Mediating a Claim to Rights: The Role of Activism in the Successes of India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act

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Presented to the Faculty of the Department of Anthropology
Union College

Submitted in partial fulfilled of the
requirement for Honors in the Department of Anthropology

Union College
March, 2016

Abstract

This anthropological study aims to understand the role of activists in the day to day operation of the rights based policy, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA), in India. MNREGA promises 100 days of employment to each household that makes a demand for such employment, providing an employment safety net for the large population of the Indian rural poor. Historically, government and local corruption in official and unofficial policy implementation structures have interfered with the efficiency of social relief and reform initiatives in India. Such systems of operation also impact the functioning of MNREGA. However, unlike previous initiatives to provide relief and support to the poor, MNREGA of the state of Andhra Pradesh has been able to achieve a level of success not witnessed before in the country. Such success has complexity in its origin, derived from cultural phenomena, historical events, and changing economic and political environments. All such factors contribute to the integral role of activists in the operation of the program within patronage bound village society. Thus, my research explores the role of activists in Andhra Pradesh, and their intermediary role in the claim to rights and citizenship by the rural poor.

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Acronyms and Vocabulary

Abhikarta – an agent of implementation

AP – Andhra Pradesh (aka Andhra)

APO – additional program officer

APVVU – Andhra Pradesh Vyavasaya Vruthidarula Union

BC (same as OBC) – backward classes/castes

Benami – false

Cheru – watershed

Cheru pani – watershed work, another name for NREGA/MNREGA work

CO – computer operator

Colom – prestige of caste

Coolie – unskilled manual laborer

CM – chief minister

CPI – Communist Party India

CPI(M) – Communist Party India (Marxist)

Dharna – protest

EC – engineering consultant

FA – field assistant

FFW – Food for Work

Gram panchayats – village councils

Gram sabhas – village assemblies

INC – Indian National Congress

JADS – Jagrut Adivasi Dalit Sangathan

MKSS – Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan

MNREGA (same as NREGA) – Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act

MPDO (or MDO) – Mandal Parishad Development Officer

NFFWP – National Food for Work Program

NGO – non-governmental organization

NREGA (same as MNREGA) – National Rural Employment Guarantee Act

OC – other category or open category casts

OBC (same as BC) – other backward classes/castes

Patta pusthakam – land ownership book

Peddamanshi – respected authority figure in village

PIL – Public Interest Litigation

PRP – Praja Rajyam Party

PUCL – People's Union for Civil Liberties

RTI – Right to Information

Sarpanch – panchayat president

SC – scheduled classes/castes (aka untouchable or *dalit*)

SGRY – Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana

ST – scheduled tribes

TA – technical assistant

TDP – Telugu Desam Party

TRS – Telangana Rashtra Samithi

UDHR – Universal Declaration of Human Rights

UN – United Nations

Vyavasayam – farming

YSR – Sri Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy aka. state Congress Party

Prologue

I arrive to a village meeting in the village of Chammochintha in my early days of fieldwork, accompanied by activists Ram Lakshmi, who I call Ram, and Sunil. A small group of men have assembled at the small community center located by the village main road. Jagraj, Sivaraj, Aparao, Nagaraj, and Chinappa have settled on the porch of the center and are chatting. All of them participate in the government employment program MNREGA. Ram, Sunil, and I sit with them and chat about life and their families. As we speak, more people join the conversation. The discussion has turned to the matter of receiving work and payment through the employment program.

The program promises work when the workers demand it. Such work requests are generally responded to. Sometimes it may take some time for groups to receive work they request. At this time the villagers have not received work for a month. They tell me that wage payments are delayed and take about a month to reach the workers. They correctly explain to me that they should be receiving these payments within 15 days. Sunil and Ram sit and listen to this common tale of government shortcomings.

I then ask what workers do when these sort of problems arise. They say they should generally issue a complaint to the local program officer, the field assistant (FA), then they should take the complaint to the local government office. Instead, they usually take the complaint to a member of APVVU, a local activist organization, or to Sunil, a local APVVU activist. An inquiry into the situation will then be placed. When I asked what the villagers would do if no change was seen after doing this, they responded saying what more could they do, at least they were being paid something.

The workers comment on an issue of not being paid the same amounts of money for doing what they perceive as equivalent amounts of work. The payment system in this area is

dependent on the amount of work completed, not the amount of time someone works. According to a woman attending this meeting, some workers are being paid 900 Rs, while others maybe receive 400 Rs for what they perceive is the same amount of work. Other members of the village agree with her concern. Raju, an outspoken local youth and NREGA participant, vocalized his concerns by showing his family's job card and the 197 Rs. he received for 3 days of work. He feels that this payment is far below the minimum wage for the amount of work he had completed. When the workers brought this disparity up to the FA they were told to redistribute the amounts amongst their groups. It is also difficult for them to prove such a disparity in payments without the payment slips to tell them how much payment each should be receiving.

This is another problem they have been encountering. Workers should be receiving payment slips providing the information about how much they will be paid and how much work they finished, as well as the dates of work they are receiving payment for. They can then take this slip to the post office to claim the money they have earned. Without these slips there is little understanding of how much work each worker is being paid for. There is some disagreement amongst the group as to why they are no longer receiving the slips. Some say that the post office is not even requesting the slips from workers so the FA and the post office no longer see the need for the slips. Others say that the FA has the slips and is not giving them out for some reason.

I ask why the people are not demanding that they be given the slips, especially when they see the slips as so important. Raju steps into the discussion saying that "they" have no slips to give. I assume the "they" he is referring to is local bureaucracy and the FA. Ram again jumps in and saying that is a bad reason to not demand. She believes that if a demand is made then the FA will be forced to demand that the slips be printed and given so she can hand them out. "If the child is hungry they should they ask their parents for food and their parent will give it to them",

she says in a metaphor in which the parents are local government and the hungry child is the workers. Raju responds saying that what she is saying is true, but in this situation the parent has no food (the payment slips). His theory is that the local NREGA office is not generating the slips so the FA does not have them and is not able to give them. The post office also does not ask for the slips so the people are not demanding the slips.

The villagers discuss some benefits the program has provided them, by the request of Ram. According to them, the program has reduced the amount of migrant workers in this village. Prior to the program many people would go to the East and West Godavari region to find work that was largely agriculture based. This did not pay well, and people were unsatisfied with distance they had to migrate for work, and the length of time they had to be away from family and friends. After NREGA people largely stopped migrating and began working through the program. The money they are getting from participating in the program is allowing them to send their children to school, pay off loans they may have needed to take, and take care of their family and themselves.

Soon however, the conversation returned to the problems they see with the program. Raju pushes the conversation back into this direction saying he feels that no one sees it as his or her duty to go demand for their rights on their own. They often see that someone else will do it. Additionally, they see the time it takes to make such demands as time they could have made money. The villagers have participated in protests and marches organized through APVVU. Raju exclaims, “We do all this but nothing happens. There are still problems!”. Ram jumps into the conversation and begins arguing with Raju. She reminds him that because of such protests they began receiving payment when they were not before. They were also receiving payment slips for some time after demands were made. Ram also says that if people are not receiving proper

payment they should make demands. Since this payment system is based on how much work is actually done, workers have physical evidence of how much work was completed (for example, the size of the hole they dug that day). She says that the people have the power to speak up and take the FA to go see the work they completed and demand for the proper payment. APVVU has even given them the measuring tape, calculator, and training for them to measure and calculate the amount of money they are entitled too. Others say that they recognize the power of demand, but they are unable to make such demands themselves. One woman asks, "Who has that much bravery?" At this point, an older man, Nokaraj speaks up and says that not demanding does shows that the continuation of problems is also their fault. He understands that the workers need to speak up for themselves. For now, they turn to activists like Sunil and Ram to help them vocalize and demand.

The problems faced by these NREGA workers are common, as is their general hesitation towards making demands for their entitlements and rights from local bureaucracy. However, unlike many villages in India, this village has frequent interactions with activists who are able to hear and organize action in an effort to solve problems encountered by the villagers. There is significance of such interactions between activist and villagers, having possible larger application to rights-based policy implementation in India, as well as the potential to reveal insight on rights in postcolonial rural India.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA), also known as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), is the world's largest poverty alleviation and public employment program. NREGA is also arguably the world's most revolutionary rights-based development legislation, based on the principle that basic livelihood provisions are a fundamental human right. Such rights-based legislation, propose an assertion of rights by the marginalized poor. Whether or not this purpose is actualized requires study. In addition to the ambitious goal of this legislation, the sheer scale by which the program can affect the massive population of India's poor further warrants research on NREGA.

Additionally, the role of activists in creating awareness, organization, day to day operation of NREGA, as well as in combating corruption draws into question what role such activists have in the claim to rights and citizenship of marginalized villagers receiving work through NREGA. The failures of such rights-based policy go deeper than the "corruption" policy makers had considered, and may be due to a disjunction between ideas of universal rights and citizenship conveyed in policy and the cultural context of the village. This research was conducted in the context of the state of Andhra Pradesh (AP), known for its high levels of NREGA success compared to other Indian states. I also had the added benefit of being fluent in Telugu, the regional language of AP.

The success of NREGA within AP have been partly based on the extensive role of activists in both the implementation of NREGA and its daily operation. Activists have had significant influence in empowering and inspiring grassroots movements crucial for the creation of development policy such as NREGA, as well as the successful implementation of the program. In fact, these activists spearheaded the right to work campaign that culminated in

NREGA. While there is a great deal of research on this program, the role of rights-based activists has received little attention. This thesis will examine the role of activists in the everyday practice of NREGA. I will explore how such activism affects this concept of the "right to work". NREGA is merely one case of such rights-based policy, but such a study can provide important insights about the nature of citizenship in post-colonial India and the role of activists in this contemporary context. It can also contribute useful insight for use in other rights-based policy.

1.1 Rights-Based Development

The rights based development framework is one that aims to achieve social transformation between various actors typically involved in economic development efforts. In the context of India, this is between those involved with the implementation of rights, and the rights holders, or those claiming their rights. It is rights-based development that stresses the need for rights holders to exercise substantial citizenship by making claims to rights. The practice of rights-based development aims to make a connection between human rights and economic development, to strengthen the development capacity of the country and empower the rights holders, in this case marginalized citizens. The empowering and transformative potential of rights-based development makes it attractive to activists who see it as a vehicle by which to alleviate symptoms of poverty and reduce the prevalence of poverty, but also as a larger way to extend citizenship to the marginalized and socially oppressed.

The modern conception of human rights began in 1948, with the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Created in the shadow of World War II and the Jewish Holocaust, the UDHR was doctored by U.S. diplomats and international delegates of the United Nations (UN). This international organization, the UN, was founded three years prior and created the UDHR as one of its founding documents (Tate, 2007). This declaration lays out in thirty

articles the universal minimal standards of humanity; the "inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family" (The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948). International pressures exerted from the UN rights framework functioned to pressurize and commit governments to providing the institutional framework to protect social arrangements of human rights (Molyneux and Lazar, 2003).

The 1990's marked a rise of discussion regarding a new form of development, rights-based development. An increased renewal of confidence in liberal values arose from the end of the Cold War, democratic governments were restored in Latin America, and the former Soviet Union, and an international human rights movement was revitalized by the 1993 UN Conference on Human Rights. A new consensus in political arenas was formed over the importance of integrating issues of rights and democracy into development practices, giving rise to an era of rights-based development (Molyneux and Lazar, 2003). Poverty alleviation and development was formerly addressed through more universal welfare principles with a greater emphasis on helping people meet basic needs, using a needs-based framework. Whereas, the rights-based framework places emphasis on empowerment of the poor, allowing the poor to demand and assert their rights from the state, the needs-based framework largely paternalistic in nature, with the state providing welfare rather than rights. There are inherent philosophical differences between the rights and needs-based framework. Unlike any needs-based policy, rights-based policy is able to create a platform for conversation between citizen and state, allowing the poor to make demands to rights (Nelson and Dorsey, 2003; Jayal, 2013). The shift in the 1990's marked the emergence of a global consensus that basic livelihood provisions are fundamental human rights.

During this time of UN influence, economist Amartya Sen's theorized the capacity approach, explaining that development should be evaluated by the capacity of individuals to fulfill rights-based capacity indicators (Sen, 1993). He created one of the first, and highly influential link between rights and development. His work influenced the acknowledgment of this link between rights and development by the United Nations (UN). This framework was further recognized by the UN with the release of UNDP Human Development Report of 2000 stating that, "capabilities and human rights [are] ends and means of escaping poverty…Human rights have intrinsic value as ends in themselves. They also have instrumental value" (UNDP, 2000: 74). International pressures influenced a few countries and NGOs to shift to a more rights-based development framework, India and South Africa at the forefront of this change.

Right-based development efforts had the added benefit of addressing differences in power within society, supporting individuals previously unable to make claims to rights to make such claims within oppressive social climates. Such imbalances among populations have the capabilities of inspiring movements for equality. Rights provided a strategic way of addressing such imbalances between the elite and the marginalized. "Rights form a valuable strategic entry point for addressing the ways in which power imbalances act to deny the marginalized access to assets and opportunities necessary for a secure and sustainable livelihood" (Moser et al., 2001). Claims of human rights were seen a method of including claims to personhood, supported by national law as a citizen, or to international law as a subject of human rights, as a human being. John Gledhill points out, "practical denial of rights can only be justified by postulating essential differences that reduce the claims to humanity of those against whom one discriminates" (Gledhill, 1997). Rights offered a possible way to rebalance power relations, allowing those previously without power to demand from the powerful. "The construction of rights implies the

rebalance of power relations and a horizon of justice" (Corrêa, 1997). Unlike previous approaches to poverty alleviation, the rights-based approach explicitly places such power relations at the center of addressing poverty (Piron, 2005). The international support of universal rights fueled social movements to claim newly legitimized entitlements, for which the only requirement was to be human.

Anthropologist James Ferguson draws to attention another philosophical shift in the adoption of the rights-based framework by governments. Ferguson claims that the root cause of poverty is political. Mainstream development discourse "de-politicizes" development, rendering it a technical issue. Rather, the rights framework succeeds in re-politicizing poverty by empowering people as a means to end poverty (Ferguson, 1990). Thus, there is a certain power to rights-based policy that previous need-based policy failed to provide. The right-based framework has the ability to combat power imbalances, increase claims to rights and citizenship, as well as increase claims to international definitions of humanity. Prominent development researchers Drèze and Khera comment on this ability of rights-based policy. Marginalized people typically have reduced access to economic rights due to the involvement of local elites. By providing access to economic rights that elites will certainly oppose, such laws can theoretically catalyze collective action from the marginalized and prompt social transformation (Drèze and Khera, 2011).

Such power dynamics are intrinsic to everyday village life. Therefore, the push of rights-based development and policy by the Indian government, inspired by international definitions of human rights, inherently contradicted village norms of such power dynamics and social hierarchy, with the expectation that the marginalized would be able to demand and exercise rights. The transformative potential of rights-based policy to extend substantive citizenship to the

marginalized and oppressed was the incentive for activists who led movements for such rights-based legislation. Activists understood that social transformation first required the appropriate supporting rights-based legislation as a catalyst of change. There was a long road to such rights-based legislation involving dedication and pressure by various governmental and non-governmental forces.

1.2 History of Rights and Rights Based Legislation in India

The pressure exerted by non-governmental forces in India was crucial to the creation of new legislation in the rights-based framework. This pressure by activists and activist organizations was largely placed during various social movements, the most influential of which were the right to food movement, and the following revolutionary right to information movement.

Social movements primarily take the form of a non-institutionalized collective social action striving for political and/or social change (Shah, 1990). The concept of a social movement itself has many definitions, but after review of definitions proposed by various social movement theorists such as Rudolf Heberle (1951), Neil Smelser (1963), John Wilson (1973), and Paul Wilkinson (1971), it is commonly agreed that social movements have a commitment to change. The purpose of its organization generally being the overall commitment to the movement's aims and/or beliefs with the active participation of the followers or members of the movement (Shah, 1990).

To clarify further the definition of social movement, we can look to Andre Gunder Frank and Marta Fuentes who address the confusion surrounding the difference between social movements and political movements (Frank and Fuentes, 1987). They explain that social movements do not strive for state power, rather the objective of social movements can be seen as

that of social transformation. As Ghanshyam Shah writes, “the participants get mobilized for attaining social justice”. The social movement associated with rights based policy in India and NREGA supports this definition. Here, similar to other social movements, social transformation is supported by political transformation with the creation of new legislation. This movement resulted in a mix of activism with the judicial activism of the Indian Supreme Court and the re-evaluation of the constitution, the political activism associated with such re-evaluation of the constitution and creation of new legislation, and an overall ambition of social transformation linked with the transformative potential of rights-based activism. Despite having classic characteristics of a social movement, the involvement of activists associated with this social movement and NREGA differ from typical preconceptions of social movements as activists have extensive involvement in the day-to-day implementation of the program. The movement exemplifies how the goals of political and social change have largely become intertwined. The call for change in one demanding of the other. The fight for the claiming of political rights supporting a related claim on humanity.

Prior to the introduction of various rights-based policy in Indian legislation, a remarkable shift in judicial thought occurred in a rights revolution. During this time the Supreme Court re-evaluated rights that were constitutionally supported. The rights Indian citizens were promised according to the constitution are separated as “fundamental rights” and “directive principles”. The two categories differ in the types of rights they support and associated legality of those rights. Fundamental rights secure civil and political rights, while directive principles support social and economic rights. Unlike the fundamental principles, directive principles are not legally enforceable. Instead, they were created with the intention of providing guidelines for law making. In the 2000s, Supreme Court began reading economic rights into Article 21 of the

Indian constitution, which promises the right to life. This began blending the previously non-legally enforceable directive principles, and the legally enforceable fundamental rights together. The judicial activism that allowed for this significant move was crucial to the creation of such rights-based policy as NREGA. Introduction of such rights policy was the result of such governmental involvement, as well as the non-governmental involvement of activists and various activist groups.

1.2.1 Right to Food

Successes of social action and activist-led movements have been an enduring feature of India's history. Sometimes these groups act as the agents of social transformation and other times they act as the pressurizing groups (Unia, 1991). In recent history, activists have succeeded in compelling the legislation of rights-based policies. One success has been the implementation of the Midday Meal Scheme. The Scheme was enacted by the government in 2001, and was formed with the purpose of providing Indian school children with free lunch each day. The scheme itself is based on the concept that every citizen has the right to food. Beyond the immediate impact such an act can have on hunger and nutrition, the scheme also provides a strong incentive for parents to send their children to school. The law itself would not have been implemented without the intervention of an activist organization a part of a larger campaign called "Right to Food". In the beginning of 2000, the group began to pressurize courts to form a law that intervened in hunger related matters. The People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) in Rajasthan initiated the "Right to Food Litigation" demanding that school meals be provided in government schools throughout the whole of India. Mobilizing action through a petition and Public Interest Litigation (PIL) resulted in the restructuring of a largely unsuccessful version of the Midday Meal Scheme from 1995. Here we see the role social action groups can have in

pressurizing the state on behalf of the poor, particularly within this era of rights-based policy (Berichfield and Corsi, 2010).

1.2.2 Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan

The work of the PUCL was more focused on involving the poor in an effort to assist them. However, looking at organizations like Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) in Rajasthan we see a social movement trend of mass-mobilization through the establishment of grassroots movements. In the case of MKSS, three founders of the organization settled in the village community of Devdungri, in central Rajasthan. Residing in the village, the three founders, Aruna Roy, Nikhil Dey, and Shanker Singh, were able to discover the many difficulties facing the villagers. They used their time – and their interactions with these villagers – to observe, learn, and understand the critical issues that shape rural life. They were inspired by stories about community members who struggled against injustice and worked towards social and political reform against enormous odds, such as Lal Singh who organized a strike against officers who forced constables such as himself to do domestic jobs like washing clothes.

One of the first actions that MKSS was successfully able to organize was the repossession of community land that was overtaken by a local land lord, Hari Singh. Hari Singh had taken over community land and was burdening the villagers with a tax to use the land. With the assistance of the three MKSS founders, villagers were able to petition that Hari Singh no longer continue his control of the land. However, this battle bordered on turning very violent when villagers became enraged the Hari Singh arranged for two of the MKSS founder to be physically assaulted, Shankar and Nikhil. The enraged and empowered villagers acted to assert their rights to land and the lack of right Hari Singh had to arrange the assault the activists. We see here an example of activists empowering locals to create action at a grassroots level.

Villagers were empowered to not only act on their own behalf, but to act against the injustices created by the powerful landlord (Ramkumar, 2004).

