey see (Hardgrave, 1965; Hardgrave, 1964)

⁶For a detailed overview of dravidian politics since they came to power, see (Subramanian, 1999)

⁷The justice party became defunct in the 1930s and was taken over by Periyar's movement. Members of the erstwhile Justice party were naturally not available for interviews, which is why I have focused on the Self-respect movement and the DMK here.

the block consisting of 45 Panchayats who were active in the movement, which came as a surprise to me since the movement is considered to be among the most powerful in Tamil history. I soon learned that this was the case with Dravidar Kazhagam (DK) in most places, *“it is only a few families here and there who were active self-respecters...it was always patchy, a few families here and there”*, said one of my interviewees about the spread of the movement. All the well-known activists of DK in the block were men, and all of them had at least a high school education. One of the most active among them - Sundaran teacher⁸ - first got introduced to Periyar and his ideals as a nine-year-old while he was in primary school at Cuddalore town. Cuddalore was one of the major centres of DK and so there were a slew of meetings and other activities in that area when he was in school. The village where he stayed had an unusually high number of DK families and it is in conversation with them that he started to appreciate the ideals of the movement. Like him, all of my other interviewees were first influenced by DK while they were still in school.

In all cases they were first introduced to the ideology by some elders in the village or by a teacher through whom they heard about the oratory of

⁸This name as the rest of the names in this dissertation are false names to protect anonymity in consonance with IRB agreement.

DK leaders such as Anna, Nedunchezian and others. Vasan, who is now a Panchayat president in the block, started following DK actively when he was 15. For the next 10 years his main activity consisted of going to meetings, *“We would take a bicycle and go doubles a long distance to listen to these leaders”*, he said, echoing a statement I heard again and again from all my interviewees that were engaged with DK. There was a long period of engagement with the movement and its ideals before one of them became a prominent local activist himself. This is not surprising since the fundamental project of DK is cultural, and it required major individual changes before any of the followers became activists for the cause. For Sundaran teacher the fundamental message of the movement was simple, *“There is no God, and this was our only message”*. In a deeply religious society and one where people who held religious offices were also the most powerful members of society, this message was not a simple one to offer. In order to spread this idea, Sundaran teacher and Dravidian movement in general were involved in a number of propaganda campaigns using a variety of cultural means.

One event illustrates the fundamental method of DK’s work and Periyar’s genius. In 1971 Periyar asked members of DK in Pondicherry to

organise a fire-walking festival by the self-respecters. This is traditionally done for religious purposes in temples where a pit is dug in front of the temple and a fire is lit on which devotees walk barefooted. The event by DK was organised in front of a well-known temple of the goddess Draupathi Amman that hosts a major fire-walking festival every year for its devotees. The popular myth (*itheegam*) is that those who walk on fire in front of the temple should do so only if they completely respect the goddess, and are pure. If one is, the goddess will protect them from harm. Sundaran teacher's grandmother told him a popular story that those who walk on fire in the pit are actually walking on the skirt [*Pavadai*] of the goddess and so they will not be hurt if they are true devotees. The story goes that one Englishman tried to observe this through his binoculars and was able to observe this, but since he was not a devotee he was promptly punished for seeing this and his eyes were burned. Periyar's call for people who are non-devotees and are antireligious to participate in this fire walking was precisely to challenge such myths.

DK was popularly called "the godless party", and the news that people who do not believe in God were going to walk fire in front of the temple sent a wave of interest in the surrounding region. Sundaran teacher was

one of the Self-respecters who participated in the event. Describing it he said,

“News spread far and wide that members of the godless party [*Sami illathavanga katchi*] were to walk the fire, and a huge crowd had gathered to watch...even the temple festival did not get this kind of a crowd. Normally, they used to bring water from the nearby river [to cool people’s feet after they walk the fire] and we did not even organise that. We also purposefully carried slippers on our hands just to indicate that we had no respect for God, and we wanted people to understand that. Carrying the slipper we walked the fire”.

The event was carefully orchestrated to challenge widely held beliefs, and the symbolism of nonbelievers walking the fire with deliberate disrespect by carrying slippers in their hands was powerful and disruptive. Like many other events organised by Periyar, this too captured people’s imagination and drew a large crowd to witness a spectacle that would challenge their own beliefs. This event also illustrates an important aspect of DK’s technique that was used by Self-respecters in Villupuram widely, which is one of raising contradictions within people’s understanding in culturally situated ways.

Let me illustrate this with a few more examples.

Sundaran teacher cultivated the habit of maintaining paper cuttings extensively on religious issues and especially on religious leaders. *“There is the famous story of Karaikal Ammaiar who said that it would be insulting to God to use her feet when she goes to worship him. She would crawl on her hands when she went to a temple so that she is respectful. While devotees like her went through such pains for God, the modern day saints need A/C cars, milk, fruits, and all kinds of luxury”,* he argued building a contradiction between a widely held belief that Godly people have to be self-denying. Talking about this tactic the teacher said, *“I collect a lot of paper cuttings and constantly compare what people do in the name of God with what people ought to do. This is my main task”.*

The idea of a saint using modern comforts may not be a contradiction in some cultural contexts, but in rural India where air conditioning is seen as a major luxury, combined with the expectation that saints should a life of material self-denial, drawing attention to such examples can lead to a devaluation of religious practices. Similarly, a set of people who deny God walking on a fire pit with slippers on their hands would be nothing but wild curiosity in most cultural contexts, but it had a powerful meaning here.

The impact of the self-respect movement cannot be understood without accounting for the fact that it was able to frame discussions on religion and deliver it powerfully in ways that were resonant with a large section of the population. This could be achieved only by being culturally situated, and by challenging cultural practices by raising contradictions and questions from within.

The self-respect movement happened at a time when religion was one of the dominant bases of influence. This base of influence was restricted to a small section of the society by the norms of caste that permitted only a few to interpret religious texts and to handle religious symbols. The self-respect movement recognised that religion was being used to sustain norms that were favourable to this small section⁹. Religion, more than anything else, had an influence on individual subjectivities through which it could get individuals to accept norms that were contrary to their own goals and interests. Subjectivities, of course was not the only way through which religion exerted influence. Temples in Tamil Nadu controlled (and still do) large amounts of land and wealth that could be used for material rewards

⁹This view was also put forward forcefully by Ambedkar who argued that Hinduism was the rockbed of the oppressive caste system, and that caste cannot be annihilated without destroying the Hindu religion (Ambedkar & Rodrigues, 2002)

and punishments. Religion could also be used to structure all kinds of social arrangements through which long term influence could be exerted in the society. The self-respect movement sought to undermine religion as a base of influence, and in the process make norms they sustain less effective.

The focus on subjective influence can be seen by the fact that self-respecters I spoke to dealt at length with terms like Periyar's ideals, ideology, religious myths, etc. All these are ways of changing people's understandings about religion and what kind of influence religious office holders should have. By making religion open to questioning, interpretation and debate, it also challenged the control that a narrow section of the society had over religion, and thus redistribute this base of influence less unequally. Though denying God was the primary purpose of people like Sundaran teacher, the self-respect movement had a broader agenda that focused on culturally imposed unfreedoms that a large proportion of the population suffered from. Cultural challenge was a means of changing the way people look and act so that the practice of imposing unfreedoms or submitting to them could be broken.

Most importantly, the movement questioned the fact that upper caste people and men enjoyed greater freedoms while drastic restrictions were im-

posed on others. It thus brought the sharp differences in the institutional hierarchy into focus and demanded an equality of freedoms across all social groups, and thus forcefully argued for norms that are equal. The movement has been criticised for prioritising the freedoms of the Backward Caste people while ignoring the Dalits. While that is certainly true in practice, the rhetoric of the movement was one of equality, and that had implications for normative change in Tamil Nadu. The main argument that I am making about the impact of the Dravidian movement on lives of Dalits is that it (along with other social movements) prepared one section of people in the dominant communities to challenge the unfreedoms that are imposed on the Dalits. As a result, when Dalits started challenging these unfreedoms, they could do so without facing as much sanctions as they would have without such an ideological preparation.

Since challenging cultural norms was the priority of the movement, it fought for the freedom of deliberation, and taking up issues that are sensitive within the prevailing norms. Following Periyar's model the teacher and the other Self-respecters insisted on the freedom to speak and to raise questions.

“I would often discuss things deeply and cause bitterness
among other people; I would tell people in advance that I will

tell my opinion [which may contradict your deeply held beliefs], and you can say yours. I won't ask you to accept my opinion, that is your choice. That is what Periyar said, it is up to you to accept or reject my opinion and I followed the same".

Raising questions relentlessly, and questioning even deeply held beliefs was an important means by which the self-respect movement sought to create empowerment.

As I discussed before, officials and Panchayat presidents complained regularly that leaders in the region had lost respect and that it is impossible to control people anymore. In most Panchayats there is a set of people who are willing to raise uncomfortable questions about the actions of leaders and other influential people. Decisions made by officials and Panchayat presidents that used to be accepted without protests a few decades ago are consistently questioned today, and this has had a profound effect on the functioning of the administration in Tamil Nadu today. Even officials whose lives were made more difficult by such questioning argued that relentless questioning has its merits, and they credit such a change to the self-respect movement.

Des Gasper points out that Kant distinguished between *external freedom*

(having attainable options) and *internal freedom* (being able to make independent and well reasoned choices), and that internal freedom is essential for progress (Gasper & van Staveren, 2003, 148). It would be reasonably uncontroversial to claim that questioning and reasoning can help people arrive at better choices. But, an argument that the self-respect movement made people question in the first place (or question more vigorously) is challenging and raises uncomfortable questions about people's agency. My interviewees who were part of the self-respect movement consistently claimed that their message resonated mainly with educated people, and that education played an important role in stimulating people to question and reason. This is an uncomfortable claim for me, since I subscribe to the idea that a lack of formal education does not mean that people cannot question or reason, or that people with a high degree of formal education are particularly questioning or critical. In fact, the self-respect movement itself relied on people's agency to reason and to question as a means of change. In my opinion, an important role that the self-respect movement played was to make it culturally acceptable to raise uncomfortable questions publicly and to transgress culturally imposed boundaries of a particular time. Having a set of people who question relentlessly can create a space for others by offering precedents as

well a solidarity network to be public in their questioning. Even if this does not have a role on the nature of individual agency, this can have an important social role by affecting the nature of public discussion and social action.

Most families that had become active Self-respecters were reasonably well-to-do and educated, and based on this Sundaran teacher repeatedly claimed that education played a fundamental role in making people question. It is quite possible that education itself had a major role to play, especially through the exposure it brings to new ideas. At the same time, I feel that Sundaran teacher overestimated the impact of education in making people question and reason. For him, income and education played an important role in people's abilities for critical thinking. In my opinion, income and education gave them a social status that enabled them to transgress boundaries without the fear of repercussions, or at least with the possibility that repressions would not be as severe as they might be for a person of a much lower social status. As a side note, whatever a reasonable analytical judgment on the impact of education on critical thinking may be, the self-respect movement gave a lot of importance to education and this was seen as the principal means of securing freedoms. This idea was so strong that

when I asked Vasana, another Self-respecter, if major social changes would have happened without the movement, he agreed promptly and argued that change was inevitable with an expansion of education and the influence of Periyar only made change faster.

While Sundaran teacher gave a lot of credit to Periyar for social change in Tamil Nadu, Vasana had slightly different take on it. He too agreed that major social changes have taken place in Tamil Nadu in the last few decades, and when I asked him what according to him were the reasons of change, he placed an overwhelming emphasis on education and geographic mobility. He argued that with the evolution of better public transport and greater communication, people started travelling and meeting many others. They also started visiting cities and realised that the norms could be very different from what they have in their own villages. He argued, *“[Initially] there was no transport and it was not easy to move. But once people started travelling, they started thinking...Once they start thinking why they’re like that [or about their social condition] they became aware”*.

Vasana’s emphasis on education and travel as a means of social change throws light on two important aspects of social change in Tamil Nadu. Firstly, he gave importance to changes in individual subjectivities such as

understandings and values as a means of social change. Secondly, such progressive changes happen both among people belonging to communities that dominate, and to those that are subordinated. The first gives importance to factors like education, dialogue, interaction across social groups, travel and other avenues that produce new ideas as a means of change. The second made him deemphasise struggles and conflict in the process of change. In fact, during my interviews with him he consistently denied that there were protests or collective action in the process of social change in his village.

Though he repeatedly claimed that there were no protests in his village, persistent questioning indicated that change was not without any organisation or conflict. The following sections from my interview with him illustrates this point:

Vivek: there are some people who claim that even if people get
an awareness, it takes some organisation to convert that into
action. Was there any such organisation here?

Vasan: there was no such organisation here.

Vivek: was there anything like a youth group in this village
when you were young?

Vasan: yes there was. We were 7 to 10 of us and everything I told you bout we did in a group, you cannot do these things as an individual.

Vasan pointed out that there were many social unfreedoms to people of lower castes that were imposed by the forward castes. Social arrangements too were created along caste and class lines, for example, when piped water to houses started in his village, it was extended only to the upper caste area in his village. It was only after a backward caste person became the Panchayat president that they were able to extend water supply to everybody. After asking him about the important social changes that have happened in this village, I started quizzing him on when was the first time in his knowledge that such changes happened in his Panchayat. These examples throw light on the nature of social change in Tamil Nadu.

Talking about the annual procession of the temple idol he mentioned that though the people who carry the idol are poor people, the idol itself was taken only to the rich people's neighbourhoods. Though Self-respecters were nonbelievers, they decided to challenge this and organised a small protest. They canvassed among the poorest sections to drop the idol midway and refuse to carry it unless the forward caste people agreed to let

the procession go to other areas as well. When the idol was put down as planned, it created tensions and the situation had to be tackled. A Panchayat was called and in the process of argument, it was decided that the idol will henceforth travel to other sections of the village as well. Given that the conflict was around the idol of the local goddess, this was a highly sensitive affair that could easily have lead to violence. The fact that it was settled with a minor argument indicates that organisation and conflict were necessary for change, but there was enough ideological preparation among a broad section of people (including many among the forward castes) that enabled a smooth transition to a new norm.

Incidentally, the temple procession story was not isolated to Vasan's village and similar challenges were raised widely across the region. In many cases, the circuit of the procession has widened to cover more social groups, though Dalits areas are widely left behind. In many cases Dalits have gained access to temples, and other religious rights have been extended, while many restrictions continue to be imposed. Norms have merely become less unequal, and they continue to distinguish between social groups and create different fields of action especially with less freedoms for Dalits.

There have been many major social changes in Tamil Nadu relating to

norms of caste, gender and other issues that were deeply held and protected in the society. Moral challenges to such unfreedoms raised by social movements in Tamil Nadu played an important role in preparing people for a normative change, without which such transition would have been impossible. The fact that Vasana claims that there were no major protests only indicates that he does not value these small protests as a means of change. He emphasised instead on subjective changes in individuals coming out of education, travel and exposure to new ways of life as the fundamental force of change. This approach underlay the activism of self-respect movement in this region and so cultural media such as cinema¹⁰, theatre, creating spectacles and oratory became the main tools of social change.

My claim that the self-respect movement emphasised cultural means does not mean that it ignored other avenues of institutional change. Among other things, Dravidian parties that came out of this movement sought to appropriate political power from the hands of upper-caste people in which Vasana himself played a part by becoming a Panchayat president¹¹. Even those who did not directly contest in elections played the role of consoli-

¹⁰Periyar himself disliked cinema as a medium, but it was embraced by younger leaders who subsequently formed the DMK

¹¹ The self-respect movement is also a product of the Justice Party that was engaged directly in electoral politics, and from that perspective the “Dravidian movement” has been engaged in electoral politics from its inception.

dating backward caste votes by forging unity across the fragmented castes. This was illustrated by Sundaran teacher when he pointed out that there was much unity among Brahmins that missing among “Tamil people”. He said that Periyar often pointed out that in Brahmin festivals the lowest to the highest among Brahmins will sit and dine with each other, but Tamil people (see below) were divided by caste and other cleavages that prevented their unity. *“When he said that, people used to understand [the issue] and it used to create a feeling among us in favour of unity”*, he argued.

The self-respect movement is a part of a wider set of movements called as the Dravidian movement or the Non-Brahmin movement. It sought to create an identity for all the Non-Brahmins of Tamil Nadu by arguing that the original inhabitants of the land (that Sundaran teacher referred to as “Tamil people”) were invaded in the past by the Aryans represented by North Indians and by Brahmins in Tamil Nadu. They argued for unity among the Tamil people as a means for achieving power, and the movement managed to forge a sizable coalition that came to political power in the state by 1967¹². Apart from Brahmins, the movement also targeted other forward caste groups like the Reddiars who were dominant forces in this

¹²Christophe Jaffrelot presents a powerful account of this argument, and he calls this process ethnicisation. For more on this see, (Jaffrelot, 2003; Jaffrelot, 2000)

region. Vasan argued that when he got into politics he did so opposing the dominance of the Reddiars. Since the Reddiars supported the Congress, he automatically became the supporter of DMK, *“this is how DMK came into being”*, he argued.

The Self-respect movement is largely a defunct force today, but the impact of the movement in cultural practices ranging from marriages to a simple act of sipping tea with each other is palpable in the region. Political power from Panchayats to the state capital have shifted from the hands of forward caste people to the backward castes and unfreedoms imposed on the lower castes have reduced dramatically. The goal that the movement sought - one of making people question everything - has certainly happened at least with respect to the government. While the self-respect movement had a role in it, these changes can be understood only in the context of other movements in the region. I turn to Communism, another major force in this region, in the next section.

5.4 The Communist movement

The Communist movement made its formal beginnings in Tamil Nadu in the late 1920s. For the first few years it was restricted to urban areas, especially among workers in large mills and railways. In rural areas, the movement took root in the forties among agricultural labourers, especially in the Cauvery River delta areas of Tanjore district. This region had a large concentration of Brahmin landlords, many of who had held large grants of lands for generations for their services in temples. Since the landlords were mostly Brahmins, the Communist movement got the support from the Dravidian Movement that was waging a struggle against Brahmins. By late 1940s the movement had taken strong roots in the Cauvery delta region among landless labourers and tenants who were mainly Dalits. The main demands of the movement included higher wages for labourers and greater share of the produce for tenants. The demand was so successful that the first elected government after independence headed by Rajagopalachari was forced to pass a law for protecting the rights of labourers and tenants. The impact of the communist movement in bringing about this law can be seen by the fact that *Pannai Aal Pathugappu Sattam* was applicable only to Tanjore district where the movement was powerful, despite the fact that

the law was made by the State government. The success of the movement in Tanjore motivated other regions to take up an active campaign. This was the context in which the communist movement took roots in rural areas in the former South Arcot district, which encompassed the region of my study.

South Arcot district and nearby Pondicherry (with a French colonial government) had an active communist movement in the industrial centres like Pondicherry, Nellikuppam (the only sugar factory in the presidency till 1950s) and Virudachellam (a major railway hub). Till late 1940s the movement was restricted mainly to urban areas and industrial centres, but in the 1950s a set of activists started expanding it to rural areas. At this time people like T R Vishwanathan, N R Ramaswamy, Kuppuswamy, Ponnaiah and Krishnan joined the party and some of them went on to become prominent leaders in the district. Krishnan worked in a grocery store, and Ponnaiah had returned from Malaysia after a prominent Communist leader, Sambasivan, was hanged in the country. One of my key informants about the early Communist movement, T R Vishwanathan (TRV henceforth)¹³ was Brahmin from Palakkad region of Kerala who had travelled to different

¹³TRV was unwell when I went to interview him. I had to return a couple of times and on the third occasion, he insisted on sitting with me despite feeling unwell since he felt that sharing his knowledge with me would help in spreading his life story. He expired one week after the interview, and I have used his name in the original.

parts of India doing odd jobs in his youth. After traveling to North India and Bengal, TRV reached Pondicherry in late 1940s where he met Communist leaders and was inspired to join the movement. They asked him to reach out to rural areas and establish the party among landless labourers and tenants following which he settled in Chidambaram town of South Arcot district to initiate a campaign.

TRV recalled that establishing an organisation among landless labourers was a difficult task in a context where landlords wielded tremendous power in the society and in politics. His recollection of the 1950s was peppered with words like *Arajagam*, *Adakku murai*, *Aadhikkam*, *Theendamai*, *Othuki vaithal*, *Pannai Adimai*, *Kodumai*, etc and that translate into words like tyranny, suppression, ostracization, domination, untouchability, slavery, cruelty and violent control. TRV argued that the society was sharply polarised between a few upper-caste people like Reddiars and Pillais who owned most of the land, but were numerically insignificant. The middle castes (often referred to as other backward classes) including the Vanniyars owned land in small pockets and were dominant in certain villages, and they were the most significant caste in terms of numbers in this region. The other numerically significant set of people were Dalits (TRV referred to

them as “Harijans”, a term coined by Gandhi that is avoided by politicised Dalits who follow Ambedkar), who were mainly landless labourers or small tenants who cultivated two or three acres of land that belonged to the landlords. In a primarily agrarian economy, the landlords wielded tremendous influence since they determined who gets employment and who gets land to cultivate. Apart from economic influence, large landlords also controlled other bases of influence such as holding administrative positions, conflict resolution councils, and other offices, be they religious, cultural or political.

