

Gendered Subjects, the State and Participatory Spaces: The Politics of Domesticating Participation in Rural India

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In the last two decades, a variety of institutional spaces have been created by the Indian state at the village level to invite, encourage and enhance the participation of poor, low-caste (*dalit*), and tribal groups and women. Claiming to be based on democratic principles and procedures, such spaces promise to include the excluded people in deliberations and decision-making. The spaces are attractive to people for the sheer logic that they are created by the state, yet there are caveats, problematics and challenges that characterize their participation in these democratic institutions and the processes that take place within them. Often the existence of other spaces created by movements, NGOs or people themselves, where they practise participation, enable them to transfer their learning and skills to state-created spaces and energize them (Mohanty 2004). However, in the absence of other spaces, the state is possibly the only actor that is expected to create conditions for the actualization and animation of the institutional spaces it constructs. If the state fails to do that, the spaces remain largely empty ones, where otherwise excluded groups, such as women, may never gain entry to actualize participation, despite their eagerness.

This chapter examines the presence and absence of women in three institutionalized spaces created by the state to promote development and democracy: sectoral institutions of health and watershed development, and the constitutionally mandated institutions of local government called panchayats. It traces the practices and dynamics of representation, inclusion and voice within these spaces in three

villages in Karuali district in the state of Rajasthan: Khubnagar, Akolpura and Bhikampura. The first is the home of the local panchayat headquarters, the second is a revenue village which has basic service institutions, and the third is a hamlet. All three are mostly populated by scheduled castes (SCs) and scheduled tribes (STs)¹ in a context marked by extremes of poverty and exclusion.

My analysis raises questions about how women are represented in these institutions, whether their inclusion leads to substantive participation and voice, and whether these spaces are capable of enhancing the political agency of women, fashioning their political imagination and resulting in their political empowerment. In analysing women's experiences of participation in this setting, I explore the challenges of building genuinely inclusive and substantive representation and voice for marginalized actors.

Visions of the State

Women in Karuali have known the state in many forms: as provider of essential services such as the post office, school, health centre and roads. They have images of the state as it manifests itself in ostentatious election campaigns – cascades of motor cars on the dusty and uneven roads, shining flags, larger-than-life photographs of future leaders, and public meetings where people gather in their millions. They have also known the state as the police, and as the revenue officer, essential in ensuring legal order. The might of the state, despite its non-performance, is a seductive force. The idea of the state as the powerful big brother is also in the post-colonial imagination. A combination of welfarism, developmental and social justice agendas are also associated with the state. Out of both fear and respect, people would like to associate with the state. Hence, despite being a merely formal presence, and notwithstanding all the humiliations that they are subjected to, women may still want to be part of the institutional spaces created by the state.

The contemporary democratic revival, with its emphasis on building and strengthening local institutions, has brought the role of the state into sharp focus. Studies have shown that in many contexts, poor and resourceless people continue to look to the state to intervene and solve their problems when it comes to the fulfilling of basic needs, physical security and conditions of dignified living.

For historical reasons, the state still looms large in the perception of millions of people. Notwithstanding the retreat of the state under a globalized and liberalized economy, in countries like India the state is an everyday presence in the lives of poor and vulnerable sectors such as low castes, women and tribal people. As codified power, ultimate decision-maker and resource mobilizer, the state impinges on the lives of people more than any other force, thereby determining how affairs in society are to be managed.

As Chandhoke puts it, political preferences for the state over other actors are 'the outcome of historical processes...that preference formation takes place in a historical context, that of specific institutions or systems of rules. These shape interest, fix responsibility and guide the formation of expectations' (2005: 1037). To understand participation in state-created developmental spaces, it is important to understand the nature of the post-colonial state and the depth of people's relationships of dependence and patronage with it. It is important to capture how the state features in the imagination of people, since it is their relationship with the state, ranging from disillusionment and despair to seeing it as a patron and a benefit, which is reflected in their relationship with state-created institutions. Despite the failure of the state to erase unequal material and social relationships, it has instilled a sense of political consciousness among the deprived section, though that consciousness is often played out on the basis of groups, which try to compete with each other for social and political dominance. In this competition and negotiation for power, women in general and low-caste and tribal women in particular are left at the margins. It is only with the creation of local institutions and reinforcement of affirmative action through reservations in political, educational and development institutions that their political participation has gained some impetus.

The local institutional spaces that I explore in this chapter have come into existence through different traditions of thought and policy decisions. Sectoral development projects, such as for watershed management and health, are guided by the state's mandate of uplifting the socio-economic conditions of the rural poor. The health institutions are part of the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) in which women are selected by government functionaries to run *anganwadi*, which are children's schools and health centres for expectant mothers and small children. The watershed project is a time-bound sectoral project. It has a village-level committee in each