The empowerment of locals only grew with time. Large numbers of local participant fought non-violent battles alongside MKSS for their right to minimum wage by participating in sit-ins. Officials responded to their actions with notable hostility, even taking police action. The officials insisted that workers had been paid the right amounts according to their financial records, however they were also refusing all of MKSS's requests to their payment records.

This withholding of information inspired the "Right to Information" (RTI) campaign of MKSS. MKSS worked to collect copies of records such as bills, vouchers, cash books, and labor rolls, which were then distributed to villagers. Villagers were then able to compare what was said to have occurred according to the records to what actually occurred. Long-held suspicions were proven to be true and villagers had the information to rise and demand their rights. The newly found voice and empowerment stemming from access to information only grew as the RTI campaign grew. The collective efforts of MKSS and locals can be seen in the fight that ensued for transparency and accountability of the Indian government for all (Roy and Dey, 2011). The fight resulted in the passage of the Right to Information Act, guaranteeing everyone access to government documents on demand. Here we see the role of activists in inspiring grassroots level action and larger mobilization of previously unorganized groups for change (Mishra, 2003; Ramkumar, 2004; Roy and Dey, 2011). More importantly we see the use of the rights framework in the formulation of the first rights-based legislation in India, the RTI.

There are obvious poverty alleviation benefits to rights-based policy that warrants the interest of activists. However, this intent of such legislation goes beyond, serving the purpose of extending citizenship to the marginalized and socially oppressed. India has witnessed many such

social movements. Therefore, the extensive literature on social movements is justified. However, the rights-based policy resulting from social movements in India has little research despite the large impact it is capable of and has already had on the Indian population. Even fewer studies have been done of activists involved in such movements for social justice through rights-based policies and the operation of such programs. NREGA is just one of such program, which happens to be the largest poverty alleviation and public employment program in the world. The program has also had immense success in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh (AP). This success has been largely attributed to the structure of the program in the state, which was built with the consideration of previous failed program, as well as the extensive involvement of activists.

1.3 The Right to Work Movement

Of the rights-based policies created in India, NREGA is one of the most ambitious rights-based legislation. In fact, it embodies in many ways the goals of rights-based legislation, to re-politicize poverty in a way that need-based policy failed. It allows people to demand from the state, forcing the state to acknowledge that poverty is a political issue. The large population of impoverished Indians makes this program even more ambitious in what it aims to accomplish. With these considerations, such success and involvement of activists makes this development program one that demands anthropological study. Still, little anthropological research on the practice of rights-based development and such policy as NREGA has been done.

The strength of the rights-based framework and the subsequent role of activists is seen once more in the “Right to Work” campaign; whose members largely worked to demand their right to employment through the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). This act aims to ensure the security of at least 100 days of waged employment to members who volunteer to perform the unskilled manual work the act offers. It is thought that by providing this security

net to the people, India will not only be able to provide work for the poor, but also be able to relieve some aspects of poverty, as well as begin to address the underdevelopment that is seen in rural areas ("Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act", 2005). The Act places an enforceable obligation on the state, and gives bargaining power to the laborers. It intended to create a relationship of accountability and gives the laborers legal entitlements such as a minimum wage, guaranteed work on demand, and unemployment payments. It helps to reduce the distress of migration to urban areas for work and is also seen as an opportunity to create useful assets in rural areas (Drèze, 2011). Indian development economists Jean Drèze and Christian Oldieges also see NREGA as a way to revitalize institutions of local governance, including *gram panchayats* (village councils), and *gram sabhas* (village assemblies) by giving them new purpose as well as substantial financial resources (Drèze and Oldieges, 2011).

Previous public works programs had existed, such as the National Food for Work Programme (NFFWP) and the Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (SGRY). NREGA was different because it is a rights-based legislation and had proven itself more successful within its first year of implementation by providing 90 crore person-days on employment. This number was less than predicted by the National Advisory Council (who predicted 200 crore person-days), but far exceeded the amount of employment generated from previous works programs (Drèze and Oldieges, 2011). This initiative in India is regarded as one of the world's largest long term social reform and relief plans, thus its success and failures provide important information to consider for future programs of social change.

Despite the potential the program has in addressing poverty and poor living conditions that affect India's population, the rates of success of such a program have been variable when looking at rates of employment between states. For example, the number of person days per rural

household was 77 in Rajasthan in 2006-7, but 3 days in Kerala the same year (Khera, 2011: 25). Such variation can be largely attributed to the decentralization of the program, in which the national government plays some role, but a significant amount of responsibility of implementation is given to each state and local governments.

1.4 Effectiveness and Transparency

Historically, a large obstacle to the success of government social improvement projects has been corruption within the Indian government, involving misutilization of funds. This corruption is caused by a variety of deep rooted cultural and historical phenomenon. Still, with the idea that corruption has caused the failure of previous programs, and in fear of perpetuation of such corruption, NREGA implemented auditing systems and increased spending transparency to help insure that funds were being properly utilized. The previously discussed RTI movement pioneered by MKSS ushered new ideologies of safeguards, and increased transparency as a mechanism of increasing accountability and providing assurance of proper program implementation. Safeguards include muster rolls (a sort of attendance sheet) present at all worksites, regular maintenance of job cards kept with the laborers themselves, the payment of wages in public, separation of payment agencies from implementation agencies, vigilance committees at worksites, and social auditing systems (Drèze and Khera, 2011). However, the implementation of these safeguards is also susceptible to variation and non-compliance, leading to the continuation of corrupt behavior.

Another mechanism of transparency includes the posting of information such as the number of households who request work, as well as the number of household who are provided work on the NREGA website. In data analyzed from 2006-7 these two numbers were curiously close and in some cases identical. Drèze comments that numerous field reports tell us otherwise,

revealing that in some districts the work application process was not even in place. He speculates that while the expenditure data may be reasonably accurate, the corresponding employment figures may be inflated for the purpose of siphoning money from the program (Drèze, 2011). While many states report high expenditure for NREGA programs, independent enquires often reveal massive leakages in the money intended to reach the poor (Vanaik and Siddhartha, 2008).

Regardless of current success rates, such a program is important to study as it has massive potential to improve the lives of the impoverished. Research has shown that individuals employed by NREGA initiatives feel there are benefits to the employment it offers. In 2008 a NREGA survey was conducted with the aim of understanding the impact the program had on the lives of the workers who it employed. Responses revealed multiple flaws, but respondents also noted benefits of the program. Women workers tended to express stories about the benefits of NREGA, as well as the independence the work and wages gave them. Many respondents believed NREGA opened up new opportunities for them. Regardless of the programs failures, the intentions of NREGA and the employment it was able to provide were perceived as benefits in individuals' lives (Khera and Nayak, 2009).

1.5 Ineffeciveness and Corruption

It is clear to recognize the major development benefits of the program and it would be reasonable to assume that increased benefit would coincide with a decrease in the prevalence of corruption. It's also important to consider the complexity that is corruption in India. Many anthropologists have devoted research to understanding corruption in India, and its roots – the basic gap between progressive legislation and the realities of village power dynamics (Witsoe, 2011; Jauregui, 2014; Björkman, 2014; Piliavsky, 2014). However, NREGA policy doesn't consider these root causes of corruption, rather claiming the failure to previous development

programs with the umbrella term that is corruption. The solution to this problem of corruption was thought to be increased transparency and accountability safeguards. The various mechanisms in place make such behavior more difficult to engage in than in previous public works programs such as NFFWP and SGRY. Regardless, it is clear that leakage of funds from the program has happened in the early years of its implementation and continues to occur. For example, despite the guarantee of minimum wage, some states have paid less than the statutory minimum wage. Workers in Rajasthan were being paid on average Rs 51 a day in 2006-7, although the minimum wage was Rs. 73 a day (Shankar and Gaiha, 2013).

The main cause of corruption in relation to this program is that those who are supposed to implement the safeguards are a part a "nexus of corruption", the terminology used by Drèze and fellow economist Khera when referring to the individuals in coalition with one another for the purpose of corrupt behavior (Drèze and Khera, 2011). When these individuals are interested in siphoning money from the program there is likely to be negligence for the safeguards.

Three techniques are frequently used by the nexus of corruption: deception, collusion, and exploitation. The *abhikarta* (an agent of implementation) may work with the local postmaster responsible for distributing worker wages to inflate the work hours and payment on the muster roll. This will deceive the government, and the *abhikarta* and postmaster will be able to embezzle money from workers. Other fraud is associated with fake names in the payment order or muster roll. The local leader responsible for implementation of the program may also have family members' names on the muster roll. Payment can then be inflated and the leader is then able to the collect money for themselves. Exploitation may occur, by which the worker is made to withdraw money from their bank account and give a share of their earnings to the *sarpanch*. As yet another example of corruption, in the Karon block of Jharkand's Deograth

district the contractors were working together with official of a local cooperative bank to siphon off funds from the accounts of NREGA workers. They would also ask NREGA workers to sign withdrawal slips in bulk claiming it was for the purpose of make "proxy withdrawals" in their name. They were then able to extort money from workers (Khera, 2011).

Much of the embezzlement of funds and extortion of money from workers occurs from the laborers' lack of knowledge regarding their own rights associated with NREGA. NREGA is different from earlier employment schemes in that it is a rights-based program. The best guarantee of workers achieving maximum benefit lies in the ability of workers to recognize their rights. It also lies in organized demand of rights on the part of well-informed workers. For example, if a worker insists on being paid the minimum wage, depriving them of their due wage would be more difficult than if they had not demanded. There are many barriers inhibiting workers' demand for their rights.

This corruption that is discussed has a complexity in its prevalence and origins in India, embedded within a legacy of patronage and brokerage. In fact, the role of politics and politicians, particularly those at the lower levels of administration, in the everyday function of the Indian state directly relates to this phenomenon of corruption (Piliavsky, 2014). Kanchan Chandra, in her work on "ethnic politics", comments on how India is a democracy in which elected representatives have substantial control in the distribution of scarce economic resources controlled by the state (Chandra, 2004). She makes the claim that India is a "patronage democracy"; therefore, it is not hard to make the leap and say that control to resources elected official have can be used for bartering for votes (Witsoe, 2012). The role of brokers at the boundary between elected representatives of the state, and society places brokers as mediator

between state resources and society, a phenomenon termed “political mediation” by Witsoe. Such patronage relationships and supporting brokerage relationships arise from historical events.

This political patronage is characteristic of the postcolonial state, and influenced by a colonial legacy of indirect rule. This legacy succeeded in forming an alliance between the ruling state and local elites, within the colonial system of “limited raj” (Witsoe, 2012). Such relationships between local elites and state persist, resulting in the contemporary influence of patronage and brokerage. Corruption within NREGA is able to continue with the “nexus of corruption”, but such corruption is deeply rooted in systems of patronage and brokerage revealing the complex causes of corruption in Indian public life.

Still, the formulation of NREGA was made to combat corruption and not social hierarchies and systems of patronage. The safeguards of transparency were created with the purpose of being used by workers to hold lower level administration, largely responsible for mis-use of funds, accountable. Thereby, reducing corrupt behavior. However, barriers to such the actions exist, and allow corrupt behavior to persist.

1.6 Awareness

One such barrier is the lack of awareness amongst workers regarding their rights. In a NREGA survey conducted in 2008 it was found that in the states of Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh only 42% of workers were aware that they were guaranteed 100 days of work, 43% were aware that they were to be paid minimum wage, and 54% knew that they were to receive payment within 15 days. Interestingly, levels of awareness were significantly higher in Rajasthan. This can most likely be attributed to the state’s history and long tradition of public mobilization for employment and wages in the context of drought relief. This state also had mass awareness campaigns (Khera, 2011).

The concept of NREGA is one that has the capability to strengthen the bargaining power of unorganized workers by providing them the incentive and opportunity to organize around something. With the promise of some levels of social security, the laborers should in theory have less fear of unemployment. As Drèze comments, this fear of unemployment has the ability to divide laborer populations and put them at the mercy of private contractors and other possible exploiters (Drèze, 2011). However, all bargaining power of the poor is reliant on their awareness of their rights. As M.S.A. Rao says regarding social movements, "A sufficient level of understanding and reflection is required on the part of participants, and they must be able to observe and perceive the contrast between the social and cultural conditions of the privileged and those of the deprived, and must realize that it is possible to do something about it" (M.S.A. Rao 1979: 207). In this case, it is not so much the contrast between the privileged and the deprived that the rural poor need to recognize, rather that contrast between what they are entitled to and what they are receiving through NREGA. Rights are undermined by corruption. The solution to this problem seems lie in increasing awareness, leading to and requiring organizing. Such organizing has yet to be seen to spontaneously arise, and often involves activists or activist organizations.

1.7 Rights-based Organizing

As mentioned previously, another strength of the program is realized when laborers are able to organize themselves. The assumption made by the architects of the act was regarding the capacity for largely unorganized workers to organize themselves in demand for their NREGA entitlements, however the degree to which is seen in not significant. This could be attributed to the lack of awareness regarding entitlements. Successes are expected in areas where workers are

able to organize and mobilize, a characteristic of social movements in general. Rajni Kothari comments on the strength of the unorganized when agitated and organized, writing:

> There is a discontent and despair in the air – still highly diffuse, fragmented and unorganized. But there is a growing awareness of rights, felt politically and expressed politically, and by and large still aimed at the State. Whenever a mechanism of mobilization has become available, this consciousness has found expression, often against very heavy odds, against a constellation of interests that are too powerful and complacent to shed (even share) the privileges.
>
> (Kothari 1984: 218)

Activists provide the mechanism by which the unorganized worker population can be organized to collectively claim the right to work through NREGA. As Dr. Ambedkar once famously said, “Educate, agitate, and organize” (Shah, 1990). In a sense these are three basic steps for any social movement and various social movements in India have followed this structure. Development researcher Pramod Unia believes that the social movement structure is one in which there is a central importance to social action groups and activists (Unia, 1991). Unia also believes that “social action is centred around mobilization of the poor, through a sense of moral outrage against injustice and inequality, for survival and identity” (Unia, 1991: 1). This crucial role of activists, and the success of NREGA with their involvement further justifies why these activists are important to study.

1.8 The Jagrut Adivasi Dalit Sangathan

Success in demands can be seen when workers are aware of their rights, and are organized and empowered to act. This can be seen in the strength of grass roots organization, such as the Jagrut Adivasi Dalit Sangathan (JADS) located in the Pati block of Bedwani district of Madhya Pradesh. JADS is a local organization managed by activist members, all of whom are local residents and rural workers who volunteer their time. This organization has been able to achieve important results. Most laborers in Pati are aware of their rights under the NREGA. In a

2008 survey it was found that all the sample workers in Pati knew that they are entitled to 100 days of work, 85% were aware of the minimum wage, and 95% knew that wages were supposed to be paid within 15 days. More impressive is that apart from awareness of entitlements, members were aware of the process through which these entitlements can be claimed. There are also high rates of employment in this area. 92% of survey respondents in 2008 from the Pati block had received work in response to their written applications. In addition to the high levels of awareness, demand-driven employment that has taken root in Pati, a demand that is defining to the functionality of the act but largely lacking throughout many areas of India. Many workers were able to work for a full 100 days under NREGA. The average number of days employed during the 12 months preceding the survey was as high as 85 days, compared with just 23 days in the Rajpur block. Very few districts in the country can boast of similar levels of employment, except Rajasthan, which as mentioned before has a history of public demand and mobilization. The corresponding average for two districts surveyed in Rajasthan, Dungarpur and Sirohi, is 71 days.

The members of the Pati block feel a sense of empowerment. Khera provides two excellent example from Pati in her analysis of the JADS' work. In an effort to improve timeliness of wage payments and reduce delay, the members of JADS levied a fine of Rs 1 per day of delay of the panchayat secretary. Although the fine seems small, fines have been found to deter noncompliance of rules (Khera, 2011). This is thought to be due to the stigma associated with being fined. The determination of members to assert their rights is evident. Another strong example of the members' collective strength is in relation to the introduction of bank payments of NREGA wage. Bank payments were introduced to the scheme as an effort to separate the implementing agencies and the payment agencies as a mechanism to reduce corrupt behavior.

Corruption becomes much easier when the implementing agency and the payment agency are the same. When Malubhai, a member of JADS, was asked what he thought about the bank payment system he said he was unsure. He understood that there was a new cost of getting to the bank, which was in the neighboring village, but that it would reduce workers' risk of being cheated. Since the system implementation was mandated from the district administration he also understood that they needed to try it out, but was certain that if they were unhappy with the results all JADS needed to do was launch an agitation or action to revert back to the old system of payment (Khera, 2011). This confidence is telling of the JADS members in their ability to assert themselves and cause change. The level of awareness, organization, and assertion in NREGA workers elsewhere contrast with that of JADS members in Pati.

The effects of organization are not isolated to Pati. The strength of organization was seen in Rajasthan with the RTI movement and the involvement of the activist organization MKSS. Interestingly, the levels of NREGA success in Rajasthan can also be attributed to the involvement of MKSS. The people of Rajasthan were actively engaged in a struggle for the RTI movement. Sudha Venu Menon believes that this spirit and empowerment causes people to assert their legitimate rights and stay actively involved in the NREGA process. The role of MKSS in empowering people, by increasing awareness and providing the basis for organization was crucial to laborers' ability to assert themselves. We can see that the assertion of rights through NREGA can be brought about through organization of laborers who are aware of their rights and recognize a difference between what they are entitled to and what they are receiving (Menon, 2008). Organization in tandem with awareness seems to empower workers to demand. However, when the ability to organize is lacking, or the level of awareness, activists such as those in MKSS can assist, resulting in increased success of development programs such as NREGA.

1.9 Acts of Citizenship

What does it mean for a poor villager to have a "right to work"? Citizenship is best phrased by American political theorist, Hannah Arendt who says people need to recognize that they have "the right to have rights" (Arendt, 1966). Brazilian theorist Evelina Dagnino comments of the success of Latin American movements in evoking this realization among people. "Urban popular movements reached this… understanding of the intermingling of culture and politics as soon as they realized that what they had to struggle for was not only their social rights, housing, health, education, but their very right to have rights" (Alvarez et al., 1998: 48).

T.H. Marshall defines three main elements of citizenship. 'Civil element (the rights necessary for individual freedom), the political element (the right to participate in the exercise of political power) and the social element, which he defined as "the whole range from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full of the social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society" (Jaya, 2013: 5). Whereas T.H. Marshall is defining citizenship in a more universalized way, historian Partha Chatterjee provides insight into concepts of citizenship within the context of India. According to Partha Chatterjee, postcolonial politics present a division between elite who inhabit "civil society". Members of this "civil society" enjoy access to rights and citizenship. In contrast, the remaining members of society, or "political society" are subjected to the "politics of the governed" and influence of classic patron-client relationships (Chatterjee, 2004). In this sense, the citizenship this "political society" receives is governed and not freely accessible. In theory however, there is formal citizenship, in the sense that every citizen is a member of the formal legal constitution structure, receiving full acknowledgement by the state. The contradiction arises

in the apparent lack of citizenship in the village context, in which social hierarchies and power dynamics negate access to substantial citizenship by the oppressed.

Niraja Gopal Jaya acknowledges in her book "Citizenship and its Discontents" that citizenship also involves the power of people to oppose the state. "It demonstrated to [citizens] who they could be as members of the political community, as participants in political endeavors that frequently placed them in adversarial positions vis-á-vis the state." (Jaya, 2013: 7). In the case of India, the incongruence between liberal state policy by higher level administration, and conservative patronage relationship and social hierarchies of the village context that affect lower level administration creates a different need of citizenship than said by Jaya. Kaviraj comments on this incongruence saying, "the Indian state has feet of vernacular clay" (Kaviraj, 1988). Rather than merely between the state, the village context creates a need for citizenship to include the ability to combat local links to state workers interact with. These actors are lower level administration, patrons, and brokers who are largely responsible for much of the misuse of NREGA funds.

1.10 Political Mediation

Citizenship is seen as the right to have rights (Arendt, 1966; Tate, 2007). As citizens of India, NREGA laborers are entitled to their rights as declared by the constitution. Many times these rights are not fulfilled, rather the rights relationship between the larger state government and impoverished citizens is interrupted by local intermediaries who translate rights to patronage. Workers still receive benefits, but fail to receive the true benefits of rights-based development. As a result, rights-based development fails to reach its full potential of social transformation. Classic intermediaries between higher level administration, or the "state", and "society" include lower level government administration, local patrons, and brokers.

