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Mudit Kumar Singh

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Politics and Community Narratives of Participation in Local Governance of Rural India

Dr. Mudit Kumar Singh¹

Visiting Research Scholar,

Social Science Research Institute, Duke University

mks61@duke.edu

Postdoctoral Fellow,

Climate and Energy Policy Research Lab, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian
Institute of Technology Kanpur

¹ Dr. Mudit Kumar Singh is a Fulbright alumnus and currently a Visiting Research Fellow affiliated with Duke Network Analysis Center, Social Science Research Institute, Duke University. He has been doing research, advocacy, and teaching for the last twelve years in India. His recent studies apply an evidence-based mix-method approach to explore linkages between social capital, social networks, and public participation in the context of small groups, local governance, and online platforms. He currently works at the Climate and Energy Policy Research Lab at IIT Kanpur while writing his upcoming book on community participation and local governance.

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Abstract

Public engagement is vital to achieving good local governance. For the last three decades, donor agencies such as World Bank (WB) have emphasized community participation and local government. Thus, understanding the micro-level ethnic and political nuances of community participation in these local governing institutions is essential. India has the second-largest population in the world with a long history of local governance reforms, so it offers valuable insights into these connections. Using the data on local elections and the narratives gathered by face-to-face interviews and participant observation, the paper highlights that people are losing interest in local participation. Councils have many vacancies, and contesting elections for council members is declining. This will increasingly centralize decision-making at the local level years of decentralization reforms would be lost. The narratives from select villages suggest further decentralization of financial powers among the village council members is needed. Additional funding alone would not increase community participation in villages; a devolution of financial powers at the village committee level must accompany additional funding in order to make local governance more inclusive.

Keywords: *Participation, villages, local governance, power, India*

1. Introduction

Academics and policymakers have long argued for increased participation in local democratic institutions and open public meetings. These local democratic institutions hold the key to participation in development interventions and are governed by the locally elected representatives and bureaucrats who (directly or indirectly) regulate all kinds of open public meetings. Scholars have stressed engaging local political institutions for improved community engagement, and the relationship between the two has been previously studied (Mansuri & Rao, 2013; Sanyal & Rao, 2018). At the same time, scholars examining community participation in development interventions have talked of involving the community with various community engagement tools while avoiding friction with local politics (Chambers, 1983; Cohen & Uphoff, 1977; Parfitt, 2004; Wald, 2015). Thus, literature intersecting decentralization, local institution building, and participation emerged with a deliberative democratic turn (Chambers, 2005; Crook, 2003; Dreze & Sen, 2002; Hickey & Mohan, 2005; Mohanty et al., 2007; Stiglitz, 2002).

The comprehensive development school argues that project participation broadly promoted and supported by civil society organizations (CSOs) can only achieve limited success. Without democratic participation, local political institutions cannot be made more accountable or transparent on a larger scale (Stiglitz, 2002). While the literature has highlighted social barriers and the politicization of community participation in local governance (Beaman, 2007; Bryld, 2001; Khera, 2005; Rao & Singh, 2003; Wald, 2015), there have been few significant attempts to understand public engagement mediated through decentralized governing institutions that transfer power and responsibility from the state to the community; such institutions shape community participation (Kruks-Wisner, 2018; Rolfe, 2018). This study contributes to these ongoing debates by examining community participation in local village council elections and open meetings in select villages of northern India. Using a mixed-method approach, this study analyzes the community engagement conditioned by the local governing institutions, *Panchayati Raj* Institutions (PRIs), in Uttar Pradesh (UP)—India’s largest state by population (over 200 million).

2. Linking Community Participation and Local Governance

According to Arnstein (2019, p. 24), participation is “the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future.” This quote indicates the requirement of a democratic mechanism to redistribute power favouring the poor. Related literature points out political influences conditioned by the local socioeconomic environment (Chhotray, 2004; Raghunandan, 2012; White, 1996). A

few empirical studies have examined the impact of socioeconomic variables on participation in project interventions; however, less attention has been given to political variables (Agrawal & Gupta, 2005). Some other literature on participatory development indicates that it is impossible to avoid external intervention in a local community devoid of power politics (Chambers, 1983; White, 1996).

