



Mobilizing Culture for Public Action: Community Participation and Child Rights in Rural Uttar Pradesh

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**Mobilizing Culture for Public Action:
Community Participation and Child Rights in Rural Uttar Pradesh**

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ABSTRACT

Community-based initiatives that work to empower the poor and promote their participation have gained a strong support among scholars and practitioners of development. Yet the questionable assumptions about culture and development that inform these initiatives render it unclear as to whether and how community participation can be promoted in practice, especially in settings that depart from the ideal conceptions of community. Through a detailed case study of the UNICEF-IKEA Bal Adhikar Pariyojana (BAP), a grassroots initiative that seeks to advance child rights in India, this paper examines how traditionally disempowered community members learn to mobilize collectively around child education and health in the least-likely setting of rural Uttar Pradesh. Building on the recent literature on culture and public action, and relying on extensive field research, village-level comparisons and interviews with key stakeholders, this paper traces the process by which BAP fieldworkers and community members make strategic use of the cultural understandings, norms and identities that govern family, gender and caste relations to build new community-based networks that promote the rights of children. Yet there are serious drawbacks to these cultural strategies when attempting to scale up participation directed at an unresponsive state. To maintain ties with different caste groups, BAP takes an apolitical posture and does not actively build the capacity of communities to mobilize politically and make demands on state agencies. The findings suggest that cultural strategies for promoting community participation in rural India need to be understood within a broader political context of poor local governance and caste politics.

1. Introduction

Community participation has gained wide currency among scholars and practitioners of development. Efforts that engage local communities in the policy implementation process are believed to enhance the developmental capabilities and political voice of the poor. Beyond its normative appeal, the idea of community participation draws empirical support from prominent cases of effective participatory institutions across the developing world, from participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil to democratically elected village councils (panchayats) in Kerala, India. By drawing on local knowledge, norms and networks, these initiatives enhance legitimacy and are expected to produce more efficient and equitable outcomes. External agencies have also joined, including international donors and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), whose program strategies signal a shift away from centralized bureaucracies and impersonal markets in favor of a more contextual and participatory approach to development (Mansuri and Rao 2004).

Notwithstanding its broad appeal, little intellectual guidance has come forward as to whether and how community participation can be fostered in practice. Proponents of community participation often cite the concept of social capital. Yet the social capital literature is nowhere near as optimistic about the prospects of stimulating public action as its proponents would like to think. By some accounts, social capital—dense, horizontal networks based on norms of trust, information and reciprocity—takes significant time, generations even, to emerge. Further, it is unclear whether community participation can even be cultivated through purposive action. Communities historically well-endowed with high stocks of social capital experience a virtuous cycle of collective action and good governance, while those less fortunate remain locked in a vicious cycle of social fragmentation and underdevelopment.¹ If that line of reasoning is correct, the prospects for community-based development would seem bleak, for such initiatives often target communities marked by strong

ethnic cleavages, patriarchy and other social divisions—precisely those features of culture that would seem ill-suited to fostering community participation around development.

Against this rather pessimistic view, a growing body of scholarship adopts a more dynamic cultural lens, one that allows for human agency and opens a series of questions regarding the collective capabilities (and constraints) facing local communities in the development process.² As some have pointed out, there is a need for close empirical analysis of *how* policies and programs are implemented in practice. Building on this research, this paper analyzes the mechanisms through which local NGOs aim to promote local collective action around child rights, particularly education and health, within the least-likely setting of rural Uttar Pradesh (UP).³ The World Bank's *2004 World Development Report* paints India's most populous state, as a paradigm case of development failure.⁴ Locked in a vicious cycle of public apathy and poor governance, UP is at the bottom among Indian states on virtually every indicator of human development. In terms of early child health, nutrition and schooling, it performs significantly worse than much poorer countries of sub-Saharan Africa. Suffice it to say that UP is among the last places one would expect community participation to succeed. A historical legacy of exploitative economic relations, an oppressive caste hierarchy and restrictive gender norms are among the reasons given for these developmental woes.⁵ To find, then, that the UNICEF-IKEA Bal Adhikar Pariyojana⁶ (hereafter BAP), a community-based initiative, has been effective in creating new social networks that promote child rights in villages of rural UP, presents a puzzle. Within a relatively short period of time, traditionally disempowered communities based in UP's Carpet Belt—an economically deprived region known for its divisive caste politics and weak rule of law—have participated in BAP and have learned over time to organize collectively around child rights.

To understand how BAP was able to promote community participation within this unwelcoming environment, I focus attention on the ways in which the intervention harnessed local

culture throughout the program implementation process. Drawing on fieldwork conducted with primary stakeholders, including frontline workers, community leaders, parents, and other village residents, the study finds that BAP frontline staff made strategic use of local culture—norms, identities and understandings governing the relationships of family, caste and gender—to initiate and sustain community participation around child rights. This culturally embedded approach allowed the intervention to gain legitimacy and broad community support for child rights. With backing from village leaders and other community members, frontline workers facilitated the creation of new social networks consisting of women’s Self Help Groups (SHGs), parents, school teachers and other village residents. These networks, in turn, were mobilized to collectively monitor the delivery of early child health and education, specifically with regards to primary school enrollment and attendance, the safe delivery of childbirths and routine immunization. These important achievements notwithstanding, the case study further demonstrates the drawbacks of these cultural strategies, particularly when attempting to broaden the base of participation and sustain it over time. The strategies deployed by frontline staff to initiate participation early on in the intervention, such as working with caste leaders and creating women’s SHGs along the lines of caste identity, made it difficult later on to mobilize broad-based collective action against the state. Furthermore, even when such broader forms of collective action did take place, the outcomes were contingent on the responsiveness of local state agencies, which was often arbitrary and unpredictable. These findings suggest that participatory development initiatives based in settings like rural UP can approach a limit when attempting to scale up and encourage collective demands on the state.

The remainder of this paper develops the above argument. I begin by engaging with the scholarship on community participation, focusing primarily on recent cultural analysis of development and public action. I argue that culture understood in dynamic terms to include norms, identities, and understandings, can be harnessed strategically by local agents to initiate and maintain

community participation. I then turn to the main empirical findings, drawing on village-level fieldwork to demonstrate the cultural strategies by which frontline workers implement the program on the ground. I then turn to the limitations of these cultural strategies. Through a structured comparison of villages, I show that BAP's approach has had difficulty sustaining larger-scale community mobilization directed at the state and argue that it has to do with the initiative's inability to engage community members in broader, political action, suggesting that cultural strategies for mobilization need to be understood within a political context. I conclude with a discussion of the avenues for future research on community participation as well as some policy implications of the empirical findings.

This paper draws on field research completed during the summer months of 2006 and 2007.⁷ I conducted fieldwork in a total of eight villages across the three administrative districts in which BAP operates—Mirzapur, Jaunpur and Bhadohi.⁸ The logic of case selection was to analyze the implementation of BAP across villages and over time. Six out of the eight villages under study had participated in BAP while two had not, which allowed me to observe the initiative's impact on community participation around education and health. Of the six intervention villages, two were selected from each district to ensure that any observed differences were not simply an artifact of district-level administration.⁹ Because BAP was implemented in phases over time, I was able to observe the initiative where it was currently active, as well as examine its immediate and longer-term effects. Within each of the three districts, I selected one village that had recently been added and one where the initiative had phased out. Villages were matched based on their caste composition and distance to motor roads, two variables that are highly correlated with the provision of public services like primary education and health. I employed a combination of field research methods to study BAP. Within each village, I used Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA)¹⁰ techniques such as village social mapping, conducted participant observation with local fieldworkers, attended SHG

meetings, and visited alternative schools created under BAP as well as government primary schools. In addition, I conducted 120 in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with fieldworkers, parents, SHG members, school teachers, and other community members, as well as local state officials, BAP program managers, representatives from UNICEF and IKEA, and local carpet exporters. Field observations were supplemented with documentary evidence, including program manuals, internal reports and external evaluations. Names of individuals, villages and other identifying markers have been changed to protect the identity of research participants.

2. Community Participation and Development

The potential for participatory development to transform local communities has gained much attention from scholars and practitioners of development.¹¹ The turn towards participation has been defended on multiple grounds. With the uneven performance of centralized state agencies and impersonal markets, community-based mechanisms are thought to be more effective in meeting the basic needs of the poor. Community participation has also been defended on normative grounds. By treating the poor not as mere recipients of aid but active partners in the development process, as Amartya Sen has so eloquently argued, participatory initiatives can enhance political voice and yield more equitable outcomes.¹² International donor agencies have also embraced community participation within their portfolio of programs. The share of World Bank projects incorporating local community participation swelled from 2 percent in 1989 to twenty-five percent in 2003, a financial commitment that has now reached close to \$80 billion dollars.¹³ Much of that funding has been routed through local state and NGO partners, whose access to local knowledge and networks is seen as critical for promoting effective participation.