A broker, according to Eric Wolf, is a "powerful yet marginal and vulnerable figure located between fault lines and connection points within complex systems and relationships" (Lewis, 2006: 12). Witsoe goes further to say that their position between state and society makes brokers "political mediators". These brokers and their involvement in the execution of programs such as NREGA demonstrate the importance of understanding such intermediary figures. David Lewis, specialist in social policy and development, has stated that this role of brokers demonstrates "that brokerage is required by the co-existence of different rationalities, interests, and meanings, so as to produce order, legitimacy, and "success" and to maintain fund flows" (Lewis, 2006: 13). However, the previous quote fails to acknowledge that activists also behave as intermediates between state and society, and that brokers may not necessarily be required. Although the role of brokers as mediator has been given some attention, the role of activists also fulfilling an intermediary role has not been explored extensively.

Similar to brokers and patrons, activists hold a position between society and state. However, their relationship with rural workers is not structured in a traditional patron-client relationship. I argue that they do not function as political mediators, rather as mediators of citizenship. The distinction not denying the role of both as intermediaries between state and society, but rather reflecting the difference in how they navigate village systems and the NREGA program, as well as the difference in outcomes experienced by workers. There is a contradiction and severe disparity between liberal right-based policy conceptualized with an explicit rights framework, and the absence of citizenship thought to accompany claims to such rights. NREGA provides a rights-based policy through which such a contradiction and the role of activists overcoming this contradiction can be further analyzed.

1.11 Methods

With the intentions of studying activists involved with the operation of NREGA in the state of AP, I began exploring my connections in search of an appropriate research village to serve as my fieldwork site. Fortunately, a preexisting network of vocal and highly involved activists and volunteers exists through the AID India organization. The organization has a wide presence within the United States and has branches throughout the country. The nearest branch to Union College was the Troy branch. A brief email to the president of this local chapter explaining my search for a research site and interest in NREGA activists of AP, brought Ajay Kumar to my attention. Much to my luck, Ajay Kumar, an activist and leader of activist organization and network APVVU, was due to visit the United States from India during the summer of 2015, conveniently the summer I was in search of a field site. Still, I searched for alternative activist organizations in AP with the fear that Ajay Kumar could not help me. My thesis advisor, Professor Jeffrey Witsoe, connected me with activists he knew. Each email sent, and each path of connections I followed led me to the same man, Ajay Kumar. Even a conversation with researcher Rajesh Veeraraghavan, who recently completed his dissertation on NREGA in AP, concluded with advise to work Ajay Kumar for this study.

Early in the summer of 2015 I traveled to Buffalo, New York to see Ajay Kumar speak. I was in coordination with the president of the Buffalo AID India chapter, Santosh, for accommodations and event details. We had arranged for me to stay in Santosh's house, and when I arrived I found a middle aged man wearing a distressed *kurti* shirt and worn pants sitting on his sofa looking at me through his broken glasses. He was introduced to me as Ajay Kumar. His humble appearance and fluent English told me that despite his simple lifestyle he was a highly educated man, versed in Indian policy, law, and the ongoing fight for rights. It was through this

connection with Ajay Kumar that I was introduced to Sunil and the mandal of Nathavaram. A mandal is similar to a county, and is made of numerous villages. Sunil was the grassroots level activist I was looking to find, and the mandal he worked in was the activist affected field site I aimed to explore. The connections I made through Sunil brought me to the village site of G.K. Godam, a village that allowed me to study the complexity of village life and local patronage.

Fieldwork was conducted for one month during the summer of 2015, and another month during the winter of 2015-16. The first round of fieldwork had a focus on Sunil and his involvement with local workers and officials. During this round of work, I lived in the mandal center of Nathavaram with Ajay Kumar's mother in law. The second round of fieldwork focused on a specific village called G.K. Godam, where I lived in the room of a local teacher. This second period functioned to reveal the intricacy of village life, embedded hierarchies of patronage affecting villagers, and how workers experience NREGA.

I had expected to incur challenges during my time in India. One I had not expected, but faced was a language barrier. Despite my fluency in Telugu, regional differences made understanding language and communicating difficult in my initial days. This obstacle was overcome in a short period of time, but other challenges were also present. My inquiry into local politics and parties led me to face resistance and hostility by local elites and party members. As I will discuss later in more detail, politics plays a significant role in everyday village life. The pervasiveness of politics and political parties within villages, and the connections political affiliations create give local politicians and party leaders considerable power and influence. Therefore, when local political leaders felt my presence was threatening, actions were taken to dissuade me from pursuing my research into what they felt were their private matters.

One such situation I faced was when I was investigating a land issue in G.K. Godam. The ex-president of the village, and current leader of the popular TDP political party, arrived on the back seat of a motorcycle accompanied by a young man. The president was very interested in my activities related to this particular land issue. Later when walking in the mandal center of Nathavaram a member of the local police department stopped me on the street. “People are talking about you everywhere. I just need some clarification of who you are and why you are here. If you could just come to the station and explain that would be good.” I ask him if I have done something wrong that requires me to come to the station. He replied, “People just see you roaming with men and Sunil and are growing concerned. Why are you going to G.K. Godam daily? What’s there of importance?” Questioning like this from the police became a regular occurrence. On a few occasions, I was brought in for interrogation with the suspicion I had involvement in local illegal activity. Interestingly, with the police officer in this first encounter was the young man that I had seen with the ex-president. I can assume that such police interest was instigated by the local TDP leader, as it began after my involvement in such land issues and inquiries into local politics. It was later revealed that the leader was providing high interest loans to the small landowners in the areas. If the land issue was resolved, small landowners would be able to receive low interest loans and he would no longer being making money or have as strong an influence in their lives as a local patron.

My gender was also a challenge at times. The regular and independent traveling I did led to much of the questioning the police and other members of the community had. A significant amount of this questioning implied judgement of my character as a woman, and were accompanied by warnings against my possible promiscuous behaviors. Being a woman also made it difficult to enter social meetings of local men. When I was able to participate in such

meetings, I can only assume that the men were hesitant to speak freely in my presence. I was, however, able to participate in social interactions with women, something that would be difficult for a man in my position to do. This proved to be a useful tool to understanding village life. Still, social curfews were clear for all women and applied to me as well, but did not apply to men. Fears for my safety prevented my hosts during both of my fieldwork periods from allowing me to leave the house past dark. This again provided another obstacle as many discussions and decisions regarding village operation and life were made at night, and many of the men making such decisions would meet to drink and discuss after dark. I was left to gather information on what had happened from conversations with village women in the mornings after such meetings.

Despite facing such obstacles, I was able to gain insight into village life and the operation of NREGA in AP, as well as the involvement of local activists. I relied on participant observation to gather my data during my fieldwork. Time provided another constraint, as two months to collect such information is a short amount of time. However, the assistance I received in finding such a field site, my previous knowledge of Indian practices from being raised Indian-American, as well as my awareness of village life and practices from previous visits to India helped me adjust quickly to my environment and gather information more effectively than if I had no guidance or such previous experiences. My fieldwork allowed me to dynamically analyze the operation of NREGA in AP by providing me insight into the bureaucratic operation of the program, the highly integral role of activists, the involvement of local patrons, and the navigation and experience of NREGA by workers.

1.12 Upcoming Chapters

Chapter 2 will provide an overview of how NREGA is intended to function within the AP. Chapter 3 will introduce my research village as well as provide examples and context of

village social hierarchies, power dynamics, village politics, and patron-client/brokerage relationships. Chapter 4 will explore the realities of NREGA in the village context, specifically typical paths of NREGA navigation by workers. Non-activist paths pursued by workers will provide more insight into village hierarchies and power dynamics. Chapter 5 will introduce Sunil, local activists and *dalit* man. This chapter will explore how Sunil is able to help workers claim rights through NREGA. Chapter 6 will provide a conclusion and further analysis of Sunil's intermediary role in claims to citizenship and rights.

Chapter 2: The Intentions and Operation of NREGA in Andhra Pradesh

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act was enacted in 2005 to guarantee employment, in the form of unskilled manual labor, to any eligible citizen of rural India. Many of those aware of the act refer to it as NREGA. NREGA promises 100 days of work per household, minimum wage paid either hourly or piece wise, and the creation of useful assets contributing to local rural infrastructure (Operation Manual, 2006; Khera, 2011). The implementation of NREGA varies by state, and Andhra Pradesh is one of the top performers in the country (Shankar and Gaiha, 2013).

The program intends to empower, and eliminate methods of corruption that Indian government attributes to the failure of previous poverty alleviation programs. Further, the formation of this rights-based policy aim not only to alleviate poverty, but also bypass social boundaries, hierarchies, and oppressive systems at the local village level that have historically prevented the socially disadvantaged poor from claiming their rights.

2.1 Past Policy Failures– The Case of Food for Work

Reflecting on the failure of previous poverty alleviation policies, the Indian government came to the consensus that corruption within government programs is the largest cause for such failures. This corrupt behavior stops beneficiaries, largely the poor, from receiving the benefits they are entitled to by law. The recognition of the high levels of corruption within programs, and the movement towards formulating policy in a way that prevents such behavior, is a large step for Indian poverty alleviation policy and is thought to contribute to the successes of NREGA However, as previously mentioned the corruption such policy was formulated to prevent goes beyond the term “corruption”. Rather it is important to acknowledge that such corruption is rooted in village systems of patronage and politics, evolved from colonial systems of indirect

rule and the "limited raj", as discussed in Chapter 1. Despite the short comings that accompany this lack of deeper understanding of corruption, NREGA policy and its self-regulation systems of transparency and accountability are progressive in that they include acknowledgement that government corruption is the cause for program failure and perpetuation of poverty re-politicizes poverty, a successful step in the direction of the rights-based framework.

Prior to NREGA, the state of Andhra Pradesh faced the failure of the National Food for Work (NFFW) program, also referred to as the "Food for Work" program (FFW), and the high levels of corruption accompanying this failure. With the consideration of the general failures of this previous poverty alleviation program, or "schemes" as they are commonly referred to in India, NREGA was designed with various safeguards to prevent the leakage of funds that made previous programs unsuccessful, the FFW program being the most recent such failure (Deshingkar et al., 2005; Khera, 2011).

The Food for Work program, similar to NREGA was created in an effort to alleviate the effects of poverty. It was designed to provide food in the form of rice, in exchange for unskilled manual labor. Similar to NREGA, FFW was a self-selecting program. This meant that it offered, as its name implies, food for work for any Indian willing to perform the unskilled manual labor. Generally speaking, only those in need for food would participate in such manual labor.

FFW was infamously ridden with the effects of corruption, providing a haunting lesson for the implementation of NREGA in AP. Deshingkar and Johnson explore the causes of FFW's failure in AP in a case study of the program. Ultimately they claim that the high levels of misallocation of food, and misuse of resources in the FFW program was due to the heavy dependence on local channels of administration, and the failure of the decentralized Indian government in regulating the program (Deshingkar and Johnson, 2005). This conclusion was also

supported by development researcher Radhika Nayak and colleagues who studied the failure of previous poverty programs (Nayak et al., 2002).

2.1.1 The Administrative Hierarchy and Decentralization

Before I discuss the proposed role of decentralization in the failure of the program, it is important to review the general structure of Indian government, and the policy implementation hierarchy. Legislation such as NREGA and FFW is implemented from the central government, but is administered at the state level through an administrative hierarchy. The state is divided into districts, and the districts are further divided into mandals, unique to the state of Andhra Pradesh. In other states, districts are instead divided into larger blocks. Mandals are divided into gram panchayats, and these panchayats are divided into villages. NREGA is implemented from the central government, but is administered at the state level though such a hierarchy. There are four tiers of administration at the four levels of the administration hierarchy: state, district, mandal, and panchayat/village levels.

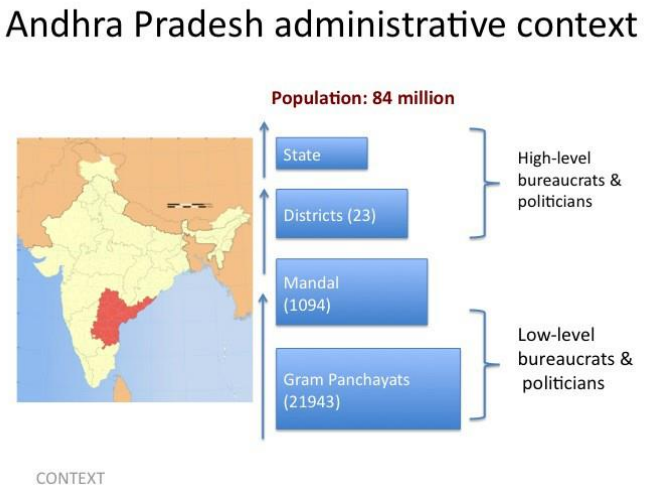

Figure 1. This figure provides and overview of the administrative context of Andhra Pradesh. NREGA is administered similarly in other state, with the exception of the mandal.

(Veeraraghavan, 2015)

This level of decentralization was created with the intentions that it would lead to greater participation by the rural poor, as well as increase their access to government. The 73rd Amendment of the Indian Constitution gives village, block and district level bodies a constitutional status under Indian law (Nambiar, 2001). This is primarily done through gram sabhas within gram panchayats.

2.1.2 The Gram Sabha

The gram sabha, which is all the eligible voters within a gram panchayat area, is intended to serve as a means for transparency and accountability within local government. The gram sabha was created to ensure that even marginal groups are included in local politics. Representatives are then to act in ways that support their formal elected responsibilities, as well as act on behalf of the interests of the constituents of the gram sabha. In practice, however, this system has largely failed to live up to satisfy this ideal function. Various studies regarding decentralization in India highlight the failure of gram sabhas and panchayat meetings in preventing the control of panchayats by local elites. They also show that many times these gram sabhas also fail to satisfy their role as a mechanism for transparency and accountability (Nambiar, 2001; Deshpande and Murthy, 2002).

High levels of decentralization within programs are also associated with increased levels of patronage and brokerage relationships. The story of FFW supports this. Deshingkar and Johnson discuss how misallocation of funds and food within the program were also attributed to use of contractors and brokers. Although the involvement of local contractors was prohibited by the FFW program legislation, the decentralized nature with heavy emphasis on local administration is one of the causes to the prevalence of this phenomenon.

In theory, the gram sabha is intended to provide a way for FFW beneficiaries to over-ride the power of local officials and elites, many of whom were the main contractors and brokers diverting FFW rice away from the rural poor. However, it was generally unable to fulfill this role. According to the FFW guidelines, laborers would have interacted with panchayat officials to obtain employment. However, contractors were found to be the main drivers for both work identification and allocation. The works that were actually approved reflected the priorities of the contractors who were invariably politically and socially powerful.

Information dissemination regarding the worker entitlement with FFW was also low. Key informant interviews and focus group discussions by Deshingkar and Johnson reveal that most villagers did not know how much rice their village received. Nor were they aware of their entitlement in terms of the amount of rice to be paid as wages and how long they would get work for (Deshingkar and Johnson, 2005).

In conclusion, this study found that beneficiary selection and works identification done through decentralized means were ineffective due to existing structures of patronage, power, and rent-seeking. Panchayat officials and *sarpanches* were found to be instrumental in the corruption in FFW. The failure of FFW calls into question the promise that decentralization holds for improved accountability and better service delivery. The case of FFW also reinforces that such mismanagement and misappropriation are important causes of continuing poverty and deprivation.

Unlike previous programs such as the FFW program, NREGA attempted to differentiate itself by removing the heavy role of the *sarpanch* and local panchayat officials in the implementation of the program, as well as creating numerous safeguards to increase accountability (Veeraraghavan, 2015). Understanding the negative consequences of

decentralization, NREGA policy was also fitted with safeguards in addition to its attempts to centralize the management and implementation structures. These safeguards are heavily rooted in increased transparency.

2.2 Re-centralizing NREGA Implementation

In practice, the significant players in NREGA in AP are at the state level and the lower-level bureaucrats at the mandal level. The most important official actors in the operation of NREGA in Andhra Pradesh are the upper-level bureaucrats and the lower-level bureaucrats. In an effort to decrease decentralization and its effects on programs, as experienced with FFW, NREGA removed the power of fulfilling workers' demand for work from local panchayat elected officials. Instead, this power was given to centrally appointed administrative officials at local levels reporting to centrally appointed officials at mandal levels. Additionally, these positions were specified to be temporary contracted positions. This was stipulated to insure that officials do not remain in one location for long enough to build networks and relationships to engage in corrupt behavior. Such connections are necessary for Drèze's "nexus of corruption" to occur.

The Mandal Parishad Development Officer (MPDO), or MDO as it was commonly referred to, is responsible for overseeing all the NREGA activity in the mandal area. Each gram panchayat of the mandal has its own field assistant (FA). The FA is typically from the same panchayat of the village. Many panchayats only have one to two villages within them so the FA is generally from the same village as well. The FA has the responsibility of giving work to the workers at the village level, as well as maintaining attendance registers, and making key field level decisions. It is important to note that the FA is not a member of the village panchayat. This is an administrative position to which the FA was appointed.

The remaining positions at the mandal level include those of the technical assistant (TA), the engineering consultant (EC), the additional program officer (APO), and the computer assistant or computer operator (CO). Similar to the FA, the TA, APO and EC are appointed at the state level, in an attempt to remove them from local political influences. The TA and EC have similar roles in that they both serves to measure the amount of work done. In the Andhra Pradesh system of NREGA, payment to workers is made in a piece-rate basis. This means that the workers are not paid by the amount of time they work per day, as workers are paid in other states, rather they are paid by how much work they physically do. The TAs are meant to regularly measure the work. They must also maintain the measurement books to document the dimensions of the work. The EC takes the initial and final measurements of any NREGA projects. COs have the responsibility of digitizing all records of NREGA work into the online NREGA system. Due to the increased emphasis on transparency this role is seen as critical to the implementation of NREGA in Andhra Pradesh. The appointment of the COs also occurs at the state level. COs all receive training at the district levels on how to operate the computers, work with the software, as well as install the software required. The manual dictates the 2 COs be appointed for mandal, with one reporting to the program officer and the other to the MPDO.

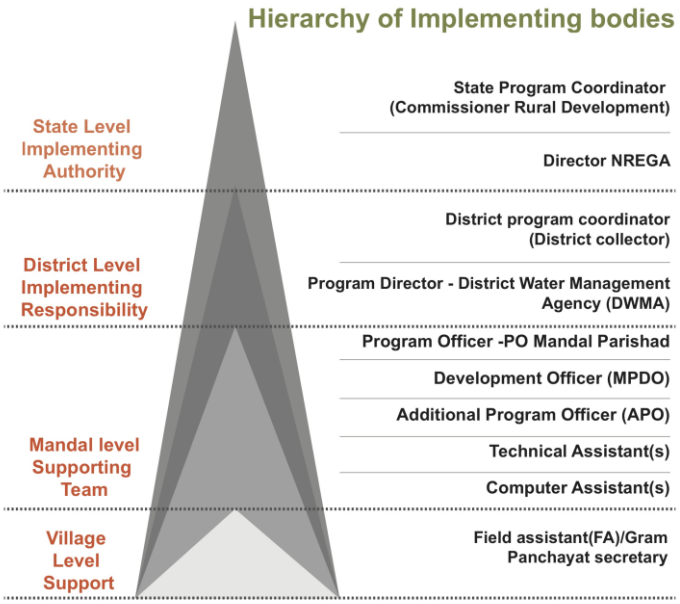

Figure 2. This image depicts the administrative hierarchy for NREGA implementation. It presents each important administrative figure, and the level at which they operate.

(Veeraraghavan, 2015)

Central appointment of these administrative officials is an effort to reduce influence of local politics on the administration and implementation of NREGA. Similarly, the temporary contracts of these positions, and the frequent transfers of these government employees is done to reduce the influence of local politics on their actions. The hierarchy within which they work is yet another attempt to increase scrutiny of the work that is being done by administrative officials lower in the hierarchy by those higher in the hierarchy.

2.3 Uses of Transparency and Technology

With the acknowledgment that there were high levels of corrupt behavior hindering the success of poverty alleviation programs such as FFW, NREGA was constructed with various transparency mechanisms to increase accountability amongst the low-level bureaucrats and politicians involved in implementation of such programs, as well as reduce the subsequent

leakage of resources. The Andhra model of governance in NREGA functions with this understanding.

Efforts have been made to build a state-civil society "sandwich". This "sandwich" refers to the abilities of high-level bureaucrats and workers to exert pressure on low-level bureaucrats and local politicians and "squeeze" out corruption. Transparency within NREGA has been increased to increase the surveillance by the two sides of the sandwich, high-level bureaucrats and worker. Increases in access to information and expected increased surveillance is intended to allow both sides of this sandwich to pressurize corrupt low-level officials and politicians (Fox, 1993).

