

# The Nation in the Village: Anti-Bahujan Development

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**Abstract:** *Local governance enables decentralisation, and is thus, more empowering to citizens, it is widely believed. In this paper I examine how the most local level activities of the state are unmistakably influenced by the national level discourse. This, I do by inspecting the working of the ward council meetings in one ward of a village in Kerala, the lowest level of working of the local self-government bodies. I show that discourses legitimised in these local governance bodies are counterproductive to the bahujans, from the local to the national level. Hence, development pursued by these bodies, meant for empowerment through local participation, is disempowering and against the interests of the majority of the nation: the bahujans. This paper set as it is, in Kerala, one of the few states to fully implement decentralisation, and serves as an example for states trying to strengthen it, has lessons for those interested in democratic and inclusive development.*

## Introduction

Caste is very often at the centre of public deliberations in India. One of the most sensitive debates has been around the constitutional provision of affirmative action, also called ‘reservations’. ‘Reservations’ are constitutional safeguards to ensure that the most marginalized are represented in the educational and government establishments and legislative bodies in India.<sup>1</sup> Some felt, as Srinivas did, that it has given a ‘new lease of life’ to caste (Srinivas, 1957, p. 529). Several agitations, most notably, the Anti-Mandal agitations, against the recommendations of the Mandal commission in India that were sought to be implemented in 1989 has come to redefine the articulations about caste in the public sphere.



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<sup>1</sup> Article 15(4) and 15 (5) of the Constitution of India allows for special provisions for socially and economically backward classes including SCs and STs in educational institutions. Articles 16 (4), 16 (4A) and 16 (4B) addresses reservations for backward classes including SC and ST in government jobs. Article 334 provides for reservation of seats for SC and STs in the parliament and the legislative bodies of the state.

The Mandal commission report had recommended that Other Backward Castes (OBCs) in India should be entitled to 27% of the government jobs. Many arguments, particularly by upper-caste individuals, have centred on the erosion of ‘merit’ that reservation promotes (See for instance, D. Kumar 1992). It has been written that affirmative action is essentially reinforcing, not ending caste discrimination (Mehta, 2004), particularly through vote bank politics (Bhambhri, 2005). Supporters argue that it is necessary to bring about social justice (Ilaiah, 2006; Mitra, 1987; Vivek Kumar, 2005). Using data from the National Statistical Survey, Thorat notes that in both ownership of businesses and educational attainment, Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) are not represented proportionate to their share in the population (Thorat, 2006). He writes, defending reservation policies that “if the lower castes possess few land and business assets and education it is because they do not have access to property rights and education. And if the higher castes are seen to have more of both, it is because access to assets and education was artificially ‘reserved’ for them at the cost of the lower castes” (ibid: 2006, 2433).

This paper investigates how these national-level discourses about reservation is reflected in the working of the government at the most local level, shaping local discourses, and with daily implications to the lives of several people who do not avail it, but nevertheless belong to communities that are entitled for reservation. This will be done by looking at development programs pursued by the local state bodies in Kerala, a south Indian state.

The context provided by Kerala is important – this is a region whose politics and development has captured the interest of researchers and policy makers, particularly after the communist party flourished in the state in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Famed for its high human development, its land reforms in the 1970s, implementation of decentralisation in the 1990s, and more recently, the spread of a network of women’s self-help groups called Kudumbashree in early 2000s, the state is one that has been touted as an example for other states in India, and sometimes, even for other regions of the world to emulate (Heller, 1999, 2001; Mohan and Stokke, 2000). This celebrated narrative about Kerala is not without its criticisms, particularly for its continued exclusion along the lines of gender, caste, and community. (Deshpande, 2000; Kurien, 1995; Shyjan and Sunita, 2008; Sivanandan, 1979) Examining whether and how exclusionary national discourses are reflected in the daily life in a state that claims exceptionalism through its progressive credentials will enable a rethink of both the idea and means of development.

