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**POWER SHARING IN THE
PANCHAYATS OF ORISSA**

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Abstract

The paper examines the nature of power, its existence, distribution and manifestation in the context of Panchayats in Orissa. It concludes that institutionalised political authority has failed in conferring power on all the elected representatives. Influential individuals or elites of the locality were successful in affecting Panchayat decision-making due to their control of significant resources such as social prestige, economic power, political contacts and organisational ability, and thus, exercised power in Panchayats, even without holding any authority. The paper, therefore, makes a clear distinction between power and authority, and explores the dual nature of power structure in the Panchayats of Orissa.

Introduction

In recent decades, decentralisation has emerged as one of the important political developments in India, with varied aims and objectives. From a developmental perspective, it aspires to locate people at the centre of the development process, by making them participants of development. From a political perspective, it works towards the empowerment of people by giving them a voice in the local decision-making process. Decentralisation seeks to increase financial autonomy of the local political institutions by giving them taxation powers, as well as transferring funds directly to the Panchayats. With these varied aims and objectives decentralisation is, thus, seen as an instrument of good governance, which can enhance transparency, accountability and efficiency of governance, while at the same time bringing power closer to the people.

Whether the objectives of decentralisation are social, economic or political, or a combination of all these, the premise upon which the

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whole process of decentralisation revolves around is the notion of 'power'. Decentralisation is obviously related to power, since the single factor that is common to all the objectives of decentralisation is the effort to bring 'power to the people'. In the context of rural communities, decentralisation brings with it new power dynamics, which often affects the already existing power dynamics of rural communities by bringing in certain changes, while at others, it is assimilated within the already existing one. Political decentralisation, which has devolved powers to local institutions of governance, has also broadened the possibility of further power sharing by reserving seats for weaker sections of society. This has also made it possible to create a new leadership at the grass roots of rural areas, which has to face challenges from the already existing leadership structure of the villages. It is this new kind of interaction between two leadership structures that makes rural politics vibrant and active.

This new kind of interaction between the emerging power holders and the existing structure of power in rural communities makes it essential to understand the very notion of 'power'. The present paper, therefore, attempts to understand the nature of power, its existence, distribution and manifestation in the context of rural political institutions, i.e. the Panchayats. In particular, the paper examines the processes in which power is shared and exercised in Panchayats. Any attempt to locate and contextualise power in the rural political institutions requires a thorough understanding of the theoretical aspects of the concept. The paper, thus, begins with a theoretical discussion of power and then proceeds to locate power in the organised rural political institutions.

The empirical data for the present paper have been collected from four Gram Panchayats in Dhenkanal Sadar Block of Dhenkanal district of Orissa, based on the following criteria that these Panchayats should have: 1) a president who is a Scheduled Caste male from a Scheduled Caste reserved constituency, 2) a president who is a Scheduled Tribe male from a Scheduled Tribe reserved constituency, 3) a president who is a woman from a constituency reserved for women and 4) a general category male president from an unreserved constituency. These four

Gram Panchayats are—Govindpur (reserved for SC), Saptasajya (reserved for ST), Talabarakot (reserved for women) and Beltikiri (unreserved). Including the president and vice-president, these four Gram Panchayats comprise 16, 14, 17 and 14 elected representatives respectively. A combination of interview method and focused group discussion method was used for the study. In total, 61 elected representatives have been interviewed.

A Theoretical Understanding of Power

Few problems in sociology are more complex than the problem of social power. As an aspect of social relationship, it confers certain privileges on some and denies them to others. Though different scholars define it differently, yet, the central question lies in who holds the power and how it affects social outcomes. Power is often defined as an ability to achieve desired outcomes, a capacity to produce effects, which essentially emerges out of social relationships and social interactions.

Power is often confused with similar concepts such as 'influence', 'coercion', 'authority', and 'domination'. Power is the capacity to make decisions, which are binding upon others; influence, on the other hand, is the ability to affect the content of these decisions through external pressure. Influence may, therefore, involve several mechanisms such as organised lobbying, rational persuasion and open intimidation (Heywood, 1994: 79).

Coercion and authority are, in fact, two different manifestations of power. Coercion is that form of power which is not regarded as legitimate by those subject to it. It is often based on physical force. On the contrary, authority is a form of power that is accepted as legitimate, right and just and, therefore, obeyed on that basis.

The distinction between power and authority is central to the understanding of the notion of power. Both are distinguished from one another as contrasting means through which compliance or obedience is achieved. Persuasion, pressure, threats, coercion or violence are some of the means through which compliance is brought about in power.

Authority, on the other hand, is based upon a perceived 'right to rule' and brings about compliance through a moral obligation on the part of the ruled. Thus, authority always has a moral character in it (see Heywood, 1994; and Connolly, 1993).

