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The political life of information: “Information” and the practice of governance in India

By
Janaki Srinivasan

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
Information Management and Systems
in the
Graduate Division
of the
University of California, Berkeley

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Professor AnnaLee Saxenian, Chair
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Abstract

The political life of information: “Information” and the practice of governance in India
by
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Information is increasingly hailed as a tool to achieve good governance. This dissertation challenges claims that naturalize the relationship between information and good governance. I argue that such claims are based on the reification of information as a well-defined object with intrinsic value and have shifted focus away from the relations, materials and practices in which information is embedded. The first goal of the dissertation is to examine the costs of reifying information in the domain of governance. I argue that “information” has to be unpacked and understood as a technique of governing that is involved in making, maintaining and shifting boundaries between a state and its population. The second goal of the dissertation is to examine the benefits of reifying information, where I argue that the reification and flexibility of *information* as a term have helped it rally support from a diverse range of organizations and individuals. I draw on a modified form of Bayly's “information order” to examine my first concern and address the second using the idea of a “boundary object.” My analysis is based on two cases from India. The first is a set of campaigns led by Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), a political people's movement, that eventually led to a nationwide campaign for a right to government information. The second is a project established by Swaminathan Foundation, an NGO, that provided government information through Information and Communication Technology-based information shops. Based on ten months of fieldwork and archival research, I analyze how information was leveraged as a term, object and rallying point in the two cases.

Addressing my first concern, I show how an information order was deployed as a technique of governing in the two cases. I argue that it helped maintain boundaries between state and population by dictating who could contribute to the creation of official records and rules, who could access documents and who was required to possess documents to make use of public schemes. But the information order was also challenged in both cases. I show that such shifts came about when the blurred nature of the state-population boundary or connections across it were leveraged, albeit differently in the two cases. MKSS organized political campaigns and lobbied with bureaucrats to change the interpretation and implementation of rules. In contrast, information shops strived to be apolitical. I show how an information shop and its operators, nevertheless, became involved in the creation and verification of social facts for the state; were drawn on as valuable resources for petitioning the state, and were deemed irrelevant in arenas where they chose to stay away from politics. By examining ideologically different initiatives, I conclude that the meaning, creation and

use of information is situated in the practice of governing and that its circulation is always political irrespective of whether an initiative sees its work as political or not. In addressing my second concern, I show how the reification and flexible meaning of *information* helped the term act as a boundary object that brought in diverse supporters in both cases. I conclude by identifying the tension between the situatedness of information in practice and the universality of the term *information* in the two cases.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ADBI – Asian Development Bank Institute

ASPA – American Society for Public Administration

BC – Backward Caste

BDO – Block Development Officer

BJP – Bharatiya Janata Party

BPL – Below Poverty Line

CD – Compact Disc

CIC – Community Information Centres

CIDA – Canadian International Development Agency

CM – Chief Minister

CS – Chief Secretary

DFID – Department for International Development (UK)

DPF Rules – Development of Private Forest Rules

DySP – Deputy Superintendent of Police

EPABX – Electronic Private Automatic Branch Exchange

FIR – First Information Report

FRW – Famine Relief Works

GATT – General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade

GoI – Government of India

IAS – Indian Administrative Service

ICT – Information and Communication Technology

ICTD – Information and Communication Technologies and Development

IDRC – International Development Research Centre

IDSJ – Institute for Development Studies Jaipur

ITU – International Telecommunications Union

IVRP – Information Village Research Project

JRY – Jawahar Rozgar Yojana

KW – Knowledge Worker

LBSNAA – Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration

MB – Measurement Book

MHRD – Ministry of Human Resource Development

MKKS – Mazdoor Kisan Kirana Store

MKSS – Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan

MLA – Member of Legislative Assembly

MoU – Memorandum of Understanding

MP – Member of Parliament

NCPRI – National Campaign for People's Right to Information

NGO – Non-Governmental Organization

NOS – Namma Ooru Saidhi

NREGA – National Rural Employment Guarantee Act

NREGS – National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme

OBC – Other Backward Castes

PA – Public Announcement

PC – Personal Computer

PRI – Panchayati Raj Institutions

PASIC – Pondicherry Agro Service and Industries Corporation Limited

PBX – Private Branch eXchange

PRA – Participatory Rural Appraisal

PRI – Panchayati Raj Institution

PRTC – Pondicherry Road Transport Corporation

PSTN – Public Switched Telephone Network

Rs. – Rupees (Indian currency)

RTI – Right to Information

SC – Scheduled Caste

SDM – Sub-Divisional Magistrate

SHG – Self-Help Group

SWRC – Social Work and Research Centre

UN – United Nations

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNPAN – United Nations Public Administration Network

UPS – Uninterrupted Power Supply

UT – Union Territory

VAC – Value Addition Centre

VAO – Village Administrative Officer

VHF – Very High Frequency

VKC – Village Knowledge Centre

VRC – Village Resource Centre

WBI – World Bank Institute

WDR – World Development Report

WTO – World Trade Organization

Glossary of terms

100-days work: Name by which rural Puducherry residents refer to the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS).

64-evidence: Required for a person to prove that they or their ancestors were residents of Puducherry in or prior to 1964. The evidence is a pre-requisite for obtaining other certificates and entitlements.

73rd Amendment: A constitutional amendment passed in 1993 that required Indian states to introduce a strengthened system of local government based on elected councils, multi-tier Panchayati Raj Institutions and a working *gram sabha*. See also PRI, panchayat and *gram sabha*.

Arasiyal: Politics (Tamil).

Backward Caste (BC): List of castes identified as disadvantaged or socio-economically “backward” in India. Castes listed vary by state. There are state-level and national-level welfare schemes targeted at the community. Public institutions might also provide educational and employment quotas for individuals belonging to such a community.

Below Poverty Line (BPL): An economic benchmark and poverty threshold that is used by the government of India to indicate economic disadvantage and to identify individuals and households for targeted public schemes.

Block: A development administration unit that caters to a group of *gram panchayats*. See appendix 1.

Block Development Officer (BDO): Bureaucrat in charge of a Block. See appendix 1.

Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA): A Canadian agency for development assistance.

Chief Minister (CM): Elected head of government of an Indian state.

Chief Secretary (CS): Senior civil servant who serves as chief of all government staff in a state.

Collector: Bureaucrat controlling authority of the revenue department at the district level. These officers are from the national level Indian Administrative Service (IAS) cadre. See appendix 1.

Commune Panchayat: Second-tier Panchayati Raj Institution in Puducherry that caters to a group of *gram panchayats*. See appendix 1.

Core: 10 million.

Dalit: See Scheduled Caste (SC). Dalit is the more politically conscious term for the community.

Dastaavez: Documents (Urdu).

Deputy Superintendent of Police (DySP): Police officer in charge of a sub-division in the district.

Dbarna: Sit-in (Hindi).

Famine Relief Works (FRW): Public work scheme for famine-affected areas.

Gram panchayat: The lowest tier of the Panchayat Raj system that consists of a group of villages whose residents elect a council or *panchayat* to represent them. See appendix 1.

Gram sabha: Village assembly consisting of the electorate in a gram panchayat. A gram sabha is mandated to meet a minimum number of times annually in order to decide on priorities and development work in the panchayat.

Gram sewak: Village secretary appointed by the state for local developmental issues.

International Development Research Centre (IDRC): A Canadian Crown corporation that supports research in developing countries to promote growth and development. Established in 1970, IDRC reports to Canada's Parliament through the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Information Village Research Project (IVRP): Flagship project of Swaminathan Foundation that was started in 1997-98 with support from IDRC. It involved setting up Information Shops in villages of Puducherry. See chapters 2 and 5 for details of the project.

Jan sunwai: Public hearing (Hindi).

Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY): A centrally-sponsored public works and employment scheme started in 1989 whose aim was to alleviate poverty, increase agricultural wages and create assets by providing employment at public works during agricultural slack periods.

Job Card: A document that bears the photograph of all adult members of a rural Indian household willing to do manual work under NREGS. It is issued free of cost by gram panchayats after verification and is an important document in the process of applying for guaranteed employment. See NREGS.

Kaagaz: Paper or document (Urdu).

Karanam: Village-level land records keeper and land revenue collector, also known as *patwari*. The traditional name changed to Village Administrative Officer (VAO) in the 1980s and to Village Secretary in 2001 following village-level administrative reforms.

Knowledge Worker (KW): Paid village-level operators of Village Knowledge Centres (VKC) in Swaminathan Foundation's Information Village Research project (IVRP).

Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration (LBSNAA): A research and training institute on public policy and public administration, where Indian civil servants receive training for their jobs.

Lakh: 0.1 million.

Magra: Mountainous (Marwari).

Mazdoor Kisan Kirana Store (MKKS): Farmers and Workers' Grocery Store

Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS): Union of Farmers and Workers established 1990 in Rajasthan. A political people's movement whose work with the Right to Information campaign I focus on in this dissertation, especially in chapters 3 and 4.

Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA): Representative elected by the voters of an electoral district to the Legislature of an Indian state.

Member of Parliament (MP): Members of either house of the Indian Parliament. Members of the lower house (Lok Sabha) are directly elected in each of the Indian states and union territories, while members of the upper house (Rajya Sabha) are elected indirectly by the State legislatures.

Memorandum of Understanding (MoU): Document describing a bilateral or multilateral agreement between parties. In this dissertation, Swaminathan Foundation signed MoUs with community organizations in a village prior to setting up an Information Shop there.

Namma Ooru Saidbi: "News from our village" (Tamil), a newsletter produced by the IVRP.

National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS): Scheme based on the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act that was enacted in 2005. It aims to enhance the livelihood security of people in rural areas by guaranteeing hundred days of wage-employment in a financial year to a rural household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work.

Other Backward Castes (OBC): A list of castes identified as historically disadvantaged or socio-economically backward. There are state-level and national-level welfare schemes targeted at the community. Public institutions might also provide educational and employment quotas for individuals belonging to such communities, much like for BC and SC communities.

Panchayat: Local government. Also used locally to refer to the lowest tier of the Panchayat Raj system, the *gram panchayat*.

Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI): Institutions at different tiers of a system of local government called Panchayati Raj. Typically three-tier, consisting of *gram panchayat* (for a group of villages), *Panchayat Samiti* (at the Block level) and *Zila Parishad* (at the District level). See appendix 1.

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA): An approach that is used by NGOs and development agencies to

incorporate the knowledge and opinions of rural people in the planning and management of development projects and programs in their communities. Includes a toolkit of techniques for interviewing, sampling and visualization among others.

Panchayat Samiti: Second-tier Panchayati Raj Institution that caters of a group of gram panchayats at the Block level. See appendix 1.

Patta: Land certificate.

Patwari: Village-level land records keeper and land revenue collector, also known as *karanam*. The traditional name changed to Village Administrative Officer (VAO) in the 1980s and to Village Secretary in 2001 following village-level administrative reforms.

Pondicherry Agro Service and Industries Corporation Limited (PASIC): A corporation that produces and distributes agricultural inputs through showrooms and agro-depots in Puducherry.

Private branch exchange (PBX): A telephone exchange that serves a particular business or office, as opposed to one that operates for many businesses or for the general public. PBXs make connections among the internal telephones of a private organization and also connect them to the PSTN via trunk lines.

Pondicherry Road Transport Corporation (PRTC): A Government of Puducherry road transport company that operates buses on inter and intra-state routes.

Public Announcement (PA) system: An audio system with loudspeakers that was used to make announcements that could be heard across a village and, depending on the placement of loudspeakers, in neighboring regions. Used by the IVRP in Puducherry and by MKK Store in Bhim.

Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN): Network of the world's public circuit-switched telephone networks that consists of telephone lines, fiber-optic cables, microwave transmission links, cellular networks, communications satellites, and under-sea telephone cables inter-connected by switching centers, that allow telephones across the world to communicate with any other.

Rajput: Patrilineal clans located mainly in central and northern India, that regard themselves as descendants or members of the warrior ruling class. They actually vary greatly in status, from princely lineages to cultivators. Classified as "Forward Caste" in Rajasthan, Rajputs have recently been demanding that they be classified as "Other Backward Caste" and be declared eligible for affirmative action benefits.

Rawat: A community from the mountainous belt of Rajasthan that is classified as "OBC." However, this classification has been challenged, with claims that the community is connected to Rajputs as well as others suggesting that it should be categorized as a "tribe."

Right to Information (RTI): An Act passed in 2005 by the Indian Parliament that mandates timely response to citizen requests for government information.

Rozgar: Employment (Hindi).

Sarpanch: Village headman or woman, an elected representative following the 73rd amendment. Also called Panchayat President in some parts of the country, including Tamilnadu and Puducherry.

Scheduled Caste (SC): Historically disadvantaged castes that were traditionally classified as “untouchables” and are now offered special protection and affirmative action benefits as per the Indian constitution. An alternative name for the community is *dalit*.

Self-Help Group (SHG): Village-based financial intermediary usually composed of ten to twenty women who make small regular savings contributions over a few months until there is enough capital in the group to begin lending. Funds may then be lent back to the members or to others in the village for any purpose. Many SHGs are linked to banks for micro-credit. India has a large number of SHGs, especially in Tamilnadu and neighboring areas.

Soochana: Information (Hindi).

Soochana ka adbhikar: Right to Information (Hindi).

Sub Divisional Magistrate (SDM): Officer in-charge of a sub-division. See appendix 1.

Taluk: The basic sub-divisional unit for purposes of general administration, treasury, land revenue, land records and other items of work that has the closest and widest contact with the rural population. Also known as a *tehsil* or *tabsil* in different parts of India. See appendix 1.

Tehsil: The basic sub-divisional unit for purposes of general administration, treasury, land revenue, land records and other items of work that has the closest and widest contact with the rural population. Also known as a *taluk* in other parts of India. See appendix 1.

Thagaval: Information (Tamil).

Thakur: Feudal title referring usually to a landowner. In Rajasthan, it was traditionally associated with Rajputs.

Value Addition Centre (VAC): The hub of the IVRP's hub-and-spokes model. Later referred to as the Village Resource Centre (VRC). Described in detail chapter 2 of the dissertation.

Village Administrative Officer (VAO): Village-level land records keeper and land revenue collector, traditionally known as patwari or karanam. The traditional name changed in the 1980s following village-level administrative reforms.

Village Knowledge Centre (VKC): Village-level computer kiosks operated by Knowledge Workers under Swaminathan Foundation's IVRP. The focus of chapter 5 of the thesis. Also mentioned briefly in chapter 2.

Village Resource Centre (VRC): The hub of the IVRP's hub-and-spokes model. Earlier referred to as the Value Addition Centre (VAC). Described in detail in chapter 2 of the dissertation.

Union Territory (UT): A sub-national administrative division in the federal framework of governance in India. Unlike the states of India, which have their own elected governments, union territories are ruled directly by the federal government. India has seven union territories, of which Delhi and Puducherry have been given partial statehood.

Zindabad: Long live (Urdu).

Notes on the use of non-English terms and transcription

Chapters 3 and 4 contain terms in Hindi and Marwari, the commonly used language in the regions of Rajasthan that I focus on. Chapter 5 contains terms in Tamil, one of the main languages in Puducherry and Tamilnadu where the research for the chapter took place. Other chapters contain a few references to terms in any of these three languages.

Non-English words and terms are italicized the first time they occur. Their meaning is also footnoted or explained in brackets at first occurrence. Subsequent mentions of a non-English word are not italicized or explained. Non-English words that appear multiple times in the text are also explained in the glossary.

Translations of conversations, documents and newspaper headlines from Hindi, Marwari and Tamil are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

. . . indicates that I have skipped some words.

[] indicates that I have inserted explanations, or completed incomplete sentences and phrases using the text within brackets.

Maps of fieldwork regions

Rajasthan



Location of Rajasthan within India

Source: <http://www.rajasthan.gov.in/rajgovt/misc/location.html>

Within the state of Rajasthan, Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) works mostly in Rajsamand, Ajmer, Bhilwara and Pali districts.



Districts of Rajasthan

Source: <http://rajasthan.gov.in/rajgovt/Districtprofile/newdistrictprofile.jsp>

The regions covered by MKSS's campaigns or mentioned in this dissertation lie roughly within the black

rectangle marked on the map above. Other than the city of Jaipur (in Jaipur district), the following villages and panchayats find mention in the dissertation either as venues for MKSS's campaigns or as places where my interviews took place.

In Rajsamand district: Barar, Bhim, Devdoongri, Kamlighat, Sohargarh, Tal panchayat, Vijayapura

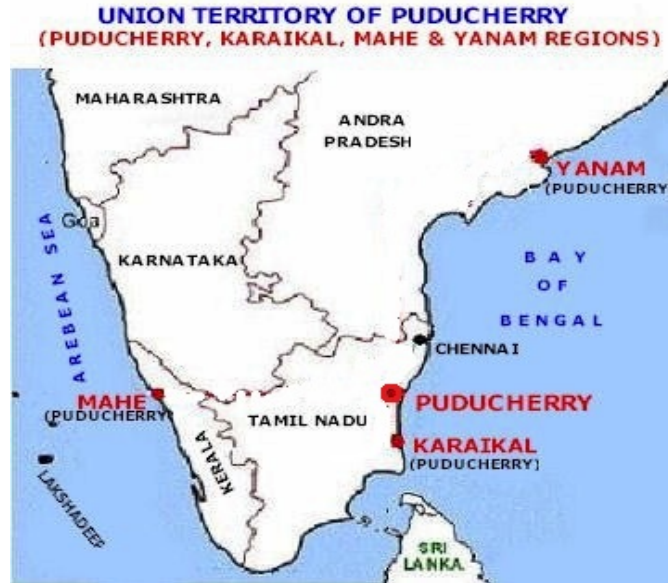
In Ajmer district: Asan panchayat, Beawar, Tilonia, Jawaja, Paluna

In Bhilwara district: Chileshtar

In Pali district: Kot Kirana panchayat

Puducherry

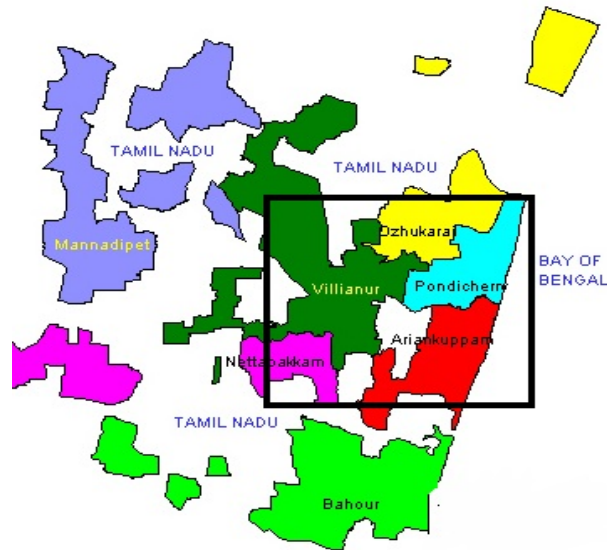
Swaminathan Foundation's Information Village Research Project that I studied, operates in Puducherry district, in the Union Territory of Puducherry.



Location of Union Territory of Puducherry and Puducherry district within India

Source: <http://electricity.puducherry.gov.in/power/index.htm>

Within Puducherry district, the regions covered by the project and mentioned in the dissertation lie roughly within the black box marked in the map below.



Puducherry district

Source: <http://statistics.puducherry.gov.in/population%20gis.htm>

Preface

If I had to lay out the objective of this dissertation in a sentence, it would be that you, the reader, should never again be able to utter the word *information* without thinking about the burden and responsibility shouldered by the term: what are the costs and benefits of using a single word to refer to so much? I am about to argue in this dissertation that while treating “information” as an object with implicit properties and beneficial consequences has allowed the term *information* to travel far and to attract support from a wide-ranging constituency, the use of a single term has also obscured the politics of how information circulates and how it is created, valued and used.

In the past three or so decades, advancements in technology and the mainstreaming of information economics have made *information* a fairly commonplace prefix. We take “information overload,” “information poverty,” and “information asymmetry” in our stride. Nor do we pause any more when we hear that we are living through an “information revolution” or in an “information age.” In the context of governance, the role of information is increasingly being discussed as part of themes ranging from the elimination of poverty to the building of stronger democracies.¹ In a country like India, where bad governance is blamed for many of the country's pressing problems, information has been especially visible in conversations focused on improving governance. Such discussions have spanned a spectrum of activities, but have all emphasized the empowering potential of information. Prominent examples include the working of the Indian Right to Information Act in the context of improved accountability² and Community Information Centers that seek to improve the efficiency of governance services with the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).³ More recently, *Aadhaar* – the Indian government's Unique Identification project – has started to gather information about residents in its combined pursuit of efficiency, convenience, and corruption reduction.⁴ With many such examples in India and elsewhere, belief in the empowering potential of information has attracted not just attention, but also considerable funding from public and private sources, especially where the use of ICTs is involved. Moreover, much of this attention and funding has been based on the belief that we understand information and what it can do to improve governance or empower people.

My objective with this dissertation is neither to deny that “information” can be empowering nor to repeat that it is. In light of the enormous resources that are being pumped into information provision by agencies across the globe, my goal is to point out that at least two aspects of discussions concerning the role of information in governance are in urgent need of re-examination. First is the range of material artifacts – documents, records, databases, emails and much more – that are referred to as “information” and are all attributed the same properties, intrinsic value and empowering potential. What is obscured in the process of lumping so much together under a single label and by seeing information as “naturally” valuable and empowering? Second is the range of individuals, institutions and ideologies that are rooting for the empowering potential of

¹ See Glennerster and Kremer's “Behavioral Economics at Work in Poor Countries” in *The Economist*, April 2011, for examples of the former and wikileaks.org for the latter.

² Text of the Act available at <http://righttoinformation.gov.in/webactrti.htm>.

³ See the Government of India's Community Information Centres (CIC) web page at <http://www.cic.nic.in/default.asp>.

⁴ “*Aadhaar*” means Foundation in Hindi. See <http://uidai.gov.in/>

information, in spite of their different goals and priorities. How does information bring these diverse entities to the table and make the differences between them inconsequential? I suggest that both these questions need to be considered in every instance that involves universalistic claims about the empowering potential of information. I suggest too that both these questions point to “the political life of information” that is seldom discussed.

Treating information as a well-defined object that has a set of properties we understand has shifted the focus away from the relations, materials and practices in which information is embedded. It has also obscured the different modes of politics that allow information to be leveraged in multiple ways and for a variety of ends. Within the practice of governing in one place, “information” might mean different things; it might change certain aspects of governing, while keeping others unchanged; or it might empower certain sections of a population, while simultaneously disempowering others. I am concerned in this dissertation with unpacking “information” and bringing back politics to discussions about the circulation of information in the practice of governing. Using two cases from Rajasthan and Puducherry in India and the idea of an “information order,” I demonstrate how the meaning, creation, valuation and use of information is situated and always political. In the process, I hope to establish that only a situated understanding of information can reveal the tradeoffs and uneven consequences associated with information among different sections of a population.

However, a situated understanding of information must not blind us to another consequence of treating information as a well-defined object and of making universalistic claims about it: the diverse communities that have embraced these claims in their work. What role did the term *information* play in the process? A recent campaign in India provides another example of a term that played a part in attracting diverse supporters. In August 2011, Anna Hazare, a social activist, led a campaign for an anti-graft bill in India. The campaign attracted thousands of people who supported the campaign's stance against “corruption.”⁵ The widespread support for the campaign brought up questions about how a single term managed to attract such a large and diverse support base. Asking this question in the context of *information* and the cases I studied, I examine the work done by a term in bringing otherwise incompatible communities to a table.

The tension between the situatedness of the objects referred to as information and the universality of the term that is used to refer to these objects is at the heart of this dissertation.

⁵ See Yardley's “Thousands Back Anti Graft Hunger Strike in New Delhi” in the *New York Times*, September 22, 2011.

Acknowledgements

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Chapter 1

Governing “information”

In October 1996, speaking at an information technology coordination meeting in Ethiopia, the Executive Secretary of the United Nations (UN) Economic Commission for Africa made the following statement:

Information empowers and information frees people at all levels of society, regardless of their gender, their level of education or their status, to make rational decisions and to improve the quality of their lives.¹

The idea that “information empowers” has only become more influential in the decade since this statement was made (Drori 2007; Grace et al. 2003; infoDev and Center for Democracy and Technology 2002; World Bank 2003).² In the domain of governance too, an increasing number of institutions, programs and initiatives have started to see information as central to their work.³ Correspondingly, research by such institutions and on these initiatives has grown (IIITB 2005; Kuriyan et al. 2008; Kauffman and Kraay 2008; Sreekumar 2007a, 2007b; Vasudevan 2007).⁴ While much of this research, including critiques, has focused on the outcomes of such initiatives vis-a-vis their broad objectives of improved governance, there has been less said about the underlying claim that information empowers, or on how that claim plays out for these initiatives, or indeed on the different meanings attributed to “information” in the different realms and locations where such initiatives operate.

The goal of this dissertation is to look beyond claims such as the one quoted above. Instead of treating information as one thing, I ask what the reification of information as a well-understood, bounded object has obscured and what it has made possible in the domain of governance. I argue that on the one hand, the reification of information has made invisible the situatedness and politics involved in the creation, usage and valuation of all that is simply labeled “government information.” On the other, reification has universalized information and allowed it to circulate as a theme in governance around which a diverse range of organizations and individuals have rallied. The tension between the costs and benefits of reifying information is central to this dissertation.

¹ K.Y. Amoako in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, October 1996. <http://www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/afrec/1997/init3.htm>.

² See Menou (1993); McConnell (1995); Hanna (1991, 30-31) for earlier versions and variations of the claim. By the mid-1990s, the World Bank, the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), the U.K. Department for International Development (DFID), the Canadian International Development Research Centre (IDRC), as well as state agencies in different developing countries encouraged and supported projects that focused on information. The United Nations also extended its support by organizing the World Summits on Information Society (WSIS) held in 2003 in Geneva and in 2005 in Tunis. Also see chapter 2 for information-related claims in the World Development Reports of the World Bank since the late 1970s.

³ The World Bank, for example, sees a role for information in good governance and, in turn, for good governance in its poverty alleviation mission. See <http://go.worldbank.org/KUDGZ5E6P0>. The World Bank Institute (WBI)'s Governance and Anti-Corruption program speaks of the importance of deploying the “power of information” to have an effective anti-corruption strategy, which is important to its poverty alleviation mission. For more, see publications by this program at <http://www.worldbank.org/wbi/governance> and by infoDev's governance program at <http://www.infodev.org/en/TopicBackground.5.html>.

⁴ I include here both research on specific initiatives and analytical pieces that synthesize the outcomes of governance policy across a region. A significant part of such research focuses on Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)-based deployments that seek to improve governance.

My analysis of the costs and benefits of reifying information is based on a study of two cases in India. The first of these is a political campaign that demanded access to government information and was led by Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), a “non-party people's organization.”⁵ The second is a research project that sought to provide government information through ICT-based “information shops” and was established by M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO). I organize my analysis of these cases around two sets of research questions. Instead of starting with pre-defined ideas of what “information” is or what it can do, my first question concerns what constitutes “information” and how it is deployed within a broader set of techniques to shape the practice of governing. My second question deals with the work done by the term *information* and the politics of its circulation. I deepen and expand the scope of both these questions by the end of this chapter. Throughout my analysis of the two cases, I point to the tension between a situated understanding of information and the leveraging of universalistic claims about it.

Before I proceed further towards making my arguments and discussing my cases, I briefly address what is at stake here and what makes the tension between universalistic claims about information and its situatedness in practice worth studying. Claims about information in governance are universalistic in three ways: they suggest that *all* information is associated with improved governance, that information is *always* associated with improved governance, and that information is associated with improved governance for *all*. Thus in this framing, the potential for improvement is located in information; more information is better and results in more improvement; and improvements brought about by information are experienced by all. What such a framing ignores is the broader landscape of governing within which information is defined, created and used. Yet, it is only by studying information as part of the overall practice of governing that it is possible to understand why certain aspects of governance are taken up for improvement using information in the first place and others are off-bounds; that there are tradeoffs involved in gathering and providing information, that more information might not always be better; and that information might be leveraged to empower some people while disempowering others. Thus, the study of information as situated in a place and in practice helps question the veracity of universalistic claims that are otherwise hard to refute in the abstract. By undertaking such a study, my dissertation encourages rethinking popular claims about information that see it as a tool of empowerment working by itself to achieve predictable positive outcomes. Instead, I use my research to argue that a more useful approach towards information in governance is to unpack “information,” to think in terms of tradeoffs, and to consider the different ways in which information is implicated in the practice of governing.

1.1 Introduction and chapter outline

This chapter serves two purposes: it first introduces and situates my concerns about information in governance and then explains how these will be addressed in the dissertation. I begin by laying out some of the ways in which information has recently been discussed in relation to governance. I suggest that these discussions have been framed in terms of the normative ideals and objectives of governance. Using the idea of governmentality, I suggest that information needs to be understood, instead, as a technique of governing and its role analyzed within the practice (rather than the objectives) of governing a population. In particular, its role in the maintenance or modification of the boundaries between the state that governs and the population that it governs needs to be examined.

I argue next that if the focus is on the *practice* of governing rather than on its normative ideals, the analysis

⁵ <http://www.mkssindia.org>. MKSS's work later led to the nationwide Right to Information campaign in India..

cannot afford to treat “information” as a pre-defined object as has been the norm: instead, there is a need to ask what constitutes information and how it comes to be defined as such, before examining how “it” circulates. This brings me to a discussion of the reification of information as a well-defined object. I examine the pitfalls of reifying information using a combination of Wenger's analysis of reification and Nunberg's analysis of the history of information as a term and a concept (Wenger 1998; Nunberg 1996). I argue that the reification of information – a term and concept that has historically had multiple meanings and been used at various levels of abstraction – as a single, bounded object with well-defined properties and an economic value obscures the role of politics and material form in the circulation of the variety of things that end up being labeled as “information.” Referring back to the need to focus on the practice of governing, I argue that we need an alternative way of analyzing the circulation of “government information” that accounts for politics and for material form. Moreover, this alternative needs to relate the creation and use of such information to the creation, maintenance or shifting of the boundary between the state that governs and the population that is governed. I argue that a modified version of Bayly's “information order” provides one way of carrying out this analysis (Bayly 2000).

Following my arguments about the costs of reifying information, I make a second set of arguments that are concerned with the benefits of reifying information. I argue that even as reifying information risks depoliticizing governance and dematerializing information, it also allows for the single term *information* to be seen as a relevant theme and a rallying point for a diverse range of entities. Therefore, what is also required is a way to understand the politics of the circulation of the term *information* itself, for which I propose using the construct of a “boundary object” (Star and Greisemer 1989).

Having outlined these arguments, I pose my research questions and explain in more detail the utility of “information order” and “boundary object” as frameworks to examine these questions. I describe and justify my research cases and research methods before concluding the chapter with an outline of the rest of the dissertation.

1.2 “Information” in recent discussions of governance

Discussions of governance have long been concerned with the role of what would today be termed “information,” even if the term *information* is itself relatively new in the field. Thus, themes including the process of state-building, the use of statistics to document population characteristics, state surveillance and the creation of identity documents for citizens have all been concerned at their core with an assemblage of ideas and things that would today fall under the rubric of information.⁶ In this section, I review recent discussions concerning the role of information in governance and their fundamental premise that better information delivery will universally lead to the normative ideals of “good governance,” especially transparency. I also highlight the emphasis accorded to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as tools of information delivery or provision in these discussions.⁷ Using some excerpts from these discussions, I argue that in a majority of them, information is treated as an object with economic value that when provided brings about transparency. But what is left *out* of these discussions is the question of what constitutes information and what tradeoffs are entailed in its provision within the practice of governing.

⁶ See Corbridge et al.(2005), Fuller and Benei (2000), Sharma and Gupta (2006a) and Scott (1998) for their descriptions of interactions with the state and the role of identity documents, laws and procedures in the process.

⁷ See Carasso (2008), Drori (2007), Grace et al.(2003), World Bank (2003) for more on the deployment of ICTs in a variety of domains of human activity in the hope that they can fundamentally improve the working of these domains.

1.2.1 Achieving good governance and transparency using information and ICTs

Governments cannot engage in good governance - i.e., good management of the country - without promoting “transparency” (Al-Jurf 1999)

Transparency has become the cornerstone of a good governance agenda (Ciborra 2005; Florini 1999; Islam 2006).⁸ In turn, the idea of transparency – openness and clarity in transactions within the government, interactions between government agents and citizens, as well as between government agents and agencies outside of that government (non-government agencies in that state, governments of other states, global funding agencies such as the World Bank or the UN) – is intimately connected with the concept of information. Further, if transparency is the underlying ethic that shapes the very definition of good governance, ICTs are perceived as useful tools for achieving transparency and good governance through the delivery of information.⁹ The connection between information, ICTs, transparency and better governance is visible in the texts of various influential agencies (infoDev and Center for Democracy and Technology 2002).¹⁰ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)'s website, for example, defines “e-governance” thus:

the public sector's use of information and communication technologies with the aim of improving information and service delivery, encouraging citizen participation in the decision-making process and making government more accountable, transparent and effective.¹¹

The role of ICTs in information provision and delivery is seen as especially important to achieving transparency and good governance in the context of economically poor communities and regions with a history of ineffective or bad governance.¹² For example, a 2007 report from an Asian Development Bank

⁸ The relationship between good governance and transparency has for the most part not been problematized. But some critiques do exist. For example, Bawa (2011) points to the problems of adopting transparency as a universal ethic. See Benjamin (2005), Gupta (2008), Florini (1999), Fung et al.(2007) and Lessig (2009) for more on the politics of transparency. Discussions of transparency have been concerned with the governance of markets as well as of the state (Florini 1999). I will focus on transparency discussions that deal primarily with the state.

⁹ Connections between ICTs and government have been discussed since the 1970s, most notably through Bell's idea of intellectual technologies (Bell 1973). But an increasing focus on "information" among development agencies, as well as innovations in ICTs, have lent an urgency to debates on what ICTs can achieve in governance since the 1990s. It is worth pointing out, though, that the push for transparency is not limited to ICT-based projects.

¹⁰ See also the “governance” or “e-governance” sections of the websites of IDRC, telecenter.org, or WBI, and United Nations Public Administration Network (UNPAN)'s “e-government surveys” for more on the role these entities envision for ICTs. Also see Gopakumar (2007), Heeks (2005), IITB (2005), Kuriyan and Ray (2009), Madon (2005), Madon (2009), Raman and Bawa (2011) and Sreekumar (2007a) for academic studies of how ICTs in governance have worked in practice, as well as for policy recommendations based on such research. Note also that my analysis will be limited to interactions between state agents and citizens, and will not dwell as much on the use of ICTs within a state institution in its internal operations.

¹¹ Quote available at <http://www.unesco.org/webworld/en/e-governance>. UNESCO's view is neither isolated, nor has it emerged recently. A research initiative by the UN and the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) as far back as 2001 had the following to say about the use of ICTs to facilitate the daily administration of the government: “(It) improves citizen access to government information, services and expertise to ensure citizen participation in, and satisfaction with the government process...it is a permanent commitment by government to improving the relationship between the private citizen and the public sector through enhanced, cost-effective and efficient delivery of services, information and knowledge. It is the practical realization of the best that government has to offer” (UN and ASPA 2001,1 quoted in Moon 2002, 424).

¹² A long history in information economics focuses on the relationship between poverty and information asymmetries. (Romer 1986; Stiglitz 1979; Stiglitz 2002). Nor is governance the only domain in the argument linking poverty and information (and ICTs):

Institute (ADBI)-sponsored e-governance seminar in Nepal states that

Nepal can gain sustainable development only through good governance. People still long for a transparent and accountable administration, and the government of Nepal has yet to fully provide effective services. E-governance may be the best medium to address this problem (ADBI 2007, v).

The report goes on to explain that the reason that e-governance is the “best medium” is because it “facilitates access to information” (ADBI 2007, 5).¹³ E-governance was similarly a buzz word for the Indian state in the late 1990s, with Madon arguing that the growing focus of the UN, DFID and various other international agencies on e-governance for development propelled the state's enthusiasm in this period (Madon 2002 quoted in Sreekumar 2007a, 3).¹⁴

1.2.2 The need for a situated understanding of “information”

I suggest that the excerpts above, as well as other reports on ICTs, information and change, project an understanding of information that is based on universalistic assumptions about information.¹⁵ First, information is often used at a high level of abstraction where it is not always obvious what it refers to, in form or in level of detail. Since government dealings cover a range of domains and activities, the “information” associated with them, accordingly, varies widely. The information required for transparency might thus be a

statements that universalize a relationship between poverty, information and ICTs, and extend it to all domains of human activity, are not rare. Also see chapter 2 in this dissertation for an example of the evolution of this discourse in the World Bank since the 1970s as reflected in World Development Reports.

¹³ E-governance is defined thus in the document: “The common objective of e-governance is to offer good governance, by (i) delivering effective and efficient public services, (ii) maintaining social equity through empowering minorities and marginalized people, (iii) involving the community at the policy making level, by providing cultural support, and so on.” (ADBI 2007, 5).

¹⁴ Sreekumar argues, however, that the Indian state's preoccupation with earlier forms of ICTs for development can be traced to the 1970s, way before ICTs for development became the focus of international agencies. See Sreekumar (2002) and Sreekumar (2007a) for the progression of this trajectory.

¹⁵ A few more examples of information and ICTs in texts produced by or for the World Bank.

From Grace et al. (2003):

“When the crucial information and communication needs of the poor go unmet, quality of life may significantly degrade, resulting in social exclusion, marginalization, isolation, alienation and humiliation.”

“People living in rural and remote areas tend to be poor and socially isolated. They lack information relevant to their particular situation and thus have difficulty interacting with other community members or other communities. This isolation serves to reinforce their marginalization.”

“ICT, such as radio, telephone, and email, can be of great value in bringing people together, bridging geographic distances and providing relevant information about and to the poor.”

“ICT can improve information flows and communication services to make government and organizations serving the poor more efficient, transparent and accountable.”

From World Bank (2003):

“As with other ICTs, the Internet provides a potentially powerful means of accessing information. For rural areas, the Internet offers a cheap and versatile mechanism connecting users with a global repository of information. The economic and productivity benefits of rural ICT access—including access to the Internet—can be generalized as follows: access to information and markets, access to information on techniques and environmental conditions, and increased business opportunities.”

“Many governments are experimenting with information provision via sites on the World Wide Web, e-mail communications, and list-serves that automatically distribute government publications and research. Accordingly, citizen participation and influence is on the rise.”

paper document or details on a website; in an email or a verbal transaction; it might include databases, bills, project reports, progress reports, identity documents, memos, laws; it might be a suggestion, an endorsement, an approval, or an estimate.¹⁶ However, these distinctions do not find their way into discussions about information and transparency. Second, information provision is portrayed as somehow naturally leading to beneficial results such as transparency (or efficiency or increased participation) in the working of a government. This train of reasoning suggests that information possesses an intrinsic value and when introduced into a process, leads to a specific kind of behavior and beneficial consequences.¹⁷ A little later, I lay out the costs of reifying information as an object with specific properties and value. The point here is that if “information” is treated a self-evident entity that “does” things such as achieve transparency, it is necessarily being abstracted from the materials in which it is inscribed.

Treating information as having well-defined properties and intrinsic value also abstracts it from the overall context of governing in which it is created and used. The example of the tension between information gathering and information provision illustrates my point well. The information that a state provides first needs to be gathered. Given that it is also the state that gathers information, there is a tension between how much or how little a state should know about its population. That is, what are the tradeoffs between transparency and privacy? Relatedly, discussions about information and transparency almost always focus on how much information a population possesses about the state.¹⁸ Yet, what about how much a state knows about a population? Once information is taken to refer not just to the former, the tradeoffs between transparency and surveillance become visible. Both these concerns point to the complicated relationship between transparency and information that comes to light only when information is understood within the context of governing in which it is created, provided and used. These points also suggest that it might be more realistic to think about information in terms of tradeoffs rather than in terms of unqualified benefits or costs when discussing interactions between a state and its population.

In summary, two points emerge from the section on recent discussions of information in governance. Fittingly, the first of these concerns information and the second, governance. But both concerns refer to the relationship between the two. First, information is treated as a well-defined thing with a set of properties and likely benefits in these discussions. However, as pointed out earlier, “information” in the domain of governance may refer to any of a diverse range of things that differ in material form, format and level of abstraction and may be put to different uses. I analyze this point in greater depth in a later section on the reification of information. Second, the domain of governance involves a spectrum of interactions and transactions between a state and a population. Since the state and its population have vastly different powers,

¹⁶ Later in this chapter and in chapter 2, I show how a variety of ideas, things and materials have come to be labeled “information” among influential funding agencies.

¹⁷ Additionally, information is presented as something that a community or an entire population either possesses or lacks. Much like jobs, money, food or shelter, information too is framed as an object of provision – provided or delivered, in this case, by the government. Moreover, the lack of information is attributed to inadequate technological capacity, rather than the unwillingness of individuals or organizations: the availability of technology can presumably correct this lack and allow for improved information delivery.

¹⁸ The relationship between information and transparency seems easy enough to understand in these discussions: if a lot more detail is available about a government’s transactions, it is likely to be ranked as more transparent using good governance indicators (Islam 2006; Kaufman 2003; Vishwanath and Kauffman 1999). For example, Islam develops a transparency index that “measures the frequency with which governments update economic data that they make available to the public.” He uses cross-country regression analysis to conclude “that countries with better information flows as measured by these indices also govern better” (Islam 2006). However, the relationship is almost always more complicated. For example, does the availability of information beget transparency or is transparency desired in order to make information available?

capacities, and interests, the circulation of information needs to be understood keeping in mind the tradeoffs that are likely to be entailed in interactions between the two.

If we take seriously the concerns that I have raised so far, I argue that a situated understanding of government information is required. Moreover, such an understanding cannot be obtained by studying the normative ideals of a governance agenda alone, as has been the case with the examples so far. As an alternative, I propose an analysis of the role of information in governance that focuses on the *practice* of governing, rather than on its normative ideals and objectives.

1.3 Information in the practice of governing

In the discussion so far, I made information central and took the meaning of governance for granted. I would like to take a step back at this point and ask what is meant by governance. In this section on governance, I distinguish between an understanding of governance as a function of its purported ideals and objectives, and an alternative that views governing as resulting from its practice on the ground. Arguing for the latter view in my analysis, I suggest that information needs to be seen as part of the techniques of governing that are used to define and maintain boundaries between state and population in the practice of governing.

I begin the section on governance by examining a view of governance that emphasizes its normative ideals. I contrast this view with one focused on the practice of governing on the ground. I use the good governance agenda as a model to illustrate the former school and follow ideas from governmentality to support the latter. I argue first that the circulation of information can be better understood by studying the practice of governing rather than its ideals and objectives. Next, I analyze the techniques deployed in order to manage a population in the practice of governing. Since my research is based in India, I pay particular attention to these techniques of governing in the Indian context and also examine their history. This helps me argue subsequently that what is now called “information” formed (and continues to form) a significant part of the techniques involved in governing the Indian population.

1.3.1 Ideals of governance: The good governance agenda

One way to understand governance is based on definitions by donor institutions. In 1992, the World Bank defined governance as “the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country’s economic and social resources for development” (World Bank 1992, 1). Following partially from such definitions, *good* governance has been defined variously as “sound development management” (World Bank 1992, 1), “the capacity of the state to effectively formulate and implement sound policies, the respect of the state and the citizens for institutions that govern economic and social interactions and the aspects of the process by which those in authority are selected, monitored and replaced” (Kaufmann et al. 1999a, 1999b, 2002).¹⁹ In spite of other differences, most definitions of good governance agree that the quality of institutions and public management is key. Funding and research agencies involved with the good governance agenda have worked on a variety of topics, including commercial law, the rule of law, public sector management, accountability, transparency, control of corruption and judicial autonomy, as means to achieve good governance (Aubut 2004, 16). They have also developed parameters to evaluate good governance (Kaufmann et al. 2006, 2007;

¹⁹ Aubut argues that donor agencies became preoccupied with the idea of good governance in the 1990s as it became clear that the development aid and policies from previous decades had done little to improve the “poor performance of Less Developed Countries (LDCs)” (Aubut 2004, 15). For the Bank, “good governance” is “an essential complement to sound economic policies” and “central to creating and sustaining an environment which fosters strong and equitable development” (World Bank 1992, 1).

Kauffman and Kraay 2008). Since the agencies creating these parameters are often also the ones funding governance-related initiatives in many countries, the above definitions and parameters of good governance have gained significance throughout the world.²⁰

What is important here for the purposes of this dissertation is that governance (and good governance) in this school of thought is understood through high-level abstractions of what ought to happen. This way of evaluating governance is not concerned with the practices of governance or with how ideals or objectives of governance translate to day-to-day governance on the ground: for example, how would a stated objective of achieving a transparent state or better public management be implemented and what would it look like to a member of the population? Therefore, if I wish to understand how routine state-citizen interactions work in practice (and where “information” fits in these interactions), I need to look elsewhere. In what follows, I suggest that “governmentality” offers one way to focus on the practice of governing.

1.3.2 Practice of governing: Governmentality and its critiques

The governmentality school of thought constitutes a radically different way of understanding how governance happens than what I have been describing so far (Burchell et al. 1991; Dean 1999; Ferguson 2002; Jessop 2007a; Li 2007a; Menon 2009; Milchman and Rosenberg 2002). Coined by Foucault, the term “governmentality” refers to an understanding of governing broadly as the “conduct of conduct” (Foucault [1978] 2006). For Foucault, the modern condition is characterized by the constant and pervasive supervision to which the conduct of individuals is subject.²¹ Among the different forms of governing involved in this condition, the governing of the territory of a state by a government has emerged as the most pervasive in the world today; and the power of government as the pre-eminent form of power.²² Unlike the rule of monarchs in an earlier time, the focus of modern day governments is not simply on controlling territory, but on extending power and rule over a population.²³ Modern day governments intervene in the welfare of their population to a much larger extent than ever before. Rather than relying solely on explicit coercion or on laws, they use a variety of techniques to shape the conduct of individuals and to manage a population. Governing occurs through the introduction of new forms of disciplinary knowledge and administrative techniques. Foucault, thus, defines governmentality as:

the ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflection, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as

²⁰ For example, World Bank funding for projects may be contingent on achieving good governance, even when not directly aimed at it. Nor is direct funding the only issue here. Much has been written about how the circulation of ideas among influential funding agencies may result in policy changes at sub-national levels. See Goldman (2006) on green neoliberalism, Harriss (2002) on social capital and Miraftab (2004) on public-private partnerships. Thus, the World Bank's endorsement of good governance is important also for how it may indirectly influence ideas and policies at local levels of the state in many countries.

²¹ Foucault argues that governing happens at the level of individuals (governed by self), within families (governed by the head of the family) and within the territory of a state (governed by a government) (Foucault [1978] 2006, 134).

²² In fact, Foucault goes farther to suggest that this happens *only* in the contemporary world. In addition, the different forms of governing are intimately connected, and use each other. Thus, self and familial discipline are also leveraged by the government in governing a state.

²³ Foucault identifies three forms of government: sovereignty, disciplinarity, and governmentality (Foucault [1978] 2006, 142). The first is associated with the medieval state based on customary law, written law, and litigation and concerned with control over land and wealth; the second with the rise of the administrative state of the fifteenth and sixteenth century based on the disciplinary regulation of individual bodies in different institutional contexts; and the third with the increasingly governmentalized state, which dates from the late sixteenth and came to fruition in the nineteenth century, when state concern became focused on controlling the mass of the population on its territory rather than controlling territoriality as such (Jessop 2007a, 8).

its target population, as its principal form of knowledge political economy, and as its essential technical means apparatuses of security (Foucault [1978] 2006, 142).²⁴

I find governmentality a useful concept because it attends to the practices through which a modern day government reaches and is encountered by a population. Burchell goes further to argue that it is the state's attempts at managing a population and its practices in doing so that shape the nature of the state, rather than the reverse (Burchell 1991).²⁵ The techniques involved in managing or governing a population, more than normative ideals of what the state ought to be or do, are therefore central to understanding the state itself.

Governmentality covers a range of techniques employed by a government to better control and manage a population. Attempts to achieve “legibility” (Scott 1998), for example, would constitute a technique as would the conduction of surveys to achieve this goal.²⁶ The rationale of managing a population that drives these processes, as well as the tactics and techniques it makes use of, together constitute governmentality in these contexts. It is significant that, for the most part, the goals of these schemes are not achieved through overt coercion or even by using primarily legal mechanisms. Coercion and laws help, but proponents of governmentality would argue that these schemes rely as much on other techniques and bodies of knowledge such as cartography and architecture to manage their population. Since the government's need to “know” its population grows along with its need to manage that population better, the role of information as a technique of governing gains significance.²⁷ But before I discuss techniques of governing, I briefly describe critiques of governmentality.

1.3.2.1 Critiques of governmentality

The idea of governmentality has been critiqued mainly on two counts. The first is that it is totalizing. It implies that the state controls the lives of a population completely, thereby leaving no room for the agency of the individuals constituting a population.²⁸ Foucault himself explicitly refutes this contention, saying that there is resistance wherever there is power (Foucault [1980] 2001).²⁹ Thus, control is by definition never

²⁴ The concept of governmentality has since been extended by theorists to include technologies of government across domains. The focus on rolling back the state and the celebration of civil society initiatives in the 1990s, for example, meant that non-state entities played an important role. In that case, the techniques of government used by NGOs or international banks or funding organizations became central to the debate. Ferguson (2002) suggests that governmentality should be used to recognize the similarity between technologies of government across domains. I keep this extension of governmentality in mind as I discuss my cases.

²⁵ Burchell argues, in fact, that the state has no essence. It is therefore not productive to analyze how a population encounters the state with the presumption that all the state is trying to do is to extend its rule.

²⁶ Scott argues that states institute procedures by which they attempt to know more about their population and make the population legible (Scott 1998). A legible population is easier to control and is useful in furthering the state's own interests. Scott, thus, relates the earliest censuses or the institution of permanent patrimonial names to more efficient tax collection and conscription. He argues that high legibility especially allowed governments with high-modernist ambitions to structure the everyday lives of their population through planning. Here, Scott uses the examples of planned cities, forced villagization and other development schemes. He argues that none of these schemes could have been set in motion had the government not had a highly legible population to plan schemes around.

²⁷ An interesting question is the relationship between the ideals and the practice of governing. How do normative ideals translate into techniques of managing a population? Further, what conflicts and tradeoffs are entailed in the process? For example, how does the goal of transparency conflict or work with legibility, or legibility with privacy?

²⁸ Though Foucault's disciples have probably used a more totalizing framework than Foucault himself.

²⁹ Besides Foucault's own refutation of this accusation, Jessop (2007a), too, argues that Foucault rejects attempts to develop a general theory of state power with apriori assumptions about domination. Menon points though to the idea that “forms of resistance also normally develop into alternative sites of domination” in discussions of governmentality (Menon 2009).

complete and, to that extent, governmentality too doesn't claim complete control. That said, the theme of resistance is not prominent in early governmentality literature, providing room for the above critique. An alternative way to understand the place for resistance in governmentality is that irrespective of whether people resist the techniques employed by a state or embrace them, they are nonetheless participating in governmentality in the process. Thus, to employ the framework of governmentality is not to reduce the role of the agency of individuals in their interactions with the government or to say that the government completely controls how their lives are led. Rather, it is to pay careful attention to how people are able and choose to conduct their lives given the underlying rationale of control that is central to governance. Li makes this point by saying that while the will to govern is present, there is nothing determinate about the outcomes (Li 2007a). As a way to move forward, Li suggests studying the limits of governmentality and the ways in which that will is not able to control the population.

The other critique of governmentality is that it tends to treat “the state” as monolithic (Bayly 2000).³⁰ Even as governmentality theorists recognize that state power is not exerted in a centralized manner or merely through laws or explicit coercion, but in fact works through diffuse channels by controlling conduct and behavior, they tend to treat the state itself as a coherent entity with a single intention or purpose. This assumption has been challenged by empirical studies that suggest that different levels of “the state” often have different, even conflicting goals and values and may also act in contradictory ways (Fuller and Benei 2000; Jeffrey and Lerche 2000; Kaviraj and Khilnani 2001).³¹

Whether or not there is consensus on the validity of these critiques of governmentality, I suggest that the concerns they raise are important ones. What is the place for resistance and for the fractured nature of “the state” in the practice of governing? As I move to examining techniques of governing, both these concerns play an important role in my analysis. Following a general discussion of techniques of governing, what they seek to achieve and their history in India, I argue that information forms a significant part of these techniques.

1.3.3 Techniques of governing

One of the fundamental requirements to manage a population is to define and maintain the coherence of the entity that governs (which is not monolithic), the entity that is governed (which may resist) and the boundary between the two. A technique of governing will, therefore, regularly undertake tasks of boundary-making. Of the vast literature on each of the themes of “the state,” population and the boundary between the two, I will restrict myself to a brief overview of the main arguments in the Indian context before I go on to argue that information is very much a part of the techniques of governing and of boundary-making.

The question of how a state should be conceptualized – as an actual organization distinct from society and not identical to the political system? a cluster of concrete institutions? a policy making actor? an apparatus furthering the interests of capital? an ideological project? a “structural effect”? – has been a topic of intense debate for decades (Abrams [1977] 2006; Fuller and Harriss 2000; Mitchell [1999] 2006). I take seriously Mitchell's argument that instead of seeing the state as either an ideological construct or as material reality, we need to place this distinction in historical question to understand how the modern state has appeared

³⁰ Once again, Jessop's analysis of Foucault suggests that Foucault rejects all attempts to conceptualize a general theory of state power, including a perception of the state as having an essential unity (Jessop 2007a).

³¹ Having now analyzed both the objective-based and practice-based understandings of governing, a further question is whether resistance shapes the high-level objectives of governance, its practice or both. Also, if “the state” is not a monolithic entity, whose practices and objectives are being discussed?

(Mitchell 2006, 184). Further, while the question of what constitutes “the state” is not unique to post-colonial contexts, the working of “the state” in regions that have been colonies introduces further distinct challenges. In the Indian context, for example, Kaviraj suggests that post independence, there developed a bureaucratic elite comfortable with a modernist discourse and Weberian rationality, and a lower-level bureaucracy that used an “everyday vernacular discourse,” that was not based on formal rationality (quoted in Fuller and Harriss 2000, 8). This gap between those who make policies and those who implement them is significant because it has consequences for policy implementation in India today, with policies often being reinterpreted beyond recognition in their implementation. While the extent of the gap between different levels of bureaucracy, or between policy makers and implementors, may be debated, few would dispute that the bureaucracy, and the Indian state more broadly, are not monolithic or coherent entities (Corbridge et al. 2005).³² Resident of an Indian village, for example, are likely to encounter a range of state agents at the village or block levels, even occasionally at the district, state or national levels in their lifetime. These agents act differently, have different interests and objectives than each other, and often different also than the stated objectives of the state. The Indian “state” is encountered at many levels spatially, and both as an idea and as a concrete institution.³³

Much as “the state” is not monolithic in practice but appears coherent, the boundary between “the state” and society is blurred but appears sharp and distinct.³⁴ I follow writers who suggest that the most interesting questions about this boundary is how it is produced and made to appear real (Fuller and Beni 2000, Gupta 2006; Sharma and Gupta 2006b; Mitchell 2006). For example, a distinctive aspect shaping the nature of a state are the dominant groups that are not part of “the state” but with which “the state” has relations. In the Indian context, Vanaik points to the agrarian elite as a significant group in the dominant-class ruling coalition (Fuller and Harriss 2000, 6). In addition to these groups, Bardhan identifies a class of bureaucrats and professionals as a third dominant group (Bardhan 1999). Fuller and Harriss argue that these analyses treat “the state” as an actual, bounded organization, albeit one whose functioning is determined by its relations with certain dominant groups. What these arguments also point out is the blurred nature of the boundary between “state” and “society” in the Indian context (Gupta 2006; Harriss-White 1997; Harriss-White 2003). Everyday practices of interactions between state and individuals of the population also bring home this point. Examples of the ways in which “the state” and “society” bleed into each other in the Indian context range from the police taking sides in a local conflict, bureaucrats who regularly work from their homes instead of from designated offices, colonizing the state with one's kin, the reduction in bribe-based transactions during a local religious festival, or deferential feet-touching of bureaucrats (Fuller and Harriss 2000).

Fuller makes the important point that while these boundaries are blurred, there is nevertheless widespread acceptance that there *is* a boundary between state and society, and that the state is at the center of the political imagination in India (Fuller and Harriss 2000, 24).³⁵ The question, then, is what are the techniques

³² Fuller and Harriss argue, for example, that lower-level bureaucrats (as well as local politicians and citizens) have largely internalized the impersonal norms and values of the modern Indian state (Fuller and Harriss 2000, 14).

³³ What is interesting then, is to understand what work is being continuously done in order to have “the state” be perceived as coherent *in spite of* all these encounters. Does this constitute a tactic and what are its benefits if so?

