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FIXERS, PATRONAGE, 'FIXING', AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN KARNATAKA

Anand Inbanathan
D. V. Gopalappa

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FIXERS, PATRONAGE, 'FIXING,' AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN KARNATAKA

**Anand Inbanathan
and
D.V. Gopalappa***

Abstract

Various individuals, including party officials, elected representatives of panchayats, and sundry persons carry out functions designated as 'fixing'. These activities are carried out for rural people, mainly in relation to government agencies and departments, which they would otherwise have found difficult to accomplish on their own. A fee is charged for such work. Elites ('big men' of the village) too are occasionally engaged in fixing. An essential distinction we have made is to emphasise the payment of a fee for whatever assignment is carried out. The function, rather than the person, has been given primary importance in analysing 'fixers' and 'fixing'.

Introduction

With the enormous number of poor in the country, India had embarked on a programme of development aimed at achieving higher economic growth and a just distribution of income. However, despite successive plans, and other government initiatives, poverty has remained extremely high. Even to suggest that India could have, like the developmental states of east Asia, made economic growth the main focus, rather than getting embroiled in political manipulation and restrictive policies related to industry and economic activities, is to miss the belief held for many years that the distribution of income and anti-poverty efforts could be carried out even without substantial economic growth (see Bhagwati, 1988: 539-555). The panchayati raj in Karnataka (institutions of rural local governance, of district councils and below), in its various manifestations (see Crook and

* Anand Inbanathan is Associate Professor, Sociology, and D. V. Gopalappa is Assistant Professor, Economics, Institute for Social and Economic Change, Nagarbhavi, Bangalore-560072, India. Email: dr.anand@vsnl.com

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Manor, 1998; Inbanathan, 1992; Inbanathan et. al, 1997; Mathew, 1986), came into existence on the principle that people should be involved in the functioning of the panchayats, such as in the planning of development activities, and that this would increase the benefits reaching them. However, this is not something that can be taken for granted. To consider the panchayats as a system of service delivery (rather than governance as some people do) is also to recognize that there are several weaknesses in the manner in which not only these institutions but also state government agencies work. It is in this context that we have located the analysis of fixers and fixing.

A Discussion of Concepts

People who are engaged in the activity of 'fixing', the fixers, are not a new social entity in the Indian context. They have existed in various forms and functions for years, and have taken on various names, as the situation demanded. Being called social workers, brokers, middlemen, or pyraveekar ('fixer'), as the case may be, they have functioned as an intermediary between the village people and political parties, or officials and the government, or political representatives of different levels. These were individuals whose main occupation entailed functioning as brokers or pyraveekars. There were also others who functioned as brokers from time to time, but whose sole or even main occupation was not that of a fixer. These latter individuals included party functionaries or workers, village or local elites, and elected representatives of panchayats. The fact of being a temporary activity or a more permanent one also has a bearing on the activities that are taken up through 'fixing' by specific individuals.

Studies that focussed on fixers/brokers have not been plentiful, but there have been some references to their functions and utility in various contexts. Neale (1983) suggested that moneylenders in rural areas functioned also as culture brokers¹, and played an essential role, even though they were not held in high esteem. Ram Reddy and Haragopal (1985) focused on the role that pyraveekars played as intermediaries between the rural people and the administration. They included among fixers, traditional officials of villages (*karnams* or *patels*), politician pyraveekars (those even holding formal political positions) and officials who functioned also as fixers. They had a fourth category of persons who had no political or administrative position, but who functioned as fixers as a means of livelihood. It is this group (the fourth) which they described and discussed. Manor (2000: 816-17) has suggested that Karnataka had a 'sizeable army of small-time, freelance political 'fixers'.... who functioned as 'political' intermediaries between the localities and powerful figures (bureaucrats, and especially politicians) at higher levels'. Manor also indicated that these fixers whom he described did not hold formal political or administrative positions.

A close relation exists between fixing and the activities entailed in patronage. However, while some of the activities taken up through 'fixing' are almost the same as those carried out through patronage, it is necessary to note the conceptual distinction between the two, mainly because of a monetary/commercial element (though not exclusively). Fixing i) Fixing is a paid activity, a commercial transaction that entails just a transitory relationship, usually where the person who wants a job done asks someone to do so. Generally, the person who wanted something done would make the initial contact, with the expectation of terminating the contact once the assignment was completed. An element of 'fixing' or 'brokerage' was also that these individuals (who were involved in fixing) acted as intermediaries-i.e., they did not directly control the resources, but were connected with those who did, or whom they could influence. Patronage ii) This entails a continuing relationship, covering various activities, and reciprocity between the person who has been the recipient of patronage and the person who extends the patronage, and may not have a monetary component (payment for work done). Patron-client relations have specific qualities (see Komito: 1984: 173-94; Komito: 1992; Korovkin: 1988:105-26; Scott:1972: 91-113; Eisenstadt and Roniger, 1980: 42-77; Eisenstadt & Roniger, 1984; Powell,1970: 411-25; Foster 1963: 1280-94), and so too do other clientelist relations related to the political sphere (see Theobald, 1999: 491-502), where favours, obligations and duties are exchanged. In a typical patron-client relationship there is a status difference, the patron or the one who extends the patronage being of higher status and the client being of lower status. The contact or association can be initiated by either party, and the association may not be confined only to the immediate assignment or matter that needs to be carried out. However, neo-clientelist relations are not characterized by wide status asymmetry between the main actors, and a greater flexibility in terms of the relations is possible². Why these distinctions and emphases become essential is because the final outcome of fixing or of patronage may sometimes be identical in nature. But they may be carried out by different persons, or, even by the same person who has a transitory relationship with one individual, and acts essentially as a broker, taking money for his work, while in another relationship it is patronage and not essentially a commercial transaction. The distinctions are also significant since there is a political result in many cases, and the political ambitions of the individuals involved, and the support and base that they build up through various means, are also important aspects of electoral politics. Forming a part of political clientelism, the exchange involves the benefits that a person in a position of influence can give to someone who does not have direct access to such resources. In return, the latter individual who has his vote, uses this resource in exchange for the favours given to him (see Komito, 1992). However, the value of his vote may not be sufficient if the assistance he needs is of a kind that the influential person considers is not covered by the value of the vote. In such an event, other