Conceptualising Power

In their attempt to conceptualise power, several scholars have taken recourse to different terminologies. Scott (2001: 2) defines power as a form of social relation between two agents, who may be called 'principal' and the 'subaltern'. While the principal is the paramount agent in a power relationship, who exercises power; subaltern is the subordinate agent, who gets affected in the power relation. Dowding (1996) distinguishes between two forms in the conceptualisation of power: 'power to' and 'power over'. The ability to produce outcomes implies 'power to', which does not necessarily involve any structured interaction. On the other hand, power of one actor over another (power over) involves social relationships and interactions, in which one actor has a capacity to affect another's action.

Hindess (1996) mentions two conceptions of power. First, the idea of power as a simple quantitative phenomenon. Power, in this sense, is a generalised capacity to act. This conception of power as simple capacity suggests that there will be an unequal relation between those who employ power for their own purposes and those who are subject to its effects. Power may be used as an instrument of domination. The second understanding is that of power as involving not only a capacity but also a right to act, with both capacity and right being seen to rest on the consent of those over whom power is exercised.

The concept of power is structured differently by Goehler (2000), who attempts to define power in terms of 'transitive' and 'intransitive' models. In Latin, *transire* means 'to pass by'. Power is transitive when it refers to others and intransitive when it refers back to itself (2000: 43). The transitive model of power refers to subordination of one person's will by the will of another. This model generates a power relation in which A

restricts the actions of B and brings them into line with his or her own preferences. Intransitive power, Goehler suggests, does not refer to the subordination of one person's will to the will of another within a community, but rather it refers to the subjection of one person's will to the community itself, to the conditions and to its constitution.

Westwood (2002) discusses power in terms of *modalities* and *sites*. By modalities, she means the different forms in which power is exercised, the qualities or attributes of different forms of power and the manner in which power is enacted. Sites of power include, according to her, social spaces and locations for the exercise of power. The different modalities of power are located in repression/coercion, constraint, hegemony and counter-hegemony, manipulation and strategy, knowledge, discipline and governance, as well as seduction and resistance. The enactment of these modalities of power takes place in sites such as race, gender, class, space and visual power.

The interests and/or intentions of power holders have been central to many discussions of power. Scott (2001) has rightly pointed out that social power is necessarily more than a simple causal influence between actors. Thus, Wrong (1979) holds that social power is a form of causal influence that involves production of intended effects. An exercise of power, therefore, typically involves an intentional intervention in a chain of causal effects. In this sense, a power relation involves the intention to produce a particular effect or the desire to see a particular effect happening. Beetham (1991: 43), thus, defines social power as an intended or desired causal effect—an effect that realises a purpose. In any social relationship, the existence of power cannot be identified, unless and until there is reference to intentions and interests of the actors involved (Wartenberg, 1990: 65).

The above discussion of the concept of power can be summarised into two points. First, power is a kind of ability, which can produce some desired outcomes. These outcomes may or may not take others' actions into account. While it does not consider anybody's action, it is

just a capacity to do things in the manner that a person wants. Power in this sense, is just the production of causal effects or bringing about of consequences. Here the question of domination or subordination does not arise. But in the other case, while the action of a person affects the action of another, notions like domination or subordination often automatically come into being. In this context, the person who exercises power does not only produce some effect, but that effect also changes or affects the actions of others. Secondly, the ability, which affects the action of others in a power exertion, can be either legitimate or illegitimate. When it is legitimate, the power holder has a right to produce the effects and thereby affect the action of others. This kind of power is much closer to authority.

Though the concept of power has been widely discussed in contemporary social science, the insights from earlier theorising have a significant bearing upon the contemporary conceptions of power. The following sections examine power as propounded by several social theorists.

The Concept of Power—Dahl

Dahl's (1957) definition of power implies that (individual) A has power over (individual) B to the extent that A can get B to do something, which B would not otherwise do. This is the most frequently cited definition of the concept, which embodies a specific view of the nature of power, the social location of power, and the effects of the exercise of power. According to this view, power is defined entirely in terms of its effect and can be any kind of capacity, which produces these effects. Secondly, power is an attribute of individuals and is exercised in their relationship with other individuals. Finally, by attributing it only to individuals and identifying it as that which secures compliance, power is equated with domination or 'power over', and the effects of its exercise become, almost by definition, exploitative and unproductive. Here is the 'Zero-sum conception' of power, according to which the person with power gains only to the extent that others lose, and no overall benefit or advantage can accrue from the exercise of power (Barnes, 1993: 198).

