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96

REPRESENTATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT: THE PANCHAYATS OF KARNATAKA

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REPRESENTATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT: THE PANCHAYATS OF KARNATAKA

Anand Inbanathan*

Abstract

Karnataka's panchayats have several groups which, in the past, did not find representation in political institutions. Now, through affirmative action, they do. In the context of representing people's interests, representatives elected through open or reserved constituencies have not been responsive to the people who elected them. Regular interaction between representatives and their constituents has been suggested as crucial for deliberation in panchayats, responsiveness to the people, and finally, for accountability. However, limited interaction has resulted in lack of responsiveness and accountability to the people. People's participation in deliberation has also been weak in the panchayats.

Democratic political systems have certain attributes that, in principle, are expected to draw the people into varying degrees of participation. As a minimum, people's participation could be just the act of voting. However, participation could also be manifested in other activities such as regular interaction between representatives and their constituents, and to some extent, even in the decision-making of these institutions. Debates on the subject of what constitutes democracy, and the role and functioning of political representatives have been intense, but hardly conclusive. This paper attempts to analyse the functioning of the institutions of local government in Karnataka (the panchayati raj institutions), through attributes which are considered as essential to democratic institutions. At the outset, it needs to be stated that the institutions of local government have certain features which are not necessarily found in the higher institutions of the Indian political system such as the parliament, or even the state legislatures. For example, a clearly participatory feature has been included in the panchayat system, i.e., the grama sabhas, which are

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village assemblies, scheduled to be convened at least once in six months, and not less than twice in a year. Participation of the people and accountability of the representatives, are at least in part to be manifested through the functioning of the grama sabhas. The paper also analyses the views of the representatives to assess the form that representation has taken. It considers whether the panchayat system has been representative, and to what extent it has been responsive to the needs of the people, which is the ostensible reason for the establishment of this institution.

Representation: Panchayats of Karnataka (as elsewhere in India) have been so designed that a participatory role has been assigned to the electorate. Not only do they vote at the elections but they have the opportunity through grama sabhas and also the interaction with their representatives, to influence the functioning of the panchayats.² Programmes and development activities are to reflect the needs and requirements of the electors, and the representatives are to articulate their constituents' needs in the appropriate forums. It is in grama sabhas that there is also the opportunity of public political deliberation, which Habermas described as '.....public use of reason jointly exercised by autonomous citizens' (in Hindess, 2000: 42; see also Habermas, 1997).³

A view that seems to more closely reflect the political principles behind the establishment of the panchayats is that of Pitkin who regards representation as, '...acting in the interests of the represented, in a manner responsive to them' (in Phillips, 1998:4). Representation here implies a sense of what is due to those who are represented. In this case, accountability is a principle that is associated with representation (Phillips, 1998:4) to the extent that the representatives have fulfilled the requirements of their elected status. The idea of representation of 'interests' is not as straightforward as it may sound. Whose interests are we talking about? Is it that of the group to which a representative belongs, such as a caste? Or does he/she consider the interests of the entire constituency? Does the entire population of the constituency have the same interests? These are some of the questions that have clouded the discussions on 'representation' and provided no clear consensus on what is implied in representation (see Manin et. al 1999: 2-3). However, in the context of the functioning of the panchayats, a distinction has been made between two kinds of interests, individual interests and community interests. The former at the level of the panchayats includes providing housing (through housing loans), electricity, toilets, etc., while community interests include amenities in the villages such as drinking water (through tanks for example), proper drainage, street lights, paving roads, carrying out repairs in schools, etc.

While considering representation, certain other attributes are also implied. One is that the representatives act in a manner responsive

to the people (see Rao, 1998). However, it is not always possible that the representatives know what their constituents want. In a system where candidates contesting in elections project a particular programme, which the voters can then choose, rather than choosing the persons as such, may be indicative of the preferences of the voters. If there are efficient means of communication, then the voters can indicate their preferences, and the representatives can do what they can or wish, to meet the preferences of their voters. But in this context we need to see whether the representatives are likely to do what their constituents want or go by their own wishes or preferences.

The manner of communication is of particular importance in our perception, and people's participation could be through not only the formal means of communication in meetings or forums convened by the panchayats. They could also be through ordinary, informal meetings of representatives and the constituents, which could take place virtually anywhere. The content of the conversations could also be of a nature that is not strictly political. Thus, the manner of deliberation that is carried out in the political environment of the panchayats could be through everyday talk, with people of different walks of life, and this could still be construed as part of the 'deliberative system'. (Mansbridge, 1999).

