

Deliberative Democracy in India

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Abstract

This paper traces the evolution of deliberative institutions in India to understand the role of deliberation in democratic life, as well as the ways in which deliberative bodies influence, and are influenced by, entrenched social inequality. The paper first unpacks the historical roots of Indian deliberation in the pre-colonial and colonial periods, emphasizing the ways in which religious traditions fostered a culture of debate and dialogue. The paper then explores the interplay between Western liberal philosophers, most notably Henry Maine, and Indian political thinkers,

including Gandhi and Ambedkar, on participatory democracy in India. The discussion then highlights the continued dialogue between Indian and Western ideas in the push for greater participatory development. Finally, the paper probes the current incarnation of state-sponsored deliberation in India—namely, village assemblies known as *gram sabhas* under the constitutionally mandated system of Indian village democracy or *Panchayati Raj*—and reviews the growing empirical scholarship about these village assemblies.

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Introduction

India, as is well known, has a resilient democracy. Indian elections have been hotly contested, widely inclusive, well conducted, and integrated into a robust and active political sphere. The consistency and quality of Indian democracy is not only anomalous in the post-colonial world, but also stands as rebuttal to much of Western liberal democratic theory, which posits a set of preconditions to democracy that India sorely lacks. As historian Sudipta Kaviraj has noted, “Viewed from the angle of conventional political theory, Indian democracy is inexplicable. It defies all the preconditions that theory lays down for the success of democratic government” (Kaviraj 2011, p. 2). These preconditions are defined by those that were present at the rise of Western democracy — “namely, the presence of a strong bureaucratic state, capitalist production, industrialization, the secularization of society (or at least the prior existence of a secular state), and relative economic prosperity” (Kaviraj 2011, p.2) — but are relatively absent in contemporary India, where poverty and illiteracy are still widely prevalent. Despite these conditions, however, India has sustained democracy, and done so in ways that are distinctly Indian (Khilnani 1999).

A large body of literature has sought to understand why democracy has thrived in the Indian context (e.g. Khilnani 1999; Kaviraj 2011; Keane 2009; Chatterjee and Katznelson 2012). One proposed and contested component of that explanation has been the long history of public reasoning and debate on the subcontinent — an “argumentative tradition” that is intimately connected with the development of democracy (Sen 2005, Guha 2005). Indeed, deliberation has its roots in classic normative conceptions of democracy; it derives from the premise that “democracy revolves around the transformation rather than simply the aggregation of preferences” (Elster 1998). Whether or not this deliberative tradition has helped to sustain its democracy, the very presence of a robust deliberative sphere in India is itself puzzling. Contemporary articulations of deliberation,

drawing largely on John Rawls and Jurgen Habermas, see deliberation as rooted in equality, rationality, and the free exchange and weighting of ideas; deliberation, on this understanding, is a mechanism for resolving reasonable differences within a pluralistic society. These theories emphasize at least three necessary preconditions for deliberation: first, parties in deliberation are formally and substantively equal; second, deliberation is based on reason rather than coercion, such that “no force except that of the better argument is exercised” (Habermas 1975, p. 108); and lastly, that the object of deliberation ought only to be the common good, rather than individual interests.¹

On its face, contemporary India lacks these conditions too, and yet, it boasts the most widely used deliberative institution in human history — the village assembly, known as the *gram sabha*, which was instituted in 1992 as a part of the 73rd amendment to the Indian constitution, and now affects 840 million people living in approximately one million villages in rural India. These bodies are only the most recent in a long tradition of deliberative institutions in India, which date back to at least the fifth century BC (Sen 2005). *How does India, with its deep social and economic inequality, illiteracy, and entrenched identity politics, sustain a robust deliberative democracy?* We argue that deliberation in India has taken equality and social inclusion as one of its objectives, rather than a precondition; that is, deliberative institutions have served as a medium by which communities and peoples have come to assert their dignity and demand their social equality. Backed by state policies aimed at inclusion, these institutions have become a mechanism by which to empower those who have been historically sidelined from politics.

