Employing a view of culture as a communicative phenomenon involving discursive engagement, the authors argue that the struggle to break free of poverty is as much a cultural process as it is political and economic. The authors analyze public meetings in Indian village democracies, gram sabhas, where villagers are constitutionally empowered to make decisions regarding budgetary allocations for village development and beneficiary selection for antipoverty programs. They examine 290 transcripts of gram sabhas from South India, looking at how they create a culture of civic/political engagement and how the definition of poverty is understood within them. They highlight how gram sabhas impart discursive skills and civic agency and illustrate how the poor deploy these skills in a resource-scarce and socially stratified environment. The intersection of poverty, culture, and deliberative democracy sheds light on cultural processes that can be influenced by public action in a manner that helps improve the voice and agency of the poor.

Keywords: deliberative democracy; village democracy; poverty; culture; India; gram sabha; panchayat

Public deliberation has long been celebrated by political theorists as a hallmark of true democracy, and it is increasingly being adopted

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as a tool for resource allocation among poor communities in the developing world (Mansuri and Rao 2004). In this article we examine a major attempt by a country to address poverty through a mechanism of deliberative decision making that aims to equalize voice and political agency across stratified social groups.

The Seventy-third Amendment to the Indian constitution, ratified in 1992, vastly increased the role of village councils, or gram panchayats (GPs), in rural governance. While the ostensible goal of the amendment was to decentralize the functions of government, it did so by explicitly attempting to equalize political power by reserving quotas in political offices for women and underprivileged castes. It created scope for the exercise of voice and agency by different social groups by mandating that all village councils should hold gram sabhas (GSs), public meetings, at regular intervals, acting as the village’s parliament. In these meetings, it was envisioned that citizens would discuss and ratify core decisions made by the panchayats on the selection of beneficiaries for antipoverty programs and on budgetary allocations for the provision of public goods and services. The funds controlled by these village councils and their jurisdictional powers were accordingly increased. Since then the GS has become arguably the largest deliberative institution in human history, at the heart of two million little village democracies that affect the lives of seven hundred million rural Indians. Thus, the practice of democratic politics, with its attendant deliberative rituals, election cycles, and political machinations and negotiations, has now become part of the quotidian landscape of India’s rural life.

The panchayat system has been widely studied by scholars of Indian democracy interested in the nature and effectiveness of decentralized governance (e.g., Krishna 2002; Besley, Pande, and Rao 2005; Jayal, Prakash, and Sharma 2006; Bardhan and Mookherjee 2007; Heller, Harilal, and Chaudhuri 2007). A vast body of research considers the effect of this policy on the political participation of poor and socially marginalized groups and on the quality of governance. However, we argue, the institution of the GS should be seen as a policy intervention of much broader relevance that has implications that go far beyond concerns with governance. The GS aims to facilitate a culture of civic engagement among economically and socially disadvantaged groups, where this engagement is primarily discursive—that is, based on discussion—and discussion is meant to act as a vehicle for guiding and monitoring resource redistribution. Given that the ability to participate in discussions is based on voice, which in turn is regulated by one’s social and economic position, the GS creates a platform where various unequal groups come together in a highly stratified social context to exercise their voice. So the GS has the potential of having as many social and cultural implications as it has political and economic ones and should, consequently, be of significance for understanding the relationship among poverty, development, and culture in many parts of the world.

From a comparative perspective, one can think of the U.S. welfare system and Indian village democracies as somewhat comparable in that they both operate as mechanisms for allocating benefits to socioeconomic disadvantages groups. There are also parallels between the target populations for federal public assistance in the respective countries. In the United States, the poor are disproportionately
composed of African Americans, while in India they are largely composed of members of lower castes (also known as dalits, literally meaning “oppressed,” or scheduled castes\(^1\)) and tribes, who occupy the bottom of the symbolic and social hierarchy embodied in the caste system. In both contexts, despite the differences in their histories, the poor share some fundamental similarities. In addition to economic deprivation, both groups have been historically subject to persistent discrimination on the basis of their marginalized identities. Both have been targets of negative and essentializing assumptions about behavioral and attitudinal traits. Both are the subject of affirmative action policies, which are more extensive in scope in India than in the United States. Finally, both have been historically blocked from exercising their voice in the public sphere and have lagged behind in their levels of political participation.\(^2\) All of these factors have led to deep “in/equality of agency” (Bao and Walton 2004)—that is, differences in the voice and opportunities for redress that separate these groups from the dominant ones. It is this last deficiency that the Indian government attempts to rectify by reserving quotas for underprivileged castes, tribes, and women in local politics.

However, despite these similarities, there is a major difference between the two redistributive systems in the levels and natures of civic or political engagement required from individuals to gain access to publicly funded benefits. The U.S. welfare system requires minimal public engagement, is highly bureaucratic by nature, and vests complete authority and monitoring capacity in the hands of the state. The individual beneficiary is a powerless subject, left at the discretion of the state-appointed social worker. Additionally, becoming a beneficiary of the U.S. welfare system comes at the cost of social stigma associated with subscribing to a perceived “culture of dependency.” In contrast, the Indian GS model requires a high level of political engagement that, at least by statute, requires the active exercise of voice in framing and defending demands in the eyes of the state vis-à-vis competing individuals and groups. The GS also brings together local individuals and groups who vary in their economic, social, and cultural capital and, therefore, creates a space for public interaction among the dominant and the dominated, the literate and the illiterate, and political veterans and neophytes. The public are simultaneously subject and stakeholder, being vested with the authority to monitor the activities of the local state and demand accountability. The fact that the GS as part of the panchayat system is mapped onto an electoral space—staffed by elected representatives who for the most part belong to mainstream political parties—makes discursive engagement in it relatively free of stigma, a performance of ideal citizenship.

Our analysis of public discourse in the GS, therefore, is an examination of the extent to which a policy of redistribution targeted to the poor, a policy that creates a space for the poor and socially marginalized to exercise voice, can facilitate a culture of civic/political\(^3\) engagement among them. The eventual goal of such an analysis, in spirit, would be to examine if this structural opportunity to exercise voice can alter the “terms of recognition” (Appadurai 2004)—that is, the conditions and constraints under which groups participate in society and negotiate with the social norms that frame their lives. Accordingly, in our analysis, we ask the following questions: How, if at all, do rural men and women deliberate in these meetings,
and about what issues do they deliberate? How, for instance, does poverty and its attendant habitus shape deliberation? Do identity and social hierarchy permeate into the political sphere, which is meant to guarantee de jure equality? Does providing an arena for citizens to deliberate complicate the state’s attempt to have a quantifiable definition of poverty and encourage citizens to challenge it? In answering these questions, we look at how poverty shapes the culture of deliberation and how public discourse shapes the understanding of poverty by contesting its meaning.

Our goal here is twofold. Theoretically, we wish to contribute to the scholarly literature on culture and poverty (Lamont and Small 2008) by proposing a view of culture that amalgamates sociological perspectives on culture with the human capabilities approach in the interdisciplinary scholarship on development (Sen 1985). Empirically, we wish to contribute to the field of scholarship concerning deliberative democracy (Fung 2004; Gutmann and Thompson 2004; Elster 1998; Bohman 1996; Mansbridge 1980) by bringing in rich qualitative data to a field that has been largely restricted to theoretical discussions about the ideal nature and purported virtues of public deliberation. The data are drawn from qualitative analysis of the recorded proceedings of a large representative sample of 290 randomly selected GSs held in four states in South India.

