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**AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AND
DALITS:
POLITICAL REPRESENTATION
IN PANCHAYATS**

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Abstract

While reservations of seats in the panchayats have provided political space to Dalits, this has not been translated into effective power, partly due to their recent entry into electoral politics, and the continuing dominance of individuals from groups higher in the social hierarchy. While overt discrimination is not often found, Dalits in Karnataka do not function as equals to representatives of higher castes. Likewise in Kerala, caste as a factor in political relations though less overt, is significant. Reservations have given political representation to Dalits, but their participation is constrained by the existing social structure.

Dalits in Panchayats, Social Exclusion and Affirmative Action

Dalits¹ have faced considerable discrimination in the past and still do so in several spheres of social life. While the state has embarked on economic development, and, in fact, has succeeded in raising the economic levels of many people, i.e. above poverty, many Dalits are still poor, and form a large proportion of those below the poverty level (Nambissan 1996; Pinto 2000; Radhakrishnan 2002).² The need for specific measures to address these problems had also been recognized for a fairly long period of time, even before Indian Independence (see Charsley and Karanth 1998). Important measures include reservations of seats in educational institutions (see Chalam 1990), in jobs, and in political institutions. The objectives of these reservations have been to both compensate for past indignities, as well as to provide support to overcome present handicaps (Mendelsohn 1986; Kumar 1992; Nadkarni 1997).³ What may still be stated, however, is that while some people have benefited and have been able to raise their socio-economic status, a substantial number of Dalits have remained in poverty, and also still face various forms of

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deprivation (see Yadav 2003).⁴ Thus, the somewhat extreme expectation that the reservation of seats will result in 'equality' between castes is not manifested at present. Dalits, who have been considered as being at the lower end of the social hierarchy, have endured indignities and lack of opportunities in many fields. There is little doubt that without reservations the political space available to certain groups, and particularly to those of the Scheduled Castes, would be minimal.

The present paper examines some issues that are related to the presence of Dalits in the panchayats, and the reservation question. The usual situation is that the number of reserved seats is actually filled by Dalits. However, having occupied these seats does not automatically confer any high degree of power to the incumbents of elected positions (Inbanathan 2000). The power that the incumbent of a panchayat position holds also depends on the social standing and other attributes that are more individual in orientation, rather than based only on their caste identity. Much of the data for our analysis is from Karnataka, while some comparative material is from Kerala, and illustrations on certain issues are also from other states.⁵

Representatives of the panchayats have been considered as the first level of political leadership, and that with all their shortcomings, panchayats could be considered as the 'training grounds' for political leaders. What needs to be noted is that, since representatives to the grama panchayats to a greater extent than the taluk and zilla panchayats, have members who have entered politics for the first time, many of whom are functioning for the first time in the public sphere, they may not at first be able to function with sufficient skills in political institutions. Having said this, there should also be the opportunity for people to not only build their skills and experience, but also to be able to function as elected representatives for a longer period than just one term. In the present circumstances, for many of the panchayat representatives, being in politics is a one-time affair, and they revert to being non-political entities once their term as representatives is over. However, this is more common in the grama panchayats of Karnataka, and among specific groups such as women, who were not inclined towards politics when they contested for elections. There were more men from the taluk and zilla panchayats in Karnataka, and the panchayats of Kerala who choose to remain in politics even if they did not contest in each successive elections.

The situation of the Dalits may be considered in terms of social exclusion, 'the process through which individuals or groups are wholly or

partially excluded from full participation in the society within which they live'.⁶ Social exclusion on the basis of caste is not only entailed at birth, but overcoming such exclusion is also far more difficult to achieve. To some extent social engineering through affirmative action has enabled Dalits to get educated, find jobs and also have representation in political institutions such as the panchayats (see Nayak 1995; also Osborne 2001). While Dalits faced considerable discrimination in the past, it was a situation where they embodied what Fraser described as 'bivalent collectivities' in which economic disadvantage is bound up with cultural-valuational disadvantage (Fraser in Kabeer 2000). In the ordinary course of the manner in which the caste system works in India, it would not be easy to change social practices, particularly those which include interaction between castes in different positions of the social hierarchy. Affirmative action [Galanter (1991) called it "compensatory discrimination"]⁷ seeks to make such changes possible, to improve the life chances of those in conditions of deprivation. The introduction of affirmative action for Dalits is based on the premise that without it, the people who have faced discrimination for generations, would not be able to raise themselves to a level where such discrimination would cease to exist (see for example, Gupta 1997). The idea here is that through reservations, it is possible to improve the social condition of those in disadvantaged groups, facing acute deprivations, but there is no suggestion that affirmative action alone will be able to remove entirely or eliminate the discrimination and deprivation that have been part of the Dalit experience. Along with the cultural disabilities there is also the fact that a substantial proportion of the Dalits are extremely poor (see Thorat 2000; Aziz et. al 2000). There is the possibility that with improvement in their economic condition, the social disabilities which they faced would be reduced, and this is sometimes borne out in improved living conditions, and a lowering of the stigma which is associated with being Dalits (see for example, Saberwal 1973). But this may be more pertinent in the urban context than in the rural situation [atrocities, for instance are more often reported from rural areas than in urban areas (see Assadi and Rajendran 2000)]. The further indications of improvement in the condition of some Dalits, who were from disadvantaged families, but through reservations in education and occupation, have been able to rise to the position of 'elites' (see Inbanathan 2001) is evidence of the impact, however limited, of affirmative action.

Dealing essentially with deprivation, social exclusion is related to poverty, inequality and disadvantage (de Haan 1998). It takes into consideration economic, social and political aspects of deprivation. The

concept overlaps with poverty when, for example, Townsend defines poverty as including both material and social deprivation (Bhalla and Lapayre 1997, p.417). Lack of resources as also social ties to various institutions, result in reduced participation in decision making. Political aspects of social exclusion involve restrictions on participation and exercise of political power. Social exclusion also implies that there are certain "primary goods" as Rawls has called them, ".....that is the same basic rights, liberties, and opportunities, and the same all purpose means such as income and wealth, with all of these supported by the same bases of self-respect"(Rawls 1996, p. 180). Excluding people from any of these social goods indicates a form of exclusion. Indicating that social exclusion entails some form of deprivation, is also included in the analysis of Sen (2000) who emphasized capabilities and entitlements, the important fact being not only what poor people possess, but what it enables them to do. While poverty seems to be a crucial aspect of social exclusion, we do not choose to consider the situation of Dalits only in the context of poverty. Although many of the Dalits would find themselves in the group of the less than affluent, in an overall context of deprivations in the social and political spheres—where economic factors may be influential in the manner in which Dalits can conduct themselves— the years of deprivation have made it that much more difficult for Dalits to overcome these deprivations except through means of affirmative action. An additional aspect in social exclusion is the involuntary nature of exclusion, i.e. where someone who wants to participate in certain social activities is prevented from doing so (see Barry 1998; also Basu 1999).

