DECENTRALISED GOVERNANCE AS SITES FOR SELF-FORMATION: A COMPARISON OF PRACTICES OF WELFARE DISTRIBUTION IN TELANGANA, INDIA, AND CENTRAL LOMBOK, INDONESIA

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Studies that examine the effects of decentralisation for social change or stasis have placed necessary attention on its institutional dynamics: the ways social institutions have transformed as a result of new governance regimes, or alternatively, how the existing institutional context and attendant power relations determine its actualisation. The second facet of the structure/agency dialectic is often overlooked however, that is, the actors themselves. This article seeks to overcome this lacuna by exploring the effects of citizens' engagement in practices associated with decentralised governance for individuals' understandings of self, society, and their relationship with the state. A comparison of two villages in Telangana, India, and Central Lombok, Indonesia reveals how differences in the distribution of welfare benefits have implications for the potential of such interactions to be sites of creative self-formation. Differences such as the regularity and ability to demand entitlements, preferential versus equal access to resources, and the levels at which citizens engage with the state, may be crucial for processes of subjectification, and by extension, social transformation.

Keywords: decentralisation; subjectivities; subjectification; Lombok Indonesia; Andhra Pradesh India; comparative

A group of twelve women walk into a Mandal Parishad Development Office in Mahbubnagar, India. They are wearing the distinctive dress of their people, who are *adivasi*

people (the collective word for indigenous people of India) and classified as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) by the state. Among them is Geetha,[1] who has travelled from a nearby village with her friends and relatives to claim a subsidised LPG (cooking gas) cylinder.[2] Although they have arrived at ten in the morning, just after the office opened, there is already a crowd of people waiting to see the local officials. There is confusion as people try to identify and then speak with the relevant person, but Geetha has been here before and together they jostle for a place in the correct queue. Her name is taken, and she sits with the other women outside awaiting their turn. Five hours later, they are called. Geetha presents her identification papers to the official as proof of her ST and 'below poverty line' (BPL) status and therefore her entitlement to the gas cylinder. The official proceeds with the paper work and gives her a chit to purchase a cylinder from the nearby store at the subsidised rate. Nearly seven hours since she left home, Geetha is chatting and smiling as she climbs into a rickshaw with her friends, each carrying their gas cylinders for the return journey.

In Desa Tengah,[3] a village in Central Lombok, Indonesia, a separate transaction with the state is occurring. The monthly quota of Raskin (Raskin Beras Miskin) rice has arrived for the village. Raskin is a national scheme that provides fifteen kilograms of rice for any household below the poverty line (BPL). Ibu Bonita is the sole breadwinner for her family, and her low income more than qualifies her for the full entitlement. The rice is distributed by the head of her hamlet, and she collects it from him at the *posyandu* (local health post). Instead of the government recommendations, however, the rice is distributed equally to all households in the hamlet, regardless of wealth. Ibu Bonita returns to her family with five kilograms of rice for the month.

These incidents are both encounters with the 'state', involving citizens making claims for government resources, and in the process 'seeing the state'.[4] In anthropological readings of the state, such practices, rather than its formal institutional framework, constitute the state as a socially effective entity.[5] These are sites in which the state acquires social meaning as people's experiences inform their imagination of what the state is. In this article, I take this understanding of the state one step further, arguing that people's encounters with the state influence subjectivities. The individual sees their own reflection in their 'sighting of the state',[6] becoming constituted as subjects with a relationship with the state. These encounters are thereby potential sites of creative self-formation, as attendant discourses and experiences are resources for the re-imagination of self within the social whole. Consequent action, animated by a revised sense of selfhood, has the potential to challenge existing social relations.

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1 People's names are pseudonyms.

2 At the time of research, the distribution of LPG cylinders was not linked to the biometric Aadhaar cards. This would add a significantly different layer to this encounter.

3 Names of places are fictional to obscure the identity of respondents.

4 Corbridge et al. 2005.

5 Gupta 2012.

6 Corbridge et al. 2005.

This potential for creative self-formation has implications for our understanding of the consequences of decentralisation. Decentralised governance entails different practices and discourses from a centralised regime, and encounters with the state thereby involve different social positionings and experiences. The effects this has on processes of creative self-formation is an overlooked element in the literature about decentralisation, which has tended to concentrate on the transformation, or otherwise, of the institutional context. I argue that considering the transformation in the actors themselves both complements and extends this literature, drawing attention to the central role of actors for institutional change or stasis. I examine the potential for decentralisation to inspire new social imaginaries and reshape subjectivities through a comparison of discursive practices related to the distribution of welfare benefits in two villages: Krishnanagar in Telangana, India, and Desa Tengah in Central Lombok, Indonesia. I find that differences in how individuals encounter the state affects the possibilities for creative self-(re)formation and thereby social transformation.

ABSENT SUBJECTS IN ACCOUNTS OF DECENTRALISATION

India and Indonesia are two exemplars of states that have established ambitious decentralisation programmes. I concentrate in this article on rural decentralisation, although the implications are also relevant for urban local governance. There is a large body of literature that examines the history and formal institutional framework of decentralisation in both India and Indonesia, and I provide only a sketch here.[7]

In 1993, the Indian government passed a number of constitutional reforms that devolved political and economic power to rural representative bodies with the intention to empower and develop poor and marginal groups. Local level governance in rural areas comprises the elected bodies of the Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRI), starting at the village level (*gram panchayat*) to the district level (*zilla parishad*). Elections determine the *Sarpanch* (head of the village), and all adult villagers are members of the *Gram Sabha*, able to attend meetings and be elected to various committees. The 11th Schedule of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act devolves twenty-nine functions to PRIs, including land improvement, education, cultural activities, family welfare, social welfare, and women and child development.[8] The PRI has also assumed a central role in implementing poverty alleviation programmes, including the identification of eligible individuals, the administration of government schemes, and ensuring the accountability of programmes such as the Public Distribution System.

In 1999, the new government in Indonesia revoked the centralised and upwardly accountable model of governance during Suharto's New Order regime. Two laws, Law 22 of 1999 on Regional Governance and Law 25 of 1999 on the Fiscal Balance between the Centre and the Regions, devolved powers, revenue-raising and spending, and responsibility of delivery of services to directly elected local-level authorities. The reforms shifted the role

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7   See Aspinall 2013, Nordholt 2004, Crook and Manor 1998; Hadiz 2010; Harriss et al. 2004; Johnson 2003.

8   Government of India (GoI) n.d.

of local people's representative councils from being a mere rubber stamp on decisions made at the centre, to a council empowered to make their own decisions. The process of decentralisation was strongly supported by international aid agencies,[9] and partially based on the assumption that this would lead to better identification of local needs, more transparent and accountable governance, and the fostering of democracy after decades of authoritarian rule.[10] The reforms also had the effect of 'pushing poverty alleviation and rural development schemes down to provinces and districts'.[11] Villages have been 'liberated' from 'the authority of higher levels of government',[12] with the ability to implement local policies and to make central policies more responsive to local aspirations.