In the second section of this article, we outline our understanding of culture and contextualize it within past and present usages of culture in the literatures on poverty and development. In the third section, we outline relevant parts of the deliberative democracy literature and highlight the implicit assumptions about culture embedded within it. The fourth and fifth sections include details about the context and data and method. The sixth section, in which we present our substantive discussion, is followed by our conclusion, which highlights our important findings and elaborates on their implications.

Culture in Poverty and Development

Scholarship in the fields of culture and poverty, which has a long tradition in the United States, and scholarship in culture and development, which is more internationally focused, have contentious histories. We touch upon these fields briefly to highlight a commonality in the way culture has been used (and misused in some cases) in both and to point out some emerging useful approaches. In the former, culture has been loosely understood as patterns of behavior, or norms and values, regarding work, marriage, family, and childbearing. Often actual behavior and underlying attitudes or ethics have been confusingly conflated. Culture and race have also been used interchangeably. The combined effect of this way of thinking, best encapsulated in the “culture of poverty” theories of the 1960s, has been to suggest that some groups, particularly the poor, have a set of internalized detrimental behaviors that give rise to a self-defeating culture, which acts as a vicious cycle to trap members of these groups in persistent poverty, even in the face of opportunities to escape it. On very similar lines, some development
scholars studying the question of why some countries develop while others lag behind have suggested that some communities have cultures, beliefs, and practices that are detrimental to progress (e.g., Harrison and Huntington 2001). They have argued that “culture matters” because societies immersed in traditional cultures are ill suited to market-driven development and are critically hindered in their pursuit of economic growth and progress. This thesis bears close kinship to the notion of an adverse “culture of poverty.”

Departing from these approaches, we propose a view of culture as a relational phenomenon—among individuals within groups, among groups, and within ideas and perspectives. Culture is concerned with identity, aspiration, symbolic exchange, coordination, communication, and structures and practices that serve relational ends, such as ethnicity, ritual, norms, and beliefs (Rao and Walton 2004). It is a set of contested, malleable, and quotidian attributes, constantly being re-created and reimagined by the changing dynamics of human connections and interactions. Thus, communication is at the heart of culture, and patterns of communication both shape and are shaped by economic, social, and political inequalities. The struggle to break free of poverty and inequality is, consequently, as much a cultural process as it is political and economic. It is centrally related to voice, modes of discourse, and the degree of access to the public sphere. Thinking along these lines, we believe, has important implications for policy, since it suggests that in addition to equalizing opportunity, public action to address poverty would need to find ways to equalize voice and agency.

Among recent conceptualizations, the notion of cultures as repertoires of practices, beliefs, and attitudes that individuals mobilize at the time of action is useful for our purposes. Particularly instructive is the idea of culture as a “toolkit” of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct “strategies of action” (Swidler 1986). This understanding of culture closely resonates with the idea of culture as a capability—the constraints, technologies, and framing devices that condition how decisions are made and coordinated across different actors. We add to this toolkit of cultural capabilities by arguing that styles of political discourse, that is, ways of articulating demands in the process of political participation, are another key component of culture. Discursive styles are shaped by poverty and its associated deprivations, such as lack of literacy and access to the public sphere and resources. But at the same time, particular forms of state intervention, like the GS, require the poor to strategically deploy discursive styles to seek resources that are expected to ameliorate poverty. Our goal, therefore, is to understand the discursive styles used by the poor in their civic/political participation, or what we call the “political culture of poverty.”

Culture in Deliberative Democracy

The relationship between culture and democracy is not obvious or made explicit in much of the theoretical and empirical scholarship on democracy. In theory, democracy represents a set of procedures governing decision making that
ought to operate effectively regardless of culture and context. We argue here that, in reality, the notion of democracy, particularly of the deliberative kind, is based on implicit assumptions about culture and that a concern with culture is intrinsic to achieving a nuanced understanding of the nature of public deliberation.

A democratic system, “radical democrats” envision, will go far beyond keeping a check on the power of the few and attempting to respond to the demands of various constituencies. Participation in a democratic system is expected to lead to a process of positive self-transformation by catalyzing a set of desirable changes in the individual. These are the following: enhance the individual’s facility for practical reasoning, make people more tolerant of difference and more sensitive about the need for reciprocity, and enhance people’s ability to think and act with autonomy on the basis of their own preferences and to engage in moral discourse and make moral judgments (Warren 1995). Some scholars also expect the deliberative process of democracy to produce a consensus on preferences regarding final ends and means, that is, a “unanimous preference” determined through the power of reasoning (Elster 1998, 112). It has indeed been shown (Dryzek and List 2003; List et al. 2006) that deliberation makes individual preferences more “single-peaked” and amenable to aggregation. In theory, then, participation in a deliberative democracy is expected to produce more cognitively competent and well-informed people with an enhanced capacity for consensual action.

In theory, too, the fairness of this system would be guaranteed by the existence of an “ideal speech situation,” a social structure based on discursive equality. This structure is composed of a “public sphere” where individuals are a priori equal and free of the distorting effect of inequalities or coercion; every person with the competence to speak and act is allowed to participate; and everyone is allowed to question and introduce assertions, and to express his or her opinions, desires, and needs without fear of repercussion (Habermas 1990). In cultural terms, the kind of community envisioned is “the ideal of a moral community, one whose norms and practices are fully acceptable to those subject to them, a society based not on imposition, but on the agreement of free and equal persons” (Moon 1995, 143). In such a community, social behavior is never “agonistic”; that is, behavior that is observed among opposing entities—for example, fighting, threats, attack, appeasement, submission, and retreat—is not present.

The theoretical scholarship cited above implicitly suggests that, as far as the proper functioning of democracy is concerned, there is a right kind of culture (conducive to deliberation) and a wrong one (not conducive). The “right culture”—complete and voluntary acceptance of social norms by all in a system free of hierarchy—is expected to provide a fertile basis on which democracy will sprout and flourish. The “wrong culture” is an inequitable system, marked by the unilateral imposition of norms by dominant groups on groups possessing less clout or considered ritually polluted and hence inferior. Some scholars, such as Lyotard (1984) and Luhmann (1982), have criticized Habermas’s emphasis on reaching consensus via deliberation, interpreting the attempts to achieve such consensus in practice as a new form of hegemony that may potentially mask the interests and narratives of marginalized groups (see also Sanders 1997; Young 1996).
However, despite such theoretical criticisms, the ideal of deliberative democracy tends to maintain its intellectual dominance in thinking about how democracy should indeed operate in the real world. This dominance is reflected in the few existing empirical studies, like the extremely insightful ethnographies of Mansbridge (1980: rural Vermont) and Baiocchi (2005: Forte Allegre, Brazil), which emphasize deliberative, consensual agreement.6

A useful cultural approach to democracy, we argue, has been suggested by scholars of communication, who have pointed out that, in cultural terms, democracy itself is an “artful practice” in that it involves “the formal and informal cultivation of competencies of judging, reasoning, appreciating, performing and responding” (Barnett 2003, 199). Scholars have duly emphasized the importance of deconstructing “representation”—asking “Who speaks?” given that speaking “depends on an individual’s position within regulated systems of discourse” (Barnett 2003, 16)—and focusing on the “technologies and techniques of persuasion” used in speaking (Morris 1998, 230). This idea of democracy as an artful cultural practice reinforces our argument in favor of considering discursive styles as part of a cultural toolkit and political participation through discursive engagement as a capability, both likely to be fundamentally influenced by poverty.