The Constitution 73rd Amendment Act 1992 on the Panchayats, has affirmed that seats in all panchayats should be reserved for Scheduled Castes and Tribes, in proportion to their population in each area of the panchayat. One-third of these seats have been reserved for women. Further, reservations have also been provided for the executive positions in the panchayats (i.e. chairpersons of the panchayats) in the same proportion as the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe population in the state. One third of these positions also have been reserved for women. All these reserved positions are allotted to different constituencies by rotation. In Kerala, the proportion of seats reserved for Scheduled Castes is just about 10%.⁸ Reservations of one-third of the seats for women has also been made. Reservations for Scheduled Tribes is a very modest proportion, in keeping with their population size. But no further reservations have been made, for any other group. In Karnataka, although the required proportion of reserved seats is one third for women, and according to the population of SCs in the state (16.4%; the Scheduled Tribe population is 4.3%, Census of India 1991) the proportion of seats

actually occupied by groups which have reservations provided for them is marginally higher than the required number of seats.⁹ In Kerala, the proportion of seats actually occupied by SCs and women, for example, has been close to the required number of reserved seats. Thus, SCs in Kerala panchayats are 11.2% in gram panchayats, 11.5% in block panchayats and 10.7% in district panchayats. Among presidents, members of Scheduled Castes occupy 9.89% of the posts in gram panchayats, 9.9% in block panchayats, and 7.1% in district panchayats (lower than the required proportion).¹⁰ The Scheduled Tribe population in Kerala is 1.1%, and the number of reserved seats in the panchayats is just over this figure.

Table 1. Scheduled Caste Representatives in the Panchayats of Karnataka

	Grama Panchayats	Taluk Panchayats	Zilla Panchayats
Members	14871 (80073)	583 (3255)	158 (890)
Presidents	1033 (5659)	32 (175)	5 (27)
Vice Presidents	1033 (5659)	32 (175)	5 (27)

Source: Rural Development & Panchayath Raj Department, Annual Report 2000-2001. Figures in parentheses indicate the total number of seats

Table 2. Scheduled Caste Representatives in the Panchayats of Kerala

	Gram Panchayats	Block Panchayats	District Panchayats
Members	1487 (13259)	188 (1638)	33 (307)
Presidents	98 (991)	15 (152)	1 (14)

Figures in parentheses indicate the total number of seats
Source: Government of Kerala.

It has been remarked that the reaction to reservations of seats for the Scheduled Castes has been far less controversial than those for the backward classes. A possible answer, as indicated by Mendelsohn (1986, p. 501), is that even after many years of reservations of seats for the Scheduled Castes (for education and jobs), these have been less than effective, and the relative prosperity of middle and upper castes in comparison to the Scheduled Castes has remained more or less the same. A more recent observation, specifically in the context of the panchayats, of Lieten and Srivastava (1999), is remarkably similar to that of Mendelsohn. Based on the panchayats of Uttar Pradesh following the enactment of the 73rd Amendment, they (Lieten and Srivastava) found that most respondents of the villages in their study were not against

reservations as such, though there were also a few who opposed caste-based reservations. These authors suggested that there was no great opposition to the reservations because the Scheduled Castes had very little access to power. Scheduled Castes, in the perception of the upper castes as well as Scheduled Castes themselves, did not participate to any noticeable extent in the functioning of the panchayats and their (SC representatives) influence on the panchayats was limited. There was greater opposition to the reservation of the post of pradhan (for Scheduled Castes), to the extent that some of the respondents even suggested that this "would lead to an inversion of the natural social order"¹¹ and is therefore objectionable. However, even here, the opposition to these reservations was subdued. This was based on their perception that Scheduled Caste pradhans did not really have power to function independently, but had to carry out the wishes of their upper caste mentors (Lieten and Srivastava 1999: 251-2). Lieten also provides information about other panchayats which had only the pradhans of the upper castes active in managing the panchayats, while most members are only nominally representatives of the panchayats (Lieten 1996). More information on the panchayats in UP suggests that although changes have occurred in recent years, they have not brought about any drastic transformation of rural society following the introduction of reservations in the panchayats, after the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. Pai (2000) indicated a considerable political and economic advancement of SCs. She later even suggested (2001, p. 649) that "...jats taking advantage of the reservations provided and their numerical majority have been able to gain control of the panchayat bodies." However, her own observations seem to be less than completely consistent, and she (p. 650) indicated that the functioning of the SCs, and the pradhan, was with the approval of the local jats. This demonstrates that their numbers have not given them overwhelming or even independent decision-making power—though one may accept that their present situation is not only different from their earlier condition, but has also given them some scope for involvement in political activities. Some of Pai's conclusions have been disputed in another study in Uttar Pradesh (Jeffery et al 2001), where it has been suggested that far from being dominant, the SCs in panchayats (despite their numbers) still need the approval and consent of the local jats, before being able to carry out panchayat programmes. Further the SCs cannot divert funds from the panchayat to serve the interests of their own castes. To therefore suggest that SCs control certain panchayats by their numbers, as indicated by Pai, is an exaggeration, in their view. The still existing power in the local

context (for example with the police) is with the rich landholders among the jats, rather than the Scheduled Castes.¹² Pai has also not taken into consideration the role of the local bureaucrats who still maintain sufficient discretion despite the decentralisation that has been put in place (Jeffery et al, pp. 221-25).

While there is no disputing the fact that the seats reserved for Dalits in the panchayats have almost entirely been filled, by members of Scheduled Castes, the questions that need to be discussed are related to how these numbers have had an impact on the situation of Dalits as regards power sharing in the panchayats, the choices available to Dalits regarding their representatives, and the functioning of these representatives in the panchayats. We see their representation in terms of whether the election of Dalits in the panchayats has been followed by their interests being sufficiently well represented. In the course of this discussion, I will discuss discrimination that they may face, as well as the social exclusion that is still operative in the functioning of the Dalits in the panchayats—notwithstanding the reservations of seats.

Elections to the Panchayats

We have begun our discussion on the situation of representatives of the Scheduled Castes by considering the process of elections (in Karnataka) to the panchayats, in February 2000 to grama panchayats, and in June 2000 to the taluk and zilla panchayats. The later discussion takes into account the functioning of the panchayats before the elections of 2000, since our study covered the period when the elected representatives had already almost completed their five-year tenure. Thus, while the study could not be synchronized with the chronological sequence of events, members (not all) who had been in the panchayats for nearly a full term were able to articulate more knowledgeably about the functions of the panchayats.¹³ While the districts covered for the most part of the study were Mandya, Dakshina Kannada and Gulbarga, for the election part of the study, we covered not only these three districts, but also Shimoga, Uttara Kannada and Belgaum.