In this paper, we trace the evolution of deliberative institutions in India — in terms of their scope, participants, and objectives — to understand both the role of deliberation in democratic life, as well as the ways in which deliberative bodies influence, and are influenced by, entrenched social inequality. We first unpack the historical roots of Indian deliberation in the pre-colonial and colonial periods, emphasizing the ways in which religious traditions fostered a culture of debate and dialogue.

We then explore the interplay between Western liberal philosophers, most notably Henry Maine, and Indian political thinkers, including Gandhi and Ambedkar, on participatory democracy in India. After outlining the fraught debate around local village democracy at Independence, we highlight the continued dialogue between Indian and Western ideas in the push for greater participatory development. Finally, we probe the current incarnation of state-sponsored deliberation in India – namely, village assemblies known as *gram sabhas* under the constitutionally mandated system of Indian village democracy or *Panchayati Raj* – and review the growing empirical scholarship about these village assemblies.

Historical Roots of Indian Deliberation

While Indian electoral democracy was only instituted in its current form at independence, the practice of public reasoning and deliberation is a much older phenomenon, dating back to Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu traditions as early as the fifth century BCE. Religious councils hosted by early Indian Buddhists, for example, often focused on resolving debates within and across religious traditions; importantly, they “also addressed the demands of social and civic duties, and furthermore helped, in a general way, to consolidate and promote the tradition of open discussion on contentious issues” (Sen 2005, p. 15). In the third century BCE, such practices became celebrated under the reign of Ashoka, who sought to codify rules for public discussion that emphasized mutual respect and honor. By the 16th century, under the reign of Akbar, interfaith dialogues were explicitly aimed at the pursuit of reason rather than reliance on tradition. The priority given to equality and reason in deliberation echo standards in contemporary deliberative theory; perhaps even more significantly, their explicit sponsorship by the state reveals the extent of their importance to early Indian culture.

Early deliberation, however, was not confined to state-sponsored discourse; it was also used as a vehicle to criticize the state, particularly during the early colonial period, and established

religious doctrine. After the arrival of Christian missionaries, for example, Muslim religious leaders published placards and pamphlets to rebut Christian attacks on the Prophet; “such works often contained covert critique of the Company as a secular ruler and were not limited to the veracity of the Koran and Bible” (Bayly 2000, p. 191). Similar debates took place between Hindu philosophers and missionaries, on matters both religious and worldly. This critical dialogue in the Indian ecumene is hardly surprising, given openness to debate within India’s religious varied systems — from Buddhism and Jainism to Hinduism and Islam (Bayly 2000). Within Hinduism, for example, discussions of *apadharma*, which outlined the conditions under which the Hindu moral order did not hold, and the Bhakti movement, which provided an individual path to spiritual fulfillment regardless of birth or caste, pushed people to question the prevailing social order, often using the systems of logic and argumentation prominent in the orthodox Nyaya tradition. Within Islam, religious leaders actively interrogated the sultan’s power and its limitations under Sharia law; moreover, the growth of Sufi mysticism in South Asia challenged orthodoxy of mainstream sects.

Even in this early period, participants in such public debates extended beyond just the intellectual, political, and religious elite. Early debates — in *sabhas*, *kathas*, *panchayats*, and *samajs* — often included both notable big men and peasants, in contestation with each other and in opposition to the state. Indeed, “the term *sabha* (association) itself originally indicated a meeting in which different qualities of people and opinions were tested, rather than the scene of a pronouncement by caste elders” (Bayly 2000, p. 187). Evidence from collective literary biographies demonstrates this diverse body of peoples known to the critical public — from washermen to tailors and even women. While much of this public discourse took place via written letters and placards, oral communication played a large role in constructing a “highly effective information order,” with gossip and news disseminated outside druggist stalls and mosques, analogous to the smoking dens and coffee shops in the Middle East. Beyond this explicitly political oral culture, cultural performances, such as skits,

fables, and plays, provided yet another venue for elites and masses to link together to express political messages. Of course, the inclusiveness and accessibility of such public debates should not be overstated; like other emergent public spheres, India's growing deliberative institutions were uneven in their reach and were still predominantly the province of the educated. Despite their limited scope, however, the presence of a bounded, but critical public sphere suggests an important foundation for future participatory and democratic politics.