resources may need to be generated before the person in an influential position undertakes any activity on behalf of the prospective client. Another factor that is visible in both fixing and patronage is where corruption forms a part of this activity. Not all activities in fixing or patronage are illegal or corrupt, but several activities do have such a component. Corruption, patronage or fixing, in these cases, are not mutually exclusive. Where the difference occurs is in the conception of fixing as involving an act or function of an intermediary, broker, etc., where the individual is instrumental in achieving a certain end for someone else—and in patronage, the person himself has control over the resource and hence does not need an intermediary to act for him. A final distinction is the nature of reward for the work done on behalf of the person who had sought some assistance—in the case of the fixer, or fixing, the work is rewarded immediately, usually in the form of money. Patronage does not always involve immediate rewards, and not necessarily of money either, but may be returned in some form over a longer period.

The present paper focuses on the process of 'fixing' rather than the fixers. We extend the discussion of Manor, and Ram Reddy and Haragopal, insofar as we talk about the activity that various individuals take up, rather than only those whose main occupation was that of fixers, who did this work as a more or less full-time activity and as a means of livelihood. The rationale behind this approach is to take into consideration the large number of persons who have now been elected to panchayats and some of whom carried out activities that are usually within the purview of the fixers. Further, several persons who had been working as 'fixers' were elected to the panchayats, and continued their activities as fixers. The paper is based on a study that covered three districts: Mandya (in southern Karnataka), Gulbarga (in northern Karnataka), and Dakshina Kannada (coastal Karnataka), and two taluks (sub-district divisions) in each district; six grama panchayats in Mandya, five in Gulbarga, and four in Dakshina Kannada. The elected representatives of the selected panchayats (except for a few who were not available), 60 fixers, panchayat officials, as well as a number of ordinary residents of villages were interviewed in these selected areas. Illustrations have also been taken from cases in Bangalore rural district panchayats. While a wider study covered a range of issues connected to the panchayats, a more focused section was also included, specifically on the question of fixing.

The Activities in Fixing

Activities that were taken up regularly by the fixers or in fixing were mainly in relation to government agencies and departments:

- * Getting income and caste certificates, for the general public, as well as for students,

- * Procuring loans, through government programmes or schemes, or from banks,
- * Influencing political representatives, or leaders, to select beneficiaries of development programmes,
- * Land registrations, and related matters (getting khatha³, for example),
- * Intervening in police cases,
- * Getting party tickets at election time (taluk and zilla panchayats had elections that were contested on party lines, but grama panchayats did not have the official participation of political parties; hence intervention for getting party tickets was officially only at taluk and zilla panchayat levels).

Only in the last point here are government agencies not directly involved.

Not all these functions were carried out by the same individuals. Different persons functioned at different levels, and their contacts varied from case to case. Hence, their sphere of functioning too differed. In a general sense, the first function listed above was carried out mainly by educated persons for a small fee. The fee, however, was much higher if a false certificate was sought (not an unusual request). Usually, a person of higher status and power was required to effect the second function of arranging loans. Selection of beneficiaries was a matter that had variations in different areas. In some places, the role of elites was perceptible in the selection of beneficiaries for development schemes. These elites (called *dhodda manusharu* in Kannada, meaning 'big men') influenced the selections, even though in principle, beneficiaries were to be selected in grama sabhas. However, in the selection of beneficiaries, fixing was also a possibility, where representatives were able to influence the selection of beneficiaries. Land registration was not usually carried out by persons of relatively higher education but by those of lower education (less than high school), who were well equipped with a knowledge of rules, and contacts with officials who carried out such duties as registration. Registration was not only of normal land transactions, but sometimes involved making false registrations, or registering encroached lands. In police cases, persons who could successfully intervene were usually those of a higher social standing. This could include village elites, or representatives (not all representatives, but those from among the elites) who could, for a fee, or some other consideration, intervene on behalf of someone who has been arrested. For relatively minor crimes (theft, cheating) police chose to arrest the person, possibly beat him, and kept him in the police station for a few days. Fixers were employed by family members to intercede on their behalf, to have the arrested person released, for a price—partly to be paid to the police and partly to be kept by the

fixers. In some cases, a middleman was employed to file a case for the complainant, and another was employed by the accused.