At the outset, it should be noted that 'discrimination' as such is not really a major problem in the sense of Dalits being able to get elected to the seats reserved for the Dalits. Since it is a mandatory requirement, and not transferable to other groups,¹⁴ we do not normally find Dalits being prevented from occupying these seats, although this is not to say that we are not aware of a few instances where no one occupied the president's post.

910 panchayat in Mandya district, where the seats were auctioned (ostensibly to raise funds for a temple construction). Regardless of the 'good cause' involved in this instance, the seats were auctioned at different rates for different constituencies. For instance, general seats cost about Rs. 20,000/- ('contested' only by men), BCM(W) seats cost Rs. 6000/-, while for the seats reserved for Scheduled Castes (men) cost Rs. 3500/-.¹⁵ There was a recognition also of the economic position of Scheduled Castes in the amount that was expected for the Scheduled Caste seats. This practice obviously favours the economically well-off candidates rather than the poorer people, vitiating the principle involved in the reservation of seats, or even of democracy. Of the grama panchayats seats in the state, 26.5% were elected unopposed,¹⁶ and a substantial number were from the Scheduled Castes, though we are not able to clearly indicate the total

Issues of some importance include the fact that the constituencies may be reserved for members of specific groups, but the electorate could comprise (and usually does) different groups—not only members of the group for which the reservation has been made. A democratic political system, such as the panchayats profess to be, requires that the people of the villages have both, a choice of candidates to be their representatives, and people who are sufficiently able and willing to discharge their responsibilities towards their constituencies, whoever comprise the actual groups forming these constituencies. The constituencies of the grama panchayats comprise 400 people, and very often, members of one caste or the other were almost the entire population of the constituency. Thus, if there are no reservations for any particular group, then members of the same caste will contest for the seat. If the seat is reserved for the group which forms the majority, such as SC, then the candidates will be from this group. However, if the seat is reserved for a group which does not form any recognizable majority or even comprise a significant number, then the chances of winning of any person from this group will depend on other factors. For example, an understanding could be reached between the majority groups in two different constituencies, in which case the persons who form the majority in that place would vote for a minority candidate (enabling him/her to win), while the same would be done in the other village or constituency. This pattern was seen in several places, to suggest that this was a recognized means by which the caste groups and candidates were able to circumvent the requirements of the system of rotation in the reservations—where the constituencies were not reserved for the same group in successive elections. This form of 'exchange' was seen most often in grama panchayats, where the constituencies were small. The 'exchange' practices were less common in the larger constituencies of the taluk panchayats and zilla panchayats, where political parties put up their official candidates. Parties, however, kept several factors in view including the person's political credentials (or that of his/her family), contacts within the political parties, their wealth, or payment to party officials who acted as brokers (Inbanathan and Gopalappa 2003). Whatever be the actual factors involved in their selection, or the weightage given to specific factors in each individual case, the fact remains that reserved seats had to be filled only by persons from the group for which the seat was reserved. Hence, parties have some limitations on whom they can put up as their party candidate.

That members of the Scheduled Castes too have to pay out some money to get elected is particularly well illustrated in a grama

panchayat in Mandya district where the seats were auctioned (ostensibly to raise funds for a temple construction). Regardless of the 'good cause' involved in this instance, the seats were auctioned at different rates for different constituencies. For instance, general seats cost about Rs. 20,000/- ('contested' only by men), BCM(W) seats cost Rs. 6000/-, while for the seats reserved for Scheduled Castes (men) cost Rs. 3500/-.¹⁵ There was a recognition also of the economic position of Scheduled Castes in the amount that was expected for the Scheduled Caste seats. This practice obviously favours the economically well-off candidates rather than the poorer people, vitiating the principle involved in the reservation of seats, or even of democracy. Of the grama panchayats seats in the state, 26.5% were elected unopposed,¹⁶ and a substantial number were from the Scheduled Castes, though we are not able to clearly indicate the total numbers involved over the state, since we have detailed information only for small areas.

In grama panchayats, their location within the villages, enabled the local elites to have greater control over the selection of candidates in these constituencies. The selection of the candidates was not just a question of selecting the best candidate in the opinion of the local leaders or elites. Indications in many parts of the state suggested that the selection of candidates was not on the basis of their relative competence or experience, but the *lack* of such competence or experience. The clear indication was that the weaker candidates in each group were selected, and the Scheduled Castes fell well within such groups which were often dominated by individuals of castes higher to them. In these circumstances, the candidates were under some obligation to the leaders/local elites, who then controlled how they functioned in the panchayat. The possibility of the dominance of the elites¹⁷ was made easier, in my view, by the reservation system itself, which makes it necessary for the seats to be reserved for different groups in each successive election. The same persons were often not eligible to contest in their home constituencies, and they chose not to contest if they felt their chances of winning were low. Thus, a very high proportion of representatives in the grama panchayats were first time representatives and with a complete lack of political experience of any kind—making it easier to be dominated by the village elites (see Inbanathan 1999).¹⁸ In the event of an electoral contest, election expenses were met by these elites. On other occasions, the elections were facilitated by removing any opposition to the candidate being sponsored by a member of the local elite. Thus, not only did the members of the elite save on campaign expenditure, but were able to get their own candidate elected without any opposition. If more than

one member of the elites was involved in the political context, then some understanding was reached in terms of seat sharing.

An aspect which needs to be considered involves the kinds of patronage that are manifested in the panchayats. While patron-client relations are particularly important in the context of the panchayats, and are more prominent in the grama panchayats, it is also to be noted that SC representatives were almost always among the clients rather than among the patrons. This raises several pointers about the relative lack of high positions among the Scheduled Castes. Patrons were local leaders or elites, who were able to sponsor candidates, and help them get elected. Clients were also very often selected for their lack of importance, and were mostly those who can be easily manipulated and controlled. The higher tiers also had patron-client relationships among the SC representatives and others, but this type of relationships seemed to decrease as we went higher in the panchayat hierarchy, where neo-clientelism and relations of a more equal nature developed. But in the context of political standing where most Scheduled Caste members were weak in terms of being able to build up political support, they were dependent on the local elites to get elected. The involvement of caste elders (SC) did not significantly affect the role of the elites who were also able to influence these elders.

Elections to the taluk and zilla panchayats were somewhat different from what we observed in the grama panchayats. While in grama panchayats local elites played a crucial role in the selection of candidates, taluk and zilla panchayats candidates were selected through the intervention of elites (though not so much by village/local elites as such, but by the party elite), as well as political contacts, and often through payment of money. The overt presence¹⁹ of political parties meant that party leaders were involved in the selections (e.g. MLAs, MPs, district party presidents) in an official capacity as party functionaries. In grama panchayats, party functionaries were involved, and, local leaders were often also party functionaries, but there was every indication that the local leaders were perceived (by village people) as local elite/leaders, rather than members of any specific party. Candidates to the taluk and zilla panchayats were expected to show that they had some political presence, or were from a political family, or had sufficient political contacts with party officials. However, this by itself may not be enough. There did not appear to be significant variations between the Scheduled Caste candidates and persons from other castes in this context. The importance of high party officials cannot be overstated, and they exercised

considerable considerable discretion in the selection of candidates. Thus, even here, the indications were that 'patrons' were crucial in selections, as with the grama panchayats, though in these panchayats the party identity was much more evident.