Dahl's conceptualisation of power, which is a 'pluralistic' view of power, is contested with another conceptualisation of power known as the 'elitist' view of power. Pluralists such as Dahl (1957) are not interested in the source of power or where it resides as argued by elitists, rather they are interested in the exercise of power. Power to them means participation in decision-making and can be analysed only after careful examination of a series of concrete decisions (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962: 948). On the other hand, elite theorists, such as Mills (1956) and Hunter (1953) argue that power is concentrated in the hands of elites. Mills maintained that a 'power elite' consisting of the most influential figures in business, government and the military ruled America. Dahl's (1958) critique of Mills' 'ruling elite model' suggested that elites are not the actual holders of power; instead, they have high potential for control. This high potential for control, however, does not confirm them with power to actually have control. The real exercise of power can only be seen when decisions are taken.

Weber on Power

In Weber's definition, power is 'the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests' (Weber, 1978: 53). Giddens summarised Weber's notion of power as 'the chance of a man or a number of men to realise their own will in a communal action against the resistance of others who are participating in the action' (Giddens, in Cassell, 1993: 217).

Weber's definition of power implies that those who hold power do so at the expense of others. It suggests that there is a fixed amount of power and, therefore, if some people hold power, others will not. This view is sometimes known as the 'zero-sum' concept of power. Weber's definition also implies that power holders will use power to further their own interests. Viewed in this sense, power is used to further the sectional interest of power holders, which are in conflict with the interests of those subject to that power.

By defining power in such a manner, Weber brings the notion of 'domination' into the understanding of power. He defines domination as 'the probability that certain specific commands or all commands will be obeyed by a given group of persons' (1978: 212). Weber's analysis of power is thus manifested in his typology of legitimate domination, i.e., legal-rational, traditional and charismatic. These three types of domination are not power in itself, rather they are the basis from which power can be derived (Weber, 1978: 215).

In the case of legal-rational domination, obedience is owed to the legally established impersonal order. In the case of traditional domination, obedience is owed to the person who occupies the position that is sanctioned and bound by tradition. In the case of charismatic domination, it is the leader who is obeyed by virtue of personal trust in him and his revelation, his heroism or his exemplary qualities so far as they fall within the scope of the individuals' belief in his charisma (1978: 215 – 16). Weber describes these three pure types of legitimate domination as 'authority'.

The major difference between these three types of authority is that while in the case of charismatic and traditional authority, power is derived from personal qualities and tradition respectively; in legal-rational type, the power comes from the legally established impersonal positions of the power holder. In this case, a person holds power only because he is in that position and his power stems from that position. Here, a legal base supports power, and law can punish those who abuse power.

Parsons on Power

In contrast to Weber's conception of power, where power is regarded as a scarce resource and mutually exclusive, to the extent that one party enjoys power at the cost of the other, Parsons' view of power can be treated as a 'non-zero sum game' where both sides may gain in the power relation.

Parsons proposed that power can be seen as being 'generated' by a social system, much in the same way as wealth is

generated in the productive organisation of an economy. The parallels, which Parsons draws between the two are based on the supposition that each has a similar role in two of the four 'functional sub-systems' of society, which Parsons had distinguished in his previous work'. Power has a parallel function in the polity (goal-attainment sub-system) to that of money in the economy (adaptive sub-system). Power is defined, therefore, as 'a generalised capacity to serve the performance of binding obligations by units in a system of collective organisation when the obligations are legitimised with reference to their bearing on collective goals' (Parsons, 1963: 237). By 'binding obligations' Parsons means the conditions in which both the power exerciser and those upon whom power is exercised are legitimately allowed to do so. All power involves a certain 'mandate', which gives power holders certain rights and imposes on them certain obligations towards those who are subject to their power (Giddens in Philip Cassell, 1993).

Power is thus, for Parsons, directly derivative of authority. And authority is institutionalised legitimation, which underlies power, and is defined as 'the institutionalisation of the right of the leaders to expect support from the members of the collectivity' (Parsons, 1960: 181). By defining power in terms of 'binding obligations', Parsons invokes legitimation in power. Therefore, for him, there is no such thing as 'illegitimate power'. As Parsons expresses it, '... the threat of coercive measures, or of compulsion, without legitimation or justification, should not properly be called the use of power at all, but is the limiting case where power, losing its symbolic character, merges into an intrinsic instrumentality of securing compliance with wishes, rather than obligations' (1963: 232 – 62).

For Parsons, the use of power is one among several different ways in which one party may secure the compliance of another to a desired course of action. The other ways of obtaining compliance should not be regarded as forms of power. The possession and use of power should not be identified with the use of force. In Parsons' view, force must be seen as only one means among several modes of obtaining compliance.

The power of a group that has to constantly resort to the use of force to secure compliance is usually weak and insecure. A party may wield considerable power while at the same time having few coercive sanctions with which to enforce its commands if subordinates question them. This is possible if the power-holding party enjoys a broad mandate to take authoritative decisions, i.e., if those over whom the power is exercised agree to subject themselves to that power. The use of power entails both parties in a power relation to achieve certain objectives of their interests. Thus, power systems need not always require the coercive subordination of the desires or interests of one party by the other. Nor does the use of power also inevitably include 'oppression' or 'exploitation'.