³⁴ The non-monolithic nature of the population that is being governed and its boundaries may be similarly analyzed. The most obvious lines of fracture in this case would include class, caste and gender. In addition, Chatterjee draws a distinction between civil and political society in a post-colonial state (Chatterjee 1997). Since I do not explicitly address fractures within a community in terms of boundary-making in later chapters, I do not present a separate literature review or further elaboration here.

³⁵ Mosse makes the point that historically, the idea of removing the middle man between state and society has captured the imagination of zealous administrators. Examples include the *ryotwari* system, in which the British government directly collected tax

through which boundaries are constructed and made to seem real. Sharma and Gupta suggest that representations, symbols, performances and materiality are all linked in the production of boundaries, with “the repetitive performance of state procedures” shaping “audiences' ideas about the . . . nature of the state and their relationship to 'it'” (Sharma and Gupta 2006b, 13). Further, while techniques of governing are regularly engaged in boundary-making, a non-monolithic state, members of a population who resist and connections across the state-population boundary also shape the working of these techniques in practice.³⁶ In the following section, I examine the history of techniques of governing in India. This history illustrates how boundaries were routinely made (but also crossed) in the practice of governing. Such a history also begins to show the place for “information” among techniques of governing.

1.3.3.1 History of governing techniques in India

Techniques of governing in India were shaped by multiple influences, including the 250 years of British colonial rule. Colonial influences built disciplinary knowledge about India, shaped laws, the nature of record keeping, the documents in use and the channels of communication amongst state agents and between state and non-state agents.³⁷ The British systematized legal codes (Ludden 1993, 256). They introduced fingerprinting (Sengoopta 2003), made changes to existing land tenure categories and categorized the population.³⁸ They classified public documents and maintained extensive subject files in the name of intelligence (Bayly 2000, 145). Some of the ordinances and laws established by the British have only recently been dismantled (Official Secrets Act) and many of them continue to be used in a modified form in India today (the Famine Code).³⁹

The British also introduced means of communication and transportation through which the reach of the state expanded (Headrick 1981). They created detailed maps and conducted a census in order to understand the terrain and population better (Ludden 1993, 254).⁴⁰ One reason to “know” the population was political control, which was especially important in a colonial context where treason was an ever-present threat. The British gradually established an extensive surveillance system and hoped to predict and quell rebellion against British rule by monitoring happenings in different parts of India. Different analyses of governance in colonial

from those who cultivated land, and the Indian developmental state's efforts to abolish the *zamindari* system (where the state collected tax from a landowner who collected taxes from the cultivators). Mosse argues, however, that these attempts also introduced the need for new middlemen as the exercise in constructing state and society as separate continued (Mosse 2000, 181-182)

³⁶ For example, what happens when these techniques are not being put to use by a monolithic state with a single understanding of what needs to be done and how? How do the different levels of the state interact with one another in the use of these techniques? How do techniques work when “society” is no longer treated as a single category and the claims made by different groups are examined separately? How do they work once we see state and society as interconnected, and as working through their connections with each other, whether through bonds of kinship, shared interests or shared belief systems? If we understand society not just as a target of government control, but as an active agent shaping the ideals and practice of governing within constraints, how does that shape techniques of governing?

³⁷ See Ludden (1993) for more on the nature of colonial knowledge about India in the 1700s and 1800s. Especially interesting are his observations about documents such as riot reports through which the idea of communalism as a fundamental reason for conflict was popularized. Nor was colonial influence on record keeping unique to India. See Bowker and Star (1999) for a discussion on the classification system and procedures that were put in place to enforce the pass system in South Africa in the apartheid era.

³⁸ In the process, they created and froze many identities.

³⁹ I mention these specific examples on purpose since I will revisit them in chapters 3 and 4 when I describe my cases.

⁴⁰ The reliance on written documents became more widespread, though writing had always been prized and was not something the British introduced. Bayly points to Aurangzeb as the ruler who started the trend of requiring signatures rather than working on oral orders (Bayly 2000, 36).

India emphasize to different degrees the role of existing local practices in shaping the practice of governing. Bayly sees them as central, arguing that the planning of the 1857 uprising made use of both traditional (person-to-person) and modern (telegraph) channels of communication. In fact, Bayly argues that it was because the British focused solely on formal channels of communication and information flow that they were taken by surprise by the uprising, which relied as much on informal channels and intermediaries, modes the British failed to monitor. In his analysis of changes in land tenure systems and their documentation, Mosse pays great attention to existing systems of tenure as well as taxation that influenced the working of systems imposed by the British (Mosse 2000). The above examples also point to the tensions and tradeoffs inherent in the practice of governing. While the colonial context might be an extreme example of the need for political control over a population, these examples point nonetheless to a government's need to “know” a population both for administering welfare as well as to control it.⁴¹

Many of the techniques of governing inherited from the years of colonial rule, as well as the tradeoffs, continued to be relevant in the decades following India's independence, albeit in a changed form. Processes of counting and categorizing the population only intensified following the establishment of a welfare state with an elected government. As a vision of development was adopted, targets for development were set, corresponding five-year plans were drawn up, and new welfare schemes were instituted. Corresponding to these changes, the need to measure state activities and their outcomes grew. Mirroring this need was the one to keep track of the population that was being affected by these activities. To benefit from the state's schemes, individuals had to fulfill certain criteria. Establishing one's identity therefore became significant and identity documents grew increasingly important. The ability to vote, earn, own property, attend school or be eligible for schemes and loans were all tied to the possession of identity documents of one kind or the other, documents that were issued and verified at different levels of the state. On the other hand, records and reports that tracked the achievement of development goals also grew in importance and in volume. The transition to a democratic, elected government meant that different levels of the state had to work towards establishing some level of legitimacy among the population and at least appear accountable for their actions. So, whether or not goals were achieved, it was in the state's interest to make visible its achievement of goals and this was partly done through records and reports.⁴² Documentation and the presence of a paper trail (countability) became connected to the idea of accountability.

Sharma and Gupta point to another aspect of the importance placed on documentation and writing in the everyday procedures of various levels of the Indian state. They argue that since an application or complaint submitted in writing was much more likely to be seen as “actionable,” the need to be literate and conversant in the writing of official documents immediately placed certain sections of the population at a disadvantage (Sharma and Gupta 2006b, 13). Extending this line of reasoning, I would argue that the importance placed on writing, documents and documentation constituted a way in which the population's perception of the state, as well as of its own relationship with the state, was shaped. More broadly, the above discussion brings me to the central role of information as a technique deployed in the practice of governing.

1.3.4 Information as a technique of governing

A brief survey of writings from development agencies and projects on the ground working on governance

⁴¹ Scott et al. argue that permanent patrimonial names, for example, served both purposes (2002).

⁴² Tarlo provides an extreme example of meticulous record-keeping in her account of enforced sterilization during the Emergency period of the late 1970s in Delhi (Tarlo 2000). Those who agreed to undergo sterilization or motivated someone else to were provided land by the state and these transactions are meticulously preserved in files from that era.

issues indicates that their use of “information” overlaps with much of what I have been talking about in this section on the history of techniques of governing in India: records pertaining to government schemes, details of government procedures and processes; and documents pertaining to entitlement, ownership or identity.⁴³ If governing is about managing a population, a fundamental piece of the management has to do with what a state and its population know about each other and how they perceive each other. Based on the previous subsection, “information” shapes this process of knowing and perception. However, before I say more on the employment of information within techniques of governing, I need to re-examine how I treat information from now.

In an earlier section on recent discussions of information in governance, I had suggested that treating information as one thing is problematic and makes the circulation of information difficult to analyze. The decision to focus on the practice of governing has reinforced this problem and made it more immediate. If my interest is in how information is used to create or maintain boundaries between state and population, it is impossible to carry out this analysis without disaggregating “information.” I propose a modified version of Bayly’s “information order” (Bayly 2000, 4) as a useful alternative heuristic to understand the circulation of the various objects clubbed together as “information” and to further study how these are deployed within techniques of governing. I explore the information order in greater detail later in this chapter and include in such an order, state-created information systems and information products such as laws, procedures, records, and documents, as well as the physical and social infrastructure of their circulation.

The idea of governmentality focuses on the practice of governing, rather than deducing practices from an understanding of the state as having essential properties and propensities (Burchell et al. 1991, 4). The focus on practice can help understand both how an information order is created and how it is then used as a technique of governing in a specific place. Further, if the focus on practice allows a better understanding of how an information order operates as a technique of governing, the converse is true as well: the use of an information lens also helps understand the practice of governing better. In particular, it helps illuminate the conflicts and tradeoffs within the practice of governing as they are reflected in the circulation of government information.⁴⁴ However, before I discuss the role of an information order in governing in further detail, I examine the reasons I adopted the information order construct in the first place: the reification of information.

1.4 The reification of “information”

Earlier in the chapter, I outlined the ways in which information has been dealt with in relation to governance especially in discussions of e-governance and good governance. I suggested at the time that these discussions

⁴³ Examples of such use of *information* from the World Bank Institute (WBI) include “WBI is helping citizens gain Access to Information to disseminate knowledge to promote improved governance such as budget monitoring, public expenditure tracking, and performance monitoring,” <http://wbi.worldbank.org/wbi/about/topics/governance>; and “Open governance ensures citizens have access to government (information, data, processes) in order to engage governments more effectively,” <http://wbi.worldbank.org/wbi/content/supporting-open-governance>.

⁴⁴ For example, the themes of control and resistance, or surveillance and welfare administration – which are at the heart of discussions of governance – are reflected in an analysis of the functioning of an information order in the following way. The provision of details about a population or its use in welfare schemes requires that it first be gathered by agents of the state. The gathering of details, however, also allows for surveillance and control by the state. The tension between the gathering and provision of details, or the goals of surveillance and administration, are thus reflected here in the creation and functioning of an information order built on these details.

tend to reify information.⁴⁵ In this section, I examine the consequences of the reification of information as a well-defined object with specific properties and intrinsic value that is, nevertheless, unattached to a specific material form. I begin with an examination of what reification entails in general, followed by the specific case of the reification of information. I discuss the costs involved and examine what is at stake in obscuring politics and material form in analyses of information in the domain of governance. Following this discussion, I suggest an alternative framework for understanding information that uses the construct of an “information order” and keeps politics and materiality central to the conversation. At that stage, I also take a step back from the costs of reification to analyze its benefits. I suggest that the construct of a “boundary object” offers a useful way to study these benefits. But before I examine the benefits, the costs.

1.4.1 Costs and consequences of reifying information

Wenger defines reification as “the process of giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into 'thingness'” (Wenger 1998, 58). Reifications are useful because they offer a shortcut to communication and provide a point of focus around which negotiation for meaning can occur. Besides creating a convenient shorthand for referring to a variety of things, reification also distinguishes between what is included or excluded as an instance of that reification. Reifying “information,” for example, allows for distinguishing between information and that which is not identified as information, or between good and bad information (factual, expert sources vs. hearsay, tips, gossip, lies, lay sources).

But reifications are, after all, a projection of our meanings on the world, do not possess a reality of their own in the world and are abstractions that do not act on their own. Wenger speaks thus of the power and danger of reification:

The power of reification — its succinctness, its portability, its potential physical persistence, its focusing effect — is also its danger. The politician's slogan can become a substitute for a deep understanding of and commitment to what it stands for. The tool can ossify activity around its inertness. Procedures can hide broader meanings in blind sequences of operations. And the knowledge of a formula can lead to the illusion that one fully understands the processes it describes. The evocative power of reification is thus double-edged (Wenger 1998, 61).

Wenger's “double-edged sword of reification” is particularly so in the case of “information” since information does not have a single stable meaning to begin with. At different points in history, the term has been used variously to indicate a process, something in people's heads, a thing external to humans or all of these.⁴⁶ In tracing the rise and usage of the word *information*, Nunberg makes the important claim that the word *information* could not be used in the abstract till the mid-nineteenth century (Nunberg 1996). Till that time, there was no way “to speak of information as a kind of abstract stuff present in the world, disconnected from the situations that it is *about*” (Nunberg 1996, 111). As it became possible to use *information* in the abstract,

⁴⁵ The focus is on specific documents and modes of interaction in the discussion on governmentality, and the discussion seldom brings up “information” as a class of things. These very documents and interactions, however, become labeled “information” in writings about good governance or in the context of the use of ICTs as tools of information delivery in governance.

⁴⁶ Further, the term “information” is now associated retrospectively with entire classes of concrete objects that in their time were unlikely to have been seen as one thing. For various histories of what is now called information, see Burke (2000), Gleick (2011), Headrick (2002), and Hobart and Schiffman (1998). The historians among these writers argue that the current “Information Age” is no break from the past or less of a break than other times in the past when, for example, printing was invented (Hobart and Schiffman 1998), or principles of organization and classification were introduced (Headrick 2002). Separate, but as extensive, is the discussion of the extent to which even these inventions resulted in breaks or “impacted” societies.

the older, particularistic sense “came increasingly to be restricted to the sorts of things you might learn from a book or from an official or institutional source” (Nunberg 1996, 114). Meanwhile, an older sense of information as “instruction,” “education” or “formation of mind” became conflated with this particularistic sense of information. As a result of the conflation, information is, on the one hand, increasingly regarded as commoditized, corpuscular and measurable. Further, when understood in conjunction with theories in economics, it is a commodity that has economic value. On the other hand, in the sense of being educational, it is possible to impute to information an autonomous value. Taken together, information (now a commodity, a thing that can be found in books, digital media and people's minds, and that can be isolated) can be taken out of context and still have economic and truth value in the abstract because of the sense of information as “formation of the mind.” Nunberg argues, in fact, that the word *information* is able to perform the work it does precisely *because* it “fuzzes the boundaries between several genetically distinct categories of experience” (Nunberg 1996, 114). The possibility of using a term in both particularistic and abstract senses, and of fuzzing boundaries between its different meanings, has thus allowed for a flexibility in what *information* can be used to refer to.

Given the myriad senses in which information has been deployed as a term and as a concept, reifying it results in a strange state of affairs where, on the one hand, information is seen as an independent force that can “do” things. On the other, it is not always obvious whether this force is lodged in a human mind or is a textbook or a digital image, or is just stuff we know about the world. Claims such as “information empowers” imply that information is an independent actor that can “do” things like empowering people. But “information” is merely an abstraction for a variety of things that encompass different material forms. Not only can “it” not do anything, even information in a particularistic sense can only be leveraged keeping in mind a variety of social and political factors shaping the use of information in practice. Wenger's warning that reifications can “hide broader meanings” is thus pertinent in the case of “information” (Wenger 1998, 61).

Further, as “information” comes to be seen as a self-contained thing, it is associated with a set of properties and inherent value. In effect, reification shifts the focus away from how the idea or thing called “information” is used in practice to assuming how it will be valued or used. Moreover, I suggest that the range of specific properties and values that are associated with “information” draws from the kind of thing that information is seen to be by different disciplines and in various debates. For example, academic debates, especially in economics, have been concerned with information as an input in economic transactions or as a product of such transactions, as well as with the idea of an “information commodity” or information as a good.⁴⁷ Where it is seen as an input in economic transactions, information is of economic value because it allows for better decision-making.⁴⁸ As a commodity that circulates, information can be characterized in terms of its supply and demand. Because of the economic importance of information in transactions, the “information-seeking behavior” of individuals has also gained significance as behavior associated with information. For those concerned with the commercialization of information, the most relevant property of information is that it can be produced (Schiller 1997).⁴⁹ For other theorists, the concept of an “information flow” is its most important

⁴⁷ The definition of a commodity is itself a topic of debate. Also debated is the nature of the difference between a commodity, good and product. See Appadurai (1988) for these discussions. Of the various definitions and discussions of commodities, perhaps of most relevance here is Marx's idea of “commodity fetishism,” where the reification of a commodity obscures the social relations – for Marx, these are primarily relations of production – in which the commodity is embedded.

⁴⁸ Information is also an important background condition (“conditions of perfect information”) that economists concede is not realized in the real world.

⁴⁹ Schiller, in theorizing the information commodity, argues that a commodity has to be understood within the capitalist system of production. To the extent that others have tried to keep the information commodity separate from this system, they have indulged

aspect (Castells 2010). The idea that information can flow is itself connected to the idea of lossless transferability of information from person to person, or from one institution to another, without losing its meaning.⁵⁰ The “flow” metaphor suggests smooth movement that faces no resistance. The increasing focus on “flows,” I argue, has strengthened the conception of information as a transferable good, while distracting us from a discussion of the social roots and material form of information: it has encouraged us to think of information as free-floating stuff that is naturally valuable and capable of flowing, instead of being rooted in and shaped by practice.

Going back to Wenger's analysis of the power and danger of reifications, it is easy to see why valuing “information” as an object having a single, stable meaning is useful. Treating information as an object helps focus attention on it and treating it as a coherent object makes “information solutions” possible to devise and deploy. An alternative way of understanding information – as embedded in social relations or in its practice rather than as a finished object, or as having multiple, contextual meanings – does not lend itself as easily to the design of solutions. Yet, understanding information as a good that can be easily moved from person to person while retaining its value, obscures the fact that the value and meaning of information is always derived from its embedding in specific social relations and in a material form. In the context of governing, Scott (1998) and Bayly (2000) provide examples that indicate how this embeddedness has historically been something that states have struggled with.⁵¹

In his examples of state-building, Scott points out that while making legible was central to the enterprise of state-building, it was a time-consuming and fraught process (Scott 1998). For one, the state's measurement units were seldom aligned with local ways of measuring a fact (lengths, volume, quantities, time).⁵² Even more important, people resisted these measurements because their interests were not aligned with those of the state: for example, historically, most subjects prefer remaining illegible so they did not have to pay tax or join the military. Thus, a large proportion of the population remained illegible to the state. Even where details were collected, to the extent that the state fit them in categories and units of its own choosing, these details were either transformed or became “fictional shorthand” (Scott 1998, 24). The state could only see people as people chose to present themselves to the state within the constraints of categories made available to them. Even in contemporary schemes that required a high level of legibility, schemes panned out in very different ways than envisioned and Scott suggests that this happened because people resented, and therefore resisted, surveillance and the imposition of order on their lives. Bayly's account of the 1857 uprising that I described earlier also suggests that the same “information” could mean completely different things to the British and a member of the local social network, thus making surveillance a difficult task (Bayly 2000). Both Scott's and Bayly's accounts, thus, emphasize that the creation, use, meaning and value of “information” could not be gauged outside of the context of its circulation.⁵³ Moreover, understanding this context included foremost an

in “information exceptionalism,” which Schiller finds problematic (Schiller 1997). Schiller's analysis focuses on what can be called the “information production” industry and market. He has much less to say about government information or how the relations of production factor into that realm.

⁵⁰ Appadurai (1989) suggests that focusing on “commodity exchange” rather than on commodities per se would be useful. In the case of information, the danger so far seems the opposite, with “information flows” being the popular way of framing.

⁵¹ Brown and Duguid (2000) make a similar argument about the embeddedness of information in the context of corporations.

⁵² Scott illustrates this point with an example from where distance is measured not in miles, but in terms of the time taken to cover it. Moreover, the time taken is expressed in terms of how long it takes to cook rice (“Three rice-cookings”), a measure that locals are likely to be familiar with (Scott 1998, 25).

⁵³ Jessop makes a related, theoretical argument about the embeddedness of knowledge. He writes of the virtues of recognizing knowledge as Polanyi's fourth “fictitious commodity” (labor, land and money being the original fictitious commodities that Polanyi

understanding of the politics underlying the practice of governing.

The reification of “information” and the subsequent shift away from practice has two important consequences: it obscures politics and it is indifferent to material form. By associating inherent value and particular outcomes with information, reification does not account for politics while examining how information is created, valued or used in practice. Reification also makes the material form of information external to it: material form may still need to be factored in as a container for information, but is not intrinsic to the definition of information. These concerns lead me next to examine the possible costs of not studying the political and material dimensions of the life of information. I draw on a substantial literature concerned with the depoliticization associated with development initiatives to talk about the former.

1.4.1.1 Does “information” depoliticize?

Studies of schemes, initiatives or projects that seek to bring about change of any kind have been concerned with the idea that such initiatives “depoliticize” change as they go about their plans by shifting the focus from structural inequalities to technical solutions (Benjamin et al. 2007; Crush 1995; Escobar 1995; Goldman 2006; Ferguson 1994; Harriss 2002; Mitchell 1995; Mosse 2005, Li 2007b). Development discourse significantly shapes how problems get defined, resources allocated and solutions implemented.⁵⁴ Critics discuss how the project of development proceeds by first constructing abnormalities (development categories such as “the illiterate” or “the poor”) and then attempts to reform these abnormalities through technical solutions (Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1994; Li 2007b; Mitchell 1995). Critics argue that these “abnormalities” that development agencies identify are primarily shaped by solutions that they know they can deploy. Li (2007b) argues that the implementation of development programs has two key steps: first, the problematization and second, the “rendering technical” and simultaneously apolitical (Li 2007b, 7).⁵⁵ She suggests that “programs of improvement are always shaped by political economic relationships they can’t change; constituted that is by what they exclude” (Li 2007b, 4). Ferguson, Mitchell and Li’s accounts emphasize that the framing of the problem and solution in improvement schemes inevitably screens out what Li calls political-economic questions – the ownership of means of production, and the structures that support systemic inequalities (Li 2007b, 11).⁵⁶

Corbridge et al. (2005) offer another way of thinking about the effects of development projects. They agree with the authors discussed above that development projects offer technical solutions to political problems and also that they seldom achieve their objectives of poverty alleviation or other change. However, Corbridge et al. disagree that such projects always end up strengthening the dominant sections of society. They suggest,

identified) (Jessop 2007b).

⁵⁴ The most radical critiques of development come from the post-Developmentalists, who reject the very paradigm of development (Escobar 1995, 214) and suggest alternatives *to* development rather than development alternatives. Escobar includes innovative grassroots movements and experiments in the category of alternatives to development. He also warns against deploying fashionable terms such as grassroots or sustainable development that end up saving the development paradigm.

⁵⁵ Hand in hand with the focus on technical solutions is the centrality of solutions whose outcomes are measurable and quantifiable. The politics underlying the quantification of outcomes too remains unquestioned, as Mitchell shows. Measurability is advocated because it generates quantifiable development “information.”

⁵⁶ It is important to note, however, that Li does not attribute the recasting of political-economic questions into technical questions to a hidden agenda (Li 2007b). Instead, she suggests that often, it is well-intentioned people who run development projects. The question, then, is how these agents try to balance the interests of various sections involved in the projects and how they come to decisions that depoliticize development (Li 2007b; Mosse 2005). The focus, therefore, is on the contestation and negotiation through which questions are formed and technical solutions adopted.

instead, that development projects and schemes may equally open up spaces for contestation and political engagement, even when they do not intend to. Thus, these debates on depoliticization underscore the importance of the process by which problems and solutions are framed in the course of setting up and operating a planned initiative.

In the face of the universalistic claim that “information empowers,” it is worthwhile asking what work the framing of governance as an informational problem does: what aspects of the practice of governing does it highlight and what does it obscure? I pointed earlier in this chapter to the popular idea that economically poor people or a state suffering from bad governance have limited access to information. This is the “problem.” Having access to information can then bring people out of a state of poverty, allow them to participate more fully in the process of governance and, overall, encourage “good governance.” This then is “the informational solution.” It is not immediately obvious how the provision of “information” would, in and of itself, be able to improve governance, especially bearing in mind the issues that I raised in the previous section on the reification of information. The concerns raised by the depoliticization literature lead me to ask whether informational solutions additionally depoliticize changes in the practice of governing. Does an informational solution push efforts at finding political solutions to governance problems to the background? Further, even if informational solutions depoliticize the practice of governing, do they nevertheless open up spaces for negotiation as Corbridge et al. (2005) suggest? What are the circumstances in which informational solutions are able to offer spaces for negotiation and political engagement between state and population?

Using the depoliticization literature as a foundation, I argue that it is imperative that the political life of information be discussed in the context of governing. Moreover, this needs to be done in such a way that information is not treated as a thing possessing intrinsic value. Instead, the meaning and value of information needs to draw from the social relations in which it is embedded. In the domain of governance, these relations would include foremost the relations between the state and population, including the nature of the boundary between the two. Before I go on to propose how such analysis may be conducted, I examine the second aspect that the reification of information obscures: material form.

1.4.1.2 Does “information” dematerialize?

Reification makes the material form of information external to it. In what follows, I examine the costs of disregarding material form in discussions of information, particularly in the domain of governance. By material form, I refer to the nature of the physical matter on which content is inscribed (such as paper or silicon), its form (handwritten, spoken or typewritten) as well as the format in which content is recorded (including language, the use of technical terms and layout).

Arguments that things matter and that material form is important are no longer in dispute in most domains (Appadurai 1988; Miller 1998). Information, however, constitutes an interesting case where discussions of its material form, while they exist, are less common (Blanchette 2011; Brown and Duguid 1996; Duguid 1996). Blanchette argues that since the digital age is seen as an epoch when “information has finally achieved what it has aspired to throughout history, namely, unburdened itself from the shackles of matter,” the immateriality of digital information and its purported independence from matter are celebrated rather than questioned (Blanchette 2011, 1042). While Blanchette focuses on digital bits, Brown and Duguid argue more generally that communication technologies, including documents of all kinds, have long been described in “conduit terms” (Brown and Duguid 1996; Duguid 1996).⁵⁷ Since these technologies are seen merely as containers for

⁵⁷ The idea of the “conduit metaphor” first appeared in Reddy (1979).

information, and it is the information that is relevant, the material form of these technologies tends to be dismissed as incidental or irrelevant.⁵⁸ But, as these writers show, documents do far more than carry or transport information: they carry social meaning and provide social cues. Further, the social meaning associated with different classes of material objects varies, as Pellegram illustrates with her analysis of the different social meaning attached to different qualities of paper in an office (Pellegram 1998). Following these authors, I argue that material form is integral to the meaning of a message and, therefore, constitutes (rather than carries) “information.”

How material form is factored into discussions of information is always important; but the stakes are particularly high when the discussion happens in the domain of governance. Based on discussions from earlier sections on the techniques and practice of governing, I argue that material form acts as another dimension along which state and population are differentiated and the boundary between them made real. Since different actors have access to different material forms, material form can play a role in keeping people in or out, or shaping how they can participate in the practice of governing. For example, if the legitimacy attached by the state to verbal and written orders is different and there is an emphasis on the written form, it might have the effect of restricting or delaying access to written documents for populations with low levels of literacy or in primarily oral cultures (Clanchy 1993; Sharma and Gupta 2006b, 13). The use of technical or otherwise unfamiliar language might also make information differently accessible to the state and its population.⁵⁹ Thus, much like in the previous section on the obscuring of politics by information, I argue that it is imperative to explicitly discuss the material form of information in the practice of governing and examine how it forms an integral part of making, maintaining and shifting boundaries between state and population.

1.4.2 Benefits of reifying information

Wenger points to succinctness, portability, potential physical persistence, and its focusing effect as the power of reification (Wenger 1998, 61). While I have discussed the costs of reifying information so far, the “power of reification” is that it offers benefits by making information appear as a bounded, well-understood object. Thus, a reified term allows a wide range of communities to make use of it. In this case, information is the reified term that has, in the context of governance, been leveraged by agents from different levels of the state, donor organizations, NGOs, movements, and citizen groups, a few examples of which I have already outlined. The multiple accepted meanings and ambiguity of information have allowed groups with different ideologies and goals to leverage it.

Wenger's work, as well as Star and Greisemer's, helps me address how different groups come to use the same term in their work (Wenger 1998; Star and Greisemer 1989). Wenger suggests that the meanings associated with a reified term are not fixed from the start and are negotiated within the communities in which they circulate. What is important in the analysis of a reified entity, therefore, is the extent to which its meaning is negotiable or how much participation is involved in fixing its meaning. Star and Greisemer offer another way to understand how terms circulate. They propose the idea of a “boundary object” as one that is “both adaptable to different viewpoints and robust enough to maintain identity across them” (Star and Greisemer

⁵⁸ The argument that multiple modes of communication will help reach a wider audience has no doubt been made in the context of technologies of communication. A similar argument in the context of information and information delivery might emphasize the utility of multiple material technologies as a means to reach more people (thus, technology is once again a container of information here), but the symbolic meaning attached to different material forms has not been as debated in this domain.

⁵⁹ However, I am not suggesting that material form can only offer ways to strengthen and maintain existing boundaries: it also offers the means to modify terms of access, as Sharma and Gupta illustrate with various examples of how the emphasis on writing was subverted by village women (Sharma and Gupta 2006b,15).

1989, 387). Thus, they too offer a way to understand how a diverse range of communities are able to use a single term in their work.

Prior to the current discussion, my focus was on that which is called “information,” its context of circulation and material form. However, I conclude from this discussion that what is equally interesting is the idea of information and the term itself. How far do they circulate and what is the politics of their circulation? There is, thus, a second reason to think about the embeddedness of information: in order to examine the social relations within which the term circulates. Besides the politics of that which is labeled information, there is also a politics underlying the very label that is worth studying in the domain of governance.

1.5 The political life of information: Frameworks and questions

Consolidating the discussions on the techniques of governing and the stakes involved in reifying information, there emerge two aspects of what I am calling the “political life of information” that need further analysis and resolution: the role played by politics and material form in the circulation of the reified object called information in the practice of governing; and the politics of how different communities come to leverage the term *information* in their work.

To address the first in my work, I use a modified form of Bayly's idea of an “information order.” By information order, Bayly refers to an assemblage and arrangement of information systems, as well as channels, forms and agents of communication. I refer to the individual constituents of an information order as “elements of the information order.” Bayly sees an information order “as a type of social formation rather than as a simple adjunct to existing economic forces or a neutral technological process” (Bayly 2000, 4). He uses it as a heuristic to analyze the 1857 revolution against the British in India, arguing that it was the gaps between the British government's formally mandated information order and the informal information order used by the revolutionaries to communicate that allowed the 1857 revolution to spread.

I make use of Bayly's idea of an information order as a way to incorporate social relations in my analysis of the circulation of information products in the practice of governing. I find Bayly useful for three reasons. First, he sees the institutions of information collection and diffusion, including state intelligence networks, social communication networks, communication technologies, and “knowledgeable people,” as important for social and economic change in a community.⁶⁰ Second, he allows nevertheless that such an information order is embedded in a social context and is itself a social formation. In the face of a popular view of information as autonomous and intrinsically valuable, I value Bayly's framework for its recognition of the social meaning of information.⁶¹ Finally, he sees an information order not as a thing, but as a heuristic that is useful in analyzing certain phenomena, which in my case is the making of boundaries between a state and its population.

I borrow from Bayly the fundamental idea of a social-technological formation that is neither completely physical infrastructure, nor only the social networks in which information products circulate. But I also

⁶⁰ “Knowledgeable people” were not always intelligence gatherers employed by the British. For Bayly, they included people with everyday knowledge in particular domains of work and expertise. Bayly sees the institutions and people mentioned above as important enough to merit separate analysis rather than being relegated to some residual category of the overall analysis (Bayly 2000, 4).

⁶¹ However, Bayly goes on to say that while “not separate from the world of power or economic exploitation,” he sees an information order as having “a degree of autonomy from politics or economic structure.” It is unclear how small or large this “degree of autonomy” is (Bayly 2000, 4).

depart from Bayly's framework and modify it in significant ways to make my arguments. While Bayly applies this concept to colonial India as a whole, I understand the information order differentially in parts of present-day India. Further, and unlike Bayly, I use the heuristic for discussing the everyday practice of governing in the context of a non-colonial, welfare state. Bayly uses two information orders in his analysis – the state intelligence networks of the British and the social communication networks of Indians – to make the argument that the gaps between these orders allowed the 1857 revolution to happen. Unlike Bayly, I use a composite information order to cover interactions between the state and a population. The reason for using a composite order is both because of the shift in historical context (that is, from a colonial government to an elected and indigenous government whose links with the population were of a different nature) and because of my (consequent) focus on the interactions and connections between state and population, rather than on gaps, in the maintenance of boundaries. Thus, while Bayly's framework of an information order covers a larger geography and is analytically separate for a state and its population, mine is focused in a place but is a composite that is defined to include both the state and its population in a single social formation. Accordingly, the information order of a place and in the domain of governance, as I define it, includes the information systems, laws, procedures, documents and records that are created by the state and that frame such interactions, as well as the physical and social infrastructure that is made use of in the course of such interactions.⁶²

Another importance addition that I make to Bayly's idea is the introduction of the material form of information products as a factor in how an information order works. While Bayly pays attention to the existence of different information products, communication technologies and infrastructure in his work, he nevertheless treats material form as external to the definition of information and does not emphasize its importance in shaping the very meaning associated with the “information” in question. Unlike Bayly, I take material form seriously in my analysis, making it intrinsic to my analysis of how documents, records and other products are understood and used. I also leverage the information order to make different arguments than Bayly and with this, I arrive at my research questions and arguments.

My first research question is: what are the processes by which an information order is created, maintained or changed? I argue that an information order is fundamentally deployed as a technique to create and maintain existing boundaries between state and population. Therefore, the creation, valuation and usage of this order, as well its individual elements, shapes and is shaped by the nature of the boundary between the state and a population. However, the blurred nature of the boundary, as well as connections across the boundary (such as it is), offer opportunities to shift the information order or change its individual elements. Such a change may be dramatic or gradual, but is always politically achieved.

For my second research question, I move from the thing called information to the term *information*: what does the use of the term *information* achieve and what are the politics of the circulation of the term? I argue that the flexibility of the term has allowed it to act as a “boundary object” between communities with different ideologies and objectives who might otherwise have had little in common.

Throughout my analysis, as I address these two research questions regarding the costs and benefits of reifying information, I examine the tension between understanding information as situated within a specific information order and the benefits of leveraging universalistic claims about it.

⁶² Note that all of these state-created information products would constitute the category of “government information” among governance initiatives.

1.6 Two cases: Campaigns for a Right to Information and the Information Village Research Project

To interrogate the political life of information and address my research questions, I analyze two information initiatives in India. The groups whose information initiatives I studied included Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), a union of laborers and farmers in northern India, and M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (hereafter referred to as “Swaminathan Foundation”), an agricultural research NGO in south India. The two cases of my focus are very different and my choice is motivated precisely by their differences. How did two ideologically different initiatives both make information central to their work? As importantly, once they started working within different information orders, how did their practices around different elements of the information order differ and how were they implicated in the different kinds of politics that maintained or shifted the prevailing information order? Studying an explicitly political initiative as well as one that was not explicitly political also helps me make the argument that the circulation of “government information” is always political irrespective of whether an initiative considers its work political or not.

MKSS was started in 1990 as “a non-party people’s political process” in Rajsamand district, Rajasthan.⁶³ In the course of a campaign demanding minimum wages for laborers working in state-sponsored employment schemes, MKSS challenged the discrepancies between documented wages and the wages actually paid to workers participating in these schemes. It also highlighted the obstructions that workers faced in accessing government documents. MKSS’s endeavor grew over the next few years to become a statewide movement demanding a legal right for citizens to examine government documents. In conjunction with similar campaigns across the country, the MKSS’s campaign resulted in the national Right to Information (RTI) Act in 2005, which provided citizens a way to access “government information.”⁶⁴

Swaminathan Foundation initiated a rural telecenter project called the Information Village Research Project (IVRP) in 1998. The objective of IVRP was to provide “locale-specific, demand-driven information, and for training rural women and men for value-added information.”⁶⁵ The project works through ICT-based “information shops” or “Village Knowledge Centres” (VKCs) that are equipped with computers and operated by “knowledge workers” who are trained by the Foundation.⁶⁶ In addition to ICTs, VKCs also use conventional communication tools like display boards, newsletters and public address systems to achieve their goals of collecting, localizing, and disseminating relevant information to rural communities. One of the categories identified as relevant is “government information,” in keeping with the Foundation’s larger goals of improving the nature and efficacy of interactions between the state and the village population.

While Swaminathan Foundation is an NGO with an organizational hierarchy and receives funding from both government and non-government sources,⁶⁷ MKSS sees itself as a grassroots movement, prides itself on being non-hierarchical and is funded only through the contributions of individuals. Ideologically, the two are quite

⁶³ Details from the MKSS website unless otherwise specified, <http://www.mkssindia.org/>

⁶⁴ The Indian RTI Act 2005 is “an Act to provide for setting out the practical regime of right to information for citizens to secure access to information under the control of public authorities, in order to promote transparency and accountability in the working of every public authority, the constitution of a Central Information Commission and State Information Commissions and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto,” <http://righttoinformation.gov.in/webactrti.htm>.

⁶⁵ Details on the VKC project in this section from the MSSRF website, <http://www.mssrf.org/>, and IITB (2005).

⁶⁶ By 2009, the IVRP had set up 100 VKCs in Puducherry, Tamilnadu and Maharashtra.

⁶⁷ The IVRP was funded for its first ten years by IDRC.

different, with Swaminathan Foundation distancing itself from politics, while MKSS calls itself a political process. Their stance with respect to state policies differs as well, with the Foundation largely friendly to the state and MKSS openly confrontational when it deems it necessary. In brief, then, MKSS and Swaminathan Foundation are ideologically and structurally different. In spite of that, however, both have been associated with an initiative that associates itself with the term "information" in the realm of governance. How and why did this happen? What did they mean when they talked about "information"? What did they see as its place in governance and how did they hope to use it to change the nature of governance? What, in turn, did information mean to the larger population in which they were attempting to bring about governance changes? What was the information order that shaped and was shaped by the practice of governance in these populations?

1.7 Research Design and Methods

MKSS's involvement in the RTI campaign and Swaminathan Foundation's IVRP provide an opportunity for a historical analysis of how information has been used differently as a thing and as a term. Studying both allows me to ask how the differences in the two cases shape and are shaped by differences in functioning of the boundaries between state and society in the two cases. These specific cases are important because both MKSS and Swaminathan Foundation were pioneers and among the first to see a role for "information" in their work on governance in rural Indian communities.⁶⁸ The role that each envisioned was, of course, radically different. So were their structures and ideologies. In addition, they operated in different geographical regions that also had their distinct histories. These two cases are not comparable if comparable cases are understood as variations of an ideal type.

My research is, thus, not a typical comparative analysis of the outcomes of these two cases. What I am doing, instead, is following an idea – that "information empowers" – across two prominent cases and studying how "information" – the thing and the term – operated as a technique of governing in the two, given their widely different conditions of governance. Following Gupta and Ferguson, I do not focus on the differences between my cases as a given, but instead ask how these differences were produced (Gupta and Ferguson 1992).⁶⁹ My interest is in understanding how these cases came to the term *information* and then to understand its use in such radically different ways.

In order to answer the research questions I posed in the previous section, I spent about five months each with MKSS and the IVRP unit of Swaminathan Foundation in 2009. My research was qualitative and used a combination of archival work, participant observation and interviews. It was conducted in Hindi (in Rajasthan), Tamil (in Puducherry) and English (in both places), with most interviews and some documentation using a combination of two languages. Through the research process, my identities as a woman, a researcher, a student in the United States, and an upper-caste Tamilian who grew up in Delhi (that is, in an urban rather than a rural region, and in north India rather than south India) affected what and who I had access to, how I interacted with my informants and interviewees, as well as how they perceived me.

⁶⁸ MKSS was among the first groups to work with the idea of a Right to Information in India, and the first in rural India to use the terminology. It continued to lead, co-ordinate and play an important role in campaigns that worked on state-level RTI legislations, as well the countrywide RTI Act in 2005. The IVRP, meanwhile, was among the earliest and most discussed ICT-based projects in India.

⁶⁹ Also see Hart's notion of relational comparison (Hart 2006). Hart's discussion of critical ethnographies advocates relational comparisons. A relational comparison does not involve pre-given bounded cases. Rather, it tries to understand how the different cases are constituted in relation to one another.

Instead of seeing this as a drawback or trying not to “affect” what I studied, I used a reflexive model to frame my research.

The exact combination of methods I used for each case varied. In the case of MKSS, I was attempting to dig into a history and narrative that has already been told many times (Bakshi 1998; Baviskar 2007; Jenkins and Goetz 1999; Mishra 2003; Singh 2007; Webb 2010).⁷⁰ In addition, my interest was mainly in the earlier stages of MKSS's campaigns, which had taken place between 1987 and 1996 (that is, fifteen to twenty years prior to my study). In order to arrive at the richest possible account of the campaign, I relied on a combination of participant observation and archival work. This involved participating in the organization of a “public hearing,” an employment fair, a May Day workers' fair, various rallies and public meetings that placed demands to the local and state governments, meetings with different levels of the government on the use of information technology in the administration of a public works scheme in the region, and helping set up a filing categorization system for MKSS. Participant observation of MKSS's current work proved fruitful in several ways. First, spending a long length of time traveling and working with MKSS members allowed me to get beyond the popular narrative of their campaigns and into details. It also provided me many leads in terms of people in the bureaucracy or the local press to talk to, and of archival resources that I needed to look out for. Participating in events organized by MKSS allowed me to approach the past with an eye to what had changed and also provided me an opening to talk about similar events in the past. Further, as the Comaroffs point out, “the method should tell us something of the way in which personal acts become social facts” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992, 34).⁷¹ Being a participant observer in 2009 helped me develop a sense of how MKSS's work had been translated into social facts and a particular narrative. That, in turn, helped me approach more people and look for a broader range of points of view on the campaigns that took place. Participant observation also allowed me to talk to more members than those typically targeted as MKSS's spokespeople by the press. While my attempts did not lead me to a widely different narrative than the popular one, it nevertheless allowed me to appreciate how a wider range of people viewed these campaigns and their own role in them. Finally, traveling in the region where the RTI campaign took root, rather than spending all my times in archives, allowed me to go to the archives with some sense of the social experience of being in the region, though always aware that the region was unlikely to have remained unchanged in the intervening period.

In the case of the IVRP, I spent time at the various nodes where the project functioned: the IVRP headquarters at the main Swaminathan Foundation office in Chennai; at the regional Village Resource Center (VRC) in Puducherry district; and at different Village Knowledge Centers (VKCs) in villages of the district. Much like my argument about “the state,” “IVRP” was far from being a monolithic entity and operated at all these levels. The perception of governance at each level was different, making it important to understand these different sites. Participant observation involved spending time at meetings of IVRP personnel, at the VKCs and in the homes of residents of two villages that had VKCs. Besides spending time at the VKC and visiting village residents at their residences or public spaces, fieldwork also involved teaching a computer class at a village school.⁷² Studying documents took some time in this case as well and was informed by the participant observation. Of all the time I spent with the IVRP, I spent the most time in two villages where the earliest VKCs had been set

⁷⁰ These references are in addition to all the accounts written by members of MKSS.

⁷¹ See also Chene (1997).

⁷² IVRP and Intel run an Intel-Learn program, which involves lectures and a group project on Microsoft Office. Successful completion of the program results in a certificate from Intel. I conducted this course for twenty students at a village middle school in parallel with my fieldwork in September-October 2009.

up. As opposed to the MKSS case where I spent a lot of my time traveling with MKSS members, I spent my time with the IVRP staying in Chennai (while conducting research at the headquarters), the city of Pondicherry in Puducherry district (while visiting all VKCs and choosing villages for in-depth study) and in a village in the Puducherry district (while conducting the in-depth village studies). The choice of a village to stay in was difficult and was finally based on the following reasoning. I found that I did not have many choices of stay within villages – those who would be willing and comfortable to have me stay with them tended to be the wealthier or powerful residents (the *panchayat* president, for example), and mostly both.⁷³ If I had taken up these offers for accommodation and conducted research in the same village where I lived, I was certain that there would be aspects of the politics in the village that would be completely inaccessible for me. At the same time, I realized that living in a village would give me an understanding of the region that I could not obtain from living in the city of Pondicherry. As a compromise, I found accommodation with a panchayat president's family in a village that I was not going to study in depth. Instead, using this village as my fixed point, I travelled to the two villages every day. In this way, I learnt a lot about the region by living in a village in the region, but reduced the barriers I would have faced if I had been seen as someone close to the local village president.

1.8 Dissertation outline

This first chapter introduced and situated my concerns about information in governance. I argued that the reification of information has made invisible the politics involved in the creation, usage and valuation of all that is simply labeled “government information,” as well as its material form. I proposed that “information” be disaggregated and its role understood within the techniques used in the practice of governing, especially in the making of boundaries between a state and a population. To this end, I suggested using the framework of an “information order.” My first research question, which originated from these discussions, is: what are the processes through which an information order is created, maintained or changed? Meanwhile, I argued that the reification of information also had benefits, and allowed the term *information* to be used by a diverse range of organizations and individuals. I suggested that the politics of the circulation of the term be examined using the idea of a “boundary object.” This led to my second research question: what does the use of the term *information* achieve and what are the politics of its circulation? I described the two information initiatives to which I posed these questions: the early campaigns of the non-party political group MKSS, that later led to the nationwide RTI campaign and the ICT-based Information Village Research Project implemented by the NGO, Swaminathan Foundation. Finally, I described and justified my research methods. In subsequent chapters, I use the constructs of an information order and a boundary object to make my arguments.

In chapter 2, following an examination of the use of *information* in the texts of funding agencies in the 1980s and 1990s, I examine how MKSS and Swaminathan Foundation framed information in their work. I argue that the reification of information allowed it to be framed by the two groups as an object that could be demanded or provided. Meanwhile, the flexibility of the term *information* allowed them to do this in keeping with their vastly different ideologies and objectives. Finally, the reification of information and its multiple meanings allowed Swaminathan Foundation to find a large and diverse group of supporters for its Information Village project from the early stages of its conceptualization.

In the following three chapters, I examine how information worked in practice in MKSS's campaigns and Swaminathan Foundation's information shops using the framework of an information order. In chapters 3 and

⁷³ The lowest tier of the Indian local elected government system. Also refers (as in this case) to the group of villages that elects a council at this level.

4, I examine MKSS's campaigns between 1987 and 1996. During these campaigns, MKSS discovered the centrality of specific government documents in the lives and livelihoods of residents of rural Rajasthan, negotiated access to government records at the panchayat level and ultimately organized a 40-day *dharna* (sit-in) in 1996 that demanded a Right to Information from the Rajasthan government.⁷⁴ In chapter 3, I examine the earliest of these campaigns – a land campaign and two minimum wage campaigns – conducted between 1987 and 1991. I describe how MKSS discovered the significance of specific government records in this period. Conceptually, I address my first research question in this chapter. I argue using the rules, procedures and documents involved in land allotment and payment of wages in public work schemes that the creation of these elements of the information order was shaped by the nature of the boundary between state and population. In turn, these rules, procedures and documents were used to maintain the distinction between state and population. However, while the information order largely worked to maintain existing boundaries, the MKSS campaigns leveraged the non-monolithic character of the state and the activists' connections across the state-population boundary to bring about some changes in the procedures adopted by public work schemes. I conclude the chapter with an MKSS-authored report from 1992, where a “Right to Information” is first mentioned.

In chapter 4, I examine MKSS's work between 1992 and 1996. Through its involvement in economic enterprises, public hearings and finally, a 40-day *dharna*, MKSS concretized the demand for a Right to Information in this period. Conceptually, in this chapter, I pay attention to the role played by the material form of documents and records in maintaining or shifting the boundaries between state and population. I argue in the context of MKSS's public hearings that the technical language used by the documents associated with public worksites, in combination with the legitimacy attached to written documents, maintained the distinction between state and population. However, the public hearings conducted by MKSS leveraged material form to their advantage by reorganizing records and reading them out to make them accessible to more people. Next, I address my second research question in the context of widespread support for the 40-day RTI *dharna*. I argue that the flexibility of the term *information* allowed it to act as a “boundary object” between a wide range of communities during the *dharna*, thus allowing MKSS to expand the support base for an RTI.

In chapter 5, I examine “transactions” in information at an “apolitical” IVRP information shop in Puducherry. I show how the shop and its operators became involved in the creation and verification of social facts for the state; were drawn on as valuable resources for petitioning the state, and were deemed irrelevant by village residents in arenas where the shop chose to stay away from politics. I use the working of the information shop to argue that the production, provision, and use of “government information” is always political, whether or not an initiative sees it that way. Moreover, I demonstrate that in the absence of an overtly political campaign, village residents used a mode of everyday (and sometimes invisible) politics to negotiate changes in individual elements of the information order.

In the concluding chapter, I revisit some of the tensions that I argued were papered over by the simplistic claim that “information is power.” This is followed by a summary of my conclusions from the two cases I analyzed. I discuss how the idea of an information order helps explore the role of politics and material form in the circulation of government information. Moving to the term *information*, I analyze next how the term acted as a boundary idea and allowed a variety of groups to leverage it in their different work. I also discuss

⁷⁴ MKSS was established in 1990. However, the activists who started the movement began their work in the region in 1987. I don't make a distinction between the earlier unnamed activist group and MKSS in this section.

the relationship between the information order and the term *information*. Finally, I discuss the different modes of politics that were involved in my cases and the different spaces that these modes opened up. I conclude by discussing how the ideas developed in this dissertation can speak to the current events that I pointed out in the preface.

Chapter 2

Framing “information”

In this chapter, I examine the period in which MKSS and Swaminathan Foundation made “information” – the term and the concept – central to their work.¹ I argue that the reification of information allowed it to be framed by the two groups as an object that could be demanded or provided. The flexibility of the term *information* allowed them to do this in keeping with their vastly different ideologies and objectives. Finally, I suggest that the reification of information and its multiple meanings allowed Swaminathan Foundation to find a large and diverse group of supporters for its Information Village Research Project (IVRP) from the early stages of its conceptualization.²

Throughout this chapter, I rely on two ideas about information from chapter 1. The first is the idea that reification has made information a concrete, bounded object associated with a specific set of properties and economic value. The second idea, which sets the reification of information apart from other reifications, is that it is possible to use the term *information* in multiple senses and at various levels of abstraction. I begin by examining how these two ideas explain the popularity of information in development texts and among development agencies in the 1980s and 1990s. With this background, I analyze the use of information as a term and a concept in a 1992 report written by MKSS members where the term “Right to Information” makes an appearance. Next, I discuss how Swaminathan Foundation framed information at different stages in the conceptualization of IVRP and brought supporters on board between 1992 and 1997. In both cases, I examine the extent to which the two groups reified information and what they saw as its properties, value and potential. Further, what were the implicit assumptions about socio-economic conditions, the nature of state-citizen relations, or power structures in their ways of thinking about information? I conclude that power structures were an integral part of MKSS's framing of information and its potential role, while the Foundation framed information as a commodity that could be provided at its information shops while maintaining distance from local politics.

2.1 Information and development agencies

In this section I examine the use of information as a term and a concept in development discourse in the 1980s and 1990s. I argue that the flexibility of *information* and its reification are key to understanding the popularity of the idea of information as a development tool. The word *information* can be used in both particularistic and abstract senses. That, together with the conflation of a sense of information as “formation of mind” and its particularistic sense, has made the word *information* flexible enough to refer to a number of things (Nunberg 1996). While the timeline for my analysis is different than Nunberg's, I suggest that the ambiguity and flexibility offered by the dual sense of the word *information* was leveraged by development agencies, as well as their critics.³ The reification of information, meanwhile, made it possible to frame

¹ I refer to information in various ways in this chapter: as a term, a concept and a reified object. I use italics (*information*) to refer exclusively to the term. For the concept or the reification, I use information without quotes or italics (information). The only exception is the first mention of information in the chapter, where the word is in quotes to remind the reader that the reference is not a simple one (for all the reasons that I have laid out in chapter 1 and continue to discuss through chapter 2).

² I make a similar argument about MKSS's campaigns in chapter 4, but in the context of a later phase of its work.

³ Flexibility was by no means the sole reason for the uptake of the term. Trends in development policy and among development agencies have traditionally been closely tied to academic trends (especially in economics). Information was no exception.

information as an object that development agencies could provide.

To understand the flexibility and reification of information empirically, I devote the rest of this section to examining the use of information in documents produced by development agencies in the 1980s and 1990s. The objective of the examination is threefold: to understand how use of the term *information* evolved in the work of development agencies in the 1980s and 1990s; to understand how the ambiguity of information shaped this evolution; and to understand the properties associated with information in the work of development agencies (and in development discourse more generally) by the mid-1990s. Using excerpts from the World Bank's World Development Reports (WDRs) and documents published by other development agencies, I show that the ability to move between the two senses of information – particularistic and abstract – facilitated the implicit attribution of several properties to information, including an autonomous economic value, comparability and a capacity to be transferred between entities without loss. This, in turn, allowed for information to be framed as a development solution and as an object of provision in the work of these agencies. Moreover, I suggest that the ability to move between different levels of abstraction also allowed information to stay relevant in spite of significant shifts in the ideological climate in which development agencies operated in the 1980s and 1990s.

2.1.1 Information in World Development Reports

A good place to start an analysis of the growing popularity of information in the development realm are the World Bank's annual WDRs (first published in 1978). WDRs have been tremendously influential in setting the tone and trends for official development discourse. They also reflect the development priorities and dominant ideological positions of their times.⁴

The very first WDRs use the word *information* in two ways. The first of these pertains to the WDRs as sources of development information (and this usage continued through the decades). For example,

Whatever the uncertainties of the future, governments have to act. They are faced with the necessity of daily decisions. And hence the quality of the information, and the range of available choices on which those decisions will have to be made become critically important (World Bank 1978, iii).

The other realm in which *information* crops up in the reports is agriculture. For instance,

small farmers must receive strong institutional support to help meet their demands for vital

Information became significant to both micro and macro economic theory in the 1960s. Micro economics, in particular, began to treat information not merely as a background assumption ("conditions of perfect information"), but as an input in transactions at this time. See Romer (1986), Stigler (1961), and Stiglitz (2002) on the importance of information and knowledge in markets and governments, and for research on the link between information, growth and development. As information became a legitimate theme of academic discussion in economics and other disciplines, the change was duly reflected in the texts and objectives of development agencies ranging from international players such as the World Bank and IDRC, through national and local state entities, to NGOs with even more localized areas of operation.

⁴ For example, Yusuf argues that the theme and content of WDRs have undergone three major shifts in the three decades that they have been around (Yusuf 2008). These shifts have been "from state-directed to market-directed development; from structural to sectoral issues; and from macro-economic to microeconomic ones" (Yusuf 2008, 45). These shifts both shaped potential areas of development focus and reflected changes in dominant ideological positions about the role of the state and the market in development.

inputs-water, credit, and information on improved cropping practices (World Bank 1978, 42).

Thinking through these examples in light of Nunberg's arguments, information is used in both its particularistic and abstract senses. It is information *about* something in one case ("information on improved cropping practices") making it particularistic. In the other instance, information is abstract ("quality of information"). In both cases, the context in which *information* is used suggests that it encompasses the sense of educating or forming the mind (such as the idea of an informed state or the educated farmer), thereby assuming some sort of universal applicability.

In the 1980s, with a shift in the World Bank's focus to market-directed development and on getting prices right, mentions of information in WDRs too were in the context of market-based transactions and the (limited) role of the state (in making markets work). Examples of the use of *information* in reports from the 1980s include the following:

Increased emphasis on market information and intelligence holds out a better hope for assisting developing countries to expand their agricultural exports (World Bank 1986, 144).

Such systems are not cheap to develop, and countries that export similar crops need similar information (World Bank 1986, 144).

Increasing the availability of reliable information on State Owned Enterprises' financial and operational performance, eliminating arrears between public agencies, and controlling government guarantees of SOE borrowings will also help to restore fiscal discipline (World Bank 1988, 10).

The central government's roles would shift from those of primary decision maker, investor, maintainer, and overseer to those of regulator, technical adviser, and dispenser of information (World Bank 1988, 153)

First, it should be clear from these examples that *information* works (well) with the shifting focus of the WDRs in this period: the shift towards markets is visible in these quotes, with information playing a role in reinforcing this shift. Second, information is once again used both in the particularistic ("Information on SOE's performance") and abstract ("dispenser of information"(about what?)) senses in these examples. Third, in terms of its properties, information continues to be seen as something that can be measured and compared, as suggested by the reference to "similar information." Finally, statements such as

The poor are often set apart by cultural and educational barriers. Illiterate people may be intimidated by officials or may simply lack information about programs (World Bank 1990, 37).

also bring up the idea of "lacking"(and consequently, of providing) information, a theme that would recur through the next decade. Referring back to Nunberg, the idea of "lacking information" reflects a specific understanding of what constitutes information, with information being only that which is provided by official, expert sources, thereby making it possible for some people to "lack" it. It is also worth noting that information is once more used in the sense of "formation of the mind" in the above quote.

In the 1990s, the Bank's focus on markets continued. However, it was now more concerned with the role of the state in supporting and regulating markets, as well as in ensuring transparency and the role of information in this process. A trend towards decentralization is also reflected in discussions on information.

The extent and efficiency of the state's involvement in the economy has been critical. One lesson is that it is better for the state to focus on areas where it complements and supports the private sector (by providing, for example, information, infrastructure, health, research, and education) than on areas where it supplants the private sector (by, for example, producing cement and steel, or running airlines and hotels) (World Bank 1991, 31).

A sound national knowledge strategy requires that governments seek ways to improve information flows that make a market economy function better (World Bank 1998, 149).