Scheduled Caste Representatives and Political Participation

In the panchayats of Karnataka, caste identity is significant, first of all, for an individual to get elected. The state has reservations for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Women, and OBCs.²⁰ One way or the other, nearly 70% of the seats are reserved for groups perceived as disadvantaged. In the case of the OBCs, caste is not the only factor, income is also considered before a person is declared eligible to contest for the panchayat seats.

People of Scheduled Castes constitute a significant number not only in the total population but this has been translated into an equivalent proportion of the seats that are reserved. In a democratic system, this would be a significant number to form a 'bloc' that can exercise political 'clout'.²¹ Based on the reservation system, SC representatives are found in almost all panchayats (about 17% in Karnataka's panchayats and approximately 11% in Kerala's panchayats).²² That the SC members of the panchayats do not exert any noticeable influence or possess enough power to effect decisions, has been noted in the panchayats of our study. The main reason that their numbers do not translate into political power is that the Scheduled Castes do not form one bloc for the whole state, but are only small numbers in each panchayat. Inasmuch as the individual panchayats are often dominated by other individuals (not SCs) whether these members work in concert or not, the people of Scheduled Castes do not exert much influence in the panchayat of which they are members. One should also note the obvious fact that 17% of the seats in panchayats still leaves 83% for other groups. In Kerala, 89% of the seats were occupied by those not of the Scheduled Castes. That the Scheduled Caste members possess low influence or power²³ is illustrated by a case of a member in the Bangalore Rural Zilla Panchayat who is quite wealthy, but still has little power or influence due to the dominance of a minister. While other members also fall into the same category of the dominated, this does not improve the situation of the Scheduled Caste representatives. Most of the members from the Scheduled Caste background among the Karnataka panchayat members are in far lower positions in economic terms than the member described above, but share in the same relative

powerlessness. Most of the women representatives were not really functioning as representatives or as actual political functionaries. They were 'represented' if one could so describe it, by male members of their families, or local elites²⁴ or leaders, or other political functionaries—and thus, the panchayat representatives themselves were only nominal representatives.²⁵ N1314Contracts which were awarded by the zilla panchayats were made through the intervention of zilla panchayat members who could choose the contractors who were to carry out these projects. Through this measure, rent seeking was also facilitated, with estimates usually being above what may have been reasonable, to accommodate kickbacks to representatives and others. We should revert to the earlier example of the minister dominating the zilla panchayat. He was a powerful political functionary, and even in the matter of allotting contracts usually directed zilla panchayat members to give them (the contracts) to specific individuals, and more often to his supporters and members of his own caste. Scheduled Caste members were usually less influential in the functioning of the panchayat itself (for example in the meetings, and in choosing common development programmes for the district, or for allocation of funds for specific programmes).²⁹

While we observed the greater influence of political experience and contacts in the functioning and participation of elected representatives, there is also the indication that education (or to be more exact, the lack of it) plays some role in the degree of participation that we perceived in the panchayats. However, we have to be very cautious in gauging the levels of participation only in terms of education, since several factors were involved in the participation of representatives. In a very broad sense we can see that the members of the grama panchayats were the least educated (with the majority of Scheduled Caste members being among the lowest in terms of education), while members of the higher tiers had a relatively better education. How this impinges on the participation of the panchayat members is not easy to gauge as a one to one relationship. For example there were some indications (and these were also the views of the representatives themselves) that ordinary members did not feel particularly hampered in their participation even if they were illiterate (though they admitted that they would have preferred to be educated), and were able to participate in discussions and meetings of the panchayats. Presidents, on the other hand, were certainly handicapped by poor education. A woman grama panchayat president (from the Scheduled Castes) in Mandya district was not able to indicate whether she was supported by any political party for her elections, though she claimed a party did so. Finally she said it was the Congress (I) party which paid her election expenses, and thus, she was supported by the Congress(I), and we can conclude that she was at least a nominal member of this party. She was also illiterate,¹² and a nominal president of the panchayat, which was run by other members of the grama panchayat.³⁰ So while it is not being said that education is an absolute requirement to contest for elections, or even of political participation, there is a definite reason to suggest that education would enable representatives to be more effective participants in the panchayats. What we can say, based on the information gathered in the three districts (Mandya, Dakshina Kannada and Gulbarga), is that a lack of education (possibly in conjunction with lack of political experience) seems to make it far more easy for the elites to take over the functions of the panchayats (through the relative inactivity of most of the illiterate persons).

Election time is when Scheduled Caste elders or community

Co1516districts, which otherwise differ on several grounds, including the composition of the panchayats in terms of castes and religion. Even differences such as education (where Dakshina Kannada has a better position) do not show any major difference in the participation of the members of different castes. Dakshina Kannada also has less extremes in land ownership than many of Karnataka's districts (see Deshpande and Raju 2001), which also implied lower economic disparities between groups in rural society. But, this also did not seem to benefit SCs in terms of decision making powers. Not just that participation was dominated by a few individuals in each panchayat, but they were also perceived to be individuals with power—those who could be crucial in effecting specific decisions of the panchayats.

Dalits have also been able to occupy positions of president and vice president of certain panchayats (reservations for both president and vice presidents have been provided for in Karnataka, while in Kerala only the president's post has reservations for Scheduled Castes—in keeping with the 73rd Amendment), with reservations in the same proportion as for ordinary seats. Occupying nearly a fifth of the presidents' posts has not given prominence to the Dalits, also because they were often not the persons actually managing the functions of the panchayats as the *de facto* presidents. Our cases of Dalit presidents are not sufficient to make any major pronouncements, but they are suggestive of a certain kind of functioning. As nominal presidents, the actual functions of president were taken up by other representatives, or a member of the elites, or primarily through the efforts of the officials attached to the panchayats (such as secretary in the case of grama panchayats, or Executive Officers of the taluk panchayats; our cases did not include any Dalit president of the zilla panchayats). The dominance by other individuals was particularly pronounced in the grama panchayats, and more so when the post was occupied by a Dalit woman. On the other hand, in a case where a Dalit male was president of the grama panchayat, the person concerned was illiterate, but by no means completely unaware of political facts, or even lacking in political experience. By all accounts (of other representatives of the panchayat), he did exactly what the local landlords of a particular caste told him to do, which he strenuously denied. In the case of a Dalit woman president, the entire function of the president was carried out by somebody else, and she was expected only to put her thumb impression at the appropriate places. In another grama panchayat, the Dalit woman president did not do anything in the panchayat as president, and the Vice President, a person with some experience and ability, functioned as the *de facto* president. The president considered the Vice President as the president, and was quite happy to do whatever he told her to do. The VP, in turn, was content to continue doing what a president was expected to do, and with the title of Vice President. In an unusual situation (of virtually complete harmony), the panchayat members were also content to have this manner of functioning continue, with the Vice President, respected by all, doing the necessary work.