Accountability: The principle of accountability indicates that in a democracy, representatives who have been elected to act on behalf of the people, will be answerable to their constituents, (in the present context) for their actions in the panchayats. Elections are usually the most direct form in which representatives are accountable to their electors, but it has limitations in the political systems such as Karnataka's panchayats. Among other institutions which may further accountability are political parties (where strong opposition parties can keep some control over the functioning of the ruling party), civil society, the media, and public meetings (Blair, 2000: 27-30).⁵

Whether the representatives can actually be held accountable for what they do, and if some sanctions can be imposed on them if they do not implement what their voters indicated, is not immediately apparent. Nowhere is there a democracy where representatives are legally bound to instructions from their voters (Manin et. al, 1999:38). The ordinary presumption is that whatever the representatives do, it is in the interest of their constituency and constituents. However, if their activities are detrimental to their constituents, or the polity, their actions could constitute what has been referred to as 'shirking' (Manin et. al, 1999:41; also see Bender and Lott, 1996).⁶ Having said that, whether the representatives can provide good governance, and whether their sense of accountability has been able to motivate them to higher levels of performance as representatives, resulting in better governance (see Cornwall and Gaventa, 2000) is a matter to be ascertained. There are no clearly established

standards of judging the performance of representatives — in the sense of their meeting the interests of their constituents, or whether representatives can be seen as providing effective leadership in public life. In an extreme case, one can observe someone who has not done anything in his/her capacity as representative. Other than in these cases, it may not be feasible to state in absolute terms that the representatives have or have not fulfilled their responsibilities as elected representatives. This is not to say that electors do/did not have an opinion on their representatives' functioning. But they were essentially subjective judgements. Overall, whether the panchayats reflect a more or less participatory form of functioning is also directly connected to their responsiveness to the voters. In this, several institutions and attributes of the local community are instrumental in either furthering or hampering the participation of the people in local governance.

To the extent that a politician looks for re-election, voters may be able to hold him/her answerable for her/his past record, and vote accordingly in the next elections. This is one of the few means by which the representatives can be held accountable for their actions as representatives. Voters rarely have any control over the representatives during their tenure, and cannot impose any sanctions on them for not doing what they wanted, or for not doing anything at all.⁷ In fact, democracy itself has often been seen in terms of free, fair and regular elections, which give the people a choice of government, and possibly also a choice of programmes. Elections are often the only means by which people can indeed indicate their choices and preferences. However, the theory of electoral accountability (see Prewitt, 1979; also Ferejohn, 1999) has its drawbacks in the context of the panchayat system. Affirmative action in the panchayats of Karnataka ensures that seats are reserved for different groups in successive elections. In effect, the representatives may be facing different electorates when they contest in successive elections, i.e., if their home constituency is reserved for a different group (than one to which they belong), and they have to contest from another place. Thus, the likelihood that the same persons will be representatives following two successive panchayat elections is not high (see Inbanathan et. al, 2001; Vijayalakshmi and Chandrashekar, 2001).⁸ And if the representatives feel that they would not be elected again at the end of the current term, then they are not likely to consider accountability in the context of facing the electorate again. This may have an effect on the responsiveness of representatives to their constituents, and the motivation to make any special effort to seek the opinions of constituents on what they want. In the panchayats, it is not always possible to confirm that re-election possibilities are what makes the difference to the participation of the representatives. But the degree of shirking that one observes may depend to a greater extent on local circumstances than on the low probability of re-election by itself.

What we need to consider is whether representatives have chosen to act in the interest of their constituents or they have chosen to shirk, and go against the constituents' interests. We consider whether the representatives have any clear conception of what 'accountability' is, and what it means to them. From this, we also intend to determine what these elected representatives consider as their role as representatives. Drawing from data on panchayats in Dakshina Kannada (DK), Mandya and Gulbarga, we discuss issues that have a bearing on representation and accountability. Interviewed were representatives of the 1995-2000 term in zilla and taluk panchayats, the grama panchayat members of the 1993-2000 period, and also new members following the grama panchayat elections of February 2000, and taluk and zilla panchayat elections of June 2000. However, to a greater extent, the observations of the old members (table 1) had to be relied on, since the new members had just been elected at the time when these interviews were carried out, and were not able to express opinions on several issues.

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents

District	Grama Panchayat*	Taluk Panchayat**	Zilla Panchayat
Mandya	54	42	22
Gulbarga	55	37	42
Dakshina Kannada	55	29	29
Total	164	108	93

Note: * Six grama panchayats in Mandya, five in Gulbarga, four in Dakshina Kannada

** Two Taluk Panchayats in each district

Representation in Panchayats

The role of representation is closely associated with the idea of participation. It is through participation in the panchayat activities that representatives give expression to their elective position. However, their formal actions in panchayat meetings are only one aspect of representation. It is in panchayat meetings, standing committees, interaction with constituents, and in grama sabhas, that we see representation being manifested. Their interaction with constituents, and the overall participatory nature of the functioning of panchayats need to be taken into account to indicate not only levels of representation, but also accountability of representatives.

In the context of the functioning of representatives and panchayats, an important consideration is whether the former entered politics or became elected members through their own inclination. While this may seem a superfluous question, since elected representatives are