Whether community participation is beneficial for development or not, questions remain over how it can be promoted in practice. First, however, we must be clear on what is meant by

“community” and “participation”, terms that all too often get deployed uncritically. In community-based development projects, Mansuri and Rao suggest, a community is typically understood to be “a culturally and politically homogeneous social system or one that at least implicitly is internally cohesive and more or less harmonious.”¹⁴ Participation, meanwhile, denotes the collective involvement of community members in various stages of project planning and implementation.¹⁵ The naïve image of homogeneous communities vigorously engaged in development programs obscures the empirical reality of trying to mobilize poor, marginalized groups belonging to heterogeneous communities. It is in the latter context that community-based development has to be implemented in practice.

In assuming that culture embodies a fully integrated system of values, proponents of community-based development have failed to take seriously the actual content underlying social relations within a community. By “content” I mean the multiple elements of culture, including norms, identities and understandings that individuals draw upon to make sense of their social context and place within it. Scholars of culture, who take the content of social relations seriously, question the idea that culture constitutes a unified system of meaning and some have put forward alternative models for how it shapes behavior. In her theory of culture and action, Ann Swidler argues that elements of culture can vary, shift, and conflict, providing individuals access to a multiplicity of worldviews and modes of action.¹⁶ By this view, culture does not set a pre-ordained path for social action. Rather, it provides the normative and symbolic resources for individuals to construct a plan of action. Some features of her model bear emphasis for the study of community participation in development. First, the model highlights the *agency* of societal actors in constructing a culturally embedded program of action. As Swidler elaborates,

A culture is not a unified system that pushes action in a consistent direction. Rather, it is more like a "tool kit" or repertoire...from which actors select differing pieces for constructing lines of action.¹⁷

By examining how individuals mobilize the cultural resources available to them can help us understand how they act and behave in new and different ways. Second, in highlighting the competing and contrasting elements of culture, the model allows for the analysis of *power relations*. As critics have pointed out, the inattention to power relations by proponents of social capital has served to obscure the fact that stable and productive social ties are often achieved over time through processes of conflict, domination and resistance.¹⁸ Just as there can exist multiple, conflicting norms within a given culture, so too can there be multiple, contrasting interpretations of what a particular norm means in practice for a given cultural community, the kinds of behaviors it may entail and what kinds of reasons are deemed appropriate for following or flouting it, and the like. Which particular interpretations win out often rests on the nature of power relations within a community.

A growing body of scholarship draws fruitfully on these ideas, placing agency and power relations at the center of the analysis of community participation.¹⁹ In their study of the village panchayat system in rural India, for example, Rao and Sanyal find that public meetings (*gram sabhas*) function according to the logic of what they call “discursive competition”, where members of different caste groups use various communicative techniques to sway public opinion over problems of redistribution.²⁰ Under conditions of intense electoral competition and conflict, caste identities prevail as the primary means by which community members engage in arguments, personal demands, pleas, deferential requests, and the like. What Rao and Sanyal describe veers far from the ideal communicative practices that inform theories of deliberation, but provides a cultural window into democracy as it is actually performed in rural India. The cultural significance of public performances is also brought out in Arjun Appadurai’s study of grassroots social activism in Mumbai’s urban slums, where toilet festivals provide a means for showcasing the humiliations experienced by slum dwellers in the absence of sewage systems, ventilation and running water.²¹ By

sharing their private indignities in public to development agencies, slum dwellers claim a sense of dignity along with better public toilet facilities. These studies indicate a range of communicative techniques whereby disempowered citizens make claims on the state.

Building on the above arguments, I argue that elements of culture—shared understandings, norms and identities—can be harnessed by development initiatives to foster and sustain community participation. As I demonstrate in the case study below, BAP fieldworkers and community members employed a variety of cultural strategies to mobilize community participation for advancing child rights. First, through a process of cultural framing, fieldworkers presented the initiative’s goal of preventing child labor in terms acceptable to community members, signaling their understanding of children’s obligations to contribute to the household. Second, through public gatherings and communicative mediums such as street theatre, they conveyed the inconsistencies among norms governing gender relations while appealing to women’s identity as mothers and caretakers of children, creating a forum for them to discuss issues like girls’ education and signal their interest in forming SHGs. Third, they showed deference to caste norms and hierarchies by enlisting the support of caste leaders and identifying appropriate public spaces for women of different castes to meet, all of which aided in the process of building women’s SHGs. Through these strategies, BAP created new community-based networks comprised of SHGs, parents, teachers and children, who collectively monitored program objectives like school enrollment and immunization. As I go on to show, however, these cultural strategies carry serious limitations as well, a fact too often overlooked by proponents of community-based development. As the community participation around child rights increased, so too did parental aspirations for better education and health services from the state. However, SHGs were typically constructed along caste

lines, making collective action within a community feasible, but also making coordination across caste groups difficult, which is necessary to press the state. As the findings below will demonstrate, fieldworkers found it exceedingly difficult to organize communities on a larger scale across caste lines. Only in rare cases did community participation in BAP spill over into broader, more sustained mobilization directed at the state. More often, it reached a plateau as community demands were unmet by state agencies.

To advance these arguments, I now turn to the case of BAP, a community-based initiative for promoting child rights based in the least-likely setting of rural Uttar Pradesh. I begin with a brief overview of BAP's history, objectives and strategies. Next, I present a comparative sketch of some villages to show the impact of the initiative and discuss some alternative explanations for BAP's success in mobilizing community participation. I then detail the cultural strategies whereby BAP fieldworkers and community members mobilized community participation behind child education. As I go on to demonstrate, however, these cultural strategies face serious limitations. Through the comparative analysis of two villages in which BAP had phased out a few years back, I show the difficulties for BAP to build and sustain broader community participation directed at the state.

3. Mobilizing Culture: The Case of BAP

Since 1997, BAP has worked to mobilize communities around the basic rights of children.²² Located in the Carpet Belt region, a handful of rural districts (Mirzapur, Jaunpur and Bhadohi) of eastern UP that comprise the epicenter of India's carpet industry, the initiative emerged in response to social activism against child labor.²³ Indian activists launched campaigns against child labor in the Carpet Belt during the late 1980s and were soon joined by activists and consumers from abroad.²⁴ Public scrutiny was further fueled by a landmark Supreme Court decision that gave the Department of Labor a mandate to enforce the 1986 Child Labor Act.²⁵ A regulatory regime

involving factory inspections and fines help fuel the movement of work outside of factories to carpet looms based in rural villages, thereby reducing the likelihood of further regulation.¹ With mounting fear of losing business in global export markets, India's carpet exporters launched a number of private voluntary initiatives, including social labeling and company certification programs, to demonstrate their commitment to eliminating child labor.²⁶

In this setting of heightened public scrutiny and regulation of child labor, BAP began its community-based efforts to advance child rights, broadly conceived to include primary education, health and nutrition. In contrast of the traditional form of regulation by the state, BAP was envisioned as a bottom-up, community-based approach to address the root causes of child labor. The initiative was implemented in four phases covering a total of 950 villages and a child population of nearly half a million children (see Table 1). Each phase of the initiative lasted approximately three and a half years. The first two phases were financed by the German National Committee of UNICEF. The second two were taken over by IKEA, a leading multinational firm in home furnishings based in Sweden/Denmark that sources carpets from UP.²⁷ Villages were selected by program managers at UNICEF in consultation government officials, IKEA, local carpet exporters and NGOs. These stakeholders worked together to identify communities in which children were at highest risk of becoming child laborers, based on Indian Census data, village-level surveys and their local networks.

¹ Informal, home-based production is not covered by India's child labor laws.