In Kerala, caste as a defining principle, either in the elections or in the functioning of the panchayats seems to be in a more subdued form than in Karnataka, though it is still significant.³² The intervening factor of political parties is far more visible in Kerala—and particularly the impact of leftist parties (in the context of reducing the overt significance of caste). While in Karnataka, the influence of local elites was particularly noticeable in the functioning of the grama panchayats, in Kerala, the party (more specifically the leftist parties) reduced the influence of local

contest for elections, or even of political participation, there is a definite reason to suggest that education would enable representatives to be more effective participants in the panchayats. What we can say, based on the information gathered in the three districts (Mandya, Dakshina Kannada and Gulbarga), is that a lack of education (possibly in conjunction with lack of political experience) seems to make it far more easy for the elites to take over the functions of the panchayats (through the relative inactivity of most of the illiterate persons).

Election time is when Scheduled Caste elders or community leaders played a more prominent role than otherwise. They were involved in deals with other community members or local political leaders, to share seats, and also to work out political support (votes) to be cast for different candidates. There were also occasions when panchayat seats were divided, based on the decisions and collective bargaining of community elders and others. This, at times, also obviated the need to have any elections at all, i.e. these candidates were 'elected unopposed'.

There was little indication that the SC representatives were able to exert any concerted force to get further benefits for their own groups, articulate the interests of the Scheduled Castes, or assert that Scheduled Castes should have a more decisive position in the functioning of the panchayats. Individuals were able to say what they wanted, which was heard with varying degrees of interest by the other representatives, but at the end, their voices were not converted into any decisions of the panchayats. For instance, even in zilla panchayats of Karnataka (where representatives were generally of a higher educational level, and relatively more members had political experience behind them) Scheduled Caste representatives were often told to "wait" for a while, before they were allowed to speak. The period of waiting was usually much longer than the time needed to let someone else finish speaking.

Scheduled Caste representatives of all three tiers of the panchayats and all three districts of our study were more or less agreed that important decisions were taken after a few prominent members spoke about them, and these persons pushed the other representatives into agreeing to their suggestions. Actual decisions were subsequently endorsed by the rest of the representatives (comprising different castes), which persuaded some representatives into thinking that that they were consulted before the decisions were made. The clear indication, however, was that a few dominant individuals were able to push through what they thought was the right thing to be done in the panchayats.³¹ What we should indicate here are the similarities that were found in all three

districts, which otherwise differ on several grounds, including the composition of the panchayats in terms of castes and religion. Even differences such as education (where Dakshina Kannada has a better position) do not show any major difference in the participation of the members of different castes. Dakshina Kannada also has less extremes in land ownership than many of Karnataka's districts (see Deshpande and Raju 2001), which also implied lower economic disparities between groups in rural society. But, this also did not seem to benefit SCs in terms of decision making powers. Not just that participation was dominated by a few individuals in each panchayat, but they were also perceived to be individuals with power—those who could be crucial in effecting specific decisions of the panchayats.

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Seats reserved for those of the Scheduled Castes were filled by Scheduled Caste members, but an interesting variation was noticed between Kerala and Karnataka. In Kerala, seats reserved for Scheduled Castes were sometimes contested by women against male candidates. We have little information about how widespread this phenomenon may be over the whole state, and have a few cases only from some parts of the State. In Karnataka, seats reserved for Scheduled Castes were contested by men, and rarely (we came across only one instance) did women contest against men for these reserved seats. What is also important in the Kerala situation is that not only do women contest against men for panchayat seats, but are also able to win the elections. This was noticed, for example in Kozhikode, where leftist parties put up women candidates to contest seats reserved for Scheduled Castes (but not reserved for women). These women candidates were persons of some standing, such as school teachers, or those who had been active in party work.

While the person eligible to contest (in Kerala) for the reserved

seat has to belong to a specific group, and the caste identity of the person is crucial in the case of seats reserved for Scheduled Castes, both leftist and Congress parties try to put up representatives with some ability and experience (political and administrative) if they can find such candidates among their party members. The competition between the two coalitions, UDF and LDF, led by the Congress (I) and the CPI(M) respectively, is very close in terms of political support over the state, and therefore, these parties tend to be involved to a greater extent in the functioning of the panchayats. However, this is not to say that party candidates are always as experienced and able as political representatives and as administrators. Lack of experience has been indicated by several of the Scheduled Caste representatives as a crucial factor in their not being able to function effectively as representatives. Women were more often the ones who were less experienced, and also more dependent on others to function as panchayat representatives. Two gram panchayats in our study had Scheduled Caste presidents, and both were men. One of them was from a Leftist party and the other was from the Congress led coalition (UDF). Neither was remarkable for any high standing in terms of ability (we have to depend on the remarks of other members of both the parties) but it did not seem that caste as a factor was in any way significant in undermining their status. Caste feelings were certainly visible in comments from other members (not from these two panchayats) who had observed that, thanks to the reservations, the Scheduled Caste members get everything with minimal effort. "What do the SCs know?" was another question frequently posed to suggest that while others have to be selected as candidates on the basis of some degree of merit, Scheduled Caste candidates did not need to match the standards required in the case of other groups.

Being elected by itself does not give the representatives the possibility of making a greater impact on the functioning of the panchayats. For example, the Sectoral Committee for Scheduled Caste Development has a Scheduled Caste person as chairman, as well as other members who are also from the Scheduled Castes. The committee decides on how the money from the Scheduled Caste Component Fund should be utilized, and the programmes which should be taken up. One would assume that this facility gives Scheduled Castes a significant role in the functioning of the panchayat. However, this is not always so, as for example in a gram panchayat where the Sectoral Committee chairman was more or less controlled by the Development Standing Committee Chairman who was the UDF convener from the Cong (A). The fact was that the SC chairman was relatively inexperienced, whereas the Cong (A) member had been in

politics for several years, and was also backed by party support due to his political connections. In the ordinary course of the panchayat's activities, it was usually a few panchayat representatives who carried out the work of the panchayats, and the others did relatively little. An explanation to account for most of such cases was that the candidates that the political parties put up at the elections (for seats not reserved for women) were usually men who had been in the party for some time, and had been involved in various political activities of the party. Hence, they were able to participate more effectively in the functioning of the panchayats. Discrimination as such, based on caste identities was not openly manifested in Kerala, though in Karnataka, there were a few instances where caste considerations were effective in preventing Scheduled Castes from functioning as panchayat presidents (at the grama panchayat level), and there were also a few instances, where SCs were discouraged from contesting for even the reserved (for SCs) seat of president.