Broadly, there are two different conceptualizations of community participation in the literature: as a 'means' and an 'end.' Failing to distinguish between these two concepts can lead to differing perceptions of the relationship between the community and intervention programs and popular participation (Parfitt, 2004). Participation as a means, for example, can be seen as a way to increase information sharing and access to resources to ensure better project outcomes and increased influence by the community (Cohen & Uphoff, 1977; Khwaja, 2004; Paul, 1987). As an end, participation gives control of resources to the community by empowering the marginal poor (Chambers, 2005; Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Kanji & Greenwood, 2001). While conceptualizing participation, these works primarily focus on community welfare project-based interventions that intend to avoid friction with the local polity. At the same time, some scholars have highlighted the political dimension as a crucial factor shaping forms of participation at the grassroots level (Hickey & Mohan, 2005; Rolfe, 2018; Stiglitz, 2002; White, 1996). It is also argued that the elite capture on community participation increases monitoring costs and corruption in policy interventions (Olken, 2007).

At a local level, building decentralized local governing agencies to achieve community participation is one of the top priorities of development interventions (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). However, building such institutions requires careful consideration of local polity and social conditions. Indeed, some thinkers argue that powerful local elites influence community participation processes, often working against the interests of socially marginalized groups, and it is believed that marginalized groups would want to replace the dominant elite class (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Hickey & Mohan, 2005). This approach echoes the Marxist perspective of conflict between ruling and deprived social classes, which can ignore individual-level psychological fears and costs involved in such conflicts, especially in the context of open meetings in developing countries such as India. In India, local elites often control the participatory process and local governing councils, and often, their formal or informal consent is required for any external intervention. Hence, conceptualizing participation without engaging the local political dimensions will result in an incomplete assessment of community engagement at local levels.

Elite capture and brokerage, in principle independent of state and federal elections, shape the participation of the local community in open village meetings. Sanyal and Rao (2018) argue that local polity adversely influences these open meetings following the polls. State election commissions conduct the polls every five years under India's Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) system. The PRIs involve two stages of community participation, first in elections and then in open meetings regulated by these elected representatives. However, due to limited election data, these elected positions in village councils have not yet been empirically examined. Barrett and Zani (2015) assert that understanding local governance and voting mechanisms is essential for an inclusive local democracy. Therefore, because elected representatives regulate these open meetings, the linkages between participation in elections and open meetings are an important consideration. This study seeks to examine these linkages by assessing the participation of villagers in electing the council of villages, followed by understanding the community view of achieving participation in local village democracy. It also adds to the continuing debate on participatory community development with case-specific insights from Indian villages.

2.1. Research Questions

In light of the above discussion, it becomes imperative to understand participation in the broader realm of political democratic institutions run by locally elected representatives who, in turn, regulate community participation in open meetings. Within this context, this study seeks to answer two main questions. First, how far has India succeeded in inducing participation in local democracy through the local electoral systems? Second, is the decentralization aimed at villagers fully realized through the local democratic system? This study examines empirical indicators from elections and the community perspective of participation in local governance through open meetings to investigate these questions.

2.2. Context of Local Governance in Rural India

Over the last two decades, there has been emerging literature discussing the evolution of PRIs and their reform in India, keeping the people involved as a central focus. Raghunandan (2012) noted that southern states and West Bengal had been commonly focused upon, while Uttar Pradesh, the first state with PRI legislation and one that has undergone many administrative reforms, has received very little attention. Furthermore, despite being the largest state by population and sending the most representatives to the Indian parliament, the state ranks low on several development indicators. In PRIs, the village governing body is the Gram Panchayat (GP). The

electorate, made up of all village residents over 18, is called the Gram Sabha (GS). The GS members elect the GP Chief (*Pradhan*) and 9 to 15 village council members every five years. GS participation has to be improved to empower the rural grassroots communities, thus holding GPs accountable (Dreze & Sen, 2002). A similar structure prevails at higher levels, where an elected individual heads a committee (village council) at intermediary (block) and district levels, but this study will focus on the village level.