Democratic local governance – the devolving of government functions with local-level democracy – has intended benefits including improved service delivery, creating downward accountability, greater transparency and promoting inclusive and people-driven development.[13] By bringing governance closer to the people, leaders supposedly become more responsive. The record of both states in achieving positive development outcomes from decentralisation has, however, been mixed at best. Most critical commentary has focused on the ability of local elites to capture the benefits of decentralisation, and to use the new governance mechanisms to consolidate their position.[14] Rather than bringing about increased accountability, corruption has been decentralised, and in some places, become more pervasive and less predictable.[15] The objective of making governance more responsive to marginal groups has also had limited success. Existing relations of patronage have been reinforced, or in the least, not threatened by the so-called empowerment of marginal groups.[16] In many case studies, marginal groups continue to be excluded from government resources[17] and political participation.[18] Empirical studies also call into question the connection between decentralisation and greater democracy[19] as subaltern civil society has struggled to penetrate the well-managed state.[20]

Not all evidence suggests that decentralisation has been an unmitigated failure, with both positive[21] and mixed accounts.[22] Nonetheless, the overall tone of the literature is one of failure to live up to the promises of decentralisation. Research has therefore tended

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9   Ito 2006.

10   Buehler 2010.

11   Antlov 2003, p. 194.

12   *Ibid.*, p. 199.

13   Antlov 2003; Crook and Manor 1998; Oxhorn et al. 2004.

14   Hadiz 2010; Heller 2009.

15   Hadiz 2010; Nordholt 2004.

16   Aspinall 2013.

17   Krishna 2011; Pattenden 2011.

18   Bonu et al. 2011; Johnson 2001; Johnson et al. 2005.

19   Nordholt 2004.

20   Heller 2009.

21   Udayaadithya and Gurtoo 2012.

22   Bardhan 2002; Rosser et al. 2005.

to focus on why decentralisation has not achieved its potential, with an objective of making it work better. Nordholt attributes failures in the Indonesian context to 'changing continuities'.[23] Patrimonial ties, the denial of class in Indonesian politics, blurred boundaries between market, government and civil society, and the historical roles of regional elites have persisted from pre-colonial to post-colonial times, produced anew in the current institutional context of decentralised governance. Hadiz likewise notes how Indonesian elites use their position to further their interests through decentralisation reforms, outlining what appears to be a path-dependent process of powerful entities perpetuating their dominant position through their ability to control new institutional arrangements.[24] Mosse raises similar issues in his analysis of 'community' management of natural resources in Tamil Nadu, India. He argues that symbolic power persists in new institutional arrangements, which become an arena in which pre-existing social hierarchies are expressed and reaffirmed.[25]

These important sets of explanations focus on a common theme: the existing institutional and social context has shaped the actualisation of decentralised governance so that pre-existing elements persist (and in some cases are reaffirmed) in the new institutional framework. That is, new institutions of local governance are not established on a 'blank slate', but are shaped and reworked by the prevailing political economy, cultural politics and existing socially-embedded institutions.[26] New institutional arrangements are socially embedded in existing power relations and borrow from existing cultural frameworks.[27] Although the consequent continuity of institutional features is not the only explanation for the failures of decentralisation, it is critical to understanding why it has not achieved some of its more radical objectives such as the political empowerment of marginal groups.

A necessary but overlooked corollary to this literature examining institutional transformation and continuity are actors who shape and are shaped by these processes. Actors are born into an institutional and cultural context, and it is through this context that they develop an understanding of self, society, ways of being and ways of seeing the world. These understandings animate actions, which produce anew the institutional and cultural context.[28] There have been many theoretical nuances made to this general understanding of social change and continuity (see the next section below), but the basic proposition remains that institutional transformation should not be considered without reference to the actors central to these processes. The ability of individuals to critically reflect on the current state of society, and (re)orient their strategies and tactics accordingly,[29] has the potential to recursively transform the institutional context.

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23 Nordholt 2004.

24 Hadiz 2010. Hadiz rejects (rational) neo-institutional approaches to the study of decentralization, however his analysis borrows from political-economy neo-institutional theoretical understandings of path-dependent processes. These are, in any case, a useful lens through which to read Hadiz's account (see also Bartley et al. 2008 and Hall and Taylor 1996 for an elaboration of different neo-institutional approaches).

25 Mosse 1997.

26 Bebbington et al. 2004; Hadiz 2010; Heller 2009.

27 Processes called 'institutional bricolage' in Cleaver 2002 and Campbell 2004.

28 Giddens 1979; Bourdieu 1990.

29 Jessop 2001.

Further reflection is not undertaken by the 'all-knowing subject', but one (re)configured through engagement with the institutional context.[30] In short, engagement with the institutional context causes reflection on self and society, with the potential to refashion subjectivities. This animates and reorients actions in ways that have the potential to transform the institutional context.

Studies of decentralisation that focus on the changes and continuities from the past therefore need to pay greater attention to the actors themselves for two reasons. First, the institutional context of decentralisation entails different practices and cultural meanings from pre-existing institutions, which have the potential to lead to revised understandings of self. Second, changes to the constitution of acting subjects are crucial to understanding institutional transformation or continuity in response to decentralisation. The recursive processes of changes to actors and institutions mean that these two lines of inquiry are never completely distinct, and indicate the potential for changes to subjectivities as a result of decentralisation to influence socially-embedded institutions[31] beyond local governance.[32] This article focuses on the first of these processes, examining the potential for creative self-formation through new discursive practices associated with decentralisation. This research has both practical and theoretical importance. Theoretically, it indicates the importance of examining individual experiences and responses to new institutional arrangements in order to capture the full consequences of decentralisation. Practically, in highlighting the importance of the nature of citizen–state encounters for processes of self-making, it indicates potential avenues for decentralisation to achieve its more radical objectives.

SEEING THE SELF IN SIGHTINGS OF THE (DECENTRALISED) STATE

Considering the influence of the state in processes of subjectification is not new. Althusser famously uses the example of the policeman (an agent of the state) who hails an individual in the interpellation of the subject.[33] The policeman calls, 'Hey, you there', and the individual responds to that call. In the very act of turning around 180 degrees, the individual becomes the subject, the one who has been hailed. This interpellation positions the subject in relation to the other; the subject who turns recognises their subordination and the authority of the policeman: a social hierarchy of a given ideology. Ideology thereby '"recruits" subjects among individuals (it recruits them all)'.[34] Interpellation can also be used to consider the processes of subjectification that occur in practices of claiming welfare benefits. Welfare recipients are hailed as 'development subjects' responding to the calls of 'hey, you who need this'. In the process they enter into a subordinated relationship with

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30 *Ibid.*

31 Cleaver 2002.

32 A potential further explored in Jakimow 2013.

33 Althusser 1971.

34 Althusser 1971, p. 130.

the development agent and self-acknowledge their position as one who is in need of development: deficient, yet able to be reformed.