This paper will be structured in three sections. In the first, I will introduce the field site and show how caste reflects in its geography. In the second, I will detail the working of a gramasabha, or a ward-council meeting in the field site. In the third, I will explain how public meetings organized in the panchayat for addressing caste discrimination was held. And in the fourth section, I will conclude.

### **Caste geography**

Fieldwork, done between 2014 and 2015 was in a village, that administratively is one ward of a local council, the smallest unit of local governance, in central Kerala. I will call the field site ‘Perur’.<sup>2</sup> Perur ward belongs to the gramapanchayat called Oridam. The population in Perur,

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<sup>2</sup> Names of places and people have been changed to protect privacy.

gleaned from various data sources obtained through the gramapanchayat is approximately 1650, with 479 households, of which 98 households, that is, 20.5% were classified as SC. (This representation is high in comparison to the state and district average for rural areas - of 10.32% and 12.20% households respectively).<sup>3</sup>

Kerala often claims exceptionalism as a post-caste society. Caste engraved into a village space such as my field site is easy to miss on a cursory visit. However, houses, by their location and construction indicate the caste-class status of their inhabitants. The field site has a ‘colony’ – which are spaces where lower caste households, mainly scheduled castes – like Paraya (basket weavers), Pulaya (agricultural workers), and Kanakkan (both fish vendors and agricultural workers), and fewer number of other lower castes like the Karuvan (Ironsmith), Kollan (Blacksmith), and Thandaan (farm hands) etc – are concentrated. There is a Kumbaran colony, a colony of potters near the ward boundary. There is an area of Christians along the main road, near the church, and these are well-to-do upper caste Syrian Christians. There is an area where poorer, backward Christians live, away from the main road, near the potters’ colony, intermingled with other lower caste Hindu households: like Ezhava and Thattan (goldsmiths), most of whom are daily wage labourers – in occupations like painting, house construction etc. The only Muslim family in the ward lives right next to the mosque. Vilakkathala Nair (caste of barbers that were exclusive for serving upper castes), another ‘lower-caste group’, stay close together, as a cluster of houses further away from the main road. The locality of Namboodiris (Kerala Brahmins) with good houses and land are located centrally. Close to these are other upper castes houses: like Pisharody, Nambiar and Nair. Caste identities of people living here are known publicly. There are nearly 20 caste groups among 479 households.

This geography of caste, as in other places, have not been accidental. In Perur, this has global connections, coming as it does, out of displacement for a canal irrigation project.<sup>4</sup> The project itself was part of the Grow More Food campaign in 1946, started after rice shortages induced by the second world war. (Santhakumar et al., 1995) This caste geography was further reinforced when, through the land reforms, colonies were formally established. (Sreerekha, 2012)

Having laid out the importance of caste even in the structuring of physical spaces, I want to talk about some of the meetings organized by the local governance bodies in my field site.

### **Gramasabha meetings**

During fieldwork, I attended some local council meetings called the ‘gramasabha’ meetings – these are more appropriately the ‘ward council’ or ‘ward-gramasabha’ meetings. In one of the meetings, new applications for various government schemes were being accepted. The beneficiaries for schemes were to be selected from the applications submitted that day. Mostly women had turned out to represent their families. They were applying for schemes that distributed livestock such as goats and calves, poultry like chicken, and enclosures like hen coops and goat hutches, as well as

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<sup>3</sup> SECC Census 2011, Caste-tribe Status of households – rural.

<sup>4</sup>Drawn out in more detail in Herbert (2017)

the more significant grants for building houses, house repairs, toilets etc. There were also applications for pensions - widow pension, old-age pension, disability pension etc.

Addressing them, the ward councillor told assembled people that allocations would be made according to '*munganana*', or priority. The order of priority was as follows: first the Scheduled Caste community members, then widows, then the disabled, and then the old. Now we have to note that the 'non-scheduled caste members' who were excluded from priority included both upper castes as well as lower caste OBCs like blacksmiths, goldsmiths, iron smiths, and farmhands. This order of priority was reiterated at every meeting that I attended, and everyone had become familiar with it, so much so that it had become part of people's explanation as to why they did not get any help from the government: they do not have priority.