usually presumed to be politically inclined, it is in fact, quite relevant. The answer to this question is indicative also of the motivation to participate to a greater extent, in terms of committing their time and effort in the performance of their role as representatives. A substantial number of the ex-members in all the three tiers of panchayats had indicated that they were not interested in politics at all when they contested and became members of the panchayats. Different compulsions made people contest the elections. Among them, women influenced by male family members who wanted to be involved in politics but could not contest due to the reservations for women. Locally influential individuals (elites) who wanted to have more control (i.e., increase their power), placed their proxies in the panchayats. There was a difference between representatives in DK, Mandya and Gulbarga, with the highest proportion of those who indicated their lack of interest in politics being found in Gulbarga, and the least in DK. There was a higher number of women who said they were not interested being in politics, than those who said that they were interested. Among the men, the number who said they were not interested in politics was much lower than those who said they were interested in politics, with almost the entire male representatives in the taluk and zilla panchayats indicating their interest in politics. A comparatively higher proportion of grama panchayat male representatives had indicated that they were not interested in politics, though this was still lower than those who were interested in politics. The differences in the degree of interest in politics shown by members in different panchayats is also indicative of the intensity of competition that goes into the election of representatives in different tiers. Only those whose interest in politics is sufficiently high would choose to put in the time, effort, and money that would need to be spent in being elected to the zilla panchayats (and to some extent the taluk panchayats too). In the grama panchayats, getting elected required less commitment to politics, since the influence and participation of local patrons and elites obviate such a necessity. These persons (elites) used their resources to get their candidates selected to contest in the elections, and often got them elected even without a contest (i.e., elected unopposed). In any event, a large proportion of representatives, particularly among women, were only nominally the representatives, and it was their patrons, husbands, etc., who functioned as the de facto representatives (see Inbanathan, 2001; Vijayalakshmi and Chandrashekar, 2001; Vijayalakshmi, 2001). There were far fewer among the new men and women members (after the February and June 2000 elections), across all three tiers of the panchayats, who indicated that they were not interested in politics. It is not immediately clear why there was a larger number of members in the earlier panchayats who did not like to be in politics. At this point, we can only speculate that initially, they may have thought that they would have the resources and power to carry out more work to benefit the people. Once they realised this was not so, they may have lost some of their earlier motivation and enthusiasm to function as representatives.

Responsiveness to the constituency's people was limited, and a very large proportion of the representatives did not communicate regularly with their constituents (talking to them is the means of communication that we have in mind since the levels of illiteracy in most villages are very high—more so among women).⁹ As an indication of their functioning as representatives, a preliminary question on whether they meet members of their constituencies was asked. Face to face meetings appeared to be the only manner of communicating with their constituents.¹⁰ Comparisons between the three districts broadly indicate that women who interacted with their constituents ranged from a lower point of only 19 per cent of women in Gulbarga's grama panchayats to a relatively higher proportion of 68 per cent of women grama panchayat members in Dakshina Kannada, with women grama panchayat members of Mandya falling in between.¹¹ The proportion of women representatives in taluk and zilla panchayats who stated that they interacted with their constituents was higher than in the grama panchayats of each district. However, it still left many members who did not interact with their constituents at any time. Almost all the men of the taluk and zilla panchayats stated that they interacted with their constituents (in all three districts), though a few men of the grama panchayats said they did not interact with their constituents.

Social restrictions were among the problems faced by women representatives who may have otherwise been able to function more effectively as representatives. While taluk and zilla panchayat constituencies were relatively large, even in grama panchayats, where the size of constituencies was such that face to face meetings were feasible (each constituency was of 400 persons), very few women interacted with their constituents (their husbands often did so on their behalf). Such interactions appeared to be more often for personal benefits rather than to seek something for the entire village, or constituency. And village people who wanted to get anything done through their representatives, sought and met the husbands and not the women representatives. What needs to be indicated here is that even when the men stated that they interacted with the constituents, it was not as though they went around the constituencies all the time to meet constituents. For the most part, taluk and zilla panchayat members were able to meet constituents if they (constituents) went to meet the representatives for some purpose or the other, or if they met them at the zilla and taluk panchayat offices. Grama panchayat members could meet their constituents in their own local area, in their homes or even on the streets, since they lived within the small area of the constituencies. Women representatives rarely went to the panchayat offices, except to attend panchayat meetings. And there were also relatively few occasions when they were sought out by their constituents. Social gatherings of the people were also occasions when representatives met and interacted with their constituents. However, there is no indication of how effective these meetings at social gatherings were in terms of responsiveness of representatives to their constituents.

A specific (though not typical of all representatives) form of interaction that needs to be mentioned here is that several representatives functioned as middlemen or 'fixers' in the panchayat areas. Most of these fixers were men, and only a few women were engaged in this occupation. Fixers undertook various acts commissioned by their clients, and accepted fees for such functions. However, there appears to be some connection between politics and the functioning as fixers, and hence, the monetary aspect of these functions was only one of the factors that made them function as fixers. Their successful intervention on behalf of their clients enabled them to strengthen their political positions (building up a patronage network), and they were able to not only build up their political base (as thereby also their political power), but future political activities were also facilitated by their activities as fixers.¹² We observed that there was a higher incidence of representatives in the panchayats of Mandya and Gulbarga who functioned as fixers, than in the panchayats of DK.¹³

Grama Sabhas

In the panchayat system, the grama sabhas were intended as a forum where the people meet and indicate their needs regarding development works, and also find out if the panchayats have been acting in a manner that they, the people, had wanted. The regular convening of these sabhas, with a reasonably high attendance of village people, would have served the purpose of communication between panchayat members and the representatives, as well as officials working in or with the panchayats. This would have also been an effective forum for political deliberations which would have benefited the panchayats and their residents. The intended purpose of this institution has been virtually defeated through the poor performance of grama sabhas in most places. Attendance in grama sabhas in DK was far higher than in the other two districts. Further, in a comparison of the grama panchayat members' attendance of grama sabhas, the number of members who had attended a grama sabha only once in a year is significant in Mandya and Gulbarga¹⁴ with a few (more of women grama panchayat members) in the three districts indicating that they did not attend any grama sabha at all.