Therefore, our main empirical goal is to examine the ideal of deliberative democracy against actual practice, a task so far only beginning to be undertaken by empirical scholars (Delli Carpini, Cook, and Jacobs 2004; Thompson 2008), and to analyze public deliberation through the lens of culture and poverty. In keeping with our goal, we raise and answer the following questions: Does the empirical reality of India’s social and cultural life deviate from the ideal view, and if so, how? Is representation in the supposedly deliberative institution of the GS patterned by inequality and identity? If they are not deliberative in the ideal sense, do these discursive negotiations further democracy or the cause of the poor in any manner at all? We examine who speaks, what they say, and how they speak—that is, the modalities through which narratives are presented.

Context: Poverty and the Technology of Governance

The Seventy-third Amendment built upon a legacy of legislation that stemmed from the 1882 Resolution on Local Self-Government initiated by the then-Viceroy Lord Ripon. Ripon’s main intention behind this legislation was to facilitate “political education” and “training in the work of representative institutions” in a manner that built on indigenous systems of village government (Tinker 1967). Ripon’s tenure as viceroy did not last long enough for him to ensure that his reforms were sustainable, and subsequent colonial administrators de-emphasized democratic village government. But during India’s early twentieth-century struggle for independence, gram swaraj (village self-rule) became a key tenet of Mahatma Gandhi’s political philosophy and was consequently seared into Indian nationalist ideology. Based on the notion that it would concretize Gandhi’s vision of village self-rule, the Seventy-third Amendment received widespread support across all
Indian political parties and regions. The amendment made deliberative processes via the GS a cornerstone of village government, thereby creating a state-sponsored public sphere. Thus, in rural India, this sphere was not organically derived but was rather mandated from above by national legislation. Therefore, public participation in discursive negotiation toward problem resolution is a governmental technology deliberately instituted and managed by the state—a fact that blurs the boundary between civil society and the state (Gupta 1995).

Overall, the cultural context within which the deliberative institution of the GS is embedded reminds us how far removed it is from any idealized notion of the public sphere. Rather than being a monolithic moral community, India encompasses a pluralism of values, ethnicities, faiths, and caste groups represented by communities varying in size, symbolic social prestige, and economic and political power. These communities possess unequal economic, cultural, and social capital and compete for political power. In GS meetings across India, such negotiations are targeted to achieve a means of survival for individuals and families and, at best, a path to upward social and economic mobility. In this cultural context marked by inequalities and interdependencies, negotiators use their established caste and community identities as resources—a kind of capital—to stake claims to their due share.

One notable exception is the state of Kerala, one of the four states in our sample. In Kerala, which enjoys near universal literacy, a well-established cadre of Communist Party workers conducted a “people’s campaign” to train citizens in deliberative planning processes, which resulted in remarkably effective local government (Heller, Harilal, and Chaudhuri 2007). This campaign built on years of progressive left-leaning rule and effective land reform, sharp reductions in social inequality, high levels of civic participation, and extremely effective human development investments. In Kerala, moreover, where it is mandated that 40 percent of the state’s budget be allocated via GPs, these local bodies have substantial resources. Yet in Kerala, as elsewhere, the GS’s primary function as a part of the nationwide governance system is to select beneficiaries and allocate public goods.

In terms of their location in the structure of governance, GPs and GSs are the lowest level in a hierarchy that reaches upward from the village to the county (block), the district (zila), the state, and the central government in Delhi. This entire system is staffed by elected representatives and works within the framework of the Indian constitution, which adopts affirmative action policies to address social and economic inequalities. The state, therefore, plays an active redistributive role. Wealth is redistributed to the poorest citizens through a technocratic process using lists of “scheduled castes” (SCs) and “below-poverty-line” families generated via surveys. Quotas for elected positions within the government, including seats for GP presidencies and ward representatives, are reserved for SCs in proportion to their population in the village, and a third of the seats are also reserved for women. Quotas are provided for SC enrollment in educational institutions and for government jobs. In addition, a slew of antipoverty programs
implemented through GPs are meant to allocate resources (such as concrete houses, toilets, and small plots of land from common property resources) exclusively for SCs.

Additionally, several other benefits are allocated to people defined as below the poverty line, known now in every Indian language as “BPL.” Depending on the state, families classified as BPL get access to houses, toilets, subsidized food, jobs, cheap credit, and scholarships. BPL criteria, which vary from state to state, include landlessness, unemployment, and quality of housing. These “objective” criteria are typically assessed on the basis of a questionnaire designed by the state government and implemented by the GP. The creation of these lists is the government’s attempt at establishing a process of commensuration, transforming different qualities into a common metric of poverty (Espeland and Stevens 1998). It is a policy response to the complex task of measuring deprivation in order to redistribute resources and emphasizes economic criteria rather than caste identity. Consequently, it disqualifies people of disadvantaged identity groups if they are relatively better off. However, to counterbalance the GPs’ power over this process, most states require that the list of poor families be ratified by the public at the GS meeting. Thus, the GS is placed in an adjudicative role, and public deliberations on this issue reveal an interesting tension between a desire to participate in and perfect the process and, occasionally, interrogating the validity of some of the criteria used or the people selected.

Overall, citizen-state relationships in rural India exist more in the matrix of a gift economy than in the realm of rights and responsibilities. Poor accountability mechanisms, lack of resources, and the identity-based nature of electoral politics result in a culture of supplication and benefaction (Gupta 1995; Mehta 2009). Political parties engage in the politics of patronage and maintain well-oiled networks to exchange public and private goods for electoral support (Bardhan 1988). The vast majority of rural residents do not pay their taxes, and a GP’s financial resources are mostly derived from grants from higher levels of government. These grants are almost all “tied,” in that they are required to be allocated to particular groups of people (SCs, BPL, etc.) or to be used for particular purposes (such as building private toilets or houses). Untied funds are practically nonexistent. A GS’s ability to make allocation decisions is therefore limited. It can decide where to locate a road, a water pipeline, or some other public good. It can ratify the selection of beneficiaries for targeted benefits. And it can serve as a clearinghouse for information. Most discussions in the GS, therefore, arise in the form of a demand or supplication. Villagers ask the GP to provide a public good in a particular location or to recognize someone as poor enough to deserve private benefits.

Since this discursive space, this “public sphere,” is embedded within an electoral space, with politicians attempting to curry favor with different groups, political incentives preclude attempts to suppress voice. By silencing a person, a local politician may risk alienating an entire voting bloc. Consequently, the GS creates a relatively level discursive field. It briefly releases people from inequality traps and allows them the freedom to speak. Such freedom has the
tendency to spill over outside the GS into everyday life. Therefore, GSs are troublesome for local elites, who at times try to ensure that they are not held. In 2001, 25 percent of GPs did not hold even one GS over a yearlong period (Besley, Pande, and Rao 2005).

**Data and Methods**

Data for this study are drawn from tape recordings of 290 GS meetings in four South Indian states: Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu. The tape recordings were conducted by one or two field investigators who were instructed to dress in a simple manner and locate themselves in an unobtrusive spot at these meetings, after having obtained the permission of the GP president. The recordings were then transcribed into the corresponding local language, then translated into English to facilitate coding. Each transcript also includes information on attendance and the caste, gender, official designation, and social position of speakers (elected representative, school principal, villager, etc.).

