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Democratic Accountability: Social Audits, Public Hearings, and the Politics of Transparency in Rural India

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Abstract: Institutionalised transparency like social audits and public hearings has grown to be a major source of democratic accountability in rural India. Although all these reforms are generally applauded as leading to the increased participation of citizens and reduction of corruption, their operations are highly influenced by the socio-cultural and political realities of the village life. Based on ethnographic studies that were carried out in a Gramme Panchayat in southern India, this paper evaluates how these processes of accountability enable ordinary citizens to experience, interpret, and negotiate the state. The paper places social audits and Jan Sunwai in the anthropology of the state, which creates a two-fold nature of the phenomenon, they are both bureaucratic processes required by the welfare legislation and ritualised performances, which make the state visible, accessible, and morally accountable in the eyes of the community. The analysis shows that caste hierarchies, gender norms, political patronage, and mediation by middle men, who serve as facilitators of transparency are all a part of the participation in these mechanisms. Although social audits and audience hearings establish valuable space on voice and collective questioning, they expose the limitations of empowerment in environments characterized by disbalanced power relations. The daily negotiations, the informal grievance, the strategic interaction with the authorities, and the accessibility to the network further shed light on the fact that transparency is experienced as a dynamic and conflictual practise, but not as an ideal of administration. The paper

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considers transparency as a cultural and relational domain by conceptualising it and therefore posits that accountability reforms yield hybrid regimes, where formal legality collide with the local political cultures. The work is an addition to the field of political and development anthropology since it shows that democratic accountability in the rural Indian context is reproduced and re-produced in the form of performance, negotiations, and the moral demands that citizens place on the state.

Keywords: Anthropology of the state, Rural governance, Caste and gender, Transparency, Democratic accountability, social audits, Jan Sunwai/public hearings.

Introduction

Democratic accountability has emerged as a key issue in current debates about rural India governance particularly with the increasing use of transparency-based procedures like social audits and public hearings so as to control welfare provision at the state level. Although these tools are commonly referred to in policy circles as administrative innovations, their meaning goes way beyond the institutional design, they are major places where everyday citizens meet, understand and challenge the Indian state. The anthropology of the state has been insisting that states are not abstract and monolithic; on the contrary, they are lived in everyday life through certain practises, bureaucratic interfaces, and public rituals (Gupta 2012; Sharma and Gupta 2006). These sites are most visible in the rural areas of the Indian subcontinent, through social audits and Jan Sunwai (public hearings). They provide a valuable empirical insight into the dynamics of power flow, the performance of authority and the mobilisation of moral claims on the state by citizens.

Participatory modes of accountability have become institutionalised in the recent past through legislative developments like the Right to Information (RTI) Act 2005 and the MGNREGA Act 2005, which entails regular social audits. These reforms were the result of grassroots struggles that required transparency and inclusion in the welfare government, as demonstrated by scholars like Jean Drerez, Amartya Sen and Reetika Khera. Nevertheless, bureaucratic set-ups tend to recreate inequalities within the local social framework, as Akhil Gupta (2012) points out, especially caste, class, and gender inequalities. It therefore cannot be enough to assess accountability mechanisms, just based on their legal requirements, or administrative

consequences, but rather a more anthropological approach is required to explain how these mechanisms are practised and bargained in particular social situations.

Democratic accountability in this paper is viewed as a cultural and political process, as opposed to a technical administrative intervention. It posits: How do the rural populations inquire, negotiate, and reinvent accountability practices including social audits and open hearings? What social inequalities play a role in participating in these processes? And what are the impacts of transparency reforms in reforming the daily moral expectations of the state? Through foregrounding of the ethnographic attention to voice, silence, performance, moral claims and social power, the paper analyses the practises and politics that bring accountability to the ground.

The central argument formulated here is that transparency regimes in rural India exist at the same time as both state-reform and state-ritual in which bureaucratic power, local grievances, and local hierarchies are all overlapping. Those practices do not necessarily eradicate institutionalized inequalities, yet they do open some significant spaces in which peoples of the villages express rights, bargain and occasionally challenge authority. This work also adds to the anthropology of the state by placing the accountability in the micro-politics of the daily governance and the way democracy is practised, challenged, and re-conceptualised in the village level.