The overwhelming dominance of all the major bases of influence by the landlords made it easy for them to enforce unequal norms that robbed the most fundamental freedoms from the majority of the society. When the movement started in early 1950s tenants who cultivated two or three acres were responsible for all the costs of production including seeds, fertilisers and labour. The duty of the landlord was restricted to providing land in exchange for which they were entitled to three-fourth of all Paddy that was produced. Despite incurring all the costs of production, tenants were eligible to get only one fourth of the total produce. Given that tenants controlled only a few acres of land, and incurred all the costs, they were forced to live a life of absolute poverty with no scope for improvement. It is

in this context that a major conference was organised in 1951/52 under the leadership of Pragasam at Mannargudi that was attended by over 100,000 people. Following the conference there was extensive mobilisation for land reforms, that included a coordinated picketing of courts, railway stations and other government agencies in 1953/4. 1,100 people were arrested in South Arcot District and were sentenced to three months in jail, and over 60,000 people were arrested in the state on the whole.

These events intensified the efforts to extend the law to Chidambaram-Kattumanargudi Taluka of South Arcot district. Being an outsider without a well established social base, activists like TRV found it challenging even to begin a campaign. Simple acts such as entering a village was often a challenge since local landlords would object to the presence of outsiders, that too a Communist. In many places, landlords had spread a rumour that communists are trying to make India a colony of Russia, and if they win, labourers would become slaves of Russians. Organising people had to start with dispelling this notion and slowly winning the trust of landless labourers and tenants. These campaigns often started with a round of meetings where communist activists would explain to local people the ideology of communism. They would argue for example that landlords do

little work on the land but get most of the share of production, and this is also the case in industries. Apart from extracting the product of their work, they are made to live in separate and squalid quarters, labelled as Untouchables and their freedoms are severely curtailed. It is not difficult to see why such messages would have resonated with this population. As the base of support increased, the activists would slowly start organising marches and other forms of demonstrations that showed public support for their cause. TRV recalled that many marches and conferences would have very few people turning up.

“100 people would tell us they would come but only five would turn up...police will then come and arrest us. Even if 5 people come, we will organise the march, we should not leave the initiative. Only then will people start thinking about joining the march the next time. If we do not organise anything because only five people come, the struggle will come to a halt. When more and more marches happen, people start joining us. It is a way of recruiting people, [it is essential] for a mass party.”

While winning the trust of people is an essential aspect of any campaign,

communists had to face a number of other obstacles in their organising. Despite Prime Minister Nehru's orientation towards socialism, there was a deeply held suspicion against communism by many Congress leaders. This was certainly true of large landlords and industrialists whose interests were diametrically opposed to the agenda of the communists. Since these people formed the most important base of the Congress party, they were able to bring the violent power of the state to suppress communism. The party was banned in 1947 by the state government, and was made legal only after the High Court invalidated the ban of the State government. The government also used its policing powers to suppress the Communists. To quote TRV again, *"If people join the party, policemen may come at night to enquire what people are up to. They will make lists of people who were engaged in political activity and sometimes CIDs may come to take notes about your activities and very often they would come to villages to make a list of all the Communists in the village. When villagers gave them a list of people, those people would be summoned to the police station to find out how they joined the party, and the police threatened them by saying that they would lodge cases against them if they belong to the Communist Party"*.

Fearful of such suppression in the initial stages, communists made a tac-

tical decision not to enrol people in the party. Instead they decided to enrol people in All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) - the trade union of the party. Further, they carefully avoided using the flag of the party wherever possible and would instead just hoist a red flag with the name of the union written in white. Apart from such symbolic measures to keep the party in the background, activists also tried to cultivate allies. Some of the initial meetings and protests were organised along with some progressive members of the Congress party. For example, the first major protest was organised in a village called Keezhanatham in which 96 people were arrested, and that included many Congress members. One prominent Congressman, Venkatraman, campaigned for the release of the political prisoners and also for the extension of the law to South Arcot district. Venkatraman later became the President of state Congress, a prominent minister in the state cabinet and finally the President of India. While Congress had a small core of progressive thinkers, it was by and large dominated by large landlords and industrialists. Thanks to this, there was only a limited possibility of building alliances with the Congress party to further the Communist agenda.

Apart from the Congress, communists also tried building alliances with the Toilers Party, which was a party of the numerically dominant Vanni-

yars. A tactical opportunity came up during the 1952 elections for the state assembly and the national parliament. Since South Arcot district had a large number of Dalits, there was a reserved seat where only a Dalit candidate could contest. Communists supported the Dalit candidate of Toilers Party in order to secure their support and goodwill for their campaigns. Further, they tried several symbolic measures such as conducting some of the meetings under the leadership of members of the Toilers Party, asking them to hoist the party flag in meetings, etc. These measures did not go too far since communists were also taking up an active campaign against Vanniyar landlords in parts of the region.

Communists also tried to build alliances with local Dalit leaders with a large following such as Ilyaperumal and Swami Sagajanada. These alliances were somewhat more successful, though there were serious differences between the approach of Dalit leaders and the Communists especially on issues of caste versus class. Leaders such as a Ilayaperumal argued that Dalits of the region do not have enough strength to take up direct struggle against the dominant landlords, and so struggle must be waged mainly for progressive and protective laws. Initially, he was against direct agitation for wages, though that position seems to have changed over the period of time.

Further, some Dalit leaders wanted to play a more direct role in caste discrimination while communists wanted to focus on wages, tenancy reforms and land reforms. Despite some differences, the two seem to have supported each other in their struggles in the 1950s.

Communists won a major victory when the law was extended from Tanjore to this region in 1953, but predictably landlords refused to cooperate in implementing the law. This led to a series of struggles wherever the party had a strong organisational base. A quick review of some of them will illustrate the challenges involved in such struggles. One of the first struggles following the extension of the law happened in Thirucheramedu village. Landlords in the village started evicting their tenants following the extension of the law, and in order to do so they brought henchmen from Ramanathapuram district. TRV argued that, *“At the time, Harijan tenants used to be afraid of Ramanathapuram rowdies since they had large moustaches and carried things [weapons] with them”*.

Munuswami, a local communist activist held two acres of land under lease from a local landlord, and he got the message that the henchmen from Ramanathapuram would occupy that land the following day. A call was circulated to Dalits in nearby villages to assemble at his land, and

many of them joined in ploughing Munuswami's land. They were promptly arrested by the police. The next day, land was encroached by the henchmen from Ramanathapuram and Dalit labourers tried to prevent them from doing so, leading to further arrests. In the ensuing struggle, police fired a few rounds of gunshots though without injuring anybody. Shortly thereafter, communist activists attacked one of the henchmen from Ramanathapuram killing him leading to further attacks and counter-attacks, leaving five people dead in the process. This was naturally followed by long rounds of court cases in which Communists were reasonably successful, thanks to the support base of lawyers that the party had.

This was followed by a round of land and wage struggles, many of which led to increased wages, but after a protracted period of 4 to 6 months of strikes. In many cases, landlords tried to scuttle the strike by bringing workers from outside, that local people were able to prevent forcibly if they were organised. During the strike, in the absence of employment, many families had to migrate for a few days each week to other villages or even other districts in order to find work, making the process extremely difficult to sustain.

During such conflicts the government would appoint a 'conciliation offi-

cer' who sought to mediate the negotiation between the two groups. Where struggles got intense, reserve police would be stationed in the village, sometimes for many months together till there is peace in the area. In the accounts I got, the involvement of the administration worked both in favour of labourers and against them. The communists felt that by and large police were sympathetic to the landlords and would often unleash terror among the labourers. Landlords often collected money to treat policemen that helped them get their goodwill. On other occasions, senior officials including collectors of the district supported the cause of labourers by putting pressure on the landlords. This was done during conflicts mainly by instructing the landlords not to hire labourers from outside the village when there were workers available within. This was a provision in *Pannaial Padhukaapu Sattam*. This made it difficult for the landlords to resist the strikers without incurring significant losses themselves. At the same time, officials would point out that payments to labourers were below the minimum wage and thus bring the weight of law in support of labourers during negotiations.

During negotiations, even if landlords offered higher wages, they demanded that labourers remove the party flag and dissolve the union if they were to get higher wages. Such demands combined with their control on

employment and use of violence made it difficult to take up collective action among landless labourers against the local landlords. TRV also argued that there was a higher level of unity among the large landowners in the fifties that made it easier for them to quash such struggles by ensuring that labourers could not get employment during strikes from other landowners. Such unity could have reduced over time with the reduction in the concentration of land among a few castes and fragmentation of land that increased the number of people to deal with.

Use of violence by the landlords directly and their ability to bring the repressive powers of the state made mobilisation challenging. This was rendered more difficult by the fact that most people did not have the freedom of choosing alternate employers in cities or otherwise, and the dependence on certain landlords for work made it even more difficult to mobilise against them i.e. the political opportunity to mobilise was low in this context. The general context of poverty, and factors like lack of allies in positions of power meant that there were not much resources for collective action. The only resources that the labourers could count on were the organisational strength, where they had it, and some allies among lawyers and others who provided support at critical times.

While most of the struggles by communists in the early years were on “class issues” such as land redistribution, increasing wages, and tenancy reforms, they took up a few “caste issues” in their work. In most villages of the region there were restrictions on Dalits from using public wells, wearing slippers within the village, wearing shirts, riding bicycles, etc. In Ponnanthattu village, for example, communists organised a protest against the ban on Dalits from wearing slippers within the main village. When the news reached the Caste Hindus, the landlords and others warned the Dalits that they would “break their hands and legs” if they were ever to enter the village wearing slippers. Despite the threats, the local Dalits made a triumphant march across the village wearing slippers for the first time in the main village¹⁴.

Apart from these, the party also organised symbolic events to gather Dalit support. For example, they would organise an annual commemoration of the Venmani massacre of Dalits who were struggling for higher wages in Tanjore district. The party also ensured that they collected funds for its functioning only from labourers to limit the influence of large landlords.

¹⁴ I do not have a more detailed account of the event and have mentioned it only to illustrate that communists did take up caste issues on occasions and that such issues involved violent threats.

The same was done for membership as well. Such measures helped the party develop a support base among Dalits, but it also sustained a support among the poorer castes of the region. Mobilisation suffered in the 1960s as the party split into a more right leaning and more left leaning groups, with the relatively right leaning group called Communist Party of India (CPI) and the other was called Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI (M)¹⁵.

While class issues continued to be important into the 1970s, other basic necessities started becoming more and more important for the party. A number of reasons led to such a change in agenda. The increase in population created a pressure on land that made housing a major problem in many villages and it became difficult to ignore the question of homestead land and housing. Fragmentation of land and migration of children of large landlords to urban areas also meant that there was no domineering figure within villages who could control labourers with ease. This increased the bargaining power of workers, who started taking up wage issues by themselves without the need for party support all the time. Urbanisation and the growth of industry also provided alternate income opportunities, thus increasing the scarcity of agricultural labour and also providing an outlet

¹⁵ This distinction between “right communists” and “left communists” was made by TRV during his interview. I have not heard this term being used elsewhere.

for those who take up local struggles¹⁶. All these together made traditional class issues less urgent. In the 1960s transportation was politicised by the Dravidian parties as an essential service. There was also an increasing demand in the villages for better roads, water and other amenities. Water became an urgent issue with droughts in the early 1980s. These factors put together led to a profound shift in issues championed by communists, especially since the 1980s, and in the process leading to a shift in the focus of struggles from local landholders to the administration.

By this time the party was well established and the political situation in the state had also changed significantly. It was no longer as difficult to establish the party in a new region, and there was no need to hide party activities under the banner of the trade union or otherwise. The party was also well established with a support network of lawyers, activists and others who could lend a hand during major protests. By the 1980s it had developed strong bases in some regions within the district from which collective action for public services such as roads, transport, water, homestead land, and other issues were taken up. A few campaigns on issues like homestead

¹⁶Douglass North's account of institutional change in the West (North & Thomas, 1970) pays a lot of attention to labour scarcity, and helped me appreciate the wage dynamics more fully.

land were organised in a coordinated fashion in the entire state, while most struggles were initiated at the village level depending on local needs.

The communist agenda till this point was fairly distinguished from most major movements in the state since there were no major movements that focused on the question of wages or tenancy reforms with the same intensity as the communists. In taking up public services, communists did not carry the same distinction in terms of agenda. The same set of issues were being taken up by a number of others, often in a highly decentralised manner. While there was a convergence between different activist groups in terms of agenda, communists tended to be active in a large region and they also tended to take up issues on a consistent basis through the year. Since the agenda of communists and their tactics were converging with other groups, a detailed account of recent their activism will throw some light on the nature of collective action for public services in Tamil Nadu. I present a brief overview of activism in a few villages next.

Communist movement since 1980

One of my main discussants during the fieldwork was Karthikeyan. After finishing school, Karthikeyan went to Ahmedabad, a major industrial city

in the north western state of Gujarat to work in a textile mill. At the mill he was first introduced to communist ideals by the trade union. He became a member of the union, but did not become one of the major organisers. He left the mill after working for a few years and returned to his village in 1979. Upon returning he sought to open a branch of the party in the region and approached local Communist leaders and presented them with his Union membership card from Gujarat. With the advice of seasoned party leaders of Cuddalore, he started with a campaign in 1979. They advised him that there could be tremendous opposition to a new party, especially a Communist Party in the beginning and that it would be tactically wise to start with an issue that is not class-based, and something that was likely to get widespread support. With this idea, Karthikeyan initiated a campaign to approach the administration for controlling mosquitoes. *“Everyone supported us - landlords, common persons, and people belonging to all parties. Mosquitoes, after all, bite everyone. Till that time there was no history of mosquito control in this place. Neither before nor after”*, recalled Karthikeyan about the campaign. This enabled him to get a small group of supporters and also some public sympathy for the program with the village.

When he started the party in 1979 in the village, there was no major

Association that was taking up common issues actively. *“People accepted things as they were and accepted the situation as their fate. No one would argue with the police, no ordinary person will go to a government office. No ordinary person will even step into the police station to demand justice. That’s when we started communist party here”*. His statement that common people did not approach government offices or make assertive demands with officials, police or others was widely accepted by most of my interviewees in the region. Within two years of starting, there was a core of workers who started taking up issues such as demanding a bus service for the village. They also started taking up contentious issues such as wages for agricultural labourers, contesting Panchayat elections, etc.

The first campaign to be taken up after the campaign to control mosquitoes was to introduce a new bus route that would serve the needs of Karaiur well. This campaign too was successful with the introduction of the Route 1A connecting Karaiur and Villupuram town. This was followed by a campaign to start a Primary Healthcare Centre in the block headquarters, that materialised in 1983. In early 1980s, water became a major issue and a *pot breaking* protest was organised for better provision of water. Around the same time, there was a growing demand for the temple procession to go to

poorer neighbourhoods, and this was taken up in the same fashion as it was done by the Self-respectors, mentioned earlier in this chapter. The party also organised two protests demanding better electricity provision, mainly involving the installation of better transformers so that electricity need not be rationed between neighbourhoods due to infrastructural bottlenecks. A campaign was then launched to start a library in the village. Finally, the party also worked with people who had built houses near a railway line, and a few others who had built houses on a dried up pond when the government tried to evict the residents. Arguing that these people are forced to live in these areas due to the pressure on land, and because they do not have any access to homestead land, communist activists of Karaiur campaigned for land titles and against forced eviction.

Karthikeyan also contested for the Panchayat election against a Reddiar and for the first time control of the Panchayat office went into the hands of the backward caste person in this Panchayat. Karthikeyan's ability to win an election in the Panchayat against the dominant caste, despite the fact that he came from a caste that had a very small population in the Panchayat is an indication of the broad support available to the Communists in the Panchayat. Access to Panchayat office gave him and his party the

influence to break the norm of extending services mainly to wealthy sections of the village, which was radical in the prevailing social atmosphere. What is important to note here is that the agenda taken up by the communist activists had sharply shifted from class issues into one that of ensuring basic public services. The only major issue that was taken up with the village along class lines was that of demanding land titles for a few families that would have been displaced from their encroached land.

With some exceptions Karaiur represents the issues that were taken up by communists in all the Panchayats of the region. Since Karaiur was in the highway, road facilities was never a major issue. In most other villages where Communists had a base, protests were held for the provision of all-weather roads. In most cases, the protest would be in the form of *Nathu Naduthal*, or planting of the rise sapling in the mud road. In many villages, Dalits did not have a reasonable arrangement to cremate their dead, and so the demand for cremation facilities was taken up in a number of villages.

While campaigns were predominantly for public services and amenities, there were a few on other issues. One of the most impressive protests was organised in a Panchayat near Karaiur village when some of the landowners started using combined harvesters that could displace numerous labours.

This long protest culminated with a roundtable consisting of representatives of labourers, the administration and farmers right on the threshing floor situated between farms. Each party brought their grievances leading to a heated dialogue and it finally culminated with an agreement outlining the norms regulating the use of combined harvesters. The agreement outlined the principle that harvesters or other mechanical devices will not be used by farmers if there are labourers available within the village. But recognising that there are labour shortages in agricultural work the agreement allowed for the use of harvesters and other machines when there is a labour shortage. This norm was later used in similar contexts elsewhere in the block, and it was also adopted as a guiding principle for settling such conflicts by CPI (M) nationally.

The party also organised protests demanding better prices for sugar cane. The price of sugar cane to be used in sugar mills is determined by the state government, and this has been highly politicised in states that grow a lot of sugar cane. Karthikeyan indicated that these protests had a strategic value since many of the cane growers were reasonably rich and own a certain amount of land. By supporting some of their causes, it was possible to build some friendship across the class line, and thus gained some

sympathy among the landed people when the Communists take up issues in the interest of poorer people.

The struggles for public services cannot be understood without taking into account issues of caste and class. Caste norms are extensive and they regulate spheres of education, occupation, clothing, place of living, travel, food, marriage and even one's funeral. Since the caste system regulates the use of public services by different communities, anti-caste movements have focused on public services as a part of their struggles against caste. In other words, a protest for securing access to certain amenities is at the same time a struggle against caste, class and gender. Let me illustrate this by taking cremation facilities as an example.

One of the rules of caste is that each caste has a strictly assigned location for cremation. No person of one caste can be cremated in the location meant for another. There are also well defined paths by which the dead bodies are to be taken to the funeral ground and any deviation in this will not be tolerated. The seriousness of the situation can be gauged by the following incident. Towards the end of my field work there was a mini-riot in a village of Villupuram district where the police had to "open fire" killing two people. The riot was triggered when the mother of priest of the local

Catholic Church died. The priest is a Dalit by origin and presided over a population consisting of Dalit christians as well as higher caste members. When his mother expired Dalits belonging to the church insisted on taking a funeral procession in the common village road and burying her in the common (read upper caste) cremation ground. This led to a protest by upper caste Christians who vandalised the Church and many houses in the Dalit Colony¹⁷. Local cadres of the Dalit Panther Party got some reinforcement from outside leading to a clash between castes leaving two people dead in the ensuing police firing. Without doubt details of the incident are complex and I do not wish to get into them here. But the seriousness of the funeral rule can be understood by the fact that even the Priest of a Catholic Church presiding over the whole village is not immune to it.

Reflecting their lack of power, Dalit funerals face tremendous problems in many villages. Often the sites are a long distance away from their habitations. While places that the procession cannot enter are strictly demarcated, there is often no road to the cremation ground. The land around them is at times owned by others and in such cases Dalits have to step

¹⁷ “Colony” is the term given to Dalit habitations in the region.

through property owned by others to cremate dead people. This process is accompanied by insults at a difficult moment. Further the lack of a road also means that in order to access the cremation ground, the procession has to go through marshy areas with thick plantation. The process can be so acutely frustrating that at times bodies are thrown away to rot in the marshes.

This issue highlights both powerlessness of the Dalits and also the importance of social arrangements like roads to pursue some things that are fundamental to our social lives. These frustrations point to the importance Dalits will attach to cremation facilities and access roads, and also illustrates that the demand for cremation facilities is not just a matter of resources, and it is closely tied to questions of status since funerals become occasions for inscribing and contesting the status of castes. A specific form of protest has developed in the region to demand access roads and proper cremation facilities. These involve taking up a mock funeral procession from the Dalit quarter deliberately violating the path marked for Dalit funeral processions. Naturally, mock funeral processions happen under a tense atmosphere and keep the administration and the police in tenterhooks. Typically a long process of demanding cremation facilities happens before mock funerals are

announced. Mock funeral processions are announced only when these fail. The announcement itself typically creates a situation for bargaining, often bringing a tense administration to the table. A local activist described one of the first mock funerals he attended in the following terms:

“As we took the [fake] body along, people were surprised and stopped abruptly whatever they were doing to come and watch what was happening. People stopped eating half way, and dropped all things. A funeral procession does not go this way and everybody started anticipating big trouble. It was a big surprise (aacharyam) to every one. This could turn into a riot since different bodies are buried in different places”.