Table 1 provides summary information from the transcript data. The GS lasts eighty-four minutes on average and is held about an hour after the scheduled time (which is typical of public functions in India). On average, eighty-three people attend, a tiny fraction of the village population, which ranges from two thousand to ten thousand depending on the state. Besley, Pande, and Rao (2005) report results from a regression analysis of household survey data from the same sample and show that, after controlling for household characteristics and village fixed effects, illiterate individuals, SCs, the landless, and the less wealthy are more likely to attend the GSs, while women are less likely to attend them. This is primarily because of the GS role in selecting BPL beneficiaries, from which the disadvantaged families are more likely to benefit. However, Besley, Pande, and Rao also show that this extreme form of selection is less acute in villages with higher literacy levels, where GSs have more representative participation.

Table 1 shows that a third of the attendees, on average, are women and 37 percent are SCs. However, women and SCs do not speak much at the meetings. The “indicator” variable has a value of 1 when any person in a category speaks in a GS, while the “intensity” variable is the time that any person in that category speaks as a proportion of the total length of the GS. With this metric we see that 68 percent of GSs had at least one woman speak, but women spoke on average for 9 percent of the GS’s length. Similarly 60 percent of GSs had at least one SC person speak, but they spoke on average 11 percent of the time.

The typical GS meeting begins with a presentation by the president or the secretary of the GP. This is followed by a public discussion open to all participants during which, typically, villagers mention their demands and grievances, and the secretary or a member of the GP responds to them. These discussions generally center on routine problems, which are summarized in Table 1. The discussions are dominated by issues related to drinking water and village roads, followed by
Concerns about employment and agriculture feature less prominently. Discussions also address such complex problems as the legitimacy of paying taxes when obligated funds fail to arrive and the fairness of caste-based affirmative action as a principle of resource allocation.

### TABLE 1

*Gram Sabha* Characteristics and Topics

| Characteristics                          | Average | Number of Observations |
|------------------------------------------|---------|------------------------|
| Duration (hours)                         | 1.41    | 287                    |
| Delay (hours)                            | 1.03    | 186                    |
| Attendance                              | 0.83    | 288                    |
| Fraction women in attendance             | 0.33    | 287                    |
| **Women talk**                           |         |                        |
| Indicator                               | 0.68    | 288                    |
| Intensity                               | 0.09    | 288                    |
| **Fraction SC/scheduled tribes (ST) in attendance** | 0.37    | 284                    |
| **SC/ST talk**                           |         |                        |
| Indicator                               | 0.60    | 184                    |
| Intensity                               | 0.11    | 184                    |
| **Topics**                               |         |                        |
| **Drinking water**                       |         |                        |
| Indicator                               | 0.98    | 290                    |
| Intensity                               | 0.28    | 290                    |
| **Roads**                                |         |                        |
| Indicator                               | 0.93    | 290                    |
| Intensity                               | 0.21    | 290                    |
| **Education**                            |         |                        |
| Indicator                               | 0.81    | 290                    |
| Intensity                               | 0.13    | 290                    |
| **Electricity**                          |         |                        |
| Indicator                               | 0.68    | 290                    |
| Intensity                               | 0.07    | 290                    |
| **Housing**                              |         |                        |
| Indicator                               | 0.70    | 290                    |
| Intensity                               | 0.08    | 290                    |
| **Health**                               |         |                        |
| Indicator                               | 0.69    | 290                    |
| Intensity                               | 0.09    | 290                    |
| **Employment**                           |         |                        |
| Indicator                               | 0.18    | 290                    |
| Intensity                               | 0.02    | 290                    |
| **Agriculture**                          |         |                        |
| Indicator                               | 0.18    | 290                    |
| Intensity                               | 0.01    | 290                    |
We highlight a limited selection of public discourse culled from a vast array that includes discussions on diverse themes. We focus mainly on discussions about distributive justice, including caste-based affirmative action and criteria for BPL selection, which in our view is one of the areas where the voice of the poor is most crucial.

Discussion

In this section, first, we show how the contextual realities of poverty and social inequality shape the culture of deliberation in the GS, that is, the themes introduced and the discursive styles observed. Second, we explore how deliberation acts as a vehicle for questioning governmental definitions of poverty and creating a shared, intersubjective understanding of what it means to be poor. Our focus is on how poverty influences the concerns and discursive styles of the poor and the implications of this participatory exercise for cultivating their voice.

How poverty shapes deliberation and the discursive styles of the poor

An excerpt from a GS meeting in Dharmapuri, Tamil Nadu, reveals the patterns of participation and the identity of the usual interlocutors in a typical GS. This meeting, serving a village with a voting-age population of 563, was attended by only seven people: three elected members of the GP (the stand-in president, the clerk, and an officeholder) and four villagers. All of the seven attendees were men. Among the villagers, Mariappan and Muniraj are both SCs. Muniraj embodies the agonistic voice and highlights the pervasive, historically rooted inequality that is perpetuated even within the current democratic structure. A third villager, Jayaraman, belongs to the “other backward castes” (OBC). Finally, there is the “president-husband,” who is a member of the “most backward castes” (MBC). In constituencies reserved for female candidates, the female president is often only a statutory head, replaced in her seat of authority by her husband. The excerpt reveals the issues that are of importance and the modalities through which they are presented in the narratives of ordinary citizens.

Jayaraman (male, villager, OBC): There are forty-five families in our village. None of us have any land. We work for meager daily wages. Whatever little we get we spend on our children’s education. But it’s impossible to educate our children up to high school because we don’t have the money. . . . So we request the government to do something. . . . Our whole area is dirty. Even the water is muddy, and that’s what we drink. . . . How many times we have requested for a road near the cremation ground and for the supply for clean water?! We can only request and apply. The rest is up to you.

President-husband (MBC): If there are twenty to twenty-five houses in an area, a ward member should be appointed to represent the area. That ward
member should listen to your problems and must do something to help you . . .

Muniraj (SC): That way we will have the guts to enter this room. If the required ward members are not with us, to whom can we voice our woes? Who will represent us? . . . If the ward member belongs to another community, he won’t even listen to our problems. Earlier there was a time when a backward caste person was not even allowed to sit in the same area with others! The officers and leaders who come here already have a preset plan about what to do and say. You come, sit on the chair, say something, decide among yourselves, and go away. What’s there for us to do?! You’ve enjoyed power for all these years. Why don’t you let us have a turn? . . . We don’t want any problem at the communal level. For us, whether Subban comes or Kuppan comes [common names], it is the same. We vote, but what happens later? Whereas other people get water even before they ask for it, we have to ask endlessly, and even so, our demand is not fulfilled. . . . We don’t want to fight with anyone. But at least there should be someone to listen to our problems. We’ve been without water supply for the past one month. Even the president knows it. He has promised to send water. But the ward member is not allowing us to take water. The water is sent to all his relatives. We cannot do anything to stop it . . .

President-husband: . . . In any competition it’s a rule that one should win and the other should lose. There’s no community-based discrimination or problem. If all of you in booth no. 1 join and vote for me, I become the president. On the other hand, if everyone in the other booths votes for another person, then he’ll become the president. And then what’ll matter is what he can do for those booths that voted for him. Today, among youngsters, the level of public awareness is very high. Anyone can become a leader. . . . Even though there are problems between you two groups, I try to mediate. I don’t encourage communal riots. . . .

Muniraj: Everyone should be treated equally. No one should be treated as inferior to others. We should also be given a chance to sit on the dais. Why should we be denied that right? Just because I talk like this, it doesn’t mean that I fight with you or disrespect you. I am simply voicing my feeling.