In Dialogue with the West

By the late 19th century, Western liberal philosophers had begun to articulate a vision of participatory democracy in which equal citizens could collectively make decisions in a deliberative and rational manner. Thinkers such as John Stuart Mill advanced theories of democratic participation in which deliberation came to be more than a mere method of decision-making; it served an important educative function — teaching individuals how to engage as public citizens. These ideas, among others, would profoundly shape and be shaped by the British presence in India.

Of particular relevance for the trajectory of Indian deliberation was Henry Maine, who was sent to India in the 1860s to advise the British government on legal matters. While serving in the subcontinent, he came across several accounts by British administrators of thriving indigenous systems of autonomous village governments, whose structure and practice shared many characteristics of participatory democracy (Maine 1876). Maine had been influenced by J.S. Mill, who argued that universal suffrage and participation in a democratic nation would greatly benefit from the experience of such participation at the local level (Mill 1869). Observing Indian village governments, Maine came to articulate a theory of the village community as an alternative to the centralized state; these village communities, led by a council of elders, were not subject to a set of

laws articulated from above, but had more fluid legal and governance structures that adapted to changing conditions, while maintaining strict adherence to traditional customs (Mantena 2010).

This argument had a profound impact on colonial administration: As India became fertile territory for experiments in governance, the liberal British Viceroy Lord Ripon instituted local government reforms in 1882 for the primary purpose of providing “political education,” and reviving and extending India’s indigenous system of government (Tinker 1967). The implementation of these reforms followed an erratic path, but an Act passed in 1920 set up the first formal, democratically elected village councils, with provinces varying widely in how councils were constituted, in the extent of their jurisdiction, and in how elections were held (Tinker 1967).

Beyond influencing colonial policy, Maine’s description of self-reliant Indian village communities came to shape the thinking of Mohandas Gandhi, who made it a central tenet of his vision for an independent India (Rudolph and Rudolph 2006, Mantena 2012). Gandhi’s philosophy of decentralized economic and political power, as articulated in his book *Village Swaraj*, viewed the self-reliant village as emblematic of a “perfect democracy,” ensuring equality across castes and religions and self-sufficiency in all needs. These villages would come to form “an alternative *panchayat raj*, understood as a non-hierarchical, decentralized polity of loosely federated village associations and powers” (Mantena 2012, p. 536). Stressing non-violence and cooperation, this Gandhian ideal elevated local participation — not just for the political education of India’s new citizens, but as a form of democratic self-governance.

Gandhi’s proposal, however, was defeated during the Constituent Assembly Debates. The debates themselves, which reflected many deliberative ideals, instead led to the creation of a constitutional order that de-emphasized village democracy — largely out of B.R. Ambedkar’s concern that the hierarchical and largely illiterate society of rural India would not allow the downtrodden to exercise their voice, regardless of any constitutional guarantee of formal political

equality (Austin 1972). Ambedkar², the principal architect of the Constitution and a fierce advocate for the rights of Dalits (formerly untouchables), was deeply skeptical of village democracy, arguing: “What is the village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism?” (Immerwahr 2015, p. 86). In many ways, his thinking was consistent with contemporary liberal theorists, who suggest that deliberation and participatory democracy are only possible when citizens see each other as equals, deserving of voice in decision-making. Ambedkar’s recognition of entrenched social and economic inequality ruled out the possibility of a robust, participatory democracy in India; he suggested that India would enter democracy in a “life of contradictions” — in which political equality would be in conflict with persistent social and economic inequality. This animated his belief that the constitution should guarantee more than just formal equality via the vote; it should also play a major role in the nation’s development agenda — via the guarantee of education and employment, the abolition of caste and other social ills, and the provision of certain forms of group representation.

Village democracy did not entirely disappear from the Indian constitution, however; Article 40 stated that “the State shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government.” Though this article was a mere “directive principle,” or non-judicial guidepost for policy, some state governments did set up formally constituted village democracies. In 1947, India’s largest state, Uttar Pradesh, pioneered the approach of instituting a deliberative body that it called a *gaon sabha*, which met twice a year to discuss and prioritize the concerns of the village (Retzlaff 1963; Tinker 1967).