Creating a social tension is an essential part of the protest since it drives the administration with its power to the negotiating table. I got to observe some of this while I spent time in the local police station and the administrative offices. This was highlighted in the way the local police Inspector introduced me to his colleagues, “*He is here to study what kind of problems these protests create for the police*”! It is well known that access to public amenities are unequal for people belonging to different communities, and the administration has traditionally ignored this inequality knowing that

the creation of common or identical facilities may lead to caste tensions. Thus, the administration often leaves these contests to people within a village and does not interfere unless it fears that there are going to be overt tensions or violence. If a protest creates a tense situation, it enables the administration to step in with its power to settle the issue by either fulfilling the demands (by going against prevailing norms) or by the stifling protest.

I cited this example to illustrate the importance of civic amenities and how its provision is affected by cultural norms as well as political and economic status of communities. Thus, the demand for such amenities is not just a matter of demanding more funds from the government - but an active challenge to social status that is accompanied by tensions seen in power struggles. Consequently such protests cannot be taken up by any community at any time. It requires careful preparation, strategic thinking, building allies and other mobilisational activities to gain the influence required for effective action. It is for this reason that the backing of a political party or some sort of a network can be helpful even when a protest is mainly conceived and organised at the village level. I mentioned that when Karthikeyan started party activities in the block he got support from seasoned communist activists in the district. Within a few years, Karthikeyan

learnt important lessons about organising protests and he became a resource for people in other villages when they sought to take up their grievances.

Like most other social activities, there is a grammar to protests. To say the least, it would be completely unacceptable to organise a roadblock as the first stage of demanding water facilities. Typically, the first step of grievance redressal involves sending a petition or some form of collective representation to the official concerned. This is followed by a collective meeting and further petitions. If there is no response, the next step involves a symbolic measure, such as a protest march. When all this fails, the ultimate step involves something more disruptive such as blocking the traffic in highway, aggressively breaking pots in front of a government office, picketing, forcibly locking an administrative office with a lock, planting saplings in a road, mock funerals, etc. Successful grievance redressal often involves the knowledge of how to organise a protest in different stages based on the grievance involved. Knowledge of this grammar, and also a keen understanding of how the administration works, which officials to get in touch with, who the allies in administration are and which newspapers cover such events¹⁸ are important tactical knowledges that the leaders from outside the

¹⁸For example, some of the most powerful newspapers and television channels in the state are owned by political parties. Seasoned activists knew well to inform media

village brought to complement the organising that was done within. When a protest leads to negotiations, such leaders also bring important tactical knowledge in terms of how to negotiate and what to negotiate for so that the new norms crafted on the basis of negotiation will serve the long term goals of the protesters. Very often, such protests lead to arrests or court cases that require dealing with the police or even getting legal support from qualified lawyers. Organising a protest with the party, or some organised group, can help villagers get these resources in order to organise a protest on their grievances.

While communists tend to be among the most organised and resourceful among large groups that organise collective action for public services, they are by no means the only such group. Every political party in the region offered some such resources. There were also many educated youngsters who quickly learned the ropes and took up issues of their village. Many of them contested Panchayat elections later, and thus entered the political arena. There were also associations among youth, in neighbourhoods, self-help groups among women, NGOs and others that brought such resources. As indicated in the chapter on NREGA, there was a culture of protest for public

organisations owned by the current opposition party, and to organise the protest at an appropriate time to ensure coverage.

services in Tamil Nadu that had developed over the last 30 years or so, and so the grammar of protest was widely diffused among the population. This made the organisation of protests and other forms of action a lot easier since people understood what needs to be done and often had a strong tactical understanding. What distinguished communists from other such groups is that their social base was deliberately from among the lower castes and classes. Interestingly, many protests organised by the communists involved people cutting across party lines.

Following the party's principles, most members of the party in the region are from the poorer sections of the community and are mainly backward caste people or Dalits. Given the antipathy towards Communists and their agenda the party did not attract Reddiars or other rich communities as members. Most of the members had little or no land, though there have been some whose families had owned more than 10 acres of land. Thus, in terms of class composition most members of CPI (M) at the grassroots were decidedly poor.

While communists provided an important platform for the poorer sections of the community to mobilise, they were not the sole organisational basis for the poorer class in the region. Thanks to intense political competi-

tion, every political party had some form of representation in almost every habitation in each village. Apart from parties, there were independent youngsters, seasoned activists, NGOs and other associations that competed in the political space in villages. What perhaps distinguished the communists from other parties is the fact that it had little or no representation of the higher classes of the society, and so it did not seek to replicate the class structure within the party¹⁹. This had important implications in some kinds of issues that had a steep class divide. For example, NREGA was intensely disliked by farmers who employed labourers on their lands. Since they had an important role to play in most major political parties, none of them would take a proactive stand in taking up employment or wage issues in NREGA on behalf of the labourers.

Taking up NREGA issues was a definite way to loose the critical political support of the landowners for these parties. The fact that communists did not depend on landowners or industrialists as their social base enabled them to play a proactive role in taking the grievances with respect to NREGA.

Issues such as roads, water, education, or health care were not divided

¹⁹Atul Kohli makes this point forcefully and argues (Kohli, 1987) that this is one of the critical reasons why CPM is likely to deliver land reforms more than other parties with leaders from the landed sections of the society.

along class lines like the question of providing employment and high wages for labourers. As a result, other parties including Dravidian parties, could play a proactive role in those issues in order to secure the support of any section of society without affecting the material interests of the rest²⁰.

Both CPI (M) and CPI have active women's wings and thus there were many impressive women members in the villages. While communists provide a space for women members, they are clearly second class citizens in keeping with the overall political participation of women in politics in the region. Women often brought issues and grievances to the attention of party members. These included problems with water, payment of wages in NREGA, harassment, domestic violence, etc. Women also took an active part in mobilisation within villages and took part in large numbers during protests. But at the level of party leadership, representation of women was low. Many of the party meetings I attended had very few women participants, if at all. Though there were active women members of the party, most of them had husbands who were active in the party as well.

²⁰This is not claim that there was no resistance for providing these amenities to the poorer sections of the village society; that would be far from true. But the protests from the richer sections of society on these issues have a qualitative difference from their protest to increasing wages or taking away their potential labourers directly into wage employment programs. My argument is that though there was resistance to extending education and other amenities to the poorer sections, it did not have the same material basis to be as stiff as it would be in the case of NREGA.

The mixed status of women was illustrated beautifully during one of my interviews with one of the women activists of the party who was in her early thirties, as recalled in my notes below:

25 April 2008

I went to Anjalai's house to ask her if I could talk to her about her political participation. She is a Dalit woman in her early thirties and has been engaged in some communist activism in her village. She was by herself when I went to her house and she met me without any hesitation and we fixed a time for the interview. She did not have to consult anyone in the house to grant me the interview. I later went to her house for the interview and was received by her husband. She greeted me quickly and asked me to wait a few minutes while she dressed and returned. It was evident that she felt comfortable with me because her "thozhargal" [comrades] had referred me to her. Once we went into the house one of her women friends [Luck Latha], sat next to her out of curiosity. A band of about 4-5 men came to the house and sat on the side next to her husband. Before starting the interview, I requested the men not to answer the questions that I ask her. This did not solve things since they kept offering cues now and then, especially when she stopped to think. But luckily, she was not to be cowed by this. She'd raise her hand indicating them to be silent. Luck Latha did not offer to answer unless Anjalai herself asked her anything. Though the men kept saying things, she did

not follow the line. She would think hard and give her own answers – sometimes even said she does not know rather than take their cue.

Her husband did not stay there the entire duration and he kept going out on errands. I felt glad that she had the space to be with other men, including one near-stranger, without the husband's presence. In fact, this is a phenomenon I observed several times during interviews I had with women in the region. She could meet me at her will and discuss her political engagement without any censure from her husband or relatives. As it happened to me on several occasions in North India, I did not have to go through male relatives in order to meet a woman to discuss with her. The fact that I was there to interview her was also broadly respected and she was able to ask men who intervened to stay quite without anyone considering it disrespectful. Her hesitation to many of the questions that men were able to answer more readily came out of the fact that men were more directly engaged in some of the political issues that I was asking about, an indication of the fact that women did not have the same kind of access to all political spaces like the men do.

This turns out to be a day of mixed emotions for me. The fact that she had

far more freedoms than what I had often observed in the North, or in my grandmother in Tamil Nadu, made me glad. But restrictions continue and access to higher political spaces is strongly curtailed. But Tamil Nadu, without doubt, is a society in transition.

To sum up, Communist activism since 1980s started resembling mobilisation by other associations and parties in the region. There was a sharp shift from a focus on class agenda into one that focused largely on the provision of basic public services. In some villages, communists managed to form a strong association using which they organised protests asking for the provision of different amenities and services to their village. While most action was initiated at the village level based on local grievances, the party offered a network of support. The string of protests often lasted 15 or 20 years in each village, and these played a critical role in the extension of such amenities to the village. Apart from the focus on basic public services, members also took up symbolic issues such as inter-caste marriages, action against various representations of untouchability, etc. Where they had a base, communists also tried to get political power at the Panchayat level by contesting elections. Some of these issues, especially ones that pertain to challenging political positions of the traditional elite were accompanied by violence against the challengers. An organised response in the form of

using legal protections, use of counter violence, building strategic defense and other strategies to gain influence had to be used in order to counter the use of violence against them.

Apart from CPI and CPI (M), there was one other group of communists in the district called the Naxals. I did not have the opportunity to talk to members who are directly involved in this movement, though there were many accounts of them both in official records and in my discussions with others in the region. Police records indicate that Communists were active in three or four Panchayats in the block in the 1950s and 60s. The records do not call them Naxals, and this is not surprising since the term itself evolved since then. But in popular accounts, my discussants refer to them as Naxals, perhaps based on the identification that these activists developed at a later point of time. Records indicate that the Naxals organised resistance on issues of wages leading to protracted struggles in a few villages of the region around independence. Today, there is a small “Naxal movement” in the district, though it takes a distinctly different character from the armed left-wing rebellion that characterises the movement elsewhere in the country. As far as I understand, the Naxals here have focussed on creating class consciousness and insist on staying away from the electoral process.

There have been serious disagreements between the Naxals and mainstream communist parties such as CPI (M) on the question of electoral participation, and have even lead to violent clashes on occasions.

I do not have a more detailed account of other Communist movements in the region, and I merely wish to point out here that there are tremendous differences even within the communist movement, many of which have not been recorded here. One could also safely say that other Communist groups have played an important role at least in some villages, but never had a widespread presence in the region.

5.5 Dalit movements

One of the most impressive stories from the region pertains to changes in untouchability with drastic impositions on the Dalits giving way, and greater freedoms becoming available. This process was accompanied by many struggles, as could be expected given the deep roots of untouchability in the region. Like the case of demand for public services that I outlined in the section above, many of these were led by groups of people within Dalit habitations but with a network of support from outside. In the next

chapter I have provided a detailed illustration of collective action by one of the more active groups in the region to illustrate the issues they faced and different kinds of strategies that were tried out. In this section, I will only provide a brief characterisation of Dalit activism in the region. Let me start with one of the characters, Ilavarasan.

Ilavarasan was born into a family that had a few acres of land and he was able to avail of the benefits of reservation to go beyond school education. After graduating from a polytechnic, he took up a number of business ventures. A popular account of him is that he was involved in the business of producing and distributing alcohol illegally. This is a highly regulated activity, where distribution often happens in illegal channels. But this is a lucrative business and it has been used by many across the state to gain political mobility. He was groomed by locally powerful congressman since he was educated and could help in mobilising local Dalits. He was thus offered positions within the party, and the party also helped him secure other powerful positions such as being a trustee in the local temple, membership in the district board, membership in the board of the agricultural cooperative bank, etc.

Ilavarasan's powerful positions enabled him to help a number of Dalits

to secure private benefits such as loans and jobs. For example, Ilavarasan closely watched the positions available in various government offices and checked if they were fulfilling reservation norms. When vacancies arose, he would help eligible youngsters in the region to apply for the jobs and to get them. As a relatively wealthy person in an impoverished population, he was also able to support a number of activities for the community such as running a gym under the name of popular film star, MGR, and patronising cultural activities in the locality. Through this activism, patronage and political positions, he was able to build a network of support in the Mukkiya Colony of Villupuram town.

Mukkiya Colony was a large settlement of Dalits within Villupuram town, and it had a fame in the region among the Dalits for their acts of resistance. Residents of the colony were reputed to be violent, and so inspired fear among people of other communities. This factor played a critical role at various points of time in supporting Dalit causes within Villupuram as well as outside. Ilavarasan's role grew into prominence with the infamous riots of Villupuram of 1978. The riot involved an attack by Caste Hindus on the Dalits, and counter-attacks by Dalits on Caste Hindus. Like any riot, the details of this are complex and I did not have

the opportunity to examine it closely. What I can say confidently about the riot is that it was one of the worst instances of a riot in the district involving the death of nearly 14 people and it attracted national attention.

Ilavarasan became active in protecting Dalits and also in mobilising counter violence during the brief period, and he played a major role in mediating with the justice system following the riots. Given his wealth, he was able to make periodic visits to the state capital to liaise with various officials when the riot was taken up legally. His trip “by an aeroplane” to Delhi to meet the President of India is also widely remembered in the region. He lobbied with Members of Parliament, state officials, Chief Minister and others and also mobilised a legal team on the case that lasted a long duration. The court awarded life sentences to a number of Caste Hindus, and Ilavarasan recalls this to be one of the rare occasions in a riot when Caste Hindus were punished by the legal system in a riot against Dalits. His role in mobilising legal support and lobbying is widely credited for leading to this outcome.

Ilavarasan and other discussants argued that such cases made Caste Hindus careful in taking up violence against Dalits, since they demonstrated the ability use legal protections effectively. Apart from using legal protec-

tion, Dalits of Mukkiya Colony were also able to mobilise counter violence effectively. This was used to settle conflicts within the town and also in supporting Dalits across the district. Since Villupuram was important town and a major junction, most people living within the district had to visit the town at some time or the other. This gave Villupuram a strategic advantage. When Dalits feared violence from Caste Hindus in their village, they were often able to get the support of Ilavarasan and other leaders with influence in Mukkiya Colony. Even though they never had the strength to offer protection at a different village, Caste Hindus were often worried that if they inflicted violence against Dalits within their village, they could be attacked in turn when they go to Villupuram where they will not have the same kind of protection that they could take for granted within their village.

This gave an enormous influence to Ilavarasan both within the town and across the district. In many cases where there was a possibility of violence against Dalits, Ilavarasan or one his trusted people would participate in public meetings organised by Dalits within the village as a show of support. In any society, the threat of violence is a major form of influence. While the state is the most violent force in the modern context, various communities,

corporations and individuals continue to have access to the influence of violence that they can use to sustain the norms of their choice. In this case, violence as a base of influence was concentrated mainly with the non-Dalits and this was used to sustain the oppressive norms of caste. Counter violence by the Dalits tilted this inequality and made it difficult to sustain norms that were hated by the Dalits.

Dalit mobilisation in the Mukkiya Colony combined the quest for better status in the society with a demand for public services. This is best illustrated in the declaration of Mukkiya Colony residents that they would convert to Islam *en masse*. In 1981 the Dalits of Mukkiya Colony announced their intention to convert *en masse* to Islam triggering a wave of reactions. This got tremendous public attention, and incidentally, this is the only event in Villupuram that made it to the New York Times in the history of that newspaper²¹ (Kaufman, 1981). The government led by legendary actor MGR was in tenterhooks and the administration swung into action.

The threat to convert *en masse* was a bargaining tactic by the ex-

²¹A search for the term “Villupuram” yields only two articles since 1851 in NY Times. One reference is trivial in a sense that it relates to a person changing trains in this town. The other is a substantive story on this issue.

untouchables of this region to gain a better status. Recalling the conversion movement, one of its prominent leaders, told me that the first thing the District Collector did when the issue became serious was to install a few public bore wells to ensure water supply in the Dalit habitation. The bore wells of Mukkiya Colony are symbolic of the close relationship between politics, caste, religion, status and provision of public services. The threat of mass conversion was used strategically to address a variety of grievances including ritual status, social status at large, shortage of drinking water and lack of roads. While the administration worked on water and roads, the Chief Minister arranged a meeting between representatives of Dalits and one of the most revered Hindu religious heads in India – the Shankaracharyar. Following that, the Shankaracharyar did the unprecedented by entering the Dalit habitation and officiating the *Kumbabishegam*²² of the temple in the Colony.

The erstwhile South Arcot district has seen some major Dalit leaders who had positions mainly with the Congress party. Some of them rose to prominence across the district, and even at the state level. These were

²² Kumbabishegam is one of the most important festivals in temples that happens once in twelve years or so. Normally Caste Hindus will not enter the Dalit habitation to officiate its temple festivals, and so this was unprecedented.

typically people who had a large following among Dalits in the first place, and so were tapped by the Congress party to garner Dalit support. The most famous among them is Ilayaperumal, who is considered one of the most important Dalit leaders in Tamil Nadu following India's independence and Swami Sagajananda. Ilavarasan, of course, did not rise to such prominence as these leaders, but he did follow in the mould by being a person who had links with a wide network of groups within the district. The role that Congress played post independence in providing a political space for Dalits has now been firmly taken over by Dalit parties including the Republican Party of India, and the Dalit Panthers. In the context of intense political competition where elections can be lost closely, other parties too have been forced to provide political space for the Dalits, though Dalits continue to hold only secondary positions in these parties. While there were some recognised leaders, Dalit mobilisation was led mainly at the village level. One of the most common manifestations of Dalit association in the region is the "Ambedkar Mandram" or Ambedkar societies that are typically formed at village level. They often start with a "social agenda" rather than a "political agenda". This means that, such societies focus on issues such as education, water, and other public services and do not explicitly start on

the agenda of political participation. Sometimes, this is a strategic decision taken to avoid a clash with Caste Hindus, and to secure their support in the initial stages. While many of them start engaging in the political process openly, not all Ambedkar societies joined the electoral process formally.

The most impressive Ambedkar society that I encountered was in Rambakkam village²³. A set of young Dalit men in Rambakkam finished their college education and underwent “teacher training” with the hope of becoming schoolteachers, which is a prestigious job in villages. As it happens often, there were no suitable vacancies in schools and they had to wait for over 10 years to find a teaching job. While they were waiting for the job to materialise, they came up with the idea of starting a (cost free) tuition centre for children after they return from school. Since there were many of them who had the training to become teachers, they organised the after-school tuitions systematically with well-organised timetables, and a division of labour among them based on their training. The centre was named after Ambedkar, which is a common practice in Dalit colonies in the region.

Given the enormous aspiration for education, the centre grew in popularity

²³This is the actual name of the village. I have used it since information about the village was widely available and my sources are diverse. Specific names of interviewees are not presented in this account.

and soon students started arriving after school from outside the habitation as well. At one point, there were more than 250 students, many of whom came from different villages. Interestingly, the popularity of the centre resulted in students from Caste Hindus habitations coming to the Dalit areas to study, which is an exceptionally unusual phenomenon.

Through collective effort, they secured some land and built a stage, and a library for the students. Classes began at six in the evening, a little after children came back from school, and this continued till 9 PM for children in the lower grades. Since classes 10 and 12 are particularly crucial for school students in India, coaching for them was intense. In fact, many students stayed in the centre itself so that they can wake up early in the morning and start working with their tutors. Despite the fact that none of the tutors received any salary or compensation, the sense of dedication among them was incredible. The centre operated on a daily basis for more than 17 years, though its intensity reduced after many of the founders found a job and moved to different villages to work as teachers.

By the time I did my field work in 2007, the centre was well beyond its heydays. Even then, I found sight of 80 children studying under two flood lights in an open ground at 8 pm stunning, and I thought that the

place must have been incredibly vibrant with thrice the number of children amidst highly dedicated tutors. While some of the tutors did this work full-time, they also got additional help periodically from others in the village. One graduate, for example, did not find a suitable job for his qualification and decided to become an agricultural labourer. Like many Dalits in the region, he goes to harvest sugar cane and takes up other jobs outside the district. But he makes it a point to come back around March every year in order to help children preparing for class 10 and 12 examinations. Others in the village regularly pitch in with materials, and other assistance for the tuition centre.