The voices heard and unheard in this excerpt reveal the three fundamental cleavages that fracture the Indian public: the social-symbolic-religious divide of caste hierarchies, which is distinctively Indian, and the more generally prevalent economic and gender divides. To understand who exercises voice, how they are positioned, and the significance of their speech, it is first necessary to understand these social divides.

Caste-based divisions have deep historical roots and are still manifest in such practices as physical distancing and symbolic deference. It is noteworthy that these traditional cultural scripts, which until India’s independence legitimized inequality, are now being openly challenged in GS meetings, as witnessed in Muniraj’s angry complaints. Such challenges are not completely new given the
history of caste reform movements in South India. The Lingayat movement dates back to the twelfth century, and many more such challenges to the status quo emerged during the colonial and postcolonial periods. What makes challenges voiced in GS meetings like the above different is that they derive not from the educated elite or spiritual leaders, poets, and philosophers on the margins of society but rather from ordinary villagers embedded in everyday, local structures of inequality. These caste-disadvantaged individuals now have a stake in political participation, even in time-consuming ones like GS meetings. In effect, identity and resource politics have merged into a common struggle in a scenario where caste-based affirmative action is the principle for distributing resources. And reason-giving as a process of claims-making, claims about appropriate ends and means, is frequently replaced by a competition for predetermined resources based on caste and communal identity.

The economic divide in rural India is illustrated by disparities in land ownership that frequently coincide with position in the caste hierarchy. Upper and middle castes (which include OBCs in South India) may own a significant portion of cultivable land in a village, while the lower-caste SCs work as daily agricultural wage laborers on that land. To a large extent, economic disparities determine attendance patterns in these meetings. Typically, the upper castes (the “general” or “forward” castes, referred to below as GC) do not see any value in attending the GS meetings, which they regard as the government’s vehicle to benefit the lower castes by selecting beneficiaries for subsidized goods. When they are present, the GC often try to dominate the meetings by demanding that precedence be given to their needs. The gender divide is best embodied in the GS in the figure of the president-husband and the absence of women. Even when women are present (often in large numbers, especially in the South Indian states, due to their membership in self-help, or microcredit, groups), they generally do not participate as actively or enjoy the same rights as their male counterparts. This fact is evident when they are silenced and their contribution discounted by male authority figures.

Despite the fractured terrain of identity, GSs in India function as Durkheimian “sacred spheres” marking the conjunction of civil society and the state. The ritualized interaction in this sphere gives rise to a community of citizens and a brief moment of “collective effervescence.” This moment allows individuals with disadvantaged identities (lower-caste and poor), like Muniraj, to momentarily discard the stigma of their ascriptive identities and low economic status and to slip into their sacred identity as citizens with equal rights in the eyes of the state. Therefore, as illustrated in the example above, the interactions occurring in GSs have the potential of challenging entrenched social relations. They serve to make the covert “weapons of the weak” overt, expose such “hidden transcripts” (Scott 1990) as the physical segregation of lower castes, and provide a means to challenge them.

The process of making the kinds of claims and complaints cited above may seem ordinary on the surface, but it acquires deeper significance as a vehicle through which poor, lower-caste individuals imbibe a sense of possessing equal recognition as citizens. This nascent consciousness occasionally bubbles to the
surface, as in Muniraj’s vehement request for equal treatment. Such expressions of the “politics of dignity,” which have a deep resonance in Indian political life (Varshney 2000), underlie many material and nonmaterial demands made in the GS. They are demands to reverse adverse “terms of recognition” and be recognized as social and political equals, with a concurrent desire to improve material well-being.

The work of maintaining, defending, and challenging hierarchical social and symbolic boundaries (Lamont and Fournier 1992) is prominent in the discursive landscape of the GS. In contrast to the open confrontation noted above are subversive strategies that test the boundaries of distinction, without calling for immediate change. An example is this interaction in a GS in Medak, Andhra Pradesh, where a lower-caste man uses the offer of water from the community well to tempt upper-caste members to relax the rules of purity and pollution governing their consumption.

Villager (male, SC): In our SC-ST colony, there’s a bore-well that’s flush with water . . . If a tank is constructed, this water can be useful for the entire village.

The offer is made with the knowledge that GC members are unlikely to be willing to drink lower-caste water, scoring an effective political point about discrimination. Challenges and boundary-testing such as the ones described above are civic capabilities that are being newly cultivated by poor, lower-caste individuals as they experience participation in this new arena.

What kind of reaction do these assertions meet, particularly from the GC at whom they are directed? If they are an exercise of voice, are attempts made to silence them? In GS deliberations, the GC are most notable for their absence. When they do participate, they may try to dominate the discourse and establish their privileged claim on resources. For example, in one GS meeting (Chittoor, Andhra Pradesh), a GC person states his demands and uses brute vocal force to assert their primacy over other claims.

Villager (male, GC): We need cemented roads in Brahamana Veedhi [Brahmin street]. We don’t care about the expenses incurred by the panchayat. Our problem must be addressed.

GP secretary (male): The panchayat does not have any money . . . If you want this project, you have to come forward with your voluntary contributions . . .

Villager (male, GC): We don’t care in the least about other development activities. First of all, we need cement roads. That’s it.

The discursive styles of the GC are markedly different from those of the lower castes. Their strident style contrasts with the frequently fawning and pleading tone employed by lower-caste supplicants, showing how different “technologies and techniques of persuasion” are used at different levels of the social spectrum (Morris 1998). The GC villager expresses blatant disregard for the needs of other
groups, brazenly pressing his demand for a public good meant exclusively for his upper-caste neighborhood. Muniraj, the SC villager, on the other hand, affirms his allegiance to the ideal of communal harmony even while strongly objecting to its unjust discrimination against his caste group. In an effort to allay fears that he is trying to rile up communal tensions, Muniraj even stresses that his somewhat aggressive manner of speech is not a sign of disrespect (“Just because I talk like this, it doesn’t mean that I fight with you or disrespect you”). The sharp contrast between the two techniques of persuasion illustrates how discursive styles are deeply shaped by social inequality and poverty, including factors like discrimination, social exclusion, and illiteracy.

The discursive styles of upper castes are not always abrasive. Rather, they are tempered by their economic position. Poor GC individuals use the GS forum to challenge the fairness of caste-based affirmative action, which puts the needs of SCs before those of other groups, regardless of economic criteria. An example from Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, shows how poor GC members left behind by existing redistribution policies can express their dissatisfaction in the context of the GS. OBCs who are socially proximate to the SCs similarly challenge existing policies.

Villager (male, GC): There are harijans people [SCs] here who don’t have homes. They work as coolies along with other people who also have no other option than to work as coolies. However, whereas all the harijans get their dues and facilities, the others who do the same job do not get the same reward as his fellow worker. The government does not give any sort of concessions to these poor coolies, whereas the harijans get all sorts of concessions from the government.

All of these challenges are, in reality, pleas to the government, masked in adversarial language, for a larger share of private and public goods, underscoring the government’s benefactor-to-beneficiary relationship with the public. But in the democratic system, the public as beneficiary is endowed with a moral claim. The following example suggests that villagers understand this as they make a differential request as if asking for alms, then express indignation at being passed over in favor of others’ demands.

Velusamy (villager, male, OBC): I have been residing in this village through several generations and I’ve been asking for a house to live in. They say: “today, tomorrow,” but so far, nothing’s been done. . . . I am sitting here at the mercy of my fate. . . .