Althusser used interpellation to understand people's acquiescence to power relations and exploitative relations, but such processes can equally be a site of radical change. Identity is not defined solely through a structural position, as individuals occupy multiple subject positions 'corresponding both to the different social relations in which the individual is inserted and to the discourses that constitute these relations'.[35] This leads to a contingency and creativity in processes of subjectification. As discourses are multiple and lack coherence and regularity, the subject is 'the locus of multiple possible constructions, according to the different discourses that can construct that position'.[36] This results in a precarious set of sutures, with the consequence that 'the subjectivity of a given social agent is always precariously and provisionally fixed'. Mouffe recognizes the potential that multiple discursive fields have for new constructions of individuals' identities, and through this, the possibility of radical and collective change. Mouffe writes that an 'antagonism can emerge when a collective subject ... that has been constructed in a specific way, to certain discourses, finds its subjectivity negated by other discourses and practices'.[37] Such an instance of what she calls contradictory interpellation occurs when the discourses that interpellate and thereby constitute subjects are inconsistent, constituting a subordinate and dominated subject in one set of discourses, and an equal and autonomous subject in another.

These understandings of self-formation are informed by Foucault's later work on processes of subjectivation, in which he presents the self as occupying multiple subject positions within different discursive contexts. 'In each case [...] one establishes a different type of relationship to oneself'[38] and significant others. The self, in this perspective, is 'produced in interaction with others and cultural categories, but one that is not determined by either the relations or the categories, and retains a capacity for creation, refraction and resistance'.[39] In one interpretation, discourses do not make subjects, rather subjects use the discursive resources available to them in processes of self-formation. Read this way, the institutional context provides the cultural meanings, social norms, and practices through which individuals construct their sense of self. This is *not* a process in which the individual is free to make themselves according to some innate sense of self, but rather the individual cultivates the self using the resources of the diverse institutional and discursive context.[40] Consequent subjectivities animate actors, and consequent actions shape the institutional context, resulting in the potential for 'reflexively reorganized structural configurations'.[41] This indefinite nature of subject-making has political repercussions, as the 'subject form

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35 Mouffe 1988, p. 90; see also Laclau and Mouffe 2001.

36 *Ibid.*

37 Ibid., p. 94.

38 Foucault 1994, p. 29.

39 Moore 2007, p. 32; see also Ortner 2005.

40 Butler (1997) raises the question as to why people cultivate themselves in subordinate positions, drawing upon psychoanalytical understandings of subjectification. This important question is outside the scope of this article, but will be explored in further research (see footnote 68).

41 Jessop 2001, p. 1224.

becomes not a trap within which the self is necessarily confined but a potentially creative resource through which new senses of self may emerge'.[42]

It is in this context that encounters with the state are important. Gupta rightly critiques approaches to the state that consider it a unitary entity acting with intent.[43] He instead draws attention to the dispersion and multiplicity of the state. The state exists at multiple levels (from the village, districts, provinces to the national level), and performs various functions through various departments (welfare, defence, law and order) and different branches (administration, juridical and executive). The state as it exists locally (and which provides most often the sites of direct encounters), is manifest through different individuals and personalities, and localised institutional arrangements. The state as 'social imaginary' arises from the discourses and practices at the local level, which is the site in which it is most intimately experienced.[44] This is not to say, however, that national and even global representations of the state have no effect, and responses to localised encounters are not impervious to the referent of state writ large.[45] Furthermore, people bring to localised encounters an imagination of the state, which is often of greater import than its actual content.[46]

Corbridge et al. argue that the ways people 'see' the state influence the way people conceive of themselves as citizens and members of social groups, and thereby the demands they make on the state.[47] I would go further, and argue that these sightings of the state also entail a sighting of the self within the particular discursive context of the interaction. This may reaffirm existing understandings of self, or alternatively, provide new visions and understandings, provoking alternative and creative processes of self-formation. Encounters with the state can thereby be influential in the constant refashioning of subjectivities.[48] The level/tiers, and the type of agency of the state that the individual encounters, will shape the possibilities for this refashioning. As decentralisation has changed the institutional context, alternative discourses, new practices and experiences offer an opportunity for reflection and revision of understandings of self within a broader social whole. Decentralisation may also transform the social imaginary of the state, and thereby how people see themselves (their reflections) in their sightings of the state. It is this potential that I suggest is an under-explored aspect of decentralisation.

A COMPARISON OF TWO VILLAGES

The field sites of this study are two villages: Krishnanagar, Mahbubnagar district in Andhra Pradesh, India, and Desa Tengah in Central Lombok, Indonesia.[49] The material was

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42 Phillips 2006, p. 311.

43 Gupta 2012.

44 Das and Poole 2004.

45 Taussig 1997.

46 Aretxaga 2003.

47 Corbridge et al. 2005.

48 See Agrawal 2005 and Li 2007 for an example of such processes.

49 Names of villages are pseudonyms to protect the identity of respondents.

collected as part of two research projects examining livelihoods in the context of change, notably climate change.[50] The material raises certain questions and hints at possibilities, but is not intended to be a conclusive statement as to the nature of citizen–state relations in either Andhra Pradesh or Lombok. My intention is to highlight the possibilities for self-making in state encounters, the importance of this for the literature on decentralisation, and to indicate future directions in this regard. Research consisted primarily of semi-structured interviews, informal conversations and observation. It was undertaken with the assistance of three research assistants in Andhra Pradesh between September 2010 and January 2011, and with the assistance of one research assistant in Central Lombok between March and May 2012.

Krishnanagar is located in Telangana district, a dry-land agricultural zone, marked by high social and economic differentiation. Land holdings are unequal, with a large population of landless labourers, particularly among the lower castes. Scheduled caste (SC), backward caste (BC) and scheduled tribe (ST) (government designations that mark historical marginalisation) have lower socio-economic indicators, and are targets of specific welfare programmes. The Reddy caste is politically and economically dominant in the area (with a government designation of Other Caste (OC)) and its members between them own the majority of land. They are an economically diverse group, and while farm sizes vary greatly among Reddy households, in general they have more land with a greater percentage irrigated than SC or BC landowners. The village is increasingly diversifying economically outside of agriculture, but own cultivation and/or agricultural labour remain the most important livelihood activities for the majority of households. Krishnanagar is located less than ten kilometres from a Mandal Parishad Development Office (MPDO) and less than twenty-five kilometres from the district headquarters of Mahbubnagar. Mobility to nearby villages and towns has increased dramatically over the last decade and an increase in auto-rickshaws has brought Mandal and Block level offices within reach for most villagers.