Research Methodology: Ethnographic Access to Accountability Practices

A qualitative and ethnographic approach that is based on the anthropological tradition of conceiving the state in terms of practises and interactions that define its daily existence is used in this research (Sharma and Gupta 2006; Fuller and Benei 2001). It does not simply record the procedural structure of social audits and public hearings, but examine how these places are construed, bargained and occupied by rural inhabitants in particular socio-cultural and political settings. Ethnography allows one to focus on the feel of power, voice, silence and relationality that bring these arenas of accountability to life.

Field Site and Context

The fieldwork was in a Gram Panchayat, in a semi-arid, agrarian area in north Karnataka, with a mixed-castle settlement structure, which is very dependent on seasonal agricultural labour, and where most people are dependent on social protection

programmes like MGNREGA. The Panchayat is housed in an administrative block in which the civil society organisations have been sporadically involved in ensuring transparency and easy access to welfare entitlements. The region is characterized by caste stratified hamlets, gendered conventions of movement and speech and regional types of political patronage that determine citizen interaction with the state.

The anonymity of the Panchayat and district has been purposely avoided to protect the participants- due to the political nature of audit findings, public grievances, and allegations made during field interactions. This methodology is in line with known ethical standards related to anthropological studies, especially when one is describing controversial encounters with local authorities or intermediaries (AAA Ethics Code; Das 2007).

Data Collection Methods

The empirical basis of the study is established on the basis of three main techniques, i.e. participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Participant observation entailed participation in social audit meetings, pre-audit verification meetings, Jan Sunwai (public hearings), Gramme Sabha meetings, and informal meetings in courtyards and tea stalls or panchayat offices. These observations gave an idea on how the people in the village placed themselves, related with officials, and how they perceived the audit process.

A wide range of actors, including members of women self-help groups, landless labourers, Scheduled Caste household, gram rozgar sahayaks (employment assistance facilitators), social audit facilitators and local activists of right-to-know mobilisation was the subject of semi-structured interviews. These discussions examined individual experiences of audits, views of transparency, and daily ways of manoeuvring bureaucratic organisations.

Publicly available MGNREGA muster roll, social audit reports, Gramme Panchayat resolutions, and RTI applications utilised by the villagers were included in document analysis. These documents facilitated the triangulation of assertions during interviews and observation and shedding light on the differences between what was written and reality.

Reflexivity and Ethical Practice

The researcher is inevitably involved in the social and political processes of the field, as the scholars of the state are reminding us (Gupta 2012; Fassin 2015). Reflexive

practise was thus necessary. The field notes reflected empirical observations only in addition to emotional registers, positional negotiations, as well as the dynamics of trust and suspicion. Caste and gender sensibilities were at play in every encounter and the rules of confidentiality were very much adhered to, especially when it was a matter of accusing local officials.

The methodology produces an analytically rooted and textured conception of democratic accountability as a lived practice by incorporating long-term observation, combining it with narrative accounts as well as institutional documents. It establishes the empirical foundation to the arguments, which are formulated in the following sections.

Transparency and Accountability in India: Concepts and Context

The discussions of transparency and democratic accountability in India have taken a rather different turn throughout the last twenty years, both due to the mobilisation efforts of the grassroots and state-driven reforms. The understanding that the public institutions are not only supposed to be efficient, but also accountable to the citizens, which permeates this evolution, is encased in the long-standing campaigns to secure the Right to Information (RTI) and participatory governance. Whereas transparency as a technical tool is widely discussed in the administrative literature as a means of limiting corruption, scholars in political anthropology and development studies believe that transparency is essentially a social and political process, which is mediated by cultural norms, power relations, and local histories (Corbridge et al. 2005; Gupta 2012; Aiyar and Walton 2015).

With the introduction of the Right to Information Act (2005), a new dawn was marked, institutionalising the right of the citizens to information and broadening the expectation that the state should provide reasons why it is taking a certain action. The RTI movement, which was strongly associated with rural activisms by the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) in Rajasthan, showed how the publication of records would allow the citizens to feel empowered and how it would change the local political cultures. Jean Drèze and Reetika Khera have reported the transformation of public reading of muster rolls, wage lists, and expenditure statements into a form of collective accountability leading to the Jan Sunwai (public hearings) becoming a form of social accountability. These practices undermined the secrecy that used to conceal bureaucratic activities to the eyes of the people.