Shortly after the centre started functioning, it became the centre of activities of the Dalit habitation of Rambakkam. Naturally, it also became the place to bring other kinds of issues for discussion, and for a collective action. The service done by the tutors gave them a status within the habitation that enabled them intervene in conflicts, and also take up representations on behalf of the Dalit habitation. They were thus able to use this clout to make representations to the government offices to get a library building, water tank, road facilities, and on a number of other issues for the village. They also organised a boycott of the local temple festival where Dalits has

served *Kanji*, using the bark of a banana tree. This form of untouchability involves Dalits being served the temple food where the porridge is poured on one end of banana bark by Caste Hindus to be received on the other end by Dalits. In protesting this practice, Dalits of Rambakkam organised a boycott of the temple festival and this was organised through the tuition centre.

Over the years, many of the students who went through the centre became college graduates and some of them have even become officials holding responsible positions in the government. The efforts of the centre were well-known in the district. While such effective and persistent organisation is rare, the impact of Ambedkar societies in helping students graduate, find jobs, protect themselves from police harassment, secure legal support, etc is fairly significant across the region.

Apart from associations like these, one can commonly find some individuals in most villages who are reputed to know how the system works, and so could be approached for help in dealing with the administration or the police. This form of public action at the village level gets the support of well-known Dalit activists and politicians in the region. For example, Dalit activists I spoke to regularly asked me to get in touch with the MLA from

Cuddalore who belongs to the Dalit Panther party, and in most cases they had the mobile member of the MLA, and offered to contact him on my behalf. This indicates a sustained involvement between village level activists and those in positions of power.

Ambedkar societies and independent Dalit activists were fairly common across the villages of the region. The most visible sign of such Dalit mobilisation is the pervasive presence of Ambedkar statues clad in a blue suit with the Constitution in his hands in village after village. The installation of every statue was a visible demonstration of Dalit association in the village. Such visibility has led to heated disagreements between Dalits and Caste Hindus, taking assertive bargaining by Dalits even to install a statue. The inauguration of statues is also an important political act involving the participation of well known leaders including on one occasion, Ram Vilas Paswan, a Dalit leader of national prominence from North India. Dalit activists and my other discussants argued that Ambedkar societies and independent activists played an important role in liaising with the administration and securing public services for Dalit habitations. Further, tuition centres and other collective efforts played an important role in ensuring that Dalits are able to make use of legal provisions such as reservation in jobs

and in higher education. Dalit movements thus sought to gain influence by creating social arrangements such as tuition centres, changing subjectivities and changing the nature of sanctions, especially via the use of violence.

This is of course only a partial representation of Dalit activism in the region. I did not have the opportunity to talk to Dalit women who had organised Self-Help Groups, meet with lawyers and others who give support from outside, etc. But, I was reasonably convinced that in most villages there was some form of activism and collective effort in order to remove oppressive norms based on caste, to create arrangements including educational support to make use of institutional opportunities, to bargain with political parties, to ensure freedom from violence, to secure public services, and so on²⁴.

²⁴Freedom from social control could often be sensed even upon entering a village. In one of the villages that I visited a former MLA belonging to AIADMK party kept a tight leash on the village, often using violence. I did not know of this before and had visited the village by an accident. In a sharp departure from the norm, I found the residents cautious in discussing with me and one woman who talked to me kept watching the surrounding to ensure that she is not being monitored. Only two young men who did not regularly reside in the village volunteered to talk to me boldly. In most other villages such cautiousness cannot be seen and people are boldly critical of local landholders or Panchayat presidents.

5.6 Caste associations & literary figures

Communists, Dalit activists, and the Dravidian movement represent only a small proportion of the activists in the region. For example, I have not at all discussed the role of PMK, the most dominant political party in the region that has the backbone of organising among the Vanniyars since the 1980s. Traditionally, Vanniyars are considered backward caste people and many of them work as agricultural labourers without owning any land. A common saying in the region is that the difference between most Vanniyars and Dalits in the region lies mainly in the fact that Dalits are below the pollution line and so are considered Untouchables. In terms of economic status, both communities have a significant number of landless families that depend on their labour for income. Vanniyars have also suffered limitations imposed by the higher castes in the region such as the Reddiars, though they were not as drastic as it has been for the Dalits.

The Vanniyars have a long history of mobilisation in the region. Even by late 1800s the community was mobilised and there were leaders such as Gopal Naicker who took up the cause of the community. Among other things, they sought social mobility by the process of sanskritisation, by following the practices of higher caste people. When census enumeration

started assigning caste categories, Vanniyars mobilised and argued that they should be categorised as Kshatrias, or a warrior caste. These processes also lead to political mobilisation which became very successful with the introduction of adult franchise. In fact, Vanniyars of South Arcot and neighbouring Chengalpattu districts held the key to government formation in the very first election after independence in 1952 since no political party had the majority to form a government.

Following the election, Rajagopalachari of the Congress party convinced the two Vanniyar parties to merge with the Congress, with which a separate political organisation among the caste was dropped. This was revived a few decades later in the form of Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK). PMK has since played a powerful role in state as well as national politics using their strength in just a few districts. In the limited amount of time that I had on the field, I was not able to document extensively different kinds of issues taken up by PMK or the previous Vanniyar associations. But there is no doubt that these caste associations played an enormous role in mobilising the community and in representing their cause with the state.

Apart from these organised parties, there are also a number of literary figures in the region who played a role in setting the agenda on issues such

as caste, gender and other social norms. At least two iconic literary figures lived within 50 kilometres of the region: the famous modern Tamil poet Bharathiar (who lived in Pondicherry for a while), and the Saint-poet Ramalinga Adigalar who built his temple nearby. Both of them wrote extensively and powerfully against the norms of caste and on other social issues such as gender discrimination, poverty, education, and other unfreedoms faced by people of the region. Bharathiar was in touch with the Nationalist movement, and was also influenced by women leaders such as sister Nivedita, by October Revolution in Russia, and by many anti-caste intellectuals. His life and his poetry combine these elements in arguing against institutionally imposed unfreedoms and in setting an agenda for change.

Ramalinga Adigalar rebelled against exclusionary practices in temples and founded his own temple in Vadalur village of South Arcot District, one hour's drive from Villupuram town today. Adigalar took up major symbolic efforts to ensure that his temple is open to people of all communities and radically transformed worship in the temple by not employing Brahmin priests. People offer prayers directly to god by lighting a *deepam* (lamp) at the temple even today. Instead of giving the rest area for pilgrims a typical Hindu name (that excludes people of lower castes), he called it *salai* that

literally means a ‘road’ that could be traversed by all people. He also made issues like hunger central to his work as reflected in some of his famous poems.

Adigalar’s poetry and his temple are widely known and his rebellion against caste and other issues created a debate on institutions like caste. Scholars like Ravi Vaitheespara (Vaitheespara, 2009) have argued that Adigalar and the Tamil Saivite movement at large had a major impact in framing the agenda for the radical self-respect movement that followed in the decades to come. They also were responsible for creating a agenda for social reforms that were then taken up by the Dravidian movement. These included critique of excessive Brahministic rituals in temples, radically opening up the number of people who could perform rituals themselves in temples, widow remarriage, and other issues. Apart from this cultural impact, Adigalar’s agenda for social justice influenced a number of his followers to join major social movements including Communist and Dravidian movements.

It has been argued that these social and religious reform movements played a significant role in Tamil Nadu’s neighbour, Kerala. While these reformers perhaps did not have the same impact in Tamil Nadu as in Kerala,

their ideas were widespread and a network of their followers often carried it into other movements. In a way, it could be argued that social equality that they articulated laid the foundation for Dravidian movement in the years to come²⁵.

Poetry, writing, and debating were also practised by common people who did not have the opportunity to publish their work on a mass scale. For example, Karthikeyan and his friends, used to run a manuscript magazine. When Karthikeyan first mentioned it to me, I took that to be the sign of an unusual set of youngsters who took an unusual interest in social issues. This view came perhaps from my own involvement as a high school student in initiating a manuscript magazine with my friends, that did not have an immediate parallel within my school or others that I knew at that time. Over the next few months, I discovered that organising manuscript magazines was not a completely unusual activity, and I encountered at least six groups that had done the same within Karaiur block consisting of 45 Panchayats. Even though organising a magazine might have been an unusual activity within a village, or at a given point of time, I realised later that

²⁵ These movements had both an ideological and organizational significance. Many devotees of these movements went on to join political movements such as the Communist and Dravidian movement.

there was something cultural about such a practice of writing, discussing and debating issues that was entrenched in the Tamil society.

Such speakers, writers and others served to carry the messages of social movements deeply within the society, and they created occasions to discuss politics, society, policies and other issues. The ubiquitous “tea shops” with their supply of free newspapers serve as common places (especially for men) to gather and discuss public issues. Such an active culture of deliberating on public issues involving common people is essential to understanding normative change in the Tamil context.

While Bharathiyar and Adigalar are iconic figures known widely across Tamil Nadu, less well known poets, writers and directors took up the social issues and discussed them widely within the region. The Rambakkam tuition centre for example would invite such poets or orators every year for their annual meeting. There was an active culture of organising meetings where locally popular orators would be invited to speak on social issues and many of these carried a radical tone based on the popular social movements of the region. In my estimation, this radical agenda played a critical role in undermining the moral hold of caste norms, in making the moral agenda more egalitarian, and in prioritising basic freedoms for all.

5.7 Summing up

My interviewees brought attention to unequal norms that were dominant in the Tamil society. Such norms granted freedoms selectively to people based on their caste, class and gender status, and in the process denied most people even the most basic freedoms. The Self-respect movement mounted a cultural challenge to such norms and sought to break the subjective influence that of such norms, especially by undermining religion. In the process they sought to create an alternate set of norms that gave equality a central place, and such equality could be achieved only by removing unfreedoms on women, and the non-elite castes. The communist movement similarly focussed on class based inequalities and it had a major impact on the rhetoric of the self-respect and other movements in Tamil Nadu. One could say that the dominant norms of the Tamil society today give importance to equality much more than they did a century ago.

One result of this moral change is that unequal provision of a public service tends to be questioned forcefully, and such questions also create discomfort for those in positions of power. Powerful moral arguments have a discursive influence and they become the touchstone of evaluating laws and policies. Governments risk losing their legitimacy by adopting laws

or policies that are contrary to prevailing norms, and thus a change in moral norms can have a powerful impact on all kinds of rules created in a society. For example, it is widely understood that the Congress Party lost its dominance in Tamil Nadu when it adopted policies like the “caste based education system” [Kula kalvi thittam] that were challenged relentlessly by the self-respect movement.

The moral challenges raised by these movements would have remained merely a discourse if they were not backed by a major change in the bases of influence. While inequalities continue, it is clear that the dominance of the elite and their ability to impose terrible unfreedoms on common people has reduced dramatically today. Common people have gained influence by organising, and there have been other favourable developments such as political competition, urbanisation and disappearance of large landlords. Social arrangements such as Panchayats and the introduction of adult franchise reduced the political advantages of the elite, while reservation policies spread the administrative influence more equally by creating space for those who did not have the access to them earlier. Extensive schooling facilities, scholarships, school feeding, cheap public transport with a massive reach, and other arrangements have been created to make more equal norms pos-

sible.

The reduction in social domination has come through changes in all three ideal-types of influence: There has thus been a change in the nature of sanctions when communities learned to manage violent suppressions, had alternate employment opportunities in nearby urban areas, etc. Similarly, there was a change in social arrangements to enable more equal norms including a major expansion of schooling, reservation policies, entrenched party structures, Panchayat systems, and adult franchise. Each of these enabled greater freedoms for the common people. And finally, there were major changes in the subjective influence through the moral challenges raised by various social movements. Apart from challenging the unequal norms, these movements also offered alternatives that have shaped the Tamil society considerably.

One result of these changes was an expansion of incomes, education, stable jobs and other freedoms among the common people. Educated youngsters, people with stable jobs and others then started supporting their communities effectively in dealing with the government and securing various public services to their communities. Expanding freedoms and reducing dominance created political opportunities for collective action at the grass-

roots, giving a voice to the common people to influence the process of norm making, while expanding freedoms also created resources for mobilisation. The result was collective action, which was widespread, and the space for action has increased over time for social groups that were marginalised including women, poorer people, Dalits and backward caste people.

Basic public services were the most important demand by common people, and extensive collective action made this collective goal a part of the institutional set up in Tamil Nadu. In the next chapter, I will illustrate this using a case study of one Dalit habitation that took up collective action for public services over a period of thirty years.

Chapter appendix: Repertoires of collection action in Villupuram district

One fascinating aspect of collective action in Tamil Nadu is the use a large repertoire of protests. Marches, meetings, sit-ins, hunger strikes, blocking roads and offices, petitions and post card campaigns were among some internationally known forms that were widely used. Interestingly there were several other forms that I have not encountered elsewhere, but are used widely in this state. These included breaking empty pots to demand wa-

ter, planting rice saplings in muddy roads to highlight its muddiness, mock funerals and burning effigies of corrupt officials. There were a few other tactics that were used sparingly but with good effect including mass conversion into Islam, shaving heads and wearing *namam* and locking dysfunctional offices. These are of course directed towards the administration. Protests over social issues directed at other sections of the community are too numerous to discuss here.

Unlike petitions or marches that are taken up for all kinds of grievances some of these repertoires are used for specific purposes. For example the ceremony called *Nathu Naduthal* or planting of rice saplings is a protest exclusively for all-weather roads. In this, after sufficient advertisement people of the village will gather on a muddy part of the road leading to their village and plant rice saplings on the road highlighting its poor state. This is used to shame the administration and it sends an unmistakable signal about what their grievance is. Similarly *Panai Udaithal* or breaking of empty pots is taken up as a protest for drinking water. Mock funerals are organised for cremation facilities, including access roads to the cremation area. Unlike petitions or marches these forms of protest send an unmistakable signal about the grievance and they get wide public attention. A summary of

various repertoires of protest is presented below.

The following are some forms of collective action that are taken up for demanding public services from the state. This is only a small class of protests since it does not include protests against a dominant community.

Blocking roads: road blocks are typically carried out after representations and other forms of protest do not work. Often, small highways are chosen for blocking since this creates maximum disruption.

Burning puppets: When protests on issues of corruption or political wrong-doing happen, puppets symbolising the perpetrator are burned in a public display of rage. This form of protest is typically personalised and is taken up when a particular politician or official is singled out for protest.

Collective refusal to accept wages: when a group feels that they have not got adequate wages for the work they did in a public work programme, they would collectively refuse to accept the wage paid to them. This is tactical since it leaves money in the hands of the official, which is not encouraged by the government. Further, an account cannot be closed and so it would create problems during audits. This helps start a negotiation process.

Cutting trees: This was particularly taken up in a large scale by PMK

where the highway would be blocked for a long duration by cutting trees and throwing them across the road.

Fasting: Most fasts are organised for the duration of a day, and on rare occasions there are *fast unto death* protests. These are used after the initial stage of demands, but are often used before more disruptive techniques such as road blocks.

Letter writing: Each person in the village is encouraged to write a letter demanding some amenity to a responsible official. This happens at an early stage and is intended as a show of strength.

Locking the government office: In a display of anger rooms of “dys-functional” government offices are locked by an angry mob of protesters. This is at times done with a few officials inside the office for a brief period till negotiations start. This is a highly disruptive tactic and is taken up only when there is sufficient number of people in the protests. It is taken up only at later stages when a legitimate demand for some amenity is not met.

Mock funerals: Mock funeral procession in a route that deliberately violates the route marked for funeral processions of a caste in order to create tensions and to demand cremation facilities.

Paddy planting: Paddy is transplanted in the road symbolising how muddy the road is, and thus difficult to use. Apart from being disruptive, this is also visually appealing and thus invites media attention, and also the attention of passers by.

Pattai-Namam protest: Dozens of people shave their heads and wear the highly Brahminical symbols of pattai (three horizontal lines of white ash across the forehead) or Namam (a white U shaped line spliced by a vertical red line on the forehead, typically worn by Vaishnavite Brahmins in Tamil Nadu). “Giving a namam” has the colloquial meaning that stands for being cheated, and pattai-namam protests are typically used when a promise by some official does not materialise. The sight of dozens of men with shaved heads and decorated foreheads is visually appealing, this gets quick media attention.

Petitions: One of the first stages of collective action in almost all cases, where petitions are sent to all responsible government offices at different levels. Sometimes these are sent directly to the Chief Minister’s office with an understanding that they are forwarded to the responsible officials.

Pot breaking: Protesters take empty earthen pots in a procession and smash the empty pots in front of a government office that is responsible

for providing water facilities. The empty pot is symbolic of water shortage, and this action is typically taken at a late stage when representations did not work.

Processions: A common form of protest to signal the strength of demand.

Publicity: Wall writing, putting up flags, notices announcing grievances, sticking posters in public spaces, distributing pamphlets, hanging empty pots along the road, and a variety of other measures are taken to invite public attention to a grievance after petitions have gone without any response for a reasonable time period.

Representations: A small team to meet officials at the block or district level, typically at the initial stage of action.

Religious conversion: Threats of religious conversion into Islam and into Buddhism were taken up by Dalits and in each case the first reaction of the government was to construct roads, and to create other basic amenities in the village. Dalit Panthers have recently installed a large Buddha statue in the Pennair river to highlight this issue.

Picketing: Court complexes and other major government offices are blocked and the volunteers “court arrest” (willingly get arrested).

Chapter 6

Thirty years of collective action

Abstract

This chapter presents a case study of collective action for public services by one Dalit hamlet over a period of thirty years. A series of petitions, demonstrations, protests, and bargaining marked how each hand pump, street light, road and other services were secured. This chapter seeks to illustrate the importance of collective action in expanding public services in Tamil Nadu and provide an example of long and sustained action that helped in expanding public services

to underserved areas. In the process, it also illustrates the inter-relationship between institutions and collective action.

What inspired me most during my field work were stories of social change that I encountered day on day. A great transformation had happened silently as millions of people fought for and won greater dignity and self-respect. Dreams that were once restricted to a select set of people now became widely accessible. People won freedoms that I had always taken for granted. These were at times so elementary that it is bizarre to even think that anyone was proscribed from doing these: wearing shirts, using footwear, riding bicycles, going to schools, taking up occupation of one's choice, being able to sit in an empty seat in a bus, drinking water out of a tap and on and on. Most of these had tremendous implications for people's day-to-day lives and well-being. While any such restriction is unacceptable, some restrictions were purely devastating: one community, for example, was considered so polluting that no member of that community was allowed to come out in the day¹. These restrictions have been disappearing fast, opening up new opportunities for millions of people to lead a more fulfilling life.

¹This case and other such restrictions can be found in the works of Ambedkar, see (Ambedkar & Rodrigues, 2002).

As a middle-class Brahmin boy I grew without any recognition of these marvelous changes happening right around me. One reason why these remarkable changes escaped my notice was that they were happening through the agency of common people waging determined struggles in their own localities. Though these struggles were networked and borrowed from large scale movements or political parties, they were locally initiated and for the most part locally organised. The story of one section of the village protesting to wear footwear or to enter the village temple is not likely to attract much media or public attention, especially when such restrictions have been so much a part of social life. But village by village such transformations have been happening with remarkable implications.

I stumbled on them unexpectedly, after all, I had set out to understand collective action for roads, water and other public services. My respondents helped me understand that struggles for these amenities were closely tied with their struggles to enter temples, eat in common plates and other seemingly irrelevant struggles as far as my question is concerned. In this chapter I seek to give a picture of the remarkable struggles that were organised across villages in Villpuram district over the last few decades. Since insights from these struggles are similar, I have taken one hamlet of a village

as my central story.

My main story is drawn from a series of five interviews I did with one activist in Erani village. My interviewee played a fundamental role in expanding the ideas I came with, especially in drawing me to the historical context. Initially I listened to him purely out of courtesy, but as it happens with many social scientists doing field work, I found that the stories he told me resonated in most other interviews. Soon these issues became central to my informal interview schedule.

Just as Parthasarathy introduced me to new ideas, other interviewees drew my attention to ideas that were missing in my picture. For example, communists drew my attention to the role of violence in these struggles. In my next round with Parthasarathy I asked him about his experience with social violence. Since I did five detailed interviews with Parthasarathy over a period of ten months using this iterative process, I was able to get a consolidated picture of the context of collective action in one village.

This village was studied first in 1915 by students of a Prof. Slater, an economics teacher who was concerned that his students were not exposed enough to villages. Since 1915 the village has been revisited four times by scholars giving us a picture of the village over the century, providing

remarkable background material. I had over 100 pages of transcripts from the interviews, but I have chosen only those themes that resonated widely in my other interviews as well. Thus the case below reflects wider trends in the region and is not restricted to events of just one village.

I am conscious that this account will have its biases and will not capture the complexity of the context adequately since it is based on interviews with one person². Multiplicity of perspectives within this village would certainly have enriched my study, but the nature of my fieldwork involved interviews with a sizable number of activists across the region, and that did not give me the time to look at any particular village with tremendous care. It is a limitation that has to be contented with.