Persons of local importance who sometimes functioned as patrons were also in need to get into elective positions to increase their power. For example, a grama panchayat representative (who was one of the village elites) in Mandya was very anxious to get elected as a panchayat president because there was a police case against someone in his family. He thought (this was his perception*) being the president of the panchayat would enable him to get the police case dismissed, while not being the president gave him less power to influence the police. Since he was not eligible to contest for the post of president, he thought the next best alternative would be to have his wife elected as the president. This outcome did not come through due to the opposition of another person in the panchayat, who had sufficient power to have his candidate elected as president. The present illustration of having to become the panchayat president is not the only means available to the person to influence the police. But if he were elected (or if his wife was) he could have carried out that act of influencing the police through his own devices and also political position.

What needs to be noted is that if a person already had some power and influence in the area, then becoming a grama panchayat president enhanced his power. The post of president of grama panchayat, in itself, did not provide any noticeable power to the person holding that office, particularly if that person was from a disadvantaged group such as a scheduled caste, or a woman, who did not have had any political experience before being elected a panchayat member and president. The authority attached to the position of president did not automatically translate into power for the incumbent of that post, but the president's power (in grama panchayats, and also to an extent in the taluk and zilla panchayats⁵) depended also on the person who occupied the post. Fixers, as well as the general public, were of the opinion that not all representatives could influence the police, and that those who could indeed influence the police were the ones who were perceived as possessing power. This group also included elected representatives of even higher political institutions, such as Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs). The last function that we listed was to get party tickets at election time. While this was not a regular activity, it was usually high profile rural elites or party functionaries who had the capacity to affect the distribution of tickets in elections. However, whether this was fixing or patronage is not always easy to decide, as the following case illustrates.

In the case of a zilla panchayat (ZP) member's election, he was able to get a party ticket through the intervention of a MLA (who was also a minister). This MLA asked him to contest, in preference to others who had also wanted to contest in the constituency. The ZP member, however,

also paid a substantial sum to the minister, who had told him that local leaders needed to be paid to mobilize support for him. Much of the money was reportedly retained by the minister. Paying for a particular activity, such as getting a party ticket is fixing, but here the minister and ZP member also had a continuing relationship, a form of patronage or clientelism, where the minister had sponsored his candidature, and interacted with him on a regular basis.

The names of fixers have varied from place to place. In many places, *dallali* was the word used for fixer. In some parts of Gulbarga, such as Jewargi and Shahpur, fixers have been called pyraveekars. Both villagers and the fixers identified certain persons as pyraveekars, and by and large, there was no noticeable negative connotation attached to the name as such. In Chitapur and Gulbarga taluks they were addressed as brokers/middlemen, and occasionally as 'pyravee' (which is usually the term for the activity, rather than the person performing such actions—though we came across places where the actors themselves were called 'pyravee'). Generally, they preferred to be seen as social workers or leaders, though even in this case, as in Shahpur, they chose to be called pyravees. In Dakshina Kannada, however, there was a marked reluctance of persons to be referred to as fixers (pyraveekars), though their functions (among others) included that of a typical fixer. They considered themselves as social workers. Evidently, in this district there was a negative connotation attached to being called a pyraveekar or fixer or middleman. 'Social worker' on the other hand has always had a respectable ring to it, with the indication that there was a service orientation or altruistic motive behind people's actions. Politicians, very often, called themselves social workers, to indicate their commitment to the people's needs, apparently without getting anything in return. Though the preference was to be called social workers, the public in Dakshina Kannada called them middlemen. Likewise, in Mandya, fixers were called middlemen, though they wanted to be called leaders (*nayakaru*, in Kannada). However, to be called leaders was not related to their work alone, as fixers, but also depended on how much they could effect decisions on behalf of their clients, i.e., an indication of power. 'Leader' was also an honorific title, which fixers would not be eligible to, unless the people saw them as having 'earned' it through their successful interventions on behalf of their clients. Those who functioned as fixers on a more or less full-time basis, regularly (almost every day) went to the taluk or district headquarters in search of work or assignments from potential clients. Incidentally, there was considerably more openness in discussing fixers, by both the fixers and the general public, in Mandya and Gulbarga, though there was some reluctance to talk about fixers and fixing in Dakshina Kannada. The point here is not that Dakshina Kannada did not have fixers, or that they did not need anyone to carry out 'fixing' on their behalf. It appears in Dakshina Kannada the general level of literacy and education being higher than those of

other districts enabled them to gather information themselves, rather than depending on 'fixers'. If they needed anyone to intervene on their behalf later on, they went to the elected representatives. The dependence on fixers was higher in Gulbarga and Mandya, which were also districts with relatively lower levels of literacy (particularly Gulbarga).

While we have termed as fixers those who carried out 'fixing' on a more or less full-time basis (in this connection, those who continued these activities even after getting elected to the panchayats have not been designated as 'fixers') it is by no means an easy task to classify any particular activity as fixing. Part of the complicating factors is the somewhat derogatory connotation sometimes, and in some districts, (though not always) attached to being called a 'fixer'. Being a 'middleman' is not an activity that most people see with favour, or respect. At another level, fixers were sometimes considered as being engaged in corrupt activities. Hence, the activities normally undertaken by fixers were talked of as though they did not exist, or if they did, that very few people were engaged in them. Further, and this seems to be the most difficult matter to navigate, other than the 'professional' fixers, the same people were not always engaged in acts of 'fixing'. They had a regular source of income such as agriculture, or business, or as contractors (building construction), and therefore, did not always expect monetary payments for the activity they were engaged in on behalf of someone or the other. Thus, in the latter cases, these activities were more likely to come under patronage rather than fixing. The occupation of fixers is not necessarily one that is carried out over a very long period. Persons who had been engaged in activities as fixers, after a while, found occupations or sources of income that were more regular and reliable, and stopped their activities as fixers⁶ (as we observed in Mandya). Educated unemployed often took up the job as fixers to earn a living, since it did not entail any training or formal means of recruitment. What they did was to enable their client to save time and effort and not go to government offices, for instance, so that the client could get on with his usual work, perhaps agriculture, without hindrance or interruption. These fixers stated that they would stop working as fixers once they got 'permanent' employment, preferably in the government. Indications were that their numbers were larger in Gulbarga and Mandya, and less in Dakshina Kannada. However, as the only means of ascertaining the presence of fixers was their accessibility, as well as the observations of persons in the local areas, why fixers should be less visible in Dakshina Kannada is not entirely certain-or why there should be a much smaller number of fixers (as seems to be the case) in this district compared to the other two.⁷