Some further institutionalisation of participatory oversight was the introduction of social audits in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) 2005. Gramme Panchayats are required by law to be subjected to a regular audit that includes checking records by the people, physical inspection of work and holding open meetings where dissatisfaction can be expressed. However, as researchers like Akhil Gupta (2012) and Matthew Hull (2012) make us aware, bureaucratic documents and procedures are not neutral, but are power instruments that both expose and hide state practises. Social audits thus exist in stratified systems of inequality in which the castes of dominance, political brokers, and local administrators can shape the voice, information revealed and the bargaining of results.

It is stressed in anthropological scholarship that accountability mechanisms do not exist in a vacuum. They are institutionalized within social structures, moral economies, and local political cultures which determine their effectiveness. As an example, Corbridge et al. (2005) opine that rural governance in India is characterised by actually existing local democracies where formalities are mixed with informal patronage networks. Aradhana Sharma (2008) also points out that reform efforts by the state usually recreate the same inequities they are meant to eradicate, unless they are seen to be accompanied by long term mobilisation that is community based.

In this wider context, social audits and popular hearings are not only the reforms in governance, but also the places of performative accountability, the space where the state is practised and challenged and disputed in the ways of participation in public rituals of verification, disclosure and claim-making. These mechanisms can only be understood then in the context of the multi-layered India of decentralisation, bureaucratic cultures, and village-based socio-political relations. This theoretical background gives it its basis in the ethnographic analysis that is provided in the following sections.

Social Audits as Performed Verification

One of the most noticeable experiments in institutionalised rural Indian transparency is social audits under MGNREGA. Although the technical form of a social audit is one in which financial and physical records are publicly checked, the more important sociopolitical value of such a process is its performative nature, how it stages the existence of the state in front of the ordinary citizens. Since anthropologists of the state suggest, state administrative practises usually serve as rituals, which represent

state power and at the same time create avenues of competing (Gupta 2012; Sharma and Gupta 2006). The same can be applied to social audits: they are bureaucratic practises and a very dramatic moral play at the same time.

The auditing process is conducted in three phases, which are preparation and verification of records, field trial and a Gramme Sabha style of a public meeting. The last phase, where the results are declared in front of the villagers is the most important in anthropological terms. In this case, documentation is read out, inconsistencies identified, and authorities put in the spotlight. This open reading reiterates what Jean Drèze refers to as the collective right to know and this makes ordinary bureaucratic documents into political tools and through which citizens may claim on the state. Reading per se is a performative act: it transforms the confidential administrative knowledge into the common public one, symbolically turning the balance of power between the state authorities and the citizens of the countryside.

This performance is however not neutral. It is imprinted in the social stratifications that organise village life. Research in Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Jharkhand has demonstrated that caste relations also play a major role in influencing audit participation (Aiyar and Walton 2015). Dominant caste communities will tend to place themselves at the forefront of the audit meetings, whereas the Adivasi and Dalit members can sit at the periphery or even keep quiet. The involvement of women also relies on the village norms that control the gendered mobility and speech. Women can also avoid speaking in front of male elders or local authorities even when they are present. Therefore, these deeply rooted inequalities are reproduced even by the very space of the social audit in its efforts to refute them.

There is an added complexity of the intermediaries, NGO facilitators, audit teams or trained youth volunteers. Although their importance is usually vital in the mobilisation of participation and the interpretation of bureaucratic records to the people in the villages, these intermediaries are also brokers of transparency. Their affiliation may be with the state, local elites or community and this can determine the way the audit results are reported and whose complaints are taken seriously. In other audits, the facilitators have been able to empower the villagers to address corruption in measurement books or muster rolls; in other cases, the critical advantage of the process may be eroded by informal pressures of the panchayat officials or the political forces.

Nevertheless, even in the process of being captured or caged, social audits do not lose symbolic power. They ensure periods of visibility, during which the state has to

respond publicly to a certain extent, however minor, to citizen attention. The moral pressure caused by the process publicness, in turn, as Aiyar and Walton (2015) point out, creates a kind of social accountability that would surpass the formal sanctions: the disclosure of discrepancies to a group of people creates a moral pressure that is more socially accountable than the official one.

