



Participation and Development: Reflections from a Rajasthan Development Block

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Abstract: An attempt has been made in the paper to understand the complex relation between state and societal forces in the context of local development. Though these forces operate in common space, having similar goals; their relations become highly complex and complicated, partly because they function on different principles, and partly because the boundary that separates state and societal forces have never been clearly demarcated. The result is that their relations become one of ambivalence, cooperation, conflict and negotiation, and they share inseparable but uneasy relations, where negotiation among them becomes part of their everyday life existence. A sociological account of their relation has the potential to throw some important light on the issues related to democracy and development.

Keywords: Development, Politics, Panchayat, State, Civil society, Rajasthan

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The Problem

The relation between societal forces and the state vis-à-vis development projects has remained one of the unending subjects of discussion among academicians, policy-makers, state officials and philosophers. And the failure of development projects, in many cases, has largely been attributed to the overbearing presence of the state in the planning, execution and management of development projects, leading to antipathy and alienation among the beneficiaries of the projects (Scott 1999). This line of argument is based upon the assumption that there is a boundary that separates state from society. However, today there is broad consensus that there is no neat and clear boundary that separates state from society and state and societal forces are transformative and constitutive of each other (Mitchell 1991, Gupta 1995). In

Indian context, state actors like, state bureaucracy and panchayat have a definite role in the policy formulation and implementation of development plans. Among the societal forces, non-governmental organisation (NGOs) and social movements play very important role in the developmental space. But there are some complexities associated with this clear separation between state and societal forces, since the social groups who manage the panchayat and political parties remain inside as well as outside the state system. The complexities increases because unlike the panchayat that are part of the state, and political parties who share close relation with the state; the NGOs and social movements acquire their existence and legitimation in opposition to the state in terms of their ideologies and practice. Thus, the state and societal forces, though they live together, their relations remain uneasy.

Actors and the Field

The data has been collected from the Rajsamand district in Rajasthan state. The area is part of the Aravalli Mountain system, having undulating plane dotted with peaks and valleys. Due to non-availability of arable land, agriculture is not the mainstay of economy, and consequently non-agricultural occupations have become more remunerative. Caste system is the axial around which other social institutions function. The political system is structured around party lines, and panchayat is very vibrant in the area, as after Independence the Rajasthan state has been proactively working for the strengthening of the panchayati raj institutions. There is also good presence of civil society organisations in the form of non-governmental organisation (NGOs). In those days when I was in the field, the area was also the home of an organisation called MajdoorKishan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) led by Aruna Roy spearheading right to information act.

The Methodology

The events described in this paper, were recorded during my stay in the 'field' for more than a year during 2000-2001. I have used Turner's (cited by Swartz 1969) conception of 'field', which he defines as 'composed of actors directly involved in the process being studied'. As a doctoral student, my focus of research was on the relation between democracy and development. As part of the data collection exercise, I attended large number of meetings, like zilla parishad meeting that were held four times in a year, panchayat samiti meetings, and also many meetings the district collector held with district level officials. Panchayat samiti office was my base camp, as this is the 'site' from where most of the community development projects

are handled. The panchayati raj institutions where elected representatives and state officials meet regularly provided the ideal place to observe the relations between bureaucracy and elected representatives. This 'site' (panchayat samiti office) helped to decide which issues, actors and events I should follow, as part of my multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995). I also interacted with large number of state officials, political personalities and NGO professionals. Attending political meetings and other forms of protests that was very much part of the everyday life of large number of activists, taking near panchayat samiti and district collector office, provided me an insight about the way societal forces interact among themselves and with the state. Based upon the facts I generated during my stay in the field, I have briefly summarized some principles about the relation between societal forces and the state in the context of development.