GP clerk: Till now houses have been allotted only for the SCs. . . . It hasn’t come for OBCs.

Velusamy: They say that it has come only for the SCs, only for them! Is it that only they are humans? And are we people not human beings? How can you say such a thing! What kind of a panchayat is this? We can’t go directly and meet the officer. We can only make kind requests to our president, whom we believe in. Make some arrangements for me. . . .
Poor, lower-caste women also engage in making demands, and their discursive styles frequently include demonstrations of helplessness or beseeching the state for personal assistance. They vary between making explicitly private demands and, in the most desperate cases, presenting their private predicaments as matters of public concern. In these cases, the GS becomes a site where private needs are strategically expressed as demands for just redistribution. However, often such justice frameworks are questioned and debunked by authority figures using moral arguments to judge private predicaments. Therefore, the GS is a potentially perilous terrain, where “hidden transcripts” are continually dragged into the discourse. The following example from Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, illustrates these points.

Mailaatha (villager, female, SC): You must lay a road for our street. It’s very difficult for the children to walk. You must help us. 
President (male): Your street is not at all a busy street! Your husband is ill and disabled [making it difficult for him to walk]. So you have to hold and assist him [to walk]. We will lay roads if more funds are available. . . .
Savithri (villager, female, SC): I don’t have a husband, and I’m suffering a lot with a child. I haven’t been able to pay my rent for the past six months. I want a house.
President (male): You’ve moved away [of your own accord] after fighting with your husband. . . . We’ll give you a house if they [the house grants] come.

Despite the brisk refusal with which both of these demands are met, it is important to note that individuals such as these who bear a triple burden of disadvantage, being poor, lower-caste, and women, are learning the art of making demands in a public arena that was inaccessible to them even a few decades ago. In addition, they are cultivating the art of appealing for their private needs in a larger justice frame.

In terms of the concerns expressed in the GS, distributional equity is prominent. However, this concern is not restricted to the imperatives of survival and bread-and-butter goods, like free meals and school uniforms for children and subsidized sanitation facilities. It also extends to issues of socioeconomic mobility, such as obtaining greater opportunities for education and employment. Poor, socially marginalized groups use the GS to broach such subjects, which fall far beyond the practical scope of the GS. For example, in the following excerpt from Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, the villager and the GP president debate the un/affordability of an English medium education and whether that hinders a person’s chance to get into the highly coveted civil services, in the context of caste-based affirmative action.

Villager (male): A girl who studies in Mallanad Panchayat corporation school [Tamil medium] cannot match a boy who studies in an English convent school in Coimbatore. Parents need to spend a lot for English education for their children.
President (male, GC): Your concern about how an ordinary student will compete with convent-educated students is valid. That’s why they’ve kept caste as a selection criterion. On the basis of caste, if SCs and STs have lower marks and are older, they’ll still be preferred over forward-caste candidates in the IAS [Indian Administrative Services] selection process. So, with regard to education, nowadays preferential treatment is given on the basis of caste. We should change this system in favor of income-based affirmative action. This is my opinion.

The interesting fact about discussions of this nature is that such matters lie far beyond the purview of the GS. Therefore, in pragmatic terms, it is futile to discuss them in this venue. The villagers know that an extremely complex and contested parliamentary process determines affirmative action policies. Yet the GS provides ordinary citizens a place to think about and voice their concerns about broader policy issues and abstract principles that closely touch their lives. Through this discursive engagement poor villagers participate in democracy and, hence, perform their citizenship.

As illustrated through the various examples cited above, poverty, shot through with material and symbolic inequality, inevitably undermines the idealized neutrality of democratic discourse in the GS and shapes the culture of deliberation. Most notably, an improvised vernacular style of verbal negotiation is emerging as citizens compete for resources, challenge hierarchical social boundaries, and critique principles of affirmative action and distributional equity. These styles include beseeching for benefits and demonstrating helplessness as well as assertive demands and complaints and more directly confrontational or acrimonious styles. However much they may deviate from the idealized rational argumentation envisioned under the deliberative democracy framework, these discursive styles represent the transformation of the GS into a more “level discursive playing field,” which in turn encourages a culture of competitive participation where the politics of dignity are played out, boundaries of caste and class transgressed, and the political power of the poor displayed. Voice, agency, and dignity are publicly reimagined and renegotiated, and as a consequence, the capacity of the poor and marginalized to be full and equal citizens is to some degree demonstrated and momentarily realized.

How deliberation shapes the meaning of poverty

The inadequacy of identifying the poor simply on the basis of ascriptive categories such as caste has led India’s central government to adopt a quantifiable, poverty-based measure to achieve distributive equality. Yet the definition of poverty is hardly obvious or unproblematic, as can be seen in the discursive exchanges taking place in GSs in the four states we studied. In these exchanges, elected GP representatives and the public make a joint effort to understand the definition of poverty and the category of the “BPL beneficiary” as laid out by the government.

Government representatives use the GS forum to keep the public abreast of the state’s efforts to fix poverty by pegging it to certain objective criteria and to
translate it to a common metric of numerical scores by using human and mecha-
nized technologies like surveys, computerization, and color-coded cards.¹⁵ This
complicated process determines who gets counted as poor, how different degrees
of deprivation are ranked, and who gets excluded from receiving government
benefits. Public response to this process ranges from contesting the selection of
certain beneficiaries to demanding a finer calibration of the process and even
critiquing it for fundamental flaws. People often propose particular accounts of
poverty for strategic purposes, revealing their covert desire to be counted among
those in need of government assistance. In fact, when villagers talk about what
poverty means, they are also talking about what they themselves want. The GSs
therefore become sites for the joint production of an understanding of what it
means to be officially classified as poor. Overall, these exchanges, although often
initiated by political figures and GP officials, foster the future capability of the
poor to engage in a critical dialogue with the state on definitional matters.

On the official side, GP representatives spend much of their time trying to
convey to the public the ever-changing parameters of poverty as determined by
the federal government. The following example comes from Dakshin Kannada,
Karnataka:

Ward member (male): How do we check a household’s financial status [for
BPL classification]? We cannot check this as accurately as doing a
mathematics sum. Now, what is the definition of a family? Generally, it
includes a husband, wife, and two children. If the family does not eat posh
food everyday, but has ganji [rice gruel] for breakfast, then they have to
spend Rs. 25-30 [$0.50-60] per day. Some people have unnecessary habits,
like drinking tea. Taking all of this together, a family of four needs at least
Rs. 60-70 per day. But even if they spend only Rs. 50 per day, it still comes
to more than Rs. 12,000 a year,¹⁶ which is the cutoff for determining the
poverty status according to government guidelines. We also have the details
of households having telephone connections or mobile phones. Those who
have these cannot be considered as BPL.

GP representatives also use discussions in the GS to help the public negotiate
the labyrinth of government scores attached to each disadvantaging characteristic,
such as having a physical disability or a socioeconomic handicap (as, for instance,
having multiple unmarried daughters). For example, a household with a physically
disabled person is allotted 10 points, a household with two unmarried daughters
is awarded 15 points, and an SC/ST household is awarded 10 points. The goal of
this exercise is to help individuals convert their subjective experience of depriva-
tion into a poverty score that can be aligned in a rank order of privation, with
benefits going to applicants with the highest score.