At the time of research, a Reddy man and owner of a large amount of land, was in his second term as *Sarpanch* (elected village leader). His father had been the previous (unelected) head in the days prior to local elections. The *Sarpanch* is an influential person in villages in Telangana, and acts as an important intermediary between villagers and the state. They can sanction infrastructural works (for example digging a channel to divert rainwater from a home), and are responsible for the identification of eligible villagers for various schemes. These schemes are also administered by civil servants, most of whom live outside the village and work at the Mandal level. These civil servants have replaced the *Patwari*, a local man (it was rare for a woman to be *Patwari*) who was a government-appointed official responsible for government business prior to decentralisation. Various political parties operate within the village. Different *jati* (sub-castes) often (but not always) have their own leaders that negotiate with political parties, the *Sarpanch* or other government officials.

Desa Tengah is located in Central Lombok, in the Nusa Tengarra Barat province of Indonesia. It is comprised of more than ten *dusun* (sub-villages or hamlets) that are closely located, but with vastly different levels of mobility due to the poor condition of most roads. Wealth and land ownership is again uneven, but the size of the largest farms is a fraction of those in Andhra Pradesh. Nonetheless, there are households who cultivate their own land or land on lease, with a large number of landless villagers who work as agricultural labourers. Other households depend primarily on poorly paid handicraft work, or the more lucrative activity of migrant labour in Malaysia or Saudi Arabia. The village office (*kantor desa*) is the primary location of government activity, and few residents (besides government officials) travel to the district headquarters in Janapria (about an hour by car) for government business. Nonetheless, increased mobility is a recognizable change in the village, with many young men in particular earning money through *ojek* (transporting paying passengers on motorcycle). Villagers will often travel by *ojek* to nearby markets in other villages.

The current *Kepala Desa* (elected village head) has served two years of his first five-year term. He is responsible for making proposals to the government for various schemes, for spending government money for village development (in community consultation), and organizing village-level initiatives, such as the building of bridges or roads. Each *dusun* also elects a *Kepala Dusun* (*Kedus*) who is responsible for the distribution of government resources channelled through the *desa* to be spent at the *dusun* level. They also organise *dusun*-level initiatives that do not receive government funding. Mosque building is a particularly important activity, as is the mutual assistance (*gotong-royong*) provided in the form of labour and food for families in need (for example if there is a death in the family, or someone gets married). *Desa*-level government initiatives are supported by a staff of six PNS [*Pegawai Negeri Sipil* meaning civil servant] at the *Kantor Desa* (village office). In Desa Tengah, officials come from within the village, usually from among better-off households.

The number of encounters between villagers and the 'state' as embodied in local officials and representations are almost uncountable. As Gupta notes, the ubiquity of the state presents methodological challenges.[51] On a day-to-day basis, a person may drop their children off at the government-run crèche, participate in a village meeting run by the village head, or directly interact with officials at multiple levels. In addition, they encounter multiple representations of the state,[52] through newspapers, television, posters, buildings, road signs and so on. In this article I concentrate on those encounters through which villagers receive welfare benefits. My objective is to highlight how different practices related to obtaining government entitlements have implications for processes of self-making. This is not to disregard the importance of other encounters; the selective presentation of material can necessarily reveal only a fraction of ways in which the state influences subjectivities. Further, I am focusing on encounters with a particular tier and agency of the state. Encounters with other agencies will have different sets of discursive resources and therefore contain different possibilities. My intent is to examine the potential of selected sites for processes of creative self-making, rather than to survey all sites of citizen–state interactions in the villages.

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51 Gupta 2012.

52 *Ibid.*

ENCOUNTERS WITH THE STATE IN KRISHNANAGAR

Returning to Geetha's encounter with the state in the MPDO office in Mahbubnagar, several aspects of her visit are representative of more general trends in Krishnanagar. As noted, Geetha travelled to the office herself, accompanied by friends and kin. She felt confident to stand directly before government officials, undeterred by her socially marginal subject positions of 'woman', 'poor labourer' and 'adivasi'. This represents a significant shift in the village. In the past, most marginal groups (such as women, low caste, adivasi) used to use an intermediary or broker for government business, or in other work with officials such as banks. Women stated that past inhibitions prevented them from directly meeting government officials, noting the necessity to go through a broker, usually an elder man of the village. Other respondents (most common among low-caste men) stated that in the past they were scared of the state and its agencies (especially the police) and they used to run away when they came: "Our employers used to threaten us – saying that the police had come to take us away and give us injections. They used to scare us, so we used to run away" (elderly man, SC, labourer – G20). The low-caste labourer notes his fear of government officials, as well as the complicity of village elites in preventing marginal groups directly accessing the state.

Many, but not all, villagers are no longer either afraid or apprehensive of directly approaching government and other officials. Manju, an SC labourer, described how his parents used to do anything and sign any paper that was asked of them. In his younger days, he too used to be afraid of the *Patwari* and *Sarpanch* but now:

> I myself speak to the related officer. I get this courage from my *televi*. If, he doesn't respond I go to his superior officer ... I have enough confidence even to go to the collector [district level official], as I have a right to ask.

He refers to his *televi*, a Telugu word that means street smarts, as well as awareness and education. The increase in *televi* was common in people's narratives of personal and social change, and related to the increase in formal schooling and accessibility of information. *Televi* was a common explanation for why people now feel confident to stand before government officials.

Although formal schooling is an important factor in increasing *televi*, experiences are just as crucial. Sangeetha, a female farmer, labourer and BC explained how in the past she rarely went out of the house, let alone spoke with officials. Once she started to move around in a group of women, however, her confidence increased:

> When you go out of the house and move around ... that gives you confidence and courage. Then slowly you become more confident that you alone can also do the work. You realize that you don't lack anything and if others can do it, you also can do it.

Now Sangeetha approaches officials, and this act of self-reliance brings her further confidence. The affective dimensions of such encounters are crucial to these virtuous circles. Returning to Geetha, past experiences going to the MPDO office provide her with self-

assurance in her subsequent encounters. She knows the procedures, and how to get things done. This not only increases her ability to negotiate such encounters, but provides a sense of achievement in itself. As anyone with experience of Indian bureaucracy may appreciate, a successful navigation gives a warm glow of satisfaction, of having insider knowledge, or perhaps autonomy. For Geetha, independent navigation of the state may provide a scenario for self-understanding, one in which she is independent, confident, as having *televi*. This contrasts with the practice of going through brokers to get work done, which reinforces her dependence on others and her subordinate status.