While the grama sabhas are expected to be convened by the grama panchayats¹⁵ and are most closely related to them, these sabhas are not meant to be associated with grama panchayat members alone. Panchayat members of the other tiers, particularly those whose constituencies included the areas of specific grama panchayats and villages, could attend, and participate in the proceedings of the grama sabhas. Though taluk and zilla panchayat members too are expected to attend grama sabhas in their area (constituency), the number who regularly did so was small. The general indication was that they attended about one or two grama sabhas a year, though a few indicated that they attended grama sabhas about 3 to 4 times a year. Being specific in terms of the

number of grama sabhas that they attended is difficult because taluk and zilla panchayat representatives often made claims that they attended all grama sabhas in their constituencies, which seems unlikely for two reasons. One reason is that the number of grama sabhas in the constituencies in taluk panchayats and more so in zilla panchayats would be large in number, and taluk and zilla panchayat members cannot keep going from one grama sabha to another (justification used for not attending grama sabhas at all). The second reason is that most village people and even grama panchayat members indicated that they did not see zilla and taluk panchayat members attending grama sabhas in their villages.

The recently elected members had stated that grama sabhas were the forum in which panchayat activities should be talked about, and indicated that they were even in favour of increasing the number of grama sabhas that should be convened in a year. But there was no indication of any of the new members having attended a grama sabha after their election. So thinking of increasing the number of grama sabhas in a year may look attractive now, but once they had attended a few of these sabhas they may change their minds. Or, they may not attend the sabhas at all (particularly the members of the taluk and zilla panchayats).

An indication of the functioning of the panchayats was the relatively large number of representatives (more among the women) who were not aware of the functioning of the standing committees. While in Mandya and Gulbarga the majority of male representatives in the grama panchayats clearly stated that the standing committees were not functioning, (a few in Gulbarga were not aware of standing committees) most of the women representatives stated that they were not aware of any standing committee. As a matter of fact, grama panchayat standing committees were not functional in any of our study panchayats in Mandya and Gulbarga. In DK, a substantial number of male representatives (75%) stated that standing committees were functioning in their panchayats. At the taluk and zilla panchayats in Mandya and Gulbarga, members knew that the standing committees existed, but a few indicated that they were unaware of the exact manner in which they were functioning because they were not members of these committees.¹⁶ In this context, there were more women who indicated ignorance of the standing committees' functioning. In DK, almost all the members of taluk and zilla panchayats stated that standing committees were functioning, and only one woman representative in the taluk and one in the zilla panchayat stated that they were unaware of the functioning of standing committees.

In the overall functioning of the panchayats, the role of standing committees cannot be overlooked. While grama panchayats have generally ignored standing committees, usually the standing committees were at least constituted and had a nominal presence. Standing committees in taluk and zilla panchayats had an important role, and members could

influence the panchayats through the standing committees. Participation in standing committees, therefore, was important in the decision-making process of the taluk and zilla panchayats.¹⁷

Representation and Accountability

There are several ways in which one can regard representation, but there seems little doubt that in the situation where people cannot represent themselves, their chosen representatives should try to meet the interests of their constituents. In the panchayats, to a great extent, the requirements and interests of the constituents are gauged in terms of development works and benefits to the villages and communities which are in each panchayat area. Representatives too see their role in terms of providing benefits to their constituents, whether it is individual benefits or community benefits. Individual benefits are meant to reach deserving persons through their selection as beneficiaries in development schemes. This is not something which can accrue to any large number of people, and moreover, it is in the grama sabhas that beneficiaries are to be selected—though the selection process has its own pulls and pressures, brought on by various individuals. On the other hand, all three panchayats are involved in providing benefits (by taking up development works) to entire communities and villages. Grama panchayat representatives often summed up their activities in the panchayats, and saw themselves as having fulfilled their responsibilities as representatives, by stating that they had provided street lights, drinking water, improved sanitation and drainage in their constituencies. This recitation of their 'achievements' was meant to indicate not only that they had done what their constituents would have wanted (many of the members did not even directly interact with their constituents), but having done all this, there is no real need to be 'accountable' to the electors, since they can see for themselves that these were done by their representatives.

Can this matter be laid to rest at this point? Is it legitimate for electors to expect their representatives to achieve higher standards of performance and, therefore, also expect that they are responsive and accountable to the electors, rather than keeping to themselves, or reporting only to the panchayats. It is this latter question which we would take up below.

Accountability: That the principle of accountability is not clearly understood by the panchayat members is quite evident from members' responses— among both the old and the new members. Grama panchayat members were generally less educated compared to those in the taluk and zilla panchayats. Further, in political experience, among the old members, over 90 per cent of grama panchayat members were holding an elective position for the first time, and were also, for the most part new to politics. There were fewer (though still a high proportion) taluk