In GS discussions, participants also weigh the merits and demerits of different
methodologies for determining the status of the poor. In the following example
from Palakkad, Kerala, we observe a president attempting to explain the shift
from determination by local knowledge and personal preference to impersonal,
objective criteria expressed as numbers.
**GP president (male):** Now, marks are allotted to each applicant. Previously, when Vasu and Chaelo Chetan were presidents, we used to give benefits according to our wish. We knew who the poor people were, and we used to give them the benefits. But now the government has made some rules and regulations based on which marks are allotted to applicants. It’s not like [school] teachers giving extra marks to children they like. Here there are rules. And only based on that, marks are allotted for each benefit. . . If you have any doubts with the marks allotted to you and others, then we can certainly check it out. . . .

In politically mature contexts, GP presidents and ward members sometimes use the discursive space of the GS to critique these federally defined poverty parameters and point out the flaws in the beneficiary selection criteria. In the following excerpt from a GS in Dakshin Kannada, Karnataka, a specific aspect of the poverty parameters comes under criticism.

**GP president (male):** We can ask that the government may have gifted a phone to a poor, aged man. Looking at this phone you can’t declare that he’s well off.\textsuperscript{17} They should try to give the benefits to the right person.

Similarly, in Kasargod, Kerala, a discussant points out a fundamental flaw in the housing allotment policy. This policy, which allocates house-building grants to those who do not possess a shelter, ironically overlooks landless people.

**Ward member (male):** There are many defects in selecting beneficiaries. Usually, we give houses and toilets to persons who have land. If we select a person who doesn’t have land, then we can’t give them a house. Even if people say that they’ll own land after partition [of ancestral land], it’s still not possible. Only if you own land now can you be granted a house.

These examples show how GP presidents and ward members struggle over the definition of who is poor. This struggle arises not only from differences in opinion between the government and the public but also from a lack of consensus regarding the meaning of poverty within different arms of government.

Discussions of this nature prepare the poor to question governmental techniques and tabulations and exercise vigilance over who gets included in the list of beneficiaries. For instance, the example below from Dharmapuri, Tamil Nadu, shows villagers critiquing the census data produced by the government.

**Villager (BC):** Our calculation is correct. The village people took that [census]. But the census taken by the government is not proper. It differs. So the ward members should look into it and add the beneficiaries. . . .

**Villager (SC):** This Palani [name of a villager] is rich. But he’s been added in the BPL list. How’s this possible? This BPL list is wrong.
Such disagreements over who is included in the BPL are generally successful in rectifying errors if the GS vocalizes a consensus around the issue. Discursive exchanges around the BPL category thus play a vital role in creating a shared understanding between the government and the public about the required criteria for being classified as a beneficiary. They also function as a mechanism for monitoring inclusions and exclusions from this crucial list and act as a countervailing force against corruption and nepotism. Moreover, they complicate the state’s attempt at defining poverty as a Cartesian category, precisely estimated and classified via commensuration, by debating the process and exposing its loopholes. The exercise of debating definitions also acts as a training ground for the poor and disadvantaged, who have long been excluded from such fundamentally important debates and decisions. It also serves, perhaps, as a stepping stone to inculcating skills of rational and critical argumentation in the manner imagined by proponents of deliberation.

Overall, frequently competition prevails over consensual deliberation in the GS. As frameworks of decision making about public goods allocation and choices about ends and means, competition and deliberation differ dramatically in at least four broad ways. First, competition is governed by rules of commensuration and selection set by the government, rules that award priority to certain characteristics over others. In some cases, caste identity trumps economic indicators (on the assumption that there is a positive association between the two, which is generally the case but ignores the question of the upper-caste poor). In other cases, like BPL lists, economic criteria are given precedence over caste. The government occupies the role of referee, setting and enforcing the rules. While these rules are not open to negotiation, from time to time they are questioned by groups and individuals who are left behind. In contrast, the ideal deliberative process would assume all people to have equal capacity to articulate their arguments, grant everyone equal rights to do so, and therefore privilege none.

Second, in the competition for resources as carried out in GS, citizens generally address their demands and pleas to the GP president, who represents the government. Although not physically present, the government’s paternalistic authority is recognized as the invisible power deciding winners and losers and bestowing goods and services accordingly. Members of the public usually do not address each other as they would in a true deliberative structure, where participants are expected to establish a dialogue and to jointly evaluate each another’s arguments.

Third, seeking to achieve advantage in the competition for resources, participants in GS meetings use a plethora of articulation strategies. Argument based on reasons is only one of many such strategies observed in GS meetings and is used less frequently than some others. More popular are blatant personal demands, pleas, and deferential requests for private and public goods. In the ideal world of deliberative democracy, however, reason is the only acceptable form for discursive negotiation.

Finally, in a competition, unlike a deliberation, it is not necessary to arrive at a consensus about the ends and means to be pursued or the fairness of the final distribution. In fact, the logic of competition is contrary to any attempt to
recognize the merits of the opponent’s demands, a crucial condition of the deliberative ideal, as it could weaken one’s own claim. In addition, the government’s financial constraints and programs determine the parameters of the discussion. No decision can be implemented without the approval of the higher authority, regardless of the strength of the consensus.

In the GP setting, we have a case not of deliberative democracy but of discursive competition that requires individuals and groups to declare their demands in the hopes of being heard. Those aspiring to be heard, recognized, and responded to employ various discursive means: pleading helplessness, drowning out competing voices, arguing raucously, and threatening protest as well as discussing well-considered reasons. This is the version of democracy that actually prevails in the grassroots of India, where different caste groups live and fight cheek-by-jowl and suffer from varying levels of economic deprivation. In this scenario, competitive speech acts represent a vernacularized style of participation in democratic decision making, which departs from the ideal deliberative style. The scene most resembles a courtroom, where the goal is to win by influencing the opinions of the judge and jury, who in turn determine who will win and who will lose. But even though it departs greatly from the ideal model of deliberative democracy, this exercise toward discursive engagement in the redistributive mechanism is still very valuable as a way of cultivating a capacity for civic and political engagement among the poor and socially marginalized. This engagement also has the potential of helping them to build a wide repertoire of discursive styles over time, which may lead to their greater voice and agency and to better governance as a whole.

Conclusion

This article highlights a relatively neglected aspect of the relationship between culture and poverty—culture as a relational, discursive process, which is affected by socioeconomic and political inequalities and which, in turn, influences them. If pro-poor policy is largely driven by the goal of “equality of opportunity,” we argue that this needs to be supplemented by the goal of “equality of agency” (Rao and Walton 2004) through processes that give voice and agency to the poor. Indeed, cultural processes can be shaped by public action to ameliorate poverty and inequality. Our focus here is an important constitutional amendment in India that attempted precisely such a transformation by instituting deliberative forums, GSs, in all two million Indian villages. The GSs were empowered to make important decisions on the selection of public goods and beneficiaries for antipoverty programs. Within the context of durable inequalities of caste, gender, and religion, these public forums, which can be thought of as a state-engineered public sphere, provide a deliberative space where the boundary between state and civil society is blurred. The GS is hardly a place where participants engage in rational negotiation to reach a consensus with single-peaked preferences. Deliberation is rather a competition between groups and individuals who want a piece of the public pie and employ a wide repertoire of discursive techniques to make their
voices heard. Participants are not interested in reaching a consensus but rather seek to stake their particular claims to the “gifts” of the state.