### **Special Schemes to Priority, Priority to Reservation**

The priority list came to mean that there was an exclusive treatment towards Scheduled Caste members. From here, it was easy for this discourse to transform into its popular form of widespread resentment that "All benefits go to the SC community members because of reservation." Very often, the resentment came from the poor people, who were not from the scheduled castes, but from the OBC castes who had been told that SCs were taking their benefits away.

Legitimised from government platforms (especially gramasabha meetings), and repeated by the local upper caste elites, the idea that welfare measures were 'reservation' benefits achieved a status of truth. So, did only SC members receive benefits? Examining the list of approved beneficiaries tells a different tale. It shows that only 32.4% of the total beneficiaries were from the SC communities. That is, 'other' communities benefitted equally, or more, from government schemes. When only five SC households received assistance for house repair, double the number of beneficiaries were chosen from 'Other' communities.

What is ignored while foregrounding this (anti-) 'reservation' rhetoric is the actual process and several official criteria that influences how beneficiaries of panchayat schemes are selected. This includes compiling the names of applicants for various schemes by various panchayat functionaries and officials, vetting through working groups, selection by elected representatives themselves etc. It serves to also cover the uncomfortable but well-known fact that political affiliations and personal friendships play a role in deciding who the beneficiaries are. Also, examination of the local council documents revealed that SC communities availed assistance for house construction or repair from the Scheduled Caste Sub-plan set aside exclusively for them. Therefore, strictly speaking, there was no '*munganana pattika*' (priority list) from which beneficiaries were chosen – the benefits were allocated only from special schemes, and very often not from the regular government schemes unless there were stipulations to adhere to. It appeared that local bodies were spreading misinformation, intended to cause resentment against each other among the poor 'lower castes'.

**Table 1: Beneficiaries of government schemes, 2014-15**

No	Scheme	Beneficiaries – SC	Beneficiaries – General	Beneficiaries- Total
1	House construction	5	10	15
2	House repair	10	24	34
3	House construction for the landless	2	0	2
4	Driving training for Women	3	12	15
5	Toilet Construction	1	0	1
6	Tool kit distribution	1	0	1
7	Manure for crops	0	1	1
8	Goat Distribution Scheme	1	0	1
9	Electrical/Plumbing training	0	1	1
	TOTAL	23	48	71

(source: Accessed online on Oridam gramapanchayat website, own translation)

The dangerous consequence of such a discourse was that it translated very quickly into one of the most polarizing debates in India today: that of ‘caste-based affirmative action, or ‘reservations’. Often, asking respondents the question “Have you availed any government scheme?” resulted in an answer in the negative along with the comment “all panchayat schemes are reserved for the SCs, how will we get it?” Thus, government bodies were legitimising discourses that led up to anti-reservation sentiments, while pitting against each other, SC and OBC members who very often lived in similar spaces like the colonies.

### **Seminar for SC communities’ development**

This was a half-day program where two separate functions were held together: one was a ‘seminar’ to form a comprehensive development plan for youth from SC communities, and the other was the inauguration of the newly-completed Panchayat Hall named after a Late headmaster of the local school.<sup>5</sup> Two state ministers inaugurated these programs. The seminar for SC communities was inaugurated by the then-State Minister for Welfare of Scheduled Castes and Backward Castes.

A printed six-page document which outlined the comprehensive program for the development of SC youth was also distributed along with this. This document gave some statistics about the number of colonies in Oridam, and the number of students in schools from the colonies. It also put forward plans for construction of paved roads, electrification of 28 non-electrified houses, and making drinking water schemes functional (which has to be seen as a tacit acknowledgment of the non-functionality of existing schemes). Other programs were to provide grants for house construction and repairs, as well as providing houses for those without either land or house; none

<sup>5</sup> Although it was called a seminar, in its conduct, it was more like a meeting in organization and participation.

of these were special schemes, but activities that were expected to be carried out by the local bodies.