The availability of information and the theoretical pressurizing power of workers from the bottom of this sandwich functions as a source of empowerment, the access to information providing them the ammunition to bring consequences to corrupt officials, as well as receive their rights according to NREGA.

All the data of NREGA works is posted on the public NREGA website. Payments are intended to be made publicly in post offices as another mechanism to insure workers are receiving the appropriate amount of payment. Other safeguards include muster rolls, a form of attendance sheet. These muster rolls are remotely generated to prevent *benami* (false) entries and names. The muster roll is expected to be maintained by the FA, as well as the mates. Job cards are also mandatory for each household participating in NREGA works. This are kept by the workers themselves to track what work they have been given, and when. Similarly, each worker keeps their own passbook. In these passbooks a record is kept of when workers are receiving payments for their work. Payment slips are given to each worker in addition to a record in their passbook. This payment slip is a receipt of sorts, indicating how much they are being paid and

for how much work. Payments are made at post offices and publicly, to encourage public scrutiny of payments.

These safeguard mechanisms, and the increased levels of transparency are attempts to pressurize the lower-level bureaucrats who are largely responsible for the misallocation of funds. This "sandwich" described by Fox is one in which the lower level bureaucrats should theoretically be pressurized by both state and civil society. The state being the higher-level bureaucrats of the program, and the civil society being the NREGA workers (Fox, 1993).

2.3.1 The Social Auditing System

The peak of MKSS' influence and the RTI movement coincide in time with NREGA legislation, therefore it's not surprising that the movement influenced NREGA legislation. One result of this influence was the use of social audits in the program (Baviskar, 2010). Andhra Pradesh has gone so far as to institutionalize audits. This auditing process consists of three main steps. The first step involves scrutiny of government documents such as muster rolls and measurement books by a centrally trained social auditor. The auditor will measure worksites to make sure that they coincide with what was recorded. It is also their responsibility to read the muster rolls aloud to confirm that the records are in fact correct. In the second step workers are encouraged to provide written testimonies either supporting or countering the government records. It is in the third step that all the audit documents are examined in a village public hearing. In this hearing both the government records and the audit reports are presented. This step allows the public a chance to speak. Any confirmed discrepancies are met with penalties such as fines, or suspension/termination of bureaucrats (Sushmita, 2013; Veeraraghavan, 2015; Operation Manual, 2006).

2.3.2 Biometric Identification and Aadhar Cards

Recently biometric identification in tandem with personalized national identification cards, called Aadhar cards, have been employed to confirm the identities of NREGA workers. These stringent identification tools are used to insure that only the worker is claiming his/her payments. Finger prints are a popular biometric identification. In cases where finger prints fail to register, eye scans can be used as an alternative form of identification. All workers should also have a personal Aadhar card, and have the accompanying Aadhar number linked to their NREGA account within the extensive NREGA database. These numbers are confirmed for the worker to receive his or her payment.

Whereas gram sabhas failed to increased transparency and empower the marginalized village population who comprise the poverty alleviation program beneficiaries, NREGA centralizes transparency efforts and looks to provide access to information that is independent of local governments and gram sabhas. This transparency is thought to lead to accountability and increased pressure on corruption within lower government and among local politicians. Additionally, worker protection safeguards are used to grant access to NREGA benefits to only workers, such as biometric identification and Aadhar cards. Social audits provide another outlet for worker to expose misuse of fund within the program, an appropriate alternative to the gram sabhas in which marginalized worker participation is generally low (Nambiar, 2001). NREGA policy equips workers with the tools to reclaim entitlements when corruption may occur, and to pressurize government officials to insure their entitlements are not misused. This just one way the rights-based policy aims to empower workers. The act also stipulates that work be given on the demand of the workers, another method of empowering workers.

2.4 Work on Demand

NREGA famously promises that the workers receive work when they demand for it. This functions to empower workers to make a direct claim to their right to work, insuring they are not dependent on work being made available to them. The FFW program relied on local officials within the panchayat to respond to worker demand. NREGA, removes this interaction between panchayat and worker, by allowing the worker to make the demand for their right to work directly to the state, through a state appointed official, the FA. This demand for work from the state is made through a worker group leader called a mate.

Workers are organized into groups, which are led by a mate. This mate is responsible for taking attendance, as well as supervising work. Their role is acknowledged by the state, and they are given additional payment for their work. They have also been hired by the state to act on behalf of their group, as a representative who is responsible for maintain and filling out official documents such as demand forms, and muster rolls. The mate system was created as a controlled alternative to contractors, the use of whom was extensive in FFW. Mates fulfill some of the roles of contractors, such as managing the demand for work. In submitting the required form on behalf of their groups, they are also responsible for satisfying the demand for work made by their fellow workers. In compensation for duties they fill, mates are given additional financial payments. They are also given financial incentives when they involve more people in NREGA works. This is done in an attempt to deter them from selectively giving access to work. These work groups are also important in payment calculation per worker. The piece-rate system of payment measures the collective output of each workgroup, rather than tracking the work output of each individual. This method of measurement is enforced to incentivize the workers to work collaboratively (Operation Manual, 2006).

The ability to receive work on demand rather than when local government officials decide to provide work, increases the connection of workers to the state, and is intended to reduce the influence of local relationships and politics, as well as increase the workers' claim to rights. These local relationships and associated politics are responsible for patronage and brokerage relationships associated with the failure of previous programs, as well as the mismanagement and leakage of funds referred to as corruption. NREGA provided workers with the benefits associated with receiving work and payment, but also caused a subsequent increase in agricultural wages.

2.5 Satisfying Local Interests

Higher agricultural wages were the result of the established minimum wages of NREGA. The creation of guaranteed work and minimum wage caused the increases in agricultural wages, establishing an unofficial wage standard. NREGA also created an alternative employment to agricultural work, creating competition between agriculture employers and NREGA employment. To make sure that small farmers were not suffering from the loss of labor and NREGA associated wage increases, NREGA made provisions to satisfy local actors and alleviated potential local effects on small farmers. Small landowners are thought to suffer the most from the increases in wages caused by NREGA (Veeraraghavan, 2015).

To ensure that rural agricultural economy is not negatively affected by NREGA work, NREGA stipulates that work is provided during non-agricultural seasons. This is to combat the preference workers could give to participating in NREGA work over agricultural work. Additionally, small landowners have been given significant consideration when determining where NREGA work can occur. Whereas large landowners are more capable of paying higher wages, small landowner saw themselves as financially unable to support these higher wages.

Decreased participation of small landowners in rural economies could result in increased economic power and control of large landowners in villages. These large landowners are often the local elites involved in the exploitation of workers and local systems of patronage. To stop such increases in power, while supporting small landowners in the rural economy, NREGA policy in AP clauses that NREGA work can occur on private land of small owners. This work on private land has many provisions to minimize misuse of the NREGA system. First priority for NREGA subsidized labor is given to disadvantaged members of the community, specifically small landowners of lower castes. Landowners must also have less than 5 acres of land. NREGA also identifies what works can occur on private land to insure that the works can still be classified as requiring unskilled labor. Therefore, the NREGA subsidized labor is not agricultural labor, but works such as digging irrigation channels. The struggle of the increased wages is felt most by these small farmers, but in many ways has been mitigated by such NREGA labor subsidy.

Members of local economies were given consideration as to reduce negative economic effects of the program on the rural communities, as well as to reduce backlash towards to policy by local opposition such as landowners. Consideration was also given to increase buy-in by local actors and reduce reasons they may have to interfere with NREGA operation. NREGA provisions were made in an effort to successfully empower workers, reduce local interference, and to reduce levels of corrupt behavior, while providing an employment safety net and alleviating rural poverty and its subsequent effects.

2.6 Summary

The NREGA policy was created with some understanding of the transformative potential of rights-based policy as well as village systems of power inhibiting the voice of the

marginalized, but failed to make the connection that oppressive local systems of patronage have the capability to cause corrupt behavior and the failure government programs. Therefore, it is not surprising that despite the precautions taken within the NREGA legislation, the operation of the program deviates from what is specified in the act, guidelines, and operation manual. To understand why the operation of the program varies, it is important to understand the village context, the complexity of "corruption" NREGA attempts to confront, and the various social factors that contribute to the behavior and roles of the various members involved in the operation of NREGA.

Chapter 3: The Village Context of G.K. Godam

NREGA operates at the village level, therefore performing an anthropological analysis of NREGA and associated rights-based activism requires an understanding of village dynamics. Understanding the village involves an understanding of caste, class, politics, how they are intertwining, as well as the historical context of colonial legacy from which they developed into defining features of the contemporary postcolonial Indian village. With the manifestation of caste, class, and politics in everyday village life and society, it is not surprising that these features affect the operation of NREGA. These factors influence many of the interactions villagers have with one another, including those who are involved in the implementation of NREGA and those receiving work through it. Before understanding the implications of such factors on NREGA operation, an understanding of their prevalence in daily life needs to be established, as well as the influence such factors have in the social hierarchy, power relations, and power dynamics of a village. During my fieldwork in the village of G.K. Godam, where I lived during the month of December 2015, I witnessed just how entrenched such factors were. Thus, such an understanding provides the background necessary for a thorough analysis of NREGA, the factors that undermine the effectiveness of NREGA, as well as the need for rights-based activists in the day-to-day operation of the program and mediation of claims to citizenship by NREGA participants.

3.1 Caste and Class

When I ask Manga, a woman who lives near the entrance of the village, whether people of different caste groups live in different areas she says, “no! of course not”. OC households are somewhat scattered among BC households. Still it is clear there is a larger concentration of OC households present near the entrance of the village. When I walk further into the village,

following what seems to be the main road, small huts of OC/BC households appear to my right. My initial days in G.K. Godam were spent investigating the distribution of caste and class throughout the village.

3.1.1 Caste in AP

Three significant caste classifications exist in the state of Andhra Pradesh. These are Other Category or Open Category castes (OC), Other Backward Classes/Castes (OBC) or Backward Classes/Castes (BC), and Scheduled Classes/Castes (SC). Members of the tribal community are referred to as Scheduled Tribes (ST). OC castes refer to the upper castes of the state. Significant upper castes include Kamma, and Reddy, who comprise approximately 4.8% and 6.5% of the state's population respectively. These are land-owning communities that have historically exercised control over agrarian resources such as land and water. Such control of resources has been an important source to their economic and political power within villages. Traditionally, they have had control of village political life, a culmination of the influence of their class, caste, and political power. Other influential castes include Velamas and Kapus, also classified as OCs in many regions of Andhra Pradesh. Kapus are sometimes classified as BCs.

OBCs comprise approximately 46% of the state's population. Castes in this category include Gollas (shepards), Padmasalis (weavers), and many others. SCs, also known as the untouchable castes or *dalits*, have two large castes of Madiga (leather worker caste) and Mala (agrarian labor caste). Relli is another large population *dalit* caste. According to the 2001 Indian Census 7.6% the Vishakapatnam district population was SC. Of this population 22.4% Madiga, 58.26% Mala, 14.35% Relli, and 5.06% was others SC castes (Srinivasulu, 2002).

3.1.2 Caste in the Village

A brief survey revealed that there were about 50 houses in the village, each household differing significantly in relative wealth. BC families are predominant in the village, and seem to be fewer OC families, but there are noticeably few SC households. Only 5 SC households exists in G.K Godam, and are located at the edge of the village separated by a tall wooden fence.

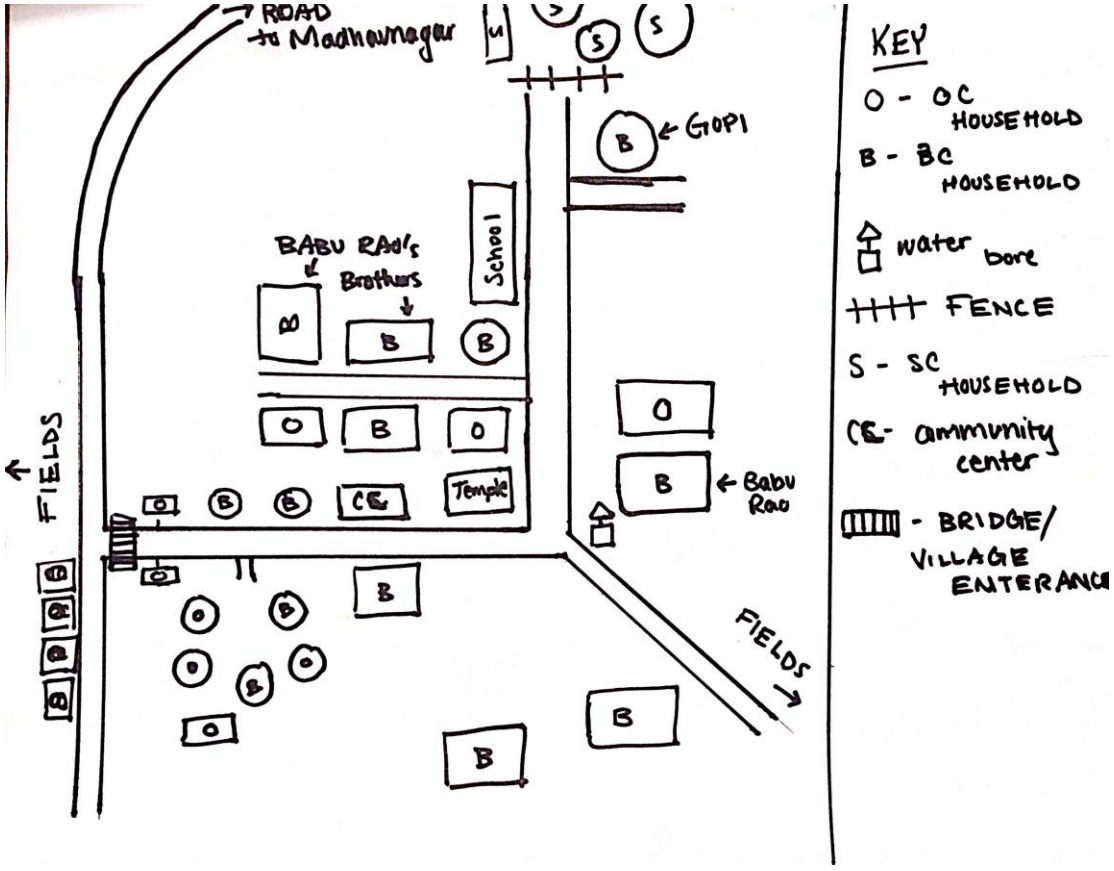

Figure 1. This is a sketch of the relative set up of the village. Included are denominations for caste separation within the village. Key locations and household are marked.

Historically, there has been an association between caste and occupation, related to concepts of purity and pollution. However, stringent caste based occupation restrictions has been reduced in recent time, as is visible in G.K. Godam. Members of the village, regardless of caste participate in common jobs such as herding cows and goats, unskilled labor referred to as *coolie* work, farming referred to as *vyavasayam*, migration for work, and *cheru pani* or NREGA works.

Migration is generally to large urban centers. There are two types of significant migration: daily migration, and seasonal migration. Daily migration is generally to the nearest urban center of Narsipatnam. Longer term migration can be to the cities within Andhra Pradesh, such as Vishakapatnam, or to Hyderabad, former capital of Andhra Pradesh and current capital of the newly formed neighboring Telangana state. Other long term migration includes seasonal migrate to states such as Bihar, Tamil Nadu, or Maharashtra. There are also governments positions within the village such as working in the village school.

I walked through the village the day I arrive, slowly making my way to Gopi's house, one of my previous acquaintances. It's early in the morning, before everyone begins leaving to participate in agricultural work. It's at this time in the day that the men of the village gather at the entrance of the village and talk, and women exchanged conversation by the village bores. I make it to Gopi's house, despite being stopped with questions of who I was and where I was from by the groups of villagers participating in their regular morning mingling. Gopi lives in a thatch roof home closer to the edge of the village, around the corner from the SC section and near the village school. The house has two rooms with a fire stove in the front, and a chicken tied down in the small dirt space surrounding the home. It appears to be an average home, but is not as large as some of the other homes in the village. Gopi sees me sitting on his patio floor talking to his wife cooking at their outdoor stove. He runs to grab me a chair, disregarding my assuring him that I am satisfied with the floor. We both sit and enjoy a glass of tea. He's already committed me to lunch in his home and his wife is busy with the preparations.

"How do you like my home?" he enquires motioning to the two rooms behind him. "See, we have nothing in this house and work hard so our sons don't have to become *coolies*." Gopi then goes on to tell me that he has two boys, one getting his degree in Chemistry, and second

completing his MBA. He smiles when he finishes talking, clearly proud of what they have accomplished. He adds that one of his boys even studied English medium. He leaves briefly and returns from one of his rooms with two books. “Do you understand these?” he asks handing me his sons’ chemistry textbook and English textbook. I look through them and Gopi turns to his wife smiling. “See! They’re as smart as the American.”

As Gopi and I finish our tea, he asks me what caste I am. The question takes me by surprise because it is generally considered rude to discuss caste so openly. I tell him I am of the *Kamma* caste, which is one of the larger dominant castes in the state. “Wow that’s a very big *colom*” he says to his wife. *Colom*, I learn from Gopi, is the respectability and prestige of a caste group. He tells me he is of the BC caste group and is a Golla (aka Yadava).

Till this moment, no one in the village has mentioned anything about the SCs of the village. I ask Gopi about them. He gets a bit serious and silent, asking me why I need to know. I explain it’s part of my work, but still he speaks with hesitation. He begins speaking again. “They live down the road, very nearby, but I’m sure you won’t need to go there”.

I ask him why I wouldn’t go there and he seems frustrated and surprised by my questions, as if he doesn’t understand why I’m asking them. “Our right hands are our good hands, and our left hand are our bad hands. We are born like this. And the left hand cannot become the right hand. Just like that, some of us were born as the left hands and others are the right. They happen to be the left hands.” I ask him if he goes to the SC part of the village and why it is separated from the rest of the village. Gopi laughs and I think I have offended him. “Why are you asking this question here? Ask this in Nathavaram where there’s a huge SC colony. They live together and drink together and cause problems together. That’s not a question for here. Nothing bad

happens here." The conversation wraps up when Gopi excuses himself and retreats to his sewing machine to finish some saris for women in the village.

The caste system dictates a social hierarchy within village communities, as well as many inter-caste relations. Significant emphasis is placed on purity and impurity (Dumont, 1970). These differences of purity are linked to occupational differences, ritual roles, and village structure (Parish, 1995; Racine and Racine, 1997). This affect is seen in Gopi's reaction to my questions about the SC community in the village. SCs, also known as *dalits* or untouchables, are considered impure. Even in Gopi's description of caste, he uses a metaphor of hands and describes the SCs as the left hand, the impure hand. Purity was the main influence of caste relations within G.K. Godam, affecting not traditional considerations such as occupation, but rather physical separation, and restricted interactions.

3.1.3 The Overlap and Divergence of Class and Caste

Class is another significant hierarchy within the village setting, often reflected by land holdings of households. There tends to be a significant overlap between caste and class. The overlap between caste and class can be seen when looking at the villagers participating in NREGA, where those of non-land owning castes were more likely to participate in Andhra Pradesh (Shankar and Gaiha, 2013). Still the hierarchies of caste and class deviate from one another. Béteille discusses in his ethnographic account of Sripuram, that significant evolution has occurred in these hierarchies, resulting in a "cleavage" of the caste and class relation (Béteille, 2012). Although he observes significant overlap between the two social hierarchies, upward mobility of the lower caste has become more normal.

The overlap and divergence of caste and class is apparent in G.K. Godam. Despite Gopi's clear distaste for my interest in the SCs of the village, I make plans to cross the tall wooden fence

at the edge of the village that separates the SC houses. I take Sunil with me, a local *dalit* and mutual friend of Gopi and myself. Suresh comes out of his two room home and greets Sunil, a local activist, and I with a smile. “We are family,” he says patting Suresh on the back. Later I ask him what relation Suresh has to him. He tells me he has no idea, but they are *dalits* so they are family.

During this conversation with Suresh I find out that Suresh is a land owning member of the village, although it is only 1 acre. He tells me that he bought the land with his own money. Gopi too only owns 1 acre of land, despite being a member of a higher caste. Behind Suresh I see his sister sitting in one of the rooms and sewing. I can’t help but reflect one the similarities between Gopi and Suresh, both small landowners, both use tailoring as a supplementary source of income, both living in similarly sized homes with two rooms, and both participating in NREGA work. Still, Gopi refuses to cross the fence as I had that day. Despite being on different level on the caste hierarchy, Gopi and Suresh appeared to be in a similar position within the village class hierarchy.