Public institutions, including governments and multilateral institutions, have a special obligation to disclose information about their operations – that is, to be transparent (World Bank 1998, 151).

Decentralization can help countries and communities deal with information problems relating to differences in local preferences and conditions (World Bank 1998, 49).

The use of information as something linked to education is also clearly visible in examples such as this one:

By improving people's ability to acquire and use information, education deepens their understanding of themselves and the world" (World Bank 1991, 55).⁵

Finally, with advancements in technology, there is also more in the 1990s WDRs on Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and their relationship with information.⁶

The telegraph (1844), telephone (1876), radio (1895), and television (1925) changed the way people interact. With the electronic computer (1924) (sic), communication satellites (1960), and fiber optics (1977), information is now transmitted and processed at breathtaking speed, yet at practical cost (World Bank 1991, 15).

Although traditional channels of communication will remain important, the new information and communications technologies hold great potential for broadly disseminating knowledge at low cost, and for reducing knowledge gaps both within countries and between industrial and developing countries (World Bank 1998, 56).

What leaps to the eye in these excerpts from the 1990s is the increased use of *information* in an abstract

⁵ Others include: "A better-educated person absorbs new information faster and applies unfamiliar inputs and new processes more effectively" (World Bank 1991, 57); "A free press and expanding flow of information often spur social and economic progress" (World Bank 1991, 50); and (About the Green Revolution) "Wealth and the ability to bear risk were important, but the most critical factor in adopting the technology was the ability of farmers to make use of new information" (World Bank 1991, 35).

⁶ There was also a lot more on "knowledge" and the "knowledge economy." While information and knowledge were seen as related, they were also treated as distinct, with knowledge defined as value-added information. There was continued interest in the lack of information and indeed, knowledge, among the poor.

sense (access to information, making use of new information, providing information, transmission of information) and in the educational sense (“makes use of information to deepen understanding of world,” “absorbs new information faster”). The particularistic examples here are relatively few. What is even more interesting is that particularistic information is not treated as an altogether different category: it is, instead, treated as a subtype of information in the abstract that also inherits the properties of abstract information. Thus, in earlier excerpts, particularistic information, such as “market information” or “information on cropping practices,” is described as useful or essential; but increasingly, information in the abstract is also being described as useful and essential (e.g. “information flows that make a market economy function better”).

I suggest that the ability to use information in the abstract, with particularistic information as a subtype, makes *information* handy. The argument that particularistic information is important is empirically grounded and impossible to refute (who can deny that information about cropping practices is critical for farmers?). However, if in current usage, particularistic information simply adds up to give us abstract information, as Nunberg suggests, it also becomes impossible to refute a statement such as “information is power,” that does not specify what that information is *about*. The conflation of these various senses in the word *information* lends it a certain fuzziness. I suggest that this ambiguity, while not intentionally produced, has offered a way to reach conclusions that would not have been possible if a single sense of information was adopted. In this case, moving between the two senses – particularistic and abstract – allows the argument to connect bits, bytes and documents to democracy, participation and transformed state-citizen relations. Also, at such high levels of abstraction, information is equally applicable in the context of market and non-market transactions; in the context of different roles for the state; in different realms of economic activity; and irrespective of whether the goal is providing for “basic needs,” promoting entrepreneurship, agriculture or high-end industries, or ensuring transparency. As I already illustrated, the ambiguity inherent in *information* helped it keep up with changing ideologies as illustrated by the WDR excerpts of the 1970s, 80s and 90s.

Using a common term to refer to abstract and particularistic information also makes it easier to implicitly attribute several properties to information, such as comparability, possession of an autonomous economic value and an ability to be seamlessly transferred. Comparability is reflected in the idea of information asymmetries or gaps, and in the suggestion that some people possess more information than others. By the autonomous value of information, I refer to the notion that any information has definite, positive value. The autonomous economic value of information is implicit in the idea that information is an important input in transactions (and reflected in the idea that more information is better). The other important aspect of the value of information is that it persists through its transfer from one entity to another. In turn, the idea of information provision relies on all these properties of information (its comparability, autonomous value and capacity for lossless transfer).

The association of the above properties with information – an association amply demonstrated in the WDR excerpts – helped frame information provision as a worthwhile and feasible goal for development agencies by the 1990s. Besides the WDRs, information provision appeared explicitly in the objectives and funding priorities of development agencies in the 1990s. To the extent that development projects across the world were funded by these agencies, the funding priorities of these agencies were significant. Given the high stakes, these priorities presumably also shaped how projects in need of funding were framed in this period. Consequently, in the next section, I examine the use of information by other international funding agencies.

2.1.2 Information as a priority among funding agencies

The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) was one of the first development agencies to research the impact of information on development. Between 1992 and 1995, IDRC initiated a formal research program, conducted workshops and published two reports on the topic of information and development (Menou 1993; McConnell 1995).⁷ The 1993 workshop brought together “information users and providers, policymakers, information scientists, and others from the South and the North” with the goal of producing

a conceptual framework and methods . . . on the basis of which a number of action-research projects will be undertaken to validate the selected approaches for assessing the impact of information on development (Menou 1993).

The 1993 report brings to the fore struggles over what constitutes information (and, indeed, development); the challenges of implying a causal relationship between the two and of measuring impact; and the conditions in which information is likely to be useful.

Information, in the abstract, means little to the engineer, the agriculturist, the farmer, the craftsman, or the doctor. Information must be subject oriented, or otherwise delimited, to be relevant for specific groups. Considering information for information’s sake is a dead end (Menou 1993).

Yet the report contains terms such as “information-rich” and “information-poor” that appear to talk about information in precisely the abstract way that the above excerpt warns participants against. Both the 1993 and 1995 reports and the research they showcase illustrate IDRC’s engagement and support for the information theme among development agencies. IDRC’s role is particularly significant for me in light of its funding support for Swaminathan Foundation’s Information Village project later in the decade.

While IDRC was an important player in the information and development realm, it was not the only international agency with an interest in information. By the mid-1990s, the World Bank, the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), and the UK Department for International Development (DFID), as well as state agencies in different developing countries (some of them funded by these agencies), encouraged and supported development projects that focused on information.⁸ The United Nations (UN) too bestowed support to the idea of building a global information society by the turn of the century.⁹ In his analysis of how the formation of an inclusive Information Society became a global concern and information the “primary social resource of this era,” Drori suggests that the quest for an inclusive information society is driven by the

⁷ The IDRC program was inaugurated by Martha Stone of the Informatics division of IDRC, who later played a part in conceptualizing and setting up Swaminathan Foundation’s Information Village project. The four stages of the IDRC research program were:

Stage I: Exploring the feasibility and scope of a substantive investigation of “impact” (using a computer conference in 1992)

Stage II: Formulating an appropriate methodology for assessing the impact of information on development (workshop in 1993, with workshop proceedings compiled in Menou [1993])

Stage III: Implementing and refining the methodology through several case studies and associated research (workshop in 1995 to discuss progress, with McConnell [1995] as output)

Stage IV: Reviewing and disseminating the findings for greatest effect.

⁸ See the Buenos Aires Plan of the ITU, <http://www.itu.int/itudoc/itu-d/wtdc/wtdc1994/baape.txt> and the World Bank’s infodev project mentioned in chapter 1.

⁹ It also organized the World Summits on Information Society in 2003 (Geneva) and in 2005 (Tunis).

vision of “marginalized peoples – from minorities to the poor to residents of remote areas – connecting with the wealth of information that is available to people everywhere” (Drori 2007, 311). Indeed, the idea that information was valuable for development was so deeply embedded in development discourse by the late 1990s and early 2000s that it was seldom explicitly stated or examined.

Thus, both the documents and activities of international development agencies in the 1980s and 1990s saw information (as well as the term *information*) as important in their work. Further, the popularity of information among development agencies derived both from the flexibility of the term, particularly the ability to move between particularistic and abstract understandings of information, and from the reification of information as a bounded object with a set of properties and economic value. Once information was framed as an object with economic value that could be transferred across individuals and organizations without loss of value, information provision gained legitimacy and popularity as a worthwhile and feasible goal among development agencies.

In the next section, I examine the use of information by MKSS and Swaminathan Foundation bearing in mind two threads from the current discussion. The first is a sense of the broader development discourse around information in the time period when MKSS's early campaigns took place and Swaminathan Foundation conceptualized the Information Village project. Second, I pay attention to how the flexibility of the term *information* and its reification were leveraged in the two cases.

I make two arguments regarding the use of information by MKSS and Swaminathan Foundation. I argue first that the ambiguity of *information* and its reification allowed entities as structurally and ideologically dissimilar as MKSS and Swaminathan Foundation to leverage the same term in their own, very different work, with each entity adapting the term to its own ideology and structure. Second, I argue that the use of information allowed MKSS and Swaminathan Foundation to expand their support base to include a wider range of actors, with information as the “boundary object” that provided the point of focus and interaction between these actors in each case.

2.2 Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS)'s framing of information

While the Indian Right to Information (RTI) Act would only be legislated in 2005, the terminology and idea of a “right to information” made an appearance in a research report titled *Delivery systems of poverty alleviation programs for the rural poor* that was written by members of MKSS as far back as 1992.

Information is power, but the right to information is greater power. What is the information available that will lead to action at grass root levels? It is obviously the information that conceals a potential for legitimate change . . . Information provided must allow for a shift in perception. To allow the oppressed to see their oppression in stark terms. To allow them to present it to the rest of society in terms they will be forced to accept (Roy et al. 1992, 168-169).

As I mentioned in chapter 1, MKSS was officially formed in Rajasthan in 1990 as “a non-party people’s political process.” Through its earliest campaigns for land and for minimum wages in the late 1980s and early 1990s, MKSS's work started to focus on government records and eventually on a right for citizens to examine government records. It was in this regard that the idea of a “right to information” came into circulation and, much later (in 2005), became the title of a national legislation. In chapters 3 and 4, I will systematically work through MKSS's campaigns leading up to the first Right to Information sit-in in 1996. In this section, however,

I have a much more modest goal: how did information even come to be seen as important by MKSS following its early campaigns and how did MKSS frame information in its work? I focus on the period between 1987 – when the group that would later establish the MKSS came to stay in Devdoongri – and 1992 – when the term *right to information* appeared in the report mentioned above. I argue that by 1992, MKSS had started to frame information as potentially valuable in certain circumstances and for certain ends, including making power structures and underlying assumptions of government policy visible. This framing was very much in keeping with MKSS's experiences working in a region that relied heavily on public works and with its ideology as a political, people's movement.

2.2.1 Background for the framing: Early campaigns (1987-1991)

The idea of increased access to government records and government decision-making processes was not new in India and had been voiced on several occasions previously, especially in the arena of environmental activism.¹⁰ In spite of these earlier instances, however, the 1992 report contained one of the first explicit mentions of a “right to information” within the realm of public rural development programs. The insistence on a right was to allow for a flexibility in how information was defined, redefined, and expanded by activists in the years to come.

Four activists authored the 1992 report for the Institute for Development Studies Jaipur (IDSJ). The activists – Aruna Roy, Nikhil Dey, Shankar Singh and Anchie Singh – had settled in village Devdoongri in south-central Rajasthan in June 1987 with an objective of working with and organizing the rural poor and would later go on to form the MKSS with other residents of the region in 1990. One thing to bear in mind is that the IDSJ report was written *after* the authors had acquired more than four years of experience with the working of government delivery systems in the region around Devdoongri, in addition to several more years working in other regions of Rajasthan and India.

Two campaigns from these four years figured prominently in the 1992 report and significantly shaped its conclusions, including the section on a right to information. I describe these in brief below and return to them in detail in chapters 3 and 4.

¹⁰ See Singh (2007) for a brief timeline of movements that had been asking for transparency since India's independence from British rule in 1947. (It is worth noting that Singh uses the terms “transparency” and “right to information” interchangeably in his analysis). Singh points especially to the Chinese invasion of 1961 and the collapse of the India defenses, following which “the whole nation wanted to know what had gone wrong and who was responsible” (Singh 2007, 22); the decades of civil unrest and armed rebellion in different parts of India between the 1960s and 1990s that led to an outcry against human rights violations and a linked demand for transparency; and demands for transparency following the suspension of civil liberties during the internal emergency of the mid-1970s. In the *State of UP vs. Raj Narain*, the Supreme Court of India ruled in 1975 that “The people of this country have a right to know every public act, everything that is done in a public way by their public functionaries. They are entitled to know the particulars of every public transaction in all its bearings” (Singh 2007, 23). In 1982, the Supreme Court ruled that “disclosures of information in regard to the functioning of government must be the rule, and secrecy an exception justified only where the strictest requirement of public interest so demands” in a case related to the transfer of judges (Singh 2007, 23). Singh remarks that in spite of these judgments, a law was never seriously considered by the government. Then in the mid-80s, two landmark cases “fought for access to environmental information” (Singh 2007, 24). One of these cases dealt with a factory in Delhi that stored hazardous chemicals without any safeguards. Before the case could be heard, a gas leak occurred. When the case was heard, it emerged that a study of the risks posed by the factory had already been conducted by the government. The report, however, was not public. In response to these occurrences, the Chief Justice made a remark that he wished “someone would take up the right to information” (Singh 2007, 31). Accordingly, an environmental NGO filed an intervention and made the case that a right to know was linked to a right to life, which was guaranteed by the constitution. No written orders resulted from the petition, but it found mention several times over the years. In addition to the environmental movement, the V.P. Singh government that came to power in 1989 also attempted to enact a right to information, but resistance from bureaucrats thwarted this attempt.

Event 1: Land campaign, 1987-1990

This campaign took place in a village eight km from Devdoongri. It involved regaining public land from a local landlord who had treated that land as his private property for many years. Even though the documents associated with the land indicated that it belonged to the government, the landlord controlled it on a day-to-day basis. The objective of the land campaign was to get the land allocated to a village co-operative supported by the Devdoongri activists. The campaign eventually succeeded and the government allocated the land to a working women's co-operative from the village. This change was reflected in the land documents. The co-operative also went on to take possession of the land and make use of it. As the first major campaign carried out by the Devdoongri activists, the land campaign was important for the group for reasons that I explore in more detail in chapter 3. The land campaign established the centrality of government documents in the interactions between village residents and the local-level state.

Event 2: Minimum wage campaigns, 1987-1991

Alongside the land campaign, the Devdoongri group was also involved in minimum wage campaigns between 1987 and 1991 in a drought-prone region surrounding Devdoongri. Coupled with the small land-holdings in the region, agriculture provided little employment or income to residents. Consequently, government-sponsored public work schemes – such as the state-level famine relief scheme or a national-level employment scheme – were much sought after. In spite of being government-run, the worksites did not follow minimum wage laws and were notorious for paying arbitrary and delayed wages. Moreover, workers did not have access to the labor rolls that detailed their attendance and work output at the sites. In two such cases that I present in detail in chapter 3, the Devdoongri group brought together a set of village residents who protested against the non-payment of minimum wages. After a long series of investigations, promises and retractions from the government, some of the protestors were paid minimum wages. The minimum wage campaigns reinforced the idea that government documents were critical for village residents. Further, they established that what documents such as the labor roll recorded was often at variance with what residents said had happened in practice.

2.2.2 Framing and its consequences

Keeping these events in mind, I return now to the conclusions of the IDSJ report. Here, it is worth quoting the entire section on the need for a Right to Information from the report.

Information that:

- a) Prevents corruption
- b) Leads to a change in perception
- c) Is provided when sought
- d) Is widely disseminated

Information is power, but the right to information is greater power. What is the information available that will lead to action at grass root levels? It is obviously the information that conceals a potential for legitimate change. This legitimacy can take two forms. It can be the hiding of information of a corrupt practice, or it can be information which would make further space for the beneficiaries. The lack of information which facilitates corruption is the kind most village people show an interest in immediately . . . easy access to such information being built into any program is of great importance to its health. Identifying the pieces of information which would prevent such corruption, and the routes of access to it is one necessary at the formulation stage

of any programme.

The other kind of information that would need to be provided is information that would make the programme more effective. It would not only inform about the program itself; but also give information that provides a new perspective, one that allows for a shift in thinking. Every strata of society no matter how poor has a very strong code of ethics. The poor are at the receiving end of an accusation by all others that they are poor only through their own fault. It is an accusation so diligently dinned in that the oppressed not only have to assimilate such paradigms, but also have to form a code strong enough to allow them to retain a measure of self respect. This, the more affluent are only willing to allow them as long as the applecart is not upset. This is why information provided must allow for a shift in perception. To allow the oppressed to see their oppression in stark terms. To allow them to present it to the rest of society in terms they will be forced to accept (Roy et al. 1992, 168-169).

There is a lot to analyze in this framing of information, especially when this section is understood as emerging from the two campaigns described earlier.¹¹ First, information is abstract in this conception (The question “information about what?” is never answered). But at the same time, this abstract thing called information is not attributed implicit properties or an autonomous value in the extract. Instead of talking about information as power, for example, the statement starts by qualifying what information might be empowering (“information that ...”). The criteria up front detail conditions in which information is empowering: if provided when sought and when widely disseminated. They also provide a roadmap for what such information could do: prevent corruption and lead to changes in perception. These conditions are not treated as properties of information; rather, these are conditions that information needs to fulfill in order to be useful. The value of information is located then not in itself, but in whether it can be leveraged to bring about shifts in perception about government schemes and one's interaction with the government. Information is still abstract in this conception (information about what?), but it is qualified (“information that prevents corruption”) in terms of how it can lead to certain outcomes (“empower”). That said, information here, as in everything else I presented so far, is treated as a thing (“pieces of information”) though reified to a lesser extent.

Second, the material form of information is not part of the argument and presumably, the points about information are independent of its material form. Read alongside the chronology of the campaigns that shaped these conclusions, the absence of material form in this discussion is even more puzzling: after all, MKSS's campaigns and experiences at the time had centered on paper copies of government records. Thus, even as information is used in an abstract sense in the report, the chronology of events suggests that MKSS moved from demanding a particular document to the use of *information* in an abstract sense in its writing and work. How did *information* become the word of choice at this time? This gap suggests that the history of similar movements in India as well as external discourse might have influenced the precise choice of terminology, as detailed elsewhere in this chapter.¹²

Third, the discussion does not characterize people as having or not having information (the classic binary between information-haves and information have-nots). Instead, the discussion focuses on what would make

¹¹ In this section, I use information in the way it has been used in the extract; I do not problematize at each step the use of a single term to refer to so much. My focus here is instead on the properties and potential attributed to information as used in the extract.

¹² Refer to footnote 10 and earlier sections on WDRs and the work of development agencies

available information of value to a specific population (“What is the information available that will lead to action at grass root levels?”).¹³ Further, by focusing on a right to information, the discussion also shifts from information provision to potentially demanding information.

Fourth, the discussion relates information to hiding or concealment: the thesis is that information can conceal potential for legitimate change. Thus, it is not just that lack of information about the functioning of government programs can be used to hide practices: available information may itself be framed such that it conceals the broader value system and structures within which government programs function. For example, the excerpt suggests that the poor are forced to accept a paradigm that accuses them of being responsible for their own poverty.¹⁴ Knowing more about how government programs function will not change much in this paradigm. What is required, instead, is to understand how the underlying rationale of programs is related to the functioning of programs on the ground. That is also why information about how government programs work is not everything (“not only inform about the program itself”), since this information likely reflects the underlying assumptions and rationale of the program itself. Instead, the authors suggest, information can be as much a tool to bring about a shift in perception about the way in which poverty or anti-poverty schemes are framed or presented. (“To allow the oppressed to see their oppression in stark terms. To allow them to present it to the rest of society in terms they will be forced to accept”). Thus, power structures are an integral part of MKSS's framing of information and its potential role.

In summary then, MKSS's discussion of information in the 1992 report uses information in the abstract and does not factor in material form. It qualifies information to suggest when it might be of value, instead of imputing it an intrinsic, autonomous value that persists in all conditions. The discussion takes a view of information that sees existing structures as constitutive of information, rather than as external factors that impact it. In chapters 3 and 4, I describe in more detail the campaigns on which MKSS's framing was based, as well as campaigns in following years that built on and expanded the scope of this framing. While my focus so far has been on framing, in these later chapters I focus on the practices of governing that shaped this framing.

2.3 Swaminathan Foundation's framing of information

I now move to Swaminathan Foundation's work with information. Established in 1988 in Chennai, Swaminathan Foundation is a research-based NGO that works on research and implementation in agriculture and sustainable development.¹⁵ With its Information Village Research Project (IVRP), the Foundation aimed to use information and ICTs in its work with rural communities in Puducherry in southern India. As one of the very first “ICT for Development” projects in India, the project was widely regarded as a pioneer. It was covered by the Indian and international press, attracted visitors from across the globe, was discussed widely in academic, NGO and policy circles, and won a range of awards since its establishment in 1997 (Ofir and Kriel

¹³ The population may be characterized as “poor people” when this section is read on its own, but in the context of the entire report, it is clear that the conclusions are talking about “poor people” in a very specific region (Bhim and Deograh *tehsils*).

¹⁴ Another example that appears in chapters 3 and 4 has to do with a particular framing of public works. Thus, one part of the problem might well be that labor rolls at public work sites were not available and thus concealed corrupt practices. But the other part, equally, was whether public works are seen as legitimate employment or as dole from the government and accordingly whether workers were seen as employees with rights or as receivers of charity.

¹⁵The chairperson of the foundation, M.S. Swaminathan, has been called “the godfather of the Green Revolution in India” and also named among the most influential Asians of the century. See Anthony Spaeth's *Asia Now - Time Asia* article from August 1999 “The Most Influential Asians of the Century.”

2004).¹⁶

In my analysis of IVRP in this chapter, I focus on the period between 1992 and 1997 when the project was conceptualized and the first village-level “Information Shops” established in villages of Puducherry district. I use documents generated in this period, writings about IVRP by the Foundation and others, as well as interviews, to trace the events leading up to the establishment of the project. I argue that by the time Information Shops were set up, information had been framed as a thing of value that could be bought, sold and transferred between individuals and institutions at these shops.

2.3.1 Background for the framing: Dialogue on Information Technology (1992)

IVRP originated in an interdisciplinary dialogue organized in January 1992 by Swaminathan Foundation. *The Dialogue on Information Technology* was the second in a series of dialogues called *Reaching the Unreached* that was organized by the Foundation with support from IDRC and some other organizations.¹⁷ The goal of these dialogues was to bring the latest advancements in technology to the rural poor. The participants in the 1992 dialogue included agricultural researchers, scientists, representatives from NGOs, and from government departments (agriculture and electronics) from different parts of the world (MSSRF 1993). Since the dialogue was seen as the foundation for the IVRP by many people associated with the project, I examine the proceedings of this dialogue in detail.¹⁸

M.S. Swaminathan started the 1992 dialogue by expressing a hope that it would lead to the setting up of Information Villages, where

We can measure the impact of the knowledge and information input on the productivity, profitability and sustainability of the major farming systems of the village. . . Other things being equal, like land, labour, water and credit, how much would new knowledge and new information . . . make an impact on productivity, profitability and sustainability (MSSRF 1993, 2).

Swaminathan saw the task of the assembled group as bringing the “information age” to the “information poor.”¹⁹ Framed thus, participants discussed what they saw as the most important features of the information

¹⁶ For press coverage, see Celia Dugger's “Connecting Rural India to the World” in *The New York Times*, May 28, 2000; “Knowledge Centre Inaugurated in Pondicherry” in *The Hindu*, September 11, 2001; and Michael Le Page's “Village-life.com” in the *New Scientist*, May 4, 2002. See also MSSRF (2004a) for a compilation of press coverage on the project.

For the range of visitors, see MSSRF (2004b) for a compilation of comments from visitors to the projects. Visitors included individuals from international funding and development agencies like IDRC and USAID; a member of the U.S. Congress; bureaucrats from state-level and central ministries of the Government of India; journalists and researchers.

For discussions about the project in academic, NGO and policy circles, see journal articles and conference proceedings including Balaji et al (2002); Kanungo (2002); MSSRF (2003); and Shore (1999). For policy discussions, see details of a policy makers workshop conducted by the Foundation in MSSRF (2003) and Ofir and Kriel (2004) for an analysis of the project's policy impact. The Foundation also formed a National Alliance for Mission 2007, which aimed to create a Knowledge Center in every village in India by 2007 (MSSRF 2004c).

Awards included the Motorola (Dispatch Solution) Gold Award and the Stockholm Challenge Award in 2001.

¹⁷ A dialogue on biotechnology had led to the setting up of a “Bio Village” project the previous year.

¹⁸ Besides being mentioned in documents about the IVRP, the dialogue also came up in my interviews with current IVRP personnel in Puducherry, personnel at MSSRF's Informatics Division in Chennai and a former Project Director of IVRP. These interviews took place between August and November 2009.

¹⁹ “Today knowledge is wealth and countries which are information poor or regions which are information poor, also happen to be

age in the context of India, particularly for the practice of agriculture and the lives of the communities engaged in it. A participant suggested that India's information infrastructure problems (large gaps in the collection, processing, storage, and retrieval of information as well as in the dissemination of technology) needed to be addressed in order for rural communities in India to enter the information age (MSSRF 1993, 11). For another participant, development was linked to a country's "attitude to information," which had to be factored in while planning an information project.²⁰ An illuminating, but isolated, remark on the idea of knowledge transfer came from a government functionary who suggested that holding on to knowledge (as opposed to sharing it) would likely offer benefits to individuals: it was therefore crucial to consider the politics of information and knowledge transfer.²¹ Participants also discussed the importance of establishing a feedback loop between experts and rural communities.²² A later session brought up concerns regarding the design and definition of an interactive program, the role of literacy, demystifying computer systems for a community, and targeting the laborer community instead of restricting the program to only farmers. Participants also pointed out that new information technology tools would most likely co-exist with existing technologies rather than supplant them, at least in the foreseeable future: information villages would need to factor in this coexistence. They went even further to suggest that accepted links between a specific medium and its purpose in a region (e.g. agricultural news was associated with the radio, entertainment with films) should be leveraged by the project. Finally, participants categorized the agricultural information needs of villagers into market information, commercial information, land/water utilisation information, and technical know-how.

Following the 1992 dialogue, a consortium was created to translate some of the proposals made at the dialogue into a project.²³ The consortium proposed that the information village project should bring about an "increase in skill-based rural employment in both farm and off-farm sectors with information technology and information-related services" (MSSRF 1993, 251). The project would work through "information shops" that were described as below:²⁴

Each village, depending upon its size, will have one or more 'information shops' which will be managed by educated unemployed/school teachers/students/women of the village. These managers of information shops will act as information seekers for the village and satisfy the information demands of the village. Being modelled along the lines of *paan* shops,²⁵ information

economically backward. How can we bring the information age to rural India, that is our first important task here" (MSSRF 1993,4).

²⁰ "In many developing countries, particularly in Africa, I am afraid that one often regards knowledge as power, so people are more interested in the control of information and in selective transfer than they are in the spread of and free access to information" (MSSRF 1993, 9).

²¹ "the political dimension in this business of transferring information. If knowledge is power, information is a terrific means of control, and whenever you have that there is a political reality which I think we ought to keep in mind in order to do things more effectively and practically" (MSSRF 1993, 52).

²² Going back to their own experiences with agricultural extension or other kinds of work with rural communities, participants said that very often, experts were out of touch with ground realities and did not design their technologies in consultation with the community, leading to problems later.

²³ The consortium included representatives from the Department of Space, Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, Indian Council of Agricultural Research and the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development.

²⁴ Members also came up with a list of items that would need to be collected or designed for a pilot information village project, including farm related and non-farm related "information needs," primary information disseminators, and information resource centres.

²⁵ Small corner stores selling *paan* (areca nuts wrapped in betel leaves with a lime paste), cigarettes and various other items.

shops convey the idea of villagers going down to the shop for purchasing information. The owner of the shop being interested in making profit, selects the best site to locate the shop and pays attention to the quality and display of the products and quantum of sales.

Information seekers will obtain what they need from among a set of information resource centres using an appropriate communication medium . . . the resource centre essentially acts as a single-point source for all types of information products. The information resource centres will be fed by a set of information producers . . . information will be repackaged in such a way as to be most useful to the villagers. The specific content of the information package will be determined by the needs and requirements of the villagers (MSSRF 1993, 251).

The “information producers” for the information network were identified as “Farm men and women, remote sensing centres, national information centres, government departments and institutions.”

2.3.1.1 Framing information after the dialogue

The 1992 dialogue and the consortium's plans for an information village shed light on how information was understood and deployed, often in conflicting ways, in the early stages of IVRP.²⁶ Information was referred to in the abstract and had a positive connotation during the dialogue.²⁷ In spite of the lack of specificity, however, it was associated with a clearly-defined set of properties in terms of how it worked or made people behave. It could be produced, categorized, bought and sold. Equally, demand for information could be identified and articulated. Information could act as an identifiable input in a process. Its impact on productivity could be measured.

I suggest that the ability to move between the abstract and particularistic ways of referring to information helped hold the dialogue and consortium together. Since specific instances and a broad concept shared the same word, it became possible to arrive at the conclusion that the provision of information could fundamentally change the socio-economic conditions of a community. The need for information was established by using it in the first, abstract sense (information as wealth, as power, as constituting an “Information Age”),²⁸ while the project could be operationalized by focusing on information in the second, particularistic sense (market prices, agricultural know-how). Moreover, while participants clearly appreciated the importance of the material medium (as with their suggestion of using multiple modes of communication), the word *information* provided them a way to talk about things beyond medium and materiality, an ability to talk about agricultural know-how broadly, for example, without constantly referring to whether the know-how was an idea, a practice, on paper, or on a Compact Disc (CD). Information and medium were thus both important, but were analyzed separately. Finally, participants at the dialogue and the consortium came from different domains and might well have understood *information* slightly differently.²⁹ I argue that information

²⁶ These should be of interest also because of the extent to which many of the points made in the dialogue are points that continue to be discussed in ICTD circles today (For example, the co-existence of old media with new ICTs, the need for a supporting infrastructure once information is available, the pivotal role of intermediaries, the need for customization).

²⁷ The question “information for what?” is never addressed, making it an abstract usage. The positive connotation is manifested in the argument that it is important to not be information-poor i.e. it is important to “have” information in order to be a part of the information age and to prosper.

²⁸ Statements that were gaining popularity in development discourse at large.

²⁹ As mentioned earlier, a bureaucrat mentioned the politics of information, while many others were talking about information in the context of weather information systems and cropping practices.

acted as a “boundary object” that held the discussion together in spite of participants' different understandings. I rely on the definition of a boundary object – as being “plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites” – to make this point (Star and Greisemer 1989, 387).

A consequence of talking about information as a self-contained thing, and as a commodity that could be bought, sold or act as an input in transactions, it was possible to understand social and economic factors as external variables.³⁰ As external variables, these factors were acknowledged as “impacting” how that commodity was produced, transferred and consumed. However, they were *not* seen as fundamentally constitutive of what was being called information, how it was valued, shared and used in practice. I also suggest that this separation made it possible to plan an information village, where information activity could be isolated from other spheres of life, and its impact measured. Roles such as information-seekers and information-producers could also be allotted in this framework. Overall, the problem was framed as one of information poverty, and structural inequalities as well the messiness of everyday politics and negotiations, while relevant, were not central. They surfaced as minor irritants that might disrupt the project from time to time, but were not treated as central to the nature of resource distribution in a community. The objective of the project was information provision and how the work of information provision could succeed. It was not to challenge or explicitly articulate the resource distribution or power structures in a community. Presumably, information provision and politics could be carried on in parallel, without getting intertwined. Finally, the reference in the dialogue and consortium was not to a specific group of people, but to farmers or village residents in general.³¹ Thus, while the discussion yielded many relevant insights, these insights needed to be fine-tuned to a specific region before implementation and this was partly what was attempted in the next phase.

2.3.2 Reframing information: From dialogue to proposal (1992-1997)

Six years elapsed before the concept of the Information Village became a reality. In the intervening years, while Dr. Swaminathan spoke to many people, nothing concrete came of the project. The thinking about information continued, focused largely on weather information. Talk of information had also intensified beyond Swaminathan Foundation by this time, as I showed using excerpts from the WDRs of the 1990s and through activities undertaken by development agencies, including the IDRC.

Dr. V. Balaji, who went on to become the first project director of IVRP, was key to the process of translating the ideas on information villages into a project on the ground. He found information villages a “like-able idea, but got no takers” for years following the dialogue.³² The project finally took shape when he met Martha

³⁰ Except for the isolated remark mentioned in footnote 21, politics was not discussed much. It was thus treated as even more external.

³¹ The suggestions of participants, in turn, were based on their experience in different domains of activity (with agriculture being the primary), geographical regions and spatial scales (village, district, state or national level).

³² Interview with V. Balaji, first Project Director of IVRP at his Hyderabad residence, November 28, 2009. Asked about the origin of the idea that information was critical to changing the lives of members of rural communities, he said: “That's entirely to the credit of Swaminathan. He assumed that bio technology and information technology were going to be very big forces, shaping economics and socio-economic development for several decades to come. . . He always believed that his program, the one he directed at the Indian Agricultural Research Institute (IARI), was an information program. It had a strong element of dissemination. Scientists, instead of writing messages to farmers, did field demonstrations. . . . They encouraged people to visit [the field demonstrations]. On seeing results, the farmers were encouraged. After this, Swaminathan approached All India Radio: there was no Doordarshan [television channel] then to take the message across, then the print media followed. He felt that information had played a huge role

Stone, who was influential in IDRC.³³ Stone encouraged Balaji to introduce a research component into the idea of an information village in order to apply for funding with IDRC. Balaji drafted a proposal and IDRC staff helped him convert it into a research proposal that could potentially be funded by the IDRC.

Balaji encountered two difficulties when writing about connecting villages to the internet. For one, there was limited connectivity to the internet in villages. But Balaji felt connectivity was not the only problem. “Even if you connected them, it doesn't matter because that information is of no use to them,” he said. In imagining the design of a useful system for villages, Balaji relied on the argument that a lot of communication in a rural village was within the rural area itself and not with regions outside. He explained that, after all,

This was the time local newspapers were outstripping national newspapers. For example, The Sunday Midday [a local daily] in Mumbai was selling more than the [national daily] Times of India . . . It was printed in the afternoon and you picked it up as you get into the train to head back home. It carried primarily local news. . . . So, I said the model is there. Real hot-selling items are local. We should foster that. We should build on that understanding . . . I said we may not even need the internet in every village, simply have a connection to the hub, connectivity that makes people feel they can communicate with anyone they care.³⁴ . . . a hub here which receives inputs from the internet, it receives input from experts. Then you get a locally intelligent system which can connect to villages.

This was the origin of IVRP's “hub-and-spokes” model.

At the time the IDRC proposal was being drafted, the thinking was not in terms of computer applications because most desktop applications at the time were useless. What Balaji and his team *were* thinking about at the time was the idea that information + value-addition = knowledge: information as raw material for producing knowledge. Further, some of this value-addition was to happen in the hub.³⁵

Besides the nature of connectivity of information shops to the internet, the nature of connections with the village community was also important for the project. Balaji had faith in the strength of community organizations in Puducherry and their non-manipulability by political parties. His idea was to find a few such organizations and “hook on to them . . . I thought we should take the risk and move to the community. If it failed, that was no problem.”³⁶ Balaji was thus not denying politics, but made a decision to leave formal party-based politics to be dealt with by local community organizations.

IDRC decided to fund IVRP for five years based on the proposal. The conceptualization of the actual project thus took place in a few months' time in 1997, although the idea had first been discussed in 1992.

in the success of increased grain production, or what is now called the green revolution. That's when this idea came.”

³³ Stone wrote the foreword to Menou (1993) in her capacity as the Director General of the Information Sciences and Systems Division, IDRC. In concluding the foreword, Stone expressed a hope that the assessment framework laid out by Menou's report would be field tested by IDRC and other organizations internationally. She concluded, “I hope that this book will serve as a catalyst for such a cooperative effort, one that will ultimately confirm the impact of information on development.”

³⁴ This point of view also worked well with the Foundation's plans to set up the project in Puducherry which did not have internet connectivity at the time (1997).

³⁵ This notion of value-addition will come up repeatedly as I discuss the setting up and operationalization of the IVRP.

³⁶ The earlier Bio Village project had “gone in a different direction.” According to Balaji, the project no longer had a social element, and was paying people on contract to demonstrate technology in villages. “That's not how you can build a strong program,” he said.

2.3.3 Framing information in the IDRC proposal (1997)³⁷

According to the proposal submitted to IDRC, IVRP was supposed to assess

how enabling rural access to information using modern Information and Communication technologies particularly email and web, can lead to generation and dissemination of location-specific knowledge that will be of use in production, marketing, employment generation and improved utilization of entitlements for poverty alleviation (MSSRF [1997] 1999a, 2).

Among its specific objectives was the setting up of six information shops; the maintenance, updating and dissemination of “information on entitlements to rural families using an appropriate blend of modern and existing channels of communication;” and building “models of information dissemination and exchange in rural areas that uses advanced ICTs.”³⁸ The site office would host locally relevant databases and possess internet connectivity.³⁹ In terms of technology, a wireless network would be set up to link six villages, the Block Development headquarters and Swaminathan Foundation's site office and would provide both voice and data linkages. The proposal explained why Puducherry was chosen as the project site: it had good infrastructure (but not telecom infrastructure), strong local governance institutions, a supportive administration and awareness in its villages about the potential benefits of new technologies because of the Foundation's earlier Bio Village intervention.⁴⁰ Moreover, the project was to be established in a block of Puducherry that had access to good infrastructure and markets because “greater the access to infrastructure, higher are the chances of novel component of infrastructure such as telecom, becoming useful in a short time” (MSSRF [1997] 1999a, 3).

The value-addition centre (VAC) was central to the model proposed by the IVRP. It would act as a bridge between information available on networks and local needs.

It is here that hard technical data/information will be transformed to suit local queries or needs . . . Besides, information/data on developmental programmes (entitlements, credit, inputs etc.) and markets for a whole block of villages will be maintained here in this centre (5).

The VAC would be located at the block headquarters, making it a distance between 3km and 20 km from different villages of the block. Village-level “information shops” would be connected to the VAC, which would have access to the internet. The VAC would thus be a “relay” between information shops. It would also maintain and update information on entitlements of rural families. The proposal also provided a rationale for disseminating entitlement information (Note: The 1992 dialogue had focused largely on agricultural information).

³⁷ All details on the 1997 proposal are drawn from a copy of it included in a compilation of background papers about IVRP prepared by Swaminathan Foundation in 1999, MSSRF [1997] 1999a.

³⁸ While the initial focus was on agricultural information, preliminary surveys of the region indicated that information from the government on entitlement schemes also had an audience. The rationale provided for this follows later in this section.

³⁹ While the proposal listed the wireless networking technology and connectivity options available, it did not privilege one over the other at this stage.

⁴⁰ Puducherry (earlier Pondicherry) is a Union Territory (UT) in southern India. More details on the UT in chapter 5 and appendix 2. A district of Puducherry UT and the district's capital city are also called Puducherry (and were earlier called Pondicherry). I refer to the UT as Puducherry UT, to the district as Puducherry or Puducherry district and to the city as Pondicherry in order to differentiate.

The need for a reliable means for dissemination of accurate information on the entitlements from publicly funded poverty-alleviation schemes is critical. It has been emphasized that a considerable amount of financial resources get wasted because of avoidable duplication and non-demand by beneficiaries. Accurate information and its availability to the local elected institutions is known to alleviate this problem. Several state governments have recently enacted legislations to provide information on entitlements. The financial flow generated from such information will be critical capital in rural areas. This project will, therefore keep entitlements data in sharp focus as an important way ICT can contribute to poverty alleviation directly (MSSRF [1997] 1999a, 7).

Information shops would provide agricultural details (costs, risks, returns of seeds; market price; micro-meteorological details) in a timely fashion and would also maintain and update data on the entitlements of rural families, which would help village leaders assess gaps between budgets or works sanctioned and those delivered (MSSRF [1997] 1999a, 4). These shops would be operated on a “semi-voluntary” basis by individuals identified by existing self-help groups and networks, and selected on the basis of their educational levels, gender, socio-economic status and age. The Foundation would provide these individuals basic software training and skill development sessions in data gathering and value-addition.⁴¹

The proposal also described how it would assess impacts. One component of the impact assessment was a baseline survey examining the information needs, communication habits and existing channels of information flow in the communities. Besides these parameters, the Foundation was also interested in what it called the “non-quantifiable issues” such as the change in the attitude and response of the local development administration to an enhanced system of queries from the rural families (MSSRF [1997] 1999a, 8). In terms of outcomes, the project wished to build a model of sustainable rural communication and information infrastructure, towards which it planned to collect data on users and usage patterns. Another expected outcome of the project was the “improved expenditure of targeted public sector funds” (MSSRF [1997] 1999a, 9).

2.3.3.1 Framing information and consequences of IDRC proposal

It is useful to take a step back at this stage to review the IDRC proposal conceptually. How, for instance, was information framed by the IDRC proposal? Why was it framed that way and what were the implicit assumptions and exclusions entailed in such a framing? I have already pointed out that the Foundation's conception of information moved back and forth between particularistic and abstract senses through the 1992 dialogue, the consortium's plans, the IDRC proposal and in detailing operations. The inherent ambiguity of the word helped accommodate both meanings and shifts in emphasis in the process. In addition, given that the Foundation was applying for a grant, the IDRC proposal had to be framed in a way that allowed for it to be a research project: a project that asked a research question and made a claim regarding the answer. The question the project was going to investigate was whether access to information could “lead to generation and dissemination of location-specific knowledge” that would further “be of use in production, marketing, employment generation and in improved utilization of entitlements for poverty alleviation” (MSSRF [1997] 1999a, 2). The project's overall claim was that this could happen through the use of a variety of ICTs. Accordingly, the project's proposed structure was supposed to be able to measure changes that came about

⁴¹ For example, they would receive training on how to transform information derived from their wireless network, the internet and CDs into local idiom (MSSRF [1997] 1999a, 7).

because of access to information. For example, if access to information through ICTs improved the utilisation of entitlements for poverty alleviation, the project was going to be able to measure such an improvement. For such an analysis to be possible, information was treated as a self-standing input that could be isolated from other factors and causally linked to specific changes in outcomes.

The proposal also had to identify problems and solutions that the project could potentially address. One of the problem-solution pairs that the proposal discussed came from the idea that public resources for poverty alleviation were wasted because of lack of demand. The lack of demand, in turn, was connected to a lack of awareness among citizens and local development agencies about the specifics of public entitlement programs. The proposal's solution to this problem was that providing access to information about entitlement programs through information shops would lead to increased awareness, more demand and finally, to improved utilisation of the entitlements for poverty alleviation.⁴²

Finally, the community-based model of the project hinged on faith in the strength and political non-manipulability of (traditional, non-constitutional) panchayats by political parties. Meanwhile, village-level politics (whether involving panchayat members or other residents) would be dealt with at the village level: the Foundation would not interfere. IVRP was, thus, not engaged with the overt or covert political action of residents, nor did the proposal focus on these. To that extent, the project's role in information provision was intended to be apolitical or isolated from politics.

In the next section, I argue that all these aspects of framing information in the proposal shaped how IVRP was put into operation. In chapter 5, I argue that the way IVRP was conceptualized and later operationalized also shaped what information shops in villages were able to do.

2.3.4 From proposal to practice: Setting up information shops in Puducherry (1997-99)

Once IDRC agreed to fund the IVRP in 1997, Swaminathan Foundation spent the following several months setting the project up.⁴³ As per the hub-and-spokes and community-based model that had been proposed, the IVRP now had to:

1. set up a project office to plan and oversee the IVRP
2. set up a hub or value addition center (VAC)
3. set up a process to determine the end points to which the hub would be connected i.e. the villages where information shops should be set up
4. set up information shops in villages thus identified
5. determine what services a specific information shop could provide in its village and how
6. determine the role of the hub in the working of information shops: what value could the value addition center add?
7. set up the mechanisms by which the VAC and information shops would interact, including the technologies and processes involved

⁴² The claim misses the possibility that citizens may well know of a scheme but demand entitlements only where they judge that they have a chance of availing themselves of the benefits. The larger point that is not addressed here is the history of everyday negotiations by which rural residents transact with state functionaries. I address this point with more examples and discussion in chapter 5.

⁴³ Material in this section is from MSSRF (1999b), unless otherwise mentioned.

I examine the establishment and working of the VAC and information shops next, with an emphasis on the crucial part played by IVRP personnel and volunteers in the operations of these entities.

2.3.4.1 Value Addition Center (VAC)

The VAC, or the hub in the hub-and-spokes model of the IVRP, was established in February 1998 in Villianur, eight km from the city of Pondicherry. The IVRP project office and the VAC were collocated in these premises. Villianur is a large town, the block headquarters, an administrative node, a market center and located at an important road junction (MSSRF 1999b, 3). The rented house out of which the VAC operated was also close to the main bus stop. Since IVRP was in the business of marketing its services, the VAC had to be located such that it was easily visible to people and the premises in Villianur fulfilled this requirement.⁴⁴

The Villianur office performed several functions. As the communications hub and the center of a Very High Frequency (VHF) “star” network, it “talked” to all the peripheral stations or information shops.⁴⁵ As envisaged in the IVRP project document, it offered a mix of wired and wireless technologies for voice and data communication.⁴⁶ IVRP and VAC personnel worked out of the Villianur office.⁴⁷ In the initial years, the project personnel in Villianur were involved in developing surveys to gauge information needs in villages, and later in developing village databases based on responses to the surveys. With time, the VAC had a variety of databases – databases of Below Poverty Line (BPL) lists, a list of entitlements under government schemes, public transport schedules, contact details of health practitioners and facilities, and prices of produce in association with Pondicherry Agro Service and Industries Corporation (PASIC) – that were shared with information shops. Personnel at the Villianur office also initiated and maintained linkages with government departments and personnel.

IVRP personnel were also involved in the process of setting up and operating information shops. They worked with the Foundation's Chennai office to decide where information shops could be set up and helped establish these shops once the decision was made. Following the establishment of shops, they interacted daily with the personnel at information shops. For example, personnel at the Villianur office created daily bulletins that consisted of price data from PASIC and notifications from the government, and sent these over VHF to information shops. They shared news on transport delays over the phone. Since the concept of “value-

⁴⁴ Interview with V. Balaji, first Project Director of IVRP at his Hyderabad residence, November 28, 2009. Once the VAC was set up, the IVRP was inaugurated by Ismail Serageldin, chairperson of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research and Vice President for Environmentally and Socially Sustainable Development at the World Bank. The Foundation subsequently shifted the VAC to the village of Pillayarkuppam, primarily because the government gave it a plot of land in that location.

⁴⁵ Since it was a star network, each individual information shop could talk only to the VAC, but the VAC could talk to any of the information shops. This model was also a way to draw inputs from villages to the VAC. The VHF radio technology in use too shaped the eventual form of the network as a star network.

⁴⁶ Accordingly, the VAC in its role as a communication hub, connected to the information shops by wireless transceivers that could transmit both voice and data. The network was connected to the Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) line through a Private Branch eXchange (PBX) system and the information shops were treated as extensions of the main line at the VAC. They were provided an extension number each and could both receive and make calls through the Electronic Private Automatic Branch Exchange (EPABX) via the PSTN. The VAC could also connect to the local internet service provider using a dial-up connection. Since the connection grew unstable at higher speeds (> 4800bps), some of the data transmission between the VAC and shops was carried out on a fax protocol using Microsoft Windows Messaging that helped transmit documents up to 1MB in size or voice files up to 5 minutes at 7200bps. Technical specifications from (MSSRF 1999b, 9) and Balaji et al (2002).

⁴⁷ Balaji worked as the Project Director from Chennai. Other full-time staff included two social scientists, a programmer and a field organizer (MSSRF 1999b, inside cover). Part-time staff from other Swaminathan Foundation divisions in Chennai, such as the Informatics divisions, also helped out with the IVRP.

addition” was central to IVRP, personnel at the Villianur office also spent time “adding value” to what they had: for example, they translated content into Tamil or, in the case of weather information, focused on weather in specific regions of interest.

Finally, the Villianur office personnel compiled a monthly newsletter called *Namma Ooru Saidbi* (NOS) or “News from our village.” NOS included local history, agricultural tips and a listing of employment or educational opportunities. Some of the content came through contributions from village residents, who thus fulfilled their role as “information producers” (as proposed in the earliest documents associated with the project). Information shops collected such items from residents and the Villianur office compiled contributions from all shops to publish NOS.

2.3.4.2 Information shops

Once the hub was in place, it was time to determine locations for information shops and to think about services to offer in different villages. Project personnel conducted surveys and Participatory Rural Appraisals (PRAs) in different villages of the region over the next several months in 1997-98 (MSSRF 1999b, 11-20). Since the IVRP had been conceptualized as a community-centered project, surveys and PRAs were seen as essential components to involve the community in the project from the start.⁴⁸ The purpose of the surveys was to understand the nature of existing communication linkages between a village resident and other individuals or institutions in the region. The idea was that the VAC and information shops could build on these linkages. Thus, two sets of surveys were conducted prior to the establishment of information shops, the first in the summer of 1998, and the second through two agricultural seasons (in the summer and November 1998). The first survey was conducted in eleven villages in order to determine their existing communication infrastructure.⁴⁹ The survey researchers concluded that there was considerable unmet need in these communities for infrastructure that would meet “coping style” communication needs.

The second set of surveys was of 450 families and an attempt to assess existing patterns of communication (MSSRF 1999b, 13). The survey researchers found that for farmers, “supra local” entities such as input suppliers, money lenders, traders and other farmers remained the most important “sources of information.” These were the strongest linkages, as labeled in fig. 2.1. Farmers' linkages with the Block Development Officer (BDO) or Agricultural Officers were weak since these offices or officials were not seen as “viable sources of information.” The supra-local entities, however, had strong linkages with “external” entities such as government departments, universities or radio or television. The only strong linkage between the farmers and an external entity was through the radio or television. But these were seen less as sources of development information and more as channels of entertainment. Thus, for farmers, linkages started and terminated in the supra-local almost entirely. The absence of traditional panchayat leaders as well as MLAs or other politicians in this diagram and the accompanying analysis is intriguing and important for the purposes of my work. An earlier mentioned argument about the strength of local panchayats and of leaving local politics to them, was perhaps a reason to keep away from linkages involving panchayat leader. However, panchayat leaders were closely involved in many cases in asking for an information shop in their villages and subsequently in the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Foundation.

⁴⁸ The surveys and PRAs were geared to find out whether a village community felt the need for an information shop, was willing to support such a shop in the long term and what kinds of services it was likely to value.

⁴⁹ The survey found that 21,465 individuals shared six post offices, two reading rooms where newspapers could be read, twelve public telephones, 27 private telephones and 1,129 TVs (a third with a cable connection) (MSSRF 1999b, 12).

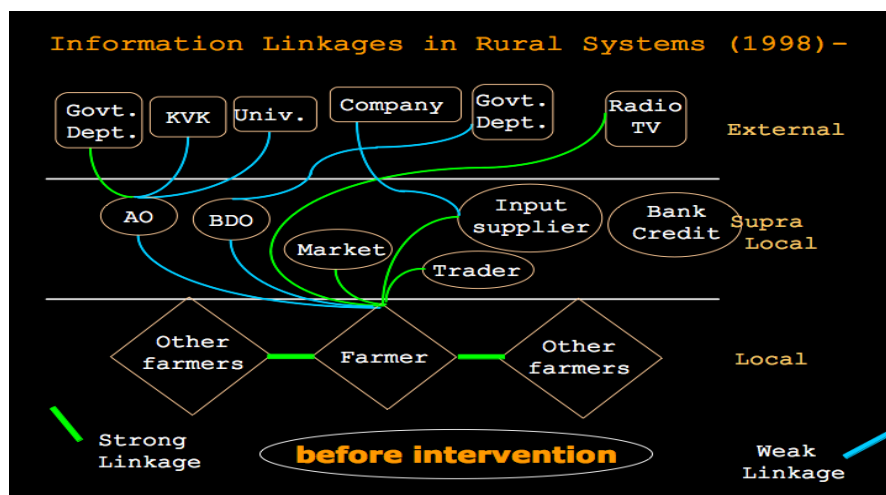


Fig. 2.1 Mapping of 'Information linkages in rural systems' by IVRP
 Source: Presentation designed by VRC staff (obtained from the VRC in August 2009)

Based on findings from both sets of surveys, researchers concluded that there was enough skill available in the villages to “introduce and internalize modern instruments of communication” since the same villages had accepted cable television easily (MSSRF 1999b, 14). Drawing further on the acceptance of cable television, they concluded that even in conditions of poverty, “where information channels fulfill a felt need, the economic viability of the channel can be brought about” (MSSRF 1999b, 14). Finally they concluded that a new information structure such as the one the IVRP proposed to introduce “must align itself” with the strong linkages between farmers and supra-local entities. Without this, the new system would have no credibility. Accordingly, project personnel decided that the project would start by providing information at the local and supra-local levels.

In addition to the surveys, PRAs were conducted in thirteen villages to understand the motivation of a village community to set up and sustain an information shop. The PRAs helped project personnel develop some sense of why an information shop may be needed in a village, where it could be located, how it could be made viable, and what sorts of services it should provide. A village hosted two PRAs before Swaminathan Foundation made a commitment to set up an information shop in that village by signing an MoU with community representatives. Three more PRAs were conducted before a shop was actually established in the village.⁵⁰

Over the years, a wide variety of local bodies, including panchayats, temple trusts, women's self-help groups (SHGs), local co-operative unions, youth clubs and a village development council, have asked the Foundation for an information shop in their village. Information shop premises have accordingly been diverse. They have included panchayat buildings, temple premises or, in one case, a building constructed with the information shop in mind.⁵¹ Some of the earliest information shops were established in private homes (IITB 2005, V.8). However, personnel received complaints that such shops restricted access, often along caste lines.⁵² IVRP

⁵⁰“We used to carry computer by car to the villages, keeping the computer under a shade of tree and show /demonstrated at the community meeting on how computer would be useful to them.” Email correspondence with K.G. Rajamohan, former Field Coordinator, IVRP, January 9, 2010. See also (IITB 2005, V.7).

⁵¹ For a complete list of shops and locations, see (MSSRF 2004d, 4)

⁵² Interview with IVRP personnel in Pillayarkuppam, Puducherry, November 5, 2009.

personnel had been concerned from the start about possible caste and gender barriers to the use of information shops and these complaints reinforced their concerns. Following a few such bad experiences, information shops were mostly set up on public land and buildings.⁵³

Shops also differed in their infrastructure and assets. All information shops were provided a minimum amount of equipment by the Foundation. This included a Personal Computer (PC), transceiver, printer, display board, interface to access PSTN and modem for data transmission and receiving. In addition, all the databases developed at the VAC were installed on the PC at the shop. Shops could also borrow CDs from a library of educational CDs at the VAC. In addition to the basic equipment, information shops in fishing villages had an electronic board that displayed weather conditions at sea. Most shops had a Public Announcement (PA) system that was used to read out important news items or job advertisements and application deadlines. Right from the dialogue on ICTs in 1992, the Foundation had emphasized using multiple modes and channels of communication. In practice too, the project was not overly attached to advanced technology solutions, using blackboards and loudspeakers when the IVRP deemed these “simple” technologies useful. These aspects have rightly been praised in the ICT and Development community for the last decade (Arunachalam 2002; IITB 2005; Kanungo 2002).⁵⁴

The most important people at information shops were the volunteers who ran the shop. These volunteers were village residents who taught computer classes, answered queries, made announcements and collected articles for NOS. They communicated regularly with VAC personnel. They also maintained user notebooks and the equipment in the shop. As their title indicates, “volunteers” were not paid by the project at this stage. Besides the volunteers who ran the shops, each shop had an attached “information group” consisting of an equal number of men and women, whose work was to guide the functioning of the shops. Both volunteers and information groups received some training from the Foundation. Project staff at the VAC, shop volunteers and information groups all had their own training sessions. While project staff and volunteers were trained largely on PC and wireless operations, the information group sat through training sessions where members had to frame the most effective queries to elicit information from the network or from project staff (MSSRF 1999b, 11).

In the decade-long history of IVRP, much has changed. As the regular funding from IDRC dried up, the project has had to look beyond its goal of social sustainability and work towards financial sustainability. There has been a high turnover of personnel at all levels of the project. New services have been introduced, and older

⁵³ IDRC conducted a gender orientation workshop for the Foundation in 1998 (Azad 1999). In addition, a widely publicized *New York Times* article mentions an Information Shop set up on temple premises that allowed *dalits* and menstruating women to enter, both groups that would normally not be allowed entry. See “Connecting Rural India to the World” in *The New York Times*, May 28, 2001 and Le Page’s “Village-life.com” in the *New Scientist*, May 4, 2002. Balaji et al (2002) describe more gender-related innovations that shaped inclusive outcomes, while Shore (1999) outlines IVRP’s policies for ensuring access to centers for dalits and women. But see also Sreekumar (2007b) who suggests that these claims are exaggerated.