The second aspect of Geetha's encounter with the state is that it occurred at the Mandal level (sub-district). This again represents a shift from a time when villagers relied on village-level institutions (*Patwari* and *Sarpanch*) to solve disputes or in times of need, to a tendency today to bypass them and go directly to the block, sub-district, or even district level. This is explained to us by a Reddy man and cultivator (see also Manju's comment above).

> In the past all officials used to come only to the Police *Patel's* house [village police representative]. Now they don't have to go to anybody's house. One can go to the police station and give complaint directly . . . Previously [villagers] used to listen to *Patels* and *Patwari* and now nobody listens to anybody.

This represents a significant change to people's sightings of the state, and their constitution as subjects. In appeals made to *Patwari*, *Sarpanch* or police *Patel*, people came before the individual not as a citizen with a relationship with the state, but as a client, in a relationship with a benefactor, or village elite. That is, the pre-existing relationship between the elite person (who was also often an employer of labourers) and villager (low caste, an employee, and so on) is dominant in the interaction. In such encounters, the latter is not interpellated as a citizen in the encounter, but reaffirmed in a subordinated position. In contrast, when a person stands before a mandal-level official, they are not positioned within a village hierarchy, but with a different social position – one of citizen before a (relatively) impartial state institution.

This is not to ignore the power relations inherent in this latter interaction (they are far from social equals) but to suggest that it occurs within a different discursive environment. Geetha may be a woman, an *adivasi*, a poor labourer, but these subject positions do not deny her the right to directly address mandal-level officials. The language people use to explain the tendency to go direct to higher levels of government is revealing: 'Because of equality nobody is listening [to the *Sarpanch*]', 'Now everyone thinks he is a leader', 'Now they need not wait, each person is independent', 'Is the *sarpanch* greater than us?' The discursive context positions all people as being equally entitled to address the government; marginal groups have a 'right' to be treated on a par with village elites. Standing before high-level officials is therefore a discursive practice, one that reaffirms the discourse of equality that is articulated in the Andhra Pradesh context in relation to caste politics. Geetha's equal right to stand before the state contradicts her subordinate position within the village. It offers an alternative subject position, one which offers a different understanding of her position within the social whole.

The third aspect of Geetha's encounter with the state is that she does not stand before the state as a *universal* citizen, but one who has *preferential* rights and entitlements. As a

response to historical marginalisation and the vast differences in socio-economic status, India's leaders at the time of independence considered differentiated citizenship as more appropriate than the difference-blind universal regimes of liberal citizenship.[53] This, combined with the political populism of Indira Gandhi's electioneering and campaigning in the 1970s and 1980s, left a legacy of a myriad of schemes and entitlements that are linked to statuses such as caste, tribe, gender, age, income levels and so on.[54] These identities become crucial in one's negotiation with the state, and have become the basis of competition between groups as each strives to gain access to more government resources.[55]

Geetha stands before the government official as a woman, a member of a scheduled tribe, and as 'below the poverty line'. These classifications entitle her to additional support – in this instance, her BPL card entitles her to an additional LPG cylinder at the subsidised rate. Characteristics that position individuals as subordinate and dominated in some relationships (such as with employers, forward caste villages), position the same individuals as preferentially entitled citizens in relation with the state. This is not to dismiss the potential for such classifications to discipline certain groups, to encourage them to self-regulate in ways that achieve national goals of 'welfare'.[56] At the same time, these disciplining effects needs to be considered alongside the potential to use the contradictory meanings attached to various subject positions to re-imagine one's relationship to and positioning within the social whole.

Geetha's journey to the MPDO is therefore not solely an activity of obtaining a gas cylinder, but rather entails a set of discursive practices that can be creative resources for self-making. Geetha draws upon her confidence and *televi* to go to the office herself instead of through a broker. Each experience builds her knowledge of how to navigate the state, and reaffirms her independence in gaining access to government resources. She bypasses village-level officials, before whom she stands as a subordinated person of the village, and instead stands before an official beyond village hierarchies. She is interpellated in this encounter as a citizen, with an equal right as a high-caste person to approach the state. Finally, she stands before the official as someone who has preferential entitlements, whose marginal status gives her additional support, rather than reaffirms her subordination. Geetha is 'hailed' as a subject of government welfare, but it is the recognition and *mis*recognition of this positioning that informs her subjectivity. Practices of state encounters take place within alternative, and in some ways contradictory, discourses to the ones

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53 Jayal 2011.

54 Corbridge et al. 2005.

55 Chatterjee 2004.

56 Governmentality has commonly been used in development studies to examine how welfare and development schemes result in disciplining through self-regulation (Foucault 1986). Classifications are often central to these processes. For example Corbridge et al. argue that citizens have become aware of their own status as belonging to certain categories (and subject positions) such as 'below poverty line', 'low caste', 'scheduled tribe' and so on, in the process 'imbibing the biopolitical discourses of "the state" itself, and its attempts to seek legitimacy precisely through its wars on "poverty" and "backwardness"' (2005: 19). Chatterjee (2004) describes such classifications as bounded seriality, which became the basis for governing populations, regulating the actions of subjects including the means of democratic expression.

that constitute individuals within village hierarchies. Alternative subject positions through state encounters thereby become a creative resource in processes of self-formation.

The frequency of the three aspects outlined above in respondents' accounts of their interactions with the state suggests that they are crucial to how people understand their social being within *and beyond* their interactions with the state. To recap, these are a direct rather than mediated sighting of the state; engaging with officials that are apart from village-level hierarchies; and the status as having a privileged relationship with the state.

It is important to reiterate that while these represent common themes that emerged in interviews, these perceptions were by no means uniform among marginal groups in Krishnanagar. For many respondents, the state was not an impartial benefactor, but one that was inaccessible, or biased towards elites. This was the opinion of Maanika, who was a backward-caste widow, and daily wage labourer. In the past, members of her *jati* had successfully agitated to be reclassified as a 'backward caste', entitling Maanika to additional entitlements. This has not benefited Maanika much, however, and she tells us that: 'There is no one to inform us about such things [government schemes and entitlements]. Educated people might know all those things but they don't share them with us. We are poor people and we don't know.' Any government entitlement that Maanika has received has been due to her relationship with the *sarpanch*, forged when her husband and then daughter used to work for him as labourers. It is the *sarpanch* who she credits for helping her to secure a ration card and small plot of land. As a migrant to Krishnanagar, there are no other people of her same *jati* in the village, and no caste-based associations to forge links with political parties. Maanika encounters the state only through existing village hierarchies, under the discursive conditions of labourer/employer. Maanika's different experiences with the state highlight the need to consider the potential for creative self-making in the context of individual life biographies.