Across from the village temple, located in the village center, is the house of Babu Rao. Babu Rao’s house is located on a larger compound area with a private well and a barn for the family’s cows and goats. When there are large issues within the village, villagers turn to Babu Rao for advice and help. I am quickly told by Gopi that Babu Rao is the *peddamanshi* of the village, meaning his is a respected authority figure. Babu Rao is also of the BC caste group. In this village there are three castes that are BC. Babu Rao is of the dominant caste within the village, the Golla caste. The other BC castes are the Yellapi caste, and the Botalu caste.

I stand outside Babu Rao’s home waiting to be invited inside. His wife sees me and calls me inside, having already heard about me. The neighboring women peaks her head over this wall

separating the two houses. She asks who I am and Babu Rao's wife tells her I'm the "foreign girl". The neighboring family is OC. The OC caste of the village is Kapu, one of the three influential caste groups in the state. I quickly find out from the neighbor that the two families are very close. "They are Gollalu and we are Kapulu, but my husband's father and Babu Rao garu's father were good friends and caste didn't matter so the two families are still good friends," she told me when I visited her home the next day. There appears to be a level friendliness between the BCs and OCs of the village that is not present in their relationship with the SCs of the village.

3.2 Politics

Babu Rao arrives from his field and casually greets me. I find myself standing with he enters his compound as a sign of respect, and sit when he motions for me to take a seat. We begin discussing an issue I observed about land distribution in the village and improper land ownership documents. During this conversation I discover that he is a local TDP party leader, with former involvement with the CPI(M). CPI(M) is the Marxist communist party in AP. Gopi is another TDP party leader in the area. Babu Rao was also the previous elected Vice President of the panchayat. There are two villages in this panchayat, the upper village and the lower village. The upper village, where the prior president and the current president and vice president live, is Madhavnagar. The lower village is G.K. Godam. The prior president was also of the TDP party and is a current TDP party leader in the area. The OC and BC members of the village are supporters of the TDP. The SC families are supporters of the YSR party. Interestingly, the current president of the panchayat is of the YSR party. Many of the local officials, such as the Village Revenue Officer, are supporters of the TDP. Additionally, the current leading party of AP is the TDP.

3.2.1 History of Caste and Politics in AP

Politics in India is entwined with everyday life. In fact, caste is regarded as one of the building blocks of politics and political organization in India (Kothari 1988; Weiner 1967; Krishna, 2003). Andhra Pradesh is no exception to this phenomenon. From its creation in 1953 till 1983, Andhra Pradesh was largely dominated by the Indian National Congress (INC) party. It was in 1983 that film star and new politician at the time, N. T. Rama Rao (NTR) established the Telugu Desam Party (TDP). With growing unrest with the INC party and dissent for Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the TDP rose to power winning with NTR voted into power as the first non-congress chief minister (CM) of Andhra Pradesh. NTR and the TDP remained in power until 1989, with the exception of a brief change in power last 31 days in 1984. It was in 1989 that INC returned to power with the election of Marri Chenna Reddy as CM. This time Congress remained in power until 1994, when NTR was elected into his second term. In 2004 the INC returned to political power once more, under the leadership of Sri Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy (YSR) by forming a coalition with the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS). The TRS party was formed in 2001 with the single point agenda of creating a separate state of Telangana from Andhra Pradesh. The regional name for the Congress is now known as the YSR party. (Chalapathi and Subramanyam, 2006). Throughout elections party alliances have changed. In fact, the 2004 election of the YSR party was possible because of the alliance they formed with the TRS party. However, in the 2009 election there was a new alliance of TDP and TRS parties referred to as the TDP Grand Alliance that allowed the TDP.

Caste and politics are also largely connected. Historically speaking, the Congress party of Andhra Pradesh is led by Reddys. In opposition to the YSR party, the TDP party is historically led by members of the Kamma caste. These two upper caste dominate the state of Andhra and

the two leading political parties. A third dominant caste in the state are the Kapus. Similar to much of the voting population in Andhra, the Kapus were had increased dissent for the Congress party and aligned with the TDP party. Kapus also joined the Kamma in the TDP party as a way of breaking the reign of Reddy CMs. Although traditionally the smaller population OCs or forward castes dominated the political sphere, the emergence of the TDP as a political counterpoint to the Reddy-dominated Congress Party drew BCs to the TDP. BCs were able to use this relation to enter the political sphere and use their involvement to challenge traditional land-owning Reddys in rural area. BCs also found themselves able to use political power and influence to their benefit. After election of NTR, Kapus felt marginalized by Kammas. NTR was known to openly give fellow Kammas higher powers in office. Later the Kapus switched support to the YSR party.

Politics in India, and the subsequent caste alliance associated reveal much background necessary to understanding the complexity of Indian life at the village level. An ethnographic study by Carolyn Elliott of the 2009 assembly elections of Andhra Pradesh reveal the alliances of parties and caste groups. During this time Other Category castes (OC) such as the dominated Kammas aligned with the TDP party. Significant portions of the BC population also aligned. The YSR party was still supported by the Reddy population, but also gathered significant support from members of Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). It was also during these elections that the TDP received support from the Telugu Rashtra Samithi (TRS) party in an effort to capture more BC votes, after understanding that the Kamma base was not large enough for victory. It was also during these elections that prominent Telugu film star Konidala Chiranjeevi and the Praja Rajyam Party (PRP) he founded in 2008 became significantly more active. The film star, of the Kapu caste, tried to capture Kapu votes. Kapus are considered BC in parts of the

state. Chiranjeevi attempted to use this connection to appeal to BC groups. The TDP Grand Alliance was also joined by the two communist parties of CPI and CPI(M), due to their opposition of the national Congress government's 2008 nuclear deal with the U.S. (Elliott, 2012).

Tensions between caste and political parties run high, especially between those castes that align with the TDP or YSR (Gundimeda, 2009). This tension between the two parties can be seen at the village level as well. During another visit with Babu Roa regarding the same land issue, Manga a local BC woman enters Babu Rao's compound. Manga is a single mother who gets her income from various *coolie* jobs. She calls Babu Rao, *anna* meaning brother and a sign of familiarity and respect. She inquiries about a new job at the local government school cleaning the bathroom. Babu Rao is unsure what this position is about, but Manga explains that she's already talked to the teacher who didn't know what to do. Then she even talked to Gopi. Gopi had assured her he would try to find out more and talk to the president, but still she hasn't got any information of what to do. She even brings up that this position has been filled in Madhavnagar. Babu Rao is surprised that she brought this issue to Gopi and that Gopi did not tell him. He asks another man walking by his house to bring Gopi. Soon Gopi arrives and Babu Rao questions why he did not bring this issue to his attention. Gopi said that he was inquiring about the issue himself and had not heard back about what to do so he did not bring it up with him. Babu Roa emphasizes that they are both part of the same group and party, and he is sad Gopi didn't bring this up with him. Babu Rao turns to Manga and promises to look into this position.

It later comes out in conversation with Babu Rao and other TDP members of the village that this position is a "TDP position" that may disappear when the state party changes it's best to use it to help supporters of the TDP. He says that it is up to the village to nominate people for

this position. He then comments on how Manga is a good woman, but has a bad reputation in the village. This reputation began when she fed drunk YSR party members in front of her home one night for money.

3.3 Patronage and Colonial Legacy

Babu Rao in many way demonstrates characteristics of a patron or headmen classically described in village ethnographies, the leader of a village (Witsoe, 2013; Srinivasa 1976; Mathur, 2012). However, to understand the significance of the headman in the social dynamics of a village, the zamindari system must also be understood. The zamindari system was a system of control within villages, in which local landlords had significant power over the peasants who farmed on their land. The system of land owning and tenant farms largely resulted in "insecure tenancies, concentrated ownership, great inequality of land holdings, prevalence of tiny uneconomic holdings, and fragmentation of holdings" which largely characterized the agrarian structure (Veeraraghavan, 2015; 18). Indirect rule was a popular form of governance by the British, in which areas were ruled by Indians rather than directly by the British Crown, often with reliance on local elites and landowners. Regions of India under indirect rule were still under British control, however, they also enjoyed considerable autonomy in matters of how they were administered internally, with the exception of regulation on warfare and armed forces, as well as enforced annual tribute obligations to the British governments in the form of taxes (Banerjee and Iyer, 2005). One method implemented for collection was through local land lords as collection intermediates utilizing the pre-existing zamindari system. Once the tribute was paid to the British Crown, the land lord was free to keep any extra he was able to collect (Iyer, 2010). Zamindaris continued to have significant economic power as well as political power through the support they

received from the British. Many of these zamindaris were of the upper caste, such as Kammas of Andhra Pradesh whose traditional caste based role is cultivator.

The British further legitimized the power of large land lord with significant changes to agricultural policy in the 18th century. Policy such as the Permanent Settlement Act gave the rights to own land to land lords, rather than to the cultivators of the land, creating a class of absentee landlords, increasing dependence of the cultivators to the land lord due to financial dependence (Bhalla, 2007; Veeraraghavan, 2015). This power that land lords had lent to their role as patrons to reliant villager clients, the most dependent of whom were of lower castes and classes.

This relationship of patronage developed further with the creation of the village headmen as an elected position within the Indian government. Patronage relationships allowed the headmen to provide for his clients in exchange for votes and political loyalty. Election of powerful patrons as headmen was made possible by their influence on villagers within their community, as well as their connectivity to the larger political sphere. Influential patrons, such as the headmen, have the influence of controlling voter populations (Srinivas, 1976; Witsoe, 2013). The previously mentioned caste-based mobilization, both vertically and horizontally, by patrons and caste leaders, have been crucial influences on political outcome throughout India. The patrons such as headmen have influence on members of their caste, horizontally, as well as those outside their caste reliant on them as clients, vertically. This influence is used during election processes (Rudolph and Rudolph 1984). In addition to controlling the voter population for their political benefit, patrons are able to control the population votes for higher level government officials. Votes can be used as a currency with higher level politicians, again used for the benefit of the patron. The role of zamindaris and headmen, demonstrate how economic, political, and

caste based advantages are intertwined and allow systems of patronage at the village level. In the spirit of clientalism, the villagers reliant on their patron receive something in turn for their loyalty. I later find out that Manga did not get the job. In fact, the job goes to Gopi's wife, and Gopi is a supporter of the TDP and Babu Rao and client of local patron Babu Rao.

Such village level dynamics are crucial to consider in any development efforts, especially since development has been on India's agenda since its conception as an independent nation. Nehru's envisioned an India of development, however his vision and the absence of results at the village level prove again the influence of local land lords/headmen and the influence they continue to have in contemporary India. Relationships of patronage and power born from the colonial legacy of indirect rule and the zamindari system result in the suffering of redistributive policy in India. Initially, the leading party of the nation, the Congress party and their development agenda dominated at both the state and the national levels, but the influence of the headmen and their self-interest resulted in diminished effects of programs at the village level. Influence of local voting allowed the headmen to pressurize state level government officials; in affect little was done by these actors to enforce village level projects. In fact, this is one of the largest criticisms of the Nehruvian developmental state, which critics characterize as culturally inappropriate and therefore, weak. They argue that the elite bureaucrats and planners treated society as a single population to be targeted for policy implementation, however lower-level state personnel took part in a different culture (Elliott, 2012). As Kaviraj notably commented on the cultural difference between India's liberal state, and conservative hierarchy and power dynamics bound to rural life. The introduction of liberal innovative policy contradicting the village context introduced the need for such policy to be vernacularized to the rural setting, India's "feet of vernacular clay" as Kaviraj phrases this difference.

3.4 Summary

Contradictions between state and society, cause the need of intermediates between the boundary between the two, a culture gap bridged by patrons such as headmen, and affiliated brokers (Gupta, 1995; Witsoe, 2012). India's shift to rights-based development and policy was an attempt to bypass the reliance on local elites and create a link of demand and fulfillment between the poor and the larger state government (Veeraraghavan, 2015). Despite the new emphasis on demand by the poor, the power of these intermediaries such as headmen persists. The NREGA program is no exception to such obstacles to effectiveness.

Such village systems of patronage, social hierarchies, and accompanying power dynamics are the cause of what is termed "corruption", the same "corruption" that higher level government policy developers saw as the culprit of the failure of previous programs. Therefore, to fully understand rights-based policy such as NREGA it is crucial to understand interactions within the village context, and such contributing factors such as politics and caste. These few interactions described in this chapter demonstrate the relative role of caste and politics in the village context of G.K. Godam, and show how caste and politics are intertwined in everyday life. They will continue to play an important role in any discussion of NREGA and program implementation.

Chapter 4: The Realities of NREGA

The social hierarchies and systems of patronage and brokerage characterize village life in India. Historically, such systems have been reinforced by colonialism, legacies of indirect rule, and the overall prevalence and influence of the caste system. The effect of such factors culminate in the power dynamic structured postcolonial village seen today. Such a village environment characterizes life in G.K. Godam, just as it does in many villages across India as shown by the similarities of such phenomenon in the many village studies and ethnographies conducted (Witsoe 2013, Veeraraghavan 2015, Béteille, 2012, Piliavsky, 2014). Thus, it is not surprising that such embedded systems affect how villagers experience NREGA.

Attempts have been made by NREGA in AP to bypass lower level elected officials and the failures of the gram sabha. Workers submit their demand forms to centrally appointed FA's rather than to gram panchayats or the *sarpanch*. The system of social audits is intended to reduce corruption and the exploitation of workers. In trying to bypass elected officials, the policy tries to bypass the role of politics in NREGA implementation. Still, the significance of patronage systems and politics persists. In fact, workers encounter many barriers to NREGA, which are both caused and exasperated by systems of patronage and village power dynamics. Such barriers inhibit workers from pursuing solutions on their own, further driving them to pursue help from local patrons and brokers. This chapter will explore specifically the realities of NREGA, demonstrating in what ways it differs from, as well as follows official NREGA guidelines of AP as discussed in Chapter 2.

4.1 Administrative and Technological Barriers

In addition to political and historical loyalties of workers to local patrons, administrative NREGA barriers exist as obstacles to workers trying to solve problems alone. Such obstacles

drive them to further seek the help of intermediaries such as patrons and brokers. Administrative barriers include general administrative apathy, biometric technology barriers, and barriers of awareness regarding NREGA operation and rights.

4.1.1 Administrative Apathy and Hiding Behind the Computer

"Hiding behind the computer" is a phenomenon commented on in fieldwork conducted by PhD candidate Rajesh Veeraraghavan (Veeraraghavan, 2015: 36). This occurs when workers encounter technical excuses by NREGA administration. The excuse commonly being that the computers are slow or the system is too busy. In his experiences workers would complain that FAs declare that they were not given work because the computer had not assigned the workers work. He continues to explain that in fact many of these cases were less rooted in technical difficulties, but in ongoing conflicts between the FA and workers (Veeraraghavan, 2015).

In my initial visits to G.K. Godam I attended village meetings with Sunil, a local activist. During one meeting a man described to us his interaction with this phenomenon of administration hiding behind the computer. He had taken the day off work and went to the mandal office to request a new job card. Instead of receiving the help he required, he was met with the excuse that the system was down and that he'd get the job card the following day. Office employees assured him that they would give it to his FA. He tells us he had little faith he would get it from the FA. In fact, he did not receive the job card for a month. Giving up on trying to get the card himself, the worker approached Sunil and soon after the problem was resolved. Similarly, he could have approached local patrons and brokers, just as many other villagers in a similar situation would have.

I spent a significant amount of time traveling with Sunil back and forth to the local mandal offices. These mandal offices house the offices of many of the lower level administrators

of NREGA, such as the MDO, APO, and COs. In many ways, it functions as the headquarters of all NREGA employees. Even all FAs, stationed in panchayats, report to the mandal center for weekly meetings. When I enter the mandal area I am quickly recognized as the American researcher. I'm greeted with a respect and geniality that many of the workers coming into the office fail to receive. The disparity between our reception is obvious. On one occasion I walked into the CO office to observe specifically what the COs do, and how they interact with workers that come into the office. I walk into the office and am immediately greeted by the CO, a women dressed neatly in a clean sari with long braided hair decorated with fresh flowers. She smiles as she stands up to say, "namaste".

She then adjusts the fan in the office to face me and asks if I would like some tea. After I kindly refused she calls one of the office assistants in and asks him to bring her a tea. She then proceeds to talk to an FA helping her with the computers that afternoon. When the tea arrives she takes her time to finish the glass. During this time, I've noticed a man waiting outside the office. Only after she has finished her chatting and her tea did she call the man inside the office. I make the connection that this man has come to the office to handle a NREGA problem and he himself is an NREGA worker.

He entered the office and stands in the corner while the CO continues to remain seated behind her desk. His hands are folded over his chest, and he slouches as he maintains eye contact with the floor, a position lacking all confidence. Raising his head slightly he asks the CO about his issue of correcting the information entered in the NREGA system. This man has been unable to receive payments through NREGA due to an incorrectly enter Aadhar card number, an error that is all too common in the area. The CO doesn't appear to be giving him her full attention. Instead, she continues to look at her computer screen and abrasively tells him she'll take care of

it. The man asks when it will be done. She dismisses him from the office harshly saying, “come tomorrow!”

On another occasion of workers approaching lower NREGA administration, husbands and their wives had been going for 3 weeks looking to add their wives to their job cards. Despite repeated efforts, 3 weeks had passed and the wives still had not been added to the household job cards. It’s clear to see how and why reliance on intermediaries persists. Typically, after an intermediary is approached the issue is resolved within a couple days. The frustration with the lower level administration is clear when talking to villagers. One husband exclaimed, “They don’t pay attention to us! Always too busy doing nothing! So lazy. You have to know someone to get anything done”.

The difference between the treatment I received, the greeting, chair, fan, an offer of tea, compared to the irritation, apathy, and general disregard for the NREGA worker waiting for assistance is representative of the general treatment workers receive when they come to the NREGA office to handle problems themselves. This general disregard for workers is apparent in the amount of time it takes workers to accomplish the work that intermediaries, such as brokers and patrons, can accomplish in a significantly shorter period of time.

4.1.2 Deviation from the Operation Manual Guidelines

Deviation from manual guidelines and the ineffective implementation of safeguards, may not themselves be corrupt behavior, but create an NREGA program more prone to exploitative corrupt behavior. One such ignorance of safeguards that I witnessed on multiple occasions was the mismanagement of muster rolls, a safeguard that has massive potential of both transparency and accountability.

During one of my first visits to a field site there was no muster roll. I approached the FA and asked him why he was recording all the names in a notebook instead and he responded, “My wife did not give me the muster roll”. After seeing the look of confusion on my face he said, “My wife is the FA, but she is ill so I have come in to do her job”. So the we had assumed was the “FA” was not in fact the FA, but rather her husband who lacked all the training she had receive for the position. I talk to the workers at this site during their break. Noka Raju, one of the workers says, “the FA hasn’t visited the site in a couple weeks. He says she is ill”. Rama Lakshmi, another activist with me, is upset at the lack of NREGA compliance and demands to speak to the FA. When she hears only the FA’s husband is here, she threatens to report them if they continue to take attendance on regular paper.

On another occasion, I was traveling with the APO on his regular field visits. We rode his motorcycle across the fields. He explains that this area is not really meant for driving, but he will not make me walk the distance. After struggling to drive through the ditches and mud we finally reach the site. The workers are digging a *cheru*, watershed. I see that there are no muster rolls at this site either and am surprised to see the APO taking no action on the issue. He explained that the physical muster rolls were not sent in so all the mates are keeping track of attendance in their own books. The FA is directly documenting the work into the online system on his smart phone, which is given to all FAs in AP by the government. Because of low connectivity, many wait until they have connection to do this. Since there were no physical muster rolls, the FA was directly entering them onto the system.

Although the act specifies that the muster roll should be maintained by the FA and mates, there are many situations where this is not followed. Workers are still getting work and payment, however the danger of the program functioning in this way is that the safeguard that is the

physical muster roll is not present. The mismanagement of muster rolls opens NREGA to an increased possibility of corruption.