⁵⁴ Many newspaper and journal articles as well as internal reports describe how information shops were used, especially success stories of individual users. However, consistent and comprehensive usage data across shops is difficult to find, especially for the earlier years. Some data is available in MSSRF (2004d), which I briefly discuss below. Usage data lists the following categories of services: phone calls, programme-related phone calls, agriculture, educational opportunities, employment opportunities, training opportunities, health, animal husbandry, welfare and government announcements and general (where the highest number of users fit in most cases). For the center in Embalam (considered one of the most successful) that had been operating since 1998, usage per month ranged between 15 and 1009 users, and averaged 430 users, in the period December 1998-July 2004. A newer, less successful center at Kunichampet recorded between 124 to 447 users per month, and averaged 300 users, in the period January 2003-July 2004. Since the maximum users were categorized under the “general” usage category in both cases, it is difficult to estimate how most people used the center.

ones retired. The names of entities associated with IVRP have changed as well. The VAC was renamed the “Village Resource Centre” (VRC) and moved from Villianur in 2005.⁵⁵ Information shops were first known as “*Saidbi Grama Maiyam*” and then became known as “*Grama Arivu Maiyam*” or Village Knowledge Centers (VKCs), which was what they were called when I visited in 2009.⁵⁶ The volunteers who had earlier operated VKCs became known as “knowledge workers” (KWs) and were also paid a monthly salary. Instead of the “information group,” VKCs were now supported by “boundary partners” and “strategy partners.” The boundary partners included notable people from the village community, including panchayat leaders, people from local self-help groups or other committees, and former volunteers. Strategy partners tended to be companies or corporations like Microsoft and Intel who extended certification, financial help or other sorts of strategic support to the project.⁵⁷ The changes in titles drew on changes over the years in how VKCs functioned. But they equally signified changes in the branding of the project in keeping with prevalent development terminology where “knowledge” was becoming increasingly important, as were partnerships.

As discussed in the earlier section on the use of *information* in development texts and among development agencies, the conceptualization and set-up of IVRP moved between particularistic and abstract uses of the term information. While material form was important in terms of using multiple modes of communication, information was nevertheless seen as distinct from its material form. Moreover, when information was imputed properties – such as being quantifiable or useful – its material form was not considered in this process. Social, economic and political factors, while taken into consideration – as in decisions about where to locate information shops or offering multiple modes of communication so people with different levels of education could use them – were never seen as constitutive of information. They were, at best, seen as “impacting” information use. Sreekumar (2007b) goes even further to argue that, in spite of all its efforts at gender, class or caste-sensitive design, IVRP ended up reinforcing existing divides by working with the already powerful members of the community while claiming to follow community-centered design. This section provided some background to the structure of the IVRP at the hub and spoke levels. In chapter 5, I describe and analyze how information provision works in one of the oldest information shops of the project. While I have focused on the framing of information by IVRP in this chapter, in chapter 5 I show what information actually looks like in practice at the village level, among individuals characterized thus far (rather simply) as “information seekers” and “information producers.”

⁵⁵ The logic behind moving the VAC to Pillayarkuppam where the Foundation had already built a structure for the Bio Village project was that it would help the project save expenditure on rent. Since Pillayarkuppam is located farther away from villages and is not an administrative or market center, some of the earlier rationale for choosing a house in Villianur for the VAC was defeated with this move. Interview with V. Balaji, former Project Director of IVRP, at his Hyderabad residence, November 28, 2009 and email exchange with K.G. Rajamohan, former Field Coordinator, IVRP, January 9, 2010.

⁵⁶ Email correspondence with K.G. Rajamohan, former Field Coordinator, IVRP, January 9, 2010. According to him, “Information Shop” and “*Saidbi Grama Maiyam*” were merely English and Tamil variants of the same title: both were used by project personnel and understood by village residents. The shift to “*Grama Arivu Maiyam*” (Village Knowledge Center) came about in order to reflect a shift in the purpose of the centers from being places where “all information [was] stored in one place” to places that had “started storing both dynamic and static information which was used for . . . immediate information need as well as like library, people could get the information at anytime on any subject.” In addition, there was a move towards making people more independent in their use of the center, allowing them to rely less on project staff for gathering or storing information at the center. Rajamohan saw this as “knowledge sharing which would empower people” and suggested that as a reason for the shift in title to “Village Knowledge Centre” (or “*Grama Arivu Maiyam*”).

Note that in Tamil *Saidbi* can also refer to “news” or “message” and *Arivu* to “intelligence.” However, I have maintained the translations used by the project where available.

⁵⁷ Large software companies were also significant players in software education. When IVRP started, project personnel were not focusing on software applications. But learning applications increasingly became central to VKCs in the 2000s.

2.4 *Information*: One term, multiple ways of framing

The fuzziness of *information* allowed groups as different as MKSS and Swaminathan Foundation to leverage it in their very different kinds of work. With the flexibility of referring both to an abstract class of things and very specific things with the single term *information*, its legitimate use in one sense (“agricultural information is useful to farmers”) could be used to extrapolate its use to the other sense (“information is useful to farmers”) and make grand claims without much trouble. The ability of different groups to leverage the same term also had a variety of outcomes. On the one hand, as with my cases, a political and apolitical intervention were both able to use the same term, pointing to the flexibility and ambiguity of the term. On the other, the flexibility and ambiguity also meant that within an initiative, the term could bring together people from different walks of life as happened with the Swaminathan Foundation's 1992 dialogue. Since no one ideology was associated with the term, using the term could obscure the specific politics of different initiatives.

I argued earlier that both MKSS and the Foundation reified information, seeing it as a thing with properties that could act in the world. I pointed out how they did this in different ways, with MKSS explicitly qualifying when information was of value instead of seeing value as intrinsic to information. The two also reified information to different extents, with MKSS often referring to what could be done *with* information and the IVRP documents pointing to what information could do. Finally, neither talked explicitly of the materiality of information, preferring to see that as an issue separate from information where it was mentioned at all.⁵⁸

Wenger argues that reifications can trick us into believing that we know more about something than we actually do (Wenger 1998). I argue that in my cases, especially the IVRP, information as a reified object appeared to be inherently valuable. It was also something that people could have more or less of. As a measurable object of value, people could articulate their demand for information. Information could be sought, provided and purchased. The question, however, is whether it is really possible to define information in a single way and in such detail. Do we know as much about information as the excerpts and statements above indicate, or is the reification merely allowing us to think that we do? I argue that imputing properties to information or making claims about what it can do came with a set of problems: these properties and claims were being taken for granted without making explicit their underlying assumptions. And there were many assumptions. For example, the information production-consumption paradigm painted “information producers” and especially “information consumers” as fairly passive individuals, who simply produced, consumed or transmitted information. Another example of an assumption was that the circulation of information could be carried on or articulated as a sphere of activity that could be isolated from the rest of the life of a community. When information was reified, these assumptions were easy to forget. When assumptions were not explicit, claims about the nature of information and what it could do were easier to make and believe.

This discussion also brings me to the idea of an information order that I detailed in chapter 1. Briefly, I had argued that information cannot be understood in isolation from the information order in which it circulates. In the context of government information, this order would necessarily shape and be shaped by the structures and practice of governance. I have begun to lay out how the framing of information allows it to be more or less embedded in an information order, and to that extent, more or less able to have its own properties or circulate in isolation. In the next three chapters, I will describe and analyze how information worked in practice and how this practice was shaped by the manner in which information was framed in the two cases.

⁵⁸ I am challenging here the view that material form and content are separate, even if both are important; a view that sees material as a container for information rather than as an inextricable part of what is called information.

Chapter 3

Discovering “information”: MKSS's land and minimum wage campaigns

On a winter afternoon in 2009, I waited to meet Megh Singh at his workplace in south-central Rajasthan. I was there to talk to him about a “public hearing” from fifteen years ago.¹ Singh was a slight man with a small mustache and strong opinions on just about everything. He worked at a block-level government office and much of his work involved interactions with residents of surrounding villages.² Residents would flock to him and his colleagues all the time with their queries about government schemes and they kept him busy. Singh had a desk within the office building from where he was supposed to conduct his work. But he would often end up spending time in the corridors of the building, taking in the sun or drinking tea, as he spoke with village residents, listening and responding to their queries. Acquaintances would drop in sometimes to chat and tell him what was happening in their villages, especially the party politics at the village level. Singh and his colleagues also talked among themselves about goings-on in the office or in a neighboring village. Every once in a while, higher-level bureaucrats in the building would summon Singh or his colleagues to fetch paperwork or for updates.

Wedged between all these interactions, Singh and I had a conversation about the public hearing held in 1994. Singh had been working at the same Block office since the time MKSS had held that public hearing in a village of the Block. Singh's colleagues encouraged me, telling me that I had come to the right place to find out about the hearing. Hadn't Singh spent his growing years playing in the corridors of the Samiti, they exclaimed. They claimed there was nothing worth remembering about the block office that Singh had not seen happen.³ In fact, Singh remembered very little about the details of the 1994 public hearing – it had been fifteen years ago after all. According to him, village residents and MKSS had complained about corruption in a public work project to the Block Development Officer (BDO) in 1994. He also remembered that MKSS had conducted a demonstration in the panchayat and demanded that copies of documents related to public works in the village be made available. Singh claimed that the BDO had already started investigating the complaint and had taken action even before the public hearing happened. Since the administration was already doing what it could, where was the need for copies or a hearing, he asked.⁴

Singh had nothing more he wished to tell me about the hearing, but went on to tell me his opinion of various contemporary public welfare schemes and laws, including the Right to Information (RTI) Act of 2005. The RTI was only adding to the work at the office. People often had no idea what they wanted, so they asked for any *soochana* (information) they could think of under the RTI, even where it was clear they could not afford to

¹ Interview with Megh Singh at his office, December 14, 2009. The term public hearing in this context refers to a public meeting attended by village residents, bureaucrats and politicians where records of public expenditure are read out and often challenged by village residents. MKSS's public hearings will be explained in chapter 4 in greater detail.

² A “Block” or “Panchayat Samiti” is an administrative division that forms the middle-tier of the Panchayati Raj system in India. See appendix 1 for more on different tiers of the Panchayati Raj system.

³ Initially, I had assumed that Singh's colleagues were either joking about him growing up in the office or were using the statement as a metaphor for his familiarity with the office. I found out soon after that they had meant their statement quite literally: Singh's father had worked at the same office before him and had therefore been entitled to housing in the staff quarters adjacent to the office.

⁴ In the activists' version, Singh had applied pressure on the BDO, who was new and agreeable to sharing records, to not do so.

pay for copies of the soochana they asked for. He told me of the “labor class” and how it was making false accusations of corruption to naïve outsiders who believed them (“like you,” he emphasized, in case that had not been obvious to me). “You have to understand the thinking in these villages,” he explained. He talked about how RTI applications could be used to signal a threat or as an act of revenge towards a bureaucrat. A colleague chimed in that while awareness about the RTI was spreading, people were using the law in a very *ajeeb* (strange) way: they were using it to make the point that bureaucrats and politicians were merely their *naukar* (servants). For instance, he said, people who sat around doing no work at public worksites would later demand wages from the government, and use the RTI as a weapon to threaten the bureaucrat who refused to pay them.⁵ The prevalent attitude about the RTI and audit mechanisms for welfare schemes among village residents, according to Singh's colleague, was “You [bureaucrat] have to work as my naukar, otherwise we know ways of setting you straight.”

As an observer, it was difficult for me to maintain analytical distinctions between “the state” and “society” while watching interactions between Singh, his colleagues and the village residents who approached them. Not only had Singh grown up in the same region where he worked, he was deeply aware of and implicated in the politics of the villages where he helped implement public schemes. This intimacy came with its benefits and costs, an understanding of the region but also implicit biases about who had what kind of “thinking.” Concerns about the misuse of the RTI also suggested similar misgivings about the figure of the local worker, with Singh and his colleagues claiming that they *knew* workers were likely to be lazy and dishonest. Their comments also illustrated that even as laws and schemes changed on paper, attitudes about the working class (especially their laziness and corrupt behavior) shifted much less on the ground.⁶ My interaction with Singh and his colleagues resonated in these aspects with interactions that I had with other bureaucrats in Rajasthan while studying MKSS's early campaigns.⁷ These interactions and my observations about them bring me to a central argument of this chapter: that the nature of the boundaries between “the state” and its population in a region shapes its information order.

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I address my first research question – how is an information order created, maintained and shifted? – in the context of a land campaign and two minimum wage campaigns conducted by MKSS between 1987 and 1991. I argue that the information order that was encountered by these campaigns was being employed as a technique of governing. The creation of individual elements of the information order was shaped by the nature of the boundary between state and population; in turn, elements of the information order were used to maintain this boundary in practice. For example, underlying mindsets about the benefactor-beneficiary relationship between state and members of the population shaped the creation and maintenance of public work scheme procedures and documents that were encountered by MKSS's minimum wage campaigns. Further, use of these procedures and documents in practice further reinforced the

⁵ Public worksites were significant sites of employment in this part of Rajasthan as I describe in detail in later sections of this chapter. Here, Singh was referring mainly to accusations of forgery in records related to worker attendance and wage payment that are created and maintained by bureaucrats.

⁶ At the same time, it seemed important for Singh and for other bureaucrats I met to be seen as being in alignment with the underlying principles of a law such as the RTI: many bureaucrats insisted they had always believed in transparency and made the records of their office available even prior to the RTI. But, as I would repeatedly find, the obstacles were in the interpretation and implementation of these principles.

⁷ It also brought home the fact that people had short memories. Reconstructing something that happened a decade and a half earlier was, therefore, not a straightforward task. I realized soon after starting fieldwork that I needed to use a combination of people's narratives and written documents from the time to construct a richer account of events.

benefactor-beneficiary relationship between state and population. However, while the information order largely worked to maintain existing boundaries between state and population, sometimes the blurred nature of the boundaries was leveraged to bring about changes in the information order and its elements. In the case of MKSS's campaigns, I argue that these changes were brought about by leveraging the non-monolithic character of the state and connections across the state-population boundary.

This chapter and the next are organized chronologically to examine MKSS's campaigns between 1987 (when the group of activists mentioned in chapter 2 moved to Devdoongri) and 1996 (when the first Right to Information *dharna* (sit-in) was organized by MKSS). In chapter 2, I analyzed an Institute of Development Studies Jaipur (IDSJ) report from 1992 that was authored by MKSS members, where a "Right to Information" was first mentioned (Roy et al. 1992). I use this report as a way to split up my analyses of MKSS's campaigns, with chapter 3 examining campaigns before the report (1987-1991) and chapter 4 the ones after (1992-1996).⁸ As opposed to chapter 2, where I emphasized how information was framed in writings by MKSS members, the focus of chapters 3 and 4 is on practice.⁹ The focus on practice also brings me to my reasons for writing yet another account of fairly well-documented events. My motivation is primarily conceptual. As discussed in chapter 1, my focus is on the techniques and practice of governing. In order to examine these, I had to examine how each of MKSS's campaigns was brought about, including how members thought about what they did, especially about information and their political strategy to alter the practice of governing in the region. To get a rich account that would meet these objectives, I conducted my own interviews with MKSS members as well as with bureaucrats, in addition to drawing on archival material and existing accounts of MKSS campaigns.¹⁰

The next section starts at the time four activists central to MKSS started their work in Devdoongri in 1987. In the following sections, I examine their campaign for land allocation and two minimum wage campaigns from the late 1980s and early 1990s. In closing the chapter, I return to the 1992 IDSJ report to examine how the report speaks to my idea of an information order as a technique of governing.

3.2 Starting off in Devdoongri (1987)

"*Zindabad!*"¹¹ Four children playing marbles in the shade of a tree, paused their game to greet me in one voice, their fists clenched and hands raised high. It was my first time in Devdoongri, a village located just off of a National Highway in the hilly belt of Rajsamand district in south-central Rajasthan.¹² I had stepped off an eight km-long jeep ride from a neighboring town and was trying to find my way to the MKSS residence when I met the kids.¹³ When I asked them the way to the office of "Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan" in the village,

⁸ Some of these events were outlined in chapter 2, will be documented in greater detail in this chapter and the next.

⁹ I start most sections with an event or conversation from my fieldwork in 2009 which I use to either lead up to, or to compare or contrast with, a significant event in MKSS's campaigns from the late 1980s and 1990s.

¹⁰ There exist less and more detailed accounts of many of the individual campaigns I describe. See Bakshi (1998); Baviskar (2007); Corbridge et al (2005); Jenkins and Goetz (1999); Kidambi (2008); Priya (1996); Singh (2007), as well as many newspaper articles. However, there are few detailed accounts that take on all of MKSS's campaigns till 1996. The closest are MKSS's IDSJ reports (Roy et al 1992; Roy et al 1995) that cover campaigns up to 1995. Unfortunately, these are not widely available. A detailed account is also to be found in Mishra (2003). However, neither the IDSJ reports nor Mishra (2003) includes voices from the bureaucracy, especially voices that depart from the popular narrative of the campaign.

¹¹ Literally translated, "*zindabad*" is Hindustani for "Long live." It is commonly invoked in rallies and protests as part of slogans.

¹² National Highway 8 connects Delhi and Mumbai and passes through many large cities, including Jaipur and Udaipur in Rajasthan on the way.

¹³ In the absence of public transit in the region, shared-ride jeeps were a popular mode of transportation between Devdoongri and

the kids directed me to a nearby building – the MKSS office – and also pointed out the MKSS residence a little farther away without hesitation. I remember being faintly surprised that the youngsters should have greeted me the way they did, indeed that they recognized the name of MKSS immediately and had known exactly where my destination lay. I learnt soon enough that in Devdoongri and its adjoining villages, everyone knew the “Sangathan” and its characteristic greeting – a “Zindabad,” sometimes accompanied by a raising of the fist.



Fig. 3.1 The MKSS logo

Source: MKSS website, <http://www.mkssindia.org/>

Devdoongri residents showed great tolerance for outsiders – researchers, activists, interns and other supporters – who regularly visited the Sangathan residence and office in the period I spent there. I was told this was not always so. When the four activists I mentioned in chapter 2 – Aruna Roy, Nikhil Dey, Shankar Singh, Anchie Singh – as well as Shankar and Anchie's children, first came to live in Devdoongri in 1987, there was a great deal of curiosity and resistance.¹⁴ The group had moved into a house that belonged to a cousin of Singh's.¹⁵ Roy and Dey were especially aware that they would always be outsiders to an extent because they did not hail from the region.¹⁶ Shankar Singh's connection to the region was critical at this time in stemming outright rejection. At the same time, though, his connections meant that he was the candidate for the most social pressure following actions by the group that the village community found unacceptable.

However, the activists also found support in Devdoongri and it was with this support that their own strategy

Bhim, the nearest town, eight km away.

¹⁴ Roy, Dey and Singh had met at the Social Work and Research Center (SWRC), Tilonia, Rajasthan, where Roy and Singh had been working since the mid-1970s.

¹⁵ Singh laughingly remarks: "People ask us 'Why Devdoongri?' all the time! We didn't move here for some political reason. Aruna, Nikhil and I wanted to work to solve people's problems in rural India in a region that was not prosperous. I am from Lotiyana which is about 35km from Devdoongri and I knew this region. I said if we are looking for an economically poor region, why don't we go to this region that I know well." From Shankar Singh's introduction to South African visitor-activists in Devdoongri, March 26, 2009.

¹⁶ Roy and Dey had grown up in cities, while Singh had grown up in the region. Roy had been in the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) from 1968-1975 after which she had worked at SWRC till 1983. While the outsider-activists decided that they would live like everyone else in the village, in terms of where they lived and how much they earned, they nevertheless continued to be perceived as outsiders in many ways, even as they were accepted as a part of the community in others.

for action evolved. When Shankar Singh and his friends came to Devdoongri, they had only a broad idea of what they wanted to do (work politically with the poor to change the conditions of their lives). They had a much better idea of what they did not want to do: work within an NGO framework, take on projects or accept funds from abroad. Their strategy for what they did want, evolved over time as they formed friendships within the village and learnt about the problems that residents faced. Soon after moving to the village, the group encountered Lal Singh, a former policeman, who Roy described as a “great political thinker, but a very bad mason.” Lal Singh came to help repair the house where the activists had moved in, but stayed on to plan a land campaign in the late 1980s with them.¹⁷ Others bonds were forged with school students whom the activists tutored in Maths and English. Two of these students, Narayan Singh and Devi Lal went on to work closely with the group on minimum wage campaigns in the early 1990s. The group also met Mohan Ram and Chunnibai who worked part time as singers at religious community gatherings in the region. With them, the group went from village to village at night using songs and music to start conversations with residents, asking them about their lives and livelihood concerns. Chunnibai later participated in the earliest minimum wage campaign in the region in the late 1980s. Throughout this period, Shankar Singh's skills as a puppeteer, actor and singer helped engage village residents and start conversations in villages across the region.¹⁸

In order to earn an income and to maintain a dialogue with the government, the Devdoongri group applied to the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), Government of India (GoI) in 1987 for a research grant to conduct participatory research on rural poverty.¹⁹ The grant was sanctioned and funded by MHRD and channeled to the group through the IDSJ. Over the years, the IDSJ proved a valuable partner, staying involved in the group's work, discussing and disseminating their findings.²⁰ Reports emerging out of the collaboration with IDSJ – including the 1992 report that I already discussed – continue to provide the greatest insights into the thinking that went into the years preceding the initiation of a formal RTI campaign.²¹

In the next section, I describe one of the first campaigns undertaken by the Devdoongri group: a land campaign in Lal Singh's village, Sohanganrh, that took place between 1987 and 1989. I begin with some background to the land conflict in Sohanganrh and from there, move to the campaign itself. Observing the campaign using the framework of an information order, I argue that the information order of land transactions was used to maintain boundaries between state and population by dictating how each was supposed to interact differently with land records. While these boundaries were for the most part maintained by the way the information order worked, the land campaign leveraged the activists' connections with the bureaucracy to bring about some shifts in its working. I conclude the section with the implications of the land campaign for the Devdoongri group's future work.

¹⁷ From transcripts of interview with Aruna Roy conducted by Bhanwar Meghwanshi for an as-yet unfinished documentary of MKSS.

¹⁸ Singh had worked in community theater for many years while working at SWRC.

¹⁹ The grant was under a GoI scheme titled “Experimental and innovative approaches to elementary education.”

²⁰ Correspondence between the group and IDSJ; and an interview with V.Vyas, an economist with the IDSJ for some of this period, at his Delhi residence, January 9, 2010.

²¹I draw heavily on Roy et al (1992); Roy et al (1995) in this dissertation.

3.3 Sohangarh and the campaign for land (1987-1989)²²

The village of Sohangarh, located in present-day Rajsamand district, was formed earlier in the twentieth century with the migration of people from the *magra* (mountainous) belt that runs across Rajasthan (Roy et al 1992).²³ Sohangarh's population consisted largely of *Rawats*, a group that formed a large proportion of the population in the *magra* belt and was described locally as one that never succumbed to the rule of local kings or, indeed, to colonial rule.²⁴ The spirit of not accepting hierarchies imposed by outsiders continued after India's independence from British colonial rule.



Fig. 3.2 Map of present day Rajsamand district (Bhim, Devdoongri and Tal marked on map)
Source: Rajasthan State Road Transport Corporation, Jaipur. rsrtc.gov.in

²² This account of the Sohangarh land campaign has been re-constructed from the following sources unless otherwise mentioned: Roy et al (1992), multiple conversations and interviews with Lal Singh between March and May 2009, transcript of a video-interview with Lal Singh done by Bhanwar Meghwanshi for an as-yet unfinished project on MKSS, a May 2009 interview with the Sub-Divisional Magistrate (SDM) of the region during the land campaign and Mishra (2003). The specific source is referenced in case of direct quotes.

²³ The Aravalli mountain range runs across Rajasthan, dividing it into regions traditionally called Marwar (to the west) and Mewar (to the east). See fig.3.3.

²⁴ In fact, the British paid the Rawats to settle down on patches of land in the region and protect the land against other invaders. See also "Celebrating a revolution at the Grassroots" in *The Hindu*, May 16, 2010.



Fig. 3.3 Present-day district boundaries in Rajasthan

Note that the Marwar (salmon-colored region)-Mewar (red outline) boundary cuts right through Rajsamand district.²⁵

By the time the land campaign was undertaken, Sohargarh was administratively part of the Tal panchayat, carved out of the traditionally feudal Mewar region of Rajasthan (Figs. 3.2 and 3.3).²⁶ As in other parts of India, traditional feudal authority was legally replaced by the Indian government's following independence from colonial rule. However, in practice, authority continued to be vested in the same individuals or families as before (Roy et al. 1992). Moreover, it was control over land that concretized this authority in many regions of the country. While land-reform legislation imposed a ceiling on the land that could be owned by an individual, traditional landlords held on to land using a variety of methods that were supported by their new-found administrative authority. Hari Singh was one such *thakur* (landlord) in Tal panchayat, who controlled in excess of 1500 acres of land (Mishra 2003, 5). If land had traditionally made his family powerful in the village, he now also had strong political support, having moved through various political parties in his career. He had also been a *sarpanch* (headman) of the panchayat for a long period (though not during the period of this campaign) and was thus in Lal Singh's words, "a king in the post-independence system as well."²⁷ As a member of the Rajput community, he had the community's backing, which was significant because Rajputs were relatively well-placed within the government hierarchy at the time.²⁸ Thus, Hari Singh continued to be a powerful individual in the panchayat.

It was partly the distinct histories of Tal panchayat and Sohargarh that opened up room for direct conflict between Hari Singh and Sohargarh residents in the late 1980s. Access to land was very important for the residents of Sohargarh: owning land helped them raise capital, provided them an income from cultivation and helped satisfy a pre-requisite for applying to many development schemes. In addition, residents also relied on common land for firewood and various other uses. However, Hari Singh treated much of the land in

²⁵ Present day Udaipur and Rajsamand districts together constituted Udaipur district till 1991.

²⁶ Unlike the magra belt, Mewar was ruled by kings and had a history of strongly feudal land relations.

²⁷ Interview with Lal Singh in Devdoongri, March 30, 2009.

²⁸ Rajputs were traditionally seen as a "warrior" class and were also classified as "forward caste" in Rajasthan post India's independence from British rule.

Sohangarh as his own and expected village residents to pay him in cash or in kind for collecting firewood from that land. There was a history of residents being beaten up or molested for venturing on “his” land. While individual residents had sometimes resisted Hari Singh's coercion, these acts had not succeeded in breaking Singh's stranglehold. A two-year campaign by Sohangarh residents and the Devdoongri group eventually changed some of this in 1989.

3.3.1 The land campaign

In 1987, when Lal Singh had first met the Devdoongri activists in the course of repairing their house, he had started talking to them about Hari Singh's actions in Sohangarh. Besides the political landscape of Sohangarh, the Devdoongri group also learnt of Lal Singh's experiences with unionization when he worked in the state police. According to Lal Singh, the group began to see him as a valuable ally because of his involvement in the all India police strikes of the late 1970s, his willingness to confront the state and his understanding of how a protest campaign was organized. Lal Singh took the group to Sohangarh where they spoke with residents about their encounters with the thakur and the ways in which they had been resisting the thakur's actions. The group's understanding of Sohangarh, the thakur's actions, the relationship between the residents and different levels of the state and potential strategies, evolved through a series of such meetings that took place between 1987 and 1989. News of these meetings also went back to Hari Singh who had his own “strong network of spies” according to Lal Singh.²⁹ Meanwhile, a high-ranking bureaucrat from the central government, who was acquainted with the Devdoongri group, wrote a letter introducing the group and asking the local administration to support the group's work.³⁰ This made Hari Singh nervous, for he did not want to openly act against a group that had backing from the central government. Yet, the thakur knew that the group was “working against him on his own turf!” chuckled Lal Singh.³¹

By 1989, the Sohangarh and Devdoongri groups decided to translate their discussions into tangible action. They concluded that individual acts of resistance against the thakur's actions did not fundamentally address the issue: the land question had to be confronted directly. The rationale, in Lal Singh's words was the following:

Our target was that land; that the land should be allotted. As long as it lay with the government, they [Hari Singh and his men] would control it. They played all their games using this land; their politics stemmed from this land too.³²

The groups found an opportunity in late 1988-89 when the government announced a camp where eligible government plots would be allotted under a recently created scheme.³³ Lal Singh and his friends first needed to understand what government records said about the ownership of the land that Hari Singh controlled: would it be eligible for re-allotment under the present scheme? They managed to obtain details about the

²⁹ Interview with Lal Singh in Sohangarh, May 28, 2009. His words: “*Thagdee kufiya agency.*”

³⁰ The bureaucrat was Anil Bordia, Secretary (Education), Government of India.

³¹ Interview with Lal Singh in Sohangarh, May 28, 2009.

³² Interview with Lal Singh in Devdoongri, March 30, 2009. His words: “*Wob zameen se hi saara kbel kbelte hain; rajneeti bhi usi se karte hain.*”

³³ The camp was part of the “*Prasbaasan gaon ki aur*” (“Administration comes to the village”) effort. The allotment would take place under the Rajasthan Land Revenue (Allotment of Unculturable Waste Land for Development of Private Forest) Rules, 1986, hereafter referred to as the DPF Rules 1986.

piece of land, including plot numbers and type of land (Mishra 2003, 5).³⁴ From these, the groups ascertained that the land was government land that could indeed be allotted during the camp.³⁵ Their supporters in Sohargarh applied for allotment of this land.

The events that followed were shaped critically by the bureaucrats and elected representatives who dealt with the land allotment and transfer of possession, including the sarpanch of the village, the *tehsildar*,³⁶ the constable, the Deputy Superintendent of Police (DySP), the forest ranger, the Sub District Magistrate (SDM) at the sub-district level, the Collector at the district level, and the elected Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA).³⁷ In all the accounts that I heard about the role of these individuals in the Sohargarh events, their caste identity, as well as that of Sohargarh residents was always mentioned and seen as fundamental to the course of events. The DySP, tehsildar, ranger and MLA were either Rajputs like Hari Singh or shared his political affiliation. They provided complete support to the thakur, lobbying on his behalf that the land be handed over to the forest department instead of being allotted at the camp. The village residents in support of land re-allotment were largely Rawats. The SDM, who was very supportive of the Devdoongri group's efforts, was not a Rajput, and faced enormous pressure as a result. He described the episode saying "It was a very tense period. I was under enormous pressure from the MLA of the time."³⁸ Besides the explicit political pressure to not allot land, the SDM also had to contend with it in the guise of procedural obstacles.³⁹

While Hari Singh leveraged caste networks to lobby for the land, the Devdoongri group leveraged its contacts in the civil services to get the land allotted, developing their strategy with the help of the SDM and other high-ranking bureaucrats.⁴⁰ The bureaucrats suggested that the chances of allotment would improve if a collective rather than individuals applied for the land allotment: Hari Singh's men would never have allowed individual households to control their own land after allotment, but might find it harder to pressure a collective. The group also decided to register a collective of women, on the reasoning that this would empower women and because Hari Singh would find it relatively difficult to threaten women or buy them out. Further, the collective would be a working women's collective, so that women from Hari Singh's family and networks would not

³⁴ In general, it is easier to obtain copies of records from the revenue department than from others. In this case, the SDM's support seems to have helped obtain records from the *patwari* (local land records official) quickly. From interviews with Shankar Singh, May 26, 2009 and Lal Singh, March 30, 2009.

³⁵ Government land could be of different types. If a piece of land was categorized as having a special purpose, it could not be allotted under rule 4 (iii) (DPF Rules 1986). The piece of land under consideration here, however, was not categorized as special purpose land, and could be allotted. From interview with Shankar Singh, en route to Kaamli Ghaat from Devdoongri, on 26th May 2009, and from DPF Rules.

³⁶ Bureaucrat in charge of the smallest revenue administration unit, a *tehsil*. See appendix 1 for details on administrative positions.

³⁷ The political alignments at the time also made some connections possible. Hari Singh was affiliated with the Congress party, as was the local MLA. The sarpanch was a supporter of the rival Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

³⁸ The pressure faced by the SDM and his constructive role in the campaign are mentioned in a letter dated July 3, 1989 from Roy to the Collector of the district and another dated June 30, 1989 to Secretary, Ministry of Human Resources Development, GoI.

³⁹ For example, the "Issue of Public Notice inviting applications for allotment" of the DPF rules 1986 specified that there had to be a period of not less than seven days between the day a notice for land allotment was affixed on the notice board of the SDM's office and the day land was allotted. The thakur brought this up on the day for which allotment was scheduled. To follow the rule and yet be able to list the land occupied by the thakur for allocation, the SDM postponed the camp by a week in a move that surprised the thakur and his supporters. Interview with SDM at his residence, May 27, 2009.

⁴⁰ "We lobbied too, but not along caste lines." Interview with Lal Singh in Devdoongri, March 30, 2009. M.L. Mehta, then Secretary (Agriculture), Rajasthan government and Anil Bordia, Secretary (Education), GoI were particularly helpful. The SDM himself also mentioned that he was deeply in agreement with the Devdoongri group and had earlier attended a three-day workshop discussing government schemes for poverty alleviation in Devdoongri along with other bureaucrats.

enter the collective, allowing it a degree of freedom from Rajput control.⁴¹ A collective of working women was formed and registered in the next two days.⁴² The collective then applied for the land in question.

Land allotment was governed by the vote of a land allocation board that comprised bureaucrats and elected representatives.⁴³ In this instance, the board consisted of the MLA, the sarpanch, the SDM, the ranger, and the tehsildar. The MLA excused himself on the day of land allocation. The ranger and tehsildar voted for the land to be allotted to the forest department. The SDM voted for the land to be allotted to the women's collective. The sarpanch was caught in the middle: he knew the power of the thakur, but had won his elections in the village with the help of campaigning support from Lal Singh and his friends in Sohargarh. Ultimately, he voted in favor of the collective. With two votes for and two against, the SDM referred the case to the Collector.⁴⁴ The Collector, to whom the SDM, Roy and her friends had already spoken, decided to allot the land to the women's collective.⁴⁵

3.3.2 The land campaign and its information order

The land campaign showed the working of an information order, its deployment as a technique of governing and its role in maintaining boundaries of (and between) state and population. The information order in this case consisted most visibly of land records, the rules, procedures and schemes of land allotment, as well as the bureaucrats involved in creating, deploying or sharing these rules and records. Land allotment and re-allotment, as well as the processing of land records, could only be done by the state – in the Sohargarh case too, it was a supportive bureaucrat who had enabled access to these records. In normal circumstances, it was difficult for village residents to even see these records, let alone modify them in any way. Rules of allotment – land type as well as number of days of notice required in order to allot land – shaped the process of allotment and made it opaque to those to whom the land was being allotted. These rules were thus a way in which the boundary between state and population was constructed, by dictating how each interacted with land records differently and had different powers in terms of manipulating them.

If the information order was shaped by existing boundaries of state and population and in turn helped maintain them, the land campaign also showed that connections across these boundaries existed and were significant. While it is widely recognized that caste is an important factor in negotiations between the Indian state and the population, the Sohargarh episode illustrated the mechanics of the process, showing the working of caste in interactions involving members of the population and the state. As described in the previous sub-section, the land allotment process was resisted by bureaucrats and elected representatives who had caste and kinship affiliations with the thakur. If caste provided grounds for lobbying for the thakur and his men, links with the bureaucracy allowed lobbying by the Devdoongri group: Roy's past career as a civil servant lent her credibility and social connections in the bureaucracy. Both the credibility and the

⁴¹ The Rajput community had considerably stronger limitations on women working outside their home than other communities. The women in the thakur's networks were therefore unlikely to be working women. Interview with Lal Singh in Devdoongri, March 30, 2009

⁴² The collective was named *Shramik Mahila Van Vikas Samiti* (Working Women's Forest Development Association).

⁴³ Rule 12 of the DPF rules 1986.

⁴⁴ While the SDM could only allocate between one and five hectares of land, the Collector could allocate up to 40 hectares (Rule 10 of DPF rules 1986), another reason to refer the matter up to the Collector. Interview with SDM at his residence, May 27, 2009.

⁴⁵ The subsequent process of taking possession of the land and actually being able to use it took many more months, in light of threats and damage inflicted on any work undertaken on the land. The thakur's men retreated only because of the actions of a constable, NGOs and activists who were supportive of the Devdoongri group. The thakur, meanwhile, fought and lost the battle to win access to the land in court.

connections gained her good will, or at least tolerance, from bureaucrats. In addition, the connections with bureaucrats also helped the group strategize and make the right administrative choices to improve their chances of being allotted the land. Finally, the social connections at higher levels of the bureaucracy were at least partially responsible for the speed with which the land reallocation and the registration of the women's collective took place. Thus, while the information order acted as a technique of governing and boundary-making in the Sohargarh land campaign, activists leveraged connections across these boundaries to bring changes in certain elements of the information order. In the case of land campaign, the issuance of a land certificate in the name of the collective was a manifestation of such a change.

The land campaign in Sohargarh was significant for the Devdoongri group in a number of ways. It helped them gain the trust of the people in the region and brought home the benefits of working as a collective. The group identified new “friends” in the bureaucracy while reinforcing connections with those already acquainted with them. The activists' existing social connections within the bureaucracy made the Sohargarh group and collective appear more credible to other bureaucrats who then agreed to support the group. The land campaign in Sohargarh was thus important to the Devdoongri group in learning how to wage a successful campaign. The group took some of these lessons to its minimum wage campaigns, which I describe next.

3.4 Minimum wage campaigns (1987-1991)

When I travelled in the region around Devdoongri in 2009, I often passed groups of women and men digging trenches, filling baskets on their heads with soil and stones, transferring these to another location, or otherwise engaged in tasks related to laying roads, building walls or water reservoirs. I found out that these individuals were working on “public works” i.e. on worksites whose material supply and labor costs were borne by the central or state government. Typical examples of public works included laying dirt roads, repairing water bodies or building boundary walls for grazing land. It was perhaps not surprising that these worksites were so common in the areas of Rajasthan where I travelled, given the region's long history of public works.

Whenever I visited a worksite, I would be told how these sites were fundamentally different than public worksites from a decade or two back.⁴⁶ The most glaring difference was that I could ask a worksite supervisor to show me “muster rolls” (labor attendance sheets) associated with that worksite: the supervisor was obliged (at least legally) to show me the document. A couple of decades ago, muster rolls could be examined by administrators of the site and their higher-ups, but not by workers, visitors or other village residents. At the time of the Devdoongri group's minimum wage campaigns in the late 1980s and early 1990s, for example, muster rolls were simply not available to workers. In the course of these campaigns, muster rolls became an object of attention and access to them became linked with questions of how much workers were being paid and why.

I examine two sets of minimum wage campaigns undertaken by the Devdoongri group in the late 1980s in the following three sub-sections. In the first, I provide some background to public works in the Devdoongri region and in Rajasthan more broadly, including the assumptions and unresolved tensions that formed the basis for such public work schemes. In the second and third two sub-sections, I describe two minimum wage campaigns in the Devdoongri region (the Dadi Rapat and Barar campaigns) between 1987 and 1991. The

⁴⁶ Many of the worksites I saw were associated with the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and Scheme (NREGA/S), whose implementation in the region was only about a year old.

argument in the land campaign section focused on how elements of an information order were used to maintain boundaries between state and population. Here, I argue using the example of rules, procedures and documents related to public work schemes, that the very creation of these elements was shaped by assumptions about the role of the state and its relationship with those members of a population who worked at public worksites. These assumptions were important because as long as they prevailed, changes in law or rules were seldom reflected in practice. Finally, I argue that the minimum wage campaigns leveraged the activists' connections with the bureaucracy and the non-monolithic nature of the state to bring about shifts in how the information order operated. I conclude the section with the lessons that these campaigns offered the Devdoongri group (or "MKSS," formed May 1990).

3.4.1 Famine Relief Works: Underlying assumptions and unresolved tensions

Unlike Sohargarh, where the distribution of land was organized within a feudal framework and the actual size of land holdings varied widely among members of the community, the Devdoongri region in the mountainous belt had relatively equitable land holdings. However, the region neither received adequate rain, nor had the quality or size of land holdings that could support a primarily agriculture-based livelihood. Migration was prevalent at the best of times, but in the face of a severe drought in the late 1980s, migration from the region grew further. Further, for those who stayed back, the Rajasthan government's famine relief schemes were an important source of income. Under these schemes, residents of famine-affected regions could work at "Famine Relief Works" (FRW or just "Famine" to village residents) to earn a subsistence wage or rations.⁴⁷

The first step in starting up FRW was the declaration of famine, which was based on a land-use report prepared by the *patwari* (land records official) (Khera 2004).⁴⁸ This document was greatly open to interpretation and manipulation, with the result that the *patwari* was at least as important to people's employment prospects as the weather (Dreze 1995; Roy et al 1992).⁴⁹ Once a famine was declared, worksites were declared "open" and any able-bodied adult was theoretically eligible to work at the site. A number of rules dictated how work was to be conducted.⁵⁰ "Mates" supervised work at worksites and maintained records of worker attendance. Engineers measured the tasks accomplished at worksites and recorded these details.⁵¹ Workers were paid a wage calculated on the basis of their attendance and the tasks they had accomplished.

A number of documents were used to record work at the site, including muster rolls, bills and vouchers and measurements books (MBs). Muster rolls were issued by the department undertaking the work, while mates recorded workers' attendance and calculated their wages on these rolls. On being paid, workers also signed against their names on muster rolls. Bills and vouchers of materials were important because suppliers were

⁴⁷ The role of the state in famine relief in Rajasthan was formalized by the British in 1880 with a Famine Relief Code, which was replaced by the "Scarcity Manual" following India's independence in 1947 (Dreze 1995).

⁴⁸ The Scarcity Manual offers many other criteria for declaring a region famine-affected, including distress migrations, increase in thefts, and news of starvation deaths. In practice, the government "relies almost exclusively on the land-use report and the losses in sowing and production reported therein" (Khera 2004, 4). The land use report compares the area sown and production in the current year with the average production for the past few years; the region is declared "famine-affected" where crop losses are more than 75%

⁴⁹ In 1987, 39 of the 110 villages in Bhim tehsil (in which Devdoongri was located) were declared affected by famine.

⁵⁰ Work had to be completed using manual labor; it must not use machinery where manual labor could achieve the task; it could not be subcontracted to private contractors (who might employ machines, not labor); the ratio of the cost of materials to the cost of wages could be no more than 40:60 (to encourage labor-intensive works).

⁵¹ Upon approval, worker payments were sent to the mate, who paid workers in cash. Suppliers of materials used at the worksite were similarly paid after the verification of bills and vouchers.

supposed to be paid only after the verification of these documents. Finally, the MB contained plans of the asset to be created at a site, the materials required, the measurements of work done, and the dimensions of the work on completion; the muster roll, the bills and vouchers were thus connected to the MB that was maintained by engineers. Muster rolls contained the stamp of the issuing department and were printed in a row and column format that was filled out by hand and signed; bills and vouchers had to be issued on the letterhead of the supplier; and MBs used technical language, units of measurement and diagrams of assets under construction. The particular form and format of these documents, including the details I mentioned above, were significant in making the documents “official” and legitimate.

Thus, FRW was associated with an information order that consisted of a set of laws, rules, procedures, documents and state functionaries who created and operated these. Presumably, the objective of FRW rules and procedures, from the declaration of famine to the structure of wages, was to maintain the spirit and goals of FRW and to prevent misuse of the scheme. However, I argue that these rules, as well as the form and format of FRW documents, equally reflected the preoccupation of the government (British and later, Indian) with worker attitudes and behavior. Of these underlying assumptions and tensions, I focus on two: assumptions about who the schemes ought to serve; and the idea of relief works as the government's largesse rather than as productive employment. These assumptions proved important because, even as rules and procedures were officially modified, these assumptions continued to dictate what documents related to public works looked like and how they worked in practice.

3.4.1.1 Serving the deserving poor

The government's fundamental concern with public works was that only the “deserving poor” be paid a wage.⁵² The figure of the “lazy worker” intensified this concern and shaped the rule that workers must both spend the whole day at the worksite and finish an allotted task in order to earn a full wage. The layout of muster rolls also reflected these concerns by recording both attendance and wages calculated according to the task accomplished for every worker. What made the situation absurd was that the *maximum* that workers could be paid for a day's work at an FRW site was the government mandated minimum wage: therefore, workers were regularly paid *less* than the “minimum” wage if they did not complete a task. Finally, while tasks were allotted and measured group-wise to simplify operations, an individual worker's output and wage were calculated based on the group output and group size. Thus, all workers in a group were paid the same wage, regardless of the different work they might have put in.

FRW rules only had the perverse effect of intensifying the government's initial concerns about a “lazy” workforce. FRW workers realized that no matter how much work they did, they would be paid only as much as everyone else. Supervisors at worksites too expressed little expectation of a tangible output at an FRW site. Their supervisory work reflected this attitude, as they focused on keeping workers at the worksite the whole day rather than on ensuring task completion. In a majority of the cases, a specific task was never even clearly assigned, something that workers quickly realized. Thus, work at FRW sites largely settled into a “Famine Relief mentality” for both workers and supervisors. For the workers, working at an FRW site essentially meant reporting to the site on time, doing some work, staying at the site through the day and being paid the same as

⁵² See Dreze (1995) for how every aspect of British famine relief (form and amount of wage, distance of worksites from where workers lived, everyday rules at the worksite) was shaped by the idea that the “undeserving” had to be kept out and that the demand and supply of labor work through the market mechanism with as little interference by the government as possible. The underlying ideas of British famine relief have shaped present notions about famine relief in India.

everyone else at the end of a fortnight.⁵³ For the mates, their work became recording attendance, maintaining muster rolls, supervising that some work went on at the site, getting work measured once in a while and paying wages. Thus, assumptions about the productivity of workers on a public worksite fundamentally shaped both what the documents and rules of FRW looked like and what tasks the individuals related to worksites focused on.

3.4.1.2 Dole or employment?

I come now to the second underlying assumption of FRW, which concerned the nature of work provided by relief schemes. In 1983, the Rajasthan government was taken to court for exempting FRW from the payment of minimum wages.⁵⁴ While the Supreme Court struck the exemption down as unconstitutional, debates persisted about the basis of the wage paid to an FRW worker: should wages be linked to the time spent on site or to the performance of a task? The origin of this debate lay in an unresolved tension about the fundamental nature of relief works: should relief works be treated as dole from the government or as public employment? Activists argued that in spite of the “Relief” label, the rules framing FRW suggest that the goal of such work was not only to provide relief in conditions of famine, but also to yield a specific output or asset on completion. If this had not been the case, and money from relief schemes was treated as charity from the government, challenging FRW rules or fighting for the rights of workers might not have been feasible. In their existing form, however, FRW rules suggested that relief works provided productive employment and that workers therefore had the rights of a public employee, including being paid at least minimum wages.

Former bureaucrat, M.L. Mehta, who was Secretary (Agriculture) in the late 1980s and later the Chief Secretary (CS) in the Rajasthan government, disagreed with this line of reasoning. According to him, FRW was historically set up to pay subsistence – and not minimum – wage. Mehta suggested that activists never acknowledged that there was a difference between these two types of wages. According to him, a subsistence wage was merely meant to keep the worker's “body and soul together” and was not tied to the quality of work output; it could be tied instead to the amount of time a worker had to spend at the worksite (“time basis” of wage payment). A minimum wage, on the other hand, was always tied to the quality or quantity of work done (the “task basis” of wage payment). Mehta added that the Supreme Court, too, was not totally convinced by the activists' “rights” approach in the minimum wage case of 1983.⁵⁵ This was precisely why the court constituted a committee in 1986 to review work norms in all types of famine works.⁵⁶ Mehta saw in this action the court's support for the task basis of wages, even if it had struck down the exemption of FRW from minimum wage laws.

In practice, the debate over the time or task basis for full wages persisted. In 1987, workers at FRW sites were still expected to both complete a task and to stay a specific number of hours in order to earn full wages: the

⁵³ This interpretation also encouraged many to send the old and the infirm in their families to the worksite because all they would need to do would be to sit in the shade the entire day and do minimal work.

⁵⁴ Sanjit Roy vs. State of Rajasthan (1983) 1 Supreme Court Cases 525. Writ Petition no. 6816 of 1981 decided on January 20 1983. The Rajasthan government had relied on the Rajasthan Famine Relief Works Employees (Resumption From Labour Laws) Ordinance, 1964, to argue that works under FRW were exempt from labor laws, including the Minimum Wages Act of 1948.

⁵⁵ Mehta defined this “rights” approach as saying that workers had to be paid the minimum wage regardless of whether they did any work, as long as they stayed out the day at a worksite. Interview with M.L. Mehta, former Secretary (Agriculture) Rajasthan, at his residence on June 2, 2009.

⁵⁶ See report of the committee constituted and reconstituted vide order dated May 1, 1986 of the Supreme Court of India under the Minimum Wages Act, 1948 to report regarding the task for famine workers, submitted to the *Sanyukta Shram Ayukta* (Joint Labour Commissioner), Jaipur, Rajasthan.

only difference was that full wages were interpreted as minimum wages following the court case.⁵⁷ The non-completion of a task continued to be the stated reason for non-payment of minimum wages to workers. This, in turn, affected what was recorded on muster rolls and how wages were calculated. Thus, besides the assumptions about the lazy worker, tensions over the basic rationale of relief works also shaped the working of the FRW information order in practice.

3.4.1.3 State of FRW in 1987

Earlier, I characterized FRW sites as having “settled” into a rhythm. This was not a completely accurate picture, for the stability of FRW sites did not indicate inertia: stability was instead being actively maintained through a number of activities undertaken by workers and by their supervisors. From the worker's point of view, the important thing was to first get on a muster roll and then to be paid wages. Neither was a trivial task: getting on a muster roll depended on a worker's relationship with the sarpanch and mate, and the payment of wages typically happened months after the completion of work. Moreover, wage payments were not scheduled in advance, nor were multiple attempts made to ensure that wages reached workers.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, for the supervisors, the creation of documents and records was an ongoing important activity, with muster rolls, bills, vouchers and MBs being the more important documents associated with FRW.

It was these routine activities that were first interrupted by the minimum wage campaigns initiated by the Devdoongri group in 1987. As I have already argued, the creation of muster rolls and the focus on certain FRW rules was shaped by assumptions about worker productivity and about the intended objective of public works. By interrupting the creation and use of these documents and rules, the minimum wage struggles challenged their underlying assumptions. In the following two sub-sections, I examine the first and second minimum wage campaigns to argue that the Devdoongri activists leveraged the non-monolithic nature of “the state,” as well as their own connections with it to raise questions about the creation and use of certain elements of the information order, especially muster rolls.

3.4.2 Dadi Rapat and the first campaign for minimum wages⁵⁹

In December 1987, a few months after they started living in Devdoongri, the Devdoongri activists started an experiment with the Rajasthan Irrigation Department in order to break the existing famine relief mentality and to ensure “complete work, complete payment.”⁶⁰ Following discussions with workers and engineers, they explored the possibility of setting up a worksite where a task would be allotted, task completion supervised, measurement of task ensured and worker wages paid in full.⁶¹ Work commenced on a water body named Dadi

⁵⁷ This caused confusion among workers in the region who were used to working in one of two ways: they were either told what to do by an employer or they were paid based on working a fixed number of hours. It was therefore difficult for workers to comprehend wages tied to both completion of a task and spending a fixed amount of time at the worksite. That no task was allotted further complicated the issue. From the section “The argument of the workers” in a note from MKSS.

⁵⁸ If a worker was not in the village when payments were being made, his or her wages went into a black hole called “unpaid,” from which people knew it would not be recovered. Interview with Chunni Singh, MKSS worker, in Paluna, May 31, 2009.

⁵⁹ This section is based on the following sources unless otherwise mentioned: interviews with B.N. Chaudhary, who was the SDM during the minimum wage campaigns, at his Jaipur office, June 2, 2009; R.L. Singhvi, the Collector at the time, at his residence December 17, 2009; and M.L. Mehta, then the Secretary (Agriculture) and later Chief Secretary, Government of Rajasthan, at his residence, June 2, 2009; multiple interviews with MKSS members Chunnibai and Shankar Singh; and narratives from Roy et al. (1992) and Mishra (2003). Newspaper articles and correspondence with government departments are referenced where used.

⁶⁰ From “*Poora kaam, poora daam*” (Hindi).

⁶¹ Letter dated December 22 1987 from Aruna Roy and Shankar Singh to Assistant Engineer, Irrigation Department, Deogarh mentions this agreement and subsequent issues in its implementation.

Rapat with the co-operation of the Irrigation Department. A skilled mason from the department was assigned to allot tasks and supervise the workers for a fortnight. Two groups of workers were identified at the worksite – one that agreed to complete assigned tasks and the other that wanted to work and be paid as usual.⁶² The idea behind this trial was that members of the former group would be paid full wages if they completed their allotted tasks.⁶³ To ensure that the groups of workers could be distinguished, the Devdoongri activists asked the mate to mark the names of the workers of this group on the muster roll. The mate refused to show them the muster roll and added that only government officials could see government documents.⁶⁴

The absolute secrecy surrounding the muster roll was a revelation to the Devdoongri group. Workers, who had encountered this secrecy all their lives, explained that muster rolls contained the names of more people than the ones reporting at the site. The mate often had a cut in the wages paid to these ghost workers or might have added names to oblige powerful people in the village. The prevalence of forged attendance also explained underpayment. Wage calculations were made based on the muster roll and completed work as measured on the ground. Since measurements were for the entire group, the size of the group was critical in determining how much an individual worker was paid. If the muster roll showed a 100 workers where only 80 had worked, the wage of each was lower than the minimum wage since the collective work they had to show was (utmost) the work of 80 people and therefore less than what was expected of a 100 people.⁶⁵ At Dadi Rapat, the mate refused to show the muster roll till the end and the Devdoongri group realized the importance of the “story told by documents” in Shankar Singh's words.⁶⁶

In spite of assurances from the Irrigation Department, workers at Dadi Rapat were paid about half of what they were promised.⁶⁷ Moreover, the workers protested that their work had not even been measured. Over the next two years, the workers continued to protest and present their demands to bureaucrats and elected representatives at different levels (district and state) of the government, but to no avail.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, the Devdoongri group continued its campaign at worksites commissioned under a variety of public work schemes. In May 1990, several works were started by the Irrigation and Public Works Departments under the Famine Relief and Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY) Schemes.⁶⁹ Workers in the Devdoongri region informed supervisors that they would complete allotted tasks and would accept no less than the minimum wage for this work.⁷⁰ When workers were nevertheless paid less than this amount, about 200 of them refused to take payment.⁷¹ After several attempts at talking to members of the administration and failed promises regarding

⁶² Letter from Shankar Singh dated May 2, 1989 addressed to Executive Engineer Kankroli, mentions that work was measured out for groups of twenty workers on December 16, 1987.

⁶³ Minimum wage at the time was Rs. 11 per worker per day.

⁶⁴ Interview with Shankar Singh in Kaamli Ghat, May 26, 2009.

⁶⁵ Also, though the implementation and paying agency were supposed to be separate, the mate was associated with both. Come payment time, the mate would pay the twenty residents he knew had not been at the worksite separately, and then make the payments to the rest of the workers at the worksite.

⁶⁶ “Documents have their own story to tell” (*Kaagazon ki apni bi kabaani hai*) said Shankar Singh, in my interview with him in Kaamli Ghat, May 26, 2009.

⁶⁷ Rs. 6 per day per worker.

⁶⁸ This included complaints to, and broken promises from, the Irrigation Department, the SDM, the Executive Engineer and the Famine Commissioner. Following the Famine Commissioner's visit and promise to pay full wages in April 1989, the Irrigation Department protested the decision and subsequent repayments were at the rate of Rs. 9 per day per worker in June 1989.

⁶⁹ Jawahar Rozgar Yojana translates to Jawahar Employment Scheme.

⁷⁰ Minimum wage was Rs. 14 per worker per day by this time.

⁷¹ They were paid between Rs. 9 and Rs. 10 per day per worker. See “*Sbramikon ne kam mazdoori lene se inkaar kiya*” (“Workers

the payment of minimum wages,⁷² twelve people decided to undertake an indefinite hunger strike in Bhim in July 1990.⁷³ The local and state-level press covered the hunger strike and residents of Bhim declared their support for the workers' demands.⁷⁴ On the sixth day of the hunger strike, the Collector visited the site of the strike, spoke to the workers and promised full payments within three or four days.⁷⁵ The fast was lifted but minimum wage payments were not made.⁷⁶ The case finally went to court.⁷⁷ While the protesting workers were not immediately paid minimum wages, the campaign had succeeded in attracting attention to the state's attitude towards public works in general and minimum wages in particular.⁷⁸

The reactions of different levels of the bureaucracy constituted a central aspect of the Dadi Rapat wage campaigns. As an alternative interpretation of wage regulations became legitimized by law, there was a grudging acceptance of a particular legal framework of understanding public works (as offering minimum wage and productive employment). However, attitudes and everyday work norms continued to hold on to the earlier conceptual understanding of public works (as dole from the government) and workers (as lazy and unproductive).⁷⁹ Viewed against the backdrop of this gap between law and practice, the reactions of bureaucrats in the Dadi Rapat episode and the drawn-out negotiating process start to make more sense. The fear of "setting a precedent" was also a factor shaping the decisions of higher-level bureaucrats. When the Collector from the time narrated his experiences of Dadi Rapat and subsequent minimum wage episodes, he

refuse to accept lower wages") in *Rajasthan Patrika*, July 6, 1990, Udaipur edition.