On the day of the program, there was a significant turn-out, with over 250 people in participating in this program. Many youngsters, particularly young women, from the SC communities were present because it was publicized that youngsters could apply for financial assistance for skill development programs. Women (not as many men) had gathered well ahead of time, before the ministers arrived, and waited inside the panchayat hall. Men stood outside, to meet the ministers personally, and possibly get photos clicked with them. Not one woman was seen in this gathering of men outside the hall to welcome the ministers. Even though the vast majority of participants were women from SC communities, only two of the thirteen speakers were women. Except for the minister himself, no speaker on stage was from the SC community. The women speakers were Shobha, the District panchayat standing committee chairman for public works, and Parvathi teacher, the Panchayat Vice-President. Among the audience was present, two elected SC women ward councillors of Oridam – they had no role except as audience, even though they might have been best equipped to speak about the topic at hand. (I know this also from having talked with both separately about issues in the ward). Also present was Sneha, another woman from the SC community who was articulate, and an active member of the Kudumbashree.

The official ceremonies were followed by speeches. I will briefly cite some of the key points in the talks by key people at this function that relate to the SC Development Seminar. In his welcome speech, the Panchayat President who was also the councillor for Perur ward, Balan, mentioned that ₹65,00,000 (then approximately £65,000) was set aside for ‘SC development’ by the Gramapanchayat. Benefits for Scheduled Castes had doubled, he said, and this was due to the bold moves made by the SC Welfare Minister (who was on-stage).

The SC Welfare Minister talked about the key housing scheme available for the community members, including financial assistance for buying land and building houses. He expressed his opinion that the biggest hurdle for the community is the lack of employment: there are educated youth who are unable to obtain good jobs. This, he said was because public sector jobs are being cut whereas SC members are not able to get into the private sector.

Another Panchayat-functionary, the Chairman of the Working Committee on Development, who was held in high regard by many spoke about the backwardness in many areas of the Panchayat. Education was critical in upliftment. But the problem, he said, was that people who enjoy the benefits continue to enjoy further benefits. This must stop, and there must be a balance. In saying this, he was once again calling into question, ‘reservations’ and using the popular trope that ‘all benefits go to the SCs’.

Parvathi, the panchayat Vice-President, after offering her initial remarks, in her brief address said that there is a lack of participation by the SC communities in the Gramasabha, and they should participate more actively and voice their demands. It seemed certainly strange because evidently, the largest single group participating in not just Gramasabha, but also all public programs were women from SC and OBC communities.

After the ministers left, most of the audience too did. The remaining participants belonged to the SC communities and stayed back for the rest of the Seminar. In this forum, one of the things the Panchayat President did (just as the Vice-President Parvathi also did earlier) was to highlight the low participation of SC communities, particularly boys and men. In the meeting, most of the participants were women. Although the hall was overflowing, only two rows in the front were occupied by men. Few men stood at the back, constituting on a rough count, approximately 1/8<sup>th</sup> (12.5%) of the participants. It appeared that the intended audience for public events were the colony inhabitants (mostly SC but also other backward castes). While other voters of the ward hardly faced any pressure to participate, even young boys from the colonies were asked to participate, whether they liked it or not, a reminder of what has been called the ‘Tyranny of Participation’ by Cooke and Kothari (2001). These researchers write that ‘tyranny is the illegitimate and/or unjust exercise of power’ and participatory development can facilitate this not because of certain individuals or processes but because the tyrannical potential of participatory development is ‘systemic’ (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). The insistence on increased participation of the men from the colonies was despite the fact that a good proportion of participants of not just the gramasabhas but of any public meeting was constituted by SC and OBC community members. Most were women who often attended these meetings at the expense of their daily wages. The expectation seemed to be that men should also sacrifice their work days, and children should take an interest in these activities by default, or because of some obligation.