6.1 Background

This village is on a main highway and is about 10 KMs from Villpuram town. Till 1992 this was a part of South Arcot District that was created in the British era. In 1992 the district was divided and now Erani belongs to Villpuram district. When it comes to provision of public services, Erani is

²I did brief cross checks with knowledgeable individuals who live in the region that gave me the satisfaction that this story is not manufactured.

30 Sept 2007

Amma asked me not to spend too much time out in the sun during fieldwork. She's worried that I might become darker. In the darkest person in the family already; Tamil Brahmins tend to be fair complexioned, and take some pride in it.

I reached the village for fieldwork and had a conversation with a passerby. He asked me to go and meet his friend who knows a lot on my topic, and telephoned his friend generously to say that I'm coming. Not knowing how to introduce me he thought for a while and then said, "a rose complexioned young man will come to meet you". I have now come a full circle. I am rose complexioned where I do my fieldwork, black for my parents and brown for the American government. Who indeed am I?

Ps. I think I said this before: I should not have trusted my ethnography professor.

similar to most villages I have visited in Tamil Nadu. The Dalit habitation (called "Colony") had all weather roads, electricity, street lights, potable water, bridges to access nearby villages, flood protection barriers and other infrastructure. All inhabitants had easy access to functional schools, a well-equipped Primary Healthcare Centre, fair price shop, and childcare centre. Many were beneficiaries of governmental programmes such as maternity cash benefits, subsidised housing, old age pension, subsidised loans, etc. Almost 300 families out of 500 had received titles for homestead land. Apart from these there were many occupational support systems provided by the government including a milk cooperative, support for buying agricultural implements, common threshing facilities, seed & fertilizer cooperatives, etc.

While these are provided at the village level, there were also public services provided at the broader level including an impressive public transport system. These services have made a tremendous difference to the lives of people.

The Dalit habitation is divided from the main village (called “Oor”) by the national highway, a common phenomenon in villages that have metal roads. While the Oor was close to the highway, the Colony was about 1 KM away from it. In rural Tamil, Nadu Dalit habitations are separated as a rule from the main village where Caste Hindus live. Being politically more powerful Caste Hindus typically corner budgets and thus those areas are typically better furnished. Even where facilities are present and physically accessible, Dalits have been prevented historically from accessing many public services making social access an important question to address for my purposes. For example, as early as 1935 there was a public school in Erani but not one Dalit child was enrolled since they were “afraid” to access it³. Dalits were keen on educating their children and had even identified some land in their part of the village for a school to be built, but neither was a school built, nor was the existing school socially accessible. Over the

³This is recorded in the 1935 round of the study of “Slater villages”.

years both social and physical access to these public services has changed considerably, I will review some of that story here.

There are three main caste groups in the village: the *Forward Castes* comprising mainly of Reddiars, the numerically significant *Backward Castes* consisting mainly of Vanniyars and *Dalits* who have typically been about half the village population. Through the last century one family belonging to the Reddiar caste has held most land in the village. The estimate of land owned by this family varies from 300 acres to 1000 acres, but by any account this family owned more land than any other family in the district⁴. Not surprisingly, the family has been politically important, especially with the Congress party⁵.

Dalits were by and large landless and worked mostly as labourers with the Caste Hindu families. Typically Dalit families were attached to some patron family among Caste Hindus who are referred to as *Aandai*. The Dalit family is referred to as *Padi Aal* where padi refers to a measure of rice and the term literally means a person who works for measures of rice. Many

⁴A forthcoming work by John Harriss, Jeyarajan and Nagaraj (Harriss *et al.*, Forthcoming) gives a detailed account of the land statistics in the village.

⁵ Congress party in its initial stages built its support on a base of locally influential individuals. Thus large landholders and industrialists played an important role in the party. In Tamil Nadu, the Backward Caste mobilization wrested political power from the Forward Castes and thus the political base of the Reddiars have been undermined. Many of them have remained faithful to the Congress Party.

families were also bonded through fairly small debts taken at atrocious rates of interest for marriage and other expenses. The *Padi Aal* and his family started work early in the morning with the cow shed by cleaning the dung and other things. They bear it on their head and throw it either in the field or in some other place provided for it. They fed the cows and took care of them. Children under-15 grazed cows and older people worked at the *Andai's* house without any cash wage, just for food. Apart from this and farm work the *Padi Aal's* family had to do all the work of the family including announcing deaths and making funeral arrangements.

The older generation got little or no money wages for working. When people worked in the farms they would be given porridge in the morning and evening. During harvest labourers will get some measures of paddy, and labourers also got one new piece of cloth each year. Many families also migrated to nearby towns for a small part of the year when there was no agricultural work. Income from all these measures were so low that they had little savings to fall back on. When alternate employment opportunities were low, dependence on Caste Hindus for employment and help during emergencies was acute, and this gave Caste Hindus extreme influence over the Dalit population.

6.2 Beginnings of change

My interviewee is a Dalit who played an important role in demanding public services for the Dalit habitation. His elder brother was the first person to go to school in the Colony. It took some boldness from his mother to ensure this since Caste Hindus led by the large landlord (referred to as ‘the Reddiar’ henceforth) refused to let Dalit children attend school. The school was in the BC area and teachers were Caste Hindus. Parthasarathy recalls his brother telling him that teachers did not differentiate much between Dalits and Caste Hindus. But it’s unlikely that they challenged the social structure much since they were all, as my respondent put it, “*in Reddiar’s custody*”. Their houses were in Reddiar’s land, they got grains from him and he had an influence on their job. Despite the attitude of the teachers, there were many forms of discrimination at school. Dalit children were expected to call Caste Hindu children “sir” even in primary school. They could not drink water unless someone served it to them. Of course, the mere act of going to school took some courage on the part of the child since it was located in a hostile neighbourhood.

The Indian Constitution came into force in 1952 and mandated that 25% of all public employment should be reserved for Scheduled Castes

and Scheduled Tribes. This ensured that his brother with a school education got a job as a police constable in 1959. The stable employment and salary in turn helped all his brothers to get remarkably good education. Parthasarathy himself did a technical diploma and his brothers graduated with different degrees and one of them got a job in the army and the other became pharmacist with the Indian Railways.

The experience of Parthasarathy and his brothers at school was reasonably different. Their elder brother was posted outside the village and the officially provided housing was typically in the Caste Hindu area. *"We never had a problem...he is neat and tidy since he's a police officer, and it was never apparent that we were Dalits. They were less well dressed than us, and so there was no discrimination...[At school] every now and then we won in sports and were given a prize in the assembly. We have about 50 certificates, even at the district level. We were always referred to as Periyavar PC's [Police Constable] brothers. So there, I never felt like a Dalit"*, Parthasarathy recalled. He was also elected School Pupil Leader in higher secondary school.

Like most government servants, his brother was transferred periodically to different places and his brothers moved with him. Cuddalore, where

they lived for the longest time, was a site of intense politics. It was one of the hubs of the Dravidian movement and it also had active Communists, Dalit leaders, Nationalists among others. Parthasarathy was introduced to Ambedkar's ideas and to the Republican Party of India (RPI) through his relatives when he was at college at Cuddalore, the District capital at that time.

Outside the village the brothers did not face much caste discrimination but had to encounter it during their periodic visits to the village. He studied in his native village for just one year, and he recalled, *"teachers used to support me then saying that I am a good student. But the situation was such that SC boys will call the BC students as sir or ayya...hierarchy among students was just like that of adults. That one year, I felt discrimination. I was beaten-up by the students [on occasions] and mother had to intervene. There had been big problems"*.

Some years later he took a bicycle and went to the Oor to the post office, which was at Reddiar's house. Dalits were not allowed to ride bicycles and seeing someone on a bicycle Reddiar enquired with his servants who it was. A Dalit servant of his told him that it was Mayandi's son and Reddiar called for him. *"When he shouted...I knew the situation at that time and I*

felt afraid. I was 17 or 18 then and [being young] I had the mental frame to resist, but I should not uselessly get caught in his place, is it not? So I came out alertly. His servant came running shouting Reddiar is calling. I told him to go mind his business; if Reddiar calls, go answer him. I said that and returned home hurriedly”.

The ban on bicycles was widely practised across South India and was a part of a basket of things Dalits could not do. Rules of caste prevented Dalits in most parts of South India from wearing footwear, riding vehicles, accessing common wells and other public amenities, eating in common restaurants, studying together, covering the upper part of their bodies in the presence of Caste Hindus, among other things. There have been many cases where Dalits were not permitted to use metal vessels for cooking in their own homes or to carry water in metal pots. While these were reasonably common across most untouchable castes, specific castes had more crushing socially imposed unfreedoms. Purada Vannas were considered so polluting that they were not allowed to come out in the day so that the higher castes need not even see them (Ambedkar & Rodrigues, 2002).

Subjugation was inscribed in such detail that even simple acts as wearing a shirt or riding a bicycle required power and high status. Though I was

mainly doing a study on provision of public services these issues invariably cropped up in all my interviews. Initially it was surprising and looked to me like interesting but irrelevant details. But over time it became clear to me that struggles on these issues were closely related to struggles to go get educated or to get clean water. In a society where norms of caste, class and gender explicitly prohibited certain groups from accessing most civic amenities the struggle for public services is not just a struggle for big budgets. They are first and foremost a power struggle waged by those lower in the hierarchy to get an equal status, to boldly violate the boundaries that regulate their lives or redraw the boundaries themselves.

Two years after the cycle incident Parthasarathy was waiting at the bus stop wearing pants, shirt and shoes. He recalls a Vanniar remarking condescendingly to a bystander of his caste, *“Who is this – is this Mayandi’s son? Look at him he’s wearing a pant and ashirt! Is he the son of the guy who used to do coolie work for Padayachi?”*. He recalls the bystander challenging the other by asking him why shouldn’t Mayandi’s son wear pants? Norms of caste were being questioned both by those who were affected and also those who belonged to dominant groups. By 1979 when this incident happened Tamil society was poised for rapid changes preceded

by decades of anti-caste movements and major political changes. In my opinion the bystander's retort indicates these changes.

In the same year Parthasarathy decided to settle in his village and take up political work. He talked to most people in the Colony and formed an "Ambedkar Manram" or the Ambedkar Society with 25 young men. As I mentioned in Section 5.5, this is a common phenomenon in Dalits hamlets in the region. Members of the *Manram* were exclusively Dalit men. When I probed on the nature of membership, I found no reason why women were not invited to be members, except that it was the norm and it was adhered to by this young educated activist as well.

As in Rambakkam mentioned before (in 5.5), education was the priority in Erani as well. But the group also sought to work for basic facilities like water, roads, housing, street lights, etc. The first three years were spent in writing petitions and waiting for answers and they got none. In a more assertive vein they organised a major march for the first time in 1982, three years after they had consolidated the organisation.

6.3 The assertive turn

Over the years a housing crisis had developed in the village due to rising population. Dalits are typically landless and it was no exception in Erani. As a village they were awarded 1 acre and 14 cents of land in 1885 as a part of Communal Award⁶. This was inadequate to support 500 families and over time people had started building houses illegally in the river forest region adjoining the village. *“This happened automatically. The forest department controlled this land and they were forcing us to move. [But] where can we go? There was no land in the Colony and we could not go to Reddiar’s land. At that stage we had to struggle”*, Parthasarathy recalled.

Despite the air of inevitability in his statement, people have lived in such precarious conditions for entire lifetimes. The housing crisis had evolved over decades but they could not do much to act on this without suitable political opportunities or resources. Social movement literature has stressed that grievances can exist forever without an outlet and organising can provide the context to translate grievances to action (Giugni *et al.*, 1999).

While organisation is important, I do not think that it explains collective

⁶ I am relying on Parthasarathy’s information on this. I did not cross verify this information.

action adequately in this hamlet or other villages I studied during the field-work. Habitations in rural Tamil Nadu tend to have very strong social ties that are solidified by common ceremonies, problems, occupations, and the sheer smallness of habitations. In Erani and other villages, there were also clear indications that people had organised previously. Other factors need to be considered to understand this assertive turn. We will discover it as the story evolves.

Between 1979-82 they had sent several petitions for homestead land and housing without any response. In 1982 the whole Colony decided to go on a march to the district capital, then at Cuddalore about 50 miles from the village. For the first time they organised under the banner of Republican Party of India (RPI), a political party started by Ambedkar. The march was organised under the leadership of Aravinthan, Parthasarathy's nephew and was assisted by the party. The two day march was organised on 13th and 14th April coinciding with Ambedkar's birthday. The party arranged for their stay and for food along the route at Nellikuppam, the first industrial town in the district and the site of early trade union movement in the state. Incidentally, I found references to Nellikuppam in most of my interviews indicating the effect such movements have in producing leaders and other

resources to support activism widely. At the district capital an eminent lawyer and a district leader of the Party joined them to talk to the Collector.

The march was a mixed success. The District Collector spoke to the forest department and directed them to stop harassing those living illegally on forest land till an alternate arrangement could be found. He also spoke to the Welfare Officer to find them suitable lands and to arrange housing facilities. This must have been a huge success at that time for the group, but the battle continued for the next fourteen years till they finally got the lands; and the struggle for housing continues as I write in 2008. Such long struggles lasting decades were not uncommon in villages across the district. I indicated earlier that the Ambedkar society in Rambakkam operated continuously for almost 20 years. The same was the case with most other activists I met in the district. Such long and sustained involvement is possible only if the activists are insiders, and it is unlikely that such changes can be brought out by outside organisations, especially if they are transient as many NGOs and foreign funding agencies are today.

Following the march, people of Erani colony took-up a succession of struggles for water, street lights, road, etc. A list of major struggles is given in table 6.1 below. Though each struggle was interesting I will concentrate

on the struggle for water since it illustrates many features of decentralised collective action in Tamil Nadu. It also illustrates how intricacies of local politics affect the provision of something as fundamental as water.

Between 1979 and 1982 several petitions were sent demanding water pumps for the Colony and like other petitions this had no response. In 1983 the Colony decided to organise a fast and “pot breaking” protest. Pot breaking is a common form of protest in this region (and perhaps elsewhere in Tamil Nadu as well) to protest for water. Residents demanding water bring old pots with them in a procession symbolising that their pots are empty when they should be holding water. After a meeting in front of the office in charge of providing water they go on to smash the pots angrily on the gates of the office. Though I have heard of no case getting violent, this is an aggressive form of protest that keeps the local police on tenterhooks. Typically this is preceded by intense mobilisation and also production of pamphlets and other materials announcing the protest, in a build up to it. In one case, the residents went to the highway near their village and strung empty pots in a row for a week before the protest drawing huge attention to their grievance.

Talking about the responsiveness of officials for more active protests

Table 6.1: Campaigns in Erani 1977-2001

Year(s)	Event
1977	Parthasarathy goes to the post office on a bicycle
1979-81	Petitions to Taluk officer for housing plots
1979-81	Petitions demanding basic amenities like water, electricity, roads, etc.
1982	March to Cuddalore
1982	Campaign to install hand pumps for water in the village
1982-83	Asking for improvement over Kumar type. A drilling was done with a rig and a handpump installed
1982-84	Stopping children from being cowheards
1982-90	Campaign encouraging migration
1982-92	Ambedkar tuition centre
1983	Fast by all Colony residents in front demanding land pattas
1983	Fast and pot breaking for water
1983	Struggles to locate hand pumps in the palm grove
1984	Aravinthan stood for MLA election in Thirunavalur constituency
1984	Handling the riot
1984	Hut service scheme to provide one free light bulb with electric connection to each house was not implemented in the Colony. Residents declared agitation and officials came at once. But Reddiar protested that connections were brought to land that he claimed. They went as a village to protest this.
1984	Violating restrictions on wearing footwear, riding bicycles and other issues.
1985-91	Campaign to get a share of the auctions of public resources
1985	Reddiyar's candidate defeated by the RPI-DMK combine in the Panchayat election
1985-88	Non-formal education and adult educate schemes of the government organised through RPI members
1985-90	Street light with Panchayat fund
1985-90	Installation of additional street lights
1985-90	Construction of cemetery access road
1985-90	Demanded and got two bridges across the canal connecting neighbouring village
1985-90	Cement road with Panchayat fund
1985-90	Cement road with MLA fund
1985-95	Following-up case in high court by Reddiar against land titles
1987	Protest in front of Taluk office demanding land titles
1989	Petition and resolution through the Panchayat for over head tank
<i>Date not clear</i>	Petition to chairman, influencing MLA
1991	Fast and protest announced in front of Block Office, for over head tank, and a series of other issues.
1993	Demanding the removal of two tumbler system
1995	All residents of Colony go to meet the District Revenue Officer during his "mass contact" programme and announce a road block if litigation in high court against land titles is not resolved immediately.
1996	March to collector office at Villupuram for land title distribution after land was allotted but the titles were not distributed formally
1996	Pattas issued. Initially pattas were organised for a part of the people. All of them refused to receive it till it came for all.
1996	Protesting that politicians should not distribute land titles first in the AIADMK regime, then in the DMK regime.
2001	Demanding mini water tanks with the local MLA and got 3 tanks

Parthasarathy said, *“When we organise hunger strike, a Gandhian protest, things are not taken seriously. It is peaceful and does not cause any disruption to the country. Officials don’t even hear of these protests, they don’t respond. If we go for a road block, all officials come to meet us at once. If we do an office blockade by locking an office that does not function things are different. This may lead to lathicharge, police may have to be involved and it will become a big issue and they will have to respond to Collector of fice and others – just for water. So they come to you at once and negotiate and make arrangements quickly”*. Each of my interviewees displayed a keen sense of strategic use of public attention and protests were often designed to this effect with humour, creating social tensions, art, music and visual representations. This helped in using the police administration strategically for their purposes instead of being terrorised by them.

A group of people with shaved heads or a string of pots are also visually attractive and get immediate attention. Some repertoires use complex social and political calculations including creating social unrest to gain public attention for their grievance. Nothing illustrates this better than threats of mass conversion and mock funeral processions mentioned before (see Sec 5.4). The use of public attention should be seen in the context of sharply

competitive politics in Tamil Nadu since the first elections in independent India in 1952. Political parties have found it difficult to take their position for granted and so are cautious about negative publicity. The state government also monitors protests closely by compiling detailed dossiers of what are called “negative news files” each day⁷. These are monitored by the Ministers and state level Secretaries in charge of various departments. These are not unusual practices across India but the potential for such news to affect the legitimacy of the government is taken more seriously in such competitive political atmosphere. Officials at the district and block levels often try to avoid coming to the gaze of senior officials and suffer humiliation, and thus tend to react quickly to the possibility of protests. Reflecting this most of my interviewees said that their demands were met before or just after their protests culminated.

Getting back to pot breaking at Erani, just before the procession could reach the government office they were stopped and cordoned off by the police. A senior police officer came personally and persuaded them to press their demands without breaking pots aggressively. In turn he promised to mediate with the officials to expedite the work so that police department

⁷ This system is fairly old and “NN files” or negative news files going back to 1800s can be found in the archives in India.

does not have to confront *law and order* problems. This yielded immediate result and officials agreed to install hand pumps in the village soon. But this was just the beginning.

6.4 Social arrangements and politics

Provision of public services is never a matter solely of technology, budgets or administrative will; local politics plays a significant role in the process. Dalits of Erani had long depended on the local landlord for a lot of basic amenities including potable water. Without doubt this gave some clout and the status of patron to the landlord. For some years Dalits had depended on the irrigation pump of the Reddiar for potable water. When they started political activities this started getting troublesome. Some Dalits activists were harassed by his employees for taking up political activities and would at times even be denied water. Parthasarathy argued that this was one of the reasons for their decision to protest for hand pumps. A simple hand pump thus became a challenge to authority in the village.

Following the pot breaking protest the administration sent two people to install hand pumps in different locations of the Colony. Most fami-

lies did not own land and some settlements were technically “illegal”. All the common land in the region were encroached by the local landlord so much so that they were traditionally called “Reddiar’s lands”. Interestingly the 1935 study points out that the six tax payers in the Panchayat shared between themselves revenues out of auctioning fishing rights and other common property in the village. While appropriation of common land by private interests was happening on one hand, it is also likely that a lot of land previously owned by the Reddiar family became illegal with the legislation of the land ceiling law. A number of practices have been devised by large land owners to skirt this law and this is easily accomplished given their political power. But when there is serious contestation, illegality can become a problem despite wealth and influence of such families.

The installation of hand pumps brought the land question to the fore. Some of the families had been living in lands that “belonged to the Reddiar” in a traditional sense but to which he did not have legal title. When officials of the water board reached that spot with their tools Reddiar sent a word out to them at once. *“[Since] he’s a senior Congress person...an official cannot do things independently in the village if it may lead to trouble. Officials are ordinary people from simple families who have taken up the*

job for their livelihood. They cannot confront these powerful political forces. Even if they had big official titles, when it comes to village issues [they can be asked]: What are you doing? Don't you see that I am here? [How can] you come and go to the village by your will? Where will you put the bore? Where do you have any land? He started such questions and interfered. To put a bore, just an 8 inch pipe, there was no place and he created trouble", argued Parthasarathy.

