

## 8 · The infinite agenda of social justice: *dalit* mobilization in Indian institutions of local governance

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### Introduction

Over the past two decades, states around the world have been promoting participatory local democracy through new institutional forms of local governance. While the new institutions promise to include the poor and the marginalized in decision-making, encouraging them to exercise their option to participate politically, there are caveats, issues and challenges that characterize local governance institutions and the processes that take place within them. These statutory spaces, referred to as 'invited spaces', have opened up possibilities for grassroots participation in decision-making on local development and governance; however, as state-created and regulated spaces, they also suffer from many limitations. Consequently, their actual potential to encourage substantive participation by marginalized populations has often come under searching scrutiny (Cornwall and Coelho, 2007).

In India, following a constitutional amendment in 1992, local governance institutions called *panchayats* were formed in rural areas. *Panchayats* are responsible for ensuring economic development and social justice for rural populations. A third of the seats in *panchayats* are reserved for women, a third for *dalits*<sup>2</sup> (low castes) and a third for tribals (indigenous people) in order to ensure their membership and participation. However, the mere act of making people who were hitherto excluded from political participation and decision-making formal members of a local government has not guaranteed their actual inclusion in these institutions.

Even as their representation is sought, agendas are finalized and, in many instances, actual decisions are taken before their opinions are solicited. Often, there is such disparity in the power and influence of *panchayat* members that it becomes very difficult for less powerful members to influence a decision. Hence, we find women excluded from a predominantly male space; illiterates excluded because the literate can control the documents, records and accounts; and low castes and the poor excluded because the locally dominant caste and economically

powerful groups continue to occupy the positions of power in these state-created institutions (Mohanty, 2007).

The rhetoric of participation – or, more accurately, of the touted participation – by the marginalized remains a constant in the state version of participatory democracy. This is promoted through what is proclaimed as participatory local governance, but the state does nothing to equip people for this participation. Government declarations of participation, therefore, have remained full of empty rhetoric, making it necessary for people to mobilize and make their own claims. Civil society often provides spaces where people learn the skills to articulate, represent their interests, organize and lead (ibid.).

This chapter presents the findings of a study conducted in Sabarkantha District Gujarat, where the deep-rooted practice of having certain people marked as ‘untouchable’ has left the *dalits* on the margins of society and polity. There will be a discussion of *dalit* mobilization in *panchayat* institutions – spearheaded by local civil society organizations (CSOs) – aimed at securing social justice for them. This is one of the critical tasks that local governance institutions must undertake to ensure local democracy. I will critically examine the interaction between *panchayats* which have been promoted by the state as participatory democratic institutions and the mobilization of poor, low-caste people seeking social justice. This will illustrate the democratic deficits that continue to plague institutions despite large-scale mobilization, and will show some of the democratic gains that can be achieved when the most marginalized of groups mobilize.

The central question of this chapter deals with the democratic outcomes that flow from mobilizations for social justice that take place within institutions created by the state to promote democracy. By analysing the democratic outcome of the *dalit* mobilization in *panchayats* in Sabarkantha, I will focus on three critical dimensions that constitute a democratic outcome: democracy within local governance institutions, democracy in social relations and democracy in the distribution of development resources to *dalits*. The research reveals that substantial gains have been made in ensuring the redistribution of developmental goods and services to *dalit* communities, but that the institutions themselves have remained largely closed. Institutions have been resistant to accepting *dalits* as equals, and the occasional *dalit* attempt to equalize social relations has yet to make an impact on the institutions. The study reveals a number of paradoxes in the practice of development and democracy as it exists in local governance institutions and in the social setting where the institutions are located.

The chapter is divided into four sections. The first provides the location, issues and methodology of the study. The second contains an overview of participatory local governance institutions: how social justice is framed within them and the issues surrounding *dalit* participation in them. The third is a discussion of three critical facets of *dalit* mobilization: mobilizing for institutional efficacy, mobilizing for developmental redistribution and mobilizing to widen the social space for equality and dignity. The final section raises some issues concerning the paradoxes of democracy and development as evident from the interaction between *dalit* mobilization and local governance institutions.

### Locating the study<sup>3</sup>

Sabarkantha is one of the twenty-five districts that comprise the state of Gujarat, in the western part of India. The 2001 Census recorded 7.1 per cent Scheduled Caste<sup>4</sup> (SC) population in Gujarat and 8.3 per cent SC population in Sabarkantha. The prominent *dalit* sub-caste groups that constitute the SC population in Sabarkantha are *vankars* (weavers), *chamars* (leather workers and tanners), *chenbas* (who make bamboo products), *tirgars* (who, in the past, made bows and arrows), *turis* (barbers; they also beat drums during festivals), *garupandyas* (who perform religious rituals for the *dalits*) and *valmikis* (village garbage cleaners). *Valmikis* are the lowest in the sub-caste hierarchy of the *dalits* and are considered the 'lowest of the low'. *Dalits*, in addition to their caste occupations, also work as wage labourers – many of them in agriculture or construction. Some of them have small landholdings, but the produce from their own fields is not enough on its own to support them.

When local governance institutions were formed following the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992, the government of Gujarat also enacted special legislation to create social justice committees (SJs) to function as *panchayat* subcommittees. SJs were created by the state to promote the agenda of social justice, which includes the values of equality and participation, and the egalitarian distribution of development resources, so that marginalized populations (particularly the *dalits*) could overcome domination and exclusion. However, the political and administrative will of the state ended with the amendment, and any power the committees have has remained on paper only. In some villages, committees were set up but did not function; in others, they were not established at all. In principle, the *panchayats* are to work on the agenda of social justice by recruiting members from *dalit* communities through election. A third of the seats in each *panchayat* are reserved for *dalit* members, and *dalit* members are to make up the