Clearly, women from deprived communities often, constituted the ‘public’ for activities of the local governance bodies. They were also the active members, functionaries of the local programs and schemes – the Kudumbashree, the MGNREGS, the gramasabhas. The demands of democracy on these women also extended to the men and children in the families too, a demand not likewise expected of upper caste households or women.

Also mentioned in this forum were the findings from a study carried out amongst the SC community. This was printed in the pamphlet distributed at the meeting. This document said that there was a need for social and economic intervention among young SC men. What the issues were that necessitated this social and economic intervention was outlined in the last section of that document and was repeated by President Balan in the public meeting. Following were the problems identified, translated from the document circulated (See Box 1 below).

This list of problems seemed less like findings of a study, and more like mainstream impressions of the colony written out in scientific-seeming language, using percentages and numbers. If it did not pathologise several communities by implying that the youth, particularly men of the community faced problems en masse, it certainly reinforced negative stereotypes of the colony as a place of violence, crime, drug abuse, backwardness and hopelessness, and blamed it on the psychology of the inhabitants. Many statements squarely blame youngsters in the community rather than serve as a useful statement of a problem. For example, the first problem identified, that, ‘Most youngsters study only until the SSLC, or Plus two at most. They do not try to go for higher education, or to find skilled areas of employment or training.’ Here, the blame is on the youngsters for not trying to develop themselves academically or in other skills. Later, they are also blamed for not sticking to any jobs, for living beyond their means, and not having a saving mentality. Another statement squarely said that a good number of youngsters in the SC communities were substance abusers. Many were vague, and immeasurable, and non-verifiable statements, but when

presented as findings from a survey, carried some authority. A statement like ‘The proportion of youngsters who think differently from their traditional ways have now risen to about 50% (sic)’ did not convey what the traditional thinking would be of the young men under question. However, it did present these men as ‘traditional, unwilling to think differently’, as if they were set in their ‘backward’ ways, in what seems like an attempt to match up with the stereotype of men from lower caste communities. Circulated as it was publicly, this can only mean that the panchayat anticipated little or no challenge to such a document. This implied a degree of powerlessness, specifically of men, in these communities, to question such sweeping statements made publicly.

***Box1: Problems identified among SC youth***

**Basic Problems Identified by the Gramapanchayat among the SC youth.**

1. Most youngsters study only until the SSLC\*, or *Plus Two*\*\* at most. They don’t try to go for higher education, or to find skilled areas of employment or training.
2. Only 25% of SC boys pursue education beyond *Plus Two*
3. Girls fare better than boys in studies
4. Less than 1% of SC people in the panchayat are employed in government jobs.
5. Only 0.5% SC men are employed abroad.
6. Majority of youngsters educated below SSLC are those who don’t stick to any jobs.
7. Less than 1% of youngsters set up their own business.
8. Among the youth, a considerable percentage of young men regularly use addictive substances.
9. This substance addiction leads them to socially exploit in many ways (*sic*).
10. Although they earn high wages daily, the lack of thrift and reckless spending leads many to indebtedness, and borrowing at high interest rates, making life very difficult.
11. Many young women are forced to take up jobs to sustain their families.
12. The proportion of youngsters who think differently from their traditional ways have now risen to about 50% (*sic*).

\*SSLC – Secondary School Leaving Certificate Exam, roughly equivalent to GCSE in the UK

\*\*Plus Two – Roughly equivalent to A-levels in the UK

*Source: Printed document distributed at the Comprehensive SC Youth Development Seminar (own translation from Malayalam)*

After the meeting, I asked President Balan about the survey on which the findings were based. He said this was the finding from a survey carried out by the SC promoter, and asked me to get in touch with Mini, the SC promoter for the area. When I shared with him that I feel uncomfortable about these statements, he said that they were yet to properly compile the figures, and this may not be accurate. Later, I asked Mini for the survey results, or the questionnaire if they had any, and she said she had no idea about this as the SC promoter preceding her had carried out this survey. Suddenly it appeared there might have been no survey at all, and even if there had been, this had

never been analysed, and these findings were indeed common-sense impressions, not findings arrived at systematically and scientifically.