4.1.3 Biometric Identification: A Technological Barrier

Besides the interaction workers have with technology through administration, the direct interactions workers themselves have with biometric identifiers provides another barrier for NREGA work, a technological barrier. Unlike many other states, AP has implemented the use of biometric finger print recognition to prevent fraudulent behavior and confirm that workers are receiving the payments there are entitled. The flaw in such a system is that the heavy manual labor workers engage in often result in unrecognizable finger prints. In many conversations I have had with workers they express the great difficulty they have in receiving the alternative iris scan. Without some successful biometric identification, they will be unable to receive their payments. One man in G.K. Godam stopped participating in NREGA work entirely, because he was receiving no money. The lack of access to iris scanner is yet another difficulty with technology workers face and one to which there is a slow response from administration. Again, reliance on local patrons to resolve such and issue is not surprising.

4.1.4 NREGA Awareness

Another common barrier is the barrier of general awareness of NREGA entitlements. This barrier is explored by Drèze and Khera, however, I witness little of this barrier during my fieldwork (Drèze and Khera, 2011). High levels of NREGA awareness by worker can be attributed largely to action taken by activists in AP. Activists, including Sunil, were able to provide training sessions to youths who were expected to participate in NREGA. The intention of which was that they would spread the information to other members of their community. In

addition, Sunil participated in a bicycle campaign in which he and other local youths distributed informational pamphlets regarding NREGA and workers' entitlements according to the act.

Continual awareness regarding the program has also been achieved through a phone relay system, pioneered by technological activist Vivek Srinivasan. With such a system, prominent AP activist leader Ajay Kumar can relay new NREGA developments to all workers subscribed to the system. Such a system is simplistic in nature and free for workers to use, and insures updated levels of awareness amongst NREGA participants.

AP has high levels of awareness, however the lack of awareness of rights and entitlements in areas lacking the presence of such activists can present another barrier to workers and their navigation of NREGA. Further, such a barrier can make workers more prone to exploitation within systems of patronage.

Administration related barriers workers encounter within the NREGA structure and official functioning make it frustrating and nearly impossible for workers to navigate. This is especially true considering the lost opportunity cost workers incur when they have to take the day off from engaging in work to go to the NREGA offices. This is in addition to the cost they incur to travel to the mandal center to get to the NREGA offices. Other barriers workers can incur are social and political barriers, outside the official NREGA administration and structural barrier discussed.

4.2 Social and Political Barriers

Administrative and technological barriers interfere with the ability of NREGA to navigate NREGA and handle problems they may be encountering. In addition to being driven toward systems of patronage for solving such problems, social and political barriers within

communities and NREGA result in additional difficulties incurred by workers that further drive them to patrons and brokers.

4.2.1 Who gets work?

Such social and political barriers can cause some workers to be given work preference over others, infringing on the basic stipulation of the NREGA legislation entitling all to work by their demand. Officials, mates, and workers within groups are all guilty of having preference for workers.

The APO of the mandal happened to be a good friend of Sunil's. Interesting in seeing more of what he did, I took a day to travel with the APO on his duties of checking on NREGA work sites. After visiting a few worksites, we rode his motorcycle through Madhavnager. He told me he wanted to investigate a potential new worksite. This was interesting because the EC and TA should be the official people to investigate a new site, and this was not at all in the official description of the APO's position. We reach a school building near the entrance of the village and are met by a large older man walking with the assistance of two younger men. He was also followed by a two other middle aged me. This man was dressed in all white, donning a white *lungi* (a wrap with a white fabric) and short sleeved button up shirt. I find out later that he was the old *sarpanch* of the area and current TDP member.

He approaches the APO and guides us into the school grounds. They both look towards the mess in front of use, a school ground covered in rough rocks and plants. The APO understands immediately what is wanted of him. The *sarpanch* would like to use NREGA work to clean up the government school grounds. The APO is really keen on having this work done. He turns to the *sarpanch* and says, "Let's put a few good people here to do this work and get it

done." The *sarpanch* agrees and says, "Yes. Some strong men who are not too old. Can this work be done with NREGA?"

"Look I'm doing this because I like you. I would even do this with my own money. We'll get this done somehow because it's a school, but it might not get approved for NREGA," the APO replies. In fact, the work was not funded through NREGA and the APO paid for the work himself. Despite the good intentions of the APO, the intentions of only providing this work to young strong male NREGA workers entails that those who do not fit the description do not receive work. Although the act doesn't discriminate by skill, the APO and *sarpanch* demonstrated in this interaction the barrier to receiving work that the elderly, weak, and women may have by failing to fit the description of young strong males.

Party preferences can also have an effect on who receives work through NREGA. NREGA administrators are frequently transferred as a method of minimized local connections that can lead to collusion between administrators and local members for the purpose of engaging in corrupt behavior. In another effort to reduce local influence on administrators and NREGA officials, the positions are appointed centrally rather than through local elections. The intentions of this move to appoint all the lower-level bureaucrats rather than relying on local elections was an attempt by the AP government to separate local politics from the operation of the program. Still, the political positons of all these lower-level bureaucrats was known by everyone in the area. For example, the political affiliation of the FA in the Madhavnagar panchayat, the panchayat the G.K. Godam was a part of, was the TDP. The tensions and frequent disagreements between her and the *sarpanch* were also locally known to be connected to the *sarpanch*'s support for the TDP opposing YSR party.

Party affiliations exist, despite structural program features to prevent this, and affect interactions between lower-level bureaucrats and workers. During one conversation with workers I discovered that they had previous problems with not receiving work due their support of the YSR party. The local FA was a supporter of the TDP. Raju was sure of the connection between political party and receiving work because all the BC groups, in which a majority supported TDP, were given work. The SC groups in which a majority supported the YSR had immense difficulty receiving work. When they did receive work they would then "have to struggle to get the payments," according to Raju. Raju and his mother, an elderly NREGA workers smile as Raju says, "thankfully, [the FA] was suspended for taking bribes from those same TDP workers". Sunil, the activist, tells me that he helped them bring this issue up during the last social audit. The FA was taking bribes from the TDP workers so they could claim to be doing work when they were not.

Issues of party preferences invade groups and workers as well, especially when group members of different parties are mixed into one group. Generally, this is avoided because groups are separated according to caste. Sunil justifies this saying that there are "fewer problems that way". The connection between caste and politics is clear, in which SC members largely support the YSR party, and BC members largely support the TDP. In G.K. Godam there are a total of 5 SC households. With 7 eligible SCs participating in NREGA work it is not feasible to have a separate SC group from the BC group. Therefore, G.K. Godam provides an interesting case in which one group has mixed SC and BC members.

Due to the interrelation between caste and politics, the inter-caste group also happens to be interparty. During my stay in G.K. Godam there was no lack of politics in discussion. On a couple occasions NREGA workers would complain that they felt some of the party members

were getting paid more because they were TDP, the same party that the FA supported. Such payment disparity by party preference unfortunately does not surprise me. In fact, the FA had also been accusing of party preference in another occasion. In this situation TDP leaders in the village happened to be mates working with the FA to fraudulently claim their groups had worked, when in fact they had not. The payment that the groups had received were distributed to each worker in those groups. The TA supposed to measure how much work was done, and the FA supposed to supervise NREGA work were also paid. The mates are speculated to have benefitted by keeping a large portion of the payment amount themselves. Again, the bases of this collusion was political affiliations.

In another village the FA was found to give similar preference and benefit to groups who supported YSR, the party he happened to support. In this situation mates were creating groups in which their family members were included. However, when it came time to working they would claim their family members worked when in fact they were not even at the worksite. The FA, whose duty it is to insure this fraud does not happen, was said to have looked the other way because the mate was YSR. The mate would then claim the payment of his family members. Due to the piece wise payment methods of AP, work done by each group is measured daily and the members of the group are all paid the same amount reflecting the work done by the group. When members of the group don't participate, the overall amount of work done is expected to be less. This means that the act of claiming members working when they did not actually take money away from those actually doing the work. Other members in the group had a problem with such actions because they are being paid less as a result. The piece-wise and group system, intended to incentivize groups to work harder and motivate each other, actually provides a tool with which those not working can abuse.

Other intergroup issues with the piece-wise system arise between younger and older workers. During one conversation I have with Gopi he said, “It’s difficult because they are weaker and slower, and because of them everyone gets paid less”. Sunil explained that sometimes he is able to talk groups into taking an elderly person, but giving them the role of watching children or bringing water instead of doing the assigned work. The remaining able workers work and the payment is distributed among the entire group based on the piece-wise payment system. Overall the group will be able to complete less work, however, they have decided to receive less payment to help the older members of their community. However, when such agreement within a group is unable to occur, the older members struggle to be included in groups and struggle to complete assigned manual labor through NREGA.

4.3 Perception of Workers as Lazy

NREGA work is characterized by intensive unskilled labor, however many non-workers involved with NREGA perceive NREGA workers as lazy. This perception may dictate many of the relations between those participating in NREGA work and those not participating in NREGA work such as administration and landowners who may be involved in providing NREGA work. The land lords influence may in fact go beyond NREGA as they may behave as local patron, the same patron that workers interact with for NREGA related issues as well as issues outside NREGA.

Unlike other states, AP offers subsidized NREGA labor to small land for their land. Despite the high levels of awareness in the area, if workers are asked what NREGA is they will say they do not know. Instead, they refer to the work colloquially as *cheru pani*, which translates to watershed work. This name is reflective of the type of work most available through NREGA, watershed projects which largely occur on private land.

Still there are hesitations by farmers to use NREGA labor. There is the perception that NREGA workers are lazy. One morning during my stay in G. K. Godam I was walking into the village to join the regular morning women's gossiping group by the village well. I was living right outside the entrance to the village. As I passed the entrance I ran in to Manikum, Babu Rao's brother. Manikum was on his way into his family's field. The brothers collectively cultivated 8 acres of land and today Manikum was going in to make sure his crops were getting the appropriate amount of water. I ask to join him and he laughs, "Why would you want to do that?". I explain that I am just interested in seeing his fields. Again he chuckles and begins walking. I take this as my signal to follow him. His fields are located behind the house I am staying in. As we walk into the field he laughs again watching me struggle to walk on the narrow paths separating crops. "Once I took the madams in to the field just like this. She was so interested in seeing the land. She even took pictures!" The madam he was referring to was the teacher who's room I was staying in in the village. She was from Vizag, the largest city in the Vishakhapatnam district. It's amusing to him how interested all the "city women" are interested in agriculture.

After a brief trek we finally make it to the center of his land. He shows me the irrigation trenches between the plots of land, and drops a rock in the trench, deviating the flow of water from the neighboring plot back to his. He explains, "We have an arrangement. We share the water and alternate every other day." I ask him if he dug the trenches himself and he says, "Of course! I do all the work on my land". "All the work?" I ask for clarification. "We get *coolies* to do some of the planting and harvesting, but I am here as well helping". He then returns to talking about the irrigation. "At first I tried to have these trenches dug by that government program." "With *cheru pani*?" I ask to confirm. "Yes that. But see this section?" He points to a section of

the irrigation in which tall grass has regrown. “This is the work they did. Water cannot flow that well. Then I finished the rest” he says showing me the anther section in which there was very little grass growing. “That’s why I don’t use them to do this work. They do it badly.”

This is a common perception of NREGA work conducted on private land and leads to significant hesitation. Even Veeraraghavan recognizes this perception of workers held by land holder. I was curious as to how Manikum’s family was able to get NREGA work on their private land as their holding exceed 5 acres. I find out that the brothers have separate ownership documents, each for 2 acres of land, therefore they all qualify for NREGA work. Babu Rao’s family owned the most land in the village.

NREGA offers this labor as a method of offsetting the burdens on small landlords of increased employment wages that accompany the minimum wage promised to workers through NREGA work. According to Veeraraghavan, large land lords did not utilize NREGA work because they did not qualify. The increase in wages resulting from NREGA minimum was not particularly disastrous to them because of their overall greater wealth. Still, it is expected that there is some opposition from local land lords, as they too are affected by the expectation by workers for higher wages. Such large landholders have been documented by Veeraraghavan as having opposition to NREGA, claiming it actually made worker who participated lazier.

This perception of laziness is also helped by the NREGA lower administration. It most likely contributes to their limited and abrasive interactions with workers, as demonstrated by the earlier example of the CO. The APO hold weekly meetings with all the FAs of the mandal. During this meeting he updates them on what is happening within their office and the larger NREGA world of the state or country. The APO also uses this meeting to gather information and input from the FAs on what is happening in their panchayats. During one such meeting one of

the FAs brought up that the mates of his village would like to have more than 100 days of work. The other FAs immediately smirk and chuckle. One of them comments, “they probably want higher wages too!” Now they all laugh at the joke. A common request during my village visits was also to have more work and possible higher wages. Another FA jumps in and take the joke even further adding, “net they’ll want no work and pay!” Everyone seems to be enjoying this joke with full laughter until the APO interrupts to refocus the meeting. Still the humor they found in the request by workers exemplifies the perception they have of NREGA workers, as lazy villagers.

This lazy perception of workers by landowners and NREGA administration affects relationships they have with workers. It can be expected that this perception of workers causes much of the way administration behaves with workers, such as the CO discussed earlier. Further, the disinterest of distaste large landlords have for NREGA work and the associated wage increase may cause general dislike toward NREGA worker, displayed instead as distaste for laziness. Both contribute to the struggle NREGA workers have in navigating the program.

4.4 NREGA and Patronage

Local land lords can also be the patrons which NREGA workers approach for resolutions to problems. Although Babu Rao claims he has no relation to NREGA work, his family did pursue NREGA work and chose to not continue because of the poor quality of work they felt resulted. Still, it would not be surprising that Babu Rao has some relation with NREGA problem solving on behalf of workers. In fact, on one occasion I had discovered a land documentation issue within the village. The issue was stopping numerous small landowners from receiving low interest loans for agricultural purposes. When I approached Gopi with this issue, he immediately

said that we needed to discuss this with Babu Rao. Gopi feared handling the big issues himself. In fact, he clearly stated that all big issues have to be dealt with through Babu Rao.

In Chapter 3 I introduced Manga's issue of employment and Gopi's involvement. When Gopi tried to deal with the Manga's issue of employment without consulting Babu Rao, Babu Rao had clear anger and disappointment. When he confronted Gopi, Gopi's fear was apparent as he stumbled over his words trying to excuse his actions. The influence of a local patron like Babu Rao goes further into his influence on the community. On many occasions when he was in need of something it was easy for him to order anyone passing by and they would handle it immediately. During one of our meetings he stopped someone walking by to tell them to pick up his granddaughter from school. Within 10 minutes she was home. Still he questioned what took so long and the man responded promptly with an explanation. Another day my pen ran out of ink during our meeting and a passerby on his way to work was called to go buy another one for me. I was holding a new pen within a couple minutes, and the worker continued on his way to the fields to work. The list of demands he was able to make and the quick response and lack of hesitation people had in complying made the influence he had within the village clear. Further, his influence as a patron is evident in Gopi's wife receiving the bathroom cleaning job, a clear indicator of clientism.

4.5 Summary

The struggles NREGA workers encounter are barriers to their navigation of NREGA. Even more importantly, such barriers drive them to rely more on the systems of patronage and associated brokerage. These struggles are themselves influenced by caste, class, and politics and define many aspects of everyday village life. The patrons are the intermediates between the workers and the state. The "state" in this case being local NREGA administration workers and

patrons interact with. When the situation is viewed from the perspective of the workers', patrons and brokers are essential to how they experience NREGA, and the larger state. The influential role that patrons can have within NREGA and the associated NREGA problems provides patrons further leverage with which to influence the action of their clients, the workers.

As Witsoe's article describes, often times brokers exist in this politically charged environments. These politically-connected brokers and patrons mediate many people's access to larger state institutions with what he terms "political mediations". In many ways, patrons such as Babu Rao embody this role of politically-connected intermediaries. He has considerable influence on how people interact with the state and access state institutions. Many workers approach intermediates such as patrons and brokers as a method of handling the struggles and barrier they encounter with NREGA. Such methods often contribute to further clientalistic relationships with patrons, or other further exploitation of workers through cash payments. However, in the village of G.K. Godam, as well as other villages in the Nathavaram mandal an alternative intermediate exists, an activist named Sunil. Sunil provides workers with a non-exploitative alternative to patron and broker intermediates, through which workers still access state institutions, but can additionally access rights and citizenship through NREGA.

Chapter 5: Sunil

With the involvement of clientism and brokerage in the exploitation of rural poor workers, and the subsequent loss of access to NREGA benefits by the workers, it is not surprising that activists such as Sunil, who provide an alternative route with no exploitative intentions, facilitate a better functioning and less corrupt version of the NREGA program. As we will see in this chapter, the day-to-day operation of NREGA is able to function with reduced corruption with the involvement of activists such as Sunil. These activists police the operation of the program for misuse, and ensure that NREGA fulfills its promise of providing an employment safety net for the rural poor. However, if you search NREGA policy for a description of this highly integral position it would be nowhere to be found. Rather, Sunil fulfills an unofficial intermediate role, mediating this rights-based policy as well as its subsequent effects.

5.1 Auditors not Activists

The AP government created social auditors to provide and alternative route by which villagers could vocalize problems, as well as increasing transparency and accountability within panchayats, intending to accomplish what the gram sabha and panchayat raj system were unable to. Still, as Rajesh Veeraraghavan comments, these auditors, originating from a history of activist auditors in MKSS movements, were not activists and failed to see themselves as such (Veeraraghavan, 2015). In official rhetoric, portrayed during training sessions Veeraraghavan witnessed, auditors were told to view themselves as activists. This differed from how the auditors viewed themselves. In one auditor meeting Veeraraghavan saw no auditors raise their hand when they were asked by a senior auditor whether they saw themselves as activists. Such is the drawback of the institutionalized social auditing process of Andhra Pradesh NREGA. Even

former MKSS activists and current director of social audits in AP recognizes this as a drawback of the institutionalized auditors. She tells Veeraraghavan:

> "When I compare MKSS and AP, [there are few similarities] except for the fact that we have state support, we get information really easily, and we have public hearing and some form of follow-up action. I think what is missing from our side is that real streak of activism. MKSS will never ever compromise on going and eating at a worker's house. We never do that. No matter how difficult it is individually, they go to each house and eat, whereas I have not been able to enforce it at all: no matter how much I pushed them, saying each person should eat in a laborer's house. That's what makes the personal connection. But that's not what happened. I don't think it is just a question of scale. It is also a mindset. You also feel *sarkari hai* [part of the government]. Since they feel sarkari they prefer to each in a hotel. That is something that bothers me."
>
> (Veeraraghavan, 2015)

The ability to relate to workers, behave as non-governmentalized forces, and exercise power during investigations against local officials are characteristics that unfortunately many auditors lack or hesitate to exercise, but that activists have plenty of. It would be incorrect for me to not comment on the successes of the social auditing. This process has significantly improved the experience of NREGA beneficiaries, and is thought to have reduced rates of corruption within NREGA. Still certain power comes with the involvement of activists, such as Sunil.

5.2 Who is Sunil?

I met Sunil soon after I arrived to India. Although I hadn't expected to spend as much time with him as I had, in many ways my first day in India set me up to meet such a grassroots level activist. I arrived at the airport in the Vishakhapatnam district to a typical suffocating humid summer afternoon. Ajay Kumar, leader of activist organization APVVU, arrived to pick me up accompanied by Uncle Rajesh, prominent industrialist of the area and my father's college friend. After scrambling to collect my oversized suitcases, I trudged my weighty cart out of the crowded airport to meet them. I learned later that industrialists and activists like Ajay Kumar don't typically get along. Any evidence of tension between them eased as they saw me, but I

expected that there was a high level of tension in the hour they had spent waiting. Ajay Kumar greets me with an unreserved smile, eager to both take me to his home and to get away from Rajesh. Rajesh looks ready to jump into his chauffeured car and retreat to his quiet air-conditioned three story house in the gated community of Garden City. I could not have been met by two more opposite individuals. The pairing is so unlikely and uncomfortable that I only considered few topics of conversations "safe" and unlikely to cause an argument between them. Thinking weather was safe to discuss I attempted to break tensions by commenting how it was very hot. Even this lead to comments by Ajay Kumar about pollution and global warming, a subtle jab and Rajesh's involvement with steel factories and the release of such pollution. Ajay Kumar follows his comments with chuckles, clearly aware of the effects of his statements.