Power as Dominance and/or Authority: Summarising Dahl, Weber and Parsons

The above discussion of the concept of power through the writings of Dahl, Weber and Parsons may lead one to conclude that the understanding of power can broadly be through two categories. For Weber and Dahl, power is equated with 'domination' or 'coercion'. This domination may or may not be legitimate. Here, power is regarded as a simple capacity to produce outcomes by changing actions or behaviour of others despite resistance. This outcome is necessarily achieved either through domination or by coercion. Parsons, however, limits the scope of power to authority. Though authority is not in itself power, he regards authority as the only basis upon which power rests. In other words, power can only be derived from authority.

By equating power with domination, Weber and Dahl see power as emanating from 'above'. Performing certain actions to realise one's own will/interest and/or taking some decisions that are to be obeyed by others are some of the overt manifestations of power. Such an exercise of power always takes into consideration the interests of the persons who hold power. On the other hand, the Parsonian understanding of power takes into consideration both the power holders as well as those upon whom power is held. Power in this context becomes an instrument

to realise the broader goal of society to achieve outcomes beneficial for all.

One could also find that empirically both the notions of power can be located differently. While the Parsonian notion fits well into organised positions of power, Weber's and Dahl's understanding of power can be located in day-to-day social interactions. Where positions are backed by rules and regulations and are considered legitimate, one may think of employing Parsons' views on power. However, on occasions where power is exercised without such legal support, one may recall Weber's understanding of power as the realisation of interests despite resistance.

The above discussion makes it clear that whatever may be the basis of power, it essentially depends upon 'control over resources'. One's capacity to exercise power rests on the resources he/she controls. Such resources, however, may not be limited only to physical force. While for Parsons, legitimate authority or organised (political) positions are the only resources, controlling which a person or a group is eligible to exercise power; Weber mentions several other resources such as domination, physical force, social status and personal charisma, which make an individual powerful. However, control over resources in terms of domination and authority may not be sufficient to exercise power in all situations. There may be certain occasions where power holders use manipulation and persuasion to uphold their own interests, and thereby exercise power. In this context, Lukes' (1974) notion of power deserves attention.

Lukes on Power

From the preceding discussion, it is clear that power is an essentially contested concept, and it is difficult to arrive at one settled or agreed upon definition. This contestation is best captured in Steven Lukes' (1974) work '*Power: A Radical View*', which distinguishes between three faces or dimensions of power. Lukes contrasts his own 'radical' perspective with the 'liberal' account of power presented by Dahl and other American Pluralists and with the 'reformist' view presented by

many of its critics. Both views regard power as enabling some individuals to prevail over others in situations where there are clear differences between their respective interests. Lukes goes further to advance the 'radical' view that power can also operate to prevent such differences from emerging in the first place, and that it does so by ensuring that those subject to its influence have a false understanding of where their true interests lie (Hindess, 1996: 68).

Lukes describes the liberal view as a 'one-dimensional' view of power. According to this 'one-dimensional' approach, it would be possible to identify a ruling elite only if there was clear evidence that the supposed elite is normally able to impose its wishes, even against majority resistance. Lukes associates the reformist view with the 'two-dimensional' approach, according to which there are two faces of power: the public face and the private face. While the pluralist analysis or the 'one-dimensional' view focuses only on the public face of power, the 'two-dimensional' view captures both the faces of power. Bachrach and Baratz (1962) mention that the private face of power can be seen in the covert exclusion of the interests of particular individuals or groups from consideration in legislative assemblies, council chambers and other arenas in which decisions are taken affecting the life of the community.

Even though Lukes regards the second view of power to be superior to the first view, he considers it to be seriously incomplete. Thus in its place he proposes a 'three-dimensional' view, which he describes as 'radical in both the theoretical and political senses' (Lukes, 1974: 9). Where the second view of power suggests that the interests of certain individuals or groups may well be excluded from political debate, Lukes goes further to argue that there may also be instances of the exercise of power in which its victims fail even to recognise that their real interests are at risk, and consequently make no attempt to defend those interests. In this view, there is a third, particularly insidious, form of power, which is able to influence the thought and desires of its victims without their being aware of its effects (Hindess, 1996: 5).

In this light, power can be said to have three faces. First, it involves the ability to influence decisions; secondly, it is reflected in the capacity to shape the political agenda and thus prevent decisions being made; and thirdly, it takes the form of controlling people's thoughts by manipulating their needs and preferences (Barnes, 1993: 199; Heywood, 1994: 78 – 85).