panchayat members who were new to politics or elective positions, and even fewer zilla panchayat members who were new to politics (see also Subha 1997: 68). Even so, the answers that were given indicated that although in a general sort of way they agreed that representatives are accountable to the people, what exactly accountability implies, and whether this is a necessary part of their role as representatives does not appear to have been understood by the members. Thus, in all three panchayats there were a few members (comparatively higher among women than men) who stated that representatives were accountable to the bureaucracy. A few felt they were accountable to their patrons (rural elites), some indicated their accountability to community elders, or to panchayat presidents, or to MLAs/MPs, or their families. The interesting fact in this connection is that there is no great difference between the perceptions of women and men. If we were to give some rank order in terms of the persons who were held in greater or lesser esteem, in which case they figured higher or lower on the scale of accountability, (i.e. to whom they should be accountable) according to the representatives, the greatest sense of accountability was to the elites (patrons), followed by MLAs/MPs, family, community elders, president/vice president of the panchayats and bureaucracy. Why these persons should be in such an hierarchical order of importance to the representatives, appears to be their sense of indebtedness to these persons (at least to some extent), and on various occasions, representatives consulted them on panchayat matters. The sense of indebtedness may have begun during the time leading up to the panchayat elections. Local elites and patrons¹⁸ played a very important role in their selection as candidates, and also towards getting them elected.¹⁹ Such a sense of indebtedness, and later even dependence on the patrons, left the representatives with very little discretionary power because the patrons sought the power from the panchayat positions, through their control of these representatives. The sense of indebtedness may not apply to all these persons who have been mentioned in the list of those to whom the representatives are accountable. Political personages such as MPs and MLAs are able to influence the panchayats through their presence and positions in the political sphere. Community leaders/elders too carry some influence, especially in the grama panchayats.

The indication that representatives think they are accountable to the bureaucracy (officials) needs some elaboration, more since a few members of all the three panchayats in all the three districts stated this concern. The number of representatives making this statement form only a minority in all the panchayats, but their numbers are sufficiently noticeable that we should comment on it (the majority had disagreed that they were accountable to the officials). A significant number of zilla panchayat members (particularly in Mandya and Gulbarga) had even indicated that dependence on officials led to decisions being taken by officials instead of the representatives themselves. This seems

extraordinary, since the background of the members was of a kind where many of them (particularly the men) had been exposed to politics before they were elected to the zilla panchayats. However, in the functioning of the panchayats, the representatives themselves have little to do in the implementation of programmes. In different tiers of the panchayats, from the grama panchayats to the zilla panchayats, the influence and presence of officials of various levels is very high. For several of the panchayat members to be in awe of these officials, and also with the officials being able to project an image of being more in control over the situation, in planning and administration of panchayat programmes, seems to result in elected representatives believing that they should be accountable to officials.²⁰

Having listed several persons to whom they should be accountable, from the 'people' onwards, may imply that they were constantly responsive and attentive to the needs of their constituents. Such an impression, however, is greatly misleading (particularly in Mandya and Gulbarga where representatives interacted less often with their electors than in DK). It is even more misleading to assume that they were actually being accountable to their electors and people of their constituencies. Even those who interacted with their constituents, did not often report or account for their activities as representatives. Even the grama sabhas, were not, for the most part, an institution which took note of the activities of the panchayats, and have become an institution where loans are discussed, and the people who attended the sabhas were usually those who wanted to give in their petitions for loans.

In the functioning of the panchayats, the general feeling of the representatives was that they should not be collectively held responsible for the failures of panchayat programmes (whenever they occurred) and chose to place the blame on the president, or officials, or specific representatives who were perceived to be directly involved in the decision-making. However, interviewing these officials and office bearers brought the other point of view that since decisions were 'panchayat' decisions, and were collectively arrived at after consultations between representatives, it is just and proper that all the members share in the blame if something went wrong in the panchayats. The observations of the new members is not very different from those held by the old members. The majority of the new members have agreed that all the members should not be held accountable for panchayat programmes that have failed. In any event, there is the overall impression that among both the old and the new members, there is a general disinclination to accept blame for whatever goes wrong in the panchayats.

Representation and interests: Electors, with all the limitations of the system which exists, can choose only from the people who contest in the elections. If no one contests, they have no choice. If

several persons contest, they do have a choice. If several people from a small group contest (after provisions for reservations of seats) then the choice gets reduced. If only one person stands as a candidate, then the choice is very limited indeed. We do not have an electoral system where electors can indicate preferences among several candidates. In a system where the 'first past the post' is elected, then the person needs to get only the largest number of votes among several candidates. He/she may still have got only a minority of votes. In this circumstance, who does the representative represent? Even though the person was elected, the majority of voters may not have voted for him/her.

In most constituencies, particularly in the taluk and zilla panchayats, the constituencies include several groups — essentially, different castes (or religious groups). These groups (or individuals) exercise varying forms of influence or leverage on the representatives. Grama panchayats often have only a few communities or castes living in each constituency area. Thus, in some cases, a constituency may even correspond directly to one caste's residence. At the level of the caste or community, elders are seen as the leaders of the communities, and thus, act as spokespersons for the entire group. This, for example, happens in grama sabhas (when they are convened), or even on other occasions where the community elders are able to convey the community's requirements to various persons—whether the representative, or to the panchayat president, or whoever else the elders think can be persuaded to take up issues relating to the community's interests. The same persons are often among the village elites and also community elders.