To what extent are these activities legitimate means of making a living, involving a fee for a service rendered in a lawful activity, as against a percentage/commission for an activity which is essentially rent-seeking? For instance, there were several references to elected

representatives who were instrumental in handing out contracts to various individuals, who then paid them a percentage of the contract. As a zilla panchayat member stated, this was frequently done. While the commercial or monetary element is decidedly prominent, the handing out of contracts is through direct control over these resources (one of the earlier points of differentiation between patronage and fixing was on the basis of having direct control over resources, or influence over someone who does). However, we do not see this instance as a typical case of either fixing or patronage. A further distinction arises in this case, which is related to the specific activity undertaken by the representative or fixer. When activities are taken up on behalf of someone else, they are classified as either fixing or patronage. But when the representative takes a decision that is meant to benefit himself (as through a percentage of a contract) then it is clearly rent-seeking.

Villagers recognized what can be construed as legitimate activity, and what entails the exceeding of such limits, which then go into essentially rent-seeking activities. Paying a percentage for the loans they have been able to get is something villagers are willing to do, as a means of getting the loan in the first place. Whether the fixers have employed less than legitimate means to procure these loans, as for example by promising a part of the amount to those who have the authority to sanction the loans, is something the villagers were willing to concede, but did not consider as illegal activity. They saw it as a necessary fee for getting what they needed.

The legitimacy or otherwise of the activities entailed in fixing are obviously of relevance in such cases as mentioned above. That there are some activities which are not lawful (for example, the more pronounced character of wrong-doing in bribing the police to let off someone accused of a crime) are considered as being a part of a fixer's job. But when a representative carries out such an activity or function, as some of them do, these are not normal functions of political representatives. Representatives have certain functions that are normal and necessary as part of their responsibilities as elected representatives. However, if representatives were engaged in illegal activities, using their position, then it is not a part of their normal functions as representatives as we see it, though there is some ambiguity in the perceptions of the village people. There is no fixed perception of some activities as legal or illegal—the question was of whether the representatives were able to effectively deal with the requirements of the people (when such requests were made⁸).

Fixing, which may be for immediate monetary gain, or for more elaborate relations entailed in patronage, those leading to illegal activities may be considered rent-seeking, or plain corruption, and cannot be considered normal duties and functions of the representatives. Representatives often did not consider certain activities unlawful but as

normal and necessary, such as giving a percentage of loans to officials, so that they would be sanctioned, and the beneficiaries could at least avail of some benefit. However, where someone who was not eligible was selected as beneficiary, the persons who were engaged to effect such a decision were paid much more. In this context, it should be noted that while grama sabhas are intended as the venues where beneficiaries to various schemes are selected, it is often the representatives, or even officials (such as executive officers of taluk panchayats) who make such selections. In these circumstances representatives can make a selection, whether through a payment that someone made, or favouring a supporter or even family members.

Variations in interpretations were observed among both representatives as well as the general public in Dakshina Kannada, who were quick to state that fixing was not needed or found in Dakshina Kannada since, with the advent of the new panchayats, elected representatives themselves were able to 'help' the people get what they need. They also claimed that the payment of money was neither solicited nor given. However, in Gulbarga, an open admission to the need and presence of pyraveekars was expressed by both representatives as well as members of the public. The only additional observation was that now that elected representatives were present, they had taken over some of the activities of the fixers, depriving fixers of their jobs. This observation was also made in Mandya, where there were indications that there were fixers, but in recent years, the functions of fixers were being performed more by elected representatives (from the panchayats) and less by those whose occupation was that of fixers. However, the degree to which such changes have taken place is uncertain. An official in a panchayat suggested that much of the work that fixers used to do are now taken up by representatives, so the number of fixers has drastically declined. On the other hand, the comment from a fixer was that representatives are not familiar with government programmes and schemes, and details about how to get work done in government offices⁹. Hence, far from a reduction in work, they have more work to do, since there are plenty of government schemes and programmes. From the point of view of village people, fixers would be able to get their work done more expeditiously than if they were to do it themselves—knowledge of the programmes and contacts among officials being the most significant advantages that the fixers possessed. And a panchayat president's husband (who functions more as the president than the president herself) observed that fixers cannot get things done on their own and had to depend on representatives for various matters. While a representative may do something for a fixer on one or two occasions, he will not be inclined to do so more often, since the representatives too have to be seen as doing something for their constituents and supporters. Hence, in his opinion, the presence of representatives has certainly reduced the need for fixers on the scale

that was seen earlier. He has, however, overlooked the distinct possibility that the fixer will pay the representative for any work that he does for him (i.e., for the fixer), and thus, the monetary incentive would probably overcome any reluctance in carrying out the fixer's requests. A representative has certain authority which the fixers lack, and they can ask questions in the panchayat about the functioning of officials. Thus, if they were to ask officials to do something, the officials may not totally ignore them. Fixers can be ignored, though if they were to pay officials for the benefit which they sought, officials may be forthcoming with what they (fixers) wanted. An example of this is the provision of electricity connections, through the bhagyajyothi programme—representatives can recommend connections and may not even have to pay anything for the officials to implement these recommendations, but fixers have to ask and also pay for them.