In this climate, few citizens are listening to one another. Each petitioner argues that he or she most deserves the benefit, whether private necessities or public goods. Each strives to make the decision makers hear and grant his or her plea. The result is a competition based on caste identity and justice rather than reason. In this way, poverty and social inequality have shaped a vernacular style of competitive discursive negotiation within GSs. The competition for state-sponsored benefits, moreover, takes place in the context of changing national priorities, which express themselves in new amendments to policies designed to correct social and economic inequalities. Federal and state “schedules,” for instance, are used to target benefits to discriminated castes, and quantitative surveys are used to identify citizens living below the “poverty line.” Yet as Scott (1999) argues, the rush to classify human populations results in a Cartesian logic that forces unforgiving geometric patterns on categories that are inherently fuzzy. The GS allows this fuzziness to be expressed and observed, if not by the “high state” far away in the state capital, then at least in the more proximate GP. The GS also allows those affected by these policies to express their dismay when state categories fail to take into account the realities they are familiar with. Since one of the functions of the GS is to ratify BPL classifications and to voice complaints about the denial of benefits, it provides a forum where public discourse shapes the meaning of poverty, discrimination, and affirmative action.

As a vehicle for expressing rural India’s understanding of poverty and the state’s attempts to address it, the GS does not always accord with the proximal interests of the state. It rather creates a new “political culture” located within the intersections of the state, the village, and the local matrix of embedded social relationships. By providing a space where opinions can be voiced with relative freedom (a temporarily level discursive playing field), these local forums also help teach people to engage and debate, and to question decisions and definitions of the government and the GP. In this sense, the GS has become an arena where poor, lower-caste villagers, male and female, participate and seek dignity. This process resembles the nature of the higher-level democratic institutions in India, which, some have argued, have been more effective as vehicles for acquiring social dignity than achieving economic mobility (Varshney 2000).

What can India’s experience with the GS teach us about policies to improve the deliberative capacity of the poor?

First, it teaches us that rituals such as the GS work when they are predictable and regular. Regularity ensures that interactions between people and groups accommodate this new space where all citizens, regardless of class, caste, or gender, can voice their opinions publicly in a way that holds the local state accountable. If deliberative forums were ad hoc events, then they could be much more easily ignored, manipulated, and rendered ineffective.

Second, it shows that participatory forums, to provide the right incentive for participation, must have clout. For instance, GSs are empowered to discuss village budgets and select beneficiaries for public programs. This makes them worth
attending, and the more clout they acquire, the higher the incentive for citizens to attend them, which reinforces their credibility. Third, it indicates that from the perspective of inculcating voice, any policy effort must pay attention to the relation between the deliberative and the electoral space. GSs are a deliberative space embedded within an electoral space, forcing local politicians to allow all groups to speak lest they lose votes.

However, deliberative rituals are potentially contentious. By allowing marginal groups the space to voice their concerns, they permit previously hidden transcripts to become public, forcing public discussion on issues that people would rather avoid. They can also shift political power by creating political coalitions between like-minded groups that social norms might have previously prevented from collaborating. All this can disturb the social equilibrium and increase the potential for conflict. In some instances the GSs may also have the ironic effect of making villages less governable by reducing the effectiveness of benevolent local dictators.

Culture therefore is not, as we are often told, a primordially fixed, historically endowed, explanatory variable that is highly resistant to change. It is a relational, communicative process that can be influenced by public policy in a manner that can result in both psychic and material advantages for the poor. Human relations are inherently stratified, and these stratifications are reinforced by acts of exclusion and discrimination that create adverse “terms of recognition” for the poor, depriving them of social, political, and cultural capital. If we recognize such non-economic capital to be as important as human and physical capital in sustaining durable inequality, then it is imperative to acknowledge that equalizing voice and civic/political participation requires just as much attention from public policy as improving access to education and employment. But processes that equalize voice and agency are necessarily cultural; they are relational and communicative, creating the capacity for the disadvantaged to cross over from being passive recipients of public largesse toward becoming active participants in determining their own destinies. Finding effective mechanisms to give the poor voice and political agency is therefore an important way by which a cultural lens can help inform public policy.

Notes

1. These castes were formerly considered the untouchable castes and were listed as “scheduled castes” by the 1935 Government of India Act. They are eligible for affirmative action in education, employment, political offices, and antipoverty programs.

2. The past two decades have seen a sharp rise in mainstream political activism and engagement by lower castes in India (Varshney 2000).

3. We use this term to indicate that this participation is simultaneously civic and political because the GS is a civic space that is mapped onto an electoral space, where panchayat officeholders belong to mainstream political parties and are appointed through democratically held elections.

4. For a fuller account of the history of this mode of thinking and the criticisms directed to it as well as the current state of scholarship in culture and poverty, see Lamont and Small (2008).

5. We hope to make it sufficiently clear that our relational, communicative perspective is orthogonal to the general understanding of the term “culture of poverty” coined by Oscar Lewis, for which he has
been incorrectly demonized; later authors were responsible for using the term to generate unfortunate stereotypes that suggested that the poor had a culture that caused their poverty. See Arizpe (2004) for a history of this.

6. While both ethnographies are optimistic about deliberation, they also reveal complex patterns of engagement. For instance, Mansbridge (1980) suggests that, depending on the context of underlying interests, deliberation should move back and forth between unitary forms suitable for more common-interest situations and adversary forms suitable for more conflicting-interest situations.

7. A few examples: women over eighteen years of age in BPL households are given Rs. 500 (approximately $11) to cover the delivery costs of up to two childbirths; 450 grams of food are given to each BPL house having a child under three years of age; these households also receive subsidized housing and electricity hookups.

8. The government uses several criteria to identify households falling below the poverty line. Some of these criteria, like annual household income below Rs. 11,500, are applicable nationwide, while others are state-specific. For example, in Kerala the criteria are as follows: (1) families that do not have shelter and have less than 10 cents (one-tenth of one acre) of land, (2) those who do not have houses, (3) those who have weekly income below Rs. 300, (4) those without access to sanitation facilities, (5) the unemployed and those having jobs for less than ten months in a year, (6) female-headed households, (7) households with mentally or physically handicapped members, (8) SC and ST households, and (9) those who are illiterate. Families having any two characteristics from criteria 6, 7, and 8 qualify as BPL.

9. Strictly speaking, it is the proportion of the number of lines in the transcript spoken by the category divided by the total number of lines in the GS transcript.

10. The SC data are imperfect because we were able to identify SC speakers in only about a third of the sample, which may result in some significant downward bias. Also, the data do not allow us to identify other discriminated castes, like the “backward castes.”

11. This term is used primarily in phenomenological sociology to refer to the mutual constitution of social relationships and reality. It suggests that people can reach an agreement about their understanding of what they have experienced in their life-world and create a shared world based on their subjective understandings. There is no objective reality that exists outside of this mutually shared subjective understanding of phenomenon. As the term has been used here, it means a mutually shared and constructed meaning of poverty.

12. This transference of authority is a complex issue that requires an understanding of the fact that these women often belong to politically affiliated families where the male members have long been actively involved in local politics.

13. The first time a villager appears in an excerpt, we note his or her name and caste. For an official we include position instead of name and caste, if available.

14. A pseudonym.

15. There are typically two types of cards, yellow and red, indicating whether an individual is classified as above or below the poverty line.

16. This amount is the annual income cutoff below which households qualify as BPL.

17. Possessing a telephone disqualifies a person from the BPL category.

18. Gibson and Woolcock (2008) call this “the capacity to engage.”

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