A lot has been said about landlessness among untouchables and people of lower castes. What has not been stressed adequately in literature is the utter powerlessness of Dalits in organising their social space. The ability to structure social space can have far reaching consequences to things we wish to pursue, including the demand for public services. The question of space came up often in my interviews. For example, given the small size of landholdings, some fields totally surrounded by fields of others without any approach roads. They have to depend on the goodwill of those around them to even reach the fields on a day-to-day basis. In many villages it was the large landholders who had lands that had road access. In similar vein, one of the most emotional political issue in Tamil Nadu today relates to having access to funeral grounds for Dalits, that I discussed before. These reflect

the powerlessness of Dalits in organising the social space that is required for us to carry out essential functions in our lives.

Common lands have effectively been under the control of powerful local people and without these it is impossible to provide most public services. Apart from “unused lands”, public ponds and lakes have been encroached widely over the last few decades in Tamil Nadu threatening the water infrastructure in the state. Creation of Special Economic Zones, large dams, large factories, roads, railways and other facilities too involve the displacement of people and activities. Some such contests have been widely publicised mainly due to their scale. What is not widely publicised is that even the installation of a hand pump or water tank can lead to such challenges, and they routinely do in densely populated areas.

All of us depend on a large number of collective arrangements for our most fundamental activities such as moving around or securing water without which our individual lives will be severely compromised. The importance of social arrangements in enabling us to pursue our activities is not adequately captured in the literature on institutions, or for that matter in social sciences by and large. Thankfully my attention was drawn to these issues repeatedly by my discussants, inevitably since a very large number

of people do not have any land, including their homestead land, making the simplest acts like walking and sleeping illegal⁸.

To conceptualise the role of social arrangements on our freedoms, we have to go beyond the notion of “negative liberties” (or freedom from interference) that predominate the literatures on freedom and liberty. Each of our lives and most activities we perform critically depend on social arrangements. When certain communities are powerless and less able to organise the social world, it can lead to remarkable unfreedoms – even in getting potable water. Large corporations, dominant castes and other powerful actors have been able to structure the social world for their convenience to enable them to pursue activities they desire, sometimes at considerable cost to a large number of others. On the other end of the spectrum are those who are not able to pursue things we would consider fundamental to social life for the lack of suitable arrangements.

Getting back to our story, a bewildered official returned to the Colony to mention that the Reddiar complained about installing the pump in the palm grove. Some residents decided to approach a senior official at the

⁸ Partha Chatterjee argues that collective action by such groups cannot be understood from the perspective of “civil society” since such actions happen outside the realm of legality. He coins the term “Political society” to account for the politics of people who have to occupy positions of illegality (Chatterjee, 2004, 173)

District level with this question. They argued with him that it's legally a common land and demanded that the Reddiar produce his title if he claimed the land to be his. The senior official decided to go ahead with the work and thus the pump got installed.

This confrontation reflects a change in the bases of influence with some traditional forms of authority continuing to hold some ground while new forms of influence, such as the modern administration, becoming important. My interviewee summed this up neatly, *“Work started again...and Reddiar did not object to it this time. He did not want a public protest where an impression will spread that Reddiar did not even allow a water pump to be installed in his village. There is a public impression about him: people think that Erani has no problems since Reddiar is there and he will cater to all our needs. That is how people think of him outside the village...He tried stalling us with the expectation that I will run to him to ask his permission. But he did not expect us to fight and claim. When I met the official directly and talked law, he immediately subsided”*. In this context, Dalits of Erani managed to gain influence by using law strategically with their legal knowledge, organisation and the strategic use of protests.

6.5 Using political means

I mentioned before that the march for housing and land was organised under the name of a political party. In 1984 they got they got the endorsement from the party for Parthasarathy's nephew to stand in the election for the legislative assembly. He contested unsuccessfully but this electoral participation change the equations in the village in important ways.

Erani is not alone in transforming from some sort of a cooperative association to a political party. It is a common practice amidst a culture of political domination by certain powerful groups. Parthasarathy recalled that if he had attempted to start a political party to begin with he would have been stifled immediately. Though they were politically oriented, it was a conscious decision to start a "society" rather than a "party". This also led them to focus on working for basic amenities for their village rather than taking up other more contentious political goals right away. Many of my other interviewees did the same before they started off politically. In this and other cases, local youngsters were advised by more experienced activists belonging to various parties or social movements on organising cautiously and strategically. To me this reflects two things: the novelty of their challenge at the village level that required them to be cautious, but

maturity of such political culture at large that provided experienced leaders and other resources for youngsters to organise locally.

The decision to contest in the Legislative Assembly election was published in newspapers and the contestant started building a small office by the highway. They also set up a tall post and hoisted the party flag on it⁹. Given the dominance of the Reddiar in the village no other party had hoisted a flag or taken up overt political action in the village till then¹⁰. The fact that Dalits had hoisted a flag and had set up an office close to the highway was too much of a challenge to Caste Hindus. A group came promptly, dismantled the office, threw the furniture in a passing truck and broke the party flag as well.

To ensure that political activities of the Dalits are quashed, Caste Hindus came with sticks and other arms to vandalise the Colony. This form of vandalism and the use of selective force has been widely practiced since independence in Tamil Nadu. In fact the use of violence and of mercenaries is one of the lasting political themes of Tamil movies today. This is of course not exclusive to Tamil Nadu. Proper understanding of politics

⁹ In India all political parties have flags that are routinely used during party meetings. Reflecting the deeply entrenched political culture of Tamil Nadu, one can find flag posts with party flags in most villages, and often in habitations within villages of Tamil Nadu.

¹⁰ I did not manage to crosscheck this information.

anywhere in India cannot be had without understanding systematic and selective use of violence by non-state actors in controlling other social groups. Parthasarathy and other Dalit interviewees recalled that many Dalit huts were burned in their villages over the decades, when influential sections of the village felt challenged.

When Caste Hindus came to attack the Colony, they were challenged this time by Dalit youth. The invaders went without causing extensive damage. Before they could regroup and attack again, the Dalits organised their support from other villages. They got the support of Dalit residents from the “Mukkiya Colony” of Villpuram that I discussed before (see Sec. 5.5).

A public meeting was organised at Erani with important leaders of Mukkiya Colony to illustrate their support. They also managed to get support from other sympathisers. One important source of support came from a Naxal organisation in a village between Erani and Villpuram town. The organisation followed a brand of communist ideology and was sympathetic to the cause of Dalits, but it was headed by a Backward Caste person. This enabled him to talk to BCs of his and other villages to and ensure that they did not group with Erani BCs in attacking the Colony there. He persuaded

people that it was a village level problem that should be settled within that village and thus reduced the strength of the attackers.

Aravinthan was not successful in contesting the Assembly election but efforts to capture political power continued. In 1985 Panchayat elections were organised in Tamil Nadu without any special reservations for women or for SCs and STs. Consistent mobilisation since 1979 ensured that the Colony represented a solid block of votes that could be mobilised by the Dalits themselves, and no longer under the control of the local landlord. Using the power of numbers the Dalits negotiated with several aspirants for positions among the BCs. They demanded a share in positions, revenues and the promise to use Panchayat funds to build basic amenities for the Colony. Their candidate for Panchayat polls succeeded with Aravinthan contesting for the post of Vice president. In the following five years street lights, roads, and a series of other facilities were built in the Colony. The Panchayat also passed a resolution demanding an Overhead Water Tank (OHT) for the Colony. That brings us back to demand for water.

The resolution was passed in 1989 towards the end of the Panchayat's term. Due to litigation demanding reservation in Panchayat elections no

election was organised between 1990 and 96 in Tamil Nadu¹¹. In the absence of Panchayat they announced another protest in 1991 for the OHT. The fact that a Panchayat had resolved for it strengthened their demand for the tank and before the announced date of protest officials agreed to build the overhead tank in the village. Locating the tank led to the same set of issues that were faced in locating the hand pump but by now Parthasarathy had learned how to handle it with ease. Building the OHT meant that water was available at the doorstep if not very close by to most houses. But being a tall structure it needs a strong motor and it requires three phases of electricity. Thanks to power shortage power is often not available in one of the three rendering the OHT dry now and then. The practical alternative that water board devised was to build “mini-tanks” that can be operated with small motors requiring just one phase of power that is available at most times.

In 1996 the Assembly went to poll again and Republican Party of India had an alliance with AIADMK that came to power. Parthasarathy like most

¹¹ The Panchayati Raj Act was not passed nationally at this time giving a lot of leeway for states in conducting Panchayat elections. The Dravidian parties that ruled Tamil Nadu alternatively since 1967 had a base and did not want to undercut it by strengthening Panchayats, and thus Tamil Nadu never had a strong system of decentralized governance. Contrasting stories can be found in Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh where Chief Ministers without an organized following initiated strong systems of decentralized governance.

other political mediators is conscious of the votes he commands and the difference it could make to political aspirants in a competitive atmosphere. Using this clout he had the local Member of Legislative Assembly MLA to sanction three mini-tanks for the Colony with his funds. Apart from these efforts to secure infrastructure, there have been efforts to ensure that the facilities are well maintained and kept functional. This included at one point a demand to change the employee who was not cleaning the tank periodically as he is supposed to.

As I mentioned before, struggles were taken up periodically in order to get each facility and the struggle for housing that started it all continues till today. This was delayed among other things by a litigation that Reddiar took up against issuing land titles to the Dalits. Interestingly while he had effective control over the land the Reddiar did not have a legal claim to it. So he argued in the court that the land housed his water pump that is used for public purposes including providing water for land cultivated by Dalits. With government's lawyers not turning up for hearings the case lingered for almost ten years. Finally Dalits went to the officials and announced a protest prompting the government to settle the case and award titles.

6.6 Economic & social struggles

I have now covered some of the main themes that came up in the interviews on struggles for public services. Apart from those, there were also numerous struggles for social status and on economic issues like livelihood and wages. Though these are not directly related to struggles for public services, looking at these will help us understand some social dynamics of collective action. When a relatively marginalised group organises itself, it becomes a threat to dominant groups in the society. A group that organises for education and water may turn their attention soon to wages that is directly confrontational. This gives an incentive for dominant groups to quash all kinds of organisation in traditionally oppressed groups and this has an indirect consequence on collective action for public services. This dynamic is illustrated in Erani where after organising themselves, Dalits turned their attention to an assortment of economic and social issues. I turn to some of these struggles now.

Campaign for education

I had mentioned in the beginning that there were close economic ties between Dalit and Caste Hindu families. Whole Dalit families were tied to

Caste Hindu families called *Andai* and this raised issues for children's education. Since education was a priority from the beginning this practice had to be confronted to ensure that children go to school. In early eighties members of the *Manram* started asking parents to stop sending children to graze the cows and goats of Caste Hindus. This invited a lot of criticism to begin with among the Dalits themselves who asked him who would feed their children. Slowly opposition started waning and children were enrolled in large numbers in schools. Some parents had enrolled their children, but with the first hint of their dropping out they would be sent to back graze. To prevent this tuition centres were started to provide additional support to keep children in schools.

This was also a period when school attendance soared across Tamil Nadu, and without doubt, the larger environment including policy measures and the social environment, must have contributed to increasing attendance. But the social dialogue facilitated by local activists cannot be discounted in facilitating this major change. By this time labourers were also getting much higher wages than previous generations did, and this enabled them to spare their child's labour. Further the presence of some highly educated people in the Colony must have provided a strong demonstration effect. All

these factors should have had their own impact in changing school participation in Erani.

Having started with no literate person around independence, the Colony had made remarkable progress by the time I visited with all school-age children in schools. The clamour for education is so high today that many children go to private schools in the hope of getting better education. Reflecting persistent inequalities today Dalit activists point out that while schooling levels of Dalits are equal to the rest in Tamil Nadu, higher education is getting out of their reach with the increasing privatisation of higher education. In the 1980s, Government of Tamil Nadu decided to allow private higher educational institutions resulting in a dramatic increase in the number of colleges. At the same time, college fees have been going up and private institutions refuse to implement communal quotas that are available in government colleges. Given the poverty of Dalits, this seriously limits their ability to get higher education.

Stopping demeaning practices

The opposition to grazing the animals of Caste Hindus was also based on a cultural aspiration. Grazing was seen as a demeaning activity and it was

a part of a campaign to stop Dalits from taking up such activities. Such strategies are a part of mobilisation by entire groups in a quest to gain greater social status for the whole group. The reference to status made the appeal to stop grazing animals of Caste Hindus more powerful, and within five years of starting only one family in the Colony at Erani was sending their child to graze. Intense pressure was mounted on this family by the whole village that finally forced them to discontinue it as well. From 1984 no family has continued this practice in the Colony.

I mentioned earlier that Dalits had also started violating casteist bans on them including wearing footwear, covering upper parts of their body, riding bicycles, etc. Going further, a decision was made to confront other discriminatory practices. These included refusing to be served food in a demeaning manner, opposing two-glass system, etc. When food was served to Dalits in farms or temple festivals, Caste Hindus had to do it without polluting their vessels. So during lunch in the fields, labourers will be made to sit in a row and porridge will be poured into their hands from a height so that no vessel will get polluted. In many temples Dalits were expected to stand at a distance and porridge would be poured from one end of a plantain bark that Dalits will receive from the other side. Village by village

these practices have disappeared and no village I visited had remnants of these during my fieldwork. One of my interviewees said that he had heard of one such village where these continued; that in itself is a massive change over a short period.

Though these practices have disappeared across the region, it happened village by village and practice by practice. I tried to enquire how each of these practices disappeared in each village. In most cases some youngsters would engineer a conflict in the village leading to a heated debate that followed a negotiated change. Let me illustrate this with an example.

In Erani a set of youngsters went to the tea shop and argued with the owner that it is illegal to discriminate between Caste Hindus and Dalits by serving them in two different sets of cups. If the tea-shop were to continue the practice, they would register a case against the owner in the police station. This led to a heated argument where some BCs took sides against such practices and some others asked the tea shop owner to serve everyone in a common glass to avoid a legal hassle. The next week, tea was served to customers in disposable glasses, but given the cost it was abandoned in favour of common glasses. The ideological preparation of both the suppressors and the suppressed via the moral challenges raised by previous social

movements is critical to understand the ease with which these challenges yielded results.

6.7 Influencing subjectivities

Parthasarathy and most of my other interviewees were conscious that social changes cannot come about without a fundamental change in who we are. Campaigns to stop demeaning practices were a reflection of these. In early eighties members of the Manram at Erani started encouraging youngsters to stop working as *Padi Aal* and to migrate instead. Reflecting his own migration, Parthasarathy argued, “*We had asked youngsters to go out of the village and not be like a bonded labourer here...go out and do anything. You’ll at least get knowledge about the surroundings. When they come back after 2-3 years they were tip-top. They earn money and come back bold; it is like they have got some clarity*”¹².

It was interesting to observe political education during my fieldwork.

There were of course meetings, newspapers and vigorous discussions around

¹²His claim that migration happened at their instigation was certainly an overestimate of the Manram’s role. Dalits have migrated from this region for a long-time including to Ceylon before 1920s, and it looks like there was a substantial migration to Bangalore, Madras and other towns in the 1960s, before the Manram was established. That said, the claim on the political education associated with migration is a very reasonable one.

them in frequent intervals. More than these, politics was a highly personal issue. It was common to see people wearing *veshtis*¹³ with borders in the colour of their party flag and houses were filled with photographs, doors and windows in the form of party symbols and other artefacts. In the sparsely furnished house of Parthasarathy was a calendar symbolising Dalit politics. Instead of marking Hindu festivals like *deepvavali* it had Buddhist festivals, birthdays of Dalit leaders and anniversary of Venmani massacre of Dalits who were struggling for wages.

Marriages too were highly politicised. Practically every marriage of politically involved youngsters during my field work was a variation of “reform marriage” initiated by Periyar. There were much fewer instances of reform marriages among those who were not holding positions in parties. One of my delightful memories from the field involves overhearing a discussion among people who had just attended a Reform Marriage of their friend who was involved in the Naxal movement near their village. The bride and the groom read a “contract”, vowing to respect the marriage and each other, based on nine vows. They exchanged garlands and there was a speech first by the bride and then by the groom. The discussants I overheard in the

¹³This is a kind of wrap around skirt commonly worn by men in Tamil Nadu.

bus gloated over the fact that the marriage was very simple involving little expenses – a rare exhibition of pride in a society where marriages are an exhibition of wealth and power.

Reform marriages were initiated by Periyar in 1920s in opposition to traditional marriages that gave importance to the Brahmin priest. Apart from the anti-Brahmin message these marriages embody a series of other messages such as gender equality, avoiding wasteful spending, etc. Variations of this are used by different parties based on their ideologies. Weddings of communist party members are done with a background of the party flag and are presided by party leaders. Similarly in Parthasarathy's family, following Ambedkarist principles, Buddhist symbols were inserted into the reform marriage.

Converting the other

Changes invariably involve conflicts and activists were careful to frame their message to others as well. When protests against the *Padi Aal* system started they framed the arguments carefully. To put it in my respondent's words, "*We only say that we won't be their slaves; we don't want them to be our slaves either. We won't ask you to do our work. This is the basic*

principle". This message was repeated in public meetings and they also sought the support of their Backward Caste allies to spread this message including friends from the Naxal movement in a nearby village.

Given the social distance between Dalits and Backward Castes it was difficult at times to argue directly and in such circumstances mediation by allies was indispensable. Reflecting on the importance of allies Parthasarathy said, "*Since they were an organisation that had people from all communities and they could talk on our behalf. They would ask what's wrong with our position. Socially and economically we are depressed and want to come out of it and what's wrong with that? What we were speaking in small circles [among Dalits] they were able to say out loud*". Networks of solidarity stretching across castes and classes can play a vital role in mediating especially in times of conflict. Bêteille (Bêteille 1996, chap. 6) argued that urbanisation, education, electoral politics based on adult franchise among other things have created new networks of solidarity that cut across caste, class and location. Similarly organisations like the Naxal movement and the Communist movement consciously created organisations that cut across castes providing new forms of solidarities and thus creating a platform for change.

6.8 Campaigns on wages & livelihood

Erani also saw several struggles for higher wages and other livelihood issues. Parthasarathy remembers that the whole village had boycotted work for sometime around India's independence on the issue of wages. Six families alone went to work and they were boycotted from the Colony for many years. Since this happened before his birth, he did not have a clear account of the incident. Police records of a nearby block that I had access to indicated that there were several long drawn wage struggles in some villages, especially those with communist activists¹⁴. It is possible that the Erani struggles were related, but in any case, it is not clear if there were wage struggles in Erani between 1950 and the time when the Ambedkar Manram became active in the 1980s.

By 1980s there were three scales of wages within the village for similar work. A government run seed farm gave agricultural labourers the official minimum wage that was substantially higher than the wage paid by smaller land owners and other private employers. The lowest wage was paid by the Reddiar who used his power as the patron to suppress wages. This issue

¹⁴ The police station to whose records I had access to did not cover Erani and so I was not able to examine what happened in this village.

was taken up residents of the colony when they sent a petition demanding the enforcement of legal minimum wage to the *Thasildhar*, and thus opened the space for negotiation. The smaller landholders quickly accepted a small increase in wages but the Reddiar held out. Most people working with the Reddiar by then were members of the Republican Party of India, and so a night meeting was easily convened and people were convinced to skip work the next day. When Reddiar's *mestri* (a manager who deals with labourers on behalf of the big man) came the next day, he found that no one willing to work. In the ensuing negotiations workers demanded that a party member replace the *mestri* who belonged to the same caste as the Reddiar. Apart from facilitating negotiations this was a highly tactical step that gave labourers control over hiring. In the negotiations that followed Reddiar agreed to increase the wage by Rs. 2 that was less than what was demanded but it was accepted by the group. Following that, there have been periodic wage negotiations to increase wages, but these have been accomplished with much less struggle in the recent years.

Apart from wage struggles, there have been numerous small struggles on livelihood issues. I will just take up one example here. Traditionally Dalit children were expected to take care of goats and cows of Caste Hindus, and

in the process there was a ban on their raising goats. In “MGR period”¹⁵ loans for animal husbandry were extended and the local MLA worked actively to extend it. The scheme involves collective loans to groups that were extended through banks, where the bank will get a subsidy from the government that is then passed on to the registered group.

A group was registered in the colony to avail the loan and formalities were almost complete with the bank when word reached the Reddiar about it. He spoke to the bank’s manager and asked him not to extend the loan arguing that Dalits don’t have any land to graze the goats. In one sense this is a reasonable objection since goats may do damage to his crops. At the same time this was discriminatory since the same objection would not be extended to Caste Hindus as well, not to say anything about the power of locally influential people to influence commercial transactions of others. Consequently the loan was denied and the group was disbanded.