Most of those interviewed in Dakshina Kannada claimed that there were no fixers in their areas, but a few were willing to state that there were fixers, albeit a very small number, and that these people worked at the district and state levels, rather than the local levels of the grama panchayats or even taluk panchayats. The problem again is a matter of interpretation. As an ex-MLA of Dakshina Kannada observed, representatives' voices carry some weight, and normally they would not need to bribe officials to get their work done. There is no doubt that representatives would be petitioned for something or the other. It is a matter of whether it is a favour given, or a commercial transaction, that the question of fixing or patronage is gauged. It is accepted that clientelism and, more specifically, electoral clientelism would be a necessary part of the functioning of representatives, insofar as the building of support for elections is a precondition to political success. This is obviously of more concern to those who have political ambitions than those who perceive their tenure in the panchayats as a 'once only' situation.

'Fixers' and 'Fixing'

The full-time occupation of fixers is something only a few people took up and stayed with through their entire working life. The bulk of their income in this case, was from fixing, though they may have some subsidiary income from small landholdings or business. Others who took up fixing as an occasional activity had a more regular source of income, from agriculture, or as contractors or business, and took up fixing only when someone asked them to do something, for which they would also be paid a fee. Representatives too, from time to time took up this activity, and not only was their income derived through fixing, but their effectiveness in fixing was enhanced due to the position they held. While no definite figures are available, it seems likely that about one-third of the

representatives in Mandya and Gulbarga were engaged in fixing, and perhaps a much lower proportion in Dakshina Kannada. A recurring theme in the context of representatives in the panchayats was that they did not get a reasonable salary¹⁰ to function as representatives, and therefore needed an income, either through their earlier occupation, or through other sources. Those who had worked as fixers and had then been elected to the panchayats, generally continued with this occupation, and their experience served them well in carrying out the functions of a fixer. The representatives who took up fixing after getting elected, were able to get some income through this activity, but their lack of experience was a handicap, at least initially. Their motivation to take up fixing in the first place was essentially to get monetary benefits. Hence, the inclination to make some money during their tenure was present among a very large proportion of the representatives- they wanted to be compensated for functioning as representatives. Whether the representatives who now carried out the activities of fixing were able to continue this means of earning after their tenure was not known, though the persons who earlier were fixers could revert to this occupation once their term as panchayat members was over.

In the three districts that we covered for this study, one of the significant facts that was observed was that a large proportion of those who were engaged in fixing were party workers of various ranks, and contacts. Their proximity to higher ranked leaders was instrumental in their effectiveness in fixing. This connection with politics and political functionaries was also associated with their ambitions to become elected representatives at some time, enabling them to get party tickets and contest the elections.

That the party identity is of some significance is to be noted in the context of whom the client would choose to carry out his work/assignment. If the client had some political contacts, or if the fixer had political links which may be of use in carrying out the assignment (or if a representative is approached for a particular favour), the political party and caste identities were taken into consideration. In Mandya, for instance, the district from which the present chief minister was elected, and which is his home district, Congress-I party workers made claims (whether true could be in doubt) on the chief minister's position, for example suggesting that they knew the chief minister (or even if only to imply that since the chief minister was of the Congress-I, a fixer with Congress-I affiliation can gain additional benefit). However, a known association with the Chief Minister (through having actually met him), as in the case of one of the study interviewees, gave the person additional power to effect outcomes that he desired.

Fixers were from different caste or community groups, but to a larger extent they were from castes that were in the upper half of the

caste rank order. Considering the caste character of the village social structure, these castes had several advantages, which were lacking among those lower in the social structure (particularly the Scheduled Castes). The possibility of better contacts among officials was found to a greater extent among fixers of higher castes than among the Scheduled Castes. Earlier, very few fixers were from Scheduled Caste groups, although we were told that in the past few years there has been an increasing number of fixers from these groups. These were usually educated youth who would otherwise have been unemployed, and who chose to carry out such work to earn a living. The assignments which they normally took up were essentially those which required some education to fill up application forms, but otherwise, hardly any influence as such. Thus, when they were new to the occupation of fixers, their contacts among officials were also quite limited. Further, being fixers did not automatically indicate that they had any base, whether political or of caste, which may have given them some power and influence in carrying out their assignments. On the other hand, a factor which has been instrumental in providing more space for the scheduled castes to function as fixers is that of affirmative action. Affirmative action has been instituted for scheduled castes in political institutions as well as in the government bureaucracy. Those who had functioned as fixers for even a few years were able to convert their visibility to their villages into political votes and get elected to the panchayat institutions. This in turn gave them an additional identity to enhance their effectiveness as fixers. They were also able to interact more comfortably with officials of their castes, in which case, their ability to successfully carry out assignments for their clients increased.