TABLE 1

Table 1: Coverage Area of UNICEF-IKEA Bal Adhikar Pariyojana

Program Phase	District	Block	Villages Covered	Population	
				Total	Age 6-14
Phase I: 1997	Bhadohi	Aurai	100	250,000	52,686
	Mirzapur	Chanve	50	200,000	42,149
Phase II: 1998	Bhadohi	Bhadohi	100	220,000	46,364
	Mirzapur	Majama	50	220,000	46,364
Phase III: 2000	Jaunpur	Rampur	100	213,000	64,860
		Ramnagar	100	188,000	34,216
	Bhadohi	Suriyava	100	162,000	34,141
	Mirzapur	Kon	50	80,000	16,860
Phase IV: 2004	Jaunpur	Barsakhi	100	170,000	30,940
	Mirzapur	City	100	200,000	36,400
	Bhadohi	Abholi	50	113,000	20,566
		Gyanpur	50	153,000	35,490
Total			950	2,169,000	461,036

The villages that BAP has targeted tend to have a higher concentration of poor, lower caste communities. The task of building community participation entails working among these traditionally disempowered groups and mobilizing them towards a common purpose. To appreciate the difficulty of what that entails, a typical village in UP is segregated into hamlets and habitations based on caste and sub-caste (*jati*). The target communities for BAP invariably fall within two lower caste categories recognized by the Indian state, the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs), each category containing literally hundreds of *jatis*. The SC category comprises Dalits, the former untouchables of the Hindu caste system, though sometimes they take the designation Harijan.²⁸ A typical SC hamlet in UP is comprised of multiple *jatis* (e.g. *pasi*, *chamar*, *dhobi*, *mochi*), each having a traditional occupation and position within society. The castes and sub-castes recognized as OBCs, meanwhile, are above the SCs in the caste hierarchy of UP, though well

below the upper castes. Their hamlets can also consist of multiple jatis (e.g. *yadav*, *lohar*, *koeri*). The practice of hierarchy, exclusion and untouchability continues to persist within and across the manifold SC and OBC communities.

Given the importance that BAP attached to understanding the village context, the intervention has been managed by a team of locally-recruited officers with backgrounds in social work and extensive experience working in rural communities. To implement its bottom-up approach, the initiative works in partnership with local grassroots NGOs that have a long history of rural development work in the Carpet Belt region. The intervention begins with an extensive community mobilization process lasting six to twelve months in which NGO field staff consisting of men and women hold a series of individual meetings with parents and public gatherings with the larger community to raise awareness and discussion around issues related to child education, health and gender.²⁹ Field workers spend another eighteen months or so promoting and strengthening women's SHGs within each community. Viewed as a means for empowering women and establishing social networks to advance child education and health, SHGs consist of about ten to fifteen women that are taught how to manage a common savings fund based on monthly member contributions. Their primary objective, however, is to mobilize behind child education and health. Education objectives include local monitoring of student enrollment and attendance in primary schools, while child health focuses on child nutrition and routine immunization. Finally, NGO field staff works with community members to address primary education more directly by launching enrollment campaigns for the public school system and the creation of Alternative Learning Centers (ALCs) for children who have dropped or face difficulty enrolling in the mainstream system. ALCs are staffed by local community members and last for two years, after which time students are mainstreamed into the public school system.

A Comparative Sketch

To motivate the discussion, I first illustrate the differences that I observed between one village where BAP had intervened and two non-intervention villages. Maniharan is a non-intervention village located in Jaunpur District. The village's primary school building, a depressing and dilapidated structure, was virtually empty on the school days that I had visited. The classrooms were bare, with no chairs or desks, not even a piece of chalk for the blackboards. The outdated teaching materials were in a storeroom in the back collecting dust. A handful of children, belonging mainly to SC and OBC families, would often play outside in the schoolyard. On one occasion, I met three school teachers there who were seated inside the building. When I asked to use the bathroom, they informed me that the person who possessed the bathroom key, the school principal, could not be located. Interviews of the teachers revealed that everyone was absent because school enrollment for the term had only just started, and the government's free lunch program had not yet been initiated for the year. The teachers themselves complained of being overburdened with administrative duties. My interactions with students revealed that they had a difficult time communicating in Hindi, the language-medium for schools in UP, opting instead to speak in the local language of Bhojpuri.

Conditioning in the primary school in Balvantpur, a SC hamlet located in another non-intervention village that I visited was not very different from Maniharan. Focus group discussions parents revealed that children in the village were not attending school regularly. Many expressed dismay with having to send their children to work in the fields to pick chilies for upper caste (*mahajan*) landowners. Some had taken out loans from these landowners, one of whom drove by us in his motorcycle on his way to gathering children to work on his field. Families were used to paying anywhere between five to ten percent interest per month on a loan, I was told, which could take years to pay back. Although the parents wished for their children to be educated, they did not

believe that their families could make ends meet. Some expressed a concern for their children's safety as well, pointing out that local primary school was too far away for children (particularly their daughters) to travel to on their own.

Just a day after visiting the school in Maniharan, I arrived at a primary school only a few miles away in Gandhava, a village located within the same block of Jaunpur District. BAP had entered Gandhava in 2000 and by 2004 it had phased out. Like the school in Maniharan, Gandhava's primary school building was dilapidated and the classrooms had no chairs or desks. Yet it was overflowing with children late into the afternoon. The voices of young children reciting poems filled the air and teachers stood at the front of each class directing lessons with the help of teaching assistants. The students had received their mid-day meal that day, though parents alerted me to the fact that it was of low quality, and sometimes induced illness in the children. Like their peers in Maniharan, children in Gandhava worked alongside their families. Yet they were able to communicate these and other facts in Hindi with clarity and poise. The primary school principal at Gandhava was eager to share his goals for the annual school enrollment drive. He also showed me progress reports and comments from parent-teacher meetings held the previous term, many of which took place at his home. He complained of having to deal with overcrowded classrooms and the routine absence of school teachers, who were often out performing other administrative tasks. The panchayat pradhan, who I later met outside the school building, showed me another dilapidated classroom off to the side that had not been remodeled for years. The letters he had written to the District Education Office requesting a building upgrade had gotten lost in a sea of bureaucratic paperwork, generating no response from the local state.

To observe any difference at all between these villages was intriguing. How was BAP able to foster community participation around primary schooling in Gandhava? Before delving into my argument, however, we should consider some alternative explanations. A first set of explanations

hinges on the provision of public services by the state. Maybe BAP's success in some places was an artifact of the state's more effective delivery of primary schooling in Gandhava. Notwithstanding a number of policies for universal primary schooling enacted by the Indian state during the same time period, field observations rule out that hypothesis.³⁰ The quality of primary schooling (and health) services was abysmal across all of the villages I visited. Interviews of parents and the school teachers revealed the prevalence of teacher absenteeism and poor relations between government school teachers and local communities.³¹ Notwithstanding crumbling infrastructure and pervasive teacher absence, the primary school in Gandhava was brimming with students, which I observed over the course of several unannounced school visits. Parents in the community were sending their children to the school more regularly, despite the fact that it appeared as unfit a place for learning as the primary school in Maniharan.

A second explanation centers on knowledge transfer by BAP to target communities. Fieldwork did suggest that knowledge transfer took place, as field staff considerable time sharing information about the public schooling and health systems. While perhaps necessary to some extent, knowledge transfer is hardly sufficient in explaining community participation. Parents in Balvantpur, one of the non-intervention villages I mentioned earlier were no less aware of government programs for primary schooling. Moreover, even after learning about the formal structure of Village Education Committees (VECs), which enables parents and teachers meet and work collectively to improve areas like infrastructure, few parents I interviewed expressed awareness or interest in participating in these structures.³²

A third explanation has to do with monetary incentives. The promotion of group savings among SHGs may have helped reduce dependency on local money lenders. Given the level of poverty among target communities, that explanation might seem most convincing. Yet fieldwork revealed quite a different story. Interviews and participant observation with frontline staff showed

that group savings was among the last components introduced by BAP during the intervention. Only after groups had been active for at least eighteen months were they taught how to manage a group-based savings account. Focus group discussions with SHG members revealed that, while they liked the notion of financial autonomy, they were not terribly attached to the group savings platform. As I observed, even the most active and enterprising groups saved tiny sums of money for members to draw upon only in times of need, which typically involved the purchase of medicines for ailing family members, medicines that anyhow should have been available for free at public clinics. Very rarely did group savings lead to larger enterprises.³³

Finally, perhaps what BAP transferred to target communities was not just information and monetary incentives, but organizational capabilities, such as skills in leadership and collective monitoring and management. There is ample evidence in support of this last hypothesis. BAP fieldworkers and community members many times referred to leadership and organizational skills imparted to SHG members and other residents as important factors. As several program evaluations also stated, training in leadership and organizational skills was a chief input that BAP provided to communities.³⁴ Yet this last explanation does not contradict the explanation that BAP fieldworkers and community members mobilized elements of culture to build and maintain community participation to advance child rights. Indeed, as I will show in the remainder of this case analysis, the organizational and leadership skills that community members obtained could only be developed through a series of cultural strategies and mechanisms.