Rajesh tells me that I must have breakfast at his home before "leaving civilization", referring to my accommodations in a village for the next month. After a quiet breakfast followed by a quick tour of his home, Rajesh takes Ajay and I on a tour of his neighborhood. "See we live just like in the U.S.," Rajesh tells me while commenting on the clean and newly paved roads. "This is development. See this worker?" he says pointing to an elderly man dressed in rags sweeping the sidewalk. "He gets paid well, and lives well." Ajay, clearly upset, tries to say nothing as Rajesh walks ahead of us in his newly ironed designer dress shirt. Rajesh tried many times to convince me to stay with him here in his large home rather than in a *dalit* home in Nathavaram. Ajay Kumar and I are prepared to leave to Ajay's home. "You should come back soon. You can understand how they live here from the air-conditioning," Rajesh said, trying once more to convince me to stay. Such was my first real introduction to the disparity between members of the urban middle class, such as Rajesh, and the workers of NREGA part of the rural poor that Ajay Kumar advocated for.

We arrive in Atcheyepeta, Ajay Kumar's village where I spent a couple hours with his family in his home. His house is a small two room home where Ajay Kumar, his family of 5, and three dogs live. It's hard to imagine that this man is able to support his family, provide a college education to all his children, and run an activist organization with numerous volunteer activists working for him.

Andhra Pradesh Vyavasaya Vruthidarula Union (APVVU) was created in the 1980's by PS Ajay Kumar, founder and activist. The organization describes itself as a federation of union of agricultural workers, marginal farmers, and other rural workers in the state of Andhra Pradesh. APVVU activity often involves struggles for land distribution, implementation of land reform laws, discrimination against untouchability and marginalized community members, and general protection of rights of the rural poor. This activity includes NREGA work and insuring that the rural poor have access to entitlements according to the act. The organization is spread over 14 districts in Andhra Pradesh, but coordinates their work with that over other activist organizations and non-governmental organizations.

After a brief visit and lunch, I leave for Nathavaram, the mandal center village I am set to live in for the next month. We have arranged for me to spend the first portion of my fieldwork living with Ajay Kumar's mother-in-law, Shivalamma, an elderly *dalit* woman who lives in the *dalit* colony of the village. According the Ajay Kumar, this is one of the largest *dalit* colonies in the state, and the largest *dalit* colony in the Vishakhapatnam district. Ajay Kumar is unable to travel with me to the village, but Shivalamma is also visiting Atcheyepeta, and Ajay sees this as the perfect time to send her back to her home. Ramlakshmi, or Ram as everyone calls her, is Ajay Kumar's eldest daughter. He sends her with me to help me adjust to my work site. We arrived to Nathavaram that evening and were met by Sunil the next morning.

Sunil is a local *dalit* activists born and raised in the SC colony of the Nathavaram Mandal. He is up and ready early every morning dressed in worn away button shirts, traveling on his tarnished bicycle. At a young age he was exposed to the activist work of Ajay Kumar. Sunil and I had many conversations about how he was inspired to do the work he does. Each and every time the conversation returned to him wanting to be like Ajay. Sunil described a land struggle that many BC and SC families had with a Brahmin family. He tells me that after years of being kept from the land that was rightfully theirs, Ajay Kumar came and started helping them get back their lands. Sunil says that he was very young and Ajay used to give him some work to do to get his families land back, and that was when he understood the impact that he could make in his people's lives. Sunil works in 10 villages in the Nathavaram Mandal area, however there are 5 villages in particular that he pays specific attention to. He is also involved in the mate training that APVVU provides to the workers.

Figure 1. This is a picture of Sunil taken during one of our many field visits.

During one of our many conversations, he began discussing the difficulties he faces as an activist. In a dialogue of passion, he continues to tell me the full story of his inspiration. “When I was very little Ajay garu wore a lungi and walked around the village [SC colony]. He used to sit by the Ambedkar statue and sing songs. People hated it! Then one day the police went after him for something and the women of the colony hid him where they all went to shower together. That’s when I wanted to become an activist. To struggle for the people. Now everywhere I go they treat me like family. They feed me and give me a place to sleep.”

From Sunil we see a demonstration effect. His role as an activist was passed down to him from Ajay Kumar, an effect of Ajay Kumar demonstrating to Sunil what individuals are capable of accomplishing despite the struggle they may face. The struggle he endures as a poor *dalit* man himself effects his drive to help those who are just as impoverished, if not more, than himself. Working on the behalf of workers, Sunil mediates their claim to rights, while refusing to take payment. This is all in an effort to differentiate himself from other intermediates such as brokers. He makes clear statements in which his refuses to be politically affiliated, distancing himself from being perceived as a political patron. This is how Sunil sees his role as an activist, an alternative form of NREGA navigation to the established routes of patronage and brokerage. His role, however unofficial as it may be, is seen very differently by the workers whom he feels he is advocating on behalf of, and supporting in their struggle to attain their legal rights.

5.3 Sunil and Workers

When workers encounter problems within the operation of NREGA there are historical paths of brokerage and patronage they can pursue, as discussed in the previous chapter. With the introduction of a Sunil like figure, workers now have an alternative path they can utilize to claim their NREGA entitlements. Sunil’s strength as an activist lies in his ability to work with and

interact with workers at the ground level. This makes him accessible to workers as needed, an access they may not have with local government officials and politicians. The relationship workers have with Sunil is one of respect. Interestingly, there is also a level of demand from the workers, in which they demand Sunil to help them, with the understanding that this is his job and he must do what they ask of him. The ease of access workers have to Sunil may be a cause of this candid relationship.

The adoration that Sunil recognizes and seems to crave is easy to notice when observing almost any interaction he has with NREGA workers. Ram, Sunil, and I make a trip to the Chammochintha village on morning, one of the villages of the Nathavaram Mandal. Sunil is quickly recognized due to his frequent visits. As he navigates the roads of the villages with ease, he attracts friendly greetings from the villagers by every building he passes. The greetings are generally tossed in with some inquiry about Sunil's life. Sunil's response is followed with a question about their lives. This interaction is repeated so frequently that I've come to understand it as an orchestrated conversation for the villagers to invite themselves to share their burdens with Sunil with an expectation for Sunil to help, revealing a reliance on Sunil by the villagers.

Soon after entering this village we arrange a meeting. Everyone who attends the meeting, even the mates, act less like his equals and friends and more reliant on him as a superior. In Chammochintha the direct action by workers and reliance on Sunil is clear. When asked what the villagers would do if there was no change in an issue they were facing, even after they brought the issue to the attention of officials, they responded that they would approach APVVU or Sunil and then if no change occurred there was nothing more they could do. Sunil doesn't jump to defend this comment. His facial expression tells me that he has heard this type of response before. With a tired expression, he tells me, "I try to fix as much as I can, but it's hard to expect

people to change without me there. They sometimes even don't change when I am there." He was referring to the reliance people have on intermediates such as patron, or on activists such as himself. Despite the alternative to the exploitative paths Sunil provides workers, allegiance between patrons and their worker clients persists.

The meeting concluded on an interesting note when I asked everyone what Sunil's role was in NREGA and NREGA related problems. They all joke that Sunil is the president of Nathavaram, but they wish he was the president of their village. Sunil's face beams with pride for their comments and he chuckles embarrassed as they speak. They comment on the transparency Sunil provides, such as sharing important information with them and teaching them about what they are entitled to in programs like NREGA.

Sunil fulfills the role of clarifying information to villagers. On one occasion Sunil and I visited Madhavnagar. At a meeting the workers tell me more about Sunil's role. They said that he makes these meetings happen, organizing everyone together. He also forms groups, asking and checking who has a group and job card. Then he helps those without job cards apply for job cards. Later at this meeting, a man comes up to Sunil and says that he is unable to get a passbook for his son. Sunil asks if his son has a job card. The man says yes. Sunil asks if his son has done any work yet. The man says no. Sunil explains that his son will get a passbook when he goes to collect his first amount. This can only happen after he works at least a week. The man says that the FA is demanding the passbook. Sunil explains that she has no need for it. He also says that the man needs to go to her and explain that he knows she doesn't need that, and that his son can only get a passbook after working and after a muster is generated by her. The man seems much more at ease now and says he will try this. In many ways Sunil works to clarify the information

and support workers make claims to their entitlements. This is one of the main roles he is able to fulfill, increasing the access to NREGA information by the workers.

During that same meeting in Madhavnagar, the Sunil sat down with mates to file a work demand for five groups. This demand was then to be taken to the FA. The FA would then fill out the remainder of the form and turn in the request. The mates submitting the request should also be given a receipt in return. The mates completed this process before and failed to receive the work they were demanding. This time they depend on Sunil to help them fill the form out and approach the FA in their demand for work. Sunil is confident that when they submit this application today they should receive work within a week. The mates plan on submitting the request forms tonight. The villagers sit down with Sunil and fill out the demand forms. Below is a photograph of them completing the forms together.

Figure 2. Image of Sunil and NREGA workers filling out a demand form together

He is also responsible for organizing trainings within villages, in an effort to equip workers with the knowledge and tools to understand and navigate NREGA. During these trainings people were told the rights they should be received through NREGA. They were also given a measuring tape in a measurement kit, so they could measure how much work was expected of them that day and measure again at the end of the day to make sure the TA was measuring properly. A calculator was given to help with payment calculations. Below is an image of the bag these were given in and the measuring tape and calculator.

Figure 3. Tools given to NREGA workers by APVVU to measure work done and payments earned.

Each village gets their own bag. If the village is a large one, they may get two bags. I ask Sunil if the government also gives such trainings and he says they do but their trainings are useless and half done.

We see that Sunil's involvement is at many levels of NREGA operation, involving extensive interaction with workers. He provides clarification and information to workers in an attempt to increase knowledge and transparency with regards to NREGA. Workers see Sunil as an alternative path of action to paths involving local patrons and brokers when they are looking to solve a problem they encounter in relation to NREGA, or to simply access their entitlements. Interestingly, they approach Sunil not only to solve problems, but for assistance simply navigating the NREGA system. Sunil has heavy involvement with organizing groups, filling job demand forms, and job card request forms. Involvement and reliance on Sunil for these tasks exemplifies his role as mediator between NREGA implementers, government officials, and

workers. Although the workers themselves interact with government workers, Sunil provides support and information that workers use in their interactions. He has significant interaction with workers, but a large portion of his effectiveness as a mediator is in his ability to interact with government officials on behalf of workers.

5.3.1 Inspiring Activists

Gopi is one of the NREGA mates in G.K. Godam. In one conversation with Gopi, I ask who Sunil is and what the people in G.K. Godam do when they encounter a problem with NREGA works. He responds that if it is big issue they go to the *peddamanshi* in the village, who was Babu Rao as mentioned in previously. They go to Sunil for problems with NREGA. “Babu Rao knows nothing of that because he doesn’t do that work,” Gopi says when I ask him why they don’t go to Babu Rao. He refers to Sunil as the “Mandal Coordinator”, giving him a “official title” although Sunil really has no official position. Even Sunil introduces himself to others as a social worker, in an attempt to give himself an “official” title of sorts. In that same conversation Gopi says that they used to go to Sunil for everything “but now everyone has become like Sunil.”

In a previous NREGA meetings in G.K. Godam, Gopi was the one to tell Sunil there were no problems. I met Gopi on my first visit to his village, G.K. Godam. Sunil and I meet Gopi at the front of the village. As he walked up to the village community center he tells Sunil that the program is working very well here. He says that the “100 days have been going well, even with money”. He also says that the mates see the work closely. Below is an image of the community center.

Figure 4. The village community center of G.K. Godam. Villagers have come together to discuss issues they are having with NREGA. Sunil has coordinated this meeting.

Soon enough however, workers approach the community center to talk to us about the problems they are having. One man approaches Sunil and says that his mother is in a different group that him. He'd like him to be in his group with Gopi. Gopi has made this arrangement, but she is still not showing up in his group in the system and on the muster rolls. Sunil says maybe this is a computer issue and he will look into it. Gopi then tells us that women in his group did not get any money for work. But more shocking is that they disappeared from the muster and online. This happened to three women in his group. He asks, "how could their names go missing just like that!?" He repeats that their money went missing and so did their names. He also says that other groups have been having this problem. Sunil then asks for the names and job card

numbers of the women so he can go to the Mandal Office and inquire about this issue. Below is one man whose wife's name disappeared. He is telling Sunil about his issue.

Figure 5. Sunil discussing how to handle a problem with an NREGA worker.

Others come with problems of missing info. One man comes to Sunil and says that he is in need of a renewed job card. He has been going to work without a job card. He also says he went to the FA to ask for a job card, but the FA did not do her job. Sunil jokes that if the FA did their jobs then there would be no need for some like himself to help out. The members present at this meeting ask about a woman who is not from this village. Both her ration card, and adhaar card are from Chammochintha, but she wants to do NREGA work here. They ask how this is

possible. Sunil asks to see her. She arrives near the end of the meeting. While we wait Sunil says that she can always change their address on both, but it may take some time.

Gopi mentions again the issue of missing names, and how alarming the missing names are and demands that Sunil try to get them back. He says the women are staying at home and not working because they are not being paid. Sunil then asks Gopi why he did not write a RTI letter for the information. He tells Gopi that he taught him how in training and in this situation that information is very useful. Gopi just laughs and brushes of the question. He says that he can't do anything and that he needs Sunil's help.

A man named Sathi brings up an issue had by someone named Rajubabu. Gopi also brings up the issue of a man that has been trying to withdraw money but his finger print has been failing. Sunil says that he needs to do an eye scan then. Gopi says that they haven't gotten an eye scanner yet, so Sunil takes the man's job card number for his trip to the mandal office. Sunil turns to Gopi and half-jokingly asks, "What Gopi? You said there were no issues, but everyone is coming here with them!"

Sunil tells me with pride later that the people of this village are able to handle many tasks themselves. He tells me that the groups are able to submit the demand forms themselves, without his help. Although Gopi had originally said there were no issues, when in fact there were many, Sunil doesn't seem too upset. In fact, he commends Gopi on the work he is able to accomplish. He defends Gopi saying that sometimes mates miss information, but mates like Gopi look after things and if needed they bring issues to Sunil. Gopi says that he was inspired by Sunil to manage problems for his people. "One day I was talking very angrily with the APO trying to solve a problem. Sunil came up to me and said that speaking with so much anger was wrong. Then he told me that there was no need to fear the government. We should only fear them when

we do something wrong. Since then I've tried to solve problems like him. Now if there are problems people come to me. If I'm busy then Sunil will handle them."

Similar to how Sunil was inspired by Ajay Kumar, Gopi and other mates and workers have been inspired by Sunil. This is a role of activism that Sunil takes pride in, but had not expected. The ability of activists to inspire workers to make demands themselves can be expected to increase workers' abilities to place pressure on corrupt low-bureaucratic officials. They are however, not completely self-sufficient, still reliant on Sunil, as exemplified by this story. Workers and mates are able to interact with NREGA bureaucracy to make claims to their rights according to NREGA, but many issues and regular NREGA work is done by Sunil. Sunil has the most interaction with local bureaucracy. His influence in the government setting is strengthened by the support and influence he has on workers, who easily outnumber the number of government officials running NREGA in the mandal, as well as his ability to mobilize workers when necessary.

5.4 Sunil and Local Bureaucracy

After Sunil encounters and records the NREGA issues, he brings them to the mandal office of Nathavaram, conveniently located a 5 min walk from the Ambedkar statue at the front of the SC colony in Nathavaram. Sunil has a recognizable familiarity with the mandal office as well, exchanging pleasantries with most everyone in and around the office complex. Although he doesn't speak openly with the MDO, he talks to the APO as if he is a friend. In fact, the APO is the classmate of Ajay Kumar's daughter Ram and fellow activist Balu. This explains to a large extent the familiarity and friendly nature of Sunil and the APO's relationship. That being said, within the NREGA office that the APO manages Sunil has difficulty dealing with the computer operators. Often the APO and the COs use the same excuse as to why entering or adjusting an

NREGA worker's information is delayed. However, Sunil defends the APO's justification saying excusing him by accepting that the delay is a combination of bureaucratic issues and technical issues of the NREGA server. In his frustration with the COs he is quick to roll his eyes at their excuse, although it may be the same as the APO's. Rather than accept their excuse he blames any delays on false "technical issues" saying that this is an excuse that the office workers throw around when they don't feel like doing the work.

Sunil's ability to simultaneously work alongside government officials as well as against government officials is a defining feature of his role. Sunil and the APO communicate in a friendly manner. Often when issues arise he calls Nani, the APO, on his cellphone asking for more information or advice. Despite the friendliness, Sunil is prepared to use collective action against officials. When the previous MDO was not fulfilling his duties, Sunil organized a *dharna* (protest) outside the office forcing the MDO to comply to NREGA policy. When Sunil is frustrated with COs he shows his frustration, but makes demands in ways he feels is appropriate but still compelling and forceful. The demand he exhibits in combination with the threat and power he poses makes him a figure worth paying attention in mandal offices.

His regular presence in these offices also contribute to the familiarity everyone seems to have with him. Sunil's understanding of NREGA protocol adds to the seriousness with which officials interact with him. It is not uncommon for me to see Sunil sitting with COs when I visited the mandal offices. He would sit to check the all the worker information is entered correctly into the NREGA system. After each name is entered he would take the necessary documents and make a Xerox that would function as a makeshift receipt, something that COs are mandated to give but fail to do. It should be noted that the mundane activity of making copies is not an expected role of an activists. However, participating in such bureaucratic systems to

ensure the functioning of NREGA requires that activists such as Sunil participate in some typical office work. The simple act of making copies for receipts shows exactly how integral Sunil is in the day-to-day operation of NREGA, both within villages and in NREGA offices. His involvement reveals just how his integral role is in insuring that NREGA is a functioning program that follows guideline as described in the operation manual.

5.5 Remaining Apolitical

Sunil's role relies heavily on mediating discourse between workers and government officials, but he is not the only such intermediate. Other intermediaries such as brokers and patrons are also available to help workers approach solving problems with NREGA, as discussed in the previous chapter. However, methods of claiming NREGA entitlements through patrons and brokers, often involve some level of exploitation of the worker. Therefore, an important interaction to explore when understanding Sunil is between him and other intermediaries, the patrons and brokers. What is interesting is not actually the interactions between Sunil and intermediaries, but rather the lack of such interactions. Sunil's interaction with these intermediaries are minimal. In fact, Sunil avoids such interactions with fear that workers will begin to associate him with the other intermediate actors. Having such an association would be problematic, because he aims to provide workers with alternative support.

During one of my conversations with the villagers of G.K Godam I find that many of the small landowners do not have a *patta pusthakam*, a book necessary for landowners to receive low interest loans to buy farming supplies. With the intentions of stressing the importance of having these books, and pushing the villagers to work together to get these books, Sunil and I are advised by Gopi to talk to Babu Rao. At first Sunil asks Gopi to call Babu Rao over to Gopi's home to discuss here. "Oh no I can't do that. We have to go to him. I can't just call him here like

he's anybody." Seeing Gopi's seriousness regarding this Sunil agrees to go to Babu Rao. We walk to his compound to find that he isn't home. His wife tells us that he has gone to the entrance of the village. This is the normal meeting spot in the village for the men to gather in the mornings and evening to talk. Gopi says that we should go there and talk to him. Sunil hesitates saying that it wouldn't look good to talk to him on the side of the road. Gopi doesn't understand Sunil's hesitation and pushes us to talk to the village entrance. Sunil had hesitated as he was not sure how respectful he must be around Babu Rao. However, as we approached the village entrance we see Babu Rao casually sitting on a fallen log brushing his teeth and talking to other men of the village.

We approach them and Gopi introduces Sunil. The men all stand together and Sunil introduces the issue. The men nod agreeing that many of them don't have the book. One of the men Niadu says he actually has all his documentation. "When Sreenuvas was the VRO people would give him 200 Rs and he would get it done, but then he was suspended and then nobody got their *patta pusthakam* after that," Naidu says. After he says this Babu Rao chimes in that Sreenuvas was a useless man taking money unnecessarily. Everyone then agrees with Babu Rao. All the men get excited as this conversation of the lack of *patta pusthakam*'s continues. "We could rent 3 or 4 tata vehicles and stand outside the collector's office to demand these!" Babu Rao suggested, the situation escalating to suggestion of direct action. As the heating discussion wraps up with a consensus that the village needs to compile a list of all the people who do not have this *patta pushthakam*. After the group disperses one of the men, Venkatramana, who also happens to me one of the 6 mates in the village lingers. He turns to Sunil, as Sunil is preparing to leave back to Nathavaram. "If we just let a party adopt the village they would solve this problem so quickly. You should bring this up the TDP. Or I'll bring it up the TDP." Sunil let's

Venkatramana finish then explains that he'll handle this and there isn't any need for a political party to get involved. He then takes this moment to explain to Venkatramana that he doesn't work with parties. "I don't work with parties and I take no payment. We'll get this done without them. I'll take care of this."