Fixers generally took up matters which persons from their own communities wanted. While fixers themselves said that they did not make any caste differentiation when it came to taking up clients, the people stated that they preferred someone from their own community to carry out work for them. Several instances in all three districts indicated the preference of both clients and fixers to confine their interactions to those within their own caste group (at times it may also be confined to the same political party). This only indicates preferences. While all castes may not be represented among the fixers or those who carry out such activities, the people have to manage with whom they can find. In Mandya, Vokkaligas were in greater number among the fixers, and also, Vokkaliga clients did not choose to go to fixers from other castes, such as Scheduled Castes. However, persons from the Scheduled Castes occasionally went to fixers from the Vokkaliga caste, but more often to fixers who were Scheduled Castes. This depended on the person's (prospective client) assessment of who was likely to be more effective to carry out his commission. Scheduled Castes were sometimes disadvantaged in influencing officials since the caste factor was an impediment in certain cases. In Gulbarga, fixers were mainly from either the Lingayat caste

(which is a dominant caste in this area) or from Scheduled Castes. There was no clear indication of the castes in Dakshina Kannada, which were better represented among the fixers.

Very few fixers were women. This does not imply that problems that were handled by fixers were essentially problems related to males alone. The opportunities for a woman to become a fixer appear to be fewer than those for a man. Women who became fixers generally had connections with family members who had been fixers, such as a woman in Gulbarga who said her father was a pyraveekar, and that she used to accompany him on his work. Thus, she not only learnt the skills of this trade, but subsequently, became a pyraveekar herself. Being a fixer, however, was not her sole occupation. And she was also a businesswoman, and owned a provision store. By her own admission, her earnings as fixer were earlier very modest [may have been very small indeed, since she was also working as an *anganwadi* teacher (child care centre, below school going age), who are not highly paid functionaries], but now that she has been in this occupation for a while, she claimed that she could fix the rate at which she will carry out any work for a client. Her advantages were that she had some knowledge of the fixer activities related to land disputes (having gone with her father when he worked as a pyraveekar), she lived in the taluk headquarters and not far from government offices, and she could take time off to carry out the fixers' work.

Otherwise, women were reluctant to undertake this work since it involved going from office to office, and took a lot of time-which most women were not willing to do. There were a few educated women in Mandya, who set up 'stalls' (they could hardly be called an office) in front of government offices in the taluk, and sold stamp papers, wrote out applications for clients, and also carried out work at the government offices for the clients. Some of the clients were women, who wanted to file applications for 'widow pension', for example, which these fixers wrote out for them. While the reservation of one-third of the seats in the panchayats has given women a significant presence (as representatives), they were rarely engaged as fixers. But there were far more occasions when women representatives' husbands were contacted to carry out some assigned work, if they were known to have contacts and a political profile that enabled them to successfully do the work-essentially as a fixer, because most often there was a fee attached to their work.

The fixers could not thrive or even survive if there was no need for their services, or if others could provide these services. Full-time fixers may be declining in number (from the observations of several persons), but quite clearly they were nowhere near becoming an extinct species even with the panchayats in existence. While there were indeed references to the unreliability of fixers, and that on occasion fixers collected money

and did not do what they had promised, by and large, it appears they were sufficiently reliable as to be sought out by the people. Evidently, the longer established means of functioning still continued even though panchayats in their more or less present form have functioned since 1987. The continued confidence that fixers, by and large, commanded, ensured that they were sought after even though some of the panchayat representatives too were engaged in fixing. However, there was a lack of confidence in representatives in Gulbarga and Mandya (partly, due to their recent entry into politics and their lack of knowledge of government programmes, inexperience in administration, and unfamiliarity with political manoeuvring and manipulation). This lack of confidence in the representatives was not observed in Dakshina Kannada, where the people appeared to have a greater belief in their representatives.

In Chitapur and Shahpur taluks of Gulbarga district, for instance, a few fixers themselves have been elected to the panchayats. And further, other representatives have even received a form of 'training' or orientation from officials to carry out the functions of a fixer. Thus, the 'professional' fixers (pyraveekars) have been finding it difficult to get jobs and commissions. The manner in which fixers have been losing out to representatives in their income earning capacity has encouraged some of them to contest the elections and carry out their work as fixers, but now with the additional benefit of being representatives themselves.

Fixers, Elites, or Representatives: the Choice of the People

An issue that needs to be discussed is the relative position of a fixer vis-à-vis a patron, or a person of high status—a member of the local elite, whose intervention is sought when some favour is needed, and the position of a representative who occasionally engages in fixing. In the local context of a village, a member of the elite is the preferred choice if the person who seeks a favour is associated through a patron-client relation. An existing relation of this sort straightaway obviates the necessity to contact anyone else. If such a relation does not already exist, and if a local representative is seen to have sufficient contacts, influence, and power to effect the desired outcome, then he/she would be sought. For example, a former representative and grama panchayat president derives his income as a contractor. He is known to have carried out panchayat works, which people have emphatically stated were of high quality. His reputation for honest work has thereby been sustained, though one might dispute the ethical standing of taking up panchayat works when he was the president of the same panchayat. And, he is also seen as having developed the panchayat, 'without making any money for himself'. Thus, there is no question that someone who does some favour for people without taking any money is held in greater esteem than someone who takes money,