State and Societal Forces Interactions

The 'Non-interference' by the State

One of the first things I noted that the government officials were evasive and not very enthusiastic in dealing with the community development projects. They are aware, as one of the lower-level officials told me, that there are so many stakeholders, and people in general are so much concerned about their personal interests, that every initiative of the government gets stuck in the messiness of socio-political environment. People aspire that development projects should be located in their villages, but the moment the implementation of a project begins, they start playing politics. A hospital that was built in the Rampur village could not be operational for many years, since different factions of the village wanted it to be located where their interest was served, completely disregarding the optimal location.¹ Development projects also become the sites for identity formation and an opportunity to take revenge with the rivals. The same hospital could not be inaugurated and consequently became functional for more than two years, because different factions wanted only their leaders to inaugurate it (Singh 2016). The 'belief' among a section of state officials that the projects which are implemented in the village belong to the villagers, and state should not interfere has something also to do with the hostile environment in which they have to work. For example, in a panchayat samiti meeting, a panchayat samiti member complained to the tehsildar that people were grabbing common property in his village, but the tehsildar responded by saying, that 'if the villagers didn't take any interest in saving the common property, the government

couldn't do anything. The common property belongs to the village and the villagers have to decide the way it should be used'. Another reason for this ambivalence on the part of the officials is what may be called 'non-implementable' rules, in the sense that if the rules are implemented in letter and spirit, it will only create more problems for the officials, and chaotic situation for the institution and its beneficiaries, leading to deadlock in the decision-making. The Rajasthan Panchayati Raj Act in those days, when I was in the field, debarred anyone having more than two children from contesting panchayat election. A contestant who had lost election complained in the Zilla Parishad that a serving sarpanch had become father of a third child. The zilla parishad official kept remain dragging the feet on the issue and deferred any decision. When I inquired about the issue, the official said that if the government implements panchayati raj acts in letter and spirit, there would be elections every month.

There are issues related to, what a panchayat secretary (gramsevak) called the 'irresponsible' behaviour of panchayat raj representatives. The fact is that though these representatives, once elected are integral part of the state, being representatives, they cannot ignore people's aspirations. The problem is that large number of people think that the state can do anything if the people who manage the state wish so. The panchayat secretary told me that when people approach a sarpanch (head of the panchayat) for some favour, the sarpanch, even when he is aware that certain things are not possible as per the rule; just in order not to antagonise the people say that if the panchayat secretary approves something, the sarpanch would also approve. The issue is that if there is any misgovernance, it is not the sarpanch, but the secretary would be held responsible by the government. This secretary had applied for premature retirement. Of course, the secretary was on the verge of retirement, but he was just narrating how the officials were torn between following rules and also obliging politicians. Basically, some of the lower-level officials who are posted in panchayati raj institutions told me that there are so many problems dealing with the panchayat, that only a corrupt official would like to continue in the present job. They were right to some extent, as now a days it is hard to get an official who is working selflessly. In the initial days of my stay in the field, I used to move to government offices, searching for a direction. I met an official in one of these government offices, who helped me getting some documents I was interested in. After two days he expressed his inability to help me. When I inquired why he was reluctant, he was very candid, 'if I keep remain helping you, people would think that I had some personal interest'.²

But it is not easy for the government departments to ignore their involvement in the community affairs, as many offices draw their existence by directly working among

the people. As part of the optimum utilisation of resources, the government discovered that many departments were underworked, and threatened to shut down those departments where there was not enough work. One of the important community development programmes was the pasture development programme, intended to minimise soil erosion, stop human encroachment and provide fodder to animals. But there were many departments, like forestry and watershed that were involved in the implementation of similar projects. Moreover, the NGOs also wanted to work for the people by taking up pasture development projects. Consequently, large number of pasture development projects were completed but majorities of them had failed. The one which was 'successful' had something to do with a section of villagers using pasture development project to deny their political rivals from using the pasture land for open grazing (Mishra and Kumar: 2007). When it comes to failure of the pasture development projects, I discovered that many times people were not interested in the implementation of pasture development projects, and they did not approach the concerned department. These departments, who were looking for projects persuaded the sarpanchs and villagers to allow the common land of their villages to be developed as pastureland. Initially people liked it since during the construction phase some of them were getting employment and other economic benefits. The biggest problem that the officials had to deal with was that individuals whose private lands were located at the margin of the pasturelands, they did everything to derail the project. A boundary wall on the pastureland would stop further encroachments.

This leads to another dimension to the problem. Since the goal of the officials to meet a 'target', their priority does extend beyond commissioning of a project, meaning just getting the projects started or allocating money for it. Once I wanted the watershed map of Rampur village from the watershed department office (the village was one of the sites for the pasture development project), which the engineer gracefully provided me. When I assured him to return the map soon, the engineer told me that now the department does not need the map, since 'our work is over'. The case of Rampur hospital is similar. The hospital was the property of the state government, but after construction of the building the department lost interest in it (Singh 2016). The reason, people opine is, that during the construction of the building, apart from the pressure to meet the 'target', the contractors and the departmental officials were making money, so they did everything to get the building constructed. An official told me that it is not the state, but the contractors who push the for the completion of a project. So, construction work is done very swiftly as it provides monetary benefits to the contractors as well officials. After that whatever good or bad happened to the project, it was not affecting the officials personally.