In this regard, social audits are not merely institutional cheques but done encounters- ritualised encounters in which the villagers, officials and facilitators negotiate the meaning of the state responsibility. Through the ethnographic study of these production, it is evident that democratic accountability gets a form, texture and meaning in day-to-day governance of rural areas.

Public Hearings (Jan Sunwai): Voice, Silence, and Power

The public hearings or Jan Sunwai have taken a centre stage in the transparency movement in India especially after its initial institutionalisation by Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) in Rajasthan. The Jan Sunwai is not just an administrative ritual but a dramaturgy of accountability in public, where complaints, bureaucracy and moral claims are portrayed in front of an audience. As the classic ideas about social drama proposed by Victor Turner (1974) imply, the public arenas tend to transform into the place where the tensions, injustices and power relations that are hidden beneath the surface are manifested and made visible. This is the exact dynamic of rural governance that the Jan Sunwai represents.

The usual village hearing will consist of the people sitting in an open courtyard or panchayat hall, and the authorities seated on a high dais. Documents: usually muster rolls, expenditure statements or beneficiary lists are read out loud. This first action is an indicator of a momentary reversal of bureaucratic secrecy and this is one of the elements emphasised in the works of Drerez and Khera who refer to public readings as a means of democratising information. However, caste, gender and the politics of place are critical determinants of the capacity to engage in this process. Dominating caste men tend to be placed in the centre, both physically and symbolically, whereas women, Dalits, and migrant labourers are placed at the periphery or in the background, their presence being recognised but their voices suppressed.

Complaint as a social life in a Jan Sunwai is instructive on the issue of inequality in the rural set-up. Speakers do not just raise complaints, but create moral storeys that aim at the shared notions of justice, honour, and rights. Subaltern criticisms of

power are usually concealed in the rhetoric of justice and reciprocity as James Scott (1990) observes in his arguments on the so-called moral economy. These allegations can be in the form of emotional testimonies in the public hearings: late paychecks, employee records being taken away, being kicked off the beneficiary roll call. This very telling of these experiences is a political gesture, taking the personal pain and turning it into a community examination.

but silence speaks, too, as much. The reason why many villagers do not speak is not that they do not have nothing to complain but they are afraid to be punished in a form of deprivation of benefits in the future, social ostracism, or the displeasure of the local elites. Silence, according to the anthropologists (Das 2007) is not just nothing but a strategically and socially constructed mode of expression. Silence in Jan Sunwai contexts can indicate the feeling of vulnerability, doubt, or distrust in the results of the hearing. Women especially tend to air their grievances to facilitators privately, as opposed to open forums, which is gendered speech and manners.

Even the officials play performative roles in such hearings. They are answers, sympathies, assurances that they will investigate or an administrative clarification, which Gupta (2012) refers to as the public face of the state. These performances are aimed at legitimising the state power by accepting grievances. In some cases, the authorities use the technicality to evade blame, as they tend to pass the blame on to the far-off bureaucracy.

Although restricted, the public hearings provide an opportunity to the rural citizens which is difficult to access to challenge the state face to face. Villagers claim their rights and moral demands of governance whether by speaking up or by silence. The Jan Sunwai, therefore, becomes a multifaceted space where voice and silence, power and defencelessness, performance, and politics come into conflict with each other, and the social character of democratic accountability is displayed in a very social way.

Everyday Negotiations of Transparency

Although social audits and public hearings are formalised spheres of democratic accountability, the life of transparency is manifested in much more dispersed, subtle and continuous forms in everyday life. To the vast majority of rural citizens, association with the state is not limited to ritualised forms of publicity but rather through informal means such as the visits to the panchayat office, the discussion with frontline workers, use of local intermediaries and informal negotiation of

rights. The state is experienced not so much in grand reforms but in everyday encounters involving bureaucracy as Akhil Gupta (2012) puts it, which determines access to welfare. These banal communications are where boundaries and capacities of transparency are experienced most often and most intensely.