Further, the broader political context is critical to understanding how alternative discourses come into, and gain traction in, the political arena. Political parties in India have been critical in instigating caste consciousness, in the process transforming the discursive terrain and thereby influencing understandings of the self. While some caste groups have been successful in building political connections that guarantee access to government resources, members of other caste groups have not successfully done so. Some people, like Maanika, have limited contact with such parties. While social and political actors may have transformed the discursive environment, due to a lack of exposure to these competing discourses, or limited discursive abilities,[57] Maanika is less able to utilize these discursive resources in her ongoing processes of self-making. It is the *most* poor and marginal groups who are *least* able to encounter the state in a way similar to Geetha.

My point is therefore not to suggest that Geetha's experiences are representative of the general situation in Telangana, or even Krishnanagar. At the same time, enough villagers have similar experiences to Geetha to make them significant for understanding the social dynamics of Krishnanagar. For many individuals, encounters with the state offer an important opportunity for ongoing process of self-formation.

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57   Schmidt 2008.

ENCOUNTERS WITH THE STATE IN DESA TENGAH

A comparison with the practices of receiving welfare benefits in Central Lombok reveals a different, and I suggest more limited, potential for such outcomes. Ibu Bonita's encounter with the state in Desa Tengah has stark differences to how Geetha sees the state in Telangana, with implications for the possibility of creative self-formation. In obtaining welfare benefits of rice, she encounters the state within her hamlet, in the government-run *Posyandu* (health centre). News spreads that the monthly Raskin allocation has arrived, and she goes and collects it from the local official, the *Kepala Dusan*. She returns with a share of rice equal to all other households in the village but lower than the national recommendations for the programme. The practice of obtaining Raskin rice is, I suggest, indicative of discursive practices that shape how people encounter the state in Desa Tengah in programmes for social welfare more generally.

In Desa Tengah, like in Krishnanagar, people used to fear government officials in the past. There was a distrust of people wearing trousers (as opposed to the sarongs that was conventional dress for both men and women), and especially its connotation with the army. During the Suharto period, the government was perceived to be able to act with impunity, and people avoided confrontations with any government official. This extended to the teachers at local schools, and more than one respondent had not gone to school due to a fear of people wearing trousers. This situation has changed over the past twenty years. A woman in her fifties stated that she used to hide when the teachers came to take her to school, but now, she feels confident to meet any high official. She told us between fits of laughter: 'Now even if the president came, then I will go to him and make a joke and I will ask for money from him'. Encounters with the state have increased, and people in Desa Tengah express that they are more confident and less fearful in approaching state agencies.[58]

There is a difference, however, in terms of where these encounters take place, and the level of officials that people can gain access to. Unlike in Krishnanagar, the distribution for all government programmes occurs at the *dusun* and *desa* level. Although the odd official from higher levels may visit the village, the village-level PNS (civil servants) and the *Kedus* and *Kedesa* are responsible for the allocation of government resources. The distribution is sometimes arbitrary, reaching some *desa* or *dusun*, but not others. While in Telangana people explained such unevenness as being a result of elite capture or the preferential treatment of particular *jati* groups, in Desa Tengah, explanation centred on the difference between villages:

> Other villages receive kerosene and LPG gas. We do not understand why we also do not get … Maybe you can ask the *Kepala Desa* why. For us, if the rice comes, we take it, but if not, then we do not know why.

Entitlements are not delivered to individuals, but rather to villages, and from villages, to hamlets. This means that the responsibility to obtain and distribute resources rests solely

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58 I do not underestimate the way memories of the Suharto period, and often-violent actions undertaken by agents of the state, have shaped subjective experiences of the state today. This is a research topic of much interest and import, but requires methods different to those employed in this study. I have reported what the respondents indicated were their reactions.

with the leadership at the *desa* and *dusun* level. The barely-disguised reference to corruption, 'maybe you can ask the *Kepela Desa*' (other accounts were more explicit) reflects the perception that failure to receive government resources is due to village-level leadership.

Crucially, people perceived that they had no recourse to go outside the village in order to receive their entitlements to government resources. As noted in Telangana, people strategically engaged with multiple levels of government from the village, sub-district, and district level. They thereby bypassed the village-level leadership and attendant social hierarchies. In Desa Tengah, in contrast, village-level hierarchies are unrestrained in their mediation of the relationship between citizens and the state, negating the potential for interpellation as a 'citizen' according to an alternative discursive context. Individuals have no opportunity to stand before the state as a person outside of local social relations; their encounters with the state, as embodied in local officials, reaffirm prevailing social hierarchies. Ibu Bonita is not equal to any other villager before the 'state', rather the state is accessible only through village elites. Although the social distance and village hierarchies between village leadership and poor villager is not as stark in Desa Tengah as in Krishnanagar, it remains the case that such encounters do not offer alternative scenarios for self-making processes.

The second difference between Ibu Bonita and Geetha's encounter with the state is that the former enjoyed no preferential treatment before the state. As noted, multiple schemes in India are delivered according to various government classifications. The targeting of households is notoriously problematic, and often has little relation to actual need. This is less important for our purposes than the identification of some individuals as being more entitled to government resources than others. This preferential treatment, as noted above, extends to most schemes, and it was on the basis of her status as both BPL and ST that Geetha was able to make her claim to subsidised LPG. In contrast, although Ibu Bonita is significantly poorer than many people in her *dusun*, she receives the same amount as everyone else, which reduces her entitlement significantly.

Practices of equal distribution of government resources occur within and produce a different discursive context to the one in Krishnanagar. Village unity is often evoked to explain why relatively rich people receive the same as the poor,[59] as one male labourer explained: 'It is more secure in terms of the community life. There are no protests from rich people. They will complain to the *Kedus* if they get a lesser amount than anyone else.' Other people highlighted problems with identifying eligible households when so much of the *dusun* was in need of support. Others simply declared that the system was 'fair' as 'this is what the *kedus* has decided' (female handicraft worker). The discursive practices of rice distribution in Desa Tengah do not constitute their subjects as having access to certain government entitlements on the basis of their individual status, but as a member of the *dusun*, who has a share of community resources. Further, individuals are not positioned as being more entitled to assistance due to their low income, but as having an equal entitlement to everyone else.

Not everyone accepts these discursive practices. Ibu Bonita does not consider this distribution of resources as fair, stating: 'Whether the person is rich or poor, everyone

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59   Note the WB report that talks about this; see also Eggen 2012.

gets the same amount [of rice]. For me, this is not fair. The poorest should get a higher amount than the rich because their life is more miserable than the rich.' Ibu Bonita rejects her positioning as someone with equal rights to government resources, and presents herself within an alternative discourse of the poor being more entitled to government support due to their miserable condition. This also implies a different relationship with the state, one in which the government should do more to help individuals, rather than distributing resources to the 'community'. She rejects the homogeneity this implies, and highlights the differences within the *dusun*. This highlights both the ability for Ibu Bonita to reject the positioning that the discursive practices of government distribution entail in her *dusun*, as well as her inability to challenge these discourses from her marginal position.