- **Decision-making** – power is exercised to ensure that one set of interests prevails over another, and that a contested political decision is made in a way preferred by the more powerful party. This treatment of power corresponds to the common-sense belief that power is about getting things done, and is, therefore, most clearly reflected in decisions and how they are made.
- **Agenda-setting** – power is used to ensure that policy issues are initially framed and formulated in the interests of its possessors, and that formulations which would serve other interests are never made available for debate. This dimension of power affects not just the immediate process of decision-making, but also behind-the-scenes activities such as agenda setting.
- **Thought control** – power is used as a means of shaping the perceptions and cognitions of others, so that what they consider to be in their interest is radically transformed. Through this third dimension of power, its possessors secure their interests not by winning a contest, or even by avoiding a contest, but by transforming the consciousness of their political opponents and weakening their grasp of the nature of their real interests so much that no contest threatens.

Lukes argues that any radical understanding of the operation of power must recognise that it takes place in all these three dimensions, but he stresses that only the first dimension of power is clearly and obviously manifested in visible behaviour, whereas in the other two, power operates invisibly.

Delimiting the Scope of Power for the Present Research

Delimiting the scope of power in the present research context becomes important owing to the fact that power is not always a straightforward case of authority derived from organised positions, despite the Panchayats being constitutionally formed institutions. Understanding the power relations in the Panchayats calls for a deeper examination of the overall social base in which they are embedded. The simple fact of the Panchayat being a constitutional body, which ensures the devolution of power to the lowest stratum of decentralised government, does not make its elected members powerful in the true sense of the term. This is mainly because the elected representatives are a part of a 'competing structure of authority' (Vijayalakshmi and Chandrashekar, 2002: 3) of the overall social structure of the community, which also includes several important players other than the elected ones. The notion of 'control over resources' becomes crucial at this juncture. The other important players of the competing authority structure control several other resources like higher position in the local caste hierarchy, higher economic attributes, personal charisma, etc. The power of these individuals gets legitimised because of its acceptance by the rest of the community over a period of time. Power in the Panchayats, therefore, necessarily involves an interaction between these different individuals or various groups of individuals who control differential resources.

The present research, while aiming to study the exercise of power in the Panchayats, apprehends that those who enjoy legal political authority may not always be in a position to exercise power in reality due to the interplay of several factors. The political authority gained through elections to rural institutions of governance, and social and/or economic power acquired and/or ascribed through one's position in the caste hierarchy or through accession of landholding may go in different directions. Even though the different representatives have equal political authority in the Panchayats, they may not enjoy equal power in the functioning of the Panchayats because of their differential backgrounds,

experiences and, above all, the differential resources that they bring with them to the political interaction. Thus, authority and power need to be examined as separate attributes. It might often happen that people without any formal political authority may influence the working of the Panchayats because of their control over other sources of power. Thus, to understand the existence, use and exercise of power in the context of Panchayats and to gauge its impact, we may conceptualise power as *the ability of individuals or groups to have a bearing on the decision-making process in the Panchayats and effect outcomes of their choosing*. The outcome may affect the interests of different people, or it may benefit the powerful individual himself/herself.

Power in the Panchayats

Power in the context of Panchayats, often corresponds to producing some outcome where someone else's action is affected. Such outcomes can be studied by looking at the decision making process in the Panchayats, which is an overt manifestation of power. By virtue of the reservation policy, the elected representatives were given formal positions of power to produce certain outcomes. In order to know whether they use this formal position in the functioning of Panchayats, the decision making process in the four Panchayats was examined.

Decision Making as Manifestation of Power

The theoretical discussions made in the previous section suggest that one of the ways of observing power is to examine the decision making process in any institutional set-up (see, Dahl, 1957). In the context of the Panchayats, an observation of the decision making process, so as to know who takes the decisions, how and in what circumstances, would help us in examining the actual exercise of power. Therefore, to understand the decision making process in the rural political institutions, the respondents were asked about how the decisions are taken in their Panchayats. The majority of the representatives in the four Panchayats (70.5 %) were of the opinion that only a small number of members are involved in making decisions (see Table 1).

Table – 1: Decision Making in the Panchayats

Process of Decision Making	Frequency	Percentage
Consulting with all GP members	13	21.3
Only by the President	5	8.2
Small number of GP members	43	70.5
Total	61	100

In most cases, consulting all the Panchayat members before arriving at any decision was not done. The role of disadvantaged groups in taking decisions was found to be minimal. Usually, members belonging to upper castes, who have some prior experience in politics, were active in Panchayat decision-making. Even the upper caste women representatives were not a part of this small group of decision makers in the Panchayats.

An examination of the process of decision making in the Panchayats of Orissa reveals the fact that a simple observation of the decision making process does not provide any clear insight into the process of power. The elected representatives, who are vested with political authority and are supposed to take concrete decisions in Panchayats by virtue of such authority, are observed to play minimal role in making important decisions. It was evident that power existed outside the framework of the institutional structure of Panchayats, and was not necessarily linked with political authority.