Among the dynamics that have influenced the everyday accountability are the rise of what Partha Chatterjee (2004) describes as political society, whereby citizens, particularly the poor, interact with the state not necessarily via the formal citizenship avenues but as a result of real-world negotiations which are mediated by the local power brokers, elected representatives and social networks. The few literate people in most villages are the so-called transparency brokers: people with political influence or bureaucratic connexions, who read documents, write applications and organise mass petitions. Their intervention may be empowering, and marginalised households can use their assistance to go through complicated bureaucratic processes like RTI applications or MGNREGA grievances. But the very intermediaries can be selective activists of transparency according to their own authority or to strengthen clientelism.

The everyday negotiation of transparency mechanisms by women portrays specific challenges. Gender conventions tend to limit movement, access to information, and precondition who is allowed to talk or come to authorities. Empowerment, as feminist scholars observe (Kabeer 1999; Sundar 2004) is seldom an abrupt event but a progressive process that is mediated by the collective action and social support and access to networks. Most women approach the state informally when they express dissatisfaction to workers of ASHA, anganwadi, or leaders of women self-help groups who then become mediators in relaying the message of wage delays or welfare exclusion. These micro-level interactions will be critical to the way transparency reforms are experienced in practise.

Another important aspect of daily state participation is fear of retaliation. Panchayat officials may not be open to facing irregularities as they depend on them to secure job cards, ration cards, or disability pensions in the village. Citizens are typically inhibited in employing rights-based claims too assertively as in the case of rural governance ethnographies (Corbridge et al. 2005; Jeffrey et al. 2014), where livelihood dependency is a limiting factor. Transparency, then, is not merely empowering, it is also exposing the citizens to new vulnerabilities, forcing them to make trade-offs between the risk of confrontation and the necessity of remaining eligible to receive state benefits.

Regardless of these limitations, daily negotiations usually lead to gradual changes in the expectations of the citizens towards the state. The dissemination of RTI knowledge, the circulation of audit reports, and recurrent exposure of the audience to public hearings are some of the factors that lead to what James Scott (1998) calls the infra politics of resisting: the small-scale, daily protests through which common people stake their moral claims without necessarily challenging authority. These can take the form of silently organising a group to pay a visit to the panchayat office, strategically leaking information to those facilitating it, or even reminding the authorities on their words to them in the process of auditing.

Therefore, the process of rural India transparency is not a linear process but an area of negotiation, which is influenced by power, dependency, social inequality, and changing moral expectations. The analysis of these daily rituals brings out the insight to the continuity of accountability as it is being created or recreated beyond the audit or hearing contexts, and how democratic governance is a profoundly relational endeavor.

Discussion: Rethinking Transparency as a Cultural Practice

Ethnographic studies of social audit, public hearings, and routine negotiations all emphasise the fact that transparency in rural India cannot be sufficiently explained by an administrative or technocratic framework. Rather, transparency needs to be theorised as a cultural practise--it is a practise that is embedded in social stratifications, ethical demands and in the politics of state-citizen interaction in its daily operations. This view follows and builds on the observations of other anthropologists like Akhil Gupta (2012), Aradhana Sharma (2008), and Corbridge et al. (2005) who claim that the state is not an abstract distant place but a social entity that is practised in relational interactions.

One of the major contributions that this work makes to the understanding of political anthropology is the conceptualisation of the accountability mechanisms as ritualised performances that show and hide the state power at the same time. An example is social audits which are carried out as a performance in which documents are read aloud in public, the officials are interrogated and discrepancies are revealed. Although the processes are based on legal requirements under MGNREGA and RTI, the meaning of these processes is found in the symbolic way they reverse the everyday obscurity of bureaucracy. To this end, transparency does not just mean disclosure, but rather a highly coordinated public ritual - a ritual that creates moral force and restates the communal demands of fairness. However, as the analysis

shows, the local power structures determine these rituals, where caste and gender hierarchies play an implicit role on who is allowed to attend or not, and how claims are aired or suppressed.

In the same manner, the public hearings help to reveal the intricate nature of the authority, vulnerability, and performative speech. They establish spaces in which villagers transform their individual complaints into social discourses, and frequently make appeals to morality that are likely to appeal to larger community values. Based on the theory of social drama developed by Turner (1974), we may interpret these hearings as instances when the suppressed tensions finally come into the limelight, where people can confront them and find a temporary solution. Nevertheless, the longevity of silence within marginalised groups, and especially women and underprivileged members of the lower castes, makes the celebratory accounts of transparency reforms more difficult. Silence, as Veena Das (2007) helps us to remember, is a form of expression that is predisposed by structure and social vulnerability.