Once the officials are just interested in getting some work completed, either due to pressure from the government or since the stakeholders are benefitting from it personally, many of the development projects get located at the unsustainable location. The Rajasthan state government in order to enhance the employment opportunities constructed shops in the villages. The shops were to be allocated to the individuals who were below poverty line (BPL), including SCs and STs. The problem got compounded since these shops were located away from the villages. This unsustainable location of projects has something to do with the unavailability of government or common land near the habitation. But the truth is that most of the shops in the villages are opened by villagers in their own houses. In the end, in one of the panchayats samiti meetings, the BDO asked the panchayat secretaries to allot the shops to the people free of cost. Still, many individuals were not interested in opening the shops.

Civil Society, NGOs and the State

The area is the home of a large number of NGOs. While the people heading these NGOs are mainly outsiders and economically well-off, most of the foot-soldiers who actually work for the NGOs are locals and are poorly paid. Large number of 'educated' unemployed youths have find NGOs an avenue to get some gainful employment. The rational and strength of civil society institutions comes from their ability to manage their affairs, including generation of resources on their own, so that their dependence on other institutions, including the state is minimal. But the core issue the NGOs operating in the area face is that they hardly generate fund on their own, and very few are funded by the private trusts. So, ultimately majorities of these NGOs are dependent upon the state for funds. And this dependence upon the state for funds and their urge to remain independent from the same state play most important role in the actual working of these NGOs. This urge for fund brings them closer to the political society. Since the politicians, particularly the MLAs, MPs and ministers have the ability to influence the state in how, whom and where the state's resources are to be allocated, these NGOs share very close relations with local politicians, if not overtly, then at least covertly. Thus, these NGOs become the support system for the politicians, whether a politician has to organise meetings, or availing their services during the elections. In turn these politicians ensure that the NGOs get at least some work from the government. However, the scarcity of fund with the state creates some sorts of competition among the NGOs and between the NGOs and the government departments for work. Here these NGOs take the help of the politicians to convince/force the higher - level officials to make the NGOs

as partner in the development schemes. The state now a days is not interested in appointing full-time employees, so for the government it is economical to take the help of the NGOs and, thus, these NGOs have become low- cost contractors for the government. These NGOs are so much dependent upon the government for funds, and they have to visit the government offices so many times, that many of these NGOs have located their offices near the district headquarter. But there is another type of relation between the state officials and the NGOs. A relative of a district collector was looking for some work. It is not easy to appoint one's relative in a government office, so the collector asked one of the NGOs operating in the district to 'adjust' his relative in the NGO. And the NGO management was very happy to oblige the district collector. Many times, these NGOs are not very comfortable with their dependence on the government and consequently politicians. In order to lessen their dependence upon the state, these NGOs constantly look towards international organisation for funds. In the district headquarter, a group of NGOs had organised a meeting of women's panchayat representatives to educate these women representatives about the rules and working of the panchayati raj institutions. A white tourist was curiously moving around the meeting venue. These NGOs people thought that the white man could be one of the potential donors. The white man was escorted on the stage, and most of the NGOs were showing their works and brochures to him. Only later on they realised that the white man was a tourist.

While the NGOs work for the people, there are other civil society organisations that may be called interest- based organisations, in which a group of people having common interest form an association and act as pressure group to avail some concessions from the government. On the 3rd day of every month, a meeting of Zilla Vikas Samiti is held at the district head quarter that is chaired by the district collector. The 'eminent people' from the district head quarter, including politicians, businessmen and other notables, are its members. Here the bureaucracy and civil society interface take place. The example cited below will throw some light on the relation between the state and private institutions if they are competing for the same space. In the district head quarter, the old bus stand was located on the national highway near the market. A spacious new bus stand was constructed little away from the market. From the new bus stand, if someone had to go to the market, another mode of transport was required, thus increasing time as well cost. The new bus stand was technically functioning and buses used to stop there, but the government buses continued to take passengers also from the old bus stand. The private bus operators were also taking passengers from the old bus stand. Consequently, hardly many passengers bothered to catch the bus from the new bus stand.