The literature related to Panchayat politics and changes discusses electoral reforms, decentralization, and devolution at great length (Alok, 2013; Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Ghorpade, 2002; Mohanty et al., 2007; Raghunandan, 2012; Robins, 1967; Sharma, 2001). The majority of these studies have argued that caste and gender-based social divisions are the primary reason the marginalized cannot affect decision-making in PRIs (Chhotray, 2004; Ray, 2009; Singh, 2018; Verma, 2005, 2016). There are various challenges regarding women's underrepresentation and proxy representation by their male counterparts, and female participation remains a significant issue in North Indian patriarchal society (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Raghunandan, 2012; Singh, 2018). Participation is also a central theme in this literature, highlighting the importance of public engagement in the decision-making process as a crucial feature of good governance. Recognizing low levels of participation as a problem, a report on decentralization (endorsed by the Government of India) recommended that increased funds would increase the frequency of open meetings in villages (Unnikrishnan, 2015).

Other studies have focused on socioeconomic factors to explain variations in citizen-state engagement that vary with community locality (Auerbach & Kruks-Wisner, 2020). Kruks-Wisner's (2018) study of 105 villages in Rajasthan develops the concept of 'claim-making,' defined as "[an] action—direct or mediated—through which citizens pursue access to social welfare goods and services...to protect and improve well-being and social security" (ibid., 124). This study suggests socioeconomic status is not the sole deciding factor on who is active in this type of citizen-state engagement. Despite socioeconomic similarities, the motivation to vote and participate in debates regarding access to these services is not always homogenous. As the motivations behind public engagement in these studies stem from various factors, a study on participation in PRIs requires an in-depth examination of the various factors beyond social status that motivate this participation, alongside an examination of the local governing mechanisms themselves.

3. Methodology and Data

To examine community engagement in democratic governance structures, voter turnout in elections and the competitiveness of the elections themselves are good indicators (Keing, 2009). States can stimulate public engagement through local decentralization mechanisms for welfare policies and service delivery (Ghazala Mansuri & Rao, 2012; Kruks-Wisner, 2018), so these too are important factors to consider when examining participation in local elections and village council meetings. Likewise, measuring vacant positions in the local governing system sheds light on community participation in local governance. If locally elected councils—which constitute village committees and regulate open village meetings—have high numbers of vacant positions, it is reasonable to assume a lack of interest in local elections and a lack of full electoral representation in the councils themselves. This suggests not only a problem with community engagement and electoral participation, but also with the functionality of the local democratic system itself.

3.1. Data sources

The data on Panchayat elections was obtained from the State Election Commission website of Uttar Pradesh. The study uses the secondary data available from the State Election Commission, Ministry of Panchayati Raj, and State Finance Commission, and further uses primary data from a field study of the Allahabad district (now Prayagraj) in the state of Uttar Pradesh. The following sub-sections discuss the sample and data collection process in more detail.

3.2. Selection of Sample Units and Variables

The study used vacant seats in PRI elections to measure the democratic deficit in electoral participation. The first indicator was the number of contestants for each electoral seat in the villages. This second indicator measured the degree of democratic contest for the *Pradhan* (village council chief) and village council membership positions. These indicators reflected the level of engagement in local polls, i.e., whether the PRI system achieved the constitutional mandate of filling all of the seats (*Pradhan* and other members) in each village council.

The proportion of vacant positions and contestants in elections at the village level was used as a proxy to measure the community representatives' participation in the villages' PRI elections. After adding vacant and uncontested positions, the Allahabad district falls near or above the upper quartile (Q3) in all three indicators: vacant, uncontested positions, and both (vacant and uncontested combined). The high proportion of empty and uncontested seats indicates that PRIs cannot ensure participation at the village level's first electoral stage (i.e., low involvement). Due to this democratic deficit, the district of Allahabad was chosen for further examination at the level of

blocks and villages.

3.3. Selection of Blocks, Villages, and Households

The 20 blocks of the Allahabad district were divided into three quartiles based on their performance in the employment guarantee scheme (Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Act – MNREGA). The scheme has a mandate of bottom-up planning through village meetings. Hence, the ratio of households (HHs) that applied for a job vs people getting a job was used to proxy participation in open meetings across these blocks. From each quartile, one block was randomly selected. Three blocks were selected out of the three strata of 20 blocks using stratified random sampling. Two villages were then chosen at random from the lists of each block. Hence, a total of six villages were selected for the HH interviews. During the fieldwork, it was found that one village had no meeting, so another village was selected from within the same block, bringing the total count to seven villages.²