Framing the Terms of Participation

Proponents of community participation often take for granted the idea that community members want to participate in external development schemes. The ground reality of implementing BAP presents quite a different picture. Communities in the Carpet Belt had experienced many

problems as a result of state regulation of child labor. The Department of Labor would conduct child labor raids, most often within factories but increasingly inside villages as well, where much informal carpet weaving takes place. Families I interviewed recalled being harassed, fined and even coerced into paying bribes to state labor inspectors and their local associates as a condition of keeping their carpet looms operational.³⁵ Over the same time period, a flurry of NGO interventions sprouted up in the Carpet Belt. In some cases, these were phony organizations attempting to profit at the expense of local communities.³⁶ BAP frontline workers were therefore met with suspicion if not outright resistance when first entering target villages to embark on community mobilization activities. Many fieldworkers recalled having to assure residents of the intentions behind the intervention. To overcome suspicions, the project management team would solicit the support from the village panchayat to establish credibility for the intervention with other community leaders and residents. To introduce BAP to residents, the gram pradhan would arrange an assembly (*chaupal*) to communicate the purpose behind the initiative and familiarize residents with local fieldworkers involved in the initiative. At the same time, however, BAP fieldworkers tried not to rely too much on panchayats as they would often make unreasonable demands, such as pressing BAP to hire a particular individual to be the ALC instructor in their village. Giving in to the particularistic demands of local elites would undermine the credibility of the initiative among the target community, comprised mostly of poor, lower caste groups.³⁷

Support from the gram panchayat was only the first step in promoting community participation. To gain access to target communities, frontline workers had to convey the purpose of BAP in terms that community members could accept, which they did through a process of framing. The role of framing has long been recognized in the literature on social movements.³⁸ Activists frame issues “to punctuate or single out some existing social condition or aspect of life and define it as unjust, intolerable, and deserving of corrective action.”³⁹ A social condition can be defined in a

variety of ways, but only some interpretations will resonate with target groups. How BAP defined the problem of “child labor” illustrates the importance of framing within a participatory initiative. In particular, when the agents of change (parents) are themselves implicated in the social problem (child labor) at hand, the challenge is to mobilize community participation without offending the community. Acutely aware of this, planners at UNICEF had envisioned BAP as an intervention to prevent child labor, but soon adapted that objective to suit local norms and understandings. According to interviews and program documents, the concept of “non-schoolgoing children” was used as the operational definition of child labor. Officially, UNICEF defines child labor in accordance with Article 32 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which recognizes certain kinds of work to be hazardous or harmful to children.⁴⁰ The Government of India includes carpet weaving among the list of hazardous occupations. Rather than highlight the illegality of child labor, however, the message that children should also attend school was seen as less threatening to prevailing norms. In focus group discussions, parents expressed the need for children to contribute to the family’s welfare in multiple ways, including domestic work, agricultural labor and carpet weaving. Work forms a normal part of children’s daily routine within these communities.⁴¹

The ways in which frontline workers framed BAP in practice further demonstrates the importance of collective understandings. The first four to six months of the initiative involved village-based campaigns to raise awareness of issues pertaining to child rights and gender inequality. During this period, frontline workers gained credibility for BAP by displaying empathy for target community members and their shared understanding of norms governing social relations within the family, and particularly need for children to perform work. When surveying villages to identify households in which children were not attending school, they would never use the words “child labor” (*bal mazduri*). The term carries negative connotations of child exploitation, often by unscrupulous traders under conditions of low wages or indentured servitude. Instead, they would

use the more acceptable term “working children” (*kamkaji bacche*), which makes explicit reference to the child’s positive contribution to the household and recognizes the family as a moral unit. Often they would avoid discussing child labor altogether, instead highlighting the importance of education. By framing BAP’s purpose in a less threatening way, frontline workers conveyed their sensitivity for the relationships and obligations within the family. Parents, as a result, were more willing to attend public gatherings and other community events organized by BAP. As I show in the following section, frontline staff used these gatherings to reinforce the message that primary education can coincide with work. By signaling their acceptance of the child’s obligation to work, field workers established the cultural credentials to insist that parents should enroll their children in school.

Appealing to Mothers

Public gatherings form an important part of participatory initiatives like BAP. Frontline workers held village assemblies (*chaupal*), performed street theatre⁴² (*nukkar natak*), organized group meetings and songs, all of which were part of a strategy to appeal broadly to community stakeholders. The importance of public signaling has been shown across a variety of political and cultural contexts. Partaking in local ceremonies and rituals allows one to demonstrate a willingness to submit to group norms and practices.⁴³ Mundane acts in public can also form part of a strategy to challenge domination and hierarchy.⁴⁴ Within BAP, public gatherings offered an opportunity for frontline workers to discuss child rights and articulate the benefits of community participation. They also gave women the opportunity to learn about Self Help Groups and gain experience mobilizing collectively outside of the home. The utility of public gatherings becomes further evident given problems of coordination—for any one person to benefit from participation, she must have assurance that others are also willing to participate.⁴⁵ The challenge is to identify others who are committed to forming a SHG. As one fieldworker put it,

“There are costs to forming a group, not just the time but your reputation as well. You do not want to be seen as the only women asserting independence and flouting village standards.”

By attending street plays and participating in group songs, women could signal to each other their commitment to participate in BAP. At the same time, public gatherings could evoke argumentation and conflict between residents, particularly around issues of gender inequality. That is why context-specific, cultural knowledge is necessary.

In one of several street plays that I attended, village residents watched as BAP field staff enacted a common household scenario. The parents had been paying disproportionate attention to their son’s needs, providing him with the best resources in terms of food, clothing and money for school. Meanwhile, they would disregard the needs and aspirations of their daughter, treating her as little more than domestic help. The mother, for instance, set milk and hot food aside for her son. When the daughter asked her mother for milk, she received a harsh scolding for not ironing her brother’s clothes in time for school that morning. In almost comical fashion, the son would constantly be showered with undeserved praise, while the daughter would get blamed for anything that went wrong or missing in the house.

As it turned out, the son had been ditching school and squandered his family’s money to gamble and purchase cigarettes. Meanwhile, the daughter attended school each day after performing her household chores. A quiet and timid student who always sat in the back row of class, she achieved top marks in her grade and the teacher expressed high regard for her achievement. Ecstatic, the daughter came home to share the good news with her family, only to be brushed aside with suspicions that she was lying. The mother told her to spend less time gloating over school and more time learning how to manage the house, as she would have to be married off soon. Over the next few days, the daughter failed to show up at school and the teacher learned that her family was

planning to marry her off early. Upset to see one of his best students quitting school, the teacher paid a visit to the family's home. In praised the daughter's performance of her parents, while at the same time exposing their son's laziness and routine absence from school. Speaking to the father, he persuaded him to devote more time and resources to his daughter's education and suspend marriage plans until she finishes college. The play ended in good humor with the parents quarrelling with over which of them their bright daughter had taken after.

With wide smiles and occasional bursts of laughter, community members both young and old enjoyed the play. The message about gender inequality, marriage and schooling resonated strongly with them. Those I interviewed afterwards felt that the play was an accurate representation of the experience in their own village. In addition to its humor and educational message, however, the play provided BAP fieldworkers an opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of norms governing family relationships. The mother in the play took charge of preparing food for the family. The daughter was responsible for helping her mother around the house. The son faced no such obligations, but instead enjoyed first claim to food, clothing and an education. Marriage was evoked as a plausible reason for the daughter to have to quit school, and the father was the final decision-maker when it came to the education of his children. In no way did the play subvert these prevailing norms and practices. Neither did it, however, pay mere deference to family hierarchy. The play exposed the contradictions between gender inequality and the duty of parents to care for their children irrespective of gender, thereby creating a space for community members to discuss the importance of educating their daughters.