The final difference in the practices of government distribution in Desa Tengah is the perception that schemes and programmes are ad hoc and unpredictable. The government of Indonesia has an array of schemes, but with the exception of Raskin, villagers in Desa Tengah do not know when those schemes will come into being, or why they do not. While these are often helpful for people struggling to meet their daily needs, the general perception is that they are insufficient:

> There has been some aid from the government, such as *Raskin*, *padat karya* (food for work), but it is not continuous, it happens periodically. It is very useful when it happens, but it is not enough to support our daily needs (male labourer).

Respondents spoke of cash payments (as part of the Bantuan Langsung Tunai (BLT) scheme: an unconditional cash transfer that has been provided to poor households to off-set rising fuel costs on two occasions) and the distribution of kerosene as being one-off programmes that only happen 'once in a lifetime'.[60] The irregularity and unpredictability of this top-down distribution means that such schemes are not considered an entitlement to be demanded, but rather a boon that comes every so often.

This differs from Krishnanagar, in which people like Geetha access information about what schemes are available, and if eligible, she will go and demand these from government officials. The difference between demand-led schemes and schemes that are delivered at specific and unpredictable times is apparent in a comparison of the *Padat Karya* (food for work) scheme in Indonesia and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in India. Both offer unskilled employment in projects to build community assets for rice and cash respectively. The difference lies in the term 'guarantee'. In the MGNREGA, each household is able to *demand* 100 days of such work a year, and local provisions must be in place to provide it. Although such guarantees have been found to be meaningless in many parts of India, in Krishnanagar, labourers have been successful in ensuring that such work is available. In contrast, the *Padat Karya* scheme is again unpredictable. The *Kepala Dusan* informs people when such work is available. People express the view that such work is very useful, but is too infrequent and unpredictable to make a real difference to their life. The consequences of these differences are felt not only in terms of welfare. The very practice of going to a government official and making

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60 The BLT scheme has since been revived in 2013 following another price rise of oil.

a demand is an experience that potentially refashions subjectivities. The affective dimension of Geetha's successful negotiation with the state is distinctly different from that of Ibu Bonita's, who must wait until such schemes are made available to her.

Government encounters in Desa Tengah can therefore be considered different to Krishnanagar in three important respects: a) entitlements are irregular and unpredictable; b) there is no preferential treatment for marginal villagers; and c) there are few if any direct encounters with non-village state officials. A consideration of these differences from the perspective of individuals highlights how concomitant discursive practices have consequences for processes of subjectification. Geetha encounters the state through officials both at and beyond the village, positioning her beyond village hierarchies and with a direct relationship with the state. Ibu Bonita only sees the state through local-level officials; she stands before them as a villager in a subordinated relationship with a village elite. Geetha makes demands on the state, the affective experiences of which spark reflection on her own abilities and confidence. Ibu Bonita can only wait passively for government resources. And finally, Geetha's preferential treatment before the state attaches new meanings to *adivasi*, poor, woman that contradict the subordinated positionings in the village. For Ibu Bonita, her status as being more in need is repressed in favour of village unity.

In short, practices associated with the distribution of welfare provide Geetha opportunities for radical re-imagination of self, and her position within society. The discursive context contradicts prevailing social positionings, and offers creative resources for processes of self-formation. Such opportunities are rare for Ibu Bonita, as practices occur within a discursive context that reaffirms her social positioning within the village. The word *opportunities* is crucial here, highlighting that the actual constitution of subjects is not predetermined by the discursive context. Rather, discursive practices provide creative resources from which individuals may draw upon in their refashioning of self. This is not a comparison of the effectiveness or benefits of government schemes in Desa Tengah and Krishnanagar, but rather an exploration of how different practices have potential consequences for processes of subjectification.

Villagers' experiences of decentralised government are of course not singular, and vary according to class and opportunities. Ibu Melati is also a wage labourer, but her 'encounters' with the state are qualitatively different. Ibu Melati is a cadre (informal official) at the local *posyandu* (government-run health centre). In her role, she 'educates' women about child health and related matters. She was offered the position because of her childhood friendship with a part-time PNS official (the only female PNS official in the village). For her, it has been a very positive experience:

> Through it I am able to meet various people, such as different types of PNS officers, and so this way I can widen my links ... I am more confident. I am not worried about meeting very important people, such as the kepala desa. I can speak with him with no hesitation.

Ibu Melati also encounters the state only through village-level governance institutions, but unlike Ibu Bonita, she does so in a different social positioning, as one of the 'cadres'. While she encounters the *Kepala Desa* in a hierarchically subordinated position, she speaks with confidence, even if not equality. She also speaks of the importance of the range of

interactions that her position affords, building her networks with PNS officials. Such links are often critical in Desa Tengah, where personal ties are critical to access government resources.

This different social positioning also entails a movement from being a target of state welfare ('developee') to an agent of development (developer).[61] This puts her in a different relationship with other women in the village. Ibu Melati is positioned as 'expert', relative to the 'ignorant' women whom she educates. Her association with, and role as one of, the 'developers', thereby provide an alternative set of experiences and imaginings with which to reconsider the self in relation to the social whole. This is possible due to a privileged relationship with the state, but unlike Geetha, this relationship is based on association with the state, rather than a privileged claim for welfare resources. Ibu Melati's different experiences and encounters with the state highlight how even people of the same socio-economic background will be positioned differently in relation to the decentralised state. This is especially the case with the establishment of new roles, in which villagers that were formerly 'developees' become 'developers', with implications for people's relationship with government officials and fellow villagers. Consequent (re)positioning within the more stable discursive context of Desa Tengah thereby also contains the potential for creative self-making.

THE POTENTIAL OF DECENTRALISED GOVERNANCE FOR PROCESSES OF SELF-FORMATION

Decentralisation involves a wide range of practices with the potential to influence subjectivities. These include attending meetings, voting in elections, taking part in audits, being a member of various committees and so on. In this article, I have focused on the distribution of government resources as these were the most frequent 'sightings' of the state in people's narratives. The recipient stands before a government official as the embodiment of the 'state', and receives resources as part of a relationship of mutually enforceable claims with the 'social imaginary'[62] of the state.[63] A comparison of two villages highlights subtle differences in the practices of attaining government resources, with consequences for the processes of subjectification through citizen–state encounters. Different discursive practices have implications for the social positioning of welfare recipients within the encounter, with the potential to refashion subjectivities beyond it. This does not result in a predetermined subject discursively constituted in a uniform way, but rather discourses and experiences become creative resources in the constant (re)fashioning of self.