This common-sense discourse legitimised in public spaces, when examined against discourses about the situation of Dalit women and men in India is revealing. In a paper that explores masculinities, the Anandhi et al. (2002) make claims that are not too far from the discourse in the gramasabhas. They write that the men are not interested in traditional occupations, and the hyper-masculinity of dalit youth is violent, and oppress women, both from their own communities, and others (S. Anandhi et al., 2002). In another paper, Anandhi (2013) looks at ritual practices in a Dalit community and portrays the men as ‘partaking’ in patriarchy that bears resemblance to Brahmin patriarchy. This has to be viewed as stemming from the same kind of anxiety expressed by Kannabiran and Kannabiran (1991) when they write, “The problem of articulation (and indeed understanding) arises when Dalit men, having gained access to power, decide to adopt the methods of the upper castes in exercising this power. It is not uncommon to see Dalit boys molesting or passing derogatory remarks about upper caste girls.” This logic of hyper-masculine oppressive Dalit young men seems to have caught on, and we find Still (2008) writing that “Where possible, then, Dalit men seek to control and restrict their women in the name of honour and prestige.” Indeed, she goes on to argue that Dalit women are suffering because of the advances made by Dalit men in India.

The discourse in the gramapanchayat, while apparently not based on any research finding, but stereotypical and discriminatory attitudes find reflection in academic literature too.

## Conclusion

To summarise, there are a few points that come out of discussions in the previous sections

1. The first is about the geography created by caste which has not been affected by various development programs that were implemented. Indeed, caste structure was reflected in the ward geography despite development projects.
2. The second is about the spaces for participation that the much-touted decentralization experience of Kerala has opened. Resembling ‘participation’ advanced through the ‘good governance’ agenda, these ‘invited spaces’ seem to hold little transformative potential to address structural inequalities. What is more worrying is that they explicitly seem to advance an anti-reservation sentiment, of disproportionate benefits reaching the SC members (even though it had no factual basis), a debate that has polarized Indian society since its implementation.
3. Even though the official ward council meetings and the inauguration events had the poor SC and OBC community members as its participants, the only way caste as structure of social inequality came up for discussion was in discussing the ‘SC’ communities and in constructing an anti-reservation sentiment. This served to make the OBCs a part of the ‘general’ category along with upper caste communities. Even though the distribution of benefits did not follow the discourse set in the public meetings, such a view was aired, meanwhile ignoring that OBC communities too avail reservations. Through very complicated manoeuvring, a simple discourse conflating caste with SC, and SC with reservation was built in the locality.

4. When read along with other problem identified, that is, of a violent hyper-masculine lower caste man, and the non-recognition of the Dalit-Bahujan women who have not had the luxury of being confined to a safe domestic space, this problem assumes a much more serious import. The true function then, of all these inter-related, co-existing discourses is to construct an incomprehensible, and artificial problem statement with internal contradictions while keeping under wraps, the structure, function and outcomes of a caste-society. In these discourses, it would appear that Dalit women need to be saved from Dalit men. Concepts in theoretical literature like Dalit Patriarchy do not conform to observations in the field, or to historical trajectories of Dalit communities, but closely resemble the disempowering discourses in public spaces.
5. Through this, what I have tried to show is how public spaces are used to perpetrate violence and in general are part of the apparatus of domination, exclusion, invisibilization, and forgetting, particularly for those it seeks to ‘develop’.

Thus, to conclude, the similarities in the discourse between the national level discourse about the reservations and the local level discourse in Kerala are uncanny. The Kerala model of development that claims a sort of exceptionalism, especially vis-à-vis caste dynamics in comparison to the rest of the country, is problematic. Caste and gender operate in the everyday working of government spaces and are alive and active in the villages in Kerala. The nation is reproduced in the village.

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