even if the outcome is the same. On the other hand, many of the representatives, particularly from the Scheduled Castes, and women, are known to be relatively powerless to effect any desired outcome (generally on the activities earlier listed), and hence were not usually contacted. A representative who already had the required political and official contacts, and was known to have functioned as a fixer in the past, had his position enhanced through being an elected representative. However, there is no indication that the position of representative by itself, particularly at the grama panchayat level, increased the power or influence of the representative to a noticeable extent. Being a grama panchayat president does at times help in matters such as police cases (as a respondent told us), but this too is not universally found (i.e., some grama panchayat presidents are rather ineffective in carrying out even panchayat responsibilities, let alone activities related to fixing). Representatives of higher levels of panchayats have a greater influence in various spheres, though here too, the power wielded by different persons varies. People engaged in fixing were found among these representatives too, but the numbers were much lower than at the grama panchayat level. This is because the activities earlier listed are mostly of a kind that would not require the influence of a high-level political entity. However, there were indeed references to police cases where the local MLA had intervened. Where higher ranked political functionaries intervened in the selection of beneficiaries, there was no indication that they derived any monetary benefit. But there were indeed indications that their supporters were the prospective beneficiaries. This is not to suggest that political functionaries of the higher levels of the panchayats or even the legislature were not interested in seeking monetary gratification. In fact, there were sufficient indications that panchayat members were involved in acts of rent-seeking. But in our definition of fixing, these acts do not find a place, and were just acts of corruption.

There is a very thin line which divides the professional fixers and elected representatives when the functions they perform are the same. When political representatives get a monetary remuneration for the work (i.e., a commercial transaction) that they do for their clients, they are in fact acting as fixers themselves. However, there are clear indications that several people in the political sphere as well as local leaders or village elites, did not see themselves as fixers, and did not choose to make any money out of doing favours for people who came to them. At the most, they described these as acts of social work. And they called themselves social workers, and claimed that they helped people out of altruistic motives ('service'). Their political standing is enhanced, and a supporter base is built up through these acts of 'help'. The distinction observed was that the person who carried out these functions without charging any fee usually had a regular, even if sometimes not substantial, income, such as business, agriculture, contractor's work, etc., which,

enabled him/her to carry out work for others without taking any fee. Most people did not have a high income, and therefore, the bulk of people who did any work for others, also charged a fee-even if, as in some cases, they glossed over this by saying the money was for 'expenses'. For instance, in a taluk panchayat in Mandya district, a woman taluk panchayat member was considered as being at a lower economic level than the other members. Her husband, a grama panchayat member, usually carried out her political functions, and she remained at home most of the time. He admitted that they had to raise funds through certain links with contractors. Further, if he were to take up any activity for someone, he would have to get the expenses on transport and other incidentals met by that person, since his own income was very low and he could not afford to spend out of his own resources. On the other hand, the husband of the taluk panchayat president claimed that as his income was sufficiently large, neither he nor his wife (the president) needed to seek payment for whatever they did to 'help' someone. However, as he had political ambitions, these acts of help were considered as credit which he could draw on at the time of elections-and be paid back as votes.

Fixers, Elites/Patrons, and Political Power

To the fixers, the clients are individuals who pay them a fee to carry out any assignment. To the patrons, the clients become a part of patronage relations, which has its own obligations and duties associated with both patrons and their clients, or in other forms of neo-clientelism, where relations between the persons involved are carried on over a period and are qualitatively different from that of the commercial relations of a typically fixer-client relationship. Having said that, fixers functioned at different levels of activity and people had some perceptions and expectations about which persons or fixers can or cannot accomplish what they wanted. In short, they perceived fixers and elites/patrons in terms of their relative power.

Individuals who functioned as patrons in one context did not necessarily remain in that position always. Giving help to those who ask, and not charging any fee was also a means to get into positions of power. Building up a bank of good-will could be exchanged for votes during elections. However, once they were in positions of power, they could indeed use the power to make money for themselves. Also, at the time of elections, higher level political functionaries (for example MLAs, block or district presidents of political parties) acted as fixers, to get party tickets for someone who wanted to contest, and for a sizeable fee (we were informed that zilla panchayat elections cost the candidates several thousands of rupees, which at times also included the cost of paying someone to get a party ticket).

Full-time fixers did not always carry out activities that entailed any great degree of power. However, political connections and contacts

were certainly useful additions to the person's effectiveness as fixers. A successful record of 'fixing' is one manner of building up political support. Persons who had a political position, either as party workers, or were the supporters of well-known political personages, were able to straddle both worlds, as a fixer and also a political functionary (even if not an elected representative). On the other hand, there were also instances where members of the local elite were not political party functionaries or elected representatives but who influenced the activities of grama panchayats (their numbers were not many, inasmuch as most of the local elites, as in Mandya for example, were involved in political activities to some degree or the other). Thus, they already had some power (to effect political decisions) through their status as village elites, but their power was enhanced through the political sphere. They were able to effect decisions in favour of those who sought their help, and this was a part of a system of patronage. However, their ability to generate political support at election time (through 'vote banks', for example) made them more important to political leaders than the fixers who did not command such local support. Professional fixers who functioned in the local area and who were able to get the confidence and support of local people were then able to translate this into elective political positions (such as in panchayats). As we had earlier indicated, several of the fixers had political connections and were in fact party workers. They were able to build local contacts, and their success in fulfilling the requirements of their clients was also a factor that made people ask them to contest for panchayat positions. Fixers who were party functionaries were also able to gain the support of the leader/s with whom they were associated, who in turn were instrumental in getting them party tickets, and endorsing their candidature in the local elections, through essentially an act of patronage.