The play also called attention to the agency of women. Throughout the play, it was the mother who dealt the uneven treatment between her son and daughter.⁴⁶ In their discussions of the play with community members, BAP frontline workers often invoked the caretaking role of women and frame their participation in the initiative in terms of advancing child rights. By appealing to

their identity as mothers, frontline workers could persuade women (and men) of the importance of forming SHGs on behalf of children. Writing about a very different time and context—women’s movements in the United States during the early 1900—Skocpol finds that women appealed to their maternal role as caretakers and advocates of child rights as part of a strategy for political and economic empowerment.⁴⁷ A crucial difference, however, was that American women already had claim to public space, while contemporary motherhood in rural UP remains confined to the private sphere of the home.⁴⁸ Given these restrictions, street plays like the one described above allowed community members to discuss gender inequality within the discursive frame of women having to care for children. Had they organized women explicitly around the issue of gender inequality, they risked alienating community members. They learned instead to accommodate patriarchy by appealing to motherhood. What BAP documents officially referred to as an “educational medium” thus served as a sociocultural medium for frontline workers to signal their understanding of the social order within the family, allowing them to avoid conflict and gain the legitimacy to challenge certain practices.⁴⁹

None of this is to suggest that conflict never erupted in public gatherings. BAP frontline workers and engaged women within the community often faced censure from men and village elders for holding public meetings to discuss the unfairness of patriarchy. Consider the example of an assembly that was held to determine how parents allocate their time over the course of a day. The “official” objective of exercise was to demonstrate to parents that they can afford to send their children to school. Yet what the process revealed was that women take on a disproportionate amount of responsibility caring for children and maintaining the home, waking up an hour beforehand and sleeping an hour later than their husbands. The gendered division of time and labor became a topic of intense public discussion. As a few men began to grumble, a village elder lashed out at the women, “*Things are the way they are because we [men] say so! We are head [pradhan] of the house.*”

Even as he spoke, other men standing in the audience shifted their gaze down at the ground in shame. For the women present at the gathering, sentiments of unfairness that were once confined to a hidden transcript finally became public. Even the grumbling of men could not deny the facts as presented in public. To affirm in public, especially in front of men, the inequalities they were subjected to in private, was a profound experience for them.⁵⁰

Gatherings like the street play and assembly described above allowed BAP field staff to identify leaders among village women, who could persuade others to join them in forming a group. Highly respected within their social circles, the elderly and highly literate women were particularly active in these gatherings, and would often vocalize their agreement with BAP's principles and objectives, signaling their disagreement with prevailing norms that restricted women's ability to organize. By expressing themselves vocally in community gatherings, women could signal publically their willingness to help lead the formation of SHGs, and BAP fieldworkers would later approach them to motivate them to pursue formal leadership roles, such as running to become elected head or treasurer of a group.

Negotiating the Dynamics of Caste

Along with family and gender relations, local caste dynamics play an important role in participatory interventions like BAP. To reach a "target community" in practice, frontline workers must establish social ties with lower caste groups within a village. As mentioned earlier, the different castes comprising the SCs and OBCs continue to practice hierarchy and exclusion among each other, and establishing ties across these groups is a difficult undertaking. Along with traditional divisions, economic and political changes experienced by these groups have spawned new sources of antagonism. Political competition over state resources has grown with the rise of parties targeting lower caste voters through patronage, generating particularistic claims on the state and undermining

programmatic action around public services like education and health.⁵¹ To achieve program objectives around child rights, BAP frontline workers had to foster participation among parents and SHG members belonging to these different caste groups.

To promote participation among community members belonging to different caste groups, BAP fieldworkers faced a cultural balancing act. On the one hand, they had to overcome social barriers to establish ties among the major castes and sub-castes. Yet they also had to display sensitivity for caste boundaries and the restrictions these boundaries imposed on women in particular. Focus group discussions with BAP frontline workers revealed many such challenges, along with strategies developed to overcome them. Perhaps the most immediate challenge facing frontline workers was to find ways to work around their own caste identities. For instance, one Brahmin worker discussed how she was able to overcome differences and establish trust with lower caste groups:

“Trust has increased between us and the residents. Before, they didn’t trust us. We had to build their trust by staying with the residents in their hamlets and living alongside them. See, I am a *Srivastava* [Brahmin]. Initially, I found it hard to approach the Harijans [Dalits]. So what I learned to do is drink water from some place inside the Harijan Basti [Dalit hamlet] where everyone could see me. By doing that, I showed that I was willing to be among them, to be one of them.”

News of the act would spread quickly throughout the village, allowing her to gain access to hamlets and households where she may not have had any previous rapport. However, defying caste norms carried a price as well. Upper castes in the village, especially Brahmins, would attach great significance to rituals of purity and pollution, and frontline staff risked antagonizing them if such acts of defiance came to be known widely.⁵² Because upper caste groups dominated village institutions like the panchayat, their cooperation was vital for BAP to gain full support within a village. For the above fieldworker, the act of drinking the ritually polluted water in Dalit homes was worth the risk because it helped her to gain trust from the target community.

Though it was not official policy to create groups along caste lines, in practice that is what BAP fieldworkers found to be most effective. Members of the same caste group faced fewer social barriers to collective action and could more easily monitor and sanction those who failed to perform their duties, particularly in the case of group savings.⁵³ That observation is in line with the conventional wisdom behind SHGs. Drawing on the experience of Grameen Bank and other microfinance institutions, initiatives like BAP have adopted the practice of creating groups that can enforce financial obligations, a task that more readily accomplished within a particular caste.⁵⁴ That is not to suggest that SHGs never can develop across caste lines.² However, as one BAP staff member explained, such groups were more often the exception than the norm:

“Typically we develop SHGs from the same caste. We find same-caste groups more effective because there is less of a problem of in-fighting between members. When we do have multi-caste groups, we make sure that the president and treasurer belong to different castes to ensure equality. Even these cross-caste groups can work well.”

With limited time and resources at their disposal, and faced with pressures to document outputs to their international funders, BAP most often promoted same-caste groups. Yet even that was no easy task. Frontline workers often solicited help from village caste leadership, which in turn required them to invest significant time and effort to identify influential allies belonging to different caste groups. As a BAP program manager explained:

“The biggest challenge we face is getting access to the head [*mukhiya*] from each caste group and bringing him on our side. Also, we need to find the right kind of people to help out within each hamlet. We have to figure out who is well respected within their own group *and* gets along with all the other groups. We have to find out who is the pacifier in the village. So we talk to them and try to work through them when creating the [women’s] groups. Also, we have to spend equal time in each [caste] hamlet otherwise some groups may feel we are being partial against them.”

² I observed several cases of multi-caste groups that performed well.

Men were often unwilling to entertain the idea of women taking time away from domestic work, to form their own groups and move independently outside the village. And in many cases, women also shared little faith in their ability to participate in a SHG due to widespread illiteracy and social constraints.³ Caste leaders would help establish ties with women and persuade men to support their participation in the initiative.

Frontline workers continued to work within caste norms when organizing public meetings as well. Take, for example, the task of identifying a suitable place to hold meetings. For village residents, the issue of where a meeting took place bore much significance. Lower caste groups were barred from gathering in some areas of the village. In other places, meanwhile, women from different caste groups could not sit together. As one fieldworker recalled, identifying an appropriate meeting place was often challenging:

“When we first tried to form the women’s group [SHG] here, we held gatherings in the village center to explain the purpose of the group to women. But we saw that not all women would show up to the meetings. It wasn’t because they didn’t have interest. They just didn’t all feel comfortable sitting where we held the meeting. So one difficulty we faced from the start was selecting a public meeting space where all women could sit. Slowly we realized that the best approach is to let them choose a place where all members feel equally welcome and nobody has any reservations.”

By recognizing the significance that community members attached to public space in their village and finding ways to adjust, BAP made it possible for meetings to take place across caste lines. With community input, they identified neutral spaces for women to meet in public, working around the boundaries of caste without defying the institution wholesale. In fact, most caste-based practices remained unchallenged by the program. As I observed in public gatherings with multiple SHGs

³ Focus group discussion with women revealed that few left the vicinity of their homes for reasons other than to collect water or work in nearby rice paddies. Participation in SHGs, meanwhile, entailed greater public interaction and movement, both within and outside the village.

belonging to different castes, the groups comprised of the lowest caste would typically be seated at the very back, sometimes maintaining a space from others to avoid ritual pollution.

Local Collective Action: Monitoring Student Attendance

The strategies that BAP fieldworkers employed to initiate community participation and develop SHGs were aimed, ultimately, towards advancing child education and health. To that end, they drew upon local knowledge, norms and understandings. Consider how community members were mobilized to monitor school enrollment and attendance in Alternative Learning Centers for out-of-school children. For such monitoring system to work, the ALC instructor had to be accessible to and respected by community members. Take the case of Sunila. The only Dalit in her village to successfully pass intermediary level (the equivalent of high school), Sunila was viewed by many as a role model, especially for young girls.⁵⁵ As with other ALC instructors I observed, she showed extraordinary dedication to the children in her community. Though it paid little more than what a carpet weaver could earn in a month, the job of an ALC instructor was demanding. Material incentives alone could not explain why Sunila gave so much of her time to the ALC, holding evening sessions for adolescent children who were not even targeted by the initiative, all free of charge.⁵⁶

When I asked Sunila why she chose to instruct children after hours, she explained:

“What I like most is the appreciation, support and encouragement I receive from parents and community members. And, of course, playing with the children!”