Being affiliate with such intermediaries with ties to local politics may give Sunil a reputation of being politically affiliated, and as someone who is looking for payment for his services. This would fail to differentiate him from the intermediaries he is trying to distance himself from. It is tempting however for Sunil to pursue such connections considering that the many financial difficulties he faces would be alleviated.

5.6 Difficulties Sunil Faces

Sunil is able to alleviate struggles of the poor he advocates for. Still, he himself is a poor *dalit* man with a family to support. The struggles he faces contribute to how he fulfills his duties as an activist. Financial, caste, and political factors all influence his life, just as they do any other member of the rural communities he works.

5.6.1 Financial Struggles

Fulfilling this role of activist is not a financially stable occupation. Unlike many activists, Sunil is paid a salary of 5000 Rs (≈ $73) a month, provided through an AID grant for his activist work. This salary was also due to end by 2016. Despite the difficulties that can be assumed with such a small and unstable salary, Sunil tries to mask such financial struggles. I follow him one day as he is trying to transfer his son to the government school instead of the private school he was in previously. Although he knows that I understand this is because the government school is far less costly, he justifies his action saying that his son never liked the private school anyways. It is also not uncommon for Sunil to disappear for days to take his mother to Visag seeking

medical treatment. He also is responsible for caring for his daughter and wife. Yet with all the financial burdens he faces, he rarely mentioned not being able to pay for something. In fact, his hand was the first to come out with the money for every auto fee or bus ticket we needed. It wasn't until I succeeded in beating him to the payment a couple times that he allowed me to pay for the tickets for the remainder of my trip.

Sunil continually craved affirmation that he was doing well, constantly asking or expecting me to compliment him on his deeds. Any questions or comments I had, regardless of how much I coated the comment in compliments, was met with a concerned response of, "so I'm not doing good…?" In one of the many discussions we had following his regular question of whether or not he is doing well, the topic of financials arose. In a heated conversation regarding the need for youth leaders to continue the work Sunil does he exclaimed, "I can't keep doing this forever!" Finally, I was able to catch a glimpse of Sunil's financial concerns and struggles. He compared the struggle he endured to that of NGOs.

"[NGOs] make money but do so little. I made 200 job cards for Chammochintha and the villagers wanted to give me 10,000 or 20,000 Rs. I can't remember exactly how much, but you know what I said? I said no! I told them to just feed me when I come and treat me like a friend. If I took money, then what would be the difference between a social worker like me and a politician? If I did that I would have less struggles. If I did that I'd have a bike instead of this cycle!" His refusal to acknowledge his financial struggles seems to be a mechanism of coping with the poverty he and his family live in. It would be easy to begin accepting money offered by workers he helps, but Sunil must remain strong and refuse any such payment. Portraying he is not in need of money helps him resist such offers and stops some people from offering.

5.6.2 Sunil as a Dalit Man

In many ways, Sunil is not bound by the same caste constraints as other *dalit* members of the community. However, his caste is still a social limitation. Specifically, it effects his relationship with workers of higher castes. The best example, is the relationship between Gopi and Sunil, a friendship and partnership in which the effects of caste differences are clear.

Gopi's feelings regarding caste were seen in the previous chapter. The relationship between Sunil and Gopi is also affect by caste differences. While Sunil is a *dalit* man, Gopi is a member of the BC caste grouping. In conversation, it is common for Gopi to refer to Sunil's *dalit* community as "your people", and "my people". On one occasion I was sitting on Gopi's porch talking to him and Sunil. The conversation turned to caste and Gopi says to Sunil, "normally I say no to your people and don't relate with them, but you're a good one. I mean have you seen the style of your guys, with their long hair and piercings?" he says laughing at how ridiculous he thinks the style of the *dalit* youth men is. I look to Sunil expecting him to be upset at this comment. Surprisingly his expression has remained the same as it was before the comment was made. The conversation continued to discuss the education of their children and the difficulties Sunil is having in making his boy more interested in school. I ask Sunil later why he didn't react to Gopi's comment about *dalits*. "That's not even the most offensive thing I've heard from Gopi. He's my friend, and always talks about *dalits* like that." Although Sunil's power as an activist makes him a more influential figure in among the local bureaucracy, his relationship with Gopi is one in which he is still seen as a *dalit* man. The only difference is that to Gopi Sunil was one of the good *dalits*. Despite the help that Sunil provided Gopi and the respect Gopi had for Sunil, a cloud of caste throws a shadow on their relationship.

5.6.3 Sunil's Fear of Politics

Politics plays a role in daily life, just as caste and class. For Sunil however, politics is something he actively avoids. In my last week in G.K. Godam an issue of misuse of funds comes up. I'm not surprised to hear that someone was claiming money through NREGA that did not belong to them, but I was surprised to hear that the main coordinator of this scheme was Gopi. The owner of the house I was staying in had been implying for days that some groups were being paid more than others. After days of trying to get the whole story out of her, she finally told me that three of the six groups in the village had claimed to be doing work for three weeks when in fact they only did one week of work. Curious as to how that was even possible with so many safeguards in place, I ask her how they were able to do this. She explains that Gopi is a TDP leader in the village. The FA also happens to be a supporter of the TDP. She also explains that rumor is he paid her 9000 Rs. to let him do this. 9000 Rs. is far too high for this to even be feasible for Gopi, however he likely paid the FA some payment he claimed. The members of Gopi's group and the workers of the two other groups also gave their payments to their mates. It would be expected that each worker also received some portion of these payments.

The next morning Sunil comes from Nathavaram to visit me, and I explain the situation to him. Sunil is also shocked that the mates would be so bold as to claim two weeks' worth of payments. "They will definitely be caught when the audit happens," he says assuring the house owner. Sunil is also surprised that the main culprit of this issue is Gopi. He asks the owner by she didn't bring this issue up to him earlier. This had happened months ago. She explained that she had assumed Sunil and Gopi were good friends. Sunil assures her that they are just friendly but they are not friends. He reminds her that he works for all of them. At the same time Sunil

seems hurt that Gopi did this. He then tells her again that they will be caught at the next social audit.

Later I ask Sunil why he himself doesn't expose the issue at the mandal office. It would be easy to compare the information in the data base to the work actually done at the work site. Sunil then gets very serious and explains that because this is a political issue he fears what will happen if he gets involved. "I don't want to cause problems. I have a family and I don't want to get in trouble because of their issue. I also have to consider these things. They'll be caught at the next social audit. When the auditor sees that the work done on the site doesn't match what the records say they'll know. If not, I'll bring it to the auditor's attention. I can't take care of this by myself." I understood his dilemma. Many actors were involved for this situation to have even occurred. The FA, TA, and EC had all had to have approved the work both before and after the work was completed and should have noted that there was a discrepancy between the work claimed and the work done. Sunil's fears are one that any individual would have, therefore there are certain issue that he too feels he cannot handle on his own and must really on auditors for.

Despite his efforts to provide routes of problem solving in NREGA absent of social constraint to the workers he works on behalf of, Sunil is still victim to such constraints, some even imposed by the workers he works for. This reinforces why understanding the village context is crucial for not only understanding why NREGA implementation difference from the guidelines, and why workers face problems, but also for understanding Sunil's role and his experiences with navigating his duties as an activist and *dalit* man. Social factors of caste and politics affect relationships of patronage and brokerage, and the relationship between Sunil, workers, and local bureaucracy.

5.7 Many Intermediates to Choose from

Both systems of navigating NREGA, through patronage or activists, function simultaneously, posing options for how workers choose to pursue handling problems or simply gaining access to their entitlements through NREGA. While Sunil provides a non-exploitative option, the other paths are notorious for exploiting workers. When Sunil aims to provide a positive alternative and other systems persist, it is understandable that Sunil harbors frustration for the other systems and workers who choose access NREGA through them.

On an earlier visit to the village of Chammochintha, I was introduced to the issue of the elderly man whose wife died at an NREGA field site while doing work. While I was being told this story for the first time I could not help but notice the concern on Sunil's face. Sunil has been involved in this case for over a year now, and the man's story continuous to make him sad. The man chose to go to local politician instead of approaching him.

Figure 6. Image of the woman who died at work site

Many people believe that going to the politicians will get the work done quicker. They may also have political allegiance, and may continue to benefit from their relationship to the politician by showing this allegiance in such ways. He believes that he actually does the work that the politicians say they will and doesn't charge money, so he doesn't fully understand why people like the old man still go to the local politicians. However, he still shows sympathy for the old man's situation. He understands that many villagers will be reliant on politicians because that is how it worked in the past.

This issue arises once more when Sunil and I are vising Nani in his office one afternoon. Sunil and I wait on the porch of the NREGA offices for 2 hours. A man has come with use to add

his new wife to his job card. Nani finally arrives and gives me a quick hello as he turns to face Sunil. He shows Sunil some documents. They discuss a post office payment issue. He just spoke to the post master who said that they have not received payment yet and that people are thinking that the post office has the payment money and is not giving it. The man who we had come with had gone home to grab his own job card. While the man is gone Sunil and the APO take about the man from Chammochintha whose wife dead at the worksite. The old man had also come to the APO and when the APO asked for the death report the old man is telling him he gave it to everyone, meaning all the local politicians. Sunil seems tired of hearing this story again. He says, "ohh but that's an old issue". The APO turns to me and explains that the according to the act the man should be given 50000 Rs. Sunil then tells me that he and the APO sat and put together all the documentation into a file that needed to be taken to a legal hearing. Sunil says that he and APO really struggled at the "ground level" and were ready to get the man his money. The APO and Sunil seem to have been frustrated with the situation in the past, but now they laugh as they talk about this, although it still seems as they are masking their frustration. Sunil then says that after all that struggle the old man went to a political leader and gave the file and the file was lost and they still haven't found it again. From then on the man has been bouncing from political leader to leader.

Although the files are lost and the man will most likely not be able to claim the 50000 Rs. a year after his wife's death, Sunil and the APO are now working for the man to at least be able to withdraw the payment balance of his wife. When his wife died she had earned 2000 Rs. (≈ $29) that had not yet been withdrawn by her. This money has still not been sanctioned to the man because the man's finger prints were failing to be recognized as his biometric identifier due to his participation in regular hard manual labor, so they are arranging for him to get an eye scan

instead. Sunil tells me that all the documentation is done for this as well, but even when the needed nominee forms were completed the man took the form and gave it to a local politician. The APO then jumps in and says that by the time Sunil got a hold of the file it was a little too late. Although past the set date, the APO was able to push the MDO to accept the document. The APO then says that he has "faith" that the man will receive payment within 15 days. He then repeats the word "faith" for emphasis.

Although both the APO and Sunil seem frustrated with the situation, they seem to somewhat excuse the man's behavior. The APO says that people like the old man have faith that politicians can get the work done faster. It seems as though the APO and Sunil have worked together closely on this case and seems as though the APO is also very interested to hear the problems bring in so I ask Nani if he and Sunil overlap on issues they hear. He says, "yes!" Not only do they overlap sometimes but he also says "We share the issues. I tells Sunil issues I hear. He tells me issues he hears." Sunil provides a method of claiming right without exploitation, to Sunil's frustration old systems of patronage and brokerage persist. Loyalties within patronage relationships, and expectations of quick results keep worker in such relationship.

5.8 Summary

Sunil has an understanding for workers' reliance on other intermediaries. He has been able to form a productive relationship with government officials in an attempt to eliminate the reliance on patrons, local politicians, and brokers. Sunil's strength is in his ability to support workers and NREGA policy, while working with government officials to insure policy is properly implemented. His influence and reputation among both workers and government officials is strengthened by his ability to oppose government officials when needed, but also connect with government officials as necessary. This in combination with his refusal to accept

payment and absence of political affiliation allow him to represent a non-exploitative alternative intermediary role, as opposed to brokers and local patrons. Sunil creates a path for workers to access their rights according to NREGA. The presence of such a path presents workers with a choice, one they would not have if activists such as Sunil are not present. This choice, in addition to the support and knowledge they gain from Sunil, has resulted in more vocal, informed, and empowered workers and citizens. The involvement of Sunil in this process leads me to suggest that the empowerment expected from rights-based policy such as NREGA is mediated by Sunil, as he mediates workers' claims to NREGA entitlements and rights.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The rights revolution within India has been shaped by activists and their commitment to not only the creation of such policy, but its implementation. I examined the understudied role and influence of activists in the everyday implementation and success of rights-based policy, of which NREGA is the largest and most ambitious existing program. NREGA was used as a case through which to study the potentials and limitations of rights-based development and, specifically, roles of activists. NREGA purports to enable an assertion of rights by the marginalized poor. In fact, all rights-based legislation has the goal of introducing a rights dialogue among the marginalized and oppressed. The actualization of this purpose was explored during this study of activists, revealing that activism is required for the realization of rights. NREGA aims to extend citizenship to the marginalized and oppressed by giving them the ability to receive work on their demand, legislating that all citizens of India have an inherent human right to work.

Historically supported systems of social hierarchy and power dynamics embedded in long standing systems of patronage function to undermine the social transformative potential of right-based policy. Such social transformation intended by rights-based policy, assumes that the marginalized would be able to claim their rights from the state, thereby asserting themselves as citizens not bound by village power dynamics. Still, such social hierarchies are deeply embedded in everyday life within the village, as discussed in Chapter 3, and interfere with the actualization of NREGA's intentions.

G.K. Godam provides an example of the everyday role of caste, class, and politics and associated systems of patronage. These confining and rigid systems within a village are simultaneously supported and combated by NREGA policy. However, before discussion of the

duality of government enforced rights-based development policy, the considerable cultural and ideological gap between higher government and local village systems needs to be emphasized. Such a gap is evident the incongruence of liberal and innovative policies created by the state, and rigid systems of hierarchies and associated power structures within the Indian village. NREGA is no exception to such a gap. Whereas NREGA was progressive and adapted from universal concepts of human rights, contemporary village life is shaped by a historical legacy of indirect rule and colonialism, resulting in the conservative postcolonial Indian village with deeply embedded systems of patronage.

6.1 Translation of Rights to Patronage

The stark cultural divide between this higher and lower levels of government place such economic institutions as NREGA in the hands of local administrators and patrons for use as currency with workers. A resource with which they can exchange not only for money, but use as political leverage through clientism. The contradiction of progressive higher level government and the inflexible systems within the village context persist as systems of patronage continue to have relevance in the lives of poor villagers. As villagers continue to face barriers and struggles, discussed in chapter 4, the reliance on patrons and brokers to resolve such issues persists. The gap is therefore further utilized by patrons and brokers in the everyday practice of NREGA, reinforcing systems of patronage. The struggles of workers to navigate NREGA, as discussed in Chapter 4 are both created, utilized, and reinforced by systems of patronage. Such phenomenon results in the vernacularization of rights based policy. In effect, rights are translated to patronage.

6.2 The Mediation of Citizenship

There appears to be and apparent failure of rights-based policy and accompanying goals of social transformation of rural India, as rights-based policy is translated to patronage. However,

Sunil is introduced in Chapter 5 and presents an optimistic alternative to the patronage system, and demonstrates the successes of NREGA's social transformation intentions. Rather than translating the rights framework to one more suited for the village structural norms, activists are able to translate such brokerage to rights with their role in mediated citizenship. With the involvement of Sunil as a mediator of citizenship, NREGA is able to fulfill its intended purpose of providing work on demand. However, his involvement makes the citizenship extended to workers different than intended – for workers to directly demand from the state without patrons, or other intermediates such as Sunil involved. Regardless of the type citizenship extended, workers are able to use Sunil to get work, effectively bypassing the exploitation of patronage. Therefore, he does provide citizenship, even though this citizenship is dependent on mediation. The citizenship he provides is actualized by the access he provides to their right to work, the right to freely demand and receive work as promised to Indians by the NREGA legislation. Further, he provides workers with an alternative to systems of patronage, giving them a choice they would not otherwise have.

Sunil has defining characteristics that allow him to function as an intermediary who mediates citizenship. The sacrifice and struggle he endures as an activist present him as everything a patron is not. His apolitical stance, contributes even more to this differentiation. In fact, he actively aims to differentiate himself in such a way, refusing money and resisting involvement with local politics. In refusing financial assistance for the work he provides, Sunil makes significant sacrifices to complete his role. This sacrifice contributes to the perception that Sunil is as not fulfilling his role for a reward, rather for a sense of justice. The sense of justice is created by his experiences witnessing such injustices happen to those around him, as well as the

injustices he and his family have experience as a poor *dalit* family, one of the most oppressed groups in India.

Another quality of Sunil is his fulfillment of simple bureaucratic roles to insure that the program is able to function as a vehicle through which workers can attain empowerment and citizenship. Such everyday bureaucratic work is demonstrative of his ability to work alongside the government officials; the same government officials he is prepared to work against. This brings us to the third defining feature of Sunil, his ability to simultaneously work with and against the state. The relationship his has with state officials at the local level is one in which they also work with him, recognizing his considerable power and influence. He is able to function in this role because of such power, a power comparable to the power of local patrons and brokers. While they have the influence of their clients, their wealth, and their larger connections, Sunil has the influence of the workers he helps, involvement with the larger activist network APVVU, NREGA knowledge, and resources that both his activist network and higher government provide him. This makes him a force worth recognition and gravity within the NREGA administrative context, one that is capable of working with the officials, but also has the power, influence, determination to work against them.

6.3 Culture Gaps Between State and Society

The failure of NREGA to accomplish what it intended without Sunil means that the state is capable of both undermining citizenship as well as promoting it. It promotes citizenship without consideration of the gap and the extensive patronage systems characterizing villages. This gap has been created by the incongruence between higher level implementation culture and lower village level implementation culture. It is largely responsible for the failures and success associated with NREGA. The state largely failed to consider this cultural divide, only accounting

for “corruption”, which we’ve uncovered is a broad term with many underlying deeply rooted causes. Therefore, the creation of such policy gives patrons and local officials yet another economic resource that can be used to exploit workers and negate any of the policies attempts to extend citizenships to the marginalized of society it targets. Sunil, however, allows such policy to function and extend citizenship, while allowing workers to access their legally entitled rights. He uses the right based policy as a tool to create citizenship. Therefore, the policy can be used by Sunil as a tool just as it can be used by patrons and brokers as a tool.

The presence of the cultural gap discussed generates the need for an intermediary at the interface between state and society. The need for intermediaries generates an increased reliance on systems of patronage. Such reliance is reasonable considering the prevalence and legacy of systems of patronage and brokerage in rural India. However, the presence of such patrons and brokers in turn generated the need of activists. While patrons and brokers within NREGA operation are largely responsible for program failures, activists are able to use the policy to catalyze social transformation, extending citizenship to the marginalized.

6.4 Limitations of NREGA

Despite the success of NREGA with the involvement of Sunil, it’s hard to ignore the immense program failures across the country when there are no activists like Sunil. The biggest problem is that there are not Sunil’s everywhere. Further, there is no strong incentive for new grassroots activists to arise considering all the struggles activists such as him incur. Gopi’s fraudulent actions to claim NREGA money, despite Sunil’s efforts to stop such actions, exemplify a force that is trying to pull back the system of patronage into the operation of NREGA. Although Sunil provides a functioning alternative to patronage systems, these patronage systems are trying to reassert themselves in NREGA operation. This presents another

problem with the implementation of rights-based policy in rural India, the continual resistance to social transformation.

AP represents in many ways a unique case of positive NREGA outcomes. It's important to reflect on the failing status of NREGA programs in other states of India. In AP, activists are largely able to work against local administration and elected officials. They are able to confidently do this with the high level of support they receive from high level officials. Support of AP state leadership has also resulted in general trust by activists of the online system for data, and the social auditing system. Mainly the social auditing system has been priceless instrument to activists, one which Sunil has used to avoid to repercussions of opposing embedded political and patronage systems alone as a *dalit* man. His use of such NREGA features, which require higher state involvement, demonstrates some success to the "sandwich" described by Veeraraghavan and Fox, by which higher level bureaucratic and ground level societal pressures are able to squeeze the corruption out of lower level bureaucracy (Veeraraghavan, 2015; Fox, 1993).

The resistance of patronage systems to activist mediated citizenship, and the continual reliance on systems of patronage results in dual systems of NREGA operation. This implies that there is still significant opportunity and need for improvement. The successes seen with the involvement of Sunil in NREGA, as well as the cultural divide state and village society brings to question whether rights-based policy and the successful extension of rights and citizenship to the marginalized and oppressed of India can ever occur without activist mediation of citizenship. This potentially calls for widespread activism in order to catalyze the transformations that rights-based development promises.

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