The head of the private bus union, who was a member of zilla vikas parishad, 'complained' to the district collector in the meeting that so much money was spent on the construction of the new bus stand but the stand was not being used, and the people were facing 'hardship' at the old bus stand. The nagarpalika chairman said that the city nagarpalika had spent Rs. 30 lakhs on the construction of the bus stand, but people were not benefiting from it. The transport department official opined that being located on the market, the buses get more passengers from the old bus stand than the new one. And if the private buses continued to take passengers from the old bus stand, hardly anyone would come to board the bus from the new bus stand, and the government transport department would lose revenue. It was decided that both government and private buses would from now would take passengers from the new bus stand only and the police was directed to enforce the rule. But the revenue for the government buses dipped, since the private bus operators with the collusion with the police continued to take passengers from the old bus stand. The collector, who is answerable to the state, after sometimes, reverted back his decision. In the zilla vikas parishad meeting, a prominent Congressman from the area wanted that Anubrat (a religious institution) should be allotted some government land for the development of a park. But the district forest officer (DFO) resisted and remarked that these small institutions are too 'selfish'. So, in spite of the best efforts by a senior politician, the Anubrat could not get the land.

An Enfeebled State

State is not a monolithic entity and its different units have different orientation towards societal forces. The following example show how the state while not ignoring the rules, negotiates with civil society institutions so that its ultimate goal of managing the society is not compromised. The MKSS was spearheading a movement to 'expose' corruption in the panchayat. The leader of the movement, Aruna Roy had held a large meeting in a panchayat named Janawad, and claimed to expose huge corruption in the panchayat. The activists of MKSS used to acquire the information from the government and mainly used to look whether the procedures were followed or not³. If there were procedural lapses in delivery of services, it was assumed to be a corrupt practice. There used to be jansunwai (public hearing) and the people used to narrate how they were 'cheated' by the sarpanch and the lower-level panchayat officials. But for the officials, in some cases, it is very difficult to follow all the procedures while delivering to the people. For example, scarcity of drinking water is a major problem in the area. The water should be made available to the

people from April itself, but by the time the fund is approved and released its already July or even August. In the meantime, the sarpanch ensures the availability of water to the people with the consent from the officials, and later on the reimbursement is done (Kumar 2005). But for the MKSS, the reimbursement from the back date is an example of corruption. No one can deny that there is corruption in panchayat, so is the case with many other sections of state and society, but too much emphasis on the procedure had the danger of stalling even the most pressing requirements.

This way of working of the MKSS was resented by the officials as well as the elected representatives, but the officials had devised a way out to deal with situation. The following example will throw some light on how the officials managed to douse the order from the higher political establishment. Under pressure from the MKSS (the leader of the MKSS Aruna Roy shared cordial relation with the Congress Party and a sarpanch told me that she was always after those sarpanchs who were the supporters of the BJP), the government announced that there would be *jansunwai* in that panchayat in a block, which had spent maximum funds for development. The sarpanchs argued that they were being penalised for being efficient. One Bahadur Singh from a panchayat that had spent maximum fund in the Rajsamand block was called by the district collector and was asked to be part of a *jansunwai*. Bahadur Singh was reluctant as people always will find some discrepancies and he would be labelled a corrupt person. But the collector assured that nothing would happen. The *jansunwai* was held in which the political opponents of Bahadur Singh raised some issues. There was a commotion and Bahadur Singh's men did beat up his opponents. When asked, a lower-level official said, that ever thing was in order. In another instance a section of state has to act against another. There are instances where there is collusion between the state officials and the private individuals, that goes against the interest of the state. When the new district of Rajsamand was carved out, many of the government departments started functioning from private buildings, since it was taking time to get the new offices constructed. The education department of the government was also functioning from a private building. But even when the new government buildings got constructed and ample space were available for the new offices, the education department was 'reluctant' to shift to the government building. In the district broad meeting the collector 'ordered' the education department head to shift the department to the zilla parishad building, as the government was unnecessarily paying rent to the private party. The district education officer was not very enthusiastic and only when the collector threatened with disciplinary action, the department moved in to the zilla parishad building. The reason is that the in small cities, very few outsiders stay, and locals commute

every day from their villages to the city. Thus, large number of houses in the small city remain empty. So, these landlords give some percentage to the government department heads to retain offices in their houses.