The status that came with being an instructor helped BAP to attract and motivate qualified individuals like Sunila, whose work gained further recognition during routine visits by field staff. Status was also critical in that it helped instructors persuade parents to educate their children and enlist their support.⁵⁷ As Sunila explained,

“My brother and I would visit all the houses in our village and try convincing parents to send their children to school. We understood that children help their parents with household work and some may have gotten into weaving carpets.”

Sunila’s ability to go house-to-house (with her brother’s help) and persuade parents was essential for running the ALC. Yet that same capacity was not available to everyone in a village. For example, another highly qualified instructor was unable to maintain good attendance at her ALC. As a Brahmin woman, she faced social restrictions from entering lower caste hamlets. Nor did she feel comfortable visiting the rice paddy fields where lower caste women spent most of the day working. As a result, she could not establish the ties necessary to mobilize parents around student attendance.⁵⁸

When recruiting instructors, BAP project managers seek candidates who are not only competent, but accessible to target community members. Finding exceptional individuals like Sunila, however, is not easy and BAP could not rely on one person alone to monitor the attendance of children in school. To negotiate the balance between children having to work and attend school at the same time, parents ALC instructors, and other community members needed to work collectively. Mr. Yadav, an instructor at an ALC that had been operating for a year, explained the challenge:

“Maintaining regular attendance of the children is the hardest thing. Residents in our village [hamlet] are mostly landless, so children have to do some work. But this has been improving slowly as parents see their children learning and enjoying school.”

To address the needs of families in his hamlet, Mr. Yadav maintained flexible hours of operation to ensure that children could attend classes each day while accommodating their obligation to work. In other cases, SHG members and other parents took the lead, holding meetings to determine the best days, times and even locations for ALC classes to run. Since communities lacked the resources to

build new classrooms, classes were often held outside or in makeshift accommodations, which became impossible during the monsoon season. As I was surprised to observe during the summer months, ALCs remained open on days of heavy rain, when most schools were shut. Community members had identified alternative solutions to deal with rainy weather. For example, some developed a rotating system in which parents took turns each week providing space for the ALC to run inside their homes.⁵⁹

The importance of a community's ability to collectively monitor schooling became most apparent when BAP attempted to integrate students into the mainstream government school system. Persistent problems with student retention in primary schools were identified the early phases of the intervention. Project officers believed that low retention had to do with overcrowding and the high student-teacher ratio in government schools. In addition, they found the disciplinarian pedagogical techniques of government school teachers failed to attract students. Insistent on working with the government system, BAP reached an agreement with the local education bureaucracy to allow former ALC instructors to serve as para-teachers within primary schools. This program innovation appeared to generate greater retention among students according to official documents, and program officers believed their initial hypotheses had been validated. However, fieldwork conducted at the primary school in Gandhava, the success case that I had presented earlier, revealed quite a different story. The addition of one para-teacher did not reduce the student-teacher ratio that much.⁶⁰ Nor was it the case that government school teachers had adopted the "Joyful Learning Techniques" used by the former ALC instructors.

Instead, I found a social network comprised of SHG women, former ALC instructors and other community members collectively monitoring the school attendance of children. When some children did not show up to class, the former ALC instructor would ask his former ALC students and their friends to go fetch them. When students came home from school, they would often joke

amongst each other about the children from their hamlet who did not attend school that day. SHG members and other residents in the hamlet would learn about it, and pay a visit to their neighbors' houses to determine their children absent. The ALC instructors themselves made frequent house visits when children were absent over prolonged periods of time. The sanctioning that took place, meanwhile, was not so clear cut. It required a fine degree of cultural sensitivity to discern what reasons counted as "acceptable" for a child to miss school. For instance, when one ALC instructor paid house visits, she inquired whether the family was planning something large, like a wedding or some other major event that required help from children. Such knowledge helped contextualize student attendance so that parents did not feel ashamed if their children had to leave for a legitimate purpose. Collective action took place to remove barriers to schooling as well, like the long walking distance between residential hamlets and the primary school. Some communities came up with solutions like having children walk to school together as a group with a SHG member or elder sibling taking turns to escort them.⁶¹ The responsibility to ensure child safety en route to school was shared by the network of community members, including children.

Scaling Up Participation: The Limits of Mobilizing Culture

The findings thus far demonstrate how community participation for child welfare gets mobilized through a variety of cultural strategies. This section examines whether and how these strategies can yield sustainable changes in community participation over a longer time period of time. The findings here are based on a comparison of two villages in which BAP had been active for a relatively long time: Saharki and Manakpur. Located within a few kilometers of each other in Rampur Block of Jaunpur District, these villages have similar populations and caste compositions.

The same local NGO had operated in both villages, starting in 2000 and phasing out by 2004. While both villages

Community participation thereafter in the domain of child health, specifically routine immunization, continued to be much higher in Manakpur than Saharki. SHG members in Manakpur were able to coordinate with the Auxiliary Nurse Midwife (ANM), a government health extension worker, to develop a micro-plan for routine immunization. As I observed during field visits, the ANM would arrive at a date and time fixed in advance, which was posted publically at the childcare center based within the village. On those particular days, SHG members made rounds within each hamlet to identify children requiring immunization and persuade their parents to take them to the childcare center.⁶² Their efforts helped facilitate immunization in Manakpur to a considerable extent. In Saharki meanwhile, community members interacted with the ANM rarely. Her visits to the village, they reported, were irregular and confined primarily to the upper caste hamlets. SHG members had never met with her to create a micro-plan for routine immunization or to mobilize parents within their hamlet. Community participation around child health foundered as parents began to seek private immunization services from outside of the village.

What explains the difference in the longer-term results of BAP in these two villages? The same community mobilization process, child health campaigns and SHG training sessions were implemented in both villages. According to fieldworker interviews and BAP documents, community participation in Saharki had been just as effective as in Manakpur during the intervention. What made Manakpur different from other villages was that SHG members had the opportunity to participate in an income-generation program that required them to interact and coordinate efforts across caste. In a project initiated in March, 2005, a handful of SHGs were given the opportunity to embroider cushion covers for IKEA, which the company marketed to customers at its retail outlets in Europe. The project was an experiment to see whether the social networks initiated by BAP for

child rights could also be mobilized for economic goals.⁶³ Producing the cushion covers for IKEA required SHGs in Manakpur to set aside caste differences and work together to meet production targets, enforce quality standards and timely delivery of the finished product. Frequently, they meet as a larger association to discuss business details, such as the expected delivery of raw materials, how to distribute the work fairly across the SHGs, what piece rate was appropriate for each design, and so on. SHG members belonging to different hamlets of Manakpur would visit each other informally as well to ensure smooth production. Through these interactions, they learned how to work across caste lines for a common purpose.⁶⁴

The capacity to collectively mobilize and coordinate with the ANM to implement a micro-plan for routine immunization did not evolve overnight. According to community members of Manakpur, prior conditions in their village were very similar to those in Saharki. SHG members participated in school monitoring, but worked mostly within their own caste hamlets. When SHG members of different castes did interact, they would follow the more common pattern of meeting at a neutral site some distance away.⁶⁵ Just like in Saharki, Manakpur's ANM used to visit the village infrequently at best. According to some residents, she would even charge them (illegally) for immunizations that should have been provided for free. After several failed attempts to get her to provide immunizations, SHG members in Manakpur organized a large group of women and other community members, along with local caste leaders and members of the panchayat to protest at their local Community Health Center. Standing before the medical officer stationed at the clinic, they described to their repeated attempts to round children for routine immunization without any response from anyone in the Health Department. A group of community members recounted the chain of events:

“The ANM in our village was not showing up for immunization, so she [one of the SHG leaders] helped organize other SHG members from different hamlets. Community leaders and residents came together and decided to visit the Public

Health Center at the [Administrative] Block. We humiliated the ANM in front of the doctor [Medical Officer], telling him that we had to purchase private drugs because she was not serving our village...The next time when the ANM did come to our village, instead of providing immunizations, she again told us to go find private drugs like last time. So we told the ANM to give us a written statement saying that she is not providing immunizations for children in our village and that we should go to a private clinic instead. The ANM was afraid that we might escalate our complaints further. She responded to our demands and now comes regularly.”

The community’s protests along with public censure by the medical officer brought shame to the ANM, who later agreed to work with the community to develop a micro-plan.⁶⁶ The mundane nature of this example does not diminish the hurdles community members had to overcome.