From these seven villages, I interviewed the head of the households from 135 HHs. A diverse pool of households was purposively selected from each village, containing HHs supporting the political party of the chief of the village (*Pradhan*), as well as HHs supporting the opposition leader. Since open meetings and participation in these meetings are the dependent variables in this study, when the information on the meeting was saturated from a village (e.g., 8-10 HHs reported no meeting or shared a similar experience in open meetings), another village was selected.³

The study recorded gender, caste segregation, and elite-brokerage relationships in interviews and village observations, as caste, education, and gender are widely discussed in the relevant literature (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Sanyal & Rao, 2018). The study reported the community narratives from the sample of seven villages, highlighting their satisfaction and concerns with PRIs. These narratives help explain and contextualize the data collected on vacant positions at the GP level in PRI elections.⁴ Questions were posed regarding the frequency of open meetings, HH attendance, and meeting participation. The interviews also contained two open-ended questions concerning the participatory local governance mechanisms of PRIs; (i) ‘What are the problems with the

² Further detail on these selections is available on the Harvard repository (M. Singh, 2021) and related published work (M. K. Singh & Moody, 2021).

³ Mostly, there was a low frequency (0-2 against 7-8) of open meetings in each village and vocal participation or interest in meetings was limited to a few households (supporters of *Pradhan* or poor people seeking benefits of a scheme). So, to have a variation in responses, a new village was selected for HH interviews after getting similar responses of no meeting or no vocal engagement from a set of 8-10 sampled HHs in a village.

⁴ Details on the questionnaire are available in the related published work (Singh, 2021).

Panchayat system?’ and (ii) ‘In your opinion, what should be done to improve the system so that people can participate in the open meetings?’ Respondents were also given the ability to report ‘inactive village councils, no/or low frequency of meetings’. To handle the data and conduct analysis, SPSS and R studio were used. CSS selectors, an add-on in the Chrome web browser and R studio, helped curate the data from the State Election Commission and census websites. I conducted interviews with 135 HHs and translated them into English for this write-up. The results of the empirical fieldwork analysis on attendance in open meetings and per-effect are available in the related published paper (M. K. Singh & Moody, 2021).

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Secondary and Metadata Results

The State Election Commission (SEC)⁵ data on the 2015 Panchayat election indicates that 18.68% of GP post positions remained vacant, and one-third of the 75 districts of the state had more than 24% vacant seats. Fewer than ten districts (<14%) were near 0% vacant positions. This high number of vacant positions indicates a serious problem in the functioning of the PRI democratic system at the grassroots level. The State Finance Commission (SFC)⁶ also reports through its survey that only 14% of villagers (N=4800) confirmed Intermediate Panchayats (IPs – block-level Panchayats) contributed to the village development works. This indicates that IPs are mostly not contributing to the village-level Panchayats. The records for GPs were also discouraging: There were multiple indicators used to determine village performance and community engagement – including village works finalized in village meetings, contributions of IPs and District committees to development works, MNREGA schemes determined in open meetings, etc. The responses were recorded on a scale of 1 to 5, ranging from No, unsatisfactory, Good, uncertain/can’t say, satisfactory. Clubbing the favourable responses (satisfactory/Good) suggests that only 1-31% of respondents in the previously mentioned report rated GPs as satisfactory/good, based on the critical parameters of GP accountability, such as work done in MNREGA and impartiality in beneficiaries’ selections. This is not encouraging, as UP has had a three-tier panchayat system since 1947, and the state has adopted reforms over time while implementing decentralized panchayats polls since 1995. The narratives from the field survey will shed light on the ‘why’ and ‘how’ aspects of these results.

⁵ Data compiled from the web portal of the State Election Commission, available at: <http://sec.up.nic.in/ElecLive/votingresultdashboardPradhani.aspx>, accessed on 20 October, 2016.

⁶ State Finance Commissions are constitutional bodies that allocate resources to the State’s Panchayati Raj institutions in terms of taxes, duties, and levies to be collected by the state and the local bodies. <https://panchayat.gov.in/en/state-finance-commission>

4.2. Narratives, Cases, and Observations

Villagers often reported a low frequency of open meetings, 2-3 times a year, compared to the expected rate of 6-12 a year reported by the PRI representatives at block levels. These open meetings should identify policy beneficiaries, awareness campaigns, and monitor and evaluate ongoing works. Since there are many vacant positions in village councils, it becomes challenging for the village chief to organize frequent meetings. The Panchayat committee members only sign off on the records of meeting minutes without dissent or resistance as they have no power to influence the signatory authorities (*Pradhan* and village secretary at the village Panchayat level). As evidenced by the secondary data, the incompleteness of Panchayat committees only adds to the challenges in maintaining these democratic practices. As noted by respondents in the interviews, this is one of the reasons for their disinterest in village council membership elections.