The question of leverage has several dimensions, and in political representation and participation, who can exercise greater leverage is an issue that needs to be discussed. In the context of the control or power of the elites (more clearly visible in the grama panchayats), do we assume that if the elites were instrumental in the election of certain representatives that they would refer only to the elites in their functioning as representatives? We have reason to believe that much of the 26 per cent of grama panchayat seats (February 2000 elections) where representatives were elected unopposed was through the manipulation and influence of local elites. However, do the representatives represent the interests of the elites, or do they represent the interests of the people? This is not an easy question to answer, inasmuch as the representatives themselves cannot make the distinction between whose interests they represented. Further, they did not see the interests of their constituencies as been negated or adversely affected if they were accountable to the local elites. Thus, the question here is whether it is possible that the elites, when they influenced the activities of the representatives, were articulating the interests of the constituencies, rather than only their own personal interests. While no absolute or categorical answers are presently available to this question, there is reason to believe that elites often do seek to

address the interests of the people of these constituencies. Whether this is in the context of their role as 'patron' to several people, or that they see their personal prestige being enhanced through their being able to look after the interests of the local people, elites do, and very often, show themselves as trying to further the interests of the local village people. Getting personal benefits for themselves do not appear to be foremost in their minds. Representatives had frequently stated that the involvement of elites in the functioning of the panchayats (and the representatives' functions) did not mean that personal benefits were always sought by the elites and patrons, though this was possible, and a few representatives said that it was present. Thus, showing themselves as being concerned about the interests of those in the villages, and in the constituents of the representatives who they controlled or influenced (i.e. their clients), was how they were able to enhance their own prestige in the villages. At some point of time, this could be translated into support for their own political advancement, through elections into higher political institutions.

Unlike in the case of grama panchayats, where local elites and representatives can show that they have been able to achieve certain outcomes in terms of benefiting individuals or communities, members of the taluk and zilla panchayats cannot so clearly show that they were directly responsible for addressing people's interests. Even in the building of a tank, for example, if the zilla panchayat member cannot establish that she was the one who was responsible for its construction, then someone else gets the credit for this act.²¹ Further, since these decisions, taken at panchayat meetings, may be construed as collective decisions, and not the direct outcome of the individual representative's actions alone, it is not easy for the taluk and zilla panchayat members to show that they were responsible for development activities which benefited the entire community, or village/s. Establishing that they were directly responsible for the selection of beneficiaries to development schemes, or in some other manner benefiting individuals (arranging bank loans, for instance), may be easier to accomplish, in which case, their claim to representing people's interests may be accepted by the people, even if the numbers involved were not high. In this context, patronage and the representing of people's interests are related in a very real sense, or constitute just two sides of the same coin. And, the objective is to benefit the representative himself/herself, and only incidentally the other person/s.

In any case, what kind of leverage is possible in these institutions? While in grama panchayats, individuals are able to effect certain outcomes directly through possessing power — as elites could accomplish, leverage in taluk and zilla panchayats is exercised in a more circuitous manner, and depends on the representatives' position in political parties, their political base, experience, and ultimately, political power. Thus, representation, in the sense of articulating and meeting the interests of

the constituents, is related to the power that a representative possesses, which as we observed varies from person to person. To the extent that certain development activities are beyond the capacity of the representatives to change, these activities (and plans) would be carried out regardless of the representatives' influence or contribution. But where a representative's initiative and power may be able to influence, for example in the location of projects, and the priorities for taking up works, depending on the availability of funds, the outcome is not the same for all representatives.

Representation and rent-seeking: Observations in Mandya and Gulbarga indicated that there was a higher proportion among representatives in these districts (about a third of the members made such remarks) who did not see themselves being re-elected, and therefore, indicated their inclination to make some money in the only term that they were likely to have. On the other hand, representatives in DK showed a lower inclination towards rent seeking. One does not need to go by the claims of the representatives themselves that they were committed to serving their people and so on, and hence were less prone to corruption. But objective conditions in DK may provide some support to the possibility that DK representatives were less likely to indulge in rent seeking. First, the political awareness is much higher among ordinary people. In panchayat offices, several people, including women, came to seek clarifications on panchayat matters, and had greater interaction with elected representatives. And the levels of interaction between people and their representatives ranged from the grama panchayat representatives to interactions with MLAs. MLAs were available in party offices in their constituencies, on a regular basis if not daily, and were far more accessible to their constituents than we found in the other two districts. Secondly, in DK, the expenditure for elections appeared to be lower than in Mandya and Gulbarga. Even in the visits to districts and certain areas during elections (to all tiers), we found that much less was spent by candidates in DK on pamphlets, banners, transport during election campaigns, and finally just at election time, much less on liquor²² than in Mandya and Gulbarga. Thirdly, the economic situation of the representatives and their constituents appears to be higher in DK compared to the other districts, and DK representatives stayed in their constituencies for longer periods due to their agricultural activities. Comparatively, representatives in Gulbarga for example, were to a high degree (about 40 per cent of ZP and TP members) located in district or taluk headquarters rather than in villages. Grama panchayat members were the only ones who stayed in the villages throughout the time. Thus, accessibility to members of DK panchayats was much higher than in the other two districts. Fifth, activities in associations (civil society) in DK appeared to be far higher than in Mandya and Gulbarga. While a few members in these latter districts claimed that they were members of local associations, their