Little later Parthasarathy used a provision in the scheme inventively. The scheme specified that loans will be extended to any registered group and this could be from a cluster of villages. Using the network of RPI,

¹⁵ One interesting practice I encountered across Tamil Nadu is for people to refer to the Chief Minister or the Panchayat president who introduced a particular scheme or facility and by saying in “her period” or “his period”.

they formed a group spanning their village and some others, and registered the group in another village. This enabled them to approach a different bank where they had more influence and thus get the loan that was denied to them in their own village. Such a challenge would have been quashed violently not long ago, but their political position had changed considerably by now enabling them to meet such challenges. Goats command a good price today and some families have made considerable amount of money by rearing them. This would not have been possible without the social and political clout that had grown over the years.

In a span of twenty or so years bonded labour has been eliminated in the village and Dalits have asserted their will in refusing unpaid labour to Caste Hindus. To put it in Parthasarathy's words again, *"our people are more aware and do not work as slaves in tending to others' cows, processing dung, beating drums, tending the lakes or doing thotti work. All these things are taken away as services from the BCs and they have to do it themselves. Now all work is wage-based"*.

6.9 Review

Erani demonstrates the close interrelationship between freedoms, influences and agency. There was an impressive increase in the substantive freedoms of Dalits in Erani over time. Many Dalits were able to find stable jobs that gave them substantially higher incomes. Apart from government jobs through reservation, Dalits were able to make use of employment opportunities in the context of increasing industrialisation and urbanisation of Tamil Nadu. Many of them also went to far off places like Bombay to secure better paying employment. Combined with the context of expanding schooling infrastructure, Dalit children were able to avail of education, and many of them went on to become graduates. Increases in such individual capabilities had a significant impact both on individual agency and on collective action. Increase in individual capabilities were accompanied by an increase in freedoms through normative changes.

Introduction of adult franchise and elected Panchayats created the freedom to participate in governance like never before. This political space could be used effectively in the context of intense political competition in the state that forced political parties to bargain for the support of all communities. At the same time, unfreedoms imposed by institutions of class,

caste and gender reduced dramatically over the last sixty years or so. Before independence even those Dalits who could afford education and physically access a school were not allowed to get educated. Such restrictions vanished over time, enabling people to make use of their capacities and to avail of opportunities. To put it in the language of collective action theories, these institutional changes created political opportunities for collective action, that was seized by Dalits to gain public services and to address a number of other grievances.

The most fundamental change in the process has been the reduction of social controls where some dominant members or a few dominant communities of a village can impose unfreedoms on others. This change has come about with a major change in the bases of influence in the village community. Many political functions of traditional bodies were first taken over by the expanding administration. The political control that the landed had on the government was undermined with the introduction of adult franchise that made numbers an important base of power over traditional status. Dalits would not have been able to use their numbers if they were not able to organise themselves. This in turn required them to temper the violent power of dominant communities by using legal means and by mobilising

counter violence themselves.

Dalits of Erani were also able to effectively tap into many modern bases of power such as political parties, officials, lawyers and others in powerful positions. There has been a lot of literature in the recent years emphasising the role of social networks in collective action, and for securing various freedoms in general. Seen from the network perspective, they were able to secure allies such as the Naxals, Ilavarasan, lawyers, officials, and others. From a narrow network of support within members of the same caste, Dalits are now able to access the support of people belonging to different castes. This could not have happened without the expansion of political parties, education, urbanisation and migration. Access to such networks can be considered an important basis of influence without which Dalits could not have effectively changed the norms of caste, and the working of the administration. These three factors are of course closely related and tended to reinforce each other.

Most readers acquainted with social movements in India would find a resonance in the campaigns at Erani. But studies of collective action by and large have concentrated on either particular issues as temple entry or on large caste or class groups. As a result one does not get a picture of

the close relationship between economic, social and political struggles in villages as a part of the larger social change. The purpose of this chapter was to demonstrate this close linkage between different struggles and thus point out the importance of long and sustained engagement. Erani helped illustrate the close interrelationship between issues.

The dynamics seen in Erani were similar to those found in many other villages in the region. Together they shaped the context in which the administration and politicians worked in, and thus had a remarkable impact on the delivery of public services. Village based collective action of such intensity and longevity is indispensable to understand the provision of public services in Tamil Nadu. Along with larger social movements, such collective action helped change the cultural framework, the distribution of influence in the society and the institutional framework on the whole.

Chapter 7

Institutional change in Tamil Nadu

Abstract

This chapter brings together the insights from chapters 3-6 using the theoretical framework outlined in chapter 2. I argue that there have been major changes in norms, influences and capabilities that have expanded the substantive freedoms of common people in Tamil Nadu. The changes in norms and influences were in part a result of social movements in the region. At the same, the expansion in freedoms enabled common people to use their agency more effectively,

and one result of this expansion in freedoms is widespread and decentralised collective action for public services. Wider participation by common people in collective action, and favourable conditions for action together ensured that aspirations of common people were reflected in institutions, thus making the institutional framework in Tamil Nadu conducive to development.

The fundamental puzzle I took up in this dissertation is how Tamil Nadu came to prioritise the substantive freedoms of its residents in the form of providing public services almost universally to all segments of society. In discussing my theoretical framework I argued that an institutional perspective can help us understand this process and made the claim that, *when inequalities of freedoms reduce in a society, or when the substantive freedoms of its people expand, the society is more likely to put in place institutions that are conducive to development.* In this chapter, I will reflect upon this theoretical claim using the Tamil context.

I also argued that in order to understand institutions and institutional change, it is important to focus on the complex interplay between norms, influences, capabilities and human agency. Tamil Nadu's performance could be explained in terms of reducing inequalities in norms and influences that

in turn increased the freedoms that common people had in shaping the institutional framework. Public services came to be understood as the most important means of advancement in the first part of 20th century, and it became the most important aspiration of common people¹. The freedoms that common people got in the process of changing norms and influences enabled them to put in place institutions that ensured the provision of public services extensively. I will review these arguments at length below, but before that let me take a brief digression on how far the insights from Villupuram can be extended to the rest of Tamil Nadu.

The analysis so far is based on insights that I gained during fieldwork that I did mainly in one district of Tamil Nadu. As I mentioned earlier (see sec. 1.2), I do not claim that the district of my choice is “representative”, the insights from which could be automatically generalised for a large region. While I cannot extend the insights ex-ante, there is reason to believe that the critical factors behind the performance of public services in Villupuram can be found widely across Tamil Nadu, and thus the insights from Villupuram can be extended cautiously and tentatively to how public

¹In saying this, I acknowledge the possibility that there are many different means of advancement. Land reforms were considered the most important means of development in some states, and large-scale industries and green revolution got prioritised in others. What becomes a priority is the product of collective deliberations in the society at any point of time, and in the Tamil case, public services came to prioritised.

services perform in Tamil Nadu.

The social, cultural, economic and political factors that enabled collective action in Villupuram are mostly state-wide factors. Similarly the four of the five forms of collective action that I found in the district are also not unique to it, and these include: (1) Localised movements often taking a religious form that challenged ritual status and related issues (2) Mobilisations by caste groups (3) A large number of relatively independent artists, poets, orators, movie makers and others who were culturally influential (4) Large scale social movements that had an impact across the state such as nationalist, Dravidian, communist and Dalit movements. I argued that the fifth form of collective action, which is village based collective action for public services, is mainly a product of the social movements that preceded it, and other institutional changes that had happened in the Tamil society. There is also circumstantial evidence that there is a high degree of participation in all forms of public action including voting, taking up complaints on public services actively (see chapter 1). During fieldwork, I also had the opportunity to discuss my ‘story-line’ with officials, activists and journalists who have worked in different regions of Tamil Nadu and there was a broad agreement that the Villupuram is not unique in the issues that I discussed

above.

While I cannot assert that collective action is pervasive across the state, there is a good reason to believe that collective action is pervasive enough in Tamil Nadu to force the parties in power and the administration to contribute to the welfare of all. While there is unevenness in how well the state responds to the aspirations of various communities, one could reasonably say that most communities cannot be entirely ignored in the scheme of things. The ability of once marginalised communities to affect the normative structure, and to muster sufficient influence to enforce it have increased without doubt across Tamil Nadu. Based on this judgement, I argue that the insights from Villupuram can be extended cautiously *ex-post*². Let me now turn to an analysis of Tamil Nadu's performance from the institutions and development perspective.

²In other words, I am arguing that since I did not assume Villupuram to be representative before the study, I could not have assumed that my analysis could be extended automatically. But the fieldwork brought up a certain set of dynamics that were powerful in the region, and my discussants and literature on Tamil Nadu give me a reason to believe that these are state-wide trends. This assessment has to happen strictly after the fieldwork.

7.1 Changing norms

The preeminent norms that regulated the Tamil society a century ago were fundamentally unequal in the sense that they prioritised the freedoms of a narrow section of the society, and vehemently denied even the most substantive freedoms to the majority of the population. The norms based on segregations of caste, gender and class assigned common people limited opportunities in their lives. Their occupations, place of living, choice of partners and most other important things were limited by their status at birth. The creation of public services in the society reflected these dominant norms, in a sense that public services were created to further these freedoms of the elite, while ignoring the aspirations of the majority.

This is reflected in a wide variety of ways. Public services, for example, were created mainly in the habitations of the dominant sections of the society, which other communities found it difficult to access. Social barriers prevented women, Dalits, and others from accessing even those services that were physically accessible. Policies such as subsidised grains, scholarships, school feeding, etc. that are critical for the poor were given less priority than low taxes, balanced budgets, higher education, urban infrastructure, etc. There have been periodic challenges to such unequal norms in various

parts of India, these were vigorous in the last two centuries in Tamil Nadu.

Such challenges were led by social movements, public intellectuals and others. What they did was to build powerful arguments against capitalism, exploitation, caste system, women's unfreedoms and other ways in which freedoms of the common people were curtailed. The effective use of cultural media carried these messages far and wide, and ideologically prepared both the elite and common people for social change. This facilitated local agitations on these issues and made social change much smoother. Many of them also articulated policy visions for a free India that framed what is 'legitimate' for a government to do. With the legitimate policies articulated, a government under threat from political competition had to resort to these policies for its very survival. In this process, norms underlying unequal institutions were altered and a new moral imperative favouring greater equality (at least in the realm of basic public services) was created.

Each movement brought into focus the unequal impact of institutions on some social group and argued for a new set of norms for the society. The Dravidian movement, for example, focussed on caste and the privileges enjoyed by Brahmins in the contemporary society and challenged all kinds of norms that gave unequal privileges to the Brahmins. In the process, they

also articulated new norms for a new society that expanded the freedoms especially for the Backward Caste community that formed the base of the Dravidian movement.

For example, the movement strongly challenged the norm of public employment which was availed predominantly by the Brahmins. In 1923 when the Justice Party was in power, it introduced a policy of reservation in public employment through the “First Communal G.O” (Government Order), which was subsequently refined and expanded over the next 60 years to create employment opportunities for the Backward Caste community. The movement discouraged the use of English (mastered by the Brahmin community more than others) and encourage the use of Tamil in education, official use and other purposes, and it challenged the caste based education system introduced by the then chief minister Rajaji. Given that the movement has been influential from the 1920s till today, it has been able to significantly alter the normative framework of the society, ushering an era of less unequal norms.

While the Dravidian movement had an anti-caste rhetoric, its base has mainly been the Backward Caste community. In the initial phases, most of the leaders of this movement were elite and highly educated as well. Given

this background, the movement did not raise class issues or challenge untouchability. In the early 1900s when Indian members were represented in the Legislative Councils, the representatives from both forward and backward caste communities were rich and landed. Seen from a class perspective, they did not represent any major break from earlier rulers. It is not surprising that the issues they were most concerned about were public employment and higher education that would mainly benefit the elite. At that time eligibility for voting also depended on property and education, and so the voter base was also largely drawn from this class. Under such conditions, the role of Dalit leaders³ is interesting, since they played a leading role in bringing attention to poverty, untouchability and in offering a new set of norms to expand the freedoms available to the Dalit population.

A brief look at the Legislative Council debates indicates that the Dalit leaders brought a different quality to their issues. For example, in the first council (1920-23) M C Rajah, a prominent leader untouchable leader, was the among the few who would foreground most of his speeches by pointing that his community is poor and if policies have to reach them, their poverty

³In an effort to break the dominance of the Brahmin community, the British administration had introduced the system of nominating members from minority communities and Dalits (then called the “Depressed classes”), which enabled some Dalit representation since the 1920s.

should be taken into account. In a memorable petition in 1923⁴ he along with others untouchable leaders argued that if the benefit of education have to reached the Dalits, measures have to go beyond just subsidised tuitions. The petition argued that there should be school feeding during the break if poor children have to get the benefit of education and there should be scholarships to compensate for their labour so that parents living in crushing poverty can afford to send children to school. He also made a point that apart from making tuitions free, the scholarships should take care of all educational expenses so that poorest of parents can send their children to school. The farsightedness of this petition is absolutely remarkable in a sense that education policy has evolved exactly in this way in state after state in India. It is my contention that the far-sighted agenda set by these leaders were to be the cornerstone of progressive policies in the years to come.

The most important group to bring class issues consistently were, not surprisingly, the Communists. The communist movement argued that the norms of property played a leading role in sustaining the privileges of the elite, and put forward a number of new norms relating to property, indus-

⁴for details see (Radhakrishnan & Srinivas, 1996)

trial relations, agricultural relations and other matters. It also questioned every policy in terms of who it would contribute to. Along with other movements, the Communists challenged the moral basis of creating policies that would privileged the elite, and also argued for a new set of norms that would greatly expand the freedoms of the underclass. But, the communist movement itself refuse to engage with caste or gender based unfreedoms arguing that all these unfreedoms a result of class relations.

The women's movement, along with its broad base of supporters in the nationalist, Dravidian, communist and other movements focused on women's unfreedoms. One of the early successes of the movement was to expand the political participation of women by campaigning for voting rights for women. Despite consistent resistance from the alien government to offer voting rights women, the movement managed to get voting rights for educated women in the 1930s itself, which was only a few years after voting rights were given to women in the UK. The women's movement also challenged the norms that prevented women from getting education, and also took up issues of women's health, mobility, property rights, the role of women within a family, domestic violence and a number of other issues that have expanded the freedoms women enjoy in the society.

The normative challenges by these movements on the whole tended to attack the special privileges of some social groups, and special unfreedoms imposed on others. Without any doubt, each of these movements had their limitations. The nationalist movement fought against alien rulers but ignored domestic inequalities in power. The Dravidian movement focused on caste, but did not pay adequate attention to untouchability or to class issues. Such examples could be given of most movements. While most movements had their limitations, a combination of multiple social movements at the same time brought some balance to the normative challenges raised by each of them.

While each movement had its ideological projects, they were not immune to the projects of others. For example, the women's movement was able to gain supporters across all social movements⁵. Similarly, Communist ideologies influenced the thinking of almost every major movement and the public intellectuals. Even when specific movements did not absorb the ideologies of others, policymakers had to respond to each of the social movements, or to the wider population that had absorbed the normative questions raised

⁵The Women's India Conference that lobbied for women's voting rights was able to get their position endorsed by all the major parties, and there were prominent women leaders in most movements who took up women's issues actively within the movements and parties.

by each of them. In the process class, caste, gender and other forms of imposed unfreedoms were challenged, and a new set of norms combining these concerns evolved.

If one could characterise the normative challenges of the time, one could definitely say that the new norms challenged the inequality inherent in the norms previously. While the new set of norms that came to be predominant in the Tamil society are less unequal, one cannot say that these norms are perfectly equal. For example, while it is unchallenged today that everybody should get a decent education, the unequal quality of education received by those who can afford it goes relatively unchallenged. The differential quality is embedded in laws, policies and other well-established norms.

Many of the social movements were effective in making use of cultural means including theatre, poetry, orators, and cinema. There were also independent artists including poets, movie makers, actors, orators, writers and others who together constituted a very powerful force in Tamil Nadu. 20th century in Tamil Nadu is also interesting for the large number of public intellectuals with a wide following. Many of them were independent thinkers without an organisational base and some had their own organisation. The public intellectual is best illustrated by the poet Bharathiar. His songs have

been popular for nearly a century in Tamil Nadu and knowing them is just a part of growing up for most of us in the state⁶. His songs and essays borrowed from different progressive movements freely combining communist, anti-caste, feminist and anti-imperialist ideas. While Bharathiar is by far the best known, a large number of other well known singers, poets, orators⁷ were influential in most of the localities that I went to during my fieldwork. What these local orators and artists did was to constantly reinforce the messages within their locality.

Cinema became the major vehicle for the new political parties that were challenging old norms. The Dravidian movement was singularly successful in this venture, while others have also tried to use this medium. The impact of cinema on politics is so entrenched that aspiring politicians still today tried to act in movies in order to get their names and their message across⁸.

The best known Tamil politicians were great orators and almost all of

⁶ Bharathiar's songs are regularly used in movies, sung in highly sanskritised Carnatic concerts, found in text books and make their way into commentaries and conversations regularly.

⁷ It may come as a surprise to outsiders that every major TV channel in Tamil Nadu has a debate based show every Sunday morning in prime time. Similarly, debate based programmes with social themes (called "patti-manram") are telecast on prime-time during all major festivals including Deepavali and Pongal.

⁸ While it is not uncommon for actors to try and get a political role, successful politicians have also tried to act in movies. For example, Thol. Thirumavalavan, the current chief of Dalit Panthers party acted in the movie *Anbuthozhi* as a militant fighting for the Tamil Elam cause.

them were involved in the movie industry as well. Dramatists and movie makers combined to take the cultural challenge far and wide. It is my contention that these public intellectuals served to weaken the moral hold of religion, caste and male domination and paved way for social and political change over the years. They also had implications for which policies of the government were ‘legitimate’ making it imperative for the government to deliver them. One of its most important contributions is to shake the moral roots of status and argue that everyone deserves education, healthcare and opportunities in life. This made the delivery of public services to all people irrespective of their socio-economic status, a key metric through which the performance of a government would be judged⁹. These changes paved the way for the expansion of basic public services.

7.2 Changing bases of influence

While normative change is an important part of institutional change, the new norms have to be supported by a set of influences for them to be

⁹One interesting contrast can be seen in the performance of Bahujan Samajwadi Party government led by the Dalit leader Mayawati. Her government has focused sharply on building large parks with statues of Dalit leaders while she has ignored issues such as education, school feeding, public employment and other issues that could have a direct economic impact on her support base. Identity issues and pride are seen as critical to her success, while public services can be ignored without any political cost.

effective. Just as the structure of norms tended to become less unequal in Tamil Nadu, common people started getting more influence in politics and in society, and at the same time the social control imposed on common people have tended to reduce appreciably. Together, one could say that the bases of influence have also become less unequal today than it was a century ago.

A century ago the most important bases of influence in rural TN included ownership of land, membership in a higher caste, control of violence, education, being a male, membership in traditional offices including religious offices and dispute resolution bodies. These bases of influence were consistently reflected in my interviews and is also widely acknowledged in literature¹⁰. Most often the distribution of these bases of influence were such that some groups had the largest access to them while most others had little or no access to them. This enabled the elite to sustain institutions that imposed harsh unfreedoms on other groups.

This changed over the last century in a variety of ways. New bases of influence such as government jobs, industry, political parties, and democratic institutions emerged. The old bases of influence like traditional offices lost

¹⁰Beteille (Béteille, 1996) provides the best reading on this issue.

some of their influence in the context of colonisation and independence. As the English East-India Company started taking over administration from the local rulers, it started taking up tax collections by itself. A board of revenue was set up for assessing and collecting taxes. As the company's power started becoming more entrenched, it also started establishing other offices for administering justice, resolving conflicts, etc. Districts were formed in different parts of Madras Province with a 'Collector' as a head. The Collectors combined revenue, judicial and executive functions, and the district administration also included a range of officials going all the way up to the village. As the administrative, judicial, policing and other functions got taken over by the centralised administration, it started undermining local forms of authority traditionally wielded by the local elite.

The loss of influence of the traditional elite in some forms cannot be understood as a democratic change, since these were usurped mainly by the alien imperial administration that would naturally seek to reduce the political voice of local people. The freedom to participate in collective decision making, especially in governance, evolved in a number of ways in this context. With consistent pressure, the alien bureaucracy started permitting local representation starting in 1851. Initially all representatives

were nominated by the government and a small set of elected officials were introduced in 1891.

The elected officials themselves had no powers over finances or other matters of policy. In fact, as a major concession, the bureaucracy allowed the elected officials in 1892 to request for information from the administration over their actions, provided they do so politely. Officials could consider this request, and were not bound to respond to the queries of elected representatives. Even this step made the bureaucracy answerable, but not accountable, to the elected representatives (Markandan, 1964, 37).

This was significantly expanded in 1920 when the number of elected representatives was increased drastically and more powers of decision making were allotted to elected members. By this time only propertied men or graduates were allowed to vote, restricting the political voice of common people. This space was further expanded through the 1930s by the Nationalist and other social movements¹¹. Women's organisations were active at this stage itself and they gained considerable support among all major parties, at least in the Madras Presidency, for women's suffrage¹². The

¹¹There was no expansion of franchise in the 1940s in the context of World War II, and India's independence followed not long after.