4.2.1. Caste and Gender-Specific Dynamics

Caste affinity is often decisive in rural India, and people are more likely to favour their caste groups. However, in PRIs, due to binding reservations, new inter-caste dynamics have emerged. The community and its leaders reported their insights in interviews.

In a discussion with a group of villagers, a 62-year-old Other Backward Caste (OBC – relatively higher caste than that of the newly elected village *Pradhan*) community leader said,

Our village is separated from the big old village that was headed by one of our own caste. He has been winning since the last two terms but never took the pain to come to us. The new Pradhan is not from our caste, but he is new and more friendly. We would expect the benefits to reach village people.

Two of the old community leaders from Schedule Caste (SC), in the presence of two of his neighbours of the same caste, said,

Community leaders from our caste also got corrupted who got the power in the previous election...they have become puppets to the officers and leaders...our leaders have sold our votes to the powerful.

These two previous statements given by local community representatives highlight the changing caste affinity in the realm of power positions granted by PRIs. The Scheduled Caste communities, who participated in the meetings, reported participating mainly to benefit from projects. They also said that merely thumb impressions are taken on the meeting minutes in exchange for the benefits of welfare projects. For the official records, the village *Pradhan* and secretary need to show the decisions are taken by a majority in open meetings. So, to show the consensus, they gather signatures/thumb impressions from the powerless village committee members. A widow awaiting

her Indira Aawas Yojana (IAY)⁷ house said,

I followed up with Pradhan several times but only got assurance and put my thumb impression on the paper... those who voted for him get the benefits early.

The *Pradhan* from the village reported that documents are with the block officials, awaiting funds. He also claimed that there are insufficient documents to prove the eligibility of villagers to take advantage of any scheme. Overall, there was hardly any occasion when the villagers of lower caste groups reported giving suggestions for village development-related works. However, on a rare occasion, vocal opposition was reported by a low caste (SC) community leader. An SC male above 50 years of age from a village that reported no meetings said,

I am giving some time to Pradhan...he has to do our welfare; otherwise, I can go to the block and even to the local politicians.

Contrary to this claim, however, other villagers reported that the man had sold community votes to the *Pradhan* himself. This highlights a problem in which an individual may come forward to speak up for deprived groups, but, due to the powerless village councils in the PRI voting system, ends up negotiating the aggregate community interest with the *Pradhan* and the secretary (village bureaucrat) instead. The incident again reflects inter-caste dynamics, differing from the case discussed earlier. Here, the *Pradhan* is from the upper caste, and the community leader is from a lower caste. This represents cooperation and negotiation between power holders and communities where caste plays a role in mobilizing votes, but does not translate beyond elections.

In rural north Indian society, patriarchy is very dominant and visible in electoral representations, and the observations of this field study were no exception. Gender roles are still very dominant in everyday social life, which extends into the political sphere. Husbands play an active proxy role for female representatives. Husbands of elected female representatives responded during the interviews, and the representatives remained inside or silent. The practice of proxy by husbands and photos of husbands in political imagery paints a gloomy picture of women's representation in the PRI system. This patriarchal behavior is standard in many north Indian states, and PRIs still have a long way to go to secure active representation for women.

4.2.2. Councils and Power Dynamics of PRI system

No village council studied in this fieldwork was fully functional. Monitoring and evaluation were

⁷ IAY is a housing scheme for poor people run by the Government of India. More information is available at <https://www.india.gov.in/indira-awaas-yojna>

reportedly dependent on bureaucrats. The respondents also pointed out the weaknesses of village councils and elected ward members. In a group of five people, consisting of past and present village council members, a 58-year-old male respondent said,

[The] Pradhan and secretary have all the committee's financial power, so our suggestion is not valuable. If we say anything against them, either they would give token money asking to favour their decision, or they could go on with the decision based on majority among 13 members of Panchayat...so why should only 2-3 members take all the pain to protest. Who would want rivalry by opposing the majority of other members?