⁷² "Nyoonatam mazdoori ki maang ko lekar Bhim mein dbarna" ("Dharna regarding minimum wages in Bhim") in *Rajasthan Patrika*, July 19, 1990, Udaipur edition; "Nyoonatam mazdoori ki maang par Bhim mein sbramikon ka dbarna sthagit. Pulis ne halka bal prayog kiya" ("Dharna by workers on minimum wages in Bhim postponed. Police used some force") in *Rajasthan Patrika*, July 20, 1990, Udaipur edition; "Bhim ke aandolanarat sbramikon ki samasya ke samaadbaan ka aashvaasan" ("Assurance that solutions will be sought for the problems of workers campaigning in Bhim") in *Rajasthan Patrika*, July 21, 1990, Udaipur edition.

⁷³ MKSS pamphlets titled "Bhim mein 15 log bhook hadtaal par baithe" ("15 people sit on hunger strike in Bhim"); and "Dinaank 25-7-90 se Bhim mein mazdooron ki anishchit kaaleen bhook hadtaal. Yab aandolan kyon?" ("Indefinite hunger strike by workers in Bhim starting 25-7-90. Why this campaign?").

⁷⁴ "Bhim tehsil par bhook hadtaal karnewaalon mein teen aur shaamil" ("Three more join those on hunger strike in Bhim tehsil"), *Rajasthan Patrika*, Udaipur, July 26, 1990; "Bhim mein sbramik teesre din bhi ansban par rabe" ("Workers continue on fast on third day") in *Rajasthan Patrika*, Udaipur, July 29, 1990; "Bhim mein sbramik paanchve din bhi bhook hadtaal par rabe" ("Workers continue with hunger strike on fifth day") in *Rajasthan Patrika*, Udaipur, July 30, 1990.

⁷⁵ "Bhim mein nyoonatam mazdoori ki sbramikon ki maang manzoor, bhugtaan teen din mein" ("Workers' demands for minimum wages accepted in Bhim, payment in three days") in *Rajasthan Patrika*, July 31, 1990, 10, Udaipur edition; and MKSS pamphlet titled "25 July ko praarambh bhook hadtaal 30 July ko samaapt. Ziladheesh ke saath samjhauta" ("Hunger strike started on 25th July ends on 30th July. Compromise reached with district collector")

⁷⁶ "Prashaasan par Bhim ke sbramikon ke saath vaayda khilaafi ka aarop" ("Administration accused of breaking promises to workers in Bhim") in *Rajasthan Patrika*, August 12, 1990, Udaipur edition. Workers who had worked with the Irrigation Department protested, but accepted the lower payments while PWD workers refused payment and returned the muster rolls. See "Afsaron ke haath ka kbilona hai, nyoonatam mazdoori kanoon?" ("Is the minimum wage legislation a toy in the hands of officers?") in *Dainik Navjyotbi*, September 1, 1990, 9.

⁷⁷ "Nyoonatam mazdoori ke liye sbramik High Court mein appeal karenge" ("Workers will appeal to High Court for minimum wage") in *Rajasthan Patrika*, August 13, 1990, 12, Udaipur edition. The workers won (as workers eventually have in most minimum wage court cases in India), but only after eight years.

⁷⁸ "Rajasthan Government Flouting Minimum Wage Law," *Indian Express*, August 16, 1990, 5 and "Afsaron ke haath ka kbilona hai, nyoonatam mazdoori kanoon?" ("Is the minimum wage legislation a toy in the hands of officers?"), *Dainik Navjyotbi*, September 1, 1990, 9. MKSS also organized a conference on minimum wages in October 1990.

⁷⁹ An activist was quoted as saying "If only they would stop treating this as dole and rigorously demand work, the labour on relief works could truly help in building national resources" in "Rajasthan government flouting minimum wage law," *Indian Express*, August 16, 1990, 5.

emphasized that as a member of the civil services, he operated within a set of limitations. While he had tried to accommodate the demands of workers, he could not oblige them all the time. The former Collector said that repeated measurements had indicated that workers had not accomplished their task. Since the minimum wage was connected to the task accomplished as per the state government's rules, the most he could have done was to have interpreted the measurements generously and paid as much as was possible to the workers. But he could, in any case, not have paid minimum wages because that would have set a precedent.⁸⁰ The underlying assumptions of wage regulations and the discomfort with “setting a precedent” remained equally significant with the Barar minimum wage campaign that I describe next.

3.4.3 Barar and the second set of campaigns for minimum wages⁸¹

Following Dadi Rapat, the Devdoongri group involved itself again with the question of minimum wage on work sites commissioned under the central government sponsored scheme JRY, in 1990-91. Thirteen works were sanctioned under JRY in Barar panchayat in December 1990 in which about 400 people of the region were employed. Narayan Singh and Devi Lal, residents who had become acquainted with the Devdoongri group as high school students, decided to work at a JRY worksite in Barar. They submitted an application to the mate and sarpanch that they wished to complete their tasks and earn the full minimum wage.⁸² They wanted to be either allotted a fixed task or to work for a fixed number of hours in a day; they also explained that the responsibility of allocating and measuring their work lay with the mate. Their application was not taken seriously and in Narayan Singh's words

They told me with a laugh that I should cut off the branches of a nearby bush: that would be my assigned task! They also tore up the application that we submitted.⁸³

Workers were not allocated work, but were nevertheless paid less than the minimum wage for the reason that they had not “completed their task.” In January 1991, the panchayat also attempted to pass an (illegal) oral resolution, stating that *all* Famine Relief and JRY workers would be paid a flat rate that was half of the mandated minimum wage.⁸⁴ When workers at the Barar site were offered this payment, eleven workers, including Narayan Singh and Devi Lal, refused to accept it.

The protesting workers submitted an application to the SDM and when he did not respond, organized a rally in the village where the sarpanch resided. The sarpanch at the time was a powerful liquor baron in the region and over the next weeks, he tried other means to break up the group of protestors. He applied pressure on workers to accept the wages that they were being paid.⁸⁵ Meanwhile, the newly formed MKSS took the issue

⁸⁰ He said he had explained as much to Roy and her colleagues, but they could not agree on a compromise.

⁸¹ This section is based on the following sources unless otherwise mentioned: interviews with bureaucrats B.N. Chaudhary, SDM at the time, at his Jaipur office, June 2, 2009; Bhanwarlal Jain, BDO at the time, at his residence, May 20, 2009; M.L.Mehta, Secretary (Agriculture) at the time, at his residence, June 2, 2009; multiple interviews with MKSS members Narayan Singh, Devi Lal, and Shankar Singh; accounts of the episode related by MKSS members Shankar Singh, Nikhil Dey, Aruna Roy and Narayan Singh to groups of interns and visitors between March and May 2009; Roy et al. (1992); Kidambi (2008) and Mishra (2003).

⁸² Minimum wage was Rs. 22 per worker per day at the time.

⁸³ Interview with Narayan Singh at his Devdoongri residence, May 11, 2009.

⁸⁴ The figure they proposed was Rs. 11 per day per worker, half of the minimum wage. A copy of this resolution too could not be accessed by the workers. Interview with Shankar Singh, 26th May 2009.

⁸⁵ Shankar told me of a worker, Meera, whose husband was pressured by the Barar sarpanch to induce her to withdraw from the protest and collect her wages. Meera held on, however, deciding to stay at the dharna site through the period of the dharna, and not returning home to avoid her husband's taunts. Shankar used this example to illustrate that individuals like Meera who held on

further to the Collector.⁸⁶ At the local level, the SDM tried to persuade the workers to take the full payment off the record, but sign for a lower payment on record.⁸⁷ The workers refused and, instead, decided to hold a *dharna* (sit-in) outside the Bhim tehsil office in the face of the unresponsiveness of the tehsil and district-level administrations. The *dharna* held on May 1, 1991, saw over 1500 workers participate (Roy 1991).⁸⁸ In the absence of any action by the administration, the protestors commenced a hunger strike in early May.⁸⁹ The five people on fast represented five districts of Rajasthan, thereby making the campaign a symbol of the non-payment of minimum wages throughout Rajasthan.

Two events changed the progression of this protest. The first was that Roy and her colleagues had forwarded their concerns and complaint to the Ministry of Rural Development, GoI, which had resulted in a visit by a Central team.⁹⁰ The Central team was concerned with the implementation of the JRY at state levels.⁹¹ It investigated and reported that minimum wages were not being paid to workers engaged in public works in the region. The second event was the Chief Minister (CM)'s visit to the region.⁹² The *dharna* was being held in the period leading up to the state-level elections and the CM, who was in the region campaigning for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), stopped to visit the *dharna*, promising that he would resolve the matter immediately. However, once he discussed the course of action with the Collector and SDM, he asked that those on fast be force-fed and the *dharna* broken using force if necessary. An interviewee suggested that this turn-around happened because the government and the CM saw it as important that the matter not “set a precedent” that decided wage levels in the future. As importantly, the CM and bureaucrats were worried that MKSS, rather than the government or the CM, would receive credit for the entire episode.

The night of the CM's visit, those on fast were force-fed by the administration in an incident that also involved violent action by the police. The next day, MKSS managed to collect a large crowd to protest the unwarranted police brutality of the previous night.⁹³ Meanwhile, the Rajasthan government came under pressure from the Central government to pay minimum wages following the report submitted by the Central team. This pressure came to a head when a national daily, *Navbharat Times*, broke the news that the central government had stopped an installment of Rs.100 crores to the Rajasthan government because of the non-payment of

at critical moments were pivotal to the campaign in the long term, because without them, MKSS's demands would have held no credibility.

⁸⁶ In the midst of this activity, a new district, Rajsamand, was carved out of Udaipur district. With this, the Collector in charge of the Barar minimum wage matter changed. This added to the delay in decision making as the new collector wanted the old Udaipur Collector to handle the case (Roy 1997).

⁸⁷ This would mean taking Rs.22 per day but signing for Rs.11 per day.

⁸⁸ MKSS decided to hold a hunger strike in the first week of May if government inaction continued. The SDM and collector convinced the protestors to defer the hunger strike by a few days giving them more time to act.

⁸⁹ The *dharna* began on May 4, 1991. See “*Aaj bhi unhe roz ki 95 paise mazdoori milti hai*” (“Even today, they earn 95 paise a day”) in *Raj India Saandhya Dainik*, May 6, 1991, 1, Jaipur edition and “*Nyoonatam mazdoori ki maang. Bhim mein aamaran ansban teesre din bhi jaari*” (“Demand for minimum wages. Hunger strike in Bhim continues on third day”) in *Rajasthan Patrika*, May 7, 1991, Udaipur edition.

⁹⁰ Note titled “Demand for Minimum Wages under JRY. Problems of implementation and policy” handed to Central team on May 5, 1991.

⁹¹ The team visited on May 5, 1991.

⁹² The CM visited on May 6, 1991.

⁹³ See flyer from MKSS titled “*Bhim ki janta se appeal*” (“Appeal to the people of Bhim”); letter dated May 8, 1991 from MKSS to the Chief Secretary (CS) to lodge a complaint against unwarranted police brutality; and flyer issued by the Congress party's block committee in Bhim titled “*Kisaan evam mazdooron se sabaanubhothi*” (“Our sympathies with farmers and workers” expressing sadness and surprise at the police action at the *dharna*.)

minimum wages. This made the CM and the Rajasthan government nervous.⁹⁴ By the end of the day, the SDM personally paid the minimum wage to those among the protestors who were present at the dharna site.⁹⁵

MKSS and its allies took out a procession in Bhim and distributed flyers signaling victory twelve days after the start of the dharna. Barar was MKSS's first decisive victory and therefore very important to them. Where the Dadi Rapat matter was ultimately resolved after eight years in court, the Barar matter ended with the workers being paid minimum wages by the end of the campaign. MKSS members learned a lot from the Barar episode in terms of protest strategies. Making the matter bigger than a specific incident and making it symbolic of the plight of workers through the state was an important move that helped involve more levels of the government and brought more attention to the issue than a focus on a few thousand rupees or one village would have. MKSS decided never again to undertake a hunger strike following the Barar campaign.⁹⁶ Finally, since it had always been presented by detractors as supporting workers to sit idle and collect full wages, MKSS consciously continued to focus on the measurement of tasks and the import of the slogan, “complete work, complete payment,” in future work.

When MKSS members referred to the Barar episode, they all agreed that it was a matter that could easily have been sorted out at the panchayat level or by the SDM: it was, after all, a matter of a few thousand rupees.⁹⁷ The trouble started because the SDM assumed the workers could not do much and did not want to “set a precedent” by paying minimum wages or showing muster rolls. As the matter escalated, it also became “a matter of honor” for the government.⁹⁸ MKSS members commented that because of the way some bureaucrats had reacted to the situation, the government ended up spending much more on the investigations than it would have had to spend, had it paid workers the minimum wage. The government was also discredited in the process.

The bureaucrats remembered the Barar episode differently, focusing mainly on the question of task completion while talking about it. The SDM at the time mentioned that when the idea of re-measuring works came up as a solution at the meeting with the CM, he had himself suggested that measuring again would only show them again that tasks were incomplete.⁹⁹ The only way to defuse tension at that point was to pay the wages being asked for. However, once the police force was ordered in, there was nothing much he could do.¹⁰⁰ The SDM also said that he had always kept his records accessible, but there was simply no provision for non-bureaucrats to make copies of muster rolls. The Secretary (Agriculture) in the Government of Rajasthan

⁹⁴ “*Kendra ki rajya sarkar ko chetawani. Nyoonatam mazdoori nabi di tho sau karod ka anudaan nabi*” (“Center warns state government. If minimum wages are not paid, 100 crores will not be disbursed”) in *Navbharat Times*, May 11, 1991, 1, Jaipur edition.

⁹⁵ “*Sbramikon ko nyoonatam mazdoori ke bbugtaan par aandolan kbatm*” (“Campaign end on payment of minimum wages to workers”) in *Rajasthan Patrika*, May 11, 1991, Udaipur edition.

⁹⁶ Narayan Singh said that the Barar dharna and hunger strike made them realize that a hunger strike was equally painful for the companions of the people on fast. Shankar Singh suggested that hungry people also tended to be more violent and aggressive. “We knew this was going to be a long battle,” said Shankar Singh. “We decided to fight it on a full stomach and cheerfully.”

⁹⁷ Calculated for twelve people at the rate of Rs. 11 beyond what they were already being paid for thirteen days.

⁹⁸ “*Mooch ki baat*” roughly translates to “concerning the mustache (manhood).”

⁹⁹ The BDO of the time, while emphasizing his faint memory of the event, said that he had been told that work was not completed. He conceded that it might be the responsibility of the supervisors, especially the mate to ensure that work was completed and that workers should not suffer for non-completion of work.

¹⁰⁰ Moreover, the health condition of the fasters had become precarious by that point and it was essential to have fed them, else they would have died. Interviews with B.N. Chaudhary, SDM during the minimum wage campaigns, at his Jaipur office, June 2, 2009.

at the time, M.L. Mehta (who had been important at the time of the land campaign earlier, was equally significant in the minimum wage campaigns and would continue to be important to future campaigns of MKSS in the 1990s), said that while it was very easy to blame the government for everything, it was important to look into the feasibility of implementation of some of the ideas related to the payment of minimum wages. For example, was it feasible to expect that the work of individual workers could be distinguished and measured every day? Further, did workers need to be explicitly told what their task was in a region that had a long history of public works: did they not know it already? Addressing the quality of supervision, Mehta remarked that people worked when they wanted to, and that “you could not really make someone work!”¹⁰¹ According to Mehta, the fact was that the workers would all be more productive if they were building something for themselves than at public worksites. Thus, bureaucrats involved in the Barar matter raised concerns similar to the ones in the Dadi Rapat campaign, including not wanting to “set a precedent” and taking the low productivity of workers at public worksites as a given. In addition, Mehta brought up a concern about bypassing levels of the government. Talking about MKSS's actions in reaching out directly to the central government with its complaints, he asked if that could ever be the right thing to do.¹⁰²

3.4.4 Minimum wage campaigns and their information order

As with the land campaign, I argue that the information order played an important role in the minimum wage campaigns. This time, the focus was not on one document but on a range of elements of the information order, including the Famine Relief Code, the Minimum Wage Act, the procedures of FRW and JRY schemes, the Official Secrets Act, muster rolls, bills, vouchers and MBs. Further, where the land campaign had contested the discrepancy between land ownership on paper and on the ground, it did not address their underlying assumptions or challenge their content. In the minimum wage campaigns, on the other hand, it was the underlying assumptions of the laws and rules pertaining to public works, as well as the content of government records particularly muster rolls, that were being questioned.

Similar to the land campaign, I argue that the information order of public works was one of the means by which the boundary between state and society was maintained. Underlying assumptions about the undeserving and unproductive worker, as well as about public works schemes as dole from the state, allowed the state to be seen as provider and workers as recipients of dole, rather than the state as an employer and workers as employees. Such an interpretation of the relationship between the state and its population emphasized the distinction in their roles and rights with respect to each other. The rules, procedures and documents of public work schemes – such as the task or time basis of wages, the attention paid to supervision and asset creation at worksites, who could examine records or who was accountable to who (bureaucrats to higher level bureaucrats; not to the people whom the records concerned) – reflected these distinctions. While the use of force to evict dharna participants was an explicit way in which this distinction was signaled, I showed how rules and documents related to public works accomplished a similar result using less violent means. Moreover, the fear of “setting a precedent” among bureaucrats meant that the information order was difficult to change. Finally, to the extent that the underlying assumptions of relief work persisted among the bureaucracy, even modifications in elements of the information order (such as the injunction that FRW was not exempt from the Minimum Wages Act) did not modify how rules were applied in practice.

However, the minimum wage campaigns were able to effect some changes in the working of the information

¹⁰¹ Mehta saw all of these as “honest differences” between activists and the government.

¹⁰² According to him, the reason for bypassing the state government act was simply that the Central government made for higher visibility in the news than the state government, which served the Barar campaign well.

order in spite of the factors mentioned above. These changes came about through MKSS's work in leveraging the blurred nature of the state-population boundaries as well as the incoherent nature of "the state." Unlike litigation, where the attempt was to change laws or rules on paper (e.g. the 1983 court case that challenged the labor laws involved in famine relief), MKSS's minimum wage campaigns tried to ensure compliance to law in the case of FRW and JRY. For this, the activists relied partly on their connections with higher-level bureaucrats in the government for co-operation or to bypass bureaucrats who did not co-operate. In the Barar campaign, they also made use of the fact that JRY was funded by the central government to push the state government to pay minimum wages. Thus, in spite of the legitimacy attached to muster rolls, these campaigns were able to challenge what muster rolls claimed because of these connections and MKSS's protest strategies.

3.5 Conclusions from the Institute of Development Studies Jaipur (IDSJ) report (1992)

I have used MKSS's land and minimum wage campaigns to argue that the information order encountered by these campaigns was being used as a technique of governing that shaped and was shaped by the boundaries between the state and its population. Further, the MKSS campaigns leveraged the fractures in the non-monolithic state and activists' connections across the state-population boundary to change the functioning of some elements of this information order.

As a way to draw together my arguments in this chapter, I use excerpts from MKSS's 1992 report (Roy et al. 1992). As the first piece of writing from MKSS that talked explicitly about a "Right to Information," this report marked the end of one phase (discussed in this chapter) and the beginning of a new one (to be discussed in chapter 4) in MKSS's activities. However, before I move to chapter 4 and the next phase of activities, it is useful to understand what MKSS itself understood as its priorities and strategies when writing the 1992 report. Two themes emerge in the report's discussion of the delivery of government schemes to the rural poor: the importance of who gets to set priorities in the administration of government schemes and the importance of recognizing, leveraging and designing for the non-monolithic nature of the government. Both these points, I argue, recognize the importance of thinking about "information" in terms of a holistic information order that is related to the practice and politics of governing.

On the point of setting administrative priorities, the authors argued that

The point is the focus. If the poor want employment, they are told they will get it if their area is declared famine affected. Immediately the focus shifts from the unemployed to a question of calculations as to whether and how many fields have less than 50 per cent grain production. This shift in focus is vital for the government, and fatal for the working class poor. To present the case of the unemployed is no problem. But get into arguments about all the fields in an area and their specific yields is one where the poor are bound to lose. And, of course, if an area is not declared famine affected, the government is no longer responsible for hunger and attendant problems and providing of employment is no longer necessary. Similarly in the question of wages, the government tries to shift the focus to the measurement of works done. It takes the dispute into an area of jargon and terminology that not only mystifies, but also leaves the worker helpless and unable to state his position (Roy et al. 1992, 157).

This observation speaks to the idea of an information order as a technique of governing. It makes the point that laws, schemes, the categories and procedures they spawn, and the details of their working are all tied to

each other. To understand any of these in isolation is to mask the politics of the overall framework.¹⁰³ By deciding what to focus on (unemployment or whether region is affected by famine), or how to categorize a condition (using yields to decide whether a region is famine-affected or not), a specific information order is created that sees certain details as more important and more worth arguing about than others. The nature of these details, in turn, shapes who is able to step up to even make these arguments.

About the non-monolithic nature of the state, the authors began with the observation that different levels of the state responded to different levels of detail effectively. The authors argued in the report that a junior officer, or a field-level government servant had great potential “to facilitate or prevent radical change” as well as knowledge of the details and feasibility of a scheme in a region. This was very different than discussions with bureaucrats at the state-level.

The dialogues at the state-level always seemed to have a touch of the unreal. Details were never considered important . . . Speak theoretically and there is no problem at all. Start speaking of practical problems and the defensive responses begin (Roy et al. 1992, 154).

Thus, people occupying different government offices played very different roles in creating or using different elements of an information order and the government was not monolithic: it was best to look at the government “as an amorphous body different parts of which could be helpful at different times” (Roy et al. 1992, 153). The authors argued that “the decisions taken on any issue depend very much on the person who occupies the chair” (Roy et al 1992, 164).¹⁰⁴ Therefore, the best way forward for their campaigns was to evaluate each officer

in an impartial manner for his/her commitment, honesty, courage, or lack of them. The most important thing was to be able to make an accurate evaluation of the individual concerned and what his real priorities were (Roy et al. 1992, 153).

Civil servants made decisions that affected a large number of people “in a more or less personalized manner” (Roy et al 1992, 164). However, the higher up these officers were, the more removed they were from the lives of the people whose lives would be affected by their decisions. Moreover, such decisions were not made in public or among those they affect. Instead, “an effort was made to keep it [the decision] anonymous” (Roy et al 1992, 165).

The authors argued that the personalized and anonymous nature of decision-making meant that the issue of accountability should be central to discussions on the malfunctioning of government schemes and delivery systems. The only way to ensure accountability was through protests and applying pressure, a task to be undertaken by people's movements, the press and publicity in general. However, in the researchers' experience, civil servants seemed to prefer the application of inside pressure through the civil service or old boy, old girl or *biradri* networks to all of the above methods. (Roy et al. 1992, 165)¹⁰⁵ This is an observation

¹⁰³ I would add that to call all of these – the levels of yield that classify land as famine-affected, work measurements, minimum wage levels – “information” equally masks politics.

¹⁰⁴ The individual has become even more important as “modern style' bureaucracy presents papers, writes for magazines and participates in seminars. An official 'Government position' gets garnished with personal biases and theoretical postulates” (Roy et al 1992, 164).

¹⁰⁵ *Biradri* refers to kinship or clan. The researchers call this an “odd” preference and see it as “the least dignified” of all the possible pressure tactics (Roy et al 1992, 165).

that also speaks to the blurred nature of the boundaries between state and society that I have discussed through the chapter. Far from being a clear line dividing “the state” and “population,” the state-population boundary is blurred and porous, with the nature of the connections across the boundary significantly influencing the results of a campaign. The authors went on to argue that since it was virtually impossible to receive feedback from the community most affected by a decision and “the only feedback which is accepted as relevant is that of the officials themselves,” the solution lay in conducting social audits to “ensure an efficient government machinery” (Roy et al. 1992, 166). Moreover, social audit was not to be seen as an isolated occurrence, being instead one link in “the chain of change – better and more information about rights, procedural details etc., accountability and collective action” (Roy et al. 1992, 167). The report took this further, concluding with the section on a “Right to Information” that I described in detail in the previous chapter.

Thus, by 1992, MKSS had already framed some part of an approach to improving the delivery of government schemes centered on the idea of a Right to Information. The precise form that the term would take or the nature of campaigns around it, however, were not obvious at this time. It was a diverse set of events and a constantly evolving understanding of the working of government schemes over the next four years that finally led to a 40-day dharna in the town of Beawar that launched the Right to Information as a national campaign. In the next chapter, I describe the key events in the 1992-1996 period when MKSS's ideas about a Right to Information became more concrete through their involvement in public hearings.

Chapter 4

Demanding “information”: MKSS's public hearings and RTI *dharna*

In the last chapter, I examined MKSS's earliest campaigns (1987-1991) to understand the working of the information order as a technique of governing. I argued that the creation of individual elements of the information order such as land certificates and muster rolls was shaped by the nature of the boundaries between state and population, including assumptions about the benefactor-beneficiary relationship between the two in the context of relief works. In turn, elements of the information order were used to maintain these boundaries by restricting who could access or manipulate these elements, a fact that was brought home by the absolute secrecy surrounding the muster roll during the minimum wage campaigns. I also argued, however, that connections with the bureaucracy as well as fractures within the state allowed MKSS activists to bring about some changes in how the information order worked. In terms of MKSS's strategizing, I concluded that by 1992, MKSS had already framed an approach to improving the delivery of government schemes centered on the idea of a Right to Information (RTI). However, it took a diverse set of events and a constantly evolving understanding of the working of government schemes over the next four years to launch the RTI as a national campaign in 1996. In this chapter, I describe the key events in the 1992-1996 period when MKSS's ideas became more concrete through its involvement in economic enterprises and public hearings. These finally led to a 40-day dharna in the town of Beawar in 1996 where participants demanded a right to examine and copy panchayat-level records, an entitlement that they termed “*Soochana ka Adhikaar*” or “Right to Information.”

As in previous discussions, I address here how an information order was created, maintained and shifted by examining MKSS's work during public hearings and the 40-day dharna. I examine how the creation of individual elements of the information order was shaped in these campaigns by the nature of the boundaries between state and population, while elements of the information order, in turn, were used to maintain these boundaries in practice. But, I pay more attention here to the role played by the material form of these elements in the process. On the one hand, the legitimacy attached to written documents and the official language of recording work at public worksites constituted a way in which the distinction between state and population was maintained by obscuring details from members of the population. On the other hand, it was also the material form that the public hearings leveraged to bring about changes in the information order and its elements. I also address my second research question in this chapter, asking what the use of the term *information* achieved in MKSS's campaigns. I argue using MKSS's public hearings and especially the Beawar dharna that the flexibility of the term allowed it to act as a “boundary object” between a wide range of communities, thus allowing MKSS to expand its support base.

The chapter is organized chronologically and begins with MKSS's work with setting up economic enterprises in 1992. From there, I go on to examine the “public hearings” conducted by MKSS in 1994-95. I analyze how the idea of a right to access government records gained momentum through these hearings and led to events that resulted in the 1996 Beawar dharna where the term “Right to Information” first gained prominence. I conclude the chapter with a discussion on the politics of the circulation of information, the thing and *information*, the term in all of MKSS's campaigns from 1987-1996.

4.1 From public work schemes to setting up shop (1992)

On a central road in the bustling marketplace in Bhim was an MKSS-run grocery store, called Mazdoor Kisan Kirana Store (MKKS).¹ The number of customers at the store seemed to indicate its popularity among local residents. Established in the early 1990s, the store looked like every other grocery store in the region, with gunny bags of wheat and other grains stacked on the floor, and shelves lined with packets of washing powder and soaps. Two MKSS-affiliates worked at the store through the day; one would measure groceries and hand them to customers, while the other was at the counter in front, adding up purchases and collecting cash from customers. MKSS members and their campaigns frequently came up in conversation at the store. MKSS members often ran into each other at the store en route to Devdoongri; sometimes, the store even acted as a rendezvous for members heading out to a meeting in another city. Every once in a while, a stranger would walk up to the store asking store workers where to find MKSS members who could help with an application to the government. The store was clearly associated with MKSS in the region and also provided a space for discussion. Yet, the more time I spent at the store, the more I wondered why a worker's union in rural India had spent the time and energy in setting up an economic enterprise in a town. In this section of the chapter, I examine how the stores fit into MKSS's earlier campaigns and contributed to later ones.

With the minimum wage campaigns in 1991, MKSS had firmly established public works as its primary area of focus.² Meanwhile, the face of government schemes started to change significantly in 1991 following drastic changes in India's economic policy.³ Further, the provisions for India to join the World Trade Organization (WTO) encouraged the reduction of government resources towards public schemes, especially rural development programs.⁴ In a workshop in August 1992 in Devdoongri, the Secretary (Rural Development), GoI, confessed that the government was helpless in the face of pressure from World Bank to waive off provisions of the minimum wages act (Roy et al. 1995, 3-14).⁵ MKSS realized that the pressure on the government was great enough this time that it would not listen to demands for more resources for rural development programs.⁶ Following this realization, MKSS worked on finding ways to increase accountability to make the most of available resources. Consequently, MKSS members discussed issues such as "Corruption in public works" and "Right to Information" with the Rural Development Secretary at the workshop (Roy et al. 1995, 3-15).⁷

¹ Translates from Hindi as "Worker Farmer Grocery Store."

² MKSS's focus on the centrally-funded JRY was not because the payment of minimum wages would have made a huge dent on rural poverty. It was because decisions on JRY made it easier to make an argument about other development programs. They argued that if the government was not paying minimum wages, it was pointless to point to underpayment by private players (Roy et al. 1995).

³ The Indian government undertook structural economic reforms and economic liberalization in 1991, following a Balance of Payments crisis. Changes included initiating privatization in various sectors of the economy, deregulation and opening up for trade and investment.

⁴ These provisions were laid out in the Dunkel Draft of December 1991. As Director-General of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) during 1980-1993, Dunkel was at the helm of the launch of the Uruguay Round of multilateral trade negotiations in September 1986 and steered the multilateral trading system to the doorstep of what is now known as the WTO. http://www.wto.org/english/news_e/pres05_e/pr409_e.htm

⁵ This also serves as an example of how development trends and policies adopted by international agencies and forums have concrete consequences for communities that are geographically and culturally distant from the physical headquarters of these agencies.

⁶ Such as for a proposed scheme guaranteeing a minimum number of days of employment, which MKSS had wanted to pursue. The suggested figure was a 100 days. JRY was providing about fifteen days of employment to a person at the time and did not have resources to provide more days of employment.

⁷ A note to the Rural Secretary included concrete suggestions on realizing a Right to Information, including making muster rolls available to anyone who asked to see it; painting details of projects sanctioned under JRY on panchayat walls, holding social audits

In addition, MKSS held a three-day workshop at the end of 1992 to discuss MKSS's changing role and strategy in light of the new economic policy. This workshop became “a turning point in Sangathan activities” (Roy et al. 1995, 4-28). MKSS members, who were convinced that the “free” market was a myth and that all markets were controlled by those who were powerful in that market, discussed alternative ways of functioning in the market at the workshop (Roy et al. 1995, 4-27). All MKSS campaigns so far were restricted by the fact that the management of work was not in the hands of the workers. But what if workers controlled the capital and if the primary motive of an enterprise was public good rather than private profit? This is how workshop participants decided to start operating a grocery store.

The first MKK Store was set up in November 1992 in the town of Bhim near Devdoongri with interest-free loans of Rs. 50,000 from friends and supporters.⁸ The shop offered low prices compared to competitors because of its lower profit margins. It was different from its neighboring stores in many ways – in its ownership structure, profit margins, and source of initial capital among others. But a strategy of particular interest to me was the use of loudspeakers. The MKK stores announced their price list three to four times a day using a microphone and loudspeaker to increase consumer awareness of prices, especially among those who could not read.⁹ The combination of lower prices, publicity and a high volume of sales had several effects on the functioning of the local market, including a fall in the price of commodities.¹⁰ A second innovation was that store records were made available to the public starting 1995.

The phase of MKSS's work described above (1992-1994) finds perhaps the least mention in accounts of its campaigns. Yet, this was the period in which fundamental shifts occurred in the nature of governance in India, including the process of economic liberalization (post-1991) and a push for decentralization (post-1993 and the 73rd Amendment).¹¹ By 1994, these two shifts shaped the questions that MKSS was asking and the work it chose to undertake next. If economic liberalization was dismantling the welfare state and taking decision-making to global fora like the World Bank or the WTO that were even further removed from the citizens of rural Rajasthan, the 73rd amendment was claiming to involve citizens in processes of decision-making through the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI). But where, asked MKSS, was the space for people to express their opinion in reality?¹² The “*jan sunwai*” or “Public Hearing” emerged as its answer.

In the next section, I use the concept of an information order to analyze public hearings. To do this, I go back in history to 1994-1995 when the first phase of MKSS's public hearings was conducted and examine their working as well as their consequences. I argue that the material form and format of muster rolls, bills/vouchers and MBs reproduced the boundary between state and population by restricting who could

and initiating punitive action against anyone found guilty in the course of social audits (Roy et al. 1995, 3-15 - 3-23).

⁸ The process finds mention in “Miles to Go,” in *The Hindu*, May 28, 2000 and in Bharat and Madhu Dogra's “The non party political process profile of a people's organization: MKSS (Rajasthan)” at <http://www.mkssindia.org/writings/mkssandrti/the-non-party-political-process-profile-of-a-people%E2%80%99s-organization-mkss-rajasthan-%E2%80%93-madhu-bharat-dogra/>

⁹ Discussions on price information typically tend to focus on prices for sellers. The focus on prices for buyers made MKKS different.

¹⁰ In spite of several challenges – the local market association banned the sale of commodities to the MKK store, obstructed transportation of goods to the store and drowned out MKKS's price announcements – MKK Stores continued to make profits, returned loans and expanded to four shops within two years of operation.

¹¹ The 73rd Amendment of 1993 mandated the setting up and regular working of multi-tier, elected Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) in rural India. See appendix 1 for a description of institutions at the different tiers.

¹² This is referenced in a Press Note from MKSS for May Day 1994 titled “May Day in Bhim examines the post Dunkel future of workers and peasants and examines strategies for survival” in which people “want to know where foreign loans have come or gone when the economic status of the village remains unchanged.”

issue, manipulate or make sense of these documents in the context of public spending. However, the process adopted by public hearings helped people cross these boundaries and change aspects of the information order in some ways: for example, by reading documents out loud or leveraging the requirement for a paper trail to their advantage. Thus, I argue that material form influenced how an information order maintained boundaries, but also how these boundaries could be crossed and changes effected to elements of the information order. But first, I begin by relating my own experience of a public hearing in 2009.

4.2 Public hearings (1994-1995)

I attended my first public hearing in village Chileshwar in district Bhilwara in March 2009.¹³ Through reading about MKSS's work and talking to members, I knew that public hearings were at the core of what MKSS did and that they provided a public platform at which village residents could ask questions about forged or fabricated government records of public schemes. But neither reading nor conversations had quite prepared me for the experience of a public hearing.

My understanding of hearings had been based on reports of the day of the hearing. I knew much less about the preparations preceding the hearing. By the time I reached Chileshwar with some MKSS members a few days before the hearing, a Chileshwar-based team had already used the RTI to obtain records related to public schemes for the past five years, including muster rolls, bills and vouchers for construction materials and MBs. These records had also been collated and organized. All papers related to one worksite or scheme were filed together and fortnightly muster rolls had been compiled to yield the total number of days of employment for each worker. Teams went out into Chileshwar with the records and compilations, and read them out to groups of residents.¹⁴ Besides workers, the teams also talked to worksite mates. For schemes involving grants of money to households, the teams talked to beneficiaries about how much they had received as a grant, and compared that against what the beneficiaries had signed for in the records. At the end of each day, teams would compile what they had learnt during the day, including records that had been contested, people who were willing to testify, and a list of leads to be followed the next day. This went on till the day before the hearing. On the last day, a master list of cases was drawn up and a narrative built that determined the order in which cases would be discussed at the hearing.¹⁵ In order to ensure good attendance, a band of MKSS members toured the streets of the village on foot a day before the hearing, singing songs about accountability and corruption, announcing the schedule for the public hearing, and urging people to attend the meeting.¹⁶ MKSS members also emailed and called bureaucrats, local panchayat leaders and activist groups, as well as the press were to invited them to the hearing. Thus, even before the day of the hearing, a lot of time and effort had been directed at discussing government records and the public hearing format in the village.

On the day of the hearing, about 800 people sat in a tent pitched on public land near the local panchayat office. They were mostly residents of Chileshwar and neighboring villages. The panel that would “hear” the

¹³ About 50 km from Devdoongri.

¹⁴ They allowed responses from the reading sessions to lead them to their next destination. For example, in reading out a muster roll associated with laying a road among a group of middle-aged men, the men pointed to a few names on the muster roll that they were unsure of. They also directed us to people who had worked on that particular job and were likely to have more details about it. The team would then track some of these people down to find out more.

¹⁵ All papers related to a case were gathered in a single file and this file was referenced in the master list. On the day of the hearing, case files would be arranged in the order in which they were required in the narrative.

¹⁶ “Come to the meeting to find out how much money came into your panchayat, how it was spent, what was constructed in the last five years” announced MKSS members with the microphone.

cases and weigh the evidence in the cases consisted of the sarpanch, the BDO, a member of MKSS and an employee of SWRC Tilonia.

Shankar Singh conducted the hearing on that day in March 2009, bringing up cases where residents had taken issue with what government records claimed. For example, some residents had not been paid what the records claimed. Others pointed to conflicting records where a boy's name appeared on a muster roll for a day when his school claimed he was taking an examination. As cases were read out one by one on a microphone, they were followed by a request for people to testify and then a defense or refutation by the public officials concerned.



Fig 4.1 Public hearing in Chileshtar, March 5, 2009

Photo: Janaki Srinivasan

As the hearing progressed, it became evident that the audience consisted of different factions. The sarpanch, and the BDO were implicated in many of the misappropriations that people testified against. Those in the audience who supported the sarpanch tried to boo out the individuals who were testifying. As tempers rose, these individuals encountered an increasingly threatening atmosphere in which to testify.¹⁷ Possibly as a result of this, many of those listed on MKSS's schedule did not come up to the microphone after all. The panel did not reach a unanimous decision either. MKSS and the village team compiled a list of the discrepancies that had been identified in the days leading up to the hearing, in any case, and sent this document to district and state-level bureaucrats. Over the course of the next few days, the public hearing was also reported in newspapers.

Conversations with Chileshtar residents after the public hearing indicated that even though the hearing did not proceed as planned, and the people they had testified against did not face severe penalties, it was nevertheless significant that matters of misappropriation, corruption, and the quality of works were being discussed in front of an audience.¹⁸ While these topics had always been talked about within the walls of the home or a community, residents argued that doing so in a public forum had brought about a shift in the

¹⁷ The teams making enquiries prior to the hearing had also faced obstacles. Teams were followed around and there were constant rumors about witnesses who had been threatened and people who had been paid off in return for keeping quiet at the hearing.

¹⁸ From a review discussion with the Chileshtar team and MKSS members in Chileshtar, May 26, 2009.

absolute, unquestionable authority of the sarpanch in the community.¹⁹ Historically, it was the need for such a shift that had driven MKSS to the idea of holding public hearings in the first place. In the next sub-section, I examine the events that led to the first series of public hearings that MKSS conducted in 1994-1995.

4.2.1 Contesting records through public hearings²⁰

By 1994, MKSS was searching for an alternative forum for the “collective articulation of people's voices” and for “issues that had an urgent appeal to sensibilities across social categories” (Roy et al. 1995, 13-97). By this time, MKSS had broadened its view of government accountability and saw “bureaucratic mismanagement, misappropriation and selective sharing of information” along with “the ignorance of actual expenditures and incomprehension of development plans” as fundamental concerns that led to drainage of funds. For MKSS, the public hearings offered a way to counter these problems by acting as

a mode to interface the government with the people's problems so that democratic processes can be understood and used better by the people.²¹

MKSS members told me that they did not invent the idea of public hearings; in fact, public hearings were already being held in parts of urban India at the time. But, the specific form of the public hearings adopted by MKSS had unique elements. Framed as “hearings” rather than as protests, they allowed people to speak their version of what happened and compare these narratives to the claims made by government records. A panel arrived at a verdict based on these testimonies. In fact, the earliest hearings were even called *Jan Adalat* (or People's Court) by the press.²²

The first public hearing was held in panchayat Kot Kirana in district Pali in December 1994. The hearing came about when the BDO, Nirmal Wadhvani, who had heard MKSS members deliver a talk at his civil services training institute, the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration (LBSNAA), offered to help them with cases of non-payment of wages in the panchayat. Taking up the BDO's offer, Shankar Singh met him in August 1994 with the details of a complaint MKSS had received. The BDO agreed to conduct an investigation and even accompanied Singh to villages.²³ He read out records related to a public work scheme to gauge reactions. As he read, people spoke up to disagree with the details he read out.²⁴ The BDO grew flustered,

¹⁹ There are close parallels between this “electric moment” when government records were first read out at the hearing in front of the entire village or the first village resident testified on the microphone (Mishra 2003, 10) and Scott's description of the moment when “hidden transcripts” first become public (Scott 1992). Scott argues that people speak against the actions of powerful individuals in their community using a “hidden transcript;” but the moment this transcript is first uttered publicly, something changes. A Chileshtar resident spoke about how a group of people could now assemble without constantly thinking about whether the sarpanch's men would harass them for getting together. That, he said, was a very big change for him. From a review discussion about the public hearing in Chileshtar, May 26, 2009.

²⁰ The account of the first public hearing draws on my interview with Shankar Singh, May 26, 2009; Kidambi (2008, 10-11) and Mishra (2003, 8-11) unless otherwise mentioned. Not many people in village Kot or village Kirana, other than a local school teacher who helped write the application for the person who had not been paid for his work, remembered the details of the public hearing fifteen years after the event.

²¹ MKSS statement December 1994.

²² References to a People's Court in “*O gram sewak tho aankhya ma dbool jhok gyo- Pradesh mein Kirana gaanv mein pebli jan-adalat lagi*” (“Oh, the gram sewak fooled us – First People's Court in the state held in Kirana village”) in *Naubharat Times*, December 3, 1994; and “Villagers Get a Chance to Air Complaints” in *The Hindu*, December 9, 1994

²³ This willingness and enthusiasm possibly indicated the naivete of the BDO, who was a new recruit and an acting BDO. A few years later, the same individual made it difficult for MKSS to conduct a public hearing in another village.

²⁴ Singh mentioned a few reactions he recalled from the reading out of muster rolls “I was in the military and am retired now. I have

moving from one set of records to another as the number of voices grew. He finally stopped reading out records, promising to return later to address people's questions. On the way back to the BDO's office, Singh suggested that they visit a supplier of materials to understand how bills and vouchers were created in practice.

The BDO agreed and they met a supplier. Consulting his diary, the supplier told them that while he had indeed supplied some construction material to the panchayat, it did not include doors and windows. According to Singh, when the BDO asked the supplier to explain how bills for doors and windows came to be issued on the supplier's letterhead if he had not supplied these materials, the supplier responded: "The sarpanch keeps the bill book and issues whatever bills he wants from it." As they continued on their way back to the BDO's office following this discovery, Singh suggested that if the BDO wanted to investigate what was going on in Kot Kirana, he should provide MKSS photocopies of records for the panchayat, so that MKSS members could investigate the records in more detail. The BDO initially agreed but when Singh visited his office, he confessed facing resistance from his office staff regarding his decision to make records available for photocopying. The BDO suggested to Singh that he should copy out the records by hand, sitting in the BDO's room. That is eventually what Singh did.

MKSS toured the panchayat with these hand-written records, asking people to verify details. The MKSS team discovered massive discrepancies between the records and people's narratives. For example, muster rolls contained names of people who lived and worked in other Indian states. Buildings that were visibly incomplete (or just did not exist) showed up on records as having been completed. The BDO acted on MKSS's complaint and filed First Information Reports (FIRs) against the Junior Engineer and the *gram sewak* (village secretary) in September 1994. Despite the complaint and multiple letters to various people in the district administration, no action was taken against the engineer or the gram sewak. As tempers rose against this lack of action, a local caste panchayat was organized around the issue, possibly at the request of the Engineer and the gram sewak themselves. It fined the engineer and the gram sewak a paltry Rs.1100 when they confessed to misappropriating government funds. With this, action was seen to have been taken.

It was at this juncture that MKSS thought of doing a public hearing. Since the complaints and "action" by the administration appeared to be happening behind closed doors and only on paper, MKSS thought it would help to have the people mentioned in the records talk about the records: a hearing among people, a *jan* (of the people or public) *sunwai* (hearing). Moreover, as the issue seemed to be fading from discussions within the administration, a public hearing would ensure that the misappropriations remained in the limelight. The Kot Kirana public hearing was scheduled for December 2, 1994. The environment before and during the hearing was tense and MKSS members, supporters and witnesses were threatened and offered bribes to withdraw. MKSS used video cameras to record testimonies of village residents in the days before the hearing in case residents were not allowed to testify at the hearing. Members distributed pamphlets in order to publicize the hearing.²⁵ They found that village residents were being cautioned against attending the hearing on the grounds that police personnel would be present at the hearing and that there was sure to be trouble. On the day of the hearing, curiosity brought residents to the site, but the fear of the police kept them a safe

never worked on these works. Why is my name on the muster roll?;" "This man lives in Kota, he hasn't worked here;" "There is no one of this name in the village."

²⁵ MKSS flyer titled "*Aapke ilaake mein pebli jan sunwai*" ("The first public hearing in your region") dated November 29, 1994. The pamphlet asked: "Whose development is this? What sort of development is this? Public works worth Rs. 18 lakhs had been carried out in 1993-94 in the three panchayats: did people see works worth that much in the panchayat?" The pamphlet invited everyone to attend and ask: ""Did development policy, implementation and information belong to a chosen few?"

distance from it. However, when residents realized that there was no police presence after all, they started to speak out.

The public hearing panel was chaired by prominent outsiders, but the government officials who had been invited to the hearing did not attend. The public hearing itself was video recorded to minimize chances of being misrepresented, especially in view of the absence of government officials at the hearing. By the end of the hearing, many cases of discrepancies in development spending had been discussed. Bills related to the purchase of stones for construction were exposed as false when people testified that the stones had come from a pre-existing structure. People pointed to a windowless and doorless building when bills for the purchase of doors and windows for that building were read out. There were multiple instances where the names of workers who resided in another state or held a salaried government job appeared on muster rolls.²⁶ An old man expressed support for the forum offered by the hearing, and asked that the Below Poverty Line (BPL) list of the village similarly be read out in public. In Singh's words, with the first public hearing

A path opened for us from there . . . Even if someone came to us with a small complaint, we would start to investigate the larger matter . . . If someone said they had not received their rations, we would not talk about only that; we would ask for copies of the complete ration register so that we could get more people involved. We kept one person's papers in front, but asked for everything.

Following the Kot Kirana hearing, the Junior Engineer and gram sewak were suspended. An individual slated to stand for the upcoming panchayat elections withdrew from the polls following accusations of corruption at the hearing.²⁷ The public hearing series continued with more scheduled within the next month. The second hearing was held in Bhim a few days later, on December 7, 1994. More discrepancies were discovered, especially a “flagrant violation of government norms regarding development schemes.”²⁸ In the Vijayapura hearing held on December 17, 1994, discrepancies related to land allotment were brought up, as was the use of low quality material in the construction of a school room.²⁹

The local and Hindi language press reported all three hearings in great detail, which was different than earlier MKSS campaigns that were covered less extensively, both in terms of the number of newspaper articles about them and the regions covered by these newspapers.³⁰ Presumably, the protests initiated by government officials against a fourth public hearing were at least partially fueled by this press coverage.³¹ A fourth hearing

²⁶ “O gram sewak tho aankhya ma dhoool jhok gyo- Pradesh mein Kirana gaanv mein pebli jan-adalat lagi” (“Oh, the gram sewak fooled us- First People's Court in the state held in Kirana village”) in *Navbharat Times*, December 3, 1994

²⁷ Sona Thakur's “Villagers Turn Arbiters, For a Change” in *The Telegraph*, December 14, 1994.

²⁸ Letter from MKSS to CS, M.L. Mehta, January 2, 1995. The Bhim hearing also brought up the range of reasons that were used to avoid showing records, including unique ones like records having been eaten up by a cow.

²⁹ Letter from MKSS to CS, M.L. Mehta, January 1995 and MKSS's press note dated December 17, 1994.

³⁰ “O gram sewak tho aankhya ma dhoool jhok gyo- Pradesh mein Kirana gaanv mein pebli jan-adalat lagi” (“Oh, the gram sewak fooled us-First People's Court in the state held in Kirana village”) in *Navbharat Times*, December 3, 1994; “Villagers Turn Arbiters, For a Change” by Sona Thakur in *The Telegraph*, December 14, 1994; “MKSS on a Noble Mission” by Lokpal Sethi in *The Hindustan Times* n.d.; “Nullifying Bullying Powers of Babus” by Malini Nair in *The Hindustan Times*, December 12, 1994; “Villagers Get a Chance to Air Complaints” in *The Hindu*, December 9, 1994; “Bhim mein jan sunwai aaj, 'Vikas' ki pol kbulegi” (“Public hearing in Bhim today, 'development' will be uncovered”) in *Navbharat Times*, December 7, 1994, Jaipur edition and others.

³¹ In other consequences, extensive media coverage led to “trials” initiated by the media. “Public Hearings sometimes degenerated into inquisitions.” said Mehta. Interview with M.L.Mehta, CS at the time, at his residence, June 2, 2009.

had been scheduled for Jawaja in the neighboring Ajmer district in early January 1995. Despite orders from the Collector,³² gram sewaks of the Jawaja Panchayat Samiti made a statement that they would not provide records to citizens, but only to senior bureaucrats in the government. Even though the Jawaja public hearing was targeted at panchayats within a single Panchayat Samiti, it worried a state-level body of gram sewaks (the “*Gram Sewak Sangh*”) enough to file a complaint with the State Development Commissioner for having been asked to make records available at all.³³ MKSS decided to go ahead with the public hearing on January 7, 1995 without official records, relying only on statements from village residents. People testified: they had had to pay a bribe in order to be allocated money under a scheme to build low-cost housing; a community rest house built with government funds had been left half-constructed; and a 40-year old anicut had been presented as altogether new even though it had only been touched up with a layer of cement. The Jawaja hearing and the resistance to it both received extensive press coverage.³⁴

The Jawaja hearing was important because it was around this hearing that “the issue of access to development information crystallized” for MKSS (Roy et al. 1995, 14-109).³⁵ It was also after this hearing that the campaign could be scaled up from the panchayat to the state level. Mishra observes that

More than the people’s action, therefore, in holding local Jan Sunwais in central Rajasthan, it was the reaction of Panchayat Secretaries that transformed the demand for transparency of development expenditure at the local level into a statewide issue of people’s Right to Information (Mishra 2003, 13).

Prior to the Jawaja hearing, MKSS had written a letter to M.L.Mehta, Chief Secretary (CS), describing public hearings as a mode that

shifted the attention from a conventional sequence of suspension, transfer etc. to the larger issues of one’s future and the country’s commitment to remove poverty.³⁶

MKSS sent out a similar letter following the Jawaja hearing, but this time threatened to organize a statewide campaign were the state to succumb to pressure from gram sewaks or to accept demands that gram sewaks were not required to show records of development works to village residents (Mishra 2003, 14).

³² Letter from MKSS to collector dated December 22, 1994; requesting for records pertaining to development schemes.

³³ Letter from MKSS to collector dated March 7, 1995; and MKSS pamphlet titled “*Hamaare ilaake mein chauthi jan sunwai*” (“Fourth public hearing in our region”).

³⁴ “*Kaagazon mein hue gram vikas ke ghotaalon ka pardafaash. Vikaas kbarch ka byora nabin bataaya tho adbikaariyon ko court mein ghaseeta jayega*” (“Scams in village development shown on documents exposed. If accounts of development expenditure are not provided, officials will be taken to court”) in *Nirantar*, January 9, 1995; “*Jawaja mein aaj jan sunwai, gram sewak virodh karenge*” (“Public hearing in Jawaja today, gram sewaks will oppose (it)”) in *Navbharat Times*, January 7, 1995, Jaipur edition; “*‘Khuli sunwai’ mein grameenon ne apni samasyayen bataayeen*” (Villagers speak about their problems in an ‘open hearing’), *Rajasthan Patrika*, January 9, 1995, Jaipur edition; “*Saarvajanik kbarche ki soochanyen nabin dene ke kbilaaf grameen aandolan karenge*” (“Villagers will conduct a campaign against information regarding public expenditure not being provided”) in *Navbharat Times*, January 10, 1995, Jaipur edition.

³⁵ A more direct consequence of the Jawaja public hearing came from complaints raised by a resident of the Asan panchayat following the hearing. From Mishra (2003); interview with Kesar Singh, who made the complaint, at his residence on May 13 2009; letters from MKSS to the Ajmer administration dated September 20, 1995 and September 26, 1995.

³⁶ Letter from MKSS to the CS dated January 2, 1995. According to the letter: “Free access to information, prompt and exemplary action against offenders, and support for the ordinary people raising their voice are areas in which the administration alone can play a crucial role.”

Meanwhile, in the lead-up to the state-level elections, the Rajasthan Chief Minister (CM) made an announcement in a public meeting and in the State Assembly, regarding access to panchayat records. The CM's announcement was picked up and published by *Dainik Navjyothi*, a local newspaper, on April 6, 1995.³⁷ The announcement read:³⁸

We have been unable to provide one right to the people of Rajasthan and that right is the Right to Information. This is not available anywhere in India but I have been thinking about it . . . During the elections between 1990 and 1994/95 . . . the Village Level Worker ate [embezzled funds], the patwari ate, the officer ate, the sarpanch ate, panchayat members ate.³⁹ I announce in this assembly today that records on development works conducted between 1990-1995 in panchayats or rural regions will be available on payment of photocopying charges if a sarpanch or a panchayat wants them. And if misdoings are detected, it will be investigated by the state government or any other agency we create.⁴⁰

In the following sub-section, I analyze the information order of public hearings, arguing that material form influenced how an information order maintained boundaries between state and population. But the public hearings also demonstrated how material form could be used to cross these boundaries and to effect changes to elements of the information order.

4.2.2 Public hearings and their information order

The material form and format of muster rolls, bills/vouchers and MBs reproduced the boundary between state and population by shaping who could manipulate, access, or even make sense of these documents. Muster rolls, bills/ vouchers and MBs were all created or verified by “the state.” Access to these documents was also differential, with only “the state” being able to access most. So important was it to maintain this boundary, in fact, that gram sewaks threatened to go on strike unless they were protected from having to show these documents to the workers (who the documents were about) or anyone other than their higher-ups within the bureaucracy. Thus, the state and its population were distinguished by whether or not they could create or access certain elements of the information order. However, even the availability of documents was no guarantee that they would be fully comprehensible. The written form, as well as the bureaucratic and technical language used by muster rolls, bills/ vouchers, and MBs obscured them to those who could not read, as well as to those who were not familiar with the administrative or technical categories and units used in the documents. For example, the language in which the progress of the construction of a road or a water body was recorded by an engineer affected what workers could make of MBs even when copies were made available. The language used in these documents was likely to be familiar only to the bureaucrats who used it everyday. Shankar Singh remarked that his own father being a patwari had enabled him to understand the

³⁷ “*Panchayat vikas kaaryon mein gadbadi karnewaalon ko dandit kiya jaayega. Vidhan Sabha mein Shekhawat ki ghoshna*” (“Those embezzling from panchayat development works will be punished. Shekhawat announces in Vidhan Sabha”) in *Dainik Navjyothi*, April 6, 1995, Ajmer edition. MKSS was already pursuing the possibility of making copies of panchayat records pertaining to development works available to all citizens. In a letter to the CS in March 1995, MKSS reminded the CS that he had promised to issue an order to this effect. The written order was important because in some cases, district collectors would refuse to work without one.

³⁸ From the transcripts of speeches in the Rajasthan Assembly, April 5, 1995, 433. Translation my own.

³⁹ The words used by the CM in the Assembly hint that the public hearings might have been a big part of why the announcement was made. An MKSS song with similar lyrics had been popular in its campaigns at the time.

⁴⁰ In my interview with him, M.L. Mehta suggested that while MKSS was indeed doing good work, it was not responsible for the birth of the idea of a right to information. The government was, he claimed.

records that he was copying down for the Kot Kirana public hearing.⁴¹ The form and format of records thus became another way in which the boundary between state and society was recreated, with elements of the information order making sense only to state agents and not others.