participation was rather low—in contrast to the situation in DK. In DK, associations such as the i. School betterment committees, ii. Temple committees, iii. Youth associations, iv. Women’s associations or mahila mandals, v. self help groups - micro credit, vi. Co-operatives, had panchayat members actively involved, and thus, not only was their participation more effective in the panchayats, but their interaction with constituents was also higher. Further, local newspapers played a greater role in DK than in Gulbarga and Mandya. Even taluks often had local newspapers which covered the activities of panchayats in their areas. Local papers were less visible in Gulbarga and Mandya (though they were found in some places). Literacy being relatively much lower than other districts, newspaper readership in Gulbarga villages was very low. Higher literacy and newspaper readership made it possible for people in DK to be better informed, as well as build up accountability to a higher extent than elsewhere. There was also some evidence to indicate that various political parties even co-operated for the public good in some panchayats of DK, once the elections were over. In the other two districts such co-operation between parties was not observed. And finally, in addition to the panchayat grama sabhas (which were far better attended in DK than in Mandya and Gulbarga), another means of direct interaction between representatives and the electors are the *janasamparka sabhas*. These are public meetings convened by MLAs about once a year in the grama panchayat headquarters to discuss local problems. These sabhas were attended by MLAs, panchayat representatives, officials and the people. The factors indicated above in the case of DK were either not noticeable in Mandya and Gulbarga, or were present to a much lesser extent. Hence, the participatory content in politics was higher, and the nature of politics in DK has certainly increased the accountability of representatives, both in terms of being answerable for their actions and also in terms of preventing (at least to some extent) them from indulging in rent seeking activities, or in shirking from their duties and responsibilities as representatives.

Conclusion

People have expectations. Did the representatives meet them, or did the representatives rarely function as representatives? In which case (the latter), the people did not see any evidence of activity by the representative, i.e. the person had not functioned as a representative. Can the people remove the person from his/her position as a representative if he/she has not performed to the expectations of the people (whether elected through an open contest—what Schumpeter referred to as “.....a competitive struggle for people’s vote”(cited in Lipset 1994:1), or not—i.e. ‘elected unopposed’. Such a problem is difficult to solve inasmuch as there is little control over the representatives during their tenure, and a ‘no-confidence’ motion is hardly the solution to this problem

(in any case this is not moved by the people or electorate). While the participatory content of the system is still weak in most places, and voters and constituents do not have regular and frequent communication with their representatives, there is certainly much to be said about developing such a link. This is essential both to ensure that representatives know what their constituents want, and also, that the constituents have some measure of control over their representatives' functioning, and can ask questions if the representatives were not functioning according to their interests. The representatives can perhaps ignore the people's voices, but that would be going against the need to be responsive to the constituents, which in effect means that the person is not functioning as a representative. Thus, participatory democracy and representation need the continuous interaction between the constituents and their representatives, to meet the interests of the voters, as well as serve the function of a representative.

The problem of accountability has always been one which has generally received less attention from representatives or officials. This may seem as being for obvious reasons, as the people who mainly circumvent cannons of accountability are the representatives and the officials. The Panchayati Raj Act of 1993 has also been less than clear in its expectation of accountability from the representatives. Grama Sabha was about the only institution which was mentioned in the Act, and when any sabha functioned in a very weak manner, then one possible institution of accountability was more or less non functional. Other institutions which do not figure in the Act, such as the media, and civil society have functioned more effectively only in some districts (such as in DK) and much less so in most places. An immediate outcome of the weak institutional structure for accountability is that rent seeking is more or less rampant in most areas. The rather brazen acknowledgement by some representatives that since they expected to be elected representatives for only one term, they had to make use of this time to make money for themselves is also indicative of the virtually risk free environment for rent seeking activities. Thus, a significant proportion of the representatives could be accused of shirking, and also be found guilty of such activities. This clearly points to the weakness of accountability in the panchayats. Ultimately, to the extent that panchayat representatives have not been responsive to their constituents or have not acted in their interest, the elected representatives were not effective representatives. Thus, the final point that needs to be emphasized is that representatives owe something to their electors or constituency in terms of performance, and a person who does not act as a representative, has failed in his/her responsibilities as a representative.

Notes

1. We have used a broad sense of the term 'interaction' between constituents and representatives. This, for the most part involves talking to each other at formal forums (such as grama sabhas), or even casual meetings on streets, or at panchayat offices. The point is that there is some form of communication taking place.
2. Schumpeter's minimalist view was that in a democracy the only role of the people was to vote for their representatives (Manin, 1997:161-7). But, as Dahl emphasized, repeated elections were instrumental in providing for responsiveness and accountability of the representatives (Manin, 1997: 178; see also, Rose and Shin, 2001: 333-4).
3. There have been some doubts expressed about the efficacy of public deliberations in the absence of any uniform levels of expertise or access to information among those who are engaged in these deliberations (Bell, 1999). However, the panchayats in Karnataka are to some extent expected to overcome this problem by being transparent in their functioning, and making information accessible to the public.
4. Accountability can be seen in two forms: the first includes informing the public, and providing information on objectives and results. The second sense, of responsibility, involves being answerable for their actions in the political institution, as elected representatives, and to their electors. It could also entail control and punishment, and fixing blame if something does not work out (Helgason, 1997; Also, Polidano and Hulme 1997: 1-16).
5. The appointment of ombudsmen, or the right to recall, have not been set up in Karnataka, and hence, are not considered here.
6. 'They shirk if they spend time conspiring against their rivals. They shirk if they act to increase their own wealth. They shirk if they extend clientilistic favours to their families and friends. But the most important way in which they can act against the best interests of their constituents is by choosing policies that advance their own interests or the interests of some special interests to which they are beholden.' (Manin et. al, 1999:41).