The villagers were also disappointed with the IP members and block development councilors (BDCs). These positions were introduced in 1995 to decentralize PRIs. For many of the respondents, the creation of powerless BDCs has only increased corruption and burdens on the state. BDCs cannot organize meaningful developmental works in the villages; they have only encouraged new political rivalries, clientele, and corruption avenues.

One of the *Pradhans* belonging to the SC category, who won his election against an open seat in a village, said,

Gram Panchayats have become more vulnerable in the three-tier system. We have a 20% share of the total budget. In contrast, block and district levels share 40% each. We, as Pradhan, also get a meager amount of 3500/- a month that too does not come under honorarium or salary and is adjusted in Gram Nidhi (a village-level aggregate fund allocated by the Government) itself. We are threatened for fake inquiries if we don't give a share to block level and district levels...they would just point out any flaw by the rule book to harass us...from where would we get the shares if not from schemes...increasing signatories will only increase share and more corruption in PRIs.

The aggregate picture suggests more influence is given to GPs, but the comparative ratio of the total numbers of the units at every level, and the shares received, is less than what it seems in aggregate. The block officials work under the acute political influence of elected members at a higher level. The majority of the community, and a village representative, reported that these higher-level officials forced a village-level bureaucrat to scam INR 60 lakhs. Under the influence of a coalition between locally elected representatives, the person was convicted of the crime and later committed suicide. There are likely large amounts of black money under circulation, which primarily comes at the expense of programs running in village Panchayats as remuneration does not seem to motivate contesting elections.

Three out of the seven interviewed village representatives did not know the complete names and numbers of the village committee, as mandated by the Uttar Pradesh Panchyati Raj Act for GPs. It was observed that some of the *Pradhans* (including two interviewed in this sample) were guided by village development officers at the block level regarding budget estimation and recording

meeting minutes. On the one hand, providing a helping hand to untrained, democratically elected individuals at the village level may be good practice, but on the other hand, it increases the risk of misleading the untrained representatives in favor of the bureaucracy and hierarchy operating above the village level.

4.2.3. Insights from an Open Meeting

To understand the process and structure of an open meeting, I attended one held on December 16, 2016, at a government school in a surveyed village, 3.8 kilometers from the headquarters of a block sampled in the study. There were 16 participants, including the audit team sent by block.⁸ The summary of the entire process from the time I was informed of the meeting is described below.

During the field survey in an SC concentrated hamlet of one of the old GPs, an individual received a phone call from the *Rojgar Sevak* (RS)⁹ inviting him to attend a social audit in the school. This individual complained they were informed of the meeting only to fulfill the auditing formality. I, along with this individual, tried to motivate people to come along to attend the social audit, but villagers were profoundly discouraged and complained that attending would be of no use, so no additional villagers could be convinced to join. Eleven village people (8 female and 3 male) attended the meeting. 10 of the attendees had worked in MNREGA, including a 14-year-old girl; further investigation revealed that she worked in her mother's place because her widowed mother had been ill for some days. After half an hour, two women left to do their household chores. No one else from the GS was part of the meeting. The team nominated an older male (in his fifties) to chair the meeting. The meeting agenda was to audit the work of the brick-kiln road from the house of *Firoz* to the house of *Imtiyaz*, on which 10 people had worked.

The audit team reviewed muster roll, job cards, and registers while confirming the proposed works and the length of working days. The chairperson himself had worked for six days. The audit team pointed out that RS was unaware that a worker might be registered with the block to benefit from multiple programs. The meeting was over, and the social audit team went along with the Panchayat Secretary to audit the worksite. Despite attempting to join this worksite audit, they requested (insistently) I leave and continue with my HHs survey. This experience suggests that only those who are immediate beneficiaries attend the meetings but remain passive participants. After the meeting, interaction with the community leader suggested that he was very active in village development works seven to eight years ago but gradually lost interest due to emerging political rivalry and corruption. The middle-aged community leader said,

⁸ The social audit team was comprised of five people, including one female, and one from each of the three administrative caste categories (schedule caste, other backward caste, and general), as mandated by the state. The team is appointed by the state in each block to annually audit employment guarantee scheme.