Ironically, the idea of public hearings drew on the legitimacy accorded to written documents in a bureaucracy, especially the need for a paper trail and records to support every expenditure and transaction. Without these, a comparison of the official and unofficial narratives would not have been possible. However, since a paper trail was essential to the operation of public work schemes, public hearings did become possible. Moreover, the material form and format of documents continued to play a role in these hearings. In preparing for public hearings, MKSS re-organized documents for clarity. For example, muster rolls for a worksite listed the attendance and wage details of multiple workers for a fortnight. MKSS compiled and re-organized muster rolls for different fortnights to list the total number of days worked and wages paid per worker. Further, they compiled and filed the muster rolls, bills/vouchers, MBs and other documents related to a single worksite and scheme together. The purpose behind this re-organization and collation was to make categories more comprehensible. Documents were also read out loud to groups of residents who could then argue over them and make sense of them collectively. Oral testimonies at the public hearings also allowed more people to hear the official record than had been possible with written documents that were difficult to access. Further, people could also hear an alternative version of what had happened as presented by other village residents. Thus, the form and format of content, including whether it was written or orally communicated, how it was laid out and formatted, and the language it used, were at least as significant as the content of records. I argue that in the course of the public hearings, material form was thus leveraged to cross some boundaries between state and population by making documents comprehensible to a wider range of the population.

The idea behind the public hearings had been to offer a forum where village residents could speak to the state. The hearings also aimed to raise broad issues that could appeal across gender and class lines. Between December 1994 and April 1995, MKSS went some distance towards achieving both these objectives with the series of public hearings that I described. Some levels of the state had paid heed to the public hearing reports and hearings had drawn working class, middle class, male and female participation.⁴² MKSS identified some of its tactics as important to achieving these goals (Roy et al. 1995, 13-101). Inviting eminent outsiders to the hearings established the legitimacy of the hearings, as did involving the press. Video-recordings, though expensive, ensured testimonies were on tape and that hearings could not be misrepresented by government workers. Shankar Singh emphasized the need for co-operation from within the village in organizing hearings.

There are already groups within a village. Wherever there have been cases of misappropriation, there is a village resident involved in it somewhere. It is not that government officials have directly, without approaching village residents [indulged in misappropriation by themselves] . . . This person will manage there, he has his politics, he will play. If you go to a place you don't know at all, you won't have an idea what politics he is playing . . . Therefore, village residents have to be connected in some way [with our work].⁴³

⁴¹ In the MKSS journal, quoted in Kidambi (2008, 10).

⁴² At a more pragmatic level, public hearings also made visible the different ways in which government funds targeted at development works were misused. Mishra (2003) classifies the corruption identified in rural development works by the public hearings in six categories: purchase over billing, sale over billing, fake muster rolls, underpayment of wages, tinkering with labor-material ratio and ghost works.

⁴³ Interview with Shankar Singh in Kaamli Ghat, May 26, 2009.

Taking a single complaint and using that to access a larger body of records proved a successful way to involve more people in the hearing. Finally, involving the press in the public hearings had been useful, both because of the coverage it provided for the public hearings and because it highlighted the CM's announcement about making copies of government records available. The latter brings me to the Beawar dharna of 1996 that I analyze in the next section.

MKSS had started to use the *Dainik Navjyothi* newspaper clipping to obtain panchayat records and conduct hearings, but the lack of a written administrative order posed difficulties. When a written order did not follow the CM's oral announcement for a year, MKSS initiated the Beawar dharna in April 1996. In the next section, I describe the events of the 40-day Beawar dharna. I focus especially on the range of speakers and activities at the dharna, and how each related information to a different theme, thereby widening the support base for the dharna and its demand for a Right to Information. My central argument in the next section concerns the use of the term *information*: I argue that the term *information* was flexible enough for MKSS to leverage it as a "boundary object" that was then able to attract a wide-ranging support base.⁴⁴

4.3 Beawar dharna (1996)

With the CM's announcement regarding a right to examine government records, MKSS felt the time was ripe to bring together more people and regions to discuss this right. The first statewide Right to Information Summit was held in the town of Beawar, about 60 km from Devdoongri, in September 1995.⁴⁵ The summit was attended by 2000 people, including village residents, representatives from NGOs, former civil servants, trade unions and panchayat members (Mishra 2003, 22; Roy et al. 1995, 15-127).⁴⁶ Participants also included journalists, lawyers, activists and civil servants. Participants' domains of work were equally diverse, including health, environment, development induced displacement, labor and economic liberalization. All these participants spoke of their experiences and difficulties in obtaining records from the state, and why these records were important to their work.⁴⁷ The concrete experiences discussed at the meeting were in terms of *records*, but the resolution that was passed used the term *information* in proposing that a right to information was a fundamental right.⁴⁸ *Nirantar*, a Beawar-based, independently owned Hindi daily, covered the meeting and published an article about it on its front page.

By early 1996, numerous parallel discussions took place the regional, state and national levels about a right to

⁴⁴ Earlier arguments about the information order, its relationship with the non-monolithic character of the state and the importance of material form are equally valid in the Beawar dharna and will come up in the course of analysis. However, my focus in the section will be on the circulation of the term *information*.

⁴⁵ Prior to the summit, a smaller meeting was held in Beawar that was attended by about a 100 Beawar residents and organizations. Participants at the meeting had supported a resolution that the state must make available copies of documents (Roy et al. 1995, 15-126).

⁴⁶ Invitation letter by MKSS dated September 19, 1995. Also see MKSS pamphlet dated September 20, 1995 that starts "*Beawar mein dinaank 25-9-95 ko soochanaon ke adbhikar par aam sabha. Rajya-stbareeya abhiyan ki shuruaat. Lekar rabenge hum is baar soochanaon ka adbhikar*" ("Public meeting on right to information in Beawar on 25-9-95. The start of a statewide campaign. This time, we will not budge without getting a right to information").

⁴⁷ See "*Soochanaon ka adbhikar milega to desh samrudh hoga*" ("With a right to informations, the country will prosper") in *Nirantar*, September 26, 1995, 1 and "*Soochanaon ko dabaane se brashtachaar badhta hai*" ("Suppressing informations leads to growing corruption") in *Nirantar*, September 26, 1995, 4. *Nirantar* is a daily owned, edited and printed by Beawar resident and journalist Ram Prasad Kumawat. *Nirantar* translates from Hindi as "Without interval."

⁴⁸ Here, and later, I point to the diverse ways in which *information* and *right to information* were used in the events leading up to the Beawar dharna, indicating an idea and terminology that was still nascent and not quite standardized.

obtain records from the government.⁴⁹ This was a right that was increasingly being framed as the “right to information,” even though the term was not standardized at the time. Despite these discussions, even panchayat records were not accessible in Rajasthan by April 1996, a full year after the CM’s oral promise that they would be. Calling it the next phase of “the struggle against corruption in public works,” MKSS announced an indefinite dharna in Beawar in April 1996.⁵⁰ A background note to the dharna demanded that

a) orders be issued that copies of all documents concerning development expenditure, including bills, vouchers and muster rolls are freely and promptly made available to any citizen on demand and that officials willfully withholding or delaying the access to such information are penalized

b) orders of government further prescribe that in the event of prima facie evidence of corruption being provided by citizens, the government is bound to register and investigate criminal cases within a prescribed time limit.⁵¹

On April 6, 1996, the day the dharna was to start, the government issued an order granting citizens the right to inspect all documents, but stopped short of a right to allow photocopying these documents. Without the right to photocopy, MKSS saw the order as toothless.⁵² The dharna started as planned and later came to be seen as a watershed event for the RTI movement (Kidambi 2008, 13-14; Mishra 2003, 22-25).

Nirantar followed the dharna closely through the 40 days it lasted and I trace the evolution of the dharna by following this coverage.⁵³ *Nirantar* articles offered a detailed day-to-day picture of how the dharna grew to involve diverse groups of people and their equally wide-ranging concerns. Intertwined with that process, was the one by which the terminology of demands adopted by the dharna became standardized, especially how “right to information” became the preferred term to refer to the right to access government records and documents. In the following pages, I intersperse existing accounts of the dharna with its coverage in *Nirantar* to explore both these processes.

⁴⁹ For example, an important meeting took place at the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration (LBSNAA), a research and training institute on public policy and public administration. Indian civil servants receive training for their jobs at this institute. A small group – including members of MKSS, senior civil servants and activists – started meeting there to discuss the RTI in October 1995 (Mishra 2003, 22; Roy et al. 1995, 15-127). The LBSNAA prepared a draft for access to information that was released in early 1996. This group was to prove crucial in the events leading up to the passage of the RTI Act in 2005.

⁵⁰ “*Mazdoor Kisan Shaka Sangathan ka al se dharna*” (“MKSS starts a dharna tomorrow”), *Nirantar*, April 4, 1996, 4; “*Soochanaon ko Jaanane va prashasan ki jawaabdebi ko lekar dharna*.” (“Dharna about knowing information and the accountability of the administration”) in *Nirantar*, April 6, 1996, 1. Earlier articles (from April 4, 6 and 8) used longer phrases like the “right to know information” and the plural form of information in Hindi (“*soochanaon*”) while describing the dharna. However, the term “right to information,” became increasingly standard after the initial days of the dharna.

⁵¹ From MKSS’s “Background note for the dharna on the Right to Information being organized by MKSS from April 6, 1996 in Beawar” dated April 4, 1996.

⁵² References to the government’s order of April 6, 1996 and MKSS’s response on April 9, 1996 in a letter from MKSS to the CM dated May 24, 1996, titled “Access to Information: The Government moves grudgingly.” See also MKSS pamphlet titled “*40 din se Beawar mein Dharna jaari hai*.” (“Dharna in Beawar continues for 40 days”) that elaborates on differences between the CM’s verbal assurances of April 5, 1995 and the order of April 6, 1996 a year later. “*Vaayda jab kiya hai poora, kyon nikaala aadesh adhoora?*” (“Why the incomplete order when the assurance was complete?”) the pamphlet queries.

⁵³ The Beawar dharna has been widely written about by both MKSS members and others in their accounts of the timeline of the RTI campaign (Bakshi 1998; Mishra 2003; Kidambi 2008; Lokayan 1996, 64; Mander and Joshi 1999; Roy and Dey 2002; Singh 2007, 26). Several key moments in the dharna that were mentioned in interviews with MKSS members also overlapped with these written accounts. While most accounts focus on the nature of the audience at the dharna, as well as the negotiations with the government, I turn to *Nirantar* for more detail on various speakers at the dharna.

The dharna took place at the centrally located Chang gate in Beawar, in a public square surrounded by shops that saw footfall through the day. Campaigners used folk songs, dance, theater and speeches to discuss the right to access government records and to demand such a right from the government at the dharna. They also led processions and rallies through town to government offices where they presented a written copy of their demands. Beawar residents were initially skeptical and puzzled about the presence of the obviously rural *ghagra paltan* (“skirt platoon”) in the more urban Beawar and by its seemingly esoteric demand for “information” rather than for food, clothes or shelter (Kidambi 2008; Singh 2007). But they quickly came around in support once they found that their own problems with the government resonated with those of the campaigners. MKSS members reminisced that unlike other dharnas, there were no bored people at this one. No one gossiped or played cards. There was so much going on and so much involvement from the audience that there was no question of monotony setting in. Besides the daily cultural performances at the dharna site, special events also kept up the momentum of the dharna. On May Day, Beawar residents and visitors flocked to MKSS's annual workers' fair that sold household items, food and drink at low prices. A *prabhat pheri* (morning procession) was organized where dharna participants walked across Beawar early in the morning, presenting their demands as songs.⁵⁴ Since such processions were usually religious in nature, this attracted a lot of attention for its unique songs. Besides attending the dharna (audience for the dharna varied between 500-700 through the day) and participating in these activities, Beawar residents also contributed wheat, vegetables, firewood, water, cleaning services or money to the dharna.⁵⁵

As support for the dharna grew, so did the panic it caused in the government and among political parties, especially since the dharna came in the middle of the campaigning season for the national elections. The dharna proved to be especially embarrassing for the BJP, since it exposed the gap between the BJP-affiliated CM's speech and his actions. Protesters were given repeated verbal assurances that the government was committed to giving people the right to peruse government records, as well as to make notes about these records, on the payment of a fee. But these assurances were not issued in a written form; further, the entitlement seemed vaguely worded and incomplete to the protestors who wanted to know what would be the magnitude of the fees or what would happen if an officer refused to show someone the records.⁵⁶ The question of allowing photocopies had also become central to the debate.⁵⁷ A few days into the dharna, the CM met dharna representatives while he was touring the region for the upcoming national-level elections in end-April and told them that detailed orders would be issued on the right to photocopy documents at a prescribed fee – but only after the elections.⁵⁸ This offer did not satisfy the participants of the dharna and the

⁵⁴ See “*Mai divas par prabhat pheri nikali*” (“Morning procession on May Day”) and “*Aaj dharne baabat vichar goshti*” (“Dharna related discussion meeting today”) in *Nirantar*, May 2, 1996, 1.

⁵⁵ See estimates of numbers and contributions in “*Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan dharna jaari. Do patrakar Kuldip Nayyar va Nikhil Chakravarty 9 ko aayenge.*” (“MKSS dharna continues. Two journalists Kuldip Nayyar and Nikhil Chakravarty will attend on the 9th”) in *Nirantar*, April 8, 1996, 1; and in “*Soochana ke adbhikar ki maang dharna teesre din bhi jaari*” (“Dharna demanding a right to information continues for a third day”) in *Nirantar*, April 9, 1996, 1. “We were not asking people to come to the dharna or telling them we would send a car to fetch them or telling them ‘Come, we will provide you a meal.’ We were connecting people [to the dharna] by saying ‘Pay your own [bus] fare and come to the dharna. Contribute your time to the dharna. When you come, bring along some wheat. Come and we will fight together,” said Shankar Singh in an interview, May 26, 2009.

⁵⁶ In “*Jis नेता का जितना बस चला, उसने इस देश को उतना ही लूटा*” (“Every politician has looted this country as much as he saw fit”) in *Nirantar*, April 11, 1996, 1.

⁵⁷ In “*Chang gate par chal rabe dharne ka kayi samajik va shramik sangathanon dwaara samarthan*” (“Dharna at Chang Gate supported by several social and workers' associations”) in *Nirantar*, April 13, 1996, 1; and in “*Soochana ke Adbhikar ki jung ke manch par diggajon ki shirkat, sarkar ki ninda*” (“Legendary figures participate in the forum for the battle for a ‘Right to Information,’ government criticized”) in *Nirantar*, April 15, 1996, 1.

⁵⁸ “*Vikaas kbarche ke byore ki photo prathi ka aadesh chunaav baad*” (“Order for photocopies of accounts of development

dharna continued.⁵⁹

MKSS invited a range of speakers to the dharna, including national-level journalists and activists as well as passers-by whose comments were solicited. Among the first speakers at the dharna were Kuldeep Nayyar and Nikhil Chakravarty, two well-known journalists and Swami Agnivesh, a prominent activist.⁶⁰ Nikhil Chakravarty's widely quoted words at the dharna are worth repeating to emphasize the perceived significance and lineage of the dharna:

The struggle for independence was built around exposing the looting of the country by foreign rulers. Your struggle is in essence the same: exposing the looting of the country by our own rulers. This was a right that should have come with independence. It is not going to be easy to win this entitlement, but you must not give up. This is like a second battle for independence. (Speech quoted in Dey and Roy 2009).

Other speakers at the dharna too spoke of its national significance in bringing together people across classes and regions. Tripurari Sharma, a Delhi-based playwright, emphasized that the strength of the dharna lay in the fact that more people were joining it by the day.⁶¹ Kesrimal, a former legislator, saw the campaign as a way to ensure justice and equality in the country.⁶²

When they spoke, people from different professions related information to their domains of work. Prabash Joshi, a Delhi-based journalist, thanked MKSS for starting a campaign that journalists across the country ought to have initiated. Harsh Mandar, a civil servant who would later play an important role in drafting the RTI Act, clarified that the dharna was against corruption, not the government.⁶³ Medha Patkar, a prominent social activist who worked on issues of development-induced displacement, spoke of the dharna's demand in the context of the government's transactions with multinational corporations and international development agencies.⁶⁴ Kuldip Nayyar, a Delhi-based journalist, wrote of the dharna's demands and how issues ranging

expenditure after elections") in *Nirantar*, April 15, 1996, 1.

⁵⁹ Other letters followed. One such letter informed the CM that the dharna would be lifted if a representative of the state government supported in writing the CM's verbal assurance of April 14 that written orders would be issued post elections regarding photocopying records. Letter from MKSS to the CM dated April 19, 1996, with subject line "*Beawar mein chal rabe soochanaon ke adbhikar par dbarne ke kram mein*" ("Regarding ongoing dharna in Beawar about the right to information").

⁶⁰ Talks announced in "*Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan dharna jaari. Do patrakar Kuldip Nayyar va Nikhil Chakravarty 9 ko aayenge.*" (MKSS dharna continues. Two journalists, Kuldip Nayyar and Nikhil Chakravarty, will attend on the 9th") in *Nirantar*, April 8, 1996, 1; talks covered in "*Jis neta ka jitna bas chala, usne is desh ko itna hi loota*" ("Every politician has looted this country as much as he saw fit") in *Nirantar*, April 11, 1996, 1.

⁶¹ In "*Sarkar na maani tho 'soochana' ko lekar Jaipur bhi dharna*" ("If the government doesn't consent, dharna on 'information' in Jaipur as well") in *Nirantar*, April 29, 1996, 1.

⁶² In "*Bha Ja Pa sarkar ke brasbtachaar ki pol kbulne ke dar se 'soochana ka adbhikaar' nabi diya ja raba: Motwani*" ("Fear of exposure of its corruption keeps BJP government from granting a 'right to information': Motwani") in *Nirantar*, April 20, 1996, 1.

⁶³ "*Soochana ka adbhikaar' milne se imaandaar shaasan ki neenv padegi*" ("Foundation to honest rule will be laid with a 'Right to Information'") in *Nirantar*, April 19, 1996, 1.

⁶⁴ See "*Medha Patkar kal jan sabha mein bolengi*" ("Medha Patkar will speak at the public gathering tomorrow") in *Nirantar*, April 20, 1996; "*Soochana ke adbhikaar' roopi atom bum se Bhairon Singh Shekhawat darte hain*" ("Bhairon Singh Shekhawat scared of the atom bomb called 'Right to Information'") in *Nirantar*, April 22, 1996, 1; and "*Beesalpur yojana se Beawar ko paani milna dboka hai. Medha Patkar se 'Nirantar' ki vistrut baat cheet*" ("Deceitful to say that Beawar will get water through the Beesalpur project. 'Nirantar' has detailed conversation with Medha Patkar") in *Nirantar*, April 22, 1996, 4. Patkar brought up the secrecy surrounding the government's signing of an agreement with the Enron Corporation. Multi-national companies also came up in a

from the Bhopal gas leak to electoral spending were related to the lack of accountability.⁶⁵ Why was information on transactions between the government and private players not made public, asked other speakers.⁶⁶ Another speaker encouraged people to talk about the RTI more in their own communities and residential localities.⁶⁷

Participants at the dharna too were attracted to it for a variety of reasons. A local textile workers' union expressed support declaring that a government whose promises and actions were so different had no right to ask for people's votes.⁶⁸ The right to information was only one on the CM's list of unmet promises, with other promises ranging from a water dispute in the region to changing administrative boundaries. In this case, the dharna had simply provided the union members a platform to share their frustration and thoughts regarding broken promises more broadly. Even as diverse groups came up to join the dharna, dharna organizers also actively reached out to more people. For example, young adults from 35 villages bicycled a 100 km to reach Beawar, discussing the RTI at villages en route.⁶⁹ Meanwhile, a process of administrative enquiry into corruption in development works that MKSS had helped initiate in a nearby panchayat found government officers guilty of corruption on preliminary inspection.⁷⁰ The decision boosted MKSS's confidence that its demands were timely, legitimate and would resonate with residents of the region.

Alongside the attempt to reach out to more people and to establish the legitimacy of its demands, MKSS continued to strategize about escalating the idea of an RTI beyond Beawar. Participants agreed that demand for an RTI and the anti-corruption message of the dharna would be taken very seriously by voters at the upcoming national elections given the context of recent scams in India.⁷¹ Nor were voters likely to forget the reactions of the government and different political parties to the dharna. By this time, politicians too had realized the stakes and started to speak at the dharna. The head of the local Congress committee expressed his support for the dharna.⁷² Many other elected leaders and regional politicians affiliated with different political parties had expressed written support for the demands put forth at the dharna.⁷³ BJP members, however, had a hard time deciding what their public face would be and BJP Members of Legislative Assembly

talk by Anil Prakash, a Ganga Mukti Andolan activist : "*Videshi kompaniyon ko tho soochanyen mil sakti bain, aam aadmi ko kyon nahi?*" ("If foreign companies can get information, why not the common man?") in *Nirantar*, April 23, 1996, 1.

⁶⁵ "*Arbon rupaiyon ke chunaavi vyaya mein paardarsbita tho chaabiye*" ("Transparency needed for billions of rupees spent on elections") in *Nirantar*, April 30, 1996, 1.

⁶⁶ "*Soochana ke adbikaar ki ladaai badi hai: Manchanda*" ("The battle for a right to information is huge: Manchanda") in *Nirantar*, May 4, 1996, 1.

⁶⁷ "*Moballa stbar par soochanaon ke adbikaar ki maang zor pakdne lagi, dharna jaari*" ("Demand for right to information gains strength at mohalla level, dharna continues") in *Nirantar*, May 8, 1996, 1.

⁶⁸ "*Shekhawat ki vaayda khilaafi se naaraaz shram sangh dwaara chunaavon ka babisbkar boga*" ("Angry with Shekhawat's broken promises, workers' union to boycott elections") in *Nirantar*, April 24, 1996, 1.

⁶⁹ "*Grameen yuva jatbthe cycle rally se pabunche, dharna sthal par aaj 'soochana' sammelan*" ("Rural youth groups arrive following cycle rally, 'information' summit at dharna site today") in *Nirantar*, April 24, 1996, 1.

⁷⁰ "*Gaban ke doshi sarpanch va prasbaasak ki zamaanat ki arzi khaarij*" ("Bail application of sarpanch and administrator accused of embezzlement declined") in *Nirantar*, April 20, 1996, 3.

⁷¹ "*Dharne ke bane rabne se Bha Ja Pa ko voton mein ghata. 'Soochana ke adbikaar' baabat sammelan poorna*" ("Continuing dharna likely to cause loss of votes to BJP. 'Right to information' conference concluded") in *Nirantar*, April 25, 1996, 1.

⁷² "*Soochana ka adbikaar na dena loktantra ka sabse bada makhhol hai: Bajari*" ("Not giving a right to information the biggest joke in a democracy: Bajari") in *Nirantar*, April 26, 1996, 1.

⁷³ "*Soochana ke dharne ko vyaapak samarthan*" ("Information' dharna gets widespread support") in *Nirantar*, April 30, 1996, 1.

(MLAs) never visited the dharna.⁷⁴ The fact that the ruling party MLA had not made a single appearance at the dharna nor evinced support or any reaction to the demands continued to rankle among dharna participants.⁷⁵ Meetings and correspondence between dharna participants and the CM continued in May after the national elections.⁷⁶ But a written order from the administration proved elusive. Dharna organizers started a parallel dharna in the state capital, Jaipur, on May 6, when their demands did not elicit response.⁷⁷

As the two dharnas continued and there seemed to be little action by the government, local participants in Beawar even suggested holding a one-day shutdown in the city.⁷⁸ *Nirantar* published a piece where it questioned the government's intentions.⁷⁹ Finally, on May 15, 1996, the government issued a statement to the press that it would implement the CM's commitment on a right to information.⁸⁰ It announced the constitution of a committee that would investigate the logistics of implementation, especially on how to make photocopies and certified copies of government records available to citizens on demand. The committee was to submit its recommendations in two months. MKSS saw the government's announcement as a victory. It added that while it was accepting the government's announcement in good faith for the moment, protests would be resumed if more comprehensive orders were not issued within the two month timeframe.

Following the CM's statement, MKSS concluded the Beawar dharna which had lasted 40 days. Rather than focusing on the government's final statement, MKSS described the long process of negotiation with the government in a statement to the press upon the conclusion of the dharna. According to the statement, two factors had been responsible for delaying written orders: the internal struggle between bureaucrats and politicians and a pre-occupation with the modalities of implementing the order.⁸¹ Some of the negotiation was

⁷⁴ A Congress MLA declared at the dharna that his party recognized the Right to Information as a tool for eliminating corruption. While the Congress wished to eliminate corruption, he said the BJP government in Rajasthan was scared that its corruption would be exposed if it issued an order for an RTI. See "*Bba Ja Pa sarkar ke brasbtachaar ki pol kbulne ke dar se 'soochana ka adbikaar nabi diya ja raba: Motwani'*" ("Fear of exposure of its corruption keeps BJP government from granting a 'right to information': Motwani") in *Nirantar*, April 20, 1996, 1.

⁷⁵ "*Dharna ka bhonpu bhi do din bandh, grameen karyakarta bhi chunaav mein koode*" ("Dharna horn too will be silent for two days, rural workers too will jump into the elections") in *Nirantar*, April 26, 1996, 1.

⁷⁶ Note that the state-level government was not changed by the results of the national-level elections.

⁷⁷ "*Sarkar na maani tho 'soochana' ko lekar Jaipur bhi dharna*" ("If the government doesn't consent, dharna on 'information' in Jaipur as well") in *Nirantar*, April 29, 1996, 1. In "*Jaipur Ajmer mein bhi soochana ke adbikaar ko lekar dharna sburu, 8 ko Khairnar aayenge*" ("Dharna about right to information starts in Jaipur and Ajmer as well, Khairnar to speak on the 8th") in *Nirantar*, May 7, 1996, 1.

⁷⁸ "*Isi saptah 'Beawar bandh' ki ghosbna sambhav. Soochana ke adbikaar ki maang ke samarthan mein naagarikon ki pehal*" (Announcement of 'Beawar bandh' possible this week. Residents' initiative to express support for demand for right to information") in *Nirantar*, May 13, 1996, 1.

⁷⁹ "*Mu.Mantri par soochana ka adbikaar dene mein taalmatol ka aarop*" ("CM accused of delaying right to information") in *Nirantar*, May 14, 1996, 1.

⁸⁰ Also "*Soochana ka Adbikaar' sambandbi dharna 40 din baad samaapt*" ("Dharna related to 'right to information' concluded after 40 days") in *Nirantar*, May 16, 1996; and "*Soochana ka adbikaar' laagoo karne ko vyaavahaarik banaane hetbu samiti ke gatban ka swaagat!*" ("Constitution of committee to make implementation of 'right to information' official welcomed") in *Nirantar*, May 17, 1996, 1.

⁸¹ In a Hindi press release dated May 15, 1996 as well as in a letter from MKSS in English dated May 24, 1996 titled "Access to Information: The Government moves grudgingly." According to these documents, MKSS's demands of the government's written order from the start were that it had to include the provision for photocopying records and receiving certified copies. The government claimed that working out the modalities of implementing such an entitlement would take some time, which MKSS accepted. However, MKSS had asked for a time frame for the issue of an order, which the government was not willing to provide. The CS's letter on May 12, 1996 too did not address MKSS's demands and was therefore rejected. Finally, the letter issued on May

also over who would get credit for the idea of an RTI. MKSS criticized the government's claim that MKSS was trying to garner credit for an idea which had, in fact, originated from the government itself.⁸² My interview with the CS during the campaign also reflected a similar struggle for credit. The CS insisted that while MKSS deserved credit for its “hard work and superb organizing,” its work could not have happened in a less supportive environment than the one that the Rajasthan government had offered at the time.⁸³ He argued that the Rajasthan government had already been thinking about a right to information when the dharna took place. Irrespective of the origin of the idea, the struggle goes to show how important it was for the government to be seen as the source of an entitlement.

It would take many more months for the findings of the committee to be made public, and for a written order to be crafted based on the report.⁸⁴ It was also four more years before a Rajasthan RTI came into being and nine for the national equivalent. Nevertheless, the Beawar dharna was a milestone in the RTI campaign in that it was the first time that the idea and terminology of a “Right to Information” firmed up, and received recognition from an economically, socially and geographically diverse group of people.⁸⁵ Most of all, this was the first time the idea was posed to the state and managed to receive a written response from it. How did the Beawar dharna manage to do all this and why did it matter? I examine these questions next.

4.3.1 The Beawar dharna and *information* as boundary object

The timing of the Beawar dharna was important in shaping its outcomes. The upcoming elections put the BJP in a difficult position. On the one hand, the BJP could take credit for having been the first political party to make an announcement granting rights to see panchayat records. However, the BJP faced a lot of resistance internally and from bureaucrats, which made it difficult for the CM to bring out an official order confirming the announcement. This discrepancy between promise and actions left the BJP in an embarrassing position. Meanwhile, other political parties were forced to express their support after a few days of waiting and watching. More generally, the Beawar dharna exposed the fractures and collusions between politicians and bureaucrats. Even as the CM seemed willing to make panchayat records available, bureaucrats seemed unwilling. Some of this was related to the modalities of implementing such an order across the state for which bureaucrats would be held responsible. But the resistance seemed to have as much to do with an unwillingness to make the records available at all. Thus, the point I made earlier about the non-monolithic and fractured state also held in the case of the Beawar dharna.

The material form of elements of the information order was also significant in the dharna. In fact, the dharna hinged on material form in two ways. First, MKSS demanded that the right to copy records down by hand was not enough and that photocopies of records had to be made available. Photocopies were considered more

14, 1996 met the demands that MKSS said it had been making all along. That is why the dharna was concluded following the May 14 letter.

⁸² The government claimed that MKSS had tried to gain popularity by agitating during the sensitive election period, had misinformed the public and had tried to take credit for an entitlement that was the government's brainchild. MKSS saw these claims as a reflection of the government's attitude towards citizens: an aversion to “peaceful democratic mobilisation and protest” and to talking “to its own people” and of wanting to “initiate, deliberate and execute all creative work within the state of Rajasthan” by itself, without any need for dialogue with a cross section of people. Letter from MKSS dated May 24, 1996 titled “Access to Information: The Government moves grudgingly.”

⁸³ Interview with M.L. Mehta, CS at the time, at his residence, June 2, 2009.

⁸⁴ The report from the committee was declared “confidential.”

⁸⁵ The National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI) was constituted on August 1, 1996 and would go on to lead and support RTI campaigns across India.

legitimate and were more acceptable as proof than records copied by hand. Second, the dharna's primary demand was that the CM issue a written order of his own verbal announcement from a year ago. Written order carried more weight and was binding in a way that a verbal announcement was not, even when the announcement was made in the Legislative Assembly in full view of the press. Thus, in both cases, material form shaped the social meaning of the content and was part of the message rather than a container for it.

While the points about the non-monolithic character of the state and the significance of material form hold in the Beawar dharna, my main argument about the dharna is regarding the work done by the term *information* in bringing people together in the dharna. The Beawar dharna was able to involve a range of people, including people with different occupations, economic situations and areas of concern. The use of theater, music and speeches helped in this process. But the use of the term *information* that people could not refuse alignment with, was equally significant. Specific examples of the need for “information” from people working in a variety of domains helped to simultaneously root and broaden the scope of the term. If Patkar brought in environmental concerns, Joshi saw RTI as important for the press; Mander talked about its relevance to combat corruption; and mill workers saw it as a way to match actions to the claims made on an election manifesto. MKSS itself moved from its focus on a specific document like the muster roll to talking about “information.”

I have focused so far on the reasons why the use of a single term *information* to refer to a multiplicity of things obscures politics. However, I would argue that in the Beawar dharna, the benefits of reifying information become visible: the use of a single term succeeded in bringing together very different groups of people precisely by obscuring their differences. As I pointed out earlier, the individuals and groups participating in the dharna were asking for different things when they demanded a “right to information.” Yet, traders, workers, activists and bureaucrats, who might otherwise have disagreed on many issues and on strategy, were able to agree on this one demand. The government too was unable to refuse the demand because of the progressive connotation of terms such as transparency and openness that were associated with the terms *information* and *right to information*. In these ways, *information* behaved as a boundary object that different groups of people could discuss with some degree of familiarity and confidence, even if they used the term somewhat differently in their own domains of work.

4.4 The political life of information in MKSS's work

I have so far examined and arrived at conclusions about MKSS's campaigns between 1987 and 1996, a campaign at a time. In this section, I summarize the politics shaping the creation, value, circulation and usage of information, the thing and the term, in MKSS's various campaigns. I use this summary to draw conclusions that cut across the different campaigns.

4.4.1 Information order and the practice of governing

A central concern of chapters 3 and 4 was to address my first research question: what are the processes by which an information order is created, maintained or changed? I argued using MKSS's work that the information order was used as a technique of governing that shaped and was shaped by the boundaries of (and between) the state and its population.

The creation of individual elements of the information order such as land certificates, muster rolls, bills/vouchers and MBs was shaped by the nature of the boundaries between state and population, including assumptions about the benefactor-beneficiary relationship between the two in the context of relief works. In

turn, elements of the information order were used to maintain these boundaries by restricting who could access or manipulate these elements, a fact that was brought home by the absolute secrecy surrounding the muster roll during the minimum wage campaigns. I argued that material form also played a role in the processes of making or maintaining boundaries, since the written form and technical language of documents made them opaque to large sections of a population while being perfectly comprehensible to bureaucrats.

However, while the information order was fundamentally deployed as a technique to create and maintain existing boundaries between state and population, I argued that the blurred nature of these boundaries also allowed MKSS to bring about changes in the information order and its elements. MKSS campaigns also showed that “the state” and “population” were not monolithic; that boundaries between the two were blurred; and that connections across the boundary (such as it was) allowed for some negotiation over the nature of the information order. The different levels of “the state” meant that it hardly ever behaved as a single entity in any campaign. Whether it was conflicts between the panchayat, block, district, state and central bureaucracies, or between the bureaucracy and politicians, these differences affected the extent to which the information order could change or remain unchanged. Meanwhile, connections across the state-population boundary also shaped resistance or further negotiation of the information order. These included caste or kinship relationships within “the state” as well as between “the state” and “population,” as also the activists' social connections with higher levels of the bureaucracy that allowed them access to records and a say in the creation, modification or implementation of rules. Once again, I also focused on the role of material form in effecting some of the changes to elements of the information order, particularly in the course of the public hearings.

Thus, I attempted to show in chapters 3 and 4 that the thing called “government information” needs to be understood within the context of the overall practice of governing. Rather than evaluating information as a thing with intrinsic economic properties, the need is to understand how any given instance of “government information” works within a larger information order that is both shaped by and shapes the politics and practice of governing.

Shankar Singh summed it up very well as he pointed to the importance of politics and material form in the practice of governing and in MKSS's work. Singh talked about the importance of *kaagaz*, which refers to both “paper” the material and “papers” in the sense of documents in Hindi:⁸⁶

We have all been hearing for a long time that there's corruption, that many thefts are happening. However, unless you know the specifics, everyone can keep saying this but we won't know what it is or how it is done. Until you see the kaagaz, you don't know. When we saw the kaagaz, we saw the difference between the story the kaagaz told, and the story we were told. The other thing is that we often hear that the money came from Delhi and they embezzled it. But how did they do it? Till you prepare some specific kaagaz for the funds, you can't show it in your accounts. You have to book that expenditure and at every level – from the center or the state, to the block level, to the village, to the worksite . . . What are the stories at each level? If you don't have enough children to show at the village day-care, you have to create false records. If these false records are taken to the public, what happens? For there is what the kaagaz says, and then there is what people's tongues say . . . The government trusts only the kaagaz, not people's

⁸⁶ Interview with Shankar Singh, Kaamli Ghat, May 26, 2009.

tongues . . . but people proved these false.⁸⁷ Kaagaz has a *jaadoo* [magic] of its own.

4.4.2 The term *information* and its work as a boundary object

In concluding this chapter, I address my second research question, asking what the use of the term *information* achieved in MKSS's campaigns. I argued using MKSS's work, especially the Beawar dharna, that the flexibility of the term allowed it to act as a boundary object between urban and rural residents, activists, civil servants, journalists and politicians. While each of these groups of people had different uses for "information" and different reasons for demanding a right to information, they agreed that the demand had to be made. By being "both adaptable to different viewpoints and robust enough to maintain identity across them" (Star and Greisemer 1989, 387), "information" allowed MKSS to expand its support base for an RTI campaign.

What struck me in multiple interviews and conversations with MKSS members was that they would use the words "kaagaz" (papers) or "*dastaavez*" (documents) when talking about government records until the minimum wage campaign. While referring to incidents after that campaign, they started referring to "soochana" (information). An oft-repeated event in the narrative of the Right to Information campaign suggested that the basic assumptions of the campaign took birth in Devdoongri.⁸⁸ However, this narrative still did not explain the use of the specific term *information* in these campaigns. Most members had no precise recollection of when or why exactly the term came into use.⁸⁹ They suggested that it came into use so that a wider range of records and more ground could be covered in their demands.⁹⁰ Some suggested that it might have entered through middle-class vocabulary. M.L. Mehta, the CS at the time, suggested that the CM of Rajasthan was the first to put the idea in terms of *information*, even if elements of the idea already existed by the time the CM made his announcement.⁹¹ However, I showed earlier that the IDSJ report from 1992 (that is, prior to the CM's announcement at the Assembly) had already mentioned the idea of a right to information in those terms.

While tracing the origin of a term precisely is almost impossible, the move from referencing a specific thing like a muster roll to using a broader and more flexible term such as *information* worked in the interest of expanding the support base for the campaign. The use of a reified term such as *information* nonetheless had its benefits, even if it obscured the specifics, imputed intrinsic properties and value on "information" and made invisible the politics of how that reified object circulated. MKSS leveraged these benefits to anchor a

⁸⁷ "Also, I am not talking about only monetary corruption, but also in decision making during policy making." Interview with Shankar Singh, Kaamli Ghat, May 26, 2009.

⁸⁸ "They articulated the growing recognition over years of struggle and what became the Right To Information (RTI) campaign's basic assumption. With amazing clarity and simplicity they said, 'So long as these records do not come out, we will always be liars. They have to come out, if we are to survive'" (Kidambi 2008, 8).

⁸⁹ "We went from kaagaz to soochana through conversations . . . even we don't know where the word came from" ("*Baaton baaton mein kaagaz se soochana tak pabunche . . . bame bhi nabi pata ki yah shabd kabaan se aaya*"). Interview with Chunni Singh, MKSS worker, in Paluna, May 31, 2009.

⁹⁰ An MKSS member said that the word might well have originated from middle class members (perhaps first in the IDSJ reports), but the underlying demand and concept came from village residents with whom they interacted. Moreover, the idea of a Right to Information was anyway present in the world at large and speakers at the Beawar dharna had also articulated it. The transition from asking for a right to photocopy to a right to information was almost seamless as a result. Interview with Bhanwar Meghwanshi, MKSS worker, in Devdoongri, May 25, 2009.

⁹¹ "The rudiments were always there, but the question of giving copies came from the CM." Interview with M.L. Mehta, CS at the time, at his residence, June 2, 2009.

very political campaign around a reification.

The last two chapters showed us that the circulation of information – the thing and the term – was political and situated in the practice of governing in the context of MKSS's political campaigns. I now move on to examine Swaminathan Foundation's Information Village Research Project. Using a project that did not define itself as a political initiative, the objective of chapter 5 is to demonstrate that the circulation of information is *always* political, whether or not an initiative frames it thus.

Chapter 5

Transacting in “information”: An information shop in practice

Kilipet looked a little different when I got off the bus that day.¹ The sides of the road were festooned with plants, while paper flags fluttered overhead. The village entrance was marked by strategically placed billboards on either side of the main road. The boards featured photographs and messages of welcome for a Puducherry politician.² There was a bustle of activity centered on a plot of unoccupied land opposite the local Village Knowledge Centre (VKC). Clearly, something big was going on.



Fig 5.1 The main road after a gym inauguration by a politician

Photo: Janaki Srinivasan

The VKC itself was locked and I went on to the VKC operator's house to ask her what was happening in the village that day. Even before I could reach the house, I saw the operator's 10-year-old daughter on the street.

¹ Kilipet is a pseudonym for a village in Puducherry. I use pseudonyms for all village names in this chapter in order to maintain anonymity. Only the names of cities (e.g. Pondicherry) and easily-identifiable locations in IVRP history (e.g. Villianur where the VRC was set up) have been retained as such.

² Liberally photoshopped billboards such as the ones in the photograph above are a common feature in Tamilnadu and Pondicherry. They are used for a variety of occasions, including wishing community members and public figures on their birthdays or weddings. Party affiliations are clearly marked on such hoardings.

She told me that a politician had visited the village in the morning to inaugurate a gym on the vacant plot of land. The inaugural was followed by a feast. When I asked the girl if she had eaten at the feast, she stared back incredulously. “I can't go there,” she said. “He [the guest of honor] is not from my father's *kutchi* [party].”

I found this episode telling. If a 10-year-old thought of the inauguration of a community gym and eating at a communal feast in terms of party affiliations, was it conceivable that any aspect of living in Kilipet could be delinked from politics, organized or otherwise? In the days that I had spent talking to residents of Kilipet, politics had pervaded every conversation and every discussion: for me, this episode encapsulated in a moment the centrality of politics, including organized party politics, in the everyday lives of residents in this village. Yet, Swaminathan Foundation's Information Village Research Project (IVRP) had envisioned the Kilipet VKC as an apolitical intervention in the village. To what extent did the Foundation succeed in achieving this goal?

5.1 Introduction

Using the case of the Kilipet VKC, I argue in this chapter that the creation, provision and use of “government information” is *always* political, whether or not an initiative frames it thus. My analysis in this chapter builds on material from chapters 2, 3 and 4. In chapter 2, I described how information was framed by IVRP. Based on an analysis of project documents and interviews with project personnel, I concluded that IVRP was envisioned as a project focused on “information shops” where information would be transacted (sought, produced, provided, consumed). Of particular relevance was the dissemination of “accurate information on the entitlements from publicly funded poverty-alleviation schemes,” which could potentially reduce the wastage of resources that resulted from “non-demand” by beneficiaries (MSSRF 1997). Moreover, to the extent that local politics was seen as the business of village-level councils and information shops were encouraged to stay away from it, the work of information shops was not seen as intertwined with village-level politics or as inherently political.

I have already argued in the context of MKSS's campaigns that the circulation of “government information” is political and takes place within an information order. Further, this information order is shaped by boundaries of the state, and between the state and its population. In turn, the working of the information order shapes these boundaries. Connections across the state-population boundary offer opportunities to make changes in the information order or to its individual elements. In chapters 3 and 4, it was MKSS's campaigns that leveraged such opportunities. In this chapter, I build on these insights from previous chapters to argue that the production, provision, and use of “government information” is always political whether or not an initiative sees it that way. However, in the absence of an overtly political campaign (such as the ones from chapters 3 and 4), it takes a different mode of everyday (and sometimes invisible) politics to bring about changes in elements of the information order.³ I make this argument based on the working of the “apolitical” information shop in Kilipet. I argue that the Kilipet information shop (now renamed “Village Knowledge Centre” or “VKC”) and its operators became involved in the creation and verification of social facts for the state; were drawn on as valuable resources for petitioning the state, and deemed irrelevant in arenas where they chose to stay away from politics. The Kilipet VKC, thus, operated in and through the political terrain of the village in its work of information provision.

I construct my account of the working of the Kilipet VKC based on participant observation work in Kilipet and

³ While the organized political campaigns did not preclude everyday politics in the case of MKSS's work either, the chances of digging up this type of politics from fifteen years ago were few, given that memories were faint and narratives more or less frozen.

conversations with VKC operators, now called “Knowledge Workers” (KWs), Kilipet residents, Swaminathan Foundation personnel and state functionaries between August and November 2009. I begin with a description of Kilipet and the Kilipet VKC based on my observations and conversations. I then examine what Kilipet KWs, residents, Swaminathan Foundation personnel and state functionaries perceived to be the role and relevance of the VKC in Kilipet. In this way, I identify the processes of creation, provision and use of “government information” in the village, as well as the VKC's relationship to these processes. I use the information order construct in the subsequent section to analyze the processes identified above. With this, I argue that the circulation of “information” is always political. I conclude by outlining the different types of politics that were involved in making changes to individual elements of the information order in Kilipet.

IVRP was started in Puducherry district of the Union Territory (UT) of Puducherry. The reasons for choosing Puducherry were many, as mentioned in chapter 2, and included the UT's small size, the proximity of rural areas to the city of Pondicherry, Swaminathan Foundation's familiarity with the region and an administration that was eager to host IVRP. Besides these factors, three other aspects of governance in Puducherry UT and district shaped the working of the Kilipet VKC:⁴

a. Elected panchayats were relatively new in Puducherry UT in 2009 and traditional panchayats had been village-level decision-makers till 2006. A direct consequence was that most VKCs had been set up with the help of traditional panchayats with whom the project had its longest and strongest relationships. In general, traditional panchayats continued to be important in Puducherry in the period of my visit, while elected panchayats were unclear about their powers and role.

b. Puducherry's status as a UT and its size meant that elected members of the Puducherry Legislative Assembly were more visible and proximate at the village level compared to other parts of India. In combination with the previous point, the role of panchayats was often further restricted as Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) held on to the influence and power they had legally possessed prior to the elected panchayat.⁵

c. Migration was an important aspect of the economic and social order in Puducherry. Even as people migrated to Puducherry (especially from neighboring Tamilnadu) to improve their economic and social conditions, migration introduced the fear that welfare schemes would be misused by outsiders. Identity documents therefore became important to the state as it administered welfare schemes earmarked for residents.

These three aspects of governance in Puducherry shaped the concerns and capacities of Kilipet residents, as well as the working of the Kilipet VKC, which I describe next.

5.2 The Kilipet VKC

Kilipet is a village of about 150 households, twelve km from the city of Pondicherry. Few buses connected Kilipet to either Pondicherry or to its neighboring villages and all that could be said for sure to someone traveling to Kilipet by public transport was that they would eventually reach the village! On one such

⁴ See appendix 2 for a more detailed background of Puducherry, as well as for its ties with Tamilnadu.

⁵ “In Pondicherry, panchayats have no real power or funds yet. MLAs made sure of that, keeping all funds and powers with themselves, much as they had in earlier times with traditional panchayats.” Interview with IVRP advisor at the VRC, August 24, 2009. He went to say that this was also the reason panchayat elections were held so late in Puducherry in the first place.

occasion, after missing a direct bus to Kilipet, I found myself walking a two km stretch with two women who lived in Kilipet. One of them told me she had been a student at the Kilipet VKC.⁶ She also told me about the popularity of the public announcement (PA) system used by the VKC. “When people hear [the announcement] on the loudspeaker, they lower their TV volumes and pause whatever they might be doing to listen” she said. I entered Kilipet armed with this story about the place of the VKC in the lives of its residents.

As soon as I entered the village, I saw a one-room brick-and-cement building on the main road that was identified as the Kilipet VKC by a bilingual board at its entrance. Antennae and a pole with four attached loudspeakers also made the VKC building stand out from other tenements in its neighborhood. All signs on the outside walls of the VKC prominently identified its association with Swaminathan Foundation. Next to the entrance of the VKC hung another sign marketing it as a computer training center. Adjacent to that was a blackboard on which were chalked current news items of interest. The VKC building had doors that opened directly onto the road as well as a window and a porch. I discovered in later visits that the shade offered by the VKC had made the space outside the building a de facto bus stop and, occasionally, a place of business for a visiting fish vendor.

Inside, the VKC was furnished with a bench and a long table that had three desktop computers on it. These computers, I learned later, were earmarked for students (One or more of the systems was constantly in need of repairs). Along a second wall was a desk with a desktop computer, speakers, printer, an uninterrupted power supply (UPS) and controls for the PA system. This computer, I found out, was used either by the KW for entering records of VKC usage from user registers, or by local expert users. I discovered that KWs had to maintain twelve notebooks on VKC usage and maintenance, some of which were also on the desk. Three plastic chairs and a nightstand with the day's newspaper and more notebooks made up most of the remaining furniture in the room. A corner of the VKC housed a bright red coin-operated phone atop an unused television set. I had already found out that KWs used these phones to communicate with other VKCs and with the VRC. In fact, KWs had been instructed to call each other often in order to “share information.”⁷ The walls of the VKC were as densely packed as the rest of the room and sported calendars and posters in Tamil and in English on a variety of topics, including posters by local NGOs on the *Thagaval Ariyum Sattam* (“Right to Information” in Tamil) and the law against domestic abuse.⁸ Also taped on the wall was a printout of the village map created by one of the earlier KWs (see fig 5.1 below).

When I first visited the Kilipet VKC, only one of its two KWs, Lakshmi, was at the VKC.⁹ She was in her mid-thirties and had been working as a KW for four years when I met her. I asked her how she had decided to work at the center and how she had been selected. Lakshmi responded,

They look for people with a public bent of mind. I heard about the opening and thought I should make use of this resource in my village instead of sitting at home. I was not from a self-help group, but I applied. One of the boundary partners and people who started the VKC in the village vouched for me and I got the job.

⁶ Conversation with women on the road to Kilipet, August 13, 2009.

⁷ From the monthly KW meeting at the VRC in Pillayarkuppam, August 10, 2009.

⁸ These posters were seldom directly related to the everyday work done at the VKCs; they mostly came from one-off training sessions that Swaminathan Foundation personnel had either helped organize or had attended.

⁹ KWs and village residents are identified by pseudonyms in this chapter to maintain anonymity. First interview with Lakshmi at the VKC, August 13, 2009. Multiple conversations at the VKC and at her residence through August, September and October, 2009.

Lakshmi said that there was high turnover in this job. Many KWs had come and gone before her at the Kilipet VKC. “Our circumstances are not such that we can work for long in these conditions,” she explained.¹⁰ She went to say that KWs before her had used what they learnt at the VKC to get better or higher-paying jobs.

Lakshmi provided me a basic introduction to the services offered by the Kilipet VKC and its working. She explained,

We [the VKC] give education and agriculture-related *thagaval* [information], thagaval about government help to people with disabilities, about openings in small industries work . . . We announce when rations are being distributed at the [government-run] ration shop . . . We also announced about 100-days work and the making of job cards¹¹. . . We announce when loan repayment waivers are granted.

The substance for these announcements came from newspapers and from the VRC. Sometimes, they resulted from conversations with other KWs over the VKC telephone.

Besides the announcements, details about government-funded schemes and opportunities were also written up on the blackboard outside the VKC. In addition, KWs also helped people with print-outs of government forms and with filling in government forms. Further, since KWs were supposed to know the village and its residents, government officers also came to them for assistance.¹² Lakshmi mentioned that

Officers visit us all the time. They even ask us to verify particulars such as whether people are actually Below Poverty Line or landless as they claim in their applications. They come to verify when a house is burnt down [inhabitants of burnt houses receive some relief payments].

I had some sense of what the VKC did at the end of my conversation with Lakshmi. However, as I returned to the Kilipet VKC day after day, I quickly realized that I had to look beyond the VKC in order to understand why some people visited the VKC while others did not and why certain services at the VKC attracted more people than did others. To understand why the VKC worked the way it did in Kilipet, I “looked beyond” the Kilipet VKC spatially (to understand the layout of the village, its place within the panchayat and the organization of community assets within the panchayat), historically (to understand the geographical conditions and caste history that had shaped occupation patterns and the interaction of communities in Kilipet) and politically (to understand the political factions among which the VKC operated, including factions created by Swaminathan Foundation's earlier work in Kilipet).

5.2.1 Kilipet beyond the VKC

The first step in looking beyond the VKC was to look beyond it spatially. I already knew that the main road on which the VKC was located was very important to Kilipet, since the only mode of public transit to and from Kilipet plied on this road. The road led to relatively large villages in either direction. In one direction, it led to the local middle school and the boundary of a neighboring village, Peria Agraharam that was part of the same panchayat as Kilipet, and further to another village (large village #1). In the other direction, it led to another

¹⁰ Earlier KWs were volunteers. KWs' salaries were still nominal.

¹¹ “100 days work” is how Kilipet residents referred to work conducted under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS).

¹² I return to this in more detail in section 5.2.2

large village (large village #2) and also to the Village Administrative Office (VAO) office, the commune headquarters and the city of Pondicherry (see fig 5.1).

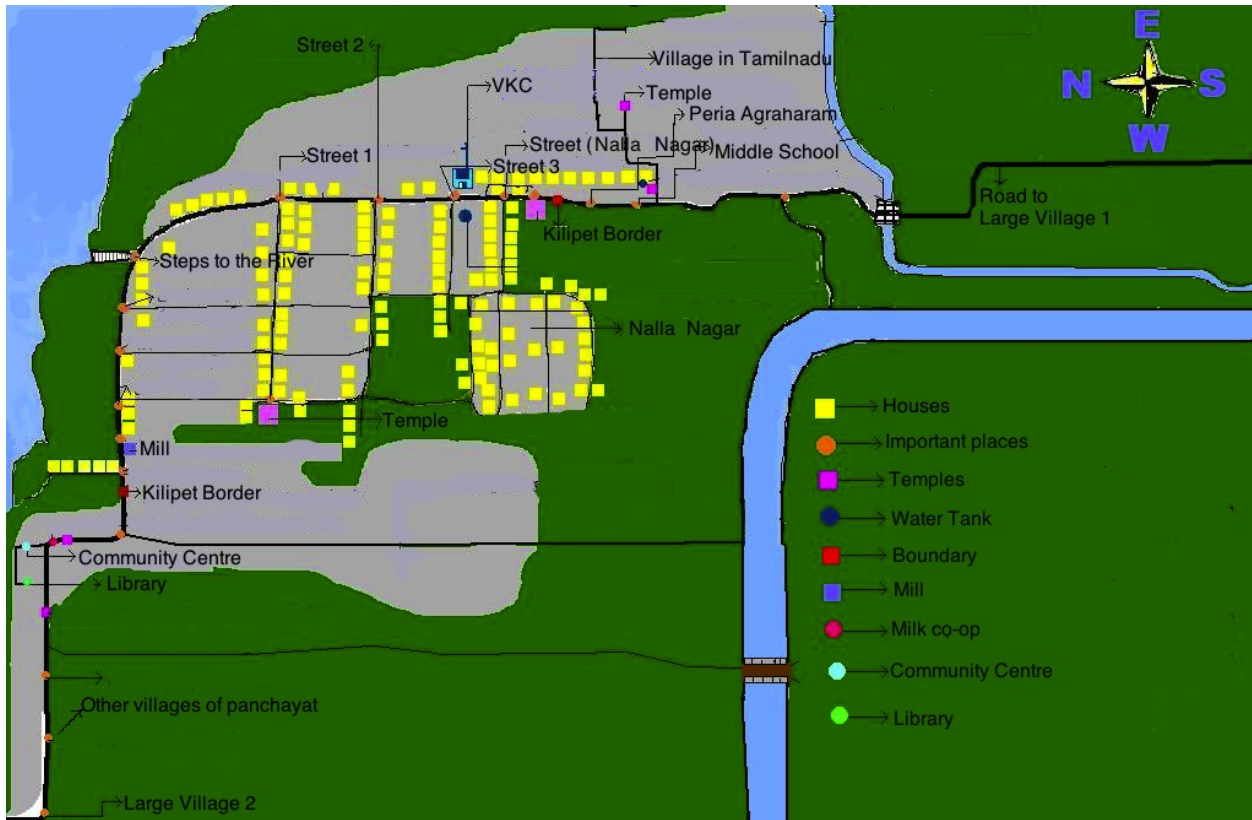


Fig. 5.1 Village map created by a former KW using the computer at Kilipet VKC (with modifications)¹³

While the Kilipet main road had a few houses and a grocery store, most houses were located on three other streets of the village. Some of these houses had flat concrete roofs indicating permanence. But many had temporary thatched roofs and a few houses were under construction. In addition, there were about 30 houses on a piece of land that a former MLA had bought for the villagers when their homes were demolished following a widening of the main road. This land had been allotted to residents using tokens and was now called “Nalla Nagar.” Nalla Nagar had no roads, no water connection or authorized electricity connections since none of the residents possessed *pattas* (land certificates) for the land on which their houses were built. Because of the uncertain status of *pattas*, all houses in Nalla Nagar were thatched and temporary structures.

¹³ The text in the original indicated the names of places and was in Tamil. I anonymized and translated the text, and also restricted it to places mentioned in the narrative.