It is, therefore, important to mention here that the small group of decision makers in the Panchayats did not act independently on Panchayat matters.ⁱⁱ It was observed that persons from outside the Panchayats were involved in the functioning of the Panchayats. The elected members were often under the control of these individuals, who were considered as important persons in the locality. When asked about the influential persons who make an impact in the functioning of the Panchayats, the elected representatives indicated the names of locally important persons. These important persons were elites of the locality.

They belonged to higher castes, possessed much of the land, commanded respect in the locality and had substantial political connections. Based on these resources, the elites influenced the course of Panchayat activities. In doing so, the elites acted as the actual power exercisers in the Panchayats.

The Public and Private Faces of Power

The theoretical arguments made in the previous section help us to identify two different faces of power: public and private (see, Bachrach and Baratz, 1962, 1963). While the public face of power is explicit and is manifested by simply observing who controls the process of decision-making, the private face emphasises more upon what happens behind the decision making process, and how certain group of persons succeed in influencing those who are supposed to take decisions. Since Panchayats are institutionalised structures, power, at least in theory, should rest with incumbents of political authority. However, the empirical observations indicated that other outside influential individuals and/or the local elites successfully prevent the elected representatives from taking decisions independently, and mould them to take decisions that favour them or their supporters. Such outside influential individuals take resort to several ways to prevent the official decision makers or the elected representatives from taking independent decisions.

In order to understand the private face of power, we tried to understand the factors that work behind the explicit decision making process in the Panchayats. In other words, an enquiry was made as to what do the elites/influential persons do to control the representative, who officially make decisions in the Panchayats. Several responses were obtained from the 61 representatives regarding the back-stage activity of the elites/influential persons, which ensures them a position to prevent the elected representatives from taking decision independently, and consequently influence them in taking Panchayat-related decisions. Since the representatives provided more than one responses, multiple response technique was adopted to analyse the category of responses (see Table 2).

Table – 2: Back-Stage Activity of Elites in Panchayats

N = 61

Type of Responses	No. of Responses	Percentage of Responses	Percentage of Cases *
1. Organise several persons to effect decisions of their choice	48	31.3	78.7
2. Campaign for representatives during elections and keep them under control	41	26.8	67.2
3. Extend financial support to representatives	28	18.3	45.9
4. Always keep the representatives under their influence	20	13.1	32.7
5. Independently decide on Panchayat matters	16	10.5	26.2
Total	153	100	

* Do not add up to 100 since multiple responses were obtained

Elites' organisational ability and their wider support base and contacts (Table-2), through which they help the representatives at the time of elections by campaigning for them, are the two most favoured responses regarding their back-stage engagements, which ensure them a position to influence decision-making process in the Panchayats. Out of the 61 representatives, 78.7 per cent stated that the elites possess the ability to organise several people to effect decisions of their choice in the Panchayats. It is, thus, evident that superior organising capacity and large supporter base in the locality help them in influencing the decisions in their favour. Besides larger support base, their position in social structure and wider contacts also act in their favour to keep the official decision makers in their control, and thereby, effect decisions of their choice. Out of the total respondents, 67.2 per cent (41 out of 61) opined that elites keep the representatives under their control by getting them elected by means of campaigning for them at the time of elections. Since the elites

campaigned for the representatives at the time of elections, the representatives obliged them by remaining under their control, and took decisions in the Panchayats as desired by the elites. Besides these two most favoured responses, there were also other opinions about the back-stage activity of the local elites. Since the representatives gave more than one responses, which were mutually inclusive, the percentage of cases do not add up to 100.

Considering 153 as the total number of responses that came from 61 representatives, it was observed that 31.3 per cent of responses have come for elites' organisational ability to effect decisions of their choice, and 26.8 per cent of responses have come for elites' campaigning for representatives, by which they keep the representatives under their influence. An inquiry into such back-stage activities of the local elites reveals the 'private face' of power, and exhibits the process and factors that take place before the actual decisions are being taken in the Panchayats. Such activities play a significant role in determining who holds power, and how such power is exercised in rural political institutions like Panchayats.

Elites' Involvement in the Panchayats

An examination of the public and private faces of power made the point clear that power did not confine itself to political authorities of rural political institutions. On many occasions, outsiders (those not elected to panchayats) intervened and successfully influenced Panchayat-related matters. Besides influencing the Panchayat decision making, the elites also played an important role in settling disagreements between Panchayat members and resolving conflicts in the course of the functioning of the Panchayats. In order to go deeper into the aspects of power exercise in Panchayats, we asked the respondents about the procedure of settling the disagreements in their Panchayats. Only a limited number of representatives stated that they settled Panchayat disagreements in Panchayat meetings (see Table 3).