Conclusion

People of the villages had certain requirements which they expected someone to provide. Whether the fixers were perceived as better able to deliver, or that local elites/patrons or persons of high status and power could manage these activities better depended also on the context and the specific requirement. The matter of approachability needs to be mentioned in this context. Persons of higher status, the elites, were indeed accessible to the people of the villages, regardless of the caste to which they belonged. Being considered as the 'big men' of the villages implied that they were able to carry out specific functions on behalf of the persons who wanted them. The difference here was that a sense of obligation was entailed when elites carried out these functions, whereas the fixers' work did not entail such obligation. Fixers were normally contacted for relatively minor matters, such as to procure a ration card, or a caste certificate. A small fee was sufficient to get these done. On the other hand, handling police cases, or to get a party ticket to contest elections in

the higher levels of panchayats, required greater power, which only a smaller number of persons possessed. That even persons of power and influence expected to be paid, depended on the case at hand. And, the money involved was also obviously much higher than the typical fixer's activities. Patrons and powerful individuals did not normally take up minor issues, though if they were requested, they did not refuse to take up these matters. They entrusted these small jobs to one of their supporters, and did not even charge anything for it (though the supporter may expect a small payment).

Whether a person charged a fee to take up any matter also depended on the person's economic standing. If a person did not have any substantial income, there was a definite possibility that he would charge a fee (or 'expenses') to take up that matter. A person of more substantial means did not necessarily do this, and could afford to show 'generosity'. Here, the expectation was that political support would be forthcoming from the beneficiary of such acts of generosity. Political support, through votes was part of electoral clientelism, and more often the means of building up political support rather than that of the fixers' activities.

Fixers too were often engaged in political activities. Some of them had contested, and were now representatives in the panchayats. However, they could not afford to stop taking payment, because their livelihood depended on being paid for the fixing that they undertook. Being elected representatives gave them an authority that they did not possess when they were only fixers, and therefore their effectiveness too was enhanced. Fixers who became representatives were certainly in a better position, in terms of power, to effect decisions in favour of their clients. But the higher degree of power that some representatives commanded depended on their position in social and political life, where they already had some wealth, prestige, and political connections and experience. Thus, being in the political sphere enhanced the power of the individual. Political positions such as panchayat seats by themselves did not provide such power, but certainly helped in placing the person in a better position than one who did not hold such an elective position.

In the Indian context the state has a significant role in a wide variety of issues in the people's lives. To most of the people of the villages, the manifestation of the state may, however, be mainly in the form of revenue officials and the police. Land records are of considerable importance to them and therefore, for various needs, they have to interact with officials who maintain land records. Towards achieving their objectives, there is always the feeling that if their own influence is not significant, they could utilize the services of those who do have such influence. The inclination to influence the agencies of the state may not always be to achieve goals which circumvent or violate existing laws.

There also appears to be a belief among people that officials do not as a matter of course perform what are essentially routine functions, and part of their jobs, but would carry out these functions only on the basis of monetary considerations (bribes) and the intervention of persons who regularly interact with them, or through the intercession of persons of high status. Thus, not only is there space created for the fixers to function, or of fixing, but they are also perceived as necessary. If we were to see the local institutions (panchayats) as essentially part of a service delivery system, then the shortcomings in the functioning of the state agencies are clearly of a type which could to some extent be overcome through the services of the fixers, or through fixing.

Notes

- 1 On cultural brokers see Wolf, 1956.
- 2 See for example, Caciagli and Belloni, 1981: 35-55.
- 3 Literally, land account entered in a register or ledger, indicating ownership of land. Khatha certificates are issued, which the individual could hold.
- 4 His description of the matter was as follows. He had called a police inspector on the telephone, asking him to drop a case against one of his relatives. The inspector, after refusing to do what he asked, told him, 'You are not president, only a representative, keep down the phone.' Hence his impression was that if he had been elected president, he could have done something about the police case.
- 5 In recent times, there were two instances which we could mention, one in Mandya zilla panchayat, and the other in Bangalore Rural zilla panchayat, where the incumbents were just nominal presidents, rather than effective functionaries themselves.
- 6 There was no indication that these fixers earned a large or regular income. Thus, finding permanent employment made it possible to get a regular income. Why they could then not combine both is because of the mobility and time involved in being fixers, which may not be available in their new occupation.
- 7 Several persons observed that with the presence of panchayat representatives, there was no need for 'fixers'. However, this still does not explain the clearly visible presence of fixers in Gulbarga and Mandya-where panchayat representatives too have taken up 'fixing'.
- 8 There were occasional complaints from officials, who stated that representatives were not aware of what is proper and legal and what is not (a very generous interpretation), and sometimes

expected officials to do something that was illegal. When officials refused, the representatives complained that they were not cooperative.

- 9 This is not entirely surprising. There are an estimated 430 government schemes, and for anyone to keep track of even a substantial part of these schemes is phenomenally difficult.
- 10 They do get an honorarium: The zilla panchayat president gets Rs. 2250/- a month, vice president Rs. 1750/-, and members get Rs. 1000; and a 'sitting fee' to attend panchayat meetings. The taluk panchayat president gets Rs. 1500/-, vice president Rs. 1000/- and members Rs. 500, and a sitting fee of Rs. 25/- to attend meetings. Grama panchayat presidents get Rs. 300/- and vice president Rs. 150/-, but members do not get any honorarium, and the sitting fee is Rs. 20/-.

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