The daily negotiations outlined in the foregoing section make the concept of transparency as an emancipatory tool even more difficult. The interaction between the state and the rural India is often based on intermediaries, informal norms and resources of networks- which is similar to the concept of political society formulated by Chatterjee (2004). Such informalities are not just distortions of transparency, but are the main modes of operation of citizens in a bureaucratic world where there is opportunity, as well as uncertainty. Transparency, consequently, does not merely deconstruct hierarchies; instead, it turns out to be a space of new types of brokerage, vulnerability, and negotiation.

Combined, the results indicate that transparency reforms in India do not completely democratise the governance and do not simply replicate the existing inequalities. Rather, they create hybrid regimes of accountability, in which the formal legality collides with the cultural norms and with political practise. The research adds to the anthropology of the state by predicting the future of how democratic accountability is practised and disputed in daily encounters, performances, and negotiations. It emphasises the necessity to take transparency as a dynamic cultural area influenced by power, agency, and bottom-up moral claims.

Conclusion

The aim of the study was to understand the manner in which democratic accountability is practised, negotiated and felt in rural India using interconnected

processes of social audits, public hearings and daily encounters with the state. Leaving administrative evaluation of transparency reforms, the evaluation has shown that the mechanisms are deeply entrenched in cultural practises, social hierarchies and micro-politics of village life. Placing the accountability in the anthropology of the state, this paper highlights the importance of how technical reforms that appear to be technical gain meaning when analysed as part of everyday encounters, performances, and negotiations.

The ethnographic attention towards social audits showed such events to be not only institutional cheques but also as performance cheques- ritualised spaces where bureaucratic papers are turned into tools of publicity. However, the ability of audits to creating a sense of real accountability is mediated by caste hierarchy, gender, and the use of the intermediaries who process the bureaucracy to the villagers. The public disclosure does not necessarily lead to the dismantling of inequality; on the contrary, it reveals the level to which the social structure is deeply rooted and the extent to which individuals remain silent and the state is made accountable.

Performative and emotional aspects of accountability were further clarified through the analysis of public hearings (Jan Sunwai). Such meetings offer infrequent chances of villagers to bring grievances to the representatives of the state, subjecting personal injustices to collective moral rights. Based on the knowledge of Victor Turner and his theory of the social drama and the knowledge of moral economies as displayed by James Scott, the discussion revealed that both voice and silence are influenced by vulnerability, the fear of retaliation, and the moral weight of the public testimony. Participatory governance and its constraints by local hierarchies are therefore shown through the public hearings.

This was further enlightened by the analysis of ordinary negotiations which showed that accountability goes well beyond the formal audit spaces. In the routine interactions with the state, villagers use social networks, political intermediaries and strategic mobilisation to negotiate the complicated bureaucratic environments. Such negotiations are a classic example of what Partha Chatterjee calls the functioning of a so-called political society a sphere where rights-based claims and pragmatic approaches to getting access to welfare intersect. Transparency, in this case, is a field of unceasing communication, confrontation and adaptation instead of a linear route towards empowerment.

Combined, the results indicate that reforms in transparency in rural India do not produce a full change or a duplication of the existing disparities. Instead, they

are a form of hybrid accountability regimes that are intersected by formal legislation, bureaucratic rituals and daily cultural practises. Anthropology of the state offers a compelling theoretical basis to comprehend these complicities and help researchers go beyond the normative beliefs about the governance to explore how democracy is practised on the ground.

To sum up, democratic accountability in rural India turns out to be a process of negotiation, evolution, and deep relations. Although transparency measures like social audits and open hearings provide valuable entry points to the process of participation by the citizens, they rely on the socio-political environment in which they take place. Ensuring accountability thus necessitates institutional reform as well as a long-term focus on cultural, social, and political interaction that governs the daily state-citizen interactions. Future studies might develop this study by addressing digital transparency instruments, caste-gender intersectionality, and comparative ethnographies of accountability in other parts of India.

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