Table – 3: Settlement of Panchayat Disagreements

Process of settlement	Frequency	Percentage
Settled in GP meetings	14	23
Settled by the help of local elites	41	67.2
Settled by the help of MLAs/political leaders	6	9.8
Total	61	100

The intervention of legislators and other political leaders was observed to be another factor curtailing the power of elected representatives in the Panchayat decision-making process. Though the majority of representatives said that the MLAs rarely intervene in Panchayat affairs directly, but it was through the local elites that they influenced the decisions of the Panchayats more often.

The representatives also sought advice from persons outside the Panchayats in Panchayat-related matters. Out of the 61 elected members, only 10 (16.4 %) stated that they did not seek advice from others on Panchayat-related matters. Several responses were obtained from the remaining 51 representatives regarding whom they consulted on Panchayat affairs. Since the representatives gave more than one response, which were mutually inclusive, I adopted the multiple response technique to analyse these responses (see Table 4).

Table – 4: Seeking Advice on Panchayat-related matters

N = 51

Types of Responses	Number of responses	Percentage of responses	Percentage of cases*
1. Seek advice from local elites	42	45.7	82.4
2. Seek advice from other members of the Panchayats	25	27.2	49
3. Seek advice from husband/family members	16	17.4	31.4
4. Seek advice from officials	9	9.7	17.6
Total	92	100	

* do not add up to 100 since multiple responses were obtained.

It is evident from Table – 4 that seeking advice from local elites (82.4 % of the respondents out of 51) and from other members of Panchayat (49 % of the respondents) are the two favoured responses for the question regarding the person from whom they seek advice on Panchayat-related matters. 31.4 per cent of the respondents (all of them women) seek advice from husband/family members to decide on Panchayat matters. It can be mentioned here that among the respondents who have sought advice from local elites, some of them also consulted persons within the Panchayats or from family members, and thus the percentage of cases are not adding up to 100.

Considering 92 as the total number of responses coming from 51 respondents, 45.7 per cent of the responses have come for seeking advice from local elites and 17.4 per cent of the responses are obtained for consulting husband and family members. We see that local elites and husbands or male family members (in case of women representatives) influence the course of decision making of the Panchayats through these *de jure* members.ⁱⁱⁱ

Sources of Power

The pluralistic approach (e.g. Dahl, 1957) to study power did not focus upon the actual sources of power or from where power emanates, and emphasised on the explicit act of exercise of power. Such an approach equated power with the act of decision-making, and stated that exercise of power can be studied by carefully observing a series of concrete decisions. In contrast to Dahl's pluralist approach, it was Weber and Parsons who highlighted the significance of sources of power in studying the power relation in a society. Parsons analysed power as the derivative of authority, and identified authority as the only source of power. However, the inclusion of the notion of dominance into the framework of power notwithstanding, Weber drew our attention to two other important sources of power in societies.

The failure of institutionalised political authority in conferring power on the elected representatives, as propounded by Parsons,

prompted us to understand the actual source of power in rural society. Moving beyond Parsons while conceptualising power in the Panchayats raises a few more questions: if institutionalised authority is not the base of power, then what are the resources that the local elites possess to exercise power or what are the bases of power in the rural social context? To understand this, the representatives were asked to give their opinions regarding the bases of power in rural society. Several responses were obtained for such a question and are analysed adopting multiple response analysis (see Table 5).

Table – 5: Bases for Exercising Power

N = 61

What are the bases for becoming powerful?	Number of responses	Percentage of responses	Percentage of cases*
1. Caste	51	26	83.6
2. Political Contact	44	22.4	72.1
3. Wealth	40	20.4	65.6
4. Personal Charisma	26	13.3	42.6
5. Family Background	22	11.3	36.1
6. Education	13	6.6	21.3
Total	196	100	

* do not add up to 100 since multiple responses were obtained.

Other than political contact and wealth, the caste identity was also an important base of power. Out of 61 elected representatives, 83.6 per cent were of the opinion that caste is an important resource to exercise power in rural context. It was followed by 72.1 per cent of the respondents, who stated that outside political contact makes somebody more powerful, and 65.6 per cent of the respondents stated that wealth was an important resource. A minimal number of representatives pointed out education as a source of power. Taking 196 as the total number of responses that

were obtained for the question regarding bases of power, 26 per cent of the responses indicated caste as an important base, while 22.4 per cent indicated political connections as important bases to exercise power.