There are other issues where state takes independence action to enhance its legitimacy among the people. For availing state directed development programmes people need various types of identities and papers. It is also true that, in most of the cases, people have to pay illegally to the concerned officials to get these certificates. For these small, but important things, people keep remain moving around the government offices and here they encounter the state as a corrupt entity (Gupta 1995). Keeping this in mind the district administration started a scheme called '*prasangon ki ore*' (administration going to the village), whereby it is the administration, which would go to the villages, and provide everyone all the documents which the people require at some points of time.

Party and Panchayat

The panchayat remains the most visible institution when it comes to the implementation of local development programmes. But it shares very complex relation with the higher-level politicians, particularly MLAs and MPs. The reason for conflict lies in the control of state's resources. Democratic politics is about extending patronage to the people for vote and support and state's resources become the most important source for achieving this goal. As control over state resources helps the politicians to win the political loyalties of the people, group of politicians, those in panchayati raj and those in higher-level politics try to have better control over the state's resources. While the MLA and MP development funds have given some resources in the hands of these elected representatives, the major chunk of resources is controlled by the panchayat. The high-level politicians feel helpless, as they have no voice in the allocation of panchayat resources, more so when the panchayat representatives are from a different political group. So, the high-level representatives have devised various methods to bypass the panchayat. One such method is the constitutions of various committees that are looking after the work in a particular area, like pasture development committee, water distribution committee, to name a few. The state officials have most important say in the constitution of these committees and these officials are very amenable to the recommendations of MLAs and MPs, particularly if these elected representatives are from the ruling party. These MLAs and MPs put their own men into these committees. In order to cement their hold on power, control over these 'non-political' institutions are a must (Baviskar 1980) Though these committees work under the overall supervision of the panchayat, those associated

with these committees work independently, and resent any 'interference' from the panchayat. This undermines the efficacy and power of the panchayat. For instance, take the case of Self-Help groups (SHGs) movement. The Self-Help group movement is an initiative by the state government to organise women into small groups. The function of this institution is less economic, and more of social in nature, where at least, once in a month, these women who are part of an SHG meet physically and deliberate. Sometimes they also meet in the block headquarter. But since this group is managed by the state, the ruling party minister and MLAs try to create a support base among them. One such large meeting of the women who were part of the SHG in the district were held at Nathdwara, and then C. P. Joshi who was a minister in the state government addressed them. Important thing is that many local BJP leaders were also present in the meeting, since they were associated with the SHGs.

Conclusion

The relation between state and society is one of complexities, cooperation, and conflict, whereas constant negotiations between the organisations and institutions is very much inbuilt in their relationships. The main reason for these disagreements is the principles upon which these entities function. The modern state has to follow neutrality, but the political personalities who need legitimacy from the people, work on partisanship principle. The panchayat, though part of the state is managed by the people and it shares highly ambiguous relation with the state non-elected officials, as well as with the higher-level politicians. The civil society organisations, like NGOs and social movements, acquires their legitimacy from their opposition to the state, but they have to work with the state, not only for funding but also as a partner. There is also dichotomy between higher level officials who oversee policy implementation and lower-level who actually implements the policies. Thus, the differences and conflict are inbuilt part of their coexistence, whereas they share uneasy but inseparable relations. Their ideologies and principle of existence limit their ability to compromise, but since they have to live together, a system develops where they neither live with nor without each other.

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Notes

1. I have published in detail about the nature of conflict and cohesion in Rampur village (Singh, 2016).
2. Dube's (2018) observation about an Indian village may be cited here: 'In their interpersonal relations, people are hypercritical and very sensitive. This leads to perpetual attitudes of fault finding... It is common to suspect other's motives: and not unusual to be always on the alert to read hidden meanings into the seemingly innocent utterances of others' (181-182).
3. This way of functioning is very part of these so-called new movements, who unlike the old social movements do not wish to capture the state to achieve their goals, but want the state to do redress the issues which they are addressing. They target the social domain of civil society and aspire to democratise the society by widening the 'political agenda and mobilizing new social categories' (Offe, 1985).

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