This article has sought to identify how variations in practices in Desa Tengah and Krishnanagar affect this *potential* – that is, the potential for sites of citizen–state encounters to transform institutional contexts through the actors themselves. The comparison highlights four aspects that have implications for the potential of decentralisation to achieve social and political empowerment of marginal groups. First, demand-driven distribution

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61 Pigg 1992.

62 Arxetega 2003.

63 Tilly 1998.

of government resources in which citizens claim entitlements from the state may have beneficial consequences beyond efficiency measures. Knowledge and experience of how government works, and the confidence to navigate bureaucracy can positively re-shape self-understandings. Of course, demand-driven distribution favours people who already have the cultural and social capital to engage with the state, and should not be the sole means of delivery of government resources. At the same time, it needs to be recognised that when a) government schemes are consistent and non-arbitrary; b) citizens make claims on the state for entitlements, rather than passively receiving benefits; and c) marginal groups experience successful claims-making, then government distribution of resources becomes a potential site for creative refashioning of self.

The second message from the comparison of practices is that individuals' access to multiple levels of government can create opportunities for contradictory interpellation.[64] Although village autonomy may lead to responsive and more accountable distribution (though the evidence of these outcomes is mixed), the channelling of all government resources through the village and sub-village level reinforces local social hierarchies. In contrast, the experience of obtaining entitlements directly from officials who are apart from village relations offers a distinctly different discursive context in which to evaluate one's position. This may contradict one's subordinate position within the village, and provide an alternative evaluation of the self within the social whole. This is not to downplay the formidable barriers many individuals still face in interactions with sub-district and district-level officials, nor does it eliminate local clientelistic relations. Rather it enables individuals to strategically engage with multiple levels of government within and beyond the village, with each encounter containing potentially different discursive resources for self-formation. The implication for decentralisation is that devolving of responsibilities for poverty alleviation and social welfare to the most localised level (as in Central Lombok) may present fewer opportunities for refashioning of selves compared to governance that is accessible at multiple levels (as in Andhra Pradesh).

Third, the comparison suggests a need to reconsider the consequences of government classifications in processes of subjectification. Targeted schemes can reaffirm deficiencies of particular groups vis-à-vis the broader population and encourage individuals to self-regulate behaviour that achieves government objectives of improved welfare.[65] The internalisation of a status of being 'deficient, yet able to be reformed' is not absent in the accounts of welfare recipients in Krishnanagar, but neither is this the extent of their self-reflection. An alternative reading is that such classifications are also signs of preferential access to government resources, and recognition of their right to greater government support. The discursive context not only suggests a deficient subject, but also one that has been historically wronged, and who is supported in their 'progress'. There are thereby different ways of interpreting the 'hailing' of the 'classified' subject in encounters with the state, with the subject's interpretation (the understandings that influence their response to the call) shaping the processes of interpellation. Classifications and preferential access to entitlements therefore may offer

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64 Mouffe 1988.

65 See Chatterjee 2004, Corbridge et al. 2005.

alternative resources for self-making. Local-level distribution based on principles of universal entitlements or 'community unity' diminishes this possibility.

Finally, the broader political context is critical to the production of alternative and contradictory discourses. Geetha's positioning in relation to government officials is the consequence of political and social actions that have demanded new relations and forms of recognition for women and low-caste citizens. As noted above, the construction of self has a capacity for creativity, but this creativity is limited to the resources of the institutional and discursive context. Without earlier and ongoing struggles for alternative meanings and identities for marginalised groups in India, as well as politically powerful backers to reassert claims, Geetha's construction of self in the encounter with the state would reaffirm, rather than challenge, prevailing social hierarchies. This underlines that the consequences for self-formation that arise from the encounter between the citizen and the state are not reducible to the actions of either. Encounters are always embedded within a political and social context, comprised of actors such as political parties, civil society groups, the media and so on, that produce, contest and negotiate discourses.[66] These, in turn, provide possibilities for alternative understandings of self.

While the comparison between Krishnanagar and Desa Tengah suggests that these four aspects are significant for our understanding of the potential consequences of decentralisation, it is important to note that comparative studies of other locales will reveal other considerations. The actualisation of decentralisation is by definition localised, and these two villages are not representative of India or Indonesia as a whole. At the same time, the comparison demonstrates that differences in the bureaucratic institutional framework of decentralisation at the national or state level shapes to an extent the possibilities at the local level. The differences between Geetha and Maanika, Ibu Bonita and Ibu Melati, also underline that the ways people in the same locale encounter and identify with the state vary considerably. Different social networks, personal characteristics, life biographies and circumstances will shape experiences of the state, and one's positioning in relation to the state and other villagers.

I have purposefully compared the experiences of women who are of a similar socio-economic background: conventionally considered as targets of state welfare. The experiences of higher caste and class people will diverge greatly from those of the female labourers explored above, with different implications for the practices and institutions of decentralised governance. Further, men experience the act of receiving welfare differently. The feminisation of welfare is a tendency evident in many parts of the world,[67] and India and Indonesia are no different in that the practice of obtaining state benefits has become a gendered role. Encounters with the state can therefore be influential in reaffirming and refashioning gendered subjectivities. The ways that class and gender shape encounters and identifications is a topic deserving of further research and attention, and I have barely scratched the surface of these possibilities in this article. My intent has rather been to show the *potential* of state encounters of welfare distribution to contribute processes of self-formation, and the *importance* of different practices and institutional forms for the realisation of refashioned subjectivities.

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66   My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this point and encouraging me to expand on it.

67   Auyero 2012; Ferguson 2013.

The potential for practices related to decentralised governance for creative self-formation should therefore be factored in to institutional design and the evaluation of consequences. This will require further research that goes beyond the *possible* implications of these practices to unravel *in detail* the constant refashioning of self in which state encounters are but one influence. As actors are the locus for institutional change or continuity, such processes are central to understanding what impact shifting subjectivities have for the actualisation of decentralisation,[68] in addition to the potential impact on other, socially embedded institutions. Small changes to the constitution of subjects as a result of decentralisation are ultimately critical to the way that the institutional context is produced anew, or refashioned in transformative ways. This article has argued for greater consideration to be placed on this overlooked aspect in studies of decentralisation.

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68   The author's ongoing research project funded under an Australian Research Council DECRA award examines processes of subjectification in two urban locations: Medan in North Sumatra, Indonesia, and Shimla, Himachal Pradesh, India. This four-year comparative project will provide a more comprehensive account of how multiple practices of decentralised governance influence ongoing processes of self-formation within a shifting socio-cultural context.

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