In rural Orissa, resources like caste, political contact and wealth act as the bases for individuals to become powerful. Here, wealth mostly means agricultural land, which forms an important endowment in agrarian relations. Individuals possessing all or most of these resources become important persons and hold considerable power to produce outcomes in various aspects of rural society. Though these three are different resources, they are most often interlinked with each other and seem to coincide (see also Omvedt, 1982, Sharma, 1997). Land has usually been linked with the caste hierarchy in rural communities. Individuals possessing a higher social status, which comes with membership of upper castes and greater wealth, have found it easy to have access to politics. In contrast to this, the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, who are lower in the caste hierarchy and economically poor, are less active in village politics. Thus, consolidation of resources like caste, land and access to politics, while on the one hand has enhanced the ability of the rural elites to exercise power; on the other hand, it has resulted in the powerlessness of representatives who lack the former two resources of power.

It is evident that besides institutionalised authority, there are several other sources that help one in exercising power. Weber (1978) who mentioned three sources of domination identifies such multiple types of legitimacy: legal-rational, traditional and charismatic. While the representatives possess only legal-rational authority, which follows from their formal positions of power, the local elites possess the other two sources of legitimacy, i.e., traditional and charismatic, which makes them powerful in the rural context and enables them to have control over the representatives and influence the functioning of the Panchayats.

Discussion and Conclusion

Distinguishing Power and Authority: The Duality in Power Structure

From the above analysis it becomes clear that the representatives have not been able to utilise the given formal positions to exercise power in the Panchayats. Their low attendance in Panchayat meetings, limited participation in several activities in the functioning of the Panchayats like identifying issues, and in the decision-making process, has resulted in leaving them without power in the Panchayats. By influencing the decision-making process in the Panchayats and having control over the representatives, local elites act as *de facto* members of the Panchayat.¹⁴

Such intervention by the local elites generated a dual power structure in the Panchayats: the *de jure* structure that comprised the elected representatives, who have legitimate authority to decide on Panchayat matters, but fail to exercise this authority and power. The other is the *de facto* structure where the elites, without having any formal positions in the Panchayats and institutionalised authority, were able to control the representatives and influenced the functioning of the Panchayats (see also Inbanathan, 2000). This dual structure of power in the Panchayats makes a clear distinction between authority and power and thus, it becomes evident that institutionalised authority alone is not enough to exercise power in the rural context. Such a conceptualisation of power, with evidence from our study, moves beyond the Parsonian (1960, 1963) concept of power, which treats power as 'direct derivative of authority'. The Parsonian understanding of power becomes problematic since the use and exercise of power do not depend only on institutionalised positions and legitimate authority.

Identifying power in the Weberian way does not, however, undermine the importance of institutional positions as bases of power as identified by Parsons. The disadvantaged sections of society, who have hitherto not been considered as an integral part of rural power structure and decision-making activities, are now in the mainstream of rural politics.

Despite the fact that they (representatives belonging to disadvantaged categories) have been dominated by rural elites in the Panchayats, the position which they enjoy now as members of an institutional body is definitely more significant compared to their earlier status in village communities as just members of Scheduled castes or Tribes. Now the question arises: why is it that the institutionalised position has not been able to make them powerful in the rural power structure—as a theoretical exposition by Parsons would have expected? Our discussion of the situation of Orissa's Panchayats clearly indicates that Parsons' conceptualisation of power can only partly explain the circumstances there. Besides, even though the Panchayats are statutory bodies and its members enjoy certain institutional power, Panchayats have always functioned within the overall social structure of village communities, which are very traditional and hierarchical in nature. While possessing institutional authority, representatives lack other resources that are important bases of power. Thus, such an institutional position alone could not help them to become powerful, independent of other resources such as a higher position in the caste hierarchy and possession of land. The embeddedness of Panchayats in the overall social structure of the village community results in the subordination of institutional authority to the traditional authorities of the village community, thus making the Weberian concept of power and authority as well as dominance more relevant in the context of Panchayats.

Notes

ⁱ Parsons in 1951 developed the AGIL Model, which represents Adaptation, Goal Attainment, Integration and Latent Pattern Maintenance, in 'The Social System', Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc, New York.

ⁱⁱ However, among the small group of decision-makers (elected members) in the Panchayats, it was observed that there were certain individuals who act independently. Out of the four presidents, one case can be stated here, who was elected from an unreserved constituency and was an influential person in the locality. Being a retired teacher and from an upper caste (*Khandayat*) with large landholding, he commanded a respectable position in the village. Compared to the other three presidents, who were elected to reserved seats, his way of functioning was more independent. The interference of outside members in Panchayat decision-making in this case was also very low.

ⁱⁱⁱ Similar cases of influence of husband/family members and local elites on the elected representatives were also found in the Panchayats of Karnataka (see Inbanathan, 1999; Vijayalakshmi and Chandrasekhar, 2002).

^{iv} Pasayat and Barik (1998) from their study of Panchayats in Orissa also observe that in rural Orissa, the representatives belonging to the disadvantaged groups have remained subordinate to the dominant caste members.

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