Section 286 of the Panchayati Raj Act, 1993, defines every representative of all three levels of panchayats as 'public servant', within the meaning of section 21 of the Indian Penal Code and the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988. However, its effectiveness has not been clearly manifested. Rent seeking through the panchayats seems to be relatively risk free, from the observations of the representatives and others.

7. Madhya Pradesh had passed a bill in April 1999, where gram sabhas could recall grama panchayat members if the electorate felt they were not functioning according to their wishes. However, there is always a problem of impementing such a principle (i.e., recall), since it affects the stability of the system, and needs fresh elections to replace the recalled representatives every time a representative is 'recalled'. The viability of too frequent elections is questionable—democracy needs regular elections but not to the extent of having them too often, or in very short time intervals. And

the tenure of representatives would also be difficult to keep constant (five years in the panchayats) if various representatives were elected at different times (See also, Mahi Pal, 1999). Mahi Pal thinks there could be the problem of political manipulation by upper caste groups against representatives from disadvantaged groups such as Scheduled Castes, through the misuse of such legislation.

8. There is every possibility for people to contest in different constituencies if they choose to do so. However, the likelihood of someone to be elected from a place different from his home area is not high (See, Inbanathan, 1999; also K. Subha, 1997).
9. In 1996, Gulbarga had a literacy rate of 57.4% (men) and 30.9% (women); Dakshina Kannada had a literacy rate of 91.9% (men) and 78.5% (women); and Mandya had a literacy rate of 67.4% (men) and 46.9% (women). Source: Department of Public Instruction, Karnataka. Human Development in Karnataka 1999, Planning Department, Government of Karnataka.
10. Elsewhere, writing letters, forming pressure groups, and demonstrations etc., were some of the means by which constituents kept their representatives informed about their needs and preferences. However, representatives were more aware of the needs of active persons than those who kept quiet (Verba et. al, 1993).
11. We are well aware that there were several members, particularly women, who indicated that others were acting on their behalf. There were women who stated that since their husbands were more experienced in politics, the fact that they (the husbands) acted as the de facto members was even better for the constituencies than if the women were active representatives. But such a facile interpretation of the role and position of the representatives seems to miss the entire objective or principle in having certain groups represented through affirmative action (such as the reservation of one third of the seats for women).
12. On fixers, a more detailed account (Inbanathan, forthcoming) gives a comparative picture of DK, Mandya and Gulbarga.
13. An important reason appears to be the relatively better economic position of representatives in DK as compared to those in Gulbarga and Mandya. Working as 'fixers' was a means of employment for many in Gulbarga and Mandya. Representatives in DK, many of whom had agricultural lands, did not need to be engaged as 'fixers' as an income generating activity, and fewer members indicated that they functioned as fixers (they did not use the word denoting 'fixers'). However, patronage, and the building up of political support through 'helping' others was a part of the DK representatives' activities too.
14. The Panchayati Raj Act states that there should be at least two grama sabhas held in each village every year. Grama panchayat members are not only expected to attend the sabhas held in their own village, but can attend grama sabhas held in other villages too.
15. If grama sabhas were not convened by the grama panchayats, then the Executive Officers of the taluk panchayats were expected to do so. But, it still left many villages which did not have any grama sabha convened in

them. In 1999, a note from the Department of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj gave guidelines for the convening and conduct of grama sabhas. These guidelines shifted the responsibility for convening grama sabhas to the Executive Officers from the president and gram panchayats. Other clauses indicated a greater role for officials, such as having a taluk-based official to function as 'moderator' of the grama sabhas.

16. This seems remarkable, since each member of the standing committee has a tenure of twenty months, and when the membership is rotated, then the chances of people being missed out is not high.
17. Standing committees in grama panchayats were: a) production committee, b) social justice committee, and c) amenities committee. In taluk panchayats: a) general standing committee, b) finance, audit and planning committee, c) social justice committee; and in zilla panchayats: a) general standing committee, b) finance, audit and planning committee c) social justice committee, d) education committee, e) agriculture and industries committee.
18. In the political development of an individual, patrons (already established politicians) helped in various ways, nurturing the new entrant's political career. Several panchayat representatives, particularly of the zilla and taluk panchayats talked of their patrons who were instrumental in initiating them into politics and also helping them up the political ranks.
19. We carried out a study during the time of the elections to the three panchayats---February 2000 and June 2000.
20. A factor in the relative abilities of panchayat members as compared to officials is also related to the minimum qualifications required for elected representatives and officials. While being illiterate is not a disqualification for representatives, persons cannot be selected to the bureaucracy unless they fulfilled certain minimum educational requirements.
21. A zilla panchayat member gave this example, where she claimed that though she was the one who was responsible for the construction of an irrigation tank, a minister of the state government who had been invited to inaugurate the functioning of this tank publicly claimed credit—which she immediately disputed in the same inaugural function.
22. There was opposition to the sale and consumption of liquor, through women's groups functioning in some villages of DK. We cannot state that this is a widespread phenomenon across the district, but it was observed in the villages that we studied. Similar activities were not observed in Mandya or Gulbarga.

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