By the 1950s, a confluence of both domestic and international factors led to resurgent calls for greater citizen voice in development. On the international stage, USAID and the Ford Foundation had taken up a strongly communitarian vision of human progress and had begun

promoting participatory development programs throughout the developing world (Immerwahr 2015). India became a particularly fertile ground for such policies, not only because of Gandhi's earlier vision for India's village democracies, but because India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru himself had to contend with the failure of his state-led, top-down Grow More Food program. The resulting community development program, financed by a bilateral aid agreement with the United States, thus grew from a mere pilot to a national program within just one decade (Immerwahr 2015). A government committee, led by a senior politician Balwantray Mehta, was formed to spearhead the initiative; it released a report in 1957 that set the foundation of *Panchayati Raj*, a government-led plan to decentralize democracy into three tiers of local government, which would be empowered to direct the local development agenda (Mehta 1957).

Deliberation under *Panchayati Raj*

As states came to adopt the *panchayati* structure, most were far from realizing the Gandhian ideal of egalitarian self-governance. Deliberation and participation under this new structure was meant to elicit the "felt needs" of the village, which depended on the ability of the village to be a cohesive body which was capable of articulating a general will. In practice, however, "the tendency of the spokesmen for the village to come from the powerful, landed classes within rural life was widely acknowledged," and any "actual felt needs that threatened village solidarity — such as a desire for land reform, the abolition of caste hierarchies, or sexual equality — were quickly ruled out" (Immerwahr 2015, p. 92). Even S.K. Dey, the first Union Cabinet Minister for Cooperation and *Panchayati Raj*, admitted that many villages had nominal success, with paper forms completed but no actual programs implemented (Immerwahr 2015, p. 94). The gradual adoption of *panchayat* implementation thus proceeded unevenly across the country, with relatively more success in some states than others.

The modern *gram sabha* was pioneered by the Government of Karnataka, which passed an act in 1985 establishing democratically elected *mandal panchayats* (a *mandal* consisted of several villages), with clearly delineated functions and appropriate budgets. *Gram sabhas* played a central role in the Karnataka *mandal panchayat* system. All eligible voters in a *mandal* were members of the *sabha*, which would be held twice a year. The *sabhas* were tasked with discussing and reviewing all development problems and programs in the village, selecting beneficiaries for anti-poverty programs, and developing annual plans for the village (Aziz 2007). In practice, the *sabhas* were resented by village councilors because they were subject to queries and demands for explanations from citizens, and their answers often elicited heated reactions. Consequently, *gram sabhas* were largely abandoned after the first year of the implementation of the 1985 act. If the meetings were held, they were conducted without prior announcement, or were held in the Mandal office, which could not accommodate more than a few people (Crook and Manor 1998).

Despite this, the Karnataka reforms were seen as an important innovation in village government and received wide support across the political spectrum. Consequently, a movement to amend the Indian constitution to strengthen Article 40 with the tenets drawn from the Karnataka Act gained momentum. This resulted, in 1992, in the passage of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment to the Indian constitution, which gave several important powers and functions to village governments. The three-tier system of decentralization and its accompanying forum for deliberation, the *gram sabha*, were formally codified. It mandated that all Indian villages would be governed by an “executive,” elected village council, and a “legislature” formed by the *gram sabha*, to which every citizen of the village would be a member, with meetings held at least two times a year. Lastly, the Amendment required that at least 33 percent of seats in village councils would be reserved for women, and a number proportionate to their population in the village reserved for disadvantaged castes.

Following the passage of this amendment, Kerala, India's most literate state, which had a long history of progressive politics, initiated a radical program of participatory decentralization (Isaac and Franke 2000), where the *gram sabha* played a central role. The program rested on three pillars. It devolved 40 percent of the state's development budget to village panchayats, gave substantial powers to these councils, and instituted a People's Campaign – a grassroots program to raise awareness and train citizens about how to exercise their rights and become active participants in the panchayat process, primarily by participating in *gram sabhas*.