Discussion and Conclusion

The reservations/affirmative actions that have been made available to the Dalits has undoubtedly given them more political space than they would have had otherwise. There is also no doubt that the rural social structure has an impact on the functioning of the Dalits even though they now occupy political positions. Social exclusion implies that certain groups are denied access to some resources, thus making them poor, or that they do not have political rights, which makes them less than participant in the political activities of the society. Ancient Greeks, who are often credited with being among the first to function as a 'democracy' also simultaneously denied the right to political participation to a significant part of their society. Modern democracy does not restrict so many groups from political participation, and in fact the measure or extent of democracy depends on the political participation of practically all recognizable groups of that society. Political rights have been given to all groups in India, though the nature of such rights needs to be more carefully qualified. People do have the right to vote, and almost every individual adult is eligible to vote. However, not every individual can contest for elections to a particular post. Affirmative action has been the means by which several groups, hitherto denied the possibility of holding political power, not the power to vote (which they had) but the power to hold political office, and thereby possess power to decide on various issues, can now do so. But how has affirmative action worked in actual practice? Scheduled castes have faced some form of deprivation (i.e. social exclusion) for many

years. While affirmative action in terms of reserving seats in political institutions serves to reduce deprivation in one sphere, what are the problems that exist in other spheres? Are they simultaneously reduced when they occupy political positions? These questions illuminate the problems of the Dalits, as comprising not only political deprivation, but deprivations of other kinds too, including poverty for example, and the less than equitable terms of distribution of other resources such as education, and occupation. However, the most significant aspect of the deprivations faced by Dalits is related to their social position. Thus, not only will the predominant section of the Dalits be among the poor in economic terms, but the poverty is aggravated by the social problems that they face due to the stigma attached to being Dalits. That they did not automatically become entities of power following their elections has been sufficiently well documented across the different tiers of panchayats. They did not often participate in the decision-making process of the panchayats, though this could vary from place to place, and was noticeably more pronounced in the grama panchayats of Karnataka than other panchayat tiers, or in Kerala. There is evidence that their prestige increased to some extent, as elected representatives, compared to their earlier status as only a member of a Scheduled Caste. A factor which inhibits the possibility of the representatives being able to build up a constituency of supporters or political base, or political and administrative experience, is the rotation of seats. Normally a representative who is elected to a reserved seat (in this case a seat for a Scheduled Caste) can serve just one term. Afterwards, when that seat is reserved for another group or is declared an open seat not reserved for any other group, it is unlikely that the same individual can contest, and win.

Ordinarily, their panchayat position alone did not significantly improve the economic condition of the representatives, though in Kerala, panchayat members are given honorariums which provide a reasonable income if they have no other source of income.³⁴ In Karnataka, honorariums are given to presidents and vice presidents, though the levels are low—for example Rs. 300/- to grama panchayat presidents. Thus, in Kerala, there are expectations from panchayat representatives, especially the presidents, to attend to panchayat activities more regularly, since they are paid these honorariums. In Karnataka, most representatives have to take up alternative work to earn a living. While honorariums (and 'sitting fees' to attend panchayat meetings) are virtually the only honest means of any income for the representatives of the panchayats, this is in the normal course of things, not if they are prone to accepting kick-backs. An example is of a Scheduled Caste woman president of a

grama panchayat in Karnataka who was said to accept commissions for panchayat works. This was indicated by other representatives of this panchayat by pointing out that before she became a panchayat representative and the president, she lived in a hut. Now she has a *pucca* house (brick and cement house) though she has no visible means of income. While it is not easy to confirm or support allegations which representatives often made, a common thread was that it was generally the panchayat presidents who had greater access to funds through rent-seeking activities. An interesting case was of a woman Scheduled Caste president in a gram panchayat in Kerala who, when she was interviewed, stated that she did not ask for any percentages or commissions, but if someone gave her a commission she did not refuse to take it.³⁵ In Karnataka, a frequently expressed justification for accepting commissions for panchayat works was that no income/salary was derived from panchayats, and hence they had to earn a living through these means.

If a Scheduled Caste representative was also poor, it is difficult to discern which factor (caste or economic condition) took precedence in interactions with others of different castes. That they have some bearing on the attitudes of other representatives, government officials, and people of the village has to be accepted as a fact. In very general terms, a poor person of any caste would be treated with much less respect than a rich man. But there is also the possibility that variations exist even in the reaction to different Dalits, based, for example, on economic or educational factors. A study in a Karnataka village³⁶ suggested that the treatment accorded to different Dalits varied according to their educational levels (a school teacher, for example, enjoys greater respect from other village people), or economic factors, where Dalit quarry owners were able to hire Vokkaligas to work for them, while Vokkaligas are otherwise considered as a 'dominant caste' in Karnataka. These Dalits were not elected representatives, but formed a part of the village elite,³⁷ and particularly so among the Dalits themselves. Their impact on the functioning of the panchayats did not extend beyond suggesting candidates for elections, but this did not appear to be because of their lack of power or local 'clout' but because they were relatively less interested in political activities.

The role of local elites in the functioning of the panchayats is a factor which may impinge on or even curtail the political space that has been provided to the Dalits through affirmative action. In Karnataka the situation in grama panchayats clearly demonstrates that local elites affect the functioning of grama panchayats in most places, and this takes place

when the elites were elected representatives themselves, or even if they were not. Insofar as the fact that Dalits were rarely among the elites, the immediate problem is that elites (non Dalits) were dominant in the panchayats. This domination may take the form of an individual controlling the functioning of certain members of the panchayats (usually the gram panchayats), or of the entire panchayat being dominated by a small number of prominent individuals of the village, who constitute the elite. In the taluk and zilla panchayats the dominance is not by the 'local' elites, but often by party elites (such as MLAs for example) who influenced the functioning of these panchayats, or prominent individuals of the panchayat. Local elites did not dominate the functioning of the panchayats in Kerala, though the influence of party functionaries is more visible in the panchayats at all levels. There is also some evidence that leftist parties tend to intervene more often and more regularly in the functions of the panchayats (though there is no suggestion that they were in daily contact with the representatives). Thus, while there is no effort to minimize the importance of affirmative action in providing political space for the Dalits, it has to be noted that in many places, this space has been taken over by local elites—or to put it in another way—wherever the Dalits do not have the opportunity to function in a reasonably independent manner, the political space of the Dalits has been drastically reduced. Having said this, one should not overlook the fact that persons who were not Dalits were also among the dominated, in those panchayats where local elites were involved. A question that needs to be addressed in this context is whether the Dalits are able to function in a more effective manner if the panchayat is not dominated by the local elites. There is some evidence that even in panchayats (in Karnataka for instance) where local elites are not the dominant entities, Dalits appear to be the weakest among the panchayat members on several attributes, such as education, land holdings,³⁸ and occupation.³⁹ Thus, their ability to either dominate or control the functioning of panchayats was not in evidence.