Fig. 5.2 Houses on one of Kilipet's cemented streets: porch and decorated area in front of a house on the main road
Photos: Janaki Srinivasan

Temporally, “looking beyond” helped me understand how a river had been pivotal to the organization of life in Kilipet. In the 1950s, a flood had forced the Kilipet community to move from the banks of a river to their present location, a move responsible for some of the present-day land issues in the village.¹⁴ If a river was historically responsible for Kilipet's present geographical location, the history of caste divisions in the region dictated its place within the spatial organization of the panchayat and its distance from the panchayat's assets and resources. Kilipet is a Scheduled Caste (SC) or *dalit* village flanked on all sides by Backward Caste (BC) villages. Since traditional village councils were the only decision-making body for the village till the panchayat elections in 2007, Kilipet residents claimed that the BC-dominated village councils brought infrastructure and facilities to only the BC villages. As a result, shared facilities such as the library, community hall, ration shop, co-operative bank and middle school were all located in one of the BC villages of the panchayat. Administrative offices such as the VAO's office or commune panchayat were even farther away, located beyond the panchayat and in larger villages or towns. In combination with poor public transit connections, Kilipet was a comparatively inaccessible village by the standards of rural Puducherry and Kilipet residents were keenly aware of this status.

Economic and occupational opportunities had historically overlapped with caste lines in the panchayat. Kilipet residents had little land of their own. In her introduction to the village, Lakshmi mentioned that no one in Kilipet had more than 0.75 acres of land even today, a fact confirmed by the village profile maintained by the VRC as well the VAO's office.¹⁵ People typically had 0.25, 0.5 or 0.75 acres of land (when they had land at all) and families worked their small piece of land themselves. However, a land holding of this size was not enough to support a household in this region. Most Kilipet residents worked as casual agricultural laborers (“coolie”) in neighboring villages in order to earn a living. In the past, they had worked on the land of higher caste (mostly BC) land owners in the adjacent village of Peria Agraharam. However, as land was increasingly sold off as plots to real estate agencies in response to a rising demand for residential and commercial space,

¹⁴ Interviews with multiple residents, including a bandmaster and artiste/political worker at their residences on August 26, 2009.

¹⁵ The village profile created by the VKC indicated that only sixteen people in the village had land: of these, ten were marginal farmers (in the less than 1 hectare category), four were small farmers (owning between one-two hectare). (0.4 hectare = 1 acre).

even this requirement for agricultural laborers had declined. As a result, residents needed to travel farther to find coolie work. Further, most individuals belonging to the older generation had not had the opportunity or financial capacity to enroll in formal school-based education; nor did they have the social connections that could have helped them land a job in the public or private sector. In fact, the lack of the right social connections made jobs difficult to come by even for the few recent college graduates of the village.

Looking beyond the nine-to-five schedule of the VKC and at life on the streets of Kilipet through the day reflected the extent to which Kilipet residents needed to step out of Kilipet to access economic and educational resources and opportunities. Kilipet streets were mostly deserted during the day (9 a.m. to 4 p.m.), with a large percentage of the adults going out for agricultural coolie work or other odd jobs, while kids and young adults went to school or college. Only the start and end of the school or work day, and the arrival or departure of the bus, brought a sudden flurry of activity to the village.¹⁶ The morning bus would ferry most of the working population and older students to Pondicherry. A short while later, younger students would make their way to the middle school in neighboring Peria Agraharam. The elderly usually stayed at home or on the village streets in front of their houses during the day. Other than that, there was little movement on the main road during the day except for the bus and the occasional vehicle. After 4 p.m., middle school students would start making their way back home at the end of the school day; some of these students also stopped by the VKC. A few school teachers also passed by the VKC on their way back to Pondicherry where most of them lived. The evening bus from Pondicherry, meanwhile, dropped off older students from their Pondicherry-based schools or colleges. As evening set, the working population returned to Kilipet. Soon after, the streets were full of the sounds of people at the communal tap, or cooking a meal, eating dinner or catching up with neighbors. Television sets provided the occasional soundtrack in the background in the evenings. Every once in a while, when the late evening bus was delayed or did not turn up, there was anger and outrage near the bus stop. By 10 p.m., with the last bus gone, most residents retired for the night and the streets were quiet again. Kilipet's deserted streets during the day and the importance of the bus in the daily schedule of Kilipet residents, thus, reflected the extent to which life in Kilipet was structured by connections with neighboring villages and with Pondicherry.¹⁷

Finally, "looking beyond" the VKC meant understanding the complicated political terrain of Kilipet within which the VKC worked. In one of my first walks in Kilipet, I visited a household of two brothers and their families in the main village.¹⁸ The elder brother, after explaining the educational objective of the range of announcements being made through the VKC, paused and said: "No education is good in this village because the politics is bad." He went on to say that every job and every opportunity required political connections. Nothing could be achieved in the village without *arasiyal* (politics). "I only survive because I have political connections," he added, reminding me that he worked with a political party. There were others like him in the village, associated formally or informally, full time or part time, with political parties or factions. These residents were referred to as "important people" by other Kilipet residents.¹⁹ The relationship between

¹⁶ The VKC accordingly attempted to make announcements largely at these times when there was some likelihood of them being heard.

¹⁷ Residents also made this point explicitly. Among other examples, Lakshmi once remarked that "Nobody comes here to work; we go to other places to work. We go to the surrounding villages for everything. There is nothing in this village." Interview with Lakshmi at the VKC, August 13, 2009.

¹⁸ Interview with brothers at their residence, August 26, 2009.

¹⁹ "*Mukkiyamaanavanga*" in Tamil. The conflict between these supporters was intense and carried on not just by that individual but sometimes by their family members as well: for instance, the young girl who would not eat at the gym-inauguration feast mentioned at the start of the chapter, was the daughter of one such supporter and an example of this phenomenon.

parties, party candidates and their supporters was most visible during state or national-level elections when supporters would be involved in bribing voters to vote in favor of their candidate. But it carried on beyond the elections. These supporters were widely perceived to be the ones who ended up with the goodies of every welfare scheme, a belief reflected in statements such as “Only the twenty people who supported the MLA in the elections got the free gas cylinders.”²⁰ I learned that politics in Kilipet operated not just through formal party politics, or organized political action, but through complicated networks that were shaped by the past career histories of politicians as well as by kinship and caste. Panchayat members and residents associated with self-help groups (SHGs) or the traditional panchayat also had their spheres of influence within and outside the village. It was within the overlapping or conflicting spheres of influence and concerns of all these groups and individuals that any activity in the village, especially an external intervention, needed to be understood. In the case of the Kilipet VKC, Swaminathan Foundation's own history in Kilipet proved significant in shaping VKC use and I examine this history next.

5.2.2 The history of Swaminathan Foundation in Kilipet

Kilipet's association with Swaminathan Foundation started because of the Foundation's Bio Village project in the late 1990s.²¹ As part of the project, the Foundation worked with Block Development Officers (BDOs) to encourage the formation of SHGs in villages. The Foundation helped SHGs apply for bank loans and start small businesses. It also organized training sessions on operating businesses and on specific skills for SHG members.²² Similar to other villages of the region, several SHGs were founded in Kilipet in the late 1990s and early on in the decade of 2000.²³ The Foundation helped these groups obtain loans to start three businesses in Kilipet. It was in the course of this association with the Foundation, that SHG members were introduced to the Informatics division of the Foundation and to IVRP.²⁴ SHG members first talked amongst themselves about setting up a VKC in Kilipet and later held meetings in the village to garner support for the idea. The idea behind having a VKC in Kilipet, they told me, was that Kilipet residents had long felt the lack of an accessible community asset in their village. If a VKC were to be set up in Kilipet, it could become just such an asset. Besides, it offered the promise of skill development at subsidized rates and job opportunities for the younger generation. Thus, the VKC also represented the aspirations of the older generation in the village for the younger generation.

The VKC was finally brought to Kilipet with the help of a local youth club that was engaged in facilitating government-citizen interactions in the village and had members associated with the SHG as well. The youth club worked with the Foundation and the government to establish the Kilipet VKC. An SHG member who was also associated with the setting up of the VKC pointed out that this was not an easy process.²⁵ SHG and youth

²⁰ Interview with the elder brother at his residence, August 27, 2009. Also mentioned in multiple conversations through September 2009.

²¹ The objective of the Bio Village project was to create environmentally sustainable livelihood opportunities for villages.

²² Sessions were organized on themes including how to operate a small enterprise, how to apply for a bank loan or to run an SHG. Skill-training sessions were on mushroom cultivation, growing fish, and rope-making. From multiple conversations with a long-time advisor to IVRP at the VRC, September 4, 2009; and with former SHG members in Kilipet through September 2009.

²³ Kilipet had twelve active SHGs till a few years back. Some in the village continue to be active in SHGs; there is even a government-sponsored SHG in Kilipet now.

²⁴ An SHG member said Foundation personnel brought up the VKC when they discovered how difficult it was to get in touch with SHG members in Kilipet. Interview with current KW and former SHG member at the VKC on August 25, 2009. Other SHG members from the time suggest that the idea was brought up by the members of the Kilipet SHGs themselves. Interview with former SHG members at their residences, September 4 and 8, 2009.

²⁵ Interview with former SHG member at the VKC, August 25, 2009.

club members had to make multiple trips to the IVRP office to convince personnel that the VKC would be useful to Kilipet and that the village community would find volunteers to take care of it on an everyday basis. The Foundation also spoke with panchayat members to get their support. Youth club members managed to convince officials at the BDO office to let them use the premises of the community television center for the VKC. Finally, an MoU was signed between the village community and the Foundation, paving the way for a VKC. The Kilipet VKC was inaugurated in November 2000.²⁶

I sat with an SHG member leafing through her photo album that had pictures from the inauguration of the Kilipet VKC.²⁷ The album also had pictures of other Foundation events, many of which had visitors from other Indian states and other countries featured prominently in them. I had noticed earlier that discussions about visitors often became central to conversations in Kilipet and the album seemed like an extension of this thread of conversation.²⁸ While Kilipet was not the most “well-connected” place either in terms of infrastructure or socially, its residents had had many encounters with visitors in the past decade as a result of their association with Swaminathan Foundation's Bio-village and Information Village projects. Visitors ranged from development agency personnel and bureaucrats, to academics, journalists and researchers, from across India and the world. These earlier encounters were important to me for two reasons. First, they shaped my own encounters with village residents: while I was always slotted as an outsider, I was also seen as connected to those before me who had come to study Swaminathan Foundation's work in the village.²⁹ Second, residents perceived the volume of visitors and news coverage at any given time through the decade of 2000 as a measure of the “success” of the project as well as of the progress of the village and its people at the time. As a former KW told me

People had such belief in Kilipet. People in other villages of Pondicherry, other states, even from other other countries knew of Kilipet. Lots of photographs were taken.

The Kilipet that was featured in newspaper articles and reports at one point, and attracted important people, was constantly being contrasted with its current “stagnation” by many residents (“Kilipet went so far, but is now stagnating” was a common statement that I heard from residents, especially former SHG members). Some of the residents wryly remarked that looking at the conditions in Kilipet, one would think one was living in neighboring Tamilnadu.³⁰

Why did the successful image of the village and the volume of visitors change over time? This was an important question to ask because all other activities involving the Foundation, including the VKC, were now connected in the perception of the residents to these experiences with the Foundation. The businesses started by the SHGs did well for two to three years but by the mid 2000s, all of them were making losses and were plagued by internal disputes and small-scale embezzlement. In the process of shutting these businesses

²⁶ From “Village Profile” document about VKC available on the Kilipet VKC computer.

²⁷ Interview with former SHG member at her residence, September 8, 2009.

²⁸ Other conversations with Lakshmi and with former SHG members at the VKC and at their residence, August 25 and 26, 2009 also brought up the topic of visitors.

²⁹ For example, while Lakshmi was a little wary at our first meeting, and not sure how much of what she said might be relayed back to her employer, she did not seem nervous. In fact, she told me she was used to visitors and described previous visitors to the VKC: where they came from, where they stayed, and what they did at the VKC.

³⁰ Puducherry is widely held to be administered better than Tamilnadu. It also offers many more pro-poor schemes and benefits. People routinely migrate from rural Tamilnadu to Puducherry in order to benefit from these schemes. Given this context, to compare one's village to a village in Tamilnadu is telling.

down, recovering money and apportioning the debt (and blame), a lot of bad blood ensued. Relations amongst village residents, and between residents and the Foundation, as well as the trust of the village community in the Foundation, were badly affected in the process. Some felt that the Foundation office had egged people on to take on more loans than they could possibly have repaid, as an angry former SHG member told me:³¹

Now, you are interested and offer us a loan. We are poor people. If the government or private entities offer us money, we will never say no. But you have to think that you have given 10 rupees . . . I take 10 rupees, then I take 20 rupees, then 30 rupees. My debts are only adding up; I am not able to repay them, or manage them. I am unemployed. Only after I somehow repay the 10 rupees should you offer me a second loan, isn't it? I can't manage to repay the interest and the capital for 50 rupees; only for 10 rupees.. If we were well-off, we could afford to think before we decided to accept a loan. I am poor; I may want to, but I can't repay. The educated people are the ones who have to think before offering us a loan . . . They [the Foundation office] merged groups that had taken different loans and formed new groups. Before the old loan was repaid, they offered us a new one for a very big amount.

Others felt that the Foundation had been there to share all the publicity generated by the projects and businesses, but did little when the businesses started to collapse.³²

We learnt one thing. The office people were always around to share our happiness when things were going well. But now that things were not going well, no one looked our way. We were very angry. When you are willing to share our joy, you must also share our despair . . . [After all] Kilipet brought you [the Foundation office] so much fame.

Not everyone agreed with this analysis of the role of the Foundation in the collapse of SHG businesses. One SHG member, for example, said that the Foundation had helped SHGs obtain loans.³³ Beyond that, if people borrowed rashly, or without thinking through the costs and returns of their business, or did not work hard enough on the business or on repaying the loan, the Foundation could hardly be held responsible for the consequences. She said that she continued to be in touch with the Foundation and even talked regularly with people in the office.

The Kilipet community did not have one single version of what had happened with the businesses started by the Bio-Village project. Nor was it possible to pin blame for what happened. What was very clear, however, was that village residents, especially SHG members, were in different factions that had varying degrees of faith in the activities of the Foundation. Even though the VKCs were operated by a different division of the Foundation, some of the bad blood and lack of trust generated by the SHG episodes spilled over to people's perceptions of the Kilipet VKC and their use of its services.

5.3 Perceptions of utility: Different points of view on the VKC

The working of the VKC usage was shaped by aspects the history and politics of Kilipet described so far. In the following sub-sections, I describe how KWs, Kilipet residents, state agents and Swaminathan Foundation

³¹ Interview with former SHG member, now coolie worker, at her residence, September 10, 2009.

³² Interview with former SHG member, August 25, 2009.

³³ Interview with former SHG member at her residence and -shop, September 7, 2009.

perceived the working of the Kilipet VKC and its position in Kilipet.

5.3.1 The Kilipet VKC as the Knowledge Workers (KWs) saw it

One reason for the inter-connected perceptions about the two Foundation projects was the large number of common members between the two. A prime example of the overlap was Rajendran, who had been an SHG member, was one of the founders of the youth club and the VKC, and had also worked as a KW. Another was Tamilselvi who had helped found the Kilipet VKC and was also the second KW of the VKC in 2009. In this subsection, I examine Rajendran, Tamilselvi and other KWs' perceptions of the VKC's role in Kilipet.

Both Rajendran and Tamilselvi were members of one of the first SHGs set up by Swaminathan Foundation in the village and were also members of the first group of people that had volunteered at the VKC. Rajendran left after four years at the VKC as his financial responsibilities towards his family increased. He continued to be a boundary partner i.e. he was consulted on the operations of the VKC.³⁴ He was, however, not on the payroll of the project and worked instead with a program sponsored by the government. Tamilselvi had to leave after working as a KW for a year because she could not manage her shop while being a KW. But she returned to being a KW in 2008, by which time KWs were being paid a small monthly salary by the Foundation.

Rajendran was a middle-aged man who lived with his wife and two children in Kilipet. For him, one of the most attractive propositions offered by the IVRP when he first encountered it was that it would install a database of government schemes at the VKC.³⁵ Rajendran tried explaining to me why this was helpful. Earlier, one could only ask bureaucrats specific questions about a given scheme. If someone asked them to list all schemes that residents were eligible for, they would almost definitely not oblige. Having a database of schemes helped ask specific questions, which was why the database had been useful in the first few years of the VKC's operation. Rajendran lamented that over the years, the database had not been regularly updated, which reduced its utility. Hardly anyone, including the KWs, looked at the database anymore. Schemes were announced only when newspapers carried details about them, which typically happened only for newly-announced schemes and not for continuing schemes.³⁶

Rajendran saw a role for the VKC in Kilipet, saying it had helped especially with government schemes and the provision of certificates while he was the KW:

[About government schemes] We did not restrict ourselves to the SC welfare department and talked about training sessions by other departments. Also we would gather training opportunities from the newspapers and write those out as well. I went and fished out these announcements as well. For students, when they transferred from class 8 to 9, or for scholarships after class 6, they required certificates. They would need income and caste certificates, nativity . . . they would write

³⁴ The term "boundary partner" was explained in chapter 2.

³⁵ Interview with Rajendran, former KW, at his residence, September 4, 2009. Note that government schemes had, in fact, not been a top priority for IVRP at the start of the project. The former Project Director of IVRP told me that even if one knew about a scheme, one would probably need to bribe the government official, so there was not much that could be achieved by compiling details about government schemes. Interview with V. Balaji, first Project Director of IVRP at his Hyderabad residence, November 28, 2009. However, village surveys at the start of the project revealed that people seemed to want to know about schemes and, therefore, employees of the VRC also went to great trouble to build such a database.

³⁶ Meanwhile, there were so many more schemes implemented by different departments that few people had a comprehensive understanding of all that was available at any point in time. Even government officers confessed that this was so.

their applications [for certificates] by hand. The applications had to be stamped at the *tabsildar's* [revenue official], then go to the *karanam* [VAO], then the Revenue Inspector, then to the Deputy Tahsildar. So, we had been getting these certificates for residents [prior to the VKC, while working with the youth group]. With the computer, we started printing out applications. We also printed out training details.

Rajendran also involved himself in the procurement of government certificates for residents in the initial years of the VKC, accompanying people to government offices and helping them through the process.³⁷ He explained that because of his earlier affiliation with the local youth club, he had learned a lot about these processes and had also developed an acquaintance with lower level bureaucrats.³⁸ Both these factors helped Rajendran facilitate the certificate procurement process for Kilipet residents. Another former KW emphasized, meanwhile, that her status as a “fellow” affiliated with the Foundation had helped her enter government offices that she would otherwise have not been allowed into.³⁹ Her point was that being associated with the VKC or the Foundation helped gain entry into offices and in transactions with bureaucrats, which was a helpful first step to sorting out problems.

I also spoke with Tamilselvi about the initial years of the VKC and changes over the years in its functioning.⁴⁰ A middle-aged woman, Tamilselvi lived with her husband and three children in a house directly opposite the VKC. She was an eloquent speaker and took me through the years when the SHGs were operational, to their eventual collapse, all of which she insisted were important pieces of the VKC story. She admitted that after the SHG loan debacles “the only thing that still gives us some pride is the VKC.” She continued:

No one knew how to use a computer in this village. Now people can use a mouse. If we can talk this much, that is progress, that is because of the center.

Given all the benefits that the VKC had brought to Kilipet, she claimed that she and her fellow-KW never stopped anyone, they “only welcomed everyone” to the VKC. In addition,

I tell students to apply [for jobs based on advertisements in newspapers]. We also type and print job applications or call up the office and get applications from them. Also, recently there was a drive to apply for land or for pattas. We also filled up these forms for some people.

People know in advance what they will get for free from the government: seeds, implements.

³⁷ Unlike a lot of kiosk projects of the time, the IVRP did not initially plan for VKCs to offer government certificates or to explicitly act as an intermediary in the process of procuring one. Balaji, former project director, argued that “the idea here is that if there is an indigenously accepted system for getting certificates etc., there’s no need for it” [i.e. for a system using the VKC to procure certificates]. He added that Puducherry was a small place and people knew a lot about what was going on in any case. Interview with Former Project Director at his residence, November 28, 2009. Other IVRP personnel also mentioned that most people in Puducherry villages had some link with government employees or an MLA, who would procure certificates for them. In the case of Kilipet, however, my observations suggested that this was not entirely true. Residents still needed to put in an effort to find someone who would help them with government procedures, partly because very few government employees lived in the village.

³⁸ Borne out by statements from village residents who mentioned that Rajendran had accompanied them when they attempted to get a caste or other certificate from a government office. While later KWs might also have told residents about procedures if asked, unlike Rajendran, they did not accompany residents on their journeys to government offices.

³⁹ Interview with former KW and Foundation fellow (now self-employed) at her residence, September 8, 2009.

⁴⁰ Interview with Tamilselvi at the VKC, August 25, 2009. Followed by multiple conversations at the VKC and at her residence through August, September and October 2009.

[Once] We just announced first, and people took their vehicles and rushed to the office, said they heard about it through the announcement. Earlier, how would they [people from the government] have gone farmer to farmer and told everyone? We just see it in the newspaper and announce. When we announced a Rs.1000 subsidy, everyone filled forms . . . Earlier, they would have had to visit the BDO office, the commune panchayat. Now, it's not like that, anybody can go since they know the questions to ask . . . Then there are free gas cylinders, marriage, death, birth registrations.

Tamilselvi added that when she was at home earlier, she would not know much about government schemes and job opportunities. Now, people sometimes sought her and Lakshmi out to ask them about such things. If she or Lakshmi knew the answer, they let people know immediately; else, they found out from the VRC and then let residents know. The latest important government scheme announcement Tamilselvi recalled making was about applying for a “job card” to be eligible to participate in the 100-days work (National Rural Employment Guarantee) scheme. “We even helped residents fill up the application forms and told them where to get pictures taken.” Since Tamilselvi's husband was an elected member of the panchayat, she laughingly admitted that she sometimes ended up doing her husband's work since he did not always have the patience to finish what he started.

Rajendran and Tamilselvi both talked of the tenuous relationship between their village and the neighboring BC village, Peria Agraharam, and how that relationship affected VKC use. According to Rajendran,

The SC/BC divide is clear in the operation of the VKC. The BCs wanted the VKC in their region and the fact that they didn't get it definitely hurt their ego.

Tamilselvi noted that

We announce agriculture-related messages. The *gounders* [a BC community] would never tell any of this to our village. They won't tell the SC people. Why should we depend on them? That's why we decided that such news can be routed through the VKC. Prior to the VKC, folks from the bank would come down for verification some times and we would find that the BC people had taken loans in our names! Now our people go to the bank themselves to get loans.

It is difficult to say that the VKC effected such a shift by itself or even that a dramatic shift had indeed taken place.⁴¹ But in terms of perceptions or the value placed on the VKC, the idea of the VKC as a community resource and an alternative source or channel was an important one, especially among KWs.⁴² “We must not let the VKC go,” said the former KW and Foundation fellow mentioned earlier. “It is the only resource we have.” She also pointed to a campaign she had been part of a few years back when there was a proposal to demolish the VKC as part of a road-widening project.⁴³ KWs and concerned residents had submitted an application to the commune-level panchayat office at the time, as had Swaminathan Foundation. They visited

⁴¹ For example, many Kilipet residents mentioned hearing about government schemes and deadlines from their televisions, as well as from the VKC. In terms of how dramatic the shift was, Kilipet residents emphasized that the BC villages continued to be powerful within the panchayat. For example, the BC community had a say and got its way in where assets were located or who got elected in the panchayat.

⁴² The fact that Kilipet had a VKC while its neighboring village did not was something that came up repeatedly in conversations, especially with KWs.

⁴³ Interview with former KW and self-employed entrepreneur at her residence, September 8, 2009.

the office multiple times in order to convince the officers that the village needed the VKC. Eventually, the panchayat agreed and the VKC stayed.

Most of the other KWs who had worked at the VKC for any length of time were younger than the KWs introduced so far.⁴⁴ In their narration of the working of the VKC, computer education came up as the most important service provided at the VKC.⁴⁵ They said they learned how to handle and operate computers for the very first time at the VKC. Some of them went on to work as volunteers or paid KWs. Once they joined college or work, they moved on. One young man had even interned as a computer operator at a local government office, a job that he got through the VKC.⁴⁶ Occasionally, these men would help out the current KWs or come by the VKC for a visit. However, few considered being a KW a viable career option in the future.

Rajendran, Tamilselvi, Lakshmi and other KWs talked glowingly about the benefits of the VKC for Kilipet residents at large, and for KWs themselves as an opportunity to improve their skills and establish connections (as with the KW who interned at a government office or the one who gained entry into government offices). But none of them saw working at the VKC as financially viable option. One of the fundamental reasons behind this was the nominal monthly salary that KWs were paid. So nominal was this amount that KWs said they had brought it up repeatedly at the monthly KW meeting at the VRC. KWs also talked about this issue amongst themselves and organized a strike in late 2009.⁴⁷ The Foundation had been promising to look into the matter but personnel at the VRC confessed that they absolutely did not have the means to spend more on the VKCs.⁴⁸ In the meantime, the VKCs continued to function: KWs with other opportunities moved on, and those without alternatives kept working, holding on half-heartedly to the expectation of a salary hike in the future.

5.3.2 The Kilipet VKC as village residents saw it

Even as KWs focused on the database of government schemes, announcements and computer education as important aspects of the Kilipet VKC's work, Kilipet residents had their own take on the place and role of the VKC. Some of this overlapped with what the KWs had told me. For example, I found that the focus on computer education was not limited to young KWs: other village residents shared that enthusiasm and saw computer education as the most important possibility offered by the VKC. As I walked the streets of Kilipet, talking to people on the street or visiting them in their homes, I heard repeatedly that the VKC could be where their kids learned computers. Sometimes, this was said in the midst of remarks appreciating the VKC; sometimes, to point to the potential of the VKC which was currently being squandered.⁴⁹ Either way, the

⁴⁴ They were also all men.

⁴⁵ Interviews with three such men at the VKC and on village streets, August 24, 25 and September 4, 2009.

⁴⁶ Interview with currently unemployed, former KW at the VKC, August 25, 2009.

⁴⁷ Not everyone participated in the strike, but the ones who did kept the VKC closed for a day.

⁴⁸ Interviews with VRC personnel on different occasions in August, September and October 2009, within and outside the VRC. VRC personnel were trying hard to push KWs to work towards raising funds at the village level by leveraging their local boundary partners or by selling more services at the VKC. They themselves had no time to spend on the fund-raising endeavor and already seemed overworked with their triple objectives of coordinating among VKCs, maintaining existing links with supporting agencies and finding sponsorship for the VRC, even as the VRC itself was losing personnel to other jobs and better salaries. VRC personnel were also on the defensive sometimes, saying that in the MoU signed between the Foundation and the village, the village had promised to provide "volunteers." Nowhere was "salary" mentioned in that document.

⁴⁹ The VKC was associated with educated people. Time and again, I heard residents without a formal school-based education say "What will we do there? That's for the educated folks." KWs were therefore expected to be visibly educated people, who knew computers and English. Residents were, therefore, not happy with the choice of local women who were not highly educated and did not know English, as KWs. Further, KWs themselves were not very confident of what they could teach students once students

perceived connection between VKCs and their contribution in exposing children to computers was hard to miss.⁵⁰

Besides computer education and computer certification courses that were offered at the Kilipet VKC, the other most visible (or audible) aspect of the VKC were the announcements on the PA system. It was by the computer or these announcements that most people identified the VKC (“where they teach computers to children” or “from where they make announcements” or “from where they speak on the mic”). On being asked what announcements were made by the VKC, people mentioned government schemes and employment opportunities the most. A common response from village residents would be

They tell us about the *nanmai* [welfare] being done by the government. They announce when rice or saris are being distributed free of cost [under various public schemes] . . . when pensions are ready for disbursement or loan waivers are announced by leaders.

Recent announcements regarding a public camp to apply for marriage certificates, or registering for a job card under the 100-days work scheme, came up repeatedly as specific examples of announcements in conversations with residents.⁵¹ But there was not always an overlap between how residents and KWs talked about the VKC. Nor did all village residents talk about the VKC in the same way, since not all of them used it equally or in similar ways. Caste and gender were significant factors shaping who visited or made use of the VKC. I have already mentioned that not many people from the BC villages visited the VKC. Even though some of the KWs were female, female residents older than ten too were difficult to spot at the VKC.⁵² In addition to caste and gender, a KW's place in the networks within the village also shaped to a great extent who used the VKCs and who elected to stay away. Residents' relationship with the Foundation also shaped who used the VKC.

While I started by talking to residents about their use of the VKC, conversations moved on seamlessly to other problems that residents saw as central to their lives. The first category of problems they brought up included issues seen as directly connected to the VKC, such as the 100-days work scheme for which the VKC had made announcements. A second category consisted of those problems that residents wanted the VKC or the Foundation to help them with, even if the VKC had nothing to do with the problem directly. This included things like helping residents obtain a patta. A final category of problems was when residents felt that a problem was so big that it shaped their lives. Even if the problem was not directly connected to the VKC in any way, the VKC could not fundamentally contribute to their lives till it was sorted out. The “64-evidence,” which I describe later, was an example of this category of problems. I discuss one example from each of these categories in sequence, building a description of the issues from my conversations with village residents, the elected panchayat president and an elected ward member.

mastered the basics.

⁵⁰ In this, the Kilipet VKC bears out research on several ICT-based initiatives that suggest they are valued most as providers of computer education especially in rural India (Pal 2008).

⁵¹ The database of government schemes did not come up in conversations. A few people mentioned being accompanied by Rajendran on their trips to procure government certificates but, on the whole, certificates too were not mentioned in relation to the VKC.

⁵² One reason for this was that many men, especially young adults, visited the VKC and made it their own space through their chatting and banter. This made it difficult for young women to negotiate visits to the VKC with their families.

5.3.2.1 Where the VKC was directly connected: 100-days work scheme

The Indian government's flagship employment scheme is known in Puducherry as "100-days work," the hundred referring to the number of days of employment the scheme is supposed to provide annually to a rural Indian household. The scheme was started in 2008 in Puducherry and the VKC was its face in Kilipet. It was the VKC, in consultation with the BDO office, that announced the procedure for obtaining the job card that allowed individuals to demand work under the scheme. The 100-days work did not provide high wages. But for those in Kilipet who had no other employment opportunities with the drying up of agricultural work, the guarantee of work itself provided some security.⁵³ Interested residents applied for and obtained job cards following the announcement made by the VKC.

In spite of the fact that residents were keen for the scheme to begin in their village, no work had started in Kilipet as of November 2009 more than a year after the scheme was announced.⁵⁴ According to the panchayat president, there were no funds for the project, a statement that the ward member repeated.⁵⁵ Personnel at the BDO office, however, said that the funds were available. However, they needed to get work plans from the panchayat president in order to start work or release funds.⁵⁶ Since the scheme was panchayat-centered, the BDO office could not dictate terms. In this case, the BDO office took the president's word for what a panchayat wanted and the Kilipet president had shown little interest.

Residents with a job card seemed unsure about where to enquire about the scheme. Some of them had enquired at the VKC since the initial announcement had come from the VKC. Others did not think the VKC would know anything and went to elected leaders instead. On asking the president and their local ward member, they were repeatedly told that there were no funds or that it was the rainy season and that "work will commence soon." Yet others had heard that there was no scope for work to be undertaken in their panchayat even if it was being undertaken in surrounding panchayats.⁵⁷ Some residents were resigned and others cynical about 100-days work in the village. They took it as a reflection of all else that was going wrong in Kilipet. "In everything, this village is a 'waste,'" said a middle-aged man, adding "This village is an orphan, no one does anything for it."⁵⁸

5.3.2.2 Where the VKC could help: Patta (Land certificate)

If 100-days work was associated with the VKC in residents' mind because of the initial announcement, they associated pattas (land certificates) with it because of what they hoped the VKC or Foundation could use its reputation and connections in the bureaucracy to resolve the patta problem in Kilipet. As mentioned earlier,

⁵³ "100-days work is a waste, look at the price of things," said a mason when I talked to him at his residence, September 18, 2009. "Coolie work gives us Rs. 200 a day." NREGS paid Rs. 100 a day at the time. When I spoke with a group of women who worked as coolie labor, they said "100-days work rates are not great. People employed elsewhere can work two shifts and therefore earn more. But there is no other agricultural work available. That's why 100 days work would have been good." when I spoke with them on the street in front of their houses, September 10, 2009.

⁵⁴ In fact, even the preliminary consultation with village residents through which worksites were supposed to be decided had not yet taken place.

⁵⁵ Interview with panchayat president at his residence, September 22, 2009; interview with elected panchayat member at his residence in end September 2009. "The ward member does not tell us anything. There are no meetings," observed the same group of women referred to in footnote 53. "He might be doing something about 100 days work, but we don't know if he's putting enough of an effort into it" ("*risk edutbu seiyaraangalannu theriyallai*").

⁵⁶ Interview with BDO office personnel in Villianur, October 8, 2009. The 100-days scheme is funded by the central government.

⁵⁷ Neighboring villages had already set up worksites, a fact that Kilipet residents were keenly aware of.

⁵⁸ Interview with middle-aged, coolie worker at her residence in Nalla Nagar, September 22, 2009.

few in Kilipet had much agricultural land. However, many did have temporary pattas for the land on which their dwelling stood and to which they had moved following a flood decades ago.⁵⁹ While temporary pattas could be used just like a patta in some respects, there were definite constraints on its usage. An important difference was that a temporary patta could not be modified and the details of ownership on it could not be changed unless it was converted into a permanent patta. As a result, when the people in whose names temporary pattas had been issued died, their family members no longer held a valid patta that could be used, for example, to apply for schemes where a patta was a prerequisite.

Meanwhile, residents of Nalla Nagar faced a different set of problems. Nalla Nagar came into being in 2004 when houses on the main road were demolished following road-widening operations. The local MLA at the time had bought the land on which Nalla Nagar now stands and allotted parcels from it, mainly to residents whose houses were slated to be demolished.⁶⁰ The patta for the land remained with the MLA, while the residents were allotted land on the basis of a token system. As a result, residents did not possess individual pattas for the land on which their dwellings stood. Kilipet residents were still praising the MLA's act when I spoke with them in 2009. Unfortunately, they had not expressed their appreciation in the form of votes, instead electing a rival candidate in the elections following the allotment of tokens for land.⁶¹ Since that time, Nalla Nagar residents, in particular, were caught in the crossfire between the former and current MLAs of the constituency: the former MLA complained that he could not do anything for an ungrateful people who did not bother to vote for him following his kind act, while the current MLA claimed that he could do nothing as he had nothing to do with the land in Nalla Nagar. Astute observers among village residents remarked that the land was now selling at millions of rupees and there was no reason for the former MLA to ever have issued individual pattas for it. Moreover, the land provided him such a hold over the village that it would be foolish of him to make over the patta to Nalla Nagar residents.

Residents who did not have pattas for either of the reasons mentioned above found themselves in a difficult situation. As a group of residents put it

Now for the first time, and only since the last 15 years or so, the government is offering loans even to those without assets or much property. Even we can do something with our lives. But it's unfortunate that we can't even avail of these loans because we don't have pattas.⁶²

New government schemes offered low-interest loans and subsidies for those wanting to build a house. A patta was required while applying for these schemes and also while applying for the provision of services such as an electricity or water connection. As a result, many residents could not apply for loans and Nalla Nagar residents could not apply for legal electricity connections, or for a community water tap.⁶³

The problem, then, was not so much that residents did not "have information" about government schemes. It

⁵⁹ When the village moved to its current location, they were on land belonging to an individual who later donated the land to the community. Residents received temporary pattas for this land.

⁶⁰ Events reconstructed based on conversations with many residents, including drummer/bandmaster; an artiste/political worker and the former KWs mentioned earlier, as well as residents of Nalla Nagar.

⁶¹ Residents emphasized that they voted out of sympathy for the other candidate who came begging for votes.

⁶² Interview with a group of four women, three of them coolie workers, on the street in front of their houses, September 10, 2009 September 10, 2009.

⁶³ Nalla Nagar residents also complained that service provision agencies did not pay much heed to them even during emergencies such as when their thatched houses caught fire during the summer or when the region flooded during the rainy season.

was that they could not make use of what they knew about schemes or loans without a patta. Over the years, groups of residents had tried a variety of methods to get pattas. They protested, appealed to the traditional and elected panchayat presidents, MLAs, lower-level bureaucrats, the Collector and the CM. The president, according to many, was no help in any matter related to the village because he belonged to the BC community. So far, Kilipet residents' actions had not brought them any closer to solutions. Meanwhile, organizing people to protest had become increasingly difficult, with people demanding money to protest or to take a day off from work.⁶⁴

The VKC's connection to a powerful NGO such as Swaminathan Foundation meant that people also approached the Foundation through the VKC or through others associated with the Foundation (SHG members or fellows affiliated with the Foundation) with their patta problem. The Foundation, thus, became another connection or resource through which residents approached leaders and decision-makers. While nothing came out of these attempts, the patta problem thus provides an example of the way in which the VKC was drawn into the village's problems not through its information provision services, but because of its social and political connections.

5.3.2.3 Where the VKC cannot help: 64-evidence

An example of the final category of problems that was brought up by residents was the “64-evidence.” This was a problem that was not directly connected to the VKC, nor something that residents approached the VKC about. However, it was so central to their everyday lives that residents felt it had to be resolved before external interventions such as the VKC could fundamentally improve their lives. The lack of “64-evidence” constituted one such fundamental problem in the lives of many Kilipet residents.

The idea of 64-evidence came out of the state's need to identify “genuine” Puducherry citizens and filter out migrants from Tamilnadu as recipients of welfare benefits. To establish this identity, people were required to prove that they or their ancestors lived in Puducherry in or prior to 1964. It was especially difficult to procure a caste certificate without establishing this identity. The caste certificate, in turn, was the most crucial for the SC community which was entitled to many affirmative action benefits, including scholarships at schools, and admissions to colleges as well as employment opportunities in government offices under the SC quota. Without a caste certificate, each such potential opportunity in the career and work life of an individual of the SC community could turn into an obstacle. The most pressing consequence in present times was in school and college education where students could not obtain a scholarship without a caste certificate and 64-evidence. In the absence of 64-evidence, students had even had to drop out of school if they could not afford to pay for school without a scholarship.

A majority of the Kilipet village population did not have 64-evidence for one of two reasons: they had migrated from Tamilnadu after 1964 (i.e. they were the ones the government was trying to filter out) or their families had been residents in Puducherry before 1964 but had no way to prove it. The first category of people without 64-evidence were recent migrants. Migrants often came to Puducherry from Tamilnadu with the express purpose of leveraging its relatively generous welfare schemes and efficient administration. Some migrants argued that when even refugees from Sri Lanka were offered support by the government, why

⁶⁴ Residents also mentioned the presence of middle-men whose job was to collect people for staging an agitation. The livelihood of these mediators was hit if people just came together by themselves to protest. Internal disputes over the division of a parent's land among offspring added an extra dimension to the current stalemate. Interview with bandmaster at his residence, August 27, 2009; interview with founders of the VKC at Rajendran's residence, September 4, 2009.

should those arriving from Tamilnadu be left behind?⁶⁵ At its end, the Puducherry government was concerned about the misuse of funds earmarked for “its” citizens and sought to prevent outsiders from using government funds or taking jobs. 64-evidence was one of the ways in which it attempted to prevent such misuse. The second category of people who did not have 64-evidence were those whose ancestors had lived in the region since 1964 but had no way to prove this. This situation was also reasonably common in Kilipet for a variety of reasons. As a community that seldom received formal education, members of the SC community were mostly unlikely to know of procedures such as birth registration, especially since births mostly occurred at home. Nor would many members of the community have attended school or been registered at one. The group of coolie workers referred to earlier observed about their parents that

The system used to be such that the BCs even in earlier times have some kind of *kurippu* [registration].⁶⁶ Our people never had time for anything but working on the fields of these people. They also never knew anything about rules.

The irony, then, was that 64-evidence, which was instituted in order to benefit the people of Puducherry, worked the worst for communities who were the most likely to need its benefits – those who did not realize the importance of being “registered” four decades back.⁶⁷

Kilipet residents had tried various methods to deal with the 64-evidence problem. Some had procured a written statement from members of the traditional panchayat supporting their residency claim. This had worked in some cases, but was not guaranteed to work with all government officials.⁶⁸ Others had tried to use their connections with political parties and MLAs to establish 64-evidence. Some had tried to hunt down old school records.⁶⁹ Those with no recourse to such alternatives had thought of other innovative ways to establish their residency. A Nalla Nagar resident and mother of three, reminisced about her ordeal when her youngest son had to obtain a caste certificate and required 64-evidence.⁷⁰

Our parents did not know enough to get our births registered. So my husband did not have a birth registration and I don't either though we are both from Pondicherry. The only thing I remembered was that the day I arrived as a bride in this village, another woman gave birth to a son. I remember that because people said I had brought luck to the village since a boy was born the day I entered. I approached that family to determine the son's year and date of birth. I used

⁶⁵ Interview with Nalla Nagar resident at her residence, September 24, 2009. She also asked how a former MLA who had attached the name of a Tamilnadu district to his name (which usually denotes a person's place of origin) got to say he was from Puducherry?

⁶⁶ Literally means “indication;” used here in the sense of “registration.”

⁶⁷ “We have no credentials, no proofs, no documentation to prove who we are,” said a resident of Nalla Nagar who had neither a patta nor 64-evidence when I spoke with her and her neighbor in front of their houses in Nalla Nagar, August 27, 2009. “We don't have 64 evidence. We can't apply for any schemes because of that. We live as slaves. We are told to go back and look for people who can prove that we were around in this place and not in Tamilnadu in 1964 . . . We have always been slaves. Earlier, at least the Reddiyars and Chettys [land-owning communities belonging to higher castes] used to help out of pity. The politicians today don't even show pity. They only work for votes.”

⁶⁸ Interview with former traditional panchayat leader at his residence, September 19, 2009.

⁶⁹ Interview with former SHG member and coolie worker, September 27, 2009. She related to me the story of how she and her husband dug up his school records, met an MLA, and also paid a bribe to a bureaucrat along the way before they could get a 64-evidence to use for their son. She was relieved she did not have to repeat the process for her daughter, who could use the same proof.

⁷⁰ Her son had to provide his parents' 64-evidence in order to get his caste certificate.

that to prove I was in this village before 1964. Finally, it all worked out. But I remember the panic I felt. One hears of so many boys who commit suicide when they can't get a caste certificate. I was so scared.

Even as individual residents succeeded in obtaining 64-evidence for their families, the larger problem facing the community persisted. Much like the patta problem, here again the residents might have had the details about a scheme, but still not be able to satisfy its pre-requisites if it directly or indirectly required 64 evidence. As a resident succinctly put it, “Of what use is this knowing?”⁷¹

Thus, in the case of 64-evidence, residents did not see the VKC as directly connected to their problem, or see it as a part of a solution to that problem. Since the problem was so significant in their lives, they did feel it had to be sorted out before initiatives such as the VKC could help them in a meaningful way. They also felt that this fundamental problem of the village was not about how much they knew about government schemes or procedures. It was simply about their inability to fulfill the conditions and prerequisites of these schemes and procedures.

Kilipet residents, thus, related to the VKC and Swaminathan Foundation at many levels. They made use of some services at the VKC. In other instances, they leveraged their connections with KWs, the VKC or the Foundation to gain entry to government offices or to register their point with government officials or leaders. But in some other cases, they did not see a role for the VKC. They did not diagnose their problem as one of not knowing or of being “information-poor.” They knew fully well what document they required in order to avail themselves of a scheme. They just did not have it.

5.3.3 The Kilipet VKC as the Foundation and the state saw it

In my discussions of the role of KWs and the VKC in state-citizen interactions so far, I have focused on what KWs thought they should be doing for village residents and what residents expected from them and from the VKC. But what did the Foundation and “the state” expect of KWs and the VKC? I suggest that both the Foundation and the state relied on KWs as experts who could tell them more about village residents and verify social facts.

For entities external to the village, such as Swaminathan Foundation or government agencies, KWs were perceived as the “insiders” and “experts” who knew the village well. The Foundation relied on the KWs' insider and expert status when it asked them to create village profiles, maintain and cultivate linkages with local leaders and boundary partners, find locally feasible ways to generate a revenue for the VKC, or gauge the “information needs” of residents, in addition to their routine work of maintaining registers, teaching classes, making announcements and keeping the VKC open to users everyday. As employees at government departments were faced with targets for the number of people they needed to reach for each scheme, they too were eager to leverage VKCs to reach a larger audience through announcements.⁷² But the other important role that they saw for VKCs also drew on the KWs' insider/expert status: KWs became verifiers of social facts. As the government announced more loans or welfare schemes, the need to verify an applicant's

⁷¹ Interview with former SHG member and coolie worker and her husband at their residence, September 10, 2009. “*Theerinju enna punyam?*” in Tamil. This is difficult to translate. “*Punyam*” can be considered the antonym of “*paavam*” (sin) and would translate as “the good deeds that accrue to one.” So, the resident was asking “How is knowing going to add to my punyam or result in anything good for me?”

⁷² Interview with VRC personnel at the Pillayarkuppam office, August 4, 2009.

identity became an important part of administering a scheme. KWs (and not just in Kilipet) were inevitably drawn into this process by both government agencies and residents.⁷³ For one, the BDO's office contacted the VKC for details such as the number of disabled people in the village, how many people drew pensions, or how many residents had thatched houses. But more importantly, KWs were also asked to verify the income situation of a person listed as being Below Poverty Line (BPL), whether a house that was reported burnt really had been burnt down in an accident, or whether a person listed as landless genuinely did not own land.

I asked Lakshmi and Tamilselvi how they went about participating in such a process and whether they faced pressure from village residents to answer a particular way. Lakshmi explained her actions thus

People sometimes come and tell us in advance that they have filled out the application and that I should answer a particular way. For example, people might live elsewhere to earn a living. We are after all here to do good for the poor. So we verify whatever details people have provided. Sometimes people who are well off also do it. We say yes to whatever they have said, because we will be scolded otherwise.

Tamilselvi said something similar: “We are asked to point out houses. We give them [government officers] any information they ask for in private.” Giving me another example, she continued

For example, they give money for a *taali* to those who can't buy one.⁷⁴ Why should we say this person is rich or that one is poor? It is from the government, everyone should experience that money. After all, only the person who suffers knows his sorrow.

She added though:

When coolie workers get a support sum, we make sure the wrong ones don't get it; not people sleeping in the comfort and cool breeze of a fan, because that is wrong.

KWs were thus deeply implicated in state-population interactions. Moreover, as intermediaries in more ways than initially envisioned, they were not merely channeling or transmitting relevant details from state to village residents. Instead, they were involved in the very creation of elements of the state's information order. This they did as required and depending on their own relationships with the residents concerned, with the bureaucrats and, often, subject to their own ideas about who was deserving of government funds.

In this section on the working of the Kilipet VKC, I have examined how KWs, residents, the Foundation and “the state” thought about the VKC and its role in the village. In the following section, I use these accounts to examine the Kilipet VKC's working in terms of an information order. I argue that the contrary to its proposed objectives, the VKC and its “information provision” works in and through the political terrain of the village.

5.4 VKC and the information order

Swaminathan Foundation projected the IVRP as an “apolitical” project that kept its distance from politics. Right from the initial surveys on existing communication linkages that did not examine linkages with either

⁷³ Nor were KWs the only village residents that government officers relied on. A member of an SHG sponsored by the BDO's office told me she often helped in processes of verification as well. Interview with SHG member at her shop, September 7, 2009.

⁷⁴ A thread with a gold pendant that is tied around a bride's neck by a groom as part of a Tamil Hindu wedding ceremony.

panchayat leaders (at that time, the traditional panchayat), or with MLAs, the desire to stay away from politics was evident in the documents, rules and reports associated with IVRP.⁷⁵ The most explicit and visible stance adopted by the project in this regard over the years was that VKCs were not to announce or display “political information.” This injunction was one that all KWs, including the Kilipet KWs, confirmed and took seriously.⁷⁶ What it meant was that KWs would never announce anything related to specific political parties because that would make the VKCs partisan, its working messy and, in consequence, less beneficial. I argue, however, that the VKC and its “information provision” objectives were inserted in such a complicated political terrain that they became deeply implicated in it in several ways, regardless of how much they sought to distance themselves from politics.

In order to examine how the centrality of arasiyal (politics) in Kilipet worked with the VKC's “information provision” goals, I return to the construct of an information order. I examine how it was deployed as a technique of governing in the working of the VKC. Following chapters 3 and 4, I argue that such an information order shaped and was shaped by boundaries between “the state” and its population. Here too, connections across the boundaries were leveraged to change individual elements of the information order. However, the nature of these connections, as well as the way they were leveraged, was significantly different in the Kilipet case than in chapters 3 and 4. In chapters 3 and 4, MKSS's organized political campaigns helped bring about some fundamental shifts to an existing information order. Kilipet residents, on the other hand, were attempting to bring about minute shifts to individual elements of the information order (such as pattas or 64-evidence) through their acts of everyday negotiations.

My narrative so far suggests that the significant elements of the information order in the Kilipet case consisted of the rules, procedures, documents and announcements related to 100-days work, pattas, 64-evidence and loans. The creation, procurement and use of these elements of the information order was connected to the process of making or changing boundaries of the state, and boundaries between state and population. While very different from an organized political campaign, the actions of Kilipet residents in trying to change individual elements of the information order nevertheless involved leveraging connections across the state-population boundary. Moreover, these actions were equally political. The VKC and KWs were deeply implicated or drawn into both processes – of maintaining the information order as well as of changing individual elements of it.

The non-monolithic character of “the state” was significant for the functioning of the Kilipet VKC since announcements about government schemes and their procedures were shaped by different levels of the state.⁷⁷ The case of the 100-days scheme is an example. Residents heard the announcement to make job cards

⁷⁵ It may be argued that since the focus was not on government schemes initially, these linkages never bubbled up. However, linkages with panchayat leaders or MLAs tended to be all pervasive in Kilipet, being quite important for dealings in every domain, including agriculture, economic opportunities, education or health. Quite possibly, the linkages were not counted since they did not lead to a “source of information” or expert in some domain of activity.

⁷⁶ When KWs said they did not make “political” announcements, they meant that they would not allow associates of a political party to make announcements specifically on behalf of that party. KWs did, however, regularly make announcements regarding welfare schemes introduced by the state. The political climate of a village like Kilipet ensured that such a scheme was immediately connected to the ruling party and the ruling party MLA in residents' minds. To the extent that welfare schemes or schemes to distribute freebies or subsidized goods acted as ways to buy consent and legitimacy among citizens and potential voters, it is worth examining if announcements on welfare schemes were any less political than announcements made directly by associates of a political party (regardless of the KWs' or the Foundation's intention in allowing such announcements and disallowing others).

⁷⁷ Nor was “the population” coherent, with caste lines, gender, political affiliation, as well as different levels of wanting to be legible to the state (residents vs. migrants) creating groups with different interests.

through the VKC (which was told by the BDO's office to make it) and got their job cards made with the help of the KWs. When no work started under the scheme, residents went to both the VKC and to elected members of the panchayat with questions. KWs did not know how to respond; and elected members complained of a lack of funds. Meanwhile, the BDO's office claimed that the panchayat president was at fault (a version the residents never heard). The working of a single program was thus shaped by different levels of the state (central government, BDO's office, panchayat), but was presented as a coherent program of "the state." Yet, residents encountered a non-monolithic state when they heard an announcement about the scheme and its procedures from one source, went to another with their complaints about it and wondered if they needed to approach a third source to actually get the scheme working in Kilipet.

While the above example was about the boundary of the state itself, the boundary between state and population was also manifested through elements of the information order. Identity documents are among the most powerful examples of the distinction between "the state" and members of its population. The state possesses the authority to issue identity documents, and to accept or reject identity documents, while members of the population have to prove their identity in a particular form and format. In Kilipet, people had to submit their evidence as a written document (birth registration certificate, school admission certificate) that was endorsed by specific people (former president in the traditional panchayat, MLA). Many residents did not have such evidence or could prove their residency only through other means – as in the case of the woman who remembered the birth of a child on the day she first arrived in Kilipet, or others cases where only non-prominent neighbors could attest to residency. These residents had to undertake additional work to convert their "proof" into an acceptable, legitimate form. This work involved either finding documents in the right form and format to support their claims, or finding connections with important people who could attest to their residence, or forging.⁷⁸ Similarly, in the case of the pattas, the need for a patta led people to look for social connections and resources that they could use in order to make their case, including their links with the Kilipet VKC and the Foundation.

If connections across the state-population boundary are significant, so is the blurred nature of these boundaries, which brings up the example of KWs once more. In their role as verifiers of social facts, KWs were sought out to provide statistics about the village and to verify details such as residents' income levels (for loans) or whether their house had truly burnt down (for relief payments). This showed that KWs were involved in the creation of government records or elements of the information order.⁷⁹ What it also showed, however, was that the state-population distinction was blurred. KWs were individuals who were not part of "the state" but were verifying the identities of residents. By these actions, KWs thus brought the distinction between the state – as the verifier of identities – and members of its population – as needing to prove their identities – into question. Moreover, the few times that KWs used their new role to verify facts they knew were false, to the extent that they both endorsed important people (those they were scared of contradicting) and helped out others (those they felt needed the resources), they were engaged simultaneously in maintaining and in changing elements of the information order.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Interestingly, the need for a particular format and political connections meant that those who were not legally supposed to have these documents also managed to obtain the document if they knew what document they had to produce and if they had the right connections.

⁷⁹ KWs also helped residents fill up forms and earlier KWs had also accompanied residents to government offices to help in the making or issue of certificates. KWs were thus involved in creating government records to different extents.

⁸⁰ Consequences of such involvement by ICT center operators varies, depending on whether operators are from the same community as residents or are outsiders, whether they are already powerful people in the village, whether they have a monopoly

In this section, I used my accounts about the working of the Kilipet VKC to show how the creation, procurement and use of elements of the information order was shaped by the boundaries of the state and the state-population boundary. I also argued that the actions of Kilipet residents in trying to change individual elements of the information order (such as their own 64-evidence status or pattas) involved leveraging connections across the state-population boundary and were intensely political. KWs as verifiers of social facts, meanwhile illustrated the blurred nature of the state-population boundary. Moreover, they used this blurring both to maintain and sometimes to change elements of the information order.

In the next section, I will examine how the above view of the working of the Kilipet VKC differs significantly from the original information provision-information consumption paradigm of IVRP. I argue that arasiyal (politics) made all the difference between the two paradigms.

5.5 VKCs and politics in the imagination of a different future

The working of the VKC in Kilipet looked significantly different than the information village envisioned in the Foundation's initial documents, where "information production" and "information consumption" were distinct activities that could be impacted, but were not fundamentally constituted, by the diverse range of politics operating in the village. The VKC's work of information provision was carefully structured to not be involved with politics and potential conflicts in Kilipet. The VKC announced or displayed details of government schemes or procedures. To the extent that these did not involve a shifting of boundaries or a fundamental shift in the information order, these announcements proved non-conflictual and continued to be undertaken at the VKC. The VKC was less or not at all involved with activities that attempted to explicitly shift the information order or could potentially lead to conflict. In the context of pattas, for example, obtaining individual pattas for Nalla Nagar residents was a sensitive issue because it could essentially have shifted the terms of transaction between the MLA and residents.⁸¹ The VKC did not get involved in the matter of pattas until residents explicitly asked the Foundation to help. Thus, the VKC's extent of involvement in Kilipet – and its decisions regarding what to announce or display – were themselves shaped by political considerations.

At the other end, far from being passive "consumers" of information, Kilipet residents gauged the value of announcements made by the VKC and then carefully chose how they wanted to make use of them. For example, details of schemes were seen to be of value only in combination with other government records or documents such as pattas or 64-evidence (which the VKC could not provide). In addition, value was determined in the light of people's memories from their past experiences. People's expectations of what they could receive from the government was based on their experience of how their connections or lack of them had worked in the past in the village. Any news about government schemes or opportunities was also interpreted through that lens. An oft-heard remark illustrated this: "What is the point of my applying for (fill in blank)? The president or MLA's men will get the loan/ gas cylinder/ cloth/ rice anyway." Thus, far from being passive "consumers" of "information," Kilipet residents carefully gauged how they could make use of what the VKC provided in light of their other resources and their past experiences with the politics and practice of

over government services and on the size and reputation of the sponsoring NGO. See Pal (2009) for an instance where individuals became more powerful because of their role as operators and Srinivasan (2010) for a case where operators gained social recognition but little power through their work as operators.

⁸¹ Residents, nevertheless, drew the Foundation into petitioning the state on the issue of pattas. Working to change the 64-evidence rules to make more kinds of evidence acceptable, or changing the year for which proof was being demanded from 1964 to later, similarly, would also have involved a shift in terms of who dictated the rules, and made it a matter of conflict. The VKC chose to stay away from this issue.

governing in Kilipet.