Gram sabhas have become central to Kerala's village planning process, which is based on a set of nested piecemeal stages (Isaac and Heller 2003). Working committees and "development seminars" are held in conjunction with *gram sabhas* to make them practical spaces of deliberative decision making and planning. Instead of open deliberation, attendees are divided into resource-themed groups or committees and the discussions within each group yield consensual decisions regarding the designated resource. This structure is geared towards increasing the efficiency of consensual decision making, and is facilitated by various training programs to instruct both citizens on deliberative planning and local bureaucrats on methods for turning plans into effective public action. Heller, Harilal and Chaudhuri (2007) study the impact of the People's Campaign in Kerala with qualitative and quantitative data from 72 *gram sabhas*, and find that the campaign has been effective, with positive effects on the social inclusion of lower-caste groups and women in decision making. Furthermore, Gibson (2012), examining the same data, argues that the key explanation for the effectiveness of *gram sabhas* in Kerala is the high level of participation by women.

Over the last two decades, all other Indian states have implemented the various tenets of the 73rd amendment, but with varying levels of intensity – and none as effectively as Kerala. The effects of several aspects of the amendment (including the strength of electoral democracy, the impact of quotas for women and lower-castes, and the implications of elections for distributive politics and

clientalism) have been the subject of a large body of research (e.g. Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004; Besley et al. 2004, 2005; Bardhan and Mookherjee 2006; Beaman et al. 2008; Ban and Rao 2008).

A small and growing body of scholarship has examined the *sabha* itself, and whether it serves as a mere “talking shop,” or constitutes a true deliberative forum in which citizens are able to raise and resolve issues of public relevance. Besley et al. (2005) examine survey data from 5,180 randomly chosen households drawn from 537 villages in the four South Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu. They find, like Crook and Manor (1998), that with the exception of Kerala, *gram sabhas* are often not held as scheduled; however, when they are held, governance sharply improves. Focusing on a specific policy administered at the local level – access to a Below Poverty Line (BPL) card, which provides an array of public benefits – they find that policies were more effectively targeted to landless and illiterate individuals when a *gram sabha* was held. And these effects were large, raising the probability of receiving a BPL card by 25 percent.

The reason why *gram sabhas* result in better poverty targeting is related to one of their primary roles in village government. BPL lists are first determined on the basis of a census conducted by the government which identifies poor households with a given set of criteria. However, in many states these lists have to be ratified by the *gram sabha*, which allows the quantitative definitions of poverty to be deliberatively interrogated by the community. Rao and Sanyal (2009) examine transcripts of deliberation from 290 *gram sabhas* from a subset of villages studied by Besley et al. (2005) and find that this process acts as a vehicle for questioning governmental definitions of poverty and creating a shared, intersubjective³ understanding of what it means to be poor. They argue that *gram sabhas* “become sites for the joint production of an understanding of what it means to be officially classified as poor,” and that “these exchanges... foster the future capability of the poor to engage in a critical dialogue with the state on definitional matters.”

Rao and Sanyal's (2009) other contribution is to highlight the important role that *gram sabhas* play shaping the discursive styles of the poor. Since they are embedded within a democratic system that is also subject to electoral accountability, they are a relatively safe space for open speech. Things that cannot be said in private discourse become possible in a *gram sabha*, because political elites may face electoral costs by taking action against a citizen for something said in a *gram sabha*. This allows lower castes to use the space to transgress social norms and make claims for dignity; marginal groups voice their concerns and previously "hidden transcripts" become public – forcing public discussion on sensitive social issues that people would rather avoid. While deliberation can thus become a tool for social inclusion, such dignity claims may simply reflect the low levels of literacy characteristic of rural India that result in low "oratory competence" (Sanyal et al. 2015). As literacy increases to reach Kerala's level, *gram sabhas* are likely to become spaces to have a dialogue on topics of public interest.