⁹ The *Rojgar Sevak* is a person recruited through a MNREGA employment guarantee scheme at the village-level to facilitate job applications, record completed work, and run open meetings.

I lost my interest in the committee...people in power stopped listening. Only [the] Pradhan and village Secretary have all the financial powers...One can not easily oppose Pradhan for any wrongdoings as the person will be appropriated or threatened. If ward member gets any financial power, it is possible for them to get corrupt as well...but the people from the very ward could easily build pressure on the ward member for some honesty on the ground.”

This statement reflects some reasons for disinterest in the local village committee member elections. His statement echoes the earlier statement by a current village committee member, as discussed at the beginning of this sub-section. Talks with a member of the social audit team indicate that there was a lack of mass awareness and curiosity about the audits. The audit team also pointed out the need for proper documentation of the works and linking the workers with schemes.

4.3 Discussion of Results

The observations and community narratives suggest that corruption and power concentration in the hands of the few are another problem and social barrier. The entire participatory promotion system has become highly political, and has given rise to new elites and intense political rivalries at the local level. Sadly, this political contest is absent at the grassroots level, where the people are losing their interest in village council membership due to these issues. A few influential people can leverage their political and bureaucratic contacts, and overall community participation is highly politicized. The insights provided by this analysis about the Indian local governing system have broader applicability to other local governing systems discussed in similar literature.

This study shows that, alongside problems such as caste and gender, the politicized participation in local open meetings (Mansuri & Rao, 2012; White, 1996) stems from the skewed power distribution from the constitution itself. The caste and gender scenario from the south Indian village assembly studies (Sanyal & Rao, 2018) shares similar conclusions of the varying possibility of vocal and silent community participation abilities in village assembly meetings. Without much reflection on local politics, Agrawal & Gupta (2005), in their empirical research of governing forest community resources in the Nepal Terai region, argue that participation in managing shared resources is highly dependent on the socioeconomic status of the community. At the same time, Olken (2007), through studies of 600 Indonesian villages, finds that elite capture in grassroots level participation potentially increases monitoring cost and corruption in the policy projects. Although Nepal and Indonesian conclusions are specific to particular policy interventions of forest and road construction projects, they share a similar concern of elite capture and corruption at the grassroots

level that are driven through socioeconomic classes. The induction of participation through PRIs now needs further power distribution correction. In the present scenario, empowering local communities requires giving power to their immediate representatives. The mere creation of powerless constitutional positions in village council members is insufficient to sustain healthy democratic efforts. Instead of facing power reversal, immediate community representatives in village councils need to be empowered to remedy poor governance. Without change, we will continue to see discouraging levels of local community participation.

5. Limitations

The study had no external funding or volunteers for the field surveys, so it had a limited sample size. The community opinion might vary in other societies where the community could traverse their social and spatial boundaries to interact with the state. The state could reach them with decentralized systems, as suggested by (Kruks-Wisner, 2018). Other relevant studies in the South Asian region (Agrawal & Gupta, 2005; Olken, 2007) help draw broader conclusions while adding to and contrasting with the results from this micro-level fieldwork.

6. Conclusion and Future Research

This study offers valuable insights through community narratives from select villages that suggest decentralizing financial powers among village council members as a critical factor for democratic community participation. One of the vital contributions of this study is the evidence of vacant positions in village councils across multiple districts of the state, which are likely to produce skewed participation in open meetings, supposedly regulated by the elected village council. Thus, the study helps contribute to the understanding of community participation in a broader local governance perspective. On theoretical terms, the study underscores the need for local democratic institution strengthening, and examination of local elections is essential to improve community participation in the local governing mechanism. The villagers find it difficult to challenge power holders directly; instead, they suggest a fiscal decentralization of the village council to mitigate elite capture and brokerage. Furthermore, the classic social barriers caused by gender and caste still play a pivotal role but have posed a new participation challenge within the new power structure. The gender bias in the local political structure remains difficult to overcome, as it is deeply rooted in patriarchal cultural dominance.

This paper provides valuable insights on stimulating community participation and concludes that providing more resources from the top, such as funds to villages to hold meetings, would not

induce more open meetings (in contrast to Unnikrishnan, 2015). Instead, it may increase the likelihood of corruption. Therefore, an important question demanding further attention is how to best implement decentralization to empower community representatives at the local level.

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