The initial idea of the IVRP – of leaving politics to the local community, while nevertheless being a community-driven information provision project – was perhaps never a feasible option. One of the reasons for staying away from political activity was that it tended to be seen as a messy process and “politics” as either avoidable or best left to the community. But did the messiness of politics preclude beneficial consequences for different groups of village residents as they participated in political activity? In fact, were there problems that could only be dealt with through politics? I found in Kilipet that politics played a role in people's imagination of a better future, one where the “government information” provided at the VKC might actually be of more use in their dealings with the state. What they referred to as politics in this context was applying pressure or negotiating with local-level bureaucrats and politicians. They pointed to the protests against the VKC demolition as an example of a success, but also to the need for something similar to resolve the patta or other issues that concerned the village as a whole.⁸² I also pointed out that the VKC was dragged into some of these processes (by submitting petitions for the resolution of patta issues or for saving the VKC from being demolished). Indirectly, then, the VKC had already become a part of this imagined future for the village that was only achievable through political means.

5.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I argued using a project that did not define itself as a political initiative that the circulation of information is *always* political, whether or not an initiative frames it thus. Chapters 3 and 4 argued that the circulation of information was political and situated in the practice of governing in the context of MKSS's political campaigns. The Kilipet VKC, too, worked in an information order that was shaped by boundaries between “the state” and its population. Connections across these boundaries, as well as the blurred boundary, were leveraged to change individual elements of the information order. Unlike the MKSS campaigns, where these shifts were brought about with the help of MKSS's organized political campaigns, Kilipet residents tried to bring about small changes to individual elements of the information order through their acts of everyday negotiations.

The VKC, thus, worked in and through the complex political terrain of Kilipet in its work of “information provision,” while residents too worked through this terrain to determine how best to make use of the VKC. The working of the VKC in Kilipet looked significantly different than the information village envisioned in the Foundation's initial documents, where “information production” and “information consumption” were distinct activities that could be impacted, but were not fundamentally constituted, by the diverse range of politics operating in the village. In the concluding chapter, I return to my understanding of an information order and the differences between how they worked in the MKSS campaigns and the IVRP's Kilipet VKC. I analyze in greater detail the different kinds of politics – formal, informal, organized and hidden – that shaped the course of events in the two cases. I also revisit the theme of the tension between the circulation of information, the thing and *information*, the term in the work of both MKSS and Swaminathan Foundation.

⁸² Nor were residents only talking about organized political action. They were as interested in undertaking an “invisible” mode of politics that I will talk about more in the concluding chapter.

Chapter 6

Conclusion: The political life of information

In the preface to this dissertation, I wrote that my goal was to make the reader uncomfortable with accepting “information” as a self-evident thing or term in the world. This dissertation set out to look beyond claims about what “information” can do, to ask what the reification of information as a well-understood, bounded object entails and what it obscures. I examined the politics involved in the use of “information” as a concept, term, thing and rallying point by initiatives attempting to change the nature of governance in India. I analyzed the case of the early campaigns organized by MKSS that later led to a nationwide Right to Information (RTI) campaign, and the working of Swaminathan Foundation's Information Village Research Project (IVRP). How did information come to be conceptualized and leveraged differently in these two cases? I was especially interested in making visible the politics involved in the circulation of all that was simply dubbed “government information” and in the politics of the circulation of the term *information* itself.

I revisit some of the tensions that I had outlined in my introduction, tensions that were papered over by the simplistic claim that “information is power.” I then summarize my conclusions about the two cases I analyzed, examining especially how I used the framework of an information order and extended it in my work to explore the role of politics and material form in the circulation of government information. Next, I analyze how the term *information* acted as a boundary idea that allowed a variety of groups to leverage it in their different work. I explore the relationship between the circulation of information the thing and *information* the term in the following section. This discussion leads me next to the different modes of politics that were involved in the cases I focused on. I conclude by moving forward from my historical account to examine current events that I had pointed out in the preface, discuss how the ideas developed in this dissertation speak to them and point to avenues for future research.

6.1 Reviewing research questions, extending frameworks

Information empowers and information frees people at all levels of society, regardless of their gender, their level of education or their status, to make rational decisions and to improve the quality of their lives.¹

In the introduction to the dissertation, I had taken issue with this quote and pointed theoretically to the various tensions and conflicts that claims such as this one obscured. Empirical research and analysis discussed in the previous chapters ground my theoretical objections.

As I had argued in the introduction, referring to “information” as a well-defined, bounded object with intrinsic value made invisible the politics of its creation, usage and valuation. Who and what was this information about? In the context of governance, was this information about state agents and agencies, or was it details about the population? Further, who were the “people” who were being empowered and were others being disempowered in the same process? Were these “people” politicians, bureaucrats, citizens with connections to any of these groups, or were they not legitimate citizens at all? The quote above suggests, in

¹ K.Y. Amoako in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, October 1996. <http://www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/afrec/1997/init3.htm>

fact, that none of these concerns matter. It contends that factors such as gender or status do not make a difference in how information is valued or used. Stepping back from the use of information to its creation, the quoted claim also does not see the information source or the process by which this information is created as significant. But as I had pointed out in the introduction, in the context of government information, provision is contingent upon details being gathered by the government in the first place. Once gathered, details might be leveraged for surveillance as much as for the administration of welfare. Having information available for provision is, thus, likely to involve tradeoffs rather than being about unqualified benefits – yet claims about the power of information rarely made this clear.

It was to take into account all these concerns that I used the framework of an information order to understand the circulation of all that was clubbed together as information. The information order framework was well-suited to my endeavor of obtaining a situated understanding of information. The framework allowed me to understand the circulation of government information as the circulation of material elements within the practice of governing in a region. The information order framework thus makes visible the politics involved the circulation of information as well as the material form of elements of the information order. However, the circulation of the term *information* had its own politics, which was the second concern of this dissertation. The flexibility of the term *information* allowed it to be used by groups with different ideologies in their own distinct work. Thus, while the goal of my first question and argument was to make the politics behind a reified term visible, the second question helped me examine the consequences of obscuring politics by reifying a concept.

6.1.1 Information Order

In the introduction, I argued that instead of treating information as a thing that acts as an input in transactions, has universal properties and intrinsic value, and circulates according to the laws of demand and supply, it is more useful to think of information in terms of its material form as well as the social formation within which it circulates. I proposed using “information order” as a heuristic to understand my two cases. By information order, I referred to state-created information systems and information products, the physical infrastructure of their circulation *and* the people involved in the process.

Bayly used information order as a heuristic to analyze the 1857 revolution in India, arguing that the gaps between the information orders of the British government and the Indian population were partly responsible for why the British were not able to predict the outbreak of the revolution (Bayly 2000). Like Bayly, I treated the information order as a heuristic rather than as a thing and, instead of identifying every element of an information order, I focused my analysis on those elements that were important to my cases. Unlike Bayly, who treated the government's and the population's information orders as partially overlapping, but largely distinct formations, I used a composite information order in order to focus on the connections and interactions between the state and its population. Moreover, I did not examine the information order as a static formation, seeking instead to focus on how it was maintained and how it changed. Finally, the purpose of using an information order was to understand how it was incorporated as a technique in the practice of governing. Such an information order both shaped and was shaped by the nature of the boundary between the state and population in a region.

I used and refined the idea of an information order while analyzing MKSS's campaigns and IVRP's VKCs. Using these cases, I showed how an information order acted as a technique of governing a population and shaped the nature of the boundary between state and population. Elements of an officially mandated information

order, such as laws, schemes, procedures and written orders, decided who could officially create, sign or in any way contribute to the creation of government documents. These elements also decided who could access government records and documents, and who was required to possess documents to avail themselves of public schemes. The procedures listed in the Famine Code ensured that the declaration of the famine was by a bureaucrat and thus illustrated how an information order worked to maintain a boundary between the state and the population. The rules related to Famine Relief Works were geared to ensure that only the “deserving poor” were paid minimum wages. Moreover, it was bureaucrats who made decisions about who qualified as deserving. Access to muster rolls and land records was limited to the bureaucrats who created them and their higher-ups. The IVRP case discussed in chapter 5 provided examples of identity and ownership documents such as 64-evidence and patta that village residents were required to possess in order to prove their eligibility for public schemes and entitlements to the government. When they did not possess these documents, it was again to a bureaucrat or a politician that they went in order to negotiate. Thus, the boundary between the population and the government was constantly emphasized in daily interactions between the two, where both were reminded of the vast differences in their roles and capacities.

Therefore, an already-existing information order and its individual elements acted as techniques of governing, that shaped the boundaries between the state and its population. But the relationship between an information order and these boundaries was far from being causal or one-way: existing boundaries that defined the state, a population and the distinction between the two, equally shaped the maintenance and shifting of an information order or its individual elements. The information order was, thus, being constantly shaped by a state that was not monolithic in practice, and a population that was not passive and resisted the officially mandated information order (whether through organized political action or through everyday negotiations). Differences between the central and state-level government that resulted in the payment of minimum wages, as well as the workers who took the Rajasthan government to court for its interpretation of the officially-mandated Famine Relief rules in chapter 3 demonstrated these points. In terms of blurred boundaries and the ability to make connections across the state-population distinction, MKSS's campaigns from chapter 3 and 4 provided many examples where MKSS activists were able to approach sympathetic higher-level bureaucrats to get things done and elements of the information order changed (for example, the issuance of a land certificate to the women's co-operative in Sohargarh). While none of this would have been possible without long-term political engagement and campaigns, some of these shifts were easier or quicker at least partly due to the legitimacy and social connections conferred by Roy's status as a former bureaucrat. Chapter 5 also illustrated the point about the importance of social or political connections when village residents with the right connections could approach an MLA to get their records straightened out.² An example of the blurred boundaries between state and population was provided by KWs who could act as verifiers of social facts even though they were not state agents.

The shaping of the information order by state-population boundaries worked at two levels: on paper and in practice. Chapter 3 showed how elements of the information order were not set in stone, with different interpretations of laws, rules and procedures co-existing in practice, albeit uneasily even when the laws and procedures themselves were fixed. Sometimes, these differences even provided opportunities to shift an information order, or make small changes to its different elements. On the other hand, the minimum wage campaigns also illustrated how the information order on paper was not adopted in practice because the underlying assumptions of older rules and procedures continued to be influential even after the rules and

² This is not to restate that connections are important and necessary, but to illustrate problems in claims that see information as the source of power, instead of examining how it is leveraged within power structures.

procedures themselves underwent changes. Thus, bureaucrats resisted following the court's orders about the payment of minimum wages in Famine Relief works, with members of the bureaucracy continuing to work with underlying assumptions about “lazy” workers and public work schemes as a dole from the government. They refused to treat relief worksites as legitimate sites of employment where assets could be created.

Building on Bayly, I also argued that material form was central in the working of an information order. Whether it was details of a government scheme, a law, documents or records, it mattered whether these were on paper, on a blackboard or were being read out, as seen in the public hearings and the Beawar dharna in chapter 4, or the working of the Kilipet VKC in chapter 5. The public hearings in chapter 4 also illustrated that technical language and the written form had obscured the claims made by records. Re-organizing records and reading them out loud before and during public hearings changed the social meaning of the claims made by the records. I argued throughout chapters 3, 4 and 5 that material form was so important to how these documents and records were used, that what they said could not be thought of as distinct from the material form in which they said it. “Information” cannot, therefore, be thought of as free-floating stuff that is contained in a material form: material form is part of what constitutes this information.

As I made my arguments about the centrality of politics and material form to an information order, my larger point was a critique of an economic, demand-supply understanding of information. Drawing especially on the working of an IVRP information shop, I illustrated how a demand-supply understanding of information made both the politics involved in the practice of governance, as well as material form, invisible. Important questions – such as how demand was generated, how it was made a force to reckon with, or whose demands were treated as important, as well as the nature of supply and how records were created and categorized – were lost when information was perceived solely within a demand-supply framework. Moreover, the value of information was also assumed and defined outside a social, economic and political context. As I described in chapter 5, details about government schemes were not necessarily valuable to people who were never able to satisfy the prerequisites for schemes or did not have the social connections required to be chosen for a loan or a job. Similarly, characterizing use in the language of information-seekers or information-producers isolated information from the rest of social reality. It made information-seeking and information-production as activities that were undertaken separately from the rest of people's lives. It is precisely this separation that I sought to highlight and avoid by using the information order framework.

By using the construct of an “information order” instead of “information,” I challenged the reification of information into a single thing that acted on its own in the world. In doing this, I made visible the layers of politics that maintained or caused shifts in the information order. However, the reification of information and the obscuring of politics that resulted, also had benefits. My second argument in the dissertation was related to these benefits. I argued that the reification of information helped groups with very different ideologies and structures to leverage this term in their very distinct work.

6.1.2 *Information*, the term

The fuzziness and ambiguity of the term *information*, as well as the possibility of using it in abstract and particularistic senses, made it amenable for use by many groups in work that was often quite different. But this also meant that the use of the term by a group would say little about how the group would leverage the term and the concept. I explored the different senses in which MKSS and Swaminathan Foundation used the term *information*, and how they framed it in alignment with their distinct objectives and political ideologies. MKSS fashioned its idea of information drawing on its previous experience and insights with political

campaigns. Information was aligned with its ideology and structure as a political people's movement. The designers of IVRP drew on their expertise in agricultural research and policy. They saw the IVRP as a project that would offer information-seekers information using information shops and with minimum involvement in village-level politics.

The obscuring of politics also had a slightly different outcome within the work of each of these groups. Information acted as a boundary object or idea to bring together people who might otherwise not have been able to work together. Information was, thus, “both adaptable to different viewpoints and robust enough to maintain identity across them” (Star and Greisemer 1989, 387). While the use of *information* might not have established consensus between groups, it nevertheless allowed them to at least work with each other. For example, it allowed for linkages between rural and urban groups, working class and middle-class groups, as well as people from different occupations within a class to participate in a common dharna in Beawar. Similarly, the term acted as a boundary object allowing collaboration between agricultural scientists, policy makers, funders researchers and NGO-based implementors in the case of the IVRP. My research led me to the less-noticed costs as well as the much-proclaimed benefits of reifying information for the two groups.

6.2 Circulation of information vs circulation of *information*

Having discussed the circulation of information, the thing, and *information*, the term, the question that arises is how the two are related. I mean this in two ways. First, how was the circulation of the term *information* itself shaped by the information order within which it circulated? Second, what was the relationship between the universality of *information*, the term, and the specificity of information, the reified object that circulated in a particular information order? While both these questions arose in my research, I treat them less as questions I have complete answers for, and more as pointers for future research.

The circulation of the term *information* had to do with how it was framed and what it was used to indicate (which I return to while addressing the second question). But it was much about how a group was able to make the term visible using different forms of communication as well its own social connections and networks of communication. MKSS used a variety of forms of communication (songs, theater, speech, written messages) successfully to make the term visible and this proved important in the circulation of the term. However, what was equally important for the circulation of the term were the social connections and networks of communication of the two groups. In both cases that I studied, these networks were fairly powerful, extensive and diverse. For MKSS, they originated from the diversity of experiences and positions from the past work of its members. They included connections with high-level bureaucrats, NGOs, movements and local residents. Such connections helped the spread of the term *information* through its campaigns in the 1990s, including the series of public hearings and the Beawar dharna. The organization of the Beawar dharna, in particular, made use of these connections to attract journalists, speakers and participants. Likewise, Swaminathan Foundation leveraged its own reputation as well as the networks of its founder, M.S. Swaminathan, to make the term *information* visible, and the idea of information provision acceptable. The increasing support for ICTs by development agencies also catapulted the term *information* and the Foundation's ideas and work with Information Villages to fame. Thus, the circulation of the term *information* was shaped by how the two groups leveraged it, as well as the times in which their work took place.

Moving on to the second question, I argue that in the cases I studied, there was a connection between how information was framed (that is, what *information* was used to denote and what attributes it was perceived to have) and how embedded it could be in an information order or, indeed, in social relations. I found that the

more information was reified and described as self-standing or having intrinsic properties and value, the less embedded it was likely to be in the structures and practice of governing in a region. However, the more information was reified, the more appealing it was as an idea, and the more universal as a solution. It also circulated farther. This was visible in both cases in different ways. With MKSS's work, the shift from focusing solely on muster rolls to focusing on documents (“kaagaz”) more generally to demanding a right to “information” – a set of steps that made information progressively more reified – resulted in an increase in the volume and diversity of its supporters. With the IVRP as well, the project drew on support from IDRC which was already conducting research on the theme of information and development at about the same time as Swaminathan Foundation was talking about Information Villages. Further, as IVRP's information shops and its model of “information provision” were established, they received a lot of publicity and further influenced designers and discussions of ICTD projects among state and non-state based funding and implementing agencies, at the global and regional levels.

Even as information circulates far as a concept and as a term, what is required for information – the reified object – to circulate in a place, is an understanding of the information order of *that* place. This poses a dilemma.³ I argued in my introduction that in the context of governance, the circulation of information has to involve understanding the nature of the boundary between state and population in a place and to see what role is played by an information order in maintaining or shifting this boundary. In order to achieve such an understanding, it is not enough to understand merely the high-level objectives of governance, but its practice in a place: therefore, not only are rules and procedures important to an information order, so are the practices through which these elements of the information order are put to use.⁴ An implication of the tension between universality and embedding, as well as between objectives and practice, is that the ways in which the idea of information is actively linked to or made to draw on the practice of governing in a region by a group turns out to be very important to how events unfold. This was also where the nature of the politics deployed makes a significant difference to outcomes, as they did in the two cases I studied. In the next section, I will turn to the kinds of politics that I encountered and described throughout chapters 3, 4 and 5.

6.3 Politics of visibility and stealth

As the title of my dissertation indicates, this work is about information, about politics and about how the two are inextricably intertwined. Besides the circulation of information, my cases also allowed me to look at the various kinds of politics that were involved in maintaining or shifting an information order.

Political interactions took place in various ways. In the MKSS case, I narrated the story of an organized political movement. However, while organizing was one aspect of the politics related to the campaigns, the other side to the politics was the “lobbying” that MKSS members undertook using their social connections within the bureaucracy. MKSS's campaigns were able to shift the state's information order through legislation and written orders, as with the right to examine and copy panchayat records. However, MKSS's work was not only on legislation; its campaigns also sought to align practices on the ground to laws, officially mandated rules and procedures, as with its land campaign, minimum wage campaigns and the series of public hearings. Thus, there were differences within each of MKSS's campaigns in the nature of the politics deployed (campaigning versus lobbying) and between the campaigns in terms of their expected political outcome

³ I should add that the tension between embedding and universality is not unique to information as a reification or as a solution; what makes the tension interesting or worth pointing to in the case of information is the range of meanings that the term already encompasses.

⁴ As I pointed in chapter 3 with the implementation of minimum wage rules in Famine Relief Works, these could often be in conflict.

(legislation versus implementation). What was common across the politics of the different campaigns, perhaps, was that all of them were fairly visible – being visible was, in fact, something that the group worked towards and saw as one of its ways of being heard.

While these kinds of campaigns and politics are progressive in their intentions and processes, Benjamin argues that they are nevertheless “taught” to a population. He argues that there exists another kind of politics, the “politics of stealth,” which is not visible and is “learnt” by people through their everyday encounters (Benjamin 2007, 545). In describing how land use conflicts are resolved at the local level in a densely populated urban context, Benjamin argues “The issue is not the absolute resolution of these conflicts but the existence of a level of administration and politics that resolves these safely even if unevenly” (Benjamin 2007, 545). Benjamin argues that the politics of stealth is important for the populations of his focus because they do not necessarily want to be visible to the state, at least not all the time. I showed in chapter 5 that the residents who dealt with the history, and multiple layers of connections shaping the political terrain of Kilipet on an everyday basis, knew only too well what they could reasonably hope to get from public schemes. What they either had, or lacked and were constantly in the process of building, were social and political connections. Further, Kilipet residents did not want to be either legible or illegible to the state on a regular basis. What they found useful was to be able to negotiate when they could operate visibly and when they could deploy the politics of stealth.⁵ Without overstating the amount of choice they had available, residents did not always choose to work through organized political campaigning to achieve their goals.⁶ In this complex situation, the politics of stealth potentially opens up new spaces for action and it is worth asking what such spaces can offer. The discussion on politics also leads me to the final section of this chapter that focuses on directions for future work, including work on different modes of politics.

6.4 Directions for future work

A shift in an information order offers new political spaces. But this is sometimes accompanied by the closing of existing political spaces. Converting an informal negotiation into a legally mandated process makes some processes possible. But it also freezes other spaces for negotiation that had earlier been available to more people. In an informal conversation with a current RTI campaigner for example, I was told that after the RTI became a national law, documents and details that were earlier obtained in “friendly” conversation were now parted with only through an RTI application.⁷ Since my focus was not on current RTI usage, I did not follow up on this statement with more research. Nevertheless, it provided me an insight into the tension between legislation and negotiation, between access to one space simultaneously with the closing of another, that can potentially arise following every political campaign. Thus, an important direction for future work is to address how different kinds of politics – especially the visible versus those of stealth – make for different kinds of resolutions that may be more or less permanent, and may allow for more or less negotiation following the success of a political campaign. What are the tradeoffs involved in the use of different kinds of politics in

⁵ For example, many residents might have been willing to join (and had indeed joined) campaigns for land certificates. But not as many residents would have joined a similar campaign for expanding the definition of 64-evidence, since many residents would not have been eligible for 64-evidence (even if its definition was expanded). Residents, nevertheless, wanted the benefits of possessing 64-evidence (after all, the reason many residents migrated to Puducherry in the first place was because they could not access comparable welfare benefits elsewhere).

⁶ Many residents mentioned not being able to join or get others to join such protests for the land certificate either because they did not have the time, because past protests had not yielded result, or because they would want to be paid for missing a day at work.

⁷ “*Bhaichaare mein*” in Hindi.

campaigns around access to information?⁸

While my work in this dissertation has been to understand how two initiatives identified with information and governance have worked in practice, many recent debates in India have been concerned with the idea of using information to improve governance. I pointed to three such instances in the preface and they raise urgent questions similar to the ones I have been concerned with in this dissertation. I examine how my work can speak to these discussions next.

One of the examples I pointed to in the preface was the enthusiasm and funding that Community Information Centres and other ICT-based governance projects have attracted in the past few years in India.⁹ While the thoughtful use of ICTs can bring changes and benefits to everyday interactions between state agents and members of a population, my analysis suggests that the use of ICTs as “information providers” needs to be thought through in the context of the information order into which ICTs are inserted, including human and non-human elements of this existing information order and how they work together. Every ICT intervention needs to think about how it will contribute towards maintaining or altering an information order, and how different groups will be affected by the maintenance or shifting of the order. Further, thinking in terms of tradeoffs, rather than in terms of the unqualified benefits of information or by taking a “more is better” attitude towards it, would help projects stay closer to the ground and to politics. For example, it would be worth considering the tradeoffs between making details available and privacy concerns, between administration and surveillance, between appointing information providers and allowing them to monopolize the verification of social facts, or between making a population either legible or illegible for all occasions and allowing place for negotiating legibility. Thinking in terms of tradeoffs is also much more likely to lead to the introduction of checks and balances in a process rather than letting “information” take care of it all. Finally, the introduction of a project such as this is bound to bring in its own politics and rather than obscure this fact, the project might be served better by understanding the political terrain it will inhabit and shape, thinking carefully about the position it seeks to take.

A second example I mentioned in the preface to this dissertation, the Unique ID project Aadhaar, has been at the center of attention and controversy in India.¹⁰ Aadhaar is concerned with collecting details about every individual residing in India and in then using these details in the administration of government schemes (But, it has been argued, also to achieve a highly legible population). As a result, the project has been widely cheered but sharply criticized by many others.¹¹ One of the fundamental tensions Aadhaar brings up is

⁸ I am interested, for example, in how the RTI is being used in India today by different groups of the population. Journalists make an interesting group to study – to what extent do they continue to rely on leaks and on befriending sources and to what extent have they shifted to obtaining these details using the RTI? What do they see as the relative merits of these different routes?

⁹ See the Government of India's Community Information Centres (CIC) web page at <http://www.cic.nic.in/default.asp>. The CIC web page makes available a white paper on e-governance that contains the following quote about the connection between governance and information: “An IT-driven e-Governance system primarily involves the creation, storage, analysis, dissemination and use of information. It can provide vital inputs to the government's policy-making process. It makes government processes accountable. e-Governance automates and thereby speeds up routine administrative functions.” (Ahmed et al. n.d.). See also Department of Information Technology GoI (2007, 3-5) for more on the National e-governance Plan, including the use of common service centers to offer government records and documents using ICTs.

¹⁰ For more on the Unique ID, see <http://uidai.gov.in/>. For critiques and evaluations, see Beiser's “Massive Biometric Project Gives Millions of Indians an ID” in *Wired*, September 2011; Polgreen's “With National Database, India Tries to Reach the Poor” in *The New York Times*, September 1, 2011; and “Aadhaar Bound to Fail: Aruna Roy” in *The Hindu* (Kochi edition), September 5, 2011.

¹¹ For the costs involved, the scale of its implementation, the nature of the agency that will implement the project and in the context of privacy.

between the use of collected details for surveillance and their use for the improved administration of welfare schemes (a tension that I had also pointed to more generally in the context of governance in chapter 1). Critics of Aadhaar argue that it will make for an increased capacity for surveillance by the government and other entities, while making the entity administering Aadhaar itself less accountable. Supporters of Aadhaar, on the other hand, point to how an ID will help people establish their identity for government schemes and by so doing, will also reduce corruption in the working of such schemes. The question that Aadhaar brings up for me is what it can potentially do to an individual's capacity to control or negotiate what the state can see of him or her, and when. If individuals do indeed want to be visible or invisible to the state at different times for a variety of reasons, as I have suggested in this dissertation, how will a universal ID shape this process? How will individuals control what "information" the state sees of them and at what times?¹²

The discussion on politics also brings me to the third occurrence that I had pointed to in the preface: Anna Hazare's anti-corruption campaign that took place in August 2011 in India.¹³ Touted by some as the "second independence movement," Hazare's thirteen-day fast attracted tens of thousands of people to the venue of his fast in Delhi as well as in other Indian cities.¹⁴ The crowds stunned the country, especially when people took to the roads in a city like Delhi whose population had often been dismissed by activists across the board as disaffected and averse to participating in collective action of any kind. Critics of Hazare's campaign argued that those who participated in it barely knew what they were supporting or opposing, let alone the pros and cons of the positions they were taking. Others pointed out that the campaign had defined "corruption" rather narrowly, using it to refer only to bribes in transactions with the government and not to structural corruption. While valid concerns that merit further discussion, these critiques nevertheless do not explain the number and diverse range of people who participated in this specific campaign. I am interested in how a single issue and term – "corruption" – managed to attract people from different walks of life. How did people who had likely experienced corruption in dissimilar transactions and circumstances, and who were therefore unlikely to refer to exactly the same thing by the term *corruption*, come together for a shared campaign, even if for a brief period? In ways similar to my analysis of the polyvalent character of "information," I am interested in what work the term *corruption* is being made to do in order to resonate with thousands of people. Words do a lot of work, and this campaign, just like the cases I looked at in this dissertation, suggests that the work they do needs to be examined, rather than assumed.

Debates and discussions on governance and democracy are only likely to grow, and to be cast increasingly in terms of information. If information could be separated from the rest of people's lives, and manipulated in isolation, many of the causal statements about what information can do might well be true. But "information" is – and always has been – embedded in social relations, materials and practices. It is important to take seriously the ways in which it is intertwined with the rest of life, and recognize that its costs and benefits are best evaluated only in light of these relations and of the "information order" within which it operates.

¹² This argument also comes up in reverse in discussions of wikileaks or RTI laws when bureaucrats ask how they can control what the population sees of them.

¹³ See Yardley's "Thousands Back Antigraft Hunger Strike in New Delhi" in *The New York Times*, August 22, 2011; "Impasse Lingers Between Anna Hazare and Indian Government" in *The New York Times*, August 26, 2011; "Anna Hazare's Hunger Strike Shakes a Political Status Quo" in *The New York Times*, August 28, 2011; Parsai's "Anna Hazare Ends Fast." in *The Hindu*, August 28, 2011; and "Thousands Gather at India Gate to Celebrate Anna's victory" in *The Times of India*, August 28, 2011.

¹⁴ For example, see "Indian Corruption: Gandhi's mantle" in *The Guardian*, August 27, 2011.

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Appendix 1: Indian administrative structures¹

Section 1: General Overview²

For administrative purposes, each state or union territory in India is divided into distinct units called districts. Most state departments are represented at the district level by their own officers. Districts are further divided into revenue units and development administration units.

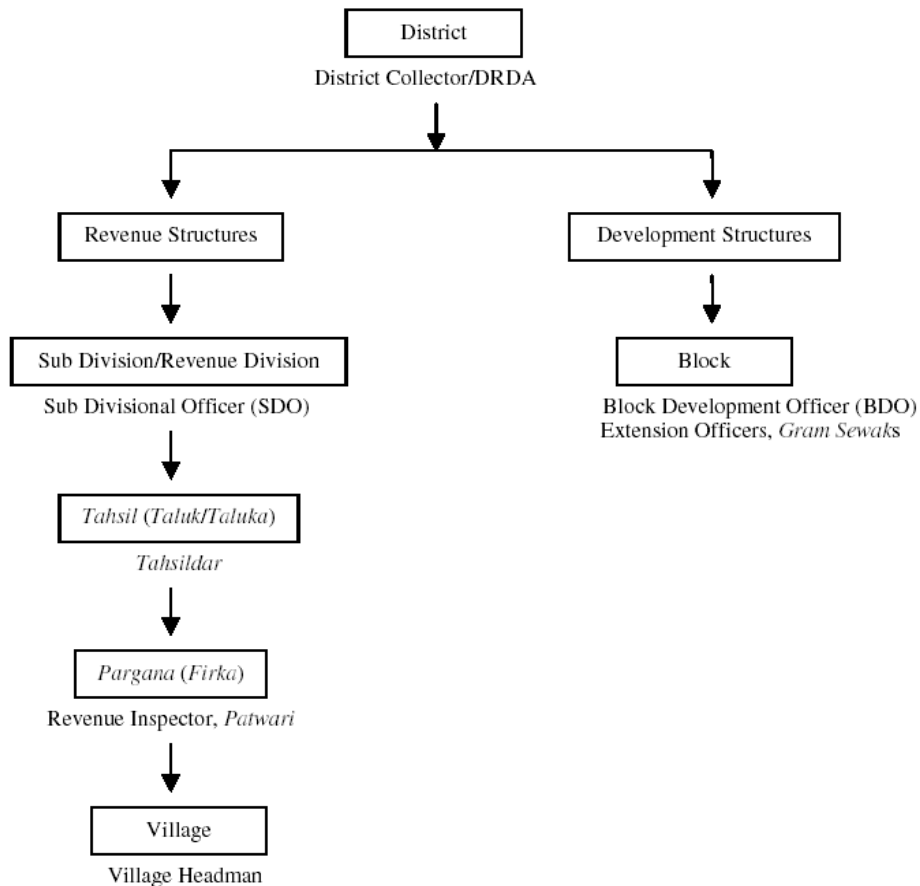


Fig. 1 District administrative structures

Source: Nayak et al. (2002, x)

¹ This appendix is adapted from a similar review of administrative structures in IITB (2005).

² This section draws on Nayak et al. (2002, viii-ix) and Johnson et al. (2003).

Revenue structures

District

The controlling authority of the revenue department at the district level is the District Commissioner or Collector (DC). This person is also the judicial magistrate of the revenue appellate court, the lowest court for filing revenue disputes. These officers are from the national level Indian Administrative Service (IAS) cadre.

Sub-Division/Revenue Division

The district is geographically divided into one or more units known as Sub-Divisions. The officer in charge of this unit is the Sub-Divisional Magistrate (SDM). The SDM is either a newly recruited member of the IAS or a member of the state civil service and has most of the powers of the DC. But SDMs have limited powers linked to the number of acres they have the authority to decide on. It is not necessary that all state government departments are represented at this level, since the distribution of staff below the District level follows departmental needs.

Tahsil

The sub-division comprises one or more divisions known as Tahsils, tehsils or taluks in different parts of India. This is the basic unit for purposes of general administration, treasury, land revenue, land records and other items of work. It has the closest and widest contact with the rural population. The officer in charge of the tahsil is the tahsildar who belongs to the state civil service. The distinguishing function of this official all over the country is the maintenance of land records. In most parts of the country, tahsildars are also the principal district administration officials responsible for actual revenue collection.

Pargana

The next unit in revenue administration, which is however not a mandatory division all over the country, is known as Pargana. Revenue Inspectors are in charge of parganas. They handle revenue administration and land records of every village within their area.

The revenue functions of a smaller group of villages are performed in most parts of the country by the patwari. The patwari is the village-level land records keeper and land revenue collector, also known as karanam. The traditional name changed to Village Administrative Officer (VAO) in the 1980s and to Village Secretary in 2001 following village-level administrative reforms. Patwaris are responsible for all work connected with land problems and perform a multitude of functions, including the collection of village statistics.

Development structures

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment of 1993 required states to introduce a strengthened system of local government. The ratification of this by the states and the actual transfer of powers has been uneven, and the names attached to the different levels of local government vary. But broadly, the overall structure is of an elected local government in three tiers, as follows:

District level: Zilla Parishad³

Block level: Panchayat Samiti⁴

Local level: Gram Panchayat (generally comprising several villages)

In addition, each village has a gram sabha, or village assembly, comprising all the adults of a village, to which certain development and other functions are allocated.

Originally, the Development Block (or simply Block) was envisaged for a population of around 0.1 million, which would be provided with developmental services, with all development functionaries attached to this office. Over the years, however, functionaries have tended to become absorbed back into the line departments and the Block office now deals only with Rural Development programmes and Panchayati Raj. The area of a Block is not necessarily a sub-set of the area of a Tahsil or even of a Sub-Division, though efforts are being made all over the country to restructure Blocks to fall within the boundaries of Sub-Divisions. Block boundaries, however, generally fall within those of a District. The Block has one or more BDO, along with Extension Officers and Gram Sewaks or Village Level Extension Workers.

³ Every District has a District Planning Committee headed by the Chairman of the District Panchayat. The District Collector is the Vice-Chairman of the Committee. The Member of Parliament (MP), Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), the Mayor of the City Municipal Corporation, all Municipal Chairpersons and a certain proportion of the total number of Chairpersons of Town Panchayats and Chairpersons of the Panchayat Union Councils in the district are members of the District Planning Committee. <http://www.tn.gov.in/citizen/drda-new-e.htm>

⁴ The Chairman of the Panchayat Union Council is indirectly elected by the members of the council. The Block Development Officer (Block Panchayat) is the executive officer of the Panchayat Union Council. <http://www.tn.gov.in/citizen/drda-new-e.htm>

Section 2: Administrative structures in Rajasthan and Puducherry UT

Basic administrative Division/ Officer	Rajasthan	Puducherry UT
District/ District Collector (DC)	District/ Collector	District/ Collector
Sub division/ Sub Divisional Magistrate (SDM)	Sub divisions/ SDM	Sub divisions/ Deputy Collector
Tahsil/ Tahsildar	Tehsil/ tehsildar	Taluk/ Tahsildar
Pargana/ Revenue Inspector(RI)	Patwar circle	Circle/ RI
Village/ Village Administrative Officer (VAO)	Village/ Patwari	Village/ Karanam or VAO

Table 1. Revenue structures in districts of Rajasthan and Puducherry

Organization/ Officer	Rajasthan	Puducherry UT
Zilla Panchayat/ Chairman	Zila Panchayat/ Zila Panchayat Adhyaksh	—
Panchayat Samiti/ BDO	Block or Panchayat Samiti/ BDO	Commune panchayat/ BDO
Gram Panchayat (GP)/ Panchayat president	GP/ sarpanch	Panchayat/ Panchayat president

Table 2 Development structures in districts of Rajasthan and Puducherry¹

¹ Puducherry follows a two-tier Panchayat system.

Section 3: Statewise statistics

	Rajasthan	Puducherry UT
Number of districts	33	4

	Rajsamand¹	Puducherry district²
Number of tehsils	7	4
Number of revenue villages	1072	129
Number of blocks	7	3
Number of commune panchayats	7	5
Number of gram panchayats	205	71

¹ All details from the Rajsamand district website, <http://rajsamand.nic.in/glance.htm>

² Details on taluks, commune panchayats and revenue villages from the Draft Annual Plan document for 2011-12 from the Puducherry Planning and Research Department website, http://pandr.puducherry.gov.in/master_dapdocuments.htm. List of gram panchayats available from the Puducherry District Rural and Development Agency's website, <http://drda.puducherry.gov.in/index.html>

Appendix 2: Background to Puducherry district

The Union Territory of Puducherry (Puducherry UT from here on) consists of four non-contiguous districts marked by squares on fig. 1 below.¹ IVRP was set up in Puducherry district (Puducherry from here on) where the capital town, Pondicherry, is also located.² Puducherry UT has a population of 1.22 million, of which about 0.95 million lives in Puducherry district.³ The district is surrounded by the state of Tamilnadu. Both coastal and inland regions of the district are inhabited. Agriculture and fishing are important occupations in the rural parts of the district.⁴

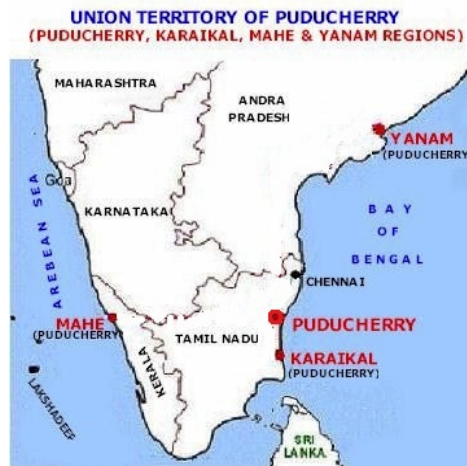


Fig. 1 Districts of Union Territory of Puducherry

Source: <http://electricity.puducherry.gov.in/power/index.htm>

Puducherry UT is one of two UTs in India with partial statehood: instead of being administered directly by the federal government like other UTs, it has an elected legislative assembly that consists of 33 Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs). A single Member of Parliament (MP) represents the UT at the national level. At the time I was doing my research, the most recent assembly elections had been held in 2006 and national-level elections in May 2009. The Congress (I) had formed the state-level government following the 2006 elections and the MP from Puducherry was also a Congress candidate.⁵

¹ Typically, the districts of a state or UT are contiguous and lie in the same region. Puducherry UT is unique in having districts that lie in four disjoint locations spanning three states (Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Tamilnadu).

² The city of Pondicherry is located 160 km south of Chennai, the capital city of the neighboring state of Tamilnadu. The UT, district and capital were all called Pondicherry prior to 2006, when the official name of all three was changed to the vernacular original, Puducherry. I use “Puducherry UT” when referring to the UT, “Puducherry” when referring to the district and “Pondicherry” when referring to the city in order to avoid confusion.

³ From the provisional figures of census 2011 (Directorate of Census Operations GoI 2011). The population of the UT according to the 2001 census was 0.97 million (Directorate of Census Operations Pondicherry 2004). In terms of urban-rural population patterns, Puducherry district is largely urban, with 229,373 persons in rural areas compared to 505,959 persons in urban areas (Directorate of Census Operations Pondicherry 2004). Urbanization has intensified over the years and land-use patterns even in rural areas indicate a shift away from cultivation due to demand for land for non-agricultural uses.

⁴ 19.95% of the population of the district works as agricultural labor, while 3.13% are cultivators, suggesting that agriculture remains significant as an occupation. Land ownership in the district is characterized by small holdings of less than a hectare. Most of the land that is sown is irrigated. Puducherry district is fed by two rivers and has many lakes and tanks. Paddy, sugarcane, pulses and groundnuts are popular crops (SLBC n.d).

⁵ The Congress (I) Party has formed the Puducherry government since 2000 with outside support from other parties. The main opposition to the Congress has been from the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazagam

Puducherry UT fares better than many Indian states and UTs on several human development indicators.⁶ It is also distinguished from other regions of the country because of its history of French (rather than British) colonial rule. Puducherry district reflects its French legacy in many ways, some of them significant for my work: for example, it draws on both the French and Indian systems in the naming and organization of administrative divisions.⁷ Thus, the district is subdivided into revenue divisions (*taluks*) for managing revenue collection and into development divisions (Blocks) for administering welfare schemes, just as in other parts of India. But, the basic administrative division continues to be the French “commune,” seven of which constitute Puducherry district (Note the seven colors in the commune map in fig. 2 below). Further, the local governance or Panchayati Raj system in rural Puducherry follows a two-tier system (rather than the three-tier common in the rest of the country) that is framed by these communes. Puducherry has gram panchayats at the village level and a commune panchayat for a cluster of gram panchayats and no district-level Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI). Five commune panchayats cover rural Puducherry (Ariyankuppam, Bahour, Mannadipet, Nettapakkam and Villianur).⁸

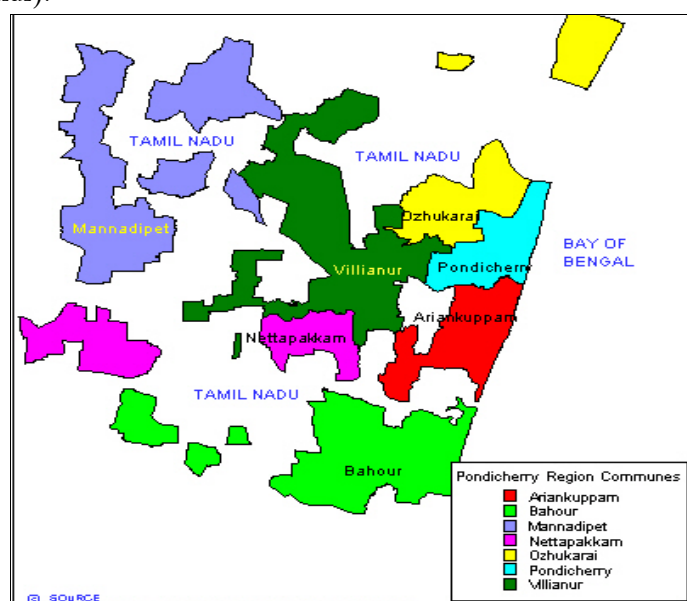


Fig. 2 Communes of Puducherry

Source: <http://statistics.puducherry.gov.in/population%20gis.htm>

As the map above illustrates, geographically, Puducherry district is non-contiguous and borders multiple

(AIADMK), parties headquartered in Tamilnadu. All three parties have formed and dissolved alliances with smaller parties and independent candidates prior to and after voting. Coalitions and alliances have thus made elections a contest between three blocks rather than three parties. There have been various episodes of internal conflicts, patching up and new alliances within the Congress alliance in the time since the state elections in 2006. One of the major rifts occurred when CM Ranganamy was replaced on corruption charges in 2008 by Vaithilingam, a fellow Congressman, leading to continuing tensions within the party especially as the 2011 state-level elections approached. Ranganamy floated a new party – Congress NR -- that allied with the AIADMK to win a majority in the 2011 assembly elections.

⁶ For example, the Union Territory has literacy levels of 81% compared to the national average of 64.8%; a sex ratio (number of females per 1000 males) of 1001 – the highest among Union Territories – compared to the national average of 933 (and the overall highest ratio of 1058 in Kerala) according to the 2001 census.

⁷ The French held Pondicherry between the 18th century and 1954 excepting for brief periods.

⁸ “Municipalities” (rather than rural panchayats) govern the remaining two communes – Puducherry and Ozhukarai – which lie in urban areas.

districts in Tamilnadu. As a result, the district cannot be understood as an isolated, self-contained unit; instead, its connections with neighboring Tamilnadu are critical factors shaping its social, political and economic conditions today. Puducherry's location and history have ensured that the two regions also have much in common: their caste structures, cuisine, language (Tamil) and festivals overlap considerably. The borders between the Tamilnadu and Puducherry remain permeable to goods, services and people. Commuting for work between the two regions is common, as is migration. In talking to Puducherry residents, one of the reasons cited often for migration to Puducherry is that it is much better administered and has better infrastructure and services than Tamilnadu. Puducherry also offers a much wider range of welfare schemes compared to Tamilnadu. Finally, given the differences in size and administrative structures, the possibility of approaching an MLA or a senior bureaucrat directly is much greater in Puducherry.⁹ People move from Tamilnadu to Puducherry for all these reasons. However, family ties in Tamilnadu ensure that migrants regularly visit Tamilnadu and movement between the two regions continues. An important consequence of this movement is that it makes it difficult to pin people down as being “originally” from either Puducherry UT or Tamilnadu. The labeling of an individual as one or the other, however, is critical to the working of several public schemes and programs as I describe in chapter 5.¹⁰

A person living or working in rural Puducherry is expected to approach the state through bureaucrats at different tiers of the revenue and development administration.¹¹ Given the relatively small size of the district and number of people for every MLA, the proximity to state-level elected representatives is also greater than in some of the larger Indian states. With Puducherry's first panchayat elections in 2006, people now also have access to elected leaders much closer home in their panchayat leaders. In practice, though, people find that it is having the right connections that helps in their transactions with the state.

⁹ This is not in any way to suggest that Puducherry is more “decentralized” or that the institutions closest to a citizen are more effective there. In fact, Puducherry gained notoriety in the 1990s for ignoring the 73rd amendment to the Indian constitution (1993) that advocated decentralization of powers to local elected panchayats. The first Panchayat elections in Puducherry happened in 2007, a good decade and half after the 73rd amendment mandated them. But the route to an influential person is likely to be shorter in Puducherry than in Tamilnadu even if it still requires the right social and political connections in the first place.

¹⁰ Many state schemes and programs require that residents fulfill certain criteria – for example, they might be required to have an income lesser than a certain amount; that they have been residents of Puducherry UT; that they own land; or in some cases, that they are landless,. These aspects of identity typically have to be verified by revenue or development bureaucrat or a bank official.

¹¹ As in other states of India, the most important among the revenue bureaucrats in Puducherry is also the one operating closest to a village – the Village Administrative Officer (VAO) or *karanam* – who maintains land records, conducts land-use surveys, and verifies residents' credentials when they apply for birth, death, and caste certificates. The *karanam* is the counterpart of the *patwari* in the Rajasthan context.

Appendix 3: Pudupattinam VKC¹

Here, I briefly present the case of the Pudupattinam VKC – another VKC that I researched. The reason I present it here is in order to illustrate that politics is central to the operation of a VKC in this very different village as well. While the nature of the politics and the specific issues in question at the Pudupattinam VKC may be different than at the Kilipet VKC given the differences between the two villages, it is nevertheless politics that defines the provision and usage of “information” at the Pudupattinam VKC as well.

The village

Pudupattinam and Kilipet are very different. Where Kilipet is an agricultural village of 150 households, Pudupattinam is a coastal village with a population of approximately 2000 households. Only five km from the city of Pondicherry, it is also very well connected, with buses plying to Pondicherry every half-hour. Fishing is the primary occupation in Pudupattinam and the fishing population consists of both boat-owners and fishing labour. The caste hierarchy in Pudupattinam is slightly different than in a community such as Kilipet where cultivation had traditionally been the chief occupation. Pudupattinam is divided among *meenavargal* (fisherfolk, a caste unto itself), the BC and SC communities. Other than fishing, a significant number of people engaged in government and private jobs also lived in the village. Some of these were residents of the village, while others rented a house in Pudupattinam because of its proximity to Pondicherry. Literacy levels and the know-how of governmental schemes and procedures were relatively high in the village.

Pudupattinam is home to a famous temple that attracts visitors through the year, but especially during the annual temple festival when a temple car is taken around the village. The village was initially organized around the temple, but is now much expanded. Houses in the village were mostly built of brick and had permanent roofs. Besides other habitation, the village also had a resettlement colony that had been built following the devastating tsunami along the Puducherry coast in 2004. Pudupattinam also had three day-care centers, a panchayat office and two ration shops. Till 2006, all major decisions in the village were made through the traditional panchayat and the temple committee. Following the first panchayat elections, a constitutional panchayat was elected. There was considerable overlap between the membership of the traditional and constitutional panchayats, although the traditional panchayat had had no females unlike its constitutional equivalent.

Pudupattinam did not suffer many casualties in the wake of the 2004 tsunami. However, much like other coastal areas in the region, the village managed to attract many NGOs and substantial funds from the government in the rehabilitation phase. The inequitable and arbitrary manner in which funds were allocated to village residents in this period continued to be a topic of discussion and a source of resentment in the village.² In addition, the coastal management plan that was proposed following the tsunami also fueled active debate and intense opposition among the fishermen's groups and associations within the village.³ All analysis

¹ Pseudonym for a village in Puducherry district.

² Interviews with fiber-boat owner and fisherman at their residences, October 12 and 13, 2009; interview with retired government bureaucrat at his residence, October 13, 2009; interview with member of women's collective, October 21, 2009. Statements such as “The MLA made crores” or “Lots came in from the government and NGOs, but nothing was achieved” were heard in any discussion of tsunami relief. The basis of allocation of funds was also questioned and severely criticized in many conversations that I had through October 2009. These allegations are not surprising and have been discussed in the media in relation to Puducherry district as a whole. See, for example, a recent article “Tsunami Rehabilitation Irregularities: Case Against Collector” in *The Hindu*, August 3, 2011.

³ Pudupattinam was split over the question of the new Coastal Zone Management Plan suggested by the Swaminathan committee

of development activity in the village today needs to take these aftermaths of the tsunami into account. The working of the Pudupattinam VKC was no exception.

The functioning of the Pudupattinam VKC

The Pudupattinam VKC was among the first to be set up by Swaminathan Foundation in 1999 and has been the Foundation's star VKC ever since. It was brought to the village at the behest of the traditional panchayat at that time. The VKC has been housed in a panchayat building since the start and also worked closely with the panchayat and government departments. The center had four computers, a PA system and an electronic board that was supposed to display sea conditions for the day. The Pudupattinam VKC also had a blackboard on which news items from newspapers and from conversations with the VRC were displayed. Pudupattinam residents would sometimes read these or hear an announcement partially, and then visit the VKC to get more details on that item. Regular visitors to the VKC also included people who come to read the newspaper. Since the VKC was located in the central square of the village, opposite the panchayat office and the temple, adjacent to a ration shop, and close to the bus stop, people sometimes just stopped by to greet the KW and talk to her about happenings in the village.⁴ Much like in Kilipet, the use of multiple media and modes of communication including blackboards, face-to-face conversations and the PA system was intended to make local news and details of government schemes and procedures more accessible for different sections of the community.

In the initial stages of the project, the VRC culled details about the weather and fishing conditions from the internet and passed these on to the VKC. The KWs then made an announcement on the likely locations of fish before fishermen left for the sea in the morning. The PA system was lately supplemented by an electronic board that was also supposed to display the weather forecast, tide heights and locations where fish were likely to be found.⁵ Weather advisories, especially the tsunami advisories, seemed to provide a sense of comfort and security to residents. The panchayat, the fisheries department, the temple committee and the ration shop in Pudupattinam also made their announcements through the VKC. Announcements included the deadlines for applying to new schemes offered by the departments,⁶ the date and time at which old age or fishery department pensions were being distributed, or the date and time at which the ration shop was open for distributing sugar, rice or kerosene.

The PA system in Pudupattinam had proven useful given the size of the village. Since Pudupattinam was a spread-out village, announcements saved people multiple trips to different parts of the village to check if, for example, the ration shop was open or the fisheries department pensions were being distributed on a specific

following the tsunami. The plan, which ended up allowing for increased commercial and industrial operations along the coast, was widely criticized for the non-participative way in which it was drawn up. The lack of consultations with those likely to be the most affected by the plan – fisher folks – came under attack. Interviews with a former government officer at his residence, October 13, 2009; members of fisherfolk collectives at their residences, October 21 and 23, 2009.

⁴ Of the two current KWs, one had been at the VKC for more than four years and also worked part-time at the temple, while the other KW joined a few months back. The senior KW was very well-known in the village; the newer one was still getting accustomed to her work and interactions with people as a KW during my visits in 2009.

⁵ Interestingly though, conversations with residents suggested that the data provided was not really useful for fishing. Fishermen needed details on the types of fish at specific locations, rather than just the locations where schools of fish were available. The type of fish decided the equipment that a fisherman needed to take to the sea.

⁶ There were also many seasonal announcements, such as when *puyal panam* (storm money, a kind of savings fund from which people are returned their capital with interest after a few months) needed to be deposited or when rice was to be distributed to fisherfolk during the moratorium on fishing (to allow fish to breed and curb overfishing).

day.⁷ Earlier, a drummer toured the village announcing important schemes or deadlines, but some complained that he typically covered only the main streets.⁸ The announcement system had become so integral to the village that people in the village, especially panchayat members, had the KW's phone number so that they could contact her on the phone if they had an announcement to make when she was not at the VKC. The senior KW joked that she could never rest: she was once woken up at 3a.m. to issue a weather advisory!

Much like the KWs at the Kilipet VKC, the Pudupattinam KWs, too, had instructions that they would not make announcements related to politics. In addition, they would not make any announcements without prior permission from the panchayat.⁹ The process of moderating announcement requests was started following a situation where the leader of a fisherwomen's collective had wanted to announce a protest meeting against the wishes of the panchayat leader, leading to some unpleasantness.¹⁰ However, all protest meeting announcements were not automatically curbed. In fact, during the period of my study, the PA system was used to invite people to join a hunger fast protesting the incursion of coast guards into village boundaries.¹¹ The panchayat leader suggested, and the KWs seemed to agree, that some announcements had to be barred since they would otherwise lead to unrest within the village.

While Pudupattinam village residents clearly seemed to find the PA system useful for government (and other) notifications, it was not clear that they used the VKC in any way to retrieve other details about government schemes or procedures. Since Pudupattinam was a large village with a high percentage of formally educated people, and people working in the government, people usually had someone to go to for help with government-related procedures. The city of Pondicherry where many of the government departments were located was also not very far from Pudupattinam. Pudupattinam is also extremely well-connected by public transport. Village residents, therefore, did not visit the VKC in order to seek clarifications on procedural matters related to the government. Instead, the utility of the VKC for them was that notifications about deadlines reached them at their homes and saved them multiple trips.

Some residents suggested that the "information provision" through VKCs had done little to change conditions in the village.¹² One complaint was that the VKC had been targeting only boat-owners and better-off fisher people in all their activities such as training sessions. It offered nothing for fisherfolk who had no assets.¹³ In addition, the VKC had hosted no discussions on the new special coastal zone plan and its impact on small-time fishermen and women. The other frequently-voiced complaint was about the VKC's (or Swaminathan Foundation's) lack of contribution (monetary or otherwise) to the rehabilitation efforts in the village

⁷ Conversations with several village residents visiting the VKC or at their residences, October 2009.

⁸ Interview with male resident and fisherman at the VKC, October 12, 2009.

⁹ Interview with helper at a ration shop near the VKC, October 12, 2009, who said they had to show a permission letter to make an announcement at the VKC.

¹⁰ Interview with member of women's collective, October 21, 2009; interview with panchayat president and KW on the matter at the VKC, October 21, 2009.

¹¹ Strike on October 22, 2009. In a conversation with the ex-government employee on same day, he suggested that the strike was not very well-planned and there had been no need for a hunger strike at this point in the process.

¹² "There is also no follow-up of training sessions at the VKC. If you learn how to grow mushrooms, what are you going to do with it after the training?" Interview with member of a collective of fishermen who used catamarans and small boats, at his residence, October 23, 2009.

¹³ Interview with member of a collective of fishermen who used catamarans and small boats, at his residence, October 23, 2009.

following the tsunami or even otherwise.¹⁴ These voices suggested that the Foundation's explicit apolitical stance or unwillingness to undertake any political action actually limited what village residents saw as the VKC's potential.

¹⁴ "They always say they have no funds." said the member of a fishermen's collective mentioned earlier. "They are the largest of NGOs and since they are in this village, many other NGOs did not come forward to help here . . . But they provided no help. When we asked, they said let all other NGOs come and provide assistance, and we will help when they leave. . . They have not helped since." Interview with member of a collective of fishermen who used catamarans and small boats, at his residence, October 23, 2009. Senior KW at the VKC also suggested that this was a common complaint in the village in an interview at the VKC, October 13, 2009.

Appendix 4: Note on sources

MKSS

I accessed correspondence between MKSS members and government officials, the IDSJ reports, case files for complaints MKSS had received, as well as copies of posters, a diary of lyrics of MKSS songs, scripts of plays staged by MKSS members and lists of slogans from the MKSS office in Devdoongri (including files transported from Tilonia to Devdoongri in June 2009).

I also examined correspondence between MKSS and government officials, as well as early drafts of the RTI from the RTI archives at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.

Copies of *Nirantar* were obtained at the residence of the newspaper's editor and printer, Ram Prasad Kumawat, in Beawar.

I received a copy of interview transcripts from an as-yet incomplete project of video interviews of MKSS members from Bhanwar Meghwanshi, an MKSS member.

Video footage of the Beawar *dharna* and Chileshtar *jan sunwai* were purchased from SWRC Tilonia

Swaminathan Foundation

I accessed IVRP annual reports, other background papers and the initial funding proposal sent to IDRC at the Chennai office of MSSRF.

I accessed correspondence from villages, needs assessment reports, earlier studies of IVRP and digital copies of Namma Ooru Saidhi at the VRC in Pillayarkuppam.

I obtained digital data on usage patterns, as well as monthly and annual reports submitted by KWs to the VRC, from the computers at individual VKCs.