Such publicly relevant discussions are most effective, of course, when citizens are well informed and can demand accountability from public officials. Limited information and media coverage, however, often leave citizens at a "disadvantage when negotiating with local governments" (Bhattacharjee and Chattopadhyay 2011, p. 46). Analyzing transcripts from *sabhas* in West Bengal, Bhattacharjee and Chattopadhyay find that villagers do try to use information from media to negotiate with elected officials and inquire about entitlements; these requests, however, are easily ignored or dismissed by GP members, who can evade requests by claiming that the media is misleading or incorrect. The authors attribute this to the "thinness" of news coverage, which does little to empower citizens to confront officials. Despite this troubling picture, however, the authors acknowledge that the very act of demanding entitlements – even seemingly small and selfish claims for rice or pensions – reflects citizens' "capacity to aspire" for a better life (Appadurai 2004).

Low literacy also results in emotions playing an important role in deliberative discourse (Sanyal 2015). They can play a constructive role as a form of "rude accountability" (Hossain 2009)

but they can also disrupt the ability of *gram sabhas* to make rational collective decisions. In other words, deliberation in low literacy settings raises the possibility that *gram sabhas* are simply “talking shops” that bear no relationship to democratic dialogue. This hypothesis is explicitly tested by Ban, Jha, and Rao’s (2012) quantitative analysis of coded versions of the same *gram sabha* transcripts examined by Rao and Sanyal (2010). Deriving hypotheses from rational choice models of group decision making under uncertainty, they analyze the transcript data to test three competing hypotheses of the types of equilibrium that characterize *gram sabha* interactions: (a) “cheap talk,” in which discussions are not substantive even though they may appear equitable; (b) elite capture, in which discussion is dominated by the interests of landowning and wealthy citizens; and (c) “efficient democracy,” in which meetings follow patterns of good democratic practice. They find that in villages with more diversity in caste groups, and less village-wide agreement on policy priorities, the topics discussed track those of interest to the median household. In villages with less caste heterogeneity, the priorities of landowners are more likely to dominate the discourse (consistent with elite domination). The authors conclude that *gram sabhas* are more than mere opportunities for cheap talk, that they more closely follow patterns observed in a well-functioning “efficient” democracy.

In addition to elite domination by landed and wealthy classes, scholars have also begun to examine whether deliberation in *gram sabhas* is gendered in nature, and how policies aimed at inclusion might mitigate gender biases. This question is explored in a working paper by Palaniswamy, Parthasarathy, and Rao, who use text-as-data methods on an original sample of transcripts from Tamil Nadu to evaluate whether and how women participate in village assemblies. They find that despite the relatively high rates of attendance, women are the “silent sex” (Karpowitz and Mendelberg 2014); however, they also show that a state intervention which builds women’s networks and trains them to engage with village government dramatically increases both women’s presence and frequency of speech at the *sabha*. Though the authors are optimistic about the potential

of such policies to make deliberative spaces more inclusive, they also caution that the intervention shifts the topic of conversation toward the program itself – potentially crowding out organic demands and requests.

Conclusion

The sheer scale of deliberation practiced through the Indian *gram sabha* has been remarkable – not only because these forums are vibrant despite illiteracy and inequality, but because they have been a key site where citizens can challenge entrenched social hierarchies and demand improved governance from elected officials. By providing an open space for citizens – both men and women, high and low castes – to exercise voice, the *gram sabha* has served an important role in the Indian democratic experiment. Moreover, these forums have underscored the idea that deliberation is not merely a Western democratic phenomenon, but rather, an integral part of the cultures all over the world. Particularly in India, the rich interplay between Western democratic ideas and local thinkers through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries truly “Indianized” deliberative democracy – ultimately resulting in the 73rd Amendment’s constitutional mandate to create the *gram sabha*. Though the quality and integrity of implementation has varied considerably across the Indian states, the constitutional mandate has provided an invaluable blueprint for participation and deliberation over matters of public interest. At their best, as in Kerala, the *sabbas* have allowed citizens to generate consensual decisions on how the state should allocate resources; even in weaker incarnations, the *sabbas* capture aspects of “efficient” democracy, in which discussion centers around issues of broad public relevance.