¹² Most major parties including the Justice Party, Congress and even the elected representatives sent petitions following a campaign by suffragists demanding women's suffrage. Despite overwhelming support among Indian parties, the British administration

number of women who were eligible for voting increased slowly till 1952 when universal adult suffrage was introduced.

Today, any adult is permitted to run for office and there are also special reservations for marginalised communities in the parliament, state level legislative assemblies, municipalities and Panchayats. This includes reservation of one-fourth of all seats for either SC or ST candidates in parliaments and assemblies and reservation of one-fourth of all seats for women in the Panchayats¹³. There has also been a major campaign in the recent years to reserve 33% of all seats in the Parliament and assemblies for women. Introduction of Panchayats based on elected representatives following India's independence has also contributed to making collective decision making closer to people who live far from centres of power.

In keeping with the expansion of states all over the world, functions of the administration started expanding widely. Expanded functions and resources made the administration even more powerful in comparison with the traditional basis of authority. While the base of influence was changing,

refused to permit women voters till the 1930s. When women contestants were finally permitted, in a symbolic move, Dr. Muthulakshi Reddy was made the co-chairperson of the legislative council, making her the first woman anywhere in the world to occupy such a high elected office.

¹³ In some states like Bihar there is greater reservation of seats for women in Panchayats, now amounting to 50% of all seats.

its distribution across social groups also changed appreciably. If the administration had been captured by the traditional elite, it is likely that a status quo would have been maintained in terms of power relations in the society. With the lower castes capturing political power and with marginalised groups getting greater voice in this process, power equations were altered in Tamil Nadu.

The British policy of ‘divide and rule’ and the idea that there should be no ‘governing classes’ in India to challenge their rule created a political space for lower caste people. The space increased when representative (and later democratic) institutions were gradually introduced. Democratic space made numbers significant and empowered the Backward Castes that are numerically superior in southern India, as in most other parts of the country. Numerical superiority as a base of influence would have been meaningless without organisation, which social movements including caste movements, Dravidian movement and communism provided. They ensured that these political opportunities were used, thus translating the numerical superiority of Backward Castes and Dalits into political influence.

Tamil Nadu has one of the lowest proportions of Brahmins as a state in the country (3% compared to 10% plus in many North Indian states). In a

political system dominated by caste, such numerical inferiority reduced the influence of this powerful caste group when democratic institutions were introduced. Ethnicisation created by the Dravidian movement created numerical superiority among the backward castes and created a competition between numerical superiority and traditional influence. The evolution of democratic space created the same political opportunity for numerically dominant backward castes in most parts of India, but the consolidation of numbers did not happen in North India till much later. It is only since the 1990s, especially following the Mandal Commission recommendations, did the backward caste vote bank become strong in the North, just as it happened in Tamil Nadu from 1920s onwards.

While the communists have had much less success than DMK and other Dravidian parties, its electoral role cannot be ignored in a discussion of policies and institutions in Tamil Nadu. After the Indian Constitution came into effect in 1951, India had the first elections after independence in 1952. Congress party was unable to secure a majority only in three states, the biggest of which was the Madras Presidency (a major portion of which became Tamil Nadu in 1954)¹⁴. Communists were a major force

¹⁴Hyderabad and in Travancore-Cochin (a major part of which became Kerala in 1954) were the other two regions

with 64 seats, with rumours that they were trying to form a government. Significantly, in Tanjore belt and a few other areas, prominent landlords were defeated by Communists who were once their labourers, indicating the possibilities of challenging landed interests using democratic means.

The electoral success of the Communists here should be seen in the larger context. An armed uprising in Telengana by the Communists had alarmed the government and the army was used to suppress the rebellion. In Tamil Nadu and other regions, many communists were armed and there were high profile incidents of Zamindars being forced to vacate their lands. USSR was at its heights of power and the fear of Communist expansion was high. Animosity between the local Congress leaders and the Communists was high, which prompted the banning of the Communist party in 1947, and one of my interviewees who died recently even tried assassinating the Chief Minister around independence. In this overall context, the electoral success of Communists represented a serious threat for the economic elite in Tamil Nadu.

It is in this political context that far sighted measures on education, health, and village infrastructure in general was initiated in Tamil Nadu. The success of the communists posed a threat to landed interests and the

industrialists. Moral challenge against elitism, political competition and other factors outlined earlier created a condition where the government was compelled to do something to gain legitimacy and support of the masses. It is in this context that the Tamil Nadu government started expanding rural infrastructure widely, thus gaining legitimacy without taking tougher measures like land redistribution.

Starting with a coalition government in 1952, political competition has been intense in Tamil Nadu ever after. Despite the fact that Congress party was in power from 1952 to 1967, it did not go unchallenged. It started with a government that was not a majority, and from 1957 it had to face the rising power of DMK, to which it lost ultimately in 1967. DMK split within a few years, and the most popular leader of DMK formed a new party, the ADMK. Since then there has been a constant struggle between the two parties, and in the last decade both of them have had the necessity of relying on smaller parties including the Congress, and various caste-based parties in order to secure power. In the context of intense political competition, it is difficult for any political party to ignore even a small social group in order to secure power. Common people who could have been more easily ignored when parties are unchallenged now got a greater voice in the political system.

Perhaps as a result of all the political movements in this region, the degree of politicisation in the state is very high. This can be seen from many angles. Since independence, voter turnouts in elections have been a high in Tamil Nadu. The voter turnout was above 60 % in the 50s itself and has often gone above the 70% mark, which is very high by any standards across the world¹⁵. Another interesting factor in India at large is that poor people are the predominant voters and tend to vote in much larger proportion than the educated and better off. This naturally has an impact on politics, and the keenness of politicians to respond to the aspirations of common people.

Apart from high voter turnout, Tamil Nadu is also distinguished by a high degree of political information and discussion. In an interesting illustration of political awareness, the Tamil servant maid of a friend who lives in Delhi told me that I could get scholarships for higher education that have been introduced by Karunanathi, the current Chief Minister. She knew of all the major schemes operating in Tamil Nadu despite the fact that she has lived in Delhi for the last 40 years. In sharp contrast, the taxi driver

¹⁵ This is of course not comparable to countries like Australia that have compulsory voting legislations. But by standards of any other country, Tamil Nadu's voter turnout is remarkable.

who drove me up the Himalayas did not know the Chief Minister of his state, Utthrakhand.

As I mentioned earlier, surveys have established that people are highly aware of their entitlements, and it was common for people to refer to the Chief Minister who introduced each scheme. This system is so prevalent that people often refer to the entitlement cards by the name of the Chief Minister who introduced them (e.g. Karunanithi cards for farmers, MGR's eggs in school meals, road laid by certain Panchayat president, and so on). Political parties are represented in almost every village and there are heated political discussions as a way of life. Political posters, slogans, wall writings, flags and other symbols can be found everywhere. Further there is highly politicised media with some of the major parties owning widely read newspapers and television channels. The high degree of awareness about what parties do, provides a compelling reason for political parties to deliver, and it naturally confers greater influence to the voters.

There is also increasing representation of social groups at all levels. Local Dalit leaders in my field recalled how those seeking votes some 30 years ago would not even step into the Dalit habitations, and voting independently itself was a challenge in some places. That has changed widely in

today's context. Dalits got some political space initially with the Congress. The Communist movement too created political space for ordinary Dalits. Dalit space in politics sharply increased after DMK won the election in 1967 and split into two splinter groups a little later. The founder of AIADMK was a very popular actor with a strongly pro poor image and had a large following among Dalits. He consolidated his position among them and in the context of increasing electoral competition, it became imperative for all parties to provide Dalits with political space. At the district level, it is now common to find Dalits occupying second level posts, which would have been inconceivable not long ago. But the positions continue to be second rung, and Dalit politicians complain of having limited influence within the party.

The fieldwork clearly indicated the struggles that had to take place in the process of politicization of the Dalits and others who were outside the pale of political power earlier. Every political symbol, including the hoisting of a political flag, or opening a party office in the Dalit 'Colony' was a struggle to begin with. Even today, there are high profile clashes where the Dalits have been forcibly prevented from occupying positions as Panchayat presidents. The clashes in themselves are an indication of the

changes in the society where those who were left out of the pale of power are now able to demand and get some share of it.

As a result of these processes, politics and politicians have now become far more accessible to the common person residing in the villages. It was not uncommon to see common people meet a representative of one of the major political parties (something that would not have been possible many years ago) on the road and demand favours (e.g. access to some scheme, road facility, etc.). These representatives are in turn are connected to Members of Legislative Assembly, senior officials, and others in influential positions. This network can go a long way in converting people's needs into policy priorities. While such networks have always existed, what has changed is that much larger proportion of people have access to such networks now, thus giving them a voice in the political process.

Politicisation and a well informed public put pressure on parties to deliver their promises, and the government is also sensitive to public opinion on its policies. The bottom line is that in a context of high political competition with a choice of political parties, people have a lot of bargaining power to secure their policies. But this may not happen if they are politically ill-informed or if they merely vote in a block without bargaining. These

conditions have been favourable in Tamil Nadu making the politicians more wary of public opinion and constantly seeking to deliver services in order to win votes. This has been central to sustaining many costly programmes in Tamil Nadu, some of which were withdrawn overnight elsewhere¹⁶.

Access to social networks that are connected to those in positions of power, introduction of democratic institutions that put a premium on numbers, changing social base of political party membership, context of political competition, and increasing organisation of marginalised groups have resulted in significantly greater influence for the common people.

The changing nature of political influence should be seen in the context of broader social changes in Tamil Nadu. There has been almost a dramatic reduction in the level of domination exercised by some social groups over others, arising from a number of sources. It is widely agreed that land is one of the chief sources of power in rural India. Over the last 50 years, large landholders have reduced considerably in the region that I worked in. In the few Blocks I worked in, there are only a handful of people with more than 20 acres of land spread across 100 Panchayats. Further, many large

¹⁶ For example, in 1997 the central government decided to offer subsidized grain through the Public Distribution System selectively to people below poverty line. The targeted system was introduced in all states almost overnight. In Tamil Nadu though, it was withdrawn in just a week since the government knew this would be unpopular and that they would surely lose the next elections if they did so.

landholders do not continue to reside in the village making it impossible for them to exercise day to day control. Though there are huge inequalities in landholding between castes, there are some landowners from most castes, and backward caste people now control a larger proportion of land than before. This trend is not uncommon, according to my informants, in other parts of Tamil Nadu as well.

At the same time, the shift from predominantly agrarian production to an industrial economy considerably weakened the influence of land within villages. Today, Tamil Nadu has close to half its population in urban areas – one of the highest in India. There is also a large spread of small urban areas that are often easily accessible from most villages¹⁷. These give an alternative to villagers when they do not want to succumb to the pressures and oppressions in the village. The manifestations of caste are not as demeaning in the industrial sector as it is in the agricultural fields, and the salaries are more regular. This alternative gives labourers a bargaining power in the villages¹⁸. The urban alternative, and support from relatives in urban areas also enabled a set of youngsters to start protesting against

¹⁷Dr. Nagaraj of Madras Institute of Development Studies brought this to my attention during the early stages of my fieldwork, enabling me to appreciate this dynamic.

¹⁸ Migration has been so severe that there is regular complaint of labour shortage by farmers. In this condition, farmers who employ labourers are more careful about offending labourers who may just decided not to work for them.

those who would have been their main source of employment before.

There have also been other developments including growing mechanisation of agriculture, diversification of crops¹⁹, etc. that have undermined the power of landless labourers. But fragmentation of land, disappearance of large landholders who have a greater control of employment and availability of alternative employment in the industry together have helped in increasing the bargaining power of labourers.

In any society, violence is an important base of influence and it often holds the ultimate key to what norms and rules get enforced. Around India's independence, violent power was mainly in the control of a few elite who were able to use it to enforce their favoured norms. One phrase I heard repeatedly during fieldwork was that any higher caste person could tie a Dalit to a tree and beat him even for minor infractions of norms. Other forms of punishments included making labourers drink cow dung mixed with water (called *Kalli pal*), beating with reinforced ropes, burning houses and destroying reserves of grains. These were commonly practiced till they were challenged in the recent past. The ability of individuals to inflict violence

¹⁹ Since different crops have different times of sowing and harvest, it makes collective action more difficult, since alternative arrangements for labour can be more easily done in this case, than a time when all farmers require labour at the same time.

on the marginalised groups at will combined with the fact that policing and other powers vested with the elite gave them a firm control over the exercise of violence.

I illustrated in the context of Villupuram, collective action by many of the marginalised groups involved strategic efforts to counter the violence inflicted upon them and at times inflict retaliatory violence that balanced the distribution of violence across different social groups. This approach, for example, is reflected in the slogan of Dalit Panther party in Tamil Nadu, “*Adanga maru! Aththu meeru! Thimiri yezhu! Thiruppi adi!*” (refuse to obey, cross the limits, rise up and hit back). There have been other (in)famous Dalit leaders such as John Pandian who have used counter violence against the Caste Hindu communities. One reflection of this assertion can be seen by the fact that there have been many riots between Dalits and backward caste communities in Tamil Nadu. Even though Dalits are typically disproportionately affected by the riots, they have demonstrated that they can mobilise a certain degree of counter violence²⁰.

The quest to balance disproportionate use of violent power against

²⁰There are many accounts of caste based violence in Tamil Nadu. For an overview of major riots in this region see (Manikumar, n.d.). The following works discuss specific ‘iconic’ riots such as the Venmani massacre of Dalit labourers (Appasami, 2004; Sivaraman, 2006), Mudhukuloathor riots between Dalits and Thevars (Chokalingam, n.d.), and recent riots in Southern Tamil Nadu (Narula & Watch, 1999)

marginalised groups was strengthened by the introduction of strong and protective legal framework especially for the Dalits²¹ in the Indian constitution. As organisation among Dalits increased, they were also more able to use this legal framework in order to protect themselves from violence.

Managing violence was not restricted to caste based organisation alone. Class-based organisation by Communists, for example, involved careful efforts to manage violence. Successful organisation required protection for individuals in danger, leaders who have the ability to deal with the police, occasionally striking back an aggressor, and having legal support to deal with court cases that come up in the context of violent clashes.

Finally, it should be remembered that we are in the context of a “modern state” that seeks to appropriate all violence to itself. Though the state has not succeeded in removing instruments of violence from non-state actors entirely, the state has certainly succeeded in appropriating a large share of violence from these actors. Together, all these represent a reduction in the command of violence as a means of control from the hands of a few elite, and distributing them more widely across different groups of the society,

²¹ Laws like Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 provide stiff penalties for violence against Dalits, and where Dalits are organised, there is at least the real threat that it could be invoked against the offenders that makes them cautious about beating Dalits, burning their houses and committing other violent crimes.

or at least across most major caste groups. Without this change in the distribution, the ability to violate oppressive norms or to take up collective action would have been seriously compromised.

While the changes in the political system have expanded the political voice of common people, social changes including land fragmentation, changes in the nature of social violence, diversification of employment opportunities, etc. have reduced the ability of the elite in rural areas to control Dalits and other marginalised communities. This loss of social control made it difficult for the elite to impose drastic unfreedoms that were commonplace earlier. One impact of this loss of control is that it created a space for those who were marginalised to take up collective action without facing violent sanctions. Collective action and organisation among these communities in turn played a critical role in securing them public services, which were forcefully denied to them before.

While collective action resulted in an expansion of public services, such expansion had an impact on collective action in turn. Measures of social protection such as subsidised grains through the Public Distribution System made common people less vulnerable to hunger. Subsidised food makes it possible for a labourer to meet the minimum food needs of the family

with a few days of work, and allows them to take the risk of migrating in search of more lucrative but uncertain jobs. Ensuring that the absolute basics are taken care of quickly can release people's energies to make use of other opportunities in life, as this example illustrates. Needless to say, dependence on others for the most basic needs including food can give others brutal power over those in need. Social arrangements to take care of such vulnerabilities can thus have far reaching consequences in changing the power balance in the society. Social arrangements such as education, health services, reservation policy, employment opportunities for women, etc. have created a cadre of youngsters who are capable of negotiating on behalf of their communities effectively, and thus converting their aspirations into policy priorities.

7.3 Expanding capabilities and freedoms

The changes in norms and influences should be seen in the context of expanding individual capabilities of common people such as incomes and education. While poverty continues to be significant by any account, it has decreased over the last few decades. As I mentioned in the last section,

reduced vulnerability to hunger, ill-health or other basic needs can have a remarkable impact on an individual's freedoms. Increasing literacy and education similarly can result in the ability of people to negotiate complex new systems that require such skills, thus making it possible for them to access various governmental programmes for their benefit.

Increasing individual capabilities along with institutional changes discussed above have dramatic consequences for people's freedoms with an expansion in freedoms such as incomes, education, diversity of employment options, mobility across regions, freedom to participate in collective decision making, participating in public debates, freedom from fear, hunger ill-health, etc. Expanding freedoms, in turn, has positive consequences for human agency, and one manifestation of this is widespread and decentralised collective action in Tamil Nadu.

Such changes enabled common people to influence the process of norm-making and creating a system of influence that supported the norms that they value. As institutions started reflecting the aspirations of a large number of people in the society, they started contributing more towards the well-being of a large section of the population, and thus enable development.

I have argued that groups that have traditionally been marginalised, especially poor people, backward caste people and Dalits have been able to influence institutions in Tamil Nadu, and this explains the widespread provision of public services. Seen in an institutional framework that I have used in this dissertation, the ability of the masses to influence came about in three fundamental ways: One, challenge to deeply unequal norms by powerful social movements. Two, systematic changes in the bases of influence in ways that reduced the domination of marginalised communities by the elite and thus sustain oppressive institutions and three, expansion of basic freedoms for marginalised communities that enabled greater collective action for better institutions. All three factors combined to weaken institutions that prevented people from having the most fundamental freedoms, and strengthened institutions that sought to ensure such freedoms widely across all social groups.

7.4 Conclusion

During my fieldwork on NREGA, it became clear that common people commanded a considerable amount of influence, which ensured that norms that

there were adverse to their interests could not be enforced easily, and they also had the ability to change the norms and rules to suit their aspirations. Individual resistance (often referred to as the uncontrollability of people), and collective action played the critical role of ensuring that the aspirations of common people are taken into account by the institutional structure. Such uncontrollability, and collective action for public services were new phenomena according to my interviewees.

The next two chapters that look at collective action in the region was mainly an enquiry into what is it that could have changed in the system to enable such widespread and decentralised collective action. Looking at collective action from the period before India's independence till today helped in understanding different factors that enable collective action in its form today: I have summarised it as reducing inequalities in norms & influences, and an expansion of the substantial capabilities of common people. The digression into a history of collective action was unanticipated, but it provided the clue to how people are able to influence the functioning of public services today, including the NREGA.

A look into Tamil Nadu's political and social history is of particular relevance and interest today. Large parts of North India are now follow-

ing the footsteps of Tamil Nadu in terms of political empowerment of the backward caste people, and the Dalits. Going beyond Tamil Nadu, a Dalit woman has now become the Chief Minister with a secure majority in Uttar Pradesh. From what I hear, this political change is accompanied by a social change in terms of the restrictions faced by common people, especially the Dalits. The current Chief Minister of Bihar, reputed to be one of the worst governed states in India, is now working hard to convey that he could deliver on the ground, and this is seen as an important step to retain political power. All these have a resonance with Tamil Nadu's recent past.

While there is an increase in the ability of common people to influence the system, there has been a simultaneous development with "The Market" becoming predominant in the social space. It is a social space that seeks to prioritise the interests of a certain class in the process of arguing that any other institutional arrangement will be detrimental to the interests of common people. It is a powerful idea, but one that may come into conflict with democratic aspirations²². This will be one in the defining conflicts of the decades to come, and I hope that my learning from Tamil Nadu will help me (and hopefully others) understand the changes in North India better.

²²I carefully use the word 'may' given the fact that common people could come to subscribe neo-liberal ideas, in which case there would be no democratic conflict.

If there is one lesson to carry forward from Tamil Nadu, it is that there are many paths to improve the well being of those who are marginalised today. Protecting people from violence, providing social arrangements to fulfil their aspirations, making legal changes to make democratic participation more effective, making the system of reservation equitable, expanding employment opportunities closer to home, and a slew of other measures to expand people's freedoms. Ensuring the substantive freedoms of all, and reducing inequalities in the key bases of influence in a society are the most reliable routes to creating institutions for development, and one major way of doing so is to expand the provision of public services and other social arrangements to those who are left behind in the society today.

Mahatma Gandhi once said that his ideas were as old as the mountains. I recognise that the ideas for changed mentioned above are not novel. But old insights are worth a repetition in the new context; and in a competitive world of ideas, I hope my repetitions will serve a purpose. Thank you for reading.

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