The impact of the reservations to the panchayats has to be viewed not only in the sense of the functioning of Dalits in the panchayats, but also the possible impact on their social situation. While it is not easy to gauge the impact on their social situation, it seems likely that the sheer numbers of panchayat members from all groups, and also from the Dalits, would have left a mark on their lives as well as on their communities. However, one should also think of realistic political considerations, and observe that Scheduled Castes are divided into discrete castes, as well as being divided on party lines. These too impede the possibility of a common or unified Scheduled Castes group, which

may have the possibility of a common or unified Scheduled Castes group, which has been able to make some impact with the nearly 18% seats that they occupy in Karnataka, and about 11% of the seats in Kerala. While the legislation involving the reservation of seats for Dalits has been instrumental in overcoming one problem, i.e. their lack of representation in the first place, it has not overcome the qualitative disabilities that have been present in the actual functioning of the panchayats. This, however, cannot be attributed only to the inclination of members of higher castes to continue to exploit or discriminate against the Dalits. Indications are that reservations often work as a means to keep elites or high ranking party officials in power, or increase their ability to dominate or influence the functioning of the panchayats. That it does not increase the position or power of the entire group from which these dominant members or elites belong, is also indicative of the fact that even in the castes of the elites, or political parties of the high ranking officials, most others are of relatively lower positions (i.e. there is nothing to suggest that the entire group can be considered as 'dominant'). For example, to suggest that certain Vokkaliga individuals dominate some of the panchayats in Mandya District is not to ignore the fact that Vokkaligas too were dominated in the panchayats, as were the Dalits. The important point is that one individual may choose to control the functioning of the panchayat, regardless of who were the actual members. The disabilities of the past have ensured that Dalits still do not have the wherewithal to hold their own in terms of being able to repulse or ignore the approach of the elites to include them among the elected members—as their proxies or 'dummies'.⁴⁰ Elites are able to provide certain benefits to their clients, as well as patronage to those who wish to function in the political sphere. That some Dalits are willing to play the role of a 'client' and a subordinate place within the patron-client relationship is also an indication that they are quite willing to derive personal benefits that could accrue to themselves, but these relationships do not bring benefits to the Dalits as a whole, or to their group interests. Dalit representatives in the higher tiers were more educated and also economically higher placed (they may not be rich, but most of them were not poor either). Their role was also qualitatively of a different order in the panchayats. Partly, this was due to the presence of the political parties, which were openly involved in the taluk and zilla panchayats of Karnataka (they were not officially involved in panchayat activities in the grama panchayats), and Dalits as well as other members formed part of the party presence in the panchayats. Elections to President, for example, were on the basis of party identity, in addition to caste/gender/class—if the post was reserved for any specific group. Kerala,

a state with more avowedly political nature of the functioning of panchayats, had more actively involved party functionaries. This necessarily reduced any obvious caste orientation of political activities in the panchayats. There were also more cases where party positions were held by members of Scheduled Castes. This was less visible in Karnataka, though for the most part, one could say that caste orientation was less visible in the functioning of the upper tiers of panchayats, also due to the association of political parties and party identities in the panchayats.

What can be said about affirmative action as a means of furthering the interests of the Dalits, and addressing their Castes being a part of village festival celebrations. These Scheduled Castes (Madiga caste) were expected to celebrate their festival as a caste event, rather than that of the village. An interesting development here, however, was that other SC castes, which perceived themselves as being higher in status to that of the Madigas were also a party to this interpretation, and supported the upper castes. The Hindu, 3 May 2003.

¹² Certainly in another study in UP, the situation of the SCs of a village is that they are poor, though with majority of men having migrated the women of the village were able to play a more significant role in the panchayat (Jayal, 2001).

¹³ We had indeed interviewed newly elected representatives of the same panchayats which had been selected for study. Thus, we were to some extent able to compare the relative situations of members who had spent nearly an entire five-year term before our interview, and those who had just been elected.

¹⁴ There is a provision that if there are not many Scheduled Castes in the area to be able to fill the reserved seats for Scheduled Castes, then persons from the Scheduled Tribes may fill these seats, and vice versa.

¹⁵ This information was provided by the 'winning' candidates.

¹⁶ Karnataka State Election Commission information.

¹⁷ This is not to suggest that Dalits were the only victims of this kind of circumstance. Members of other groups (e.g. women) too were often elected solely to be proxies of the local leaders/elites.

¹⁸ Often described also as elite capture, this has been observed in panchayats of other states too (Johnson 2003; Johnson et al 2003).

¹⁹ Grama panchayats did not have the 'official' or overt presence of political parties since the Panchayati Raj Act 1993 indicated that political parties were not to participate in the elections to the grama panchayats.

²⁰ The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution makes the reservations of seats for SCs and women mandatory. But reservations for Other Backward Classes is left to the states to decide. Hence, in our studies, we have Karnataka which has reserved seats for OBCs, but Kerala which has no reserved seats for them.

²¹ There are indications that SCs have been able to make their numbers count in electoral politics and political power, though at higher levels (Osborne 2001, pp. 667-8). Evidence for similar outcomes in the panchayats is far less visible. Among other factors, the smaller geographical and population size of panchayats and their constituencies makes it less feasible for vote blocks to be effective as in constituencies of the State Legislatures and Parliament. Further, the influence of locally dominant individuals and groups also makes it less possible for SCs to influence local politics as compared to the impact that they can have, with their combined numbers, in the entire state or even constituencies

Notes

¹ In this paper I have restricted my discussion to Scheduled Castes.

² The problems of lack of adequate education have also had an impact on the ability of Scheduled Castes to avail even the existing reservations (Radhakrishnan 2002).

³ Mendelsohn (1986) indicates that Scheduled Castes in general have not greatly benefited from such policies, but the paper itself talks about the elite among Scheduled Castes, who have been able to rise to such levels through the reservations of seats in various institutions. Nadkarni (1997) says the same thing.

⁴ Yadav has asserted that much of the benefits of reservation have been cornered by the relatively well off and better educated among the Scheduled Castes, and he even calls them the 'big people,' or 'sahibs' among the Dalits. The large mass of poorer people of the villages, and urban slums, suffer the worst, in that they get little of the benefits of affirmative action and reservations.

⁵ These are two studies on the panchayats, in Karnataka and Kerala, both financially supported by the Ford Foundation, and carried out in the Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bangalore.

⁶ European Foundation, quoted in Baviskar, 2002.

⁷ Galanter (1991, p.2) has recognized the fact that by including certain groups and individuals within the policy of "compensatory discrimination", and reservations of seats, some people are simultaneously excluded.

⁸ This is the proportion of SCs in the population of Kerala (9.9% according to the 1991 Census of India).

⁹ While there is a possibility of Scheduled Castes being elected to unreserved seats, this number is likely to be very small. In Karnataka, however, there is also the fact that the number of seats actually occupied by groups for whom seats were reserved is also often much higher than the requirements of the Panchayati Raj Act.