Lodging complaints on public employees carries risks. For traditionally disempowered groups, it can even backfire.⁶⁷ That is why working across caste line to demonstrate power through unity (*ekta*) was important. Combining their efforts to demand accountability from the local state was new strategy of action for these residents of Manakpur, which required the support of local leaders belonging to different castes.⁶⁸

Building collective capabilities to make demands on the state was not, however, an explicit objective of BAP. The provision of material incentives for groups to work across caste lines in the Cushion Project was a business experiment, disconnected from the program’s broader social purpose. By and large, quantitative program targets focused on the formation of SHGs and savings accounts, irrespective of how capable those groups were to mobilize on a larger scale. Faced with organizational pressures from above to demonstrate results, fieldworkers opted for the reliable strategy of creating groups within the same caste. Yet their actions were in line with the conventional wisdom on culture and development.⁶⁹ One of the principal arguments behind SHGs and group savings is that poor women can use their informal ties and collective identities to monitor and enforce obligations on each other. The central ideas is to economize on culture, not to organize communities into broader, cross-cutting coalitions.⁷⁰ The thinking behind that approach fails to

register important qualitative differences across groups. Indeed, if one counted the number of village associations in Saharki and Manakpur, the two communities would appear more or less even. Yet the comparison reveals the fact that not all groups created by BAP were equally capable of making collective demands on the state.⁷¹ To be sure, BAP was not blind to the varying quality of groups. Frontline workers placed much emphasis on the organizational weaknesses of SHGs and developed their capacities to collectively monitor schooling and health inside their villages. Nevertheless, their efforts fell short of mobilizing them as citizens on a larger scale to demand accountability from the state.

The case of Manakpur also points to the importance of the state and the responsiveness of local state agencies. Medical officers in charge of overseeing healthcare delivery exerted bureaucratic influence over frontline workers in response to community demands. Had they failed to take action, no tangible results would have emanated from local collective action directed at the state. Residents of Manakpur may just as easily have become discouraged like in so many other villages I observed, and participation might have petered off as it had in the case of Saharki. With staff absentee rates in government primary schools and health centers as high as 25 percent and 40 percent, respectively, the deplorable quality of public services in India speaks for itself.⁷² Even the most active SHG members involved in the cushion project expressed disillusionment over the fact that basic public goods and services were either non-existent or inaccessible in their villages, despite their collective attempts to make demands on the state. More often than not, SHG members recalled the times they had rounded up children for immunization only to find the ANM and other personnel absent. Parents and even headmasters complained about their inability to remedy problems like crumbling school infrastructure and the failure of teachers to show up, let alone teach.⁷³

Yet in some respects, community-based initiatives like BAP are not positioned to address state failure directly. As I mentioned earlier, fieldworkers tried to gain community support for BAP by differentiating itself from the state and politics as usual. Part of what that strategy entails is maintaining political neutrality and presenting BAP as free from the patronage and caste politics that predominates rural UP. For example, a member of the project management team described a typical scenario in which BAP exerts neutrality:

“We were planning recruitment of a field supervisor and a letter came from a Minister of UP “recommending” two names for the job. We did not want to break from our own process to satisfy the request. So we made the decision not to visit or respond to the minister and just go through the normal recruitment process, and then wait and see the minister’s response...The point is that the project has its own identity and we have to maintain that to keep our relationship with the community.”

As the quote illustrates, BAP relies on an identity and reputation of fairness among community members, which program managers fiercely protect from political incursions. However, the strategy of maintaining distance from local politics comes at the price of neglecting the hard political realities behind sustained community participation. As many parents expressed in interviews, the deficiencies of primary education and health services for their children were part of a laundry list of state failures outside of their control. Mobilizing collectively across caste boundaries, though possible as the Manakpur case shows, required a great deal of time and effort to achieve, and even then, the response of state agencies was always unpredictable. Participating in BAP allowed community members to formulate new strategies of action, yet it did not alter in any meaningful way their ideas of the state and their relation to it as citizens.

6. Concluding Considerations

Community-based initiatives aim to foster the participation of communities in the design and implementation of development processes. Through the case study of BAP, I have sought to

document how mobilization takes place in practice. I have argued that BAP fieldworkers and community members make strategic use of culture—shared understandings, norms and identities—to initiate and maintain social networks that advance child rights. Through communicative techniques such as cultural framing and street plays, they signal their deference to certain norms and understandings while highlighting the contradictions between others, establishing new social ties and strategies of collective action. As I have further argued, however, this community-based approach is inadequate in some respects as well. To facilitate community participation, BAP has had to work through caste hierarchies and practices, while at the same time distancing itself from the local state and politics. By encouraging the formation of SHGs along caste lines and dampening the prospects for larger scale community mobilization, the initiative has faced difficulties sustaining public action directed at the state. As the case of Manakpur shows, broader, political mobilization is possible when the cultural strategies deployed by BAP are combined with material incentives for groups to work across caste lines. Yet that is not a primary objective for BAP and would most likely require new combinations of cultural *and* political strategies.

These findings carry several implications for the theory and practice of community-based development. First, they challenge some of the core theoretical assumptions underlying the ideas of community participation that have gained prominence in the literature on participatory development. As I have tried to show, even in UP's Carpet Belt, a society that appears trapped in a morass of cultural backwardness, communities that are poor, hierarchical and fragmented by caste can be mobilized from the bottom up to advance child rights. To understand how, we must forego the obfuscating lens of a homogeneous cultural template and examine the actual content of social relations, the heterogeneous elements of culture that allow members of a community to develop strategies for action. That requires a more dynamic model of culture, one that places the agency and power relations of social actors at the center of the analysis. Such an analysis also brings to light the

drawbacks of community participation. At a practical level, the frame through which fieldworkers and community members initiate participation can reinforce cultural understandings that international donors may find unpalatable.⁷⁴ For example, the understanding that children have to work and go to school may conflict with the goal of preventing child labor. Moreover, the immediate goal of incorporating women's participation rapidly through caste-based SHGs, which may appeal to international donors, can nevertheless conflict with more distant objectives that require more inclusive networks that cut across caste groups. At a theoretical level, the above findings suggest that community participation, at least in the context of BAP, is domain specific and does not aggregate to a larger scale on its own accord. The social networks that monitor school enrollment and attendance at a community level do not readily spill over into the broader political realm to make demands on the state.

These findings raise a second set of theoretical concerns that I mentioned earlier, namely the interaction between community participation and local politics and institutions. A number of scholars writing under the rubric of "state-society synergy" call attention to these interactions, showing that the developmental efficacy of community participation rests in part on the external linkages between communities and the state.⁷⁵ As Peter Evans suggests, the challenge lies "in translating local networks into developmentally relevant "scaled-up" organizations."⁷⁶ To establish external linkages and scale up participation, however, entails a political process, one that often involves social and political conflict. In the Indian context, perhaps the best example lies in the labor movements of Kerala, where exclusionary practices based on caste and religion had to be contested before more inclusive identities rooted in class could take root.⁷⁷ The dominant intellectual discourse behind community-based initiatives pays scant attention to the uneven power relations that characterize communities in the first place.⁷⁸ Cultural strategies do not exist in a political vacuum. Strategies such as circumventing local caste politics and identifying neutral spaces

for women of different caste groups to sit together were not calculated by BAP planners in advance, but evolved over time as fieldworkers and community members learned to cope with a political context that promotes caste divisions and particularistic claims, while marginalizing efforts around public services like primary schooling.

Still, the case of BAP raises a serious question regarding how far culture can be mobilized for development in the absence of broader political mobilization.⁷⁹ Community-based development empowers the poor and marginalized, Arjun Appadurai argues, by enhancing their “cultural capacity to aspire”—their ability to invent, articulate and pursue new pathways for realizing material and nonmaterial wants.⁸⁰ In its efforts to initiate community participation around the education and health of children, BAP has aimed to do precisely that and has met with some success. Yet a problem emerges when, time and again, the aspirations of the disempowered surpass what the mobilization strategies available to them can accomplish. In the absence of tangible results, community members learn to recalibrate their expectations for what they can feasibly achieve as citizens. After all, how long can poor, working mothers be expected to organize and persuade each other to send their children to school when government teachers routinely fail to show up and teach? The task of organizing citizens to demand accountability from the state requires more than cultural aspirations. It requires political action that may be well outside the hands of community-based initiatives, especially those financed by international donors. As the case of BAP demonstrates, even in the backwaters of rural UP, the cultural capacity to aspire exists, can be strengthened and mobilized, but as of yet cannot be fully realized outside of politics.

Mansuri, G. and V. Rao (2004). "Community-Based and -Driven Development: A Critical Review." The World Bank Research Observer 19(1): 1-39.