Despite these successes, however, the empirical scholarship also provides evidence for the concerns articulated by Ambedkar – both the challenges of rural illiteracy and that of elite domination and gender bias. First, evidence shows that organic deliberation within the *sabbas* can be

“noisy,” filled with identity claims, emotional rhetoric, and demands for individual entitlements. Second, discourse often reflects the existing patterns of social standing and hierarchy, with elites dominating discussion in less fractionalized villages, and women remaining relatively silent even when they attend *en masse*. While these inequalities are undoubtedly concerning, three sets of empirical findings reveal the ways in which deliberation in India still thrives. First, these inequalities have been challenged from *within* the deliberative forums, with lower castes using the open discursive space to make claims of dignity that cannot be ignored by those in power. The use of such dignity claims, while not traditionally considered “rational deliberation,” still plays a vital role in enabling citizens to generate credibility, create empathy, and trigger a sense of injustice (Mansbridge 2015). Second, state policies and intervention have been shown to help lessen the extent of inequality within the deliberative sphere. Programs to train and empower citizens, like the People’s Campaign in Kerala or the women-centered Pudhu Vaazvhu Project in Tamil Nadu, suggest that facilitated deliberation can usher the *sabhas* closer to the deliberative ideal – in which citizens of equal standing arrive at consensual decisions on matters of public interest. And third, literacy in India is on the rise; over the past decade alone, adult literacy has grown by roughly 10 percent to 74 percent, with the strongest gains in rural regions and among women (Census of India 2011).⁴ Given these gains, one could speculate that the quality of deliberation should improve. The Kerala’s People’s Campaign has not translated well in other, less literate, parts of India (Ananthpur et al. 2014); thus, secular improvements in literacy levels should improve the efficacy of attempts to make deliberative democracy a more practical tool for collective action.

The deepening of democracy via deliberation, however, has also faced meaningful limitations. Perhaps most obviously, the 73rd Amendment only applies to rural India, leaving urban India devoid of any mandated deliberative institutions. This focus on rural rather than urban democracy is not surprising given the profound influence of Gandhi’s *Village Swaraj* even on

contemporary politics, but it remains a huge limitation for Indian democracy, especially as India rapidly continues to urbanize.

Nevertheless, *gram sabhas*, with all their warts, provide an important counter-example to the notion that meaningful deliberation necessarily requires equality of voice. The Indian example shows, on the other hand, that deliberative institutions can help societies *move toward* greater equality of agency and social inclusion. Moreover, the sheer scale of the network of *gram sabhas* demonstrates that governments, when they are persuaded of the added value of deliberation, can help create deliberative institutions with intrinsic and instrumental value – even in conditions of high inequality and poverty.

None of this would have happened if *gram sabhas* were not constitutionally mandated. By being enshrined in the 73rd amendment, they have become permanent structures that are difficult, if not impossible, to dislodge. Consequently, with time, *gram sabhas* are likely to become even more effective tools in India's quest to give its citizens a better life. In this sense, they demonstrate the potential value of deliberation for development and poverty reduction, a subject that is becoming increasingly important in the developing world (Heller and Rao, 2015).

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Notes

¹ More recent work has challenged these pre-conditions, creating room within deliberative theory for other forms of argumentation (including, for example, story-telling and emotional argumentation), for arguments based on particular, rather than common, interest, and even for deviations from the egalitarian ideal. See, for example, Mansbridge (2015), Dryzek (2002), and others.

² BR Ambedkar, along with Gandhi and Nehru, is considered one of the pre-eminent figures of modern India. He was born into an untouchable caste, educated at LSE and Columbia, and was the Chairman of the committee that drafted the Indian constitution in 1949.

³ This term is used primarily in phenomenological sociology to refer to the mutual constitution of social relationships and reality. As the term has been used here, it means a mutually shared and constructed meaning of poverty.

⁴ According to the Indian census, rural adult literacy grew from 58.7 to 68.9 percent between 2001 and 2011, while urban literacy grew from 79.9 to 85.0 percent. National gains in male literacy during this period totaled 6.8 percent, while for females, the growth in literacy was 12.7 percent.