¹⁰ A brief comment also needs to be made about the size of the panchayats. Kerala's gram panchayats are relatively large, with 20-40,000 population constituting one panchayat. Karnataka's grama panchayats on the other hand are much smaller, comprising a population of 5000 people.

¹¹ That there is some sensitivity to this issue of "natural social order" appears to be present in Karnataka too, where a recent newspaper report suggested that upper caste villagers were not in favour of Scheduled

Castes being a part of village festival celebrations. These Scheduled Castes (Madiga caste) were expected to celebrate their festival as a caste event, rather than that of the village. An interesting development here, however, was that other SC castes, which perceived themselves as being higher in status to that of the Madigas were also a party to this interpretation, and supported the upper castes. *The Hindu*, 3 May 2003.

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²¹ There are indications that SCs have been able to make their numbers count in electoral politics and political power, though at higher levels (Osborne 2001, pp. 667-8). Evidence for similar outcomes in the panchayats is far less visible. Among other factors, the smaller geographical and population size of panchayats and their constituencies

makes it less feasible for vote blocks to be effective as in constituencies of the State Legislatures and Parliament. Further, the influence of locally dominant individuals and groups also makes it less possible for SCs to influence local politics as compared to the impact that they can have, with their combined numbers, in the entire state or even constituencies of the State Legislatures or Parliament.

Members of Scheduled Castes who are in the State Legislatures and Parliament occasionally form blocks, though their dependence on party leaders reduces their ability to utilize their numbers too often in the interest of own caste groups (see for example, Shah 2000, pp. 55-58; Pushpendra 1999; Duncan 1999; Oommen, 1990).

²² In grama panchayats where Scheduled Castes are not in significant numbers, it could be that their population is not large in the panchayat area, in which case, it is possible that STs may constitute larger numbers.

²³ Reflecting what Lieten and Srivastava (1999, p. 14) see as "formal leadership at village level may be expected to mirror prevailing power relationships."

²⁴ 'Elites' in social science literature generally refers to the highest position occupied by individuals, in a segment of society, or the entire society itself, or an occupation/activity. In our use of the term 'elites', we refer to the important individuals of villages (local elites) who in Karnataka are referred to as the 'big men' of the village, or high ranking officials of political parties, or holders of political positions such as members of Parliament or State Legislature, or high ranks in the bureaucracy. See for example, Inbanathan (2001).

²⁵ That this phenomenon is widespread is confirmed by our studies in Karnataka and Kerala, as well as other studies (See Vijayalakshmi and Chandrashekar 2000, 2002; Shail Mayaram 2003).

²⁶ This representative was of the prominent caste of the region, i.e. Lingayat, and was from a powerful political family, which included a brother who had been a MLA.

²⁷ In an earlier study, the grama panchayats showed the highest proportion (90%) who were completely new to holding an elected political position, but taluk panchayats (77.4%) and zilla panchayats (66.6%) too had a majority of representatives who were new to electoral politics. However, this referred to all representatives, and no indication of the situation of specific groups within the panchayats was given (such as SCs/STs) (Subha: 1997, p. 68).

²⁸ We did not collect data on this question for the other districts studied, or for the higher tiers.

²⁹ We were not able to discern the presence and influence of SC representatives of State Legislature and Parliament in the panchayats. But the few powerful SC political leaders (two were mentioned in the context of Karnataka's Legislature) could have had the same impact on panchayats as the other MLAs of some standing.

³⁰ The problem here is certainly that the woman is from the Scheduled Castes. But the factor of gender too is significant in this situation. It is also seen that women from other castes often share similar conditions such as lack of education as in the case of Scheduled Castes. While both caste and gender would have been the significant factors in minimizing the role of this president, which of them is more significant is difficult to say.

³¹ In an interesting case in a grama panchayat in Mandya, a woman president (not an SC) tried to express her views in the panchayat meeting. She was castigated right in the meeting by a representative who was the dominant individual in that GP. He told her that he was the one who made her the President, and therefore, she should only listen to what he told her, and not come up with any of her own views. The point here is that dominant individuals dominate the entire panchayat, not only the members of the Scheduled Castes.

³² There is some indication that caste, while a very significant factor in social relations in the past (see Alexander 1972), is still significant, but has a less open and overt role in all political relations, from what we were able to discern from interviews with panchayat representatives.

³³ The CPI(M) had put up the candidate from the Ezhava caste, who lost to a Congress(I) candidate. While political parties are generally quite calculative about the identity of the candidate (including caste), it seems more likely that the party CPI(M) had miscalculated its political support in this area.

³⁴ Several representatives in Kerala had stated that the honorarium which they received from the panchayat was the only income that they got. A gram panchayat member is paid Rs. 1000/00 a month, block panchayat members Rs. 1250/00 and district panchayat member Rs. 1750/00. A standing committee chair person in a GP is paid Rs. 1500/00 a month, BP Rs. 2000/00 and DP Rs. 2500/00. The president of the gram panchayat is paid Rs. 3500/00 a month, BP president is paid Rs. 4000/00 and DP president Rs. 4500/00. The vice president of a GP is paid Rs. 2500/00, BP vice president Rs. 3000/00, and DP vice president Rs. 3500/00.

³⁵ These two examples should not give the impression that women SCs are more prone to rent-seeking. They were individual cases in our studies, and it is only a coincidence that we have chosen to use these cases for illustrative purposes here.

³⁶ Personal communication from N. Sivanna, who was a part of the team which carried out this study. Some information from this study has been published in Aziz et al (2000).

³⁷ The occasions when we can refer to Dalit elites in the rural context are only a few in number. Normally Dalit elders would be the caste spokesmen, in political activities.

³⁸ While land reforms have been fairly effective in Karnataka and in Kerala, in comparative terms, based on our data, Dalits in general still own the smallest or the least productive lands.

³⁹ For example, there was a grama panchayat in Mandya district which had no dominant member as such, and decisions were arrived at through a much more democratic manner than where a dominant member virtually dictates what has to be done. There was, however, no indication that Scheduled Caste representatives were in a position to make a greater impact on the decisions.

In an earlier study of mandal panchayats in Karnataka (Inbanathan 1992, 1994), there was evidence to suggest that in the absence of a dominant member or a small number of dominant individuals (who worked in concert, or worked out a *modus vivendi* between them), there was a situation of anarchy which prevailed, and local people perceived these panchayats as non-functional because the members kept fighting among themselves.

⁴⁰ In Karnataka, to a question to representatives on why they chose to contest the elections to the panchayats, a very common answer among SC members was that "the leader" **told** them to contest or to take up a seat in the panchayat. In Kerala, a similar question brought out the answer that they contested because the party (leftist parties generally) told them to contest—whether to contest in subsequent elections, again, is embarked on only if the party thinks that he/she should contest.

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