¹ Implicit within that line of reasoning are certain assumptions about culture and its relationship to development. The cultural values, traditions and associational forms that embody social capital are thought to congeal across time and space, conditioning the collective expectations and behaviors that determine a society's developmental trajectory. A prominent version of that account is Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). Also see Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: Free Press, 1995); "Social Capital and Development: The Coming Agenda" *SAIS Review* 22, no. 1 (Winter-Spring 2002): 23-37.

² This scholarship has evoked a cross-disciplinary research agenda for development, combining the careful study of cultural processes with political and economic analysis. For theoretical elaboration and empirical work along these lines see Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton, eds., *Culture and Public Action* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2004).

³ The population of UP was 167 million according to 2001 Census of India, making it India's largest state.

⁴ *World Development Report 2004: Making Services Work for the Poor*, World Bank, Washington D.C. (2003).

⁵ For discussion of these and other explanations for the poor social and economic development of UP see Jean Drèze Amartya Sen, *India: Development and Participation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Jean Drèze and Haris Gazdar, "Uttar Pradesh: The Burden of Inertia," in Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen, eds., *Indian Development: Selected Regional Perspectives*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Shekhar Shah and Manju Rani, "Worlds Apart: Why are Kerala and Uttar Pradesh so Different in their Human Development Outcomes?", Background Paper, *World Development Report 2004: Making Services Work for the Poor*, World Bank, Washington D.C. (2003);

⁶ *Bal Adhikar Pariyojana* stands for "Child Rights Initiative" in Hindi.

⁷ I worked as an intern for UNICEF during June-August 2006. During that time, I was part of a team of interns that conducted a field-based assessment of BAP for UNICEF. Between June-August 2007, I returned to UP to conduct

more extensive fieldwork on select villages for the purposes of this study. I gratefully acknowledge the research contributions of my fellow UNICEF interns: Diksha Gupta and Afsoon Donna Houshidari.

⁸ Fieldwork within each village lasted between six to twelve days, or ten days on average. By “villages”, I mean a set of hamlets consisting primarily of lower caste communities, where BAP was implemented. These hamlets can form all or part of an officially recognized village, also known as a Revenue Village. I describe these villages and lower caste communities in greater detail in the case study below

⁹ India’s federal democracy has three tiers of administration: central (or federal), state and district. While education and health policies are formulated at the federal and state levels, local implementation takes place through concerned agencies based at the district.

¹⁰ On the philosophy and techniques of Participatory Rural Appraisal see Robert Chambers, “The Origins and Practice of Participatory Rural Appraisal,” *World Development*, 22, no. 7 (1994): 953-969.

¹¹ On the advantages of community participation for development see the Robert Chambers, *Rural Development: Putting the First Last* (London: Longman 1983); Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons, The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Deepa Narayan “Participatory Rural Development,” in E. Lutz, H. Binswinger, P. Hazwell and A. McCalla, eds., *Agriculture and Environment* (Washington D.C.: World Bank 1998).

¹² Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Knopf Press, 1999). Community-based development programs also advance ideals of deliberative democracy by enabling citizens to express their preferences, identify problems and arrive at collective solutions. For an interesting discussion of citizen participation and its implications for deliberative democracy, see Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright, “Deepening Democracy: Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance,” *Politics and Society*, 29, no. 1: 5-41.

¹³ “The Effectiveness of World Bank Support for Community-Based and -Driven Development: An OED Evaluation,” Operations and Evaluation Department, World Bank, Washington D.C. (2005).

¹⁴ Mansuri and Rao, “Community-Based and -Driven Development: A Critical Review”, 8.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 6.

¹⁶ Ann Swidler, “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies,” *American Sociological Review*, 51, no. 2 (1986): 273-286; *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

¹⁷ Swidler, “Culture in Action,” 277.

¹⁸ Harriss, *Depoliticizing Development*.

¹⁹ This scholarship engages a cross-disciplinary approach to studying development, combining the close study of cultural processes with political and economic analysis. For theoretical elaboration and exemplary empirical work along these lines see Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton, eds., *Culture and Public Action* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2004).

²⁰ Vijayendra Rao and Paromita Sanyal, “Dignity through Discourse: Poverty and the Culture of Deliberation in Indian Village Democracies,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 629, no. 1 (2010): 1-46.

²¹ Arjun Appadurai, “Deep Democracy: Urban Governmentality and the Horizon of Politics,” *Public Culture*, 14, no. 1 (2002): 21-47.

²² To learn more about BAP’s history, strategies and impact, see Diksha Gupta, Afsoon Houshidari and Akshay Mangla, “Preventing Child Labour in the U.P. Carpet Belt,” UNICEF Case Studies of Development in Practice, New Delhi: UNICEF (2007).

²³ As the epicenter of India’s carpet industry, the Carpet Belt of UP accounts for more than more than 85 percent of Indian carpet production in 2006. According to officials I interviewed from the Carpet Export Promotion Council

(CPEC) of UP, the industry relies heavily on export markets, especially Germany and the United States, which together absorb more than 80 percent of all exports.

²⁴ Famous for its traditional hand-knotted carpets, UP's carpet industry is believed to employ anywhere between 130,000 and 350,000 children, mostly in the weaving process. The Carpet Belt received extensive coverage by the media in Germany (one of IKEA's primary markets) and activists there launched campaigns against brands importing carpets from the region. For background on child labor activism in the Carpet Belt see Geeta Chowdhry and Mark Beeman, "Challenging Child Labor: Transnational Activism and India's Carpet Industry," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 575 (2001):158-175.

²⁵ The Supreme Court decision of M.C. Mehta vs. State of Tamil Nadu in 1996 gave some teeth to India's Child Labor Act. The ruling focused on the elimination of child labor within the most hazardous industries, including the handmade carpet industry of UP. See ILO 2001.

²⁶ Given home-based production within a geographically diffuse and organizationally fragmented supply chain, private initiatives in the Carpet Belt have faced severe limitations. For an analysis of these initiatives see Alakh N. Sharma, Rajeev Sharma and Nikhil Raj, "The Impact of Social Labelling on Child Labour in India's Carpet Industry," ILO/IPEC Working Paper, New Delhi: Institute for Human Development (2000).

²⁷ According to executives at the IKEA, company partnered with UNICEF after deciding not to join various other private initiatives; they did not believe that a traditional compliance system based on audits and penalties could guarantee that no child labor was involved in carpet production. For a theoretical critique of the traditional model for enforcing labor standards in global supply chains, see Richard Locke, Matthew Amengual and Akshay Mangla, "Virtue out of Necessity? Compliance, Commitment, and the Improvement of Labor Conditions in Global Supply Chains," *Politics and Society*, 37, no. 3 (2009): 319-351.

²⁸ Harijan, meaning "children of God" was the name given to the former untouchables by Mahatma Gandhi as a replacement for the more derogatory names they were given. Dalit, which means "oppressed" or "broken to pieces", is

the name some former untouchables given themselves. Whereas contemporary Indian scholarship tends to use the term Dalit, in the villages I visited most SC individuals referred to themselves as Harijan or by their jati.

²⁹ Fieldworkers come from villages within the Carpet Belt and many that I interviewed had grown up within or close to one of BAP's intervention villages.

³⁰ Over the last decade, the Indian government has launched a number of policies to universalize primary schooling. Through its flagship education program, *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (The Education for All Campaign), all schools provide free textbooks, uniforms and scholarships for the underprivileged children. In addition, a free school lunch scheme known as Midday Meal Program was launched to improve student attendance and child nutrition.

³¹ These findings are consistent with a number of studies showing the abysmal state of India's government primary school system. See for example, PROBE, *Public Report on Basic Education in India*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

³² Many school teachers could not even identify what these structures were for and whether meetings were actually held. These observations are corroborated by a much larger village-level study of community participation in school committees conducted in Jaunpur, one of the districts in which BAP operates. As the study found, only a tiny fraction of parents were aware of these committee to start with, and information campaigns had virtually no effect on the level of community involvement in schools. See Abhijit V. Banerjee, Rukmini Banerji, Esther Duflo, Rachel Glennerster and Stuti Khemani, "Pitfalls of Participatory Programs: Evidence from a Randomized Evaluation in Education in India," Policy Research Working Paper 4584, World Bank, Development Research Group (2008).

³³ For groups that did partake in enterprise, moreover, the connection to participation around child rights was unclear. In some cases, I found that SHG savings were used to purchase new carpet looms where children worked. It seems more plausible that monetary incentives enabled some group members to learn practical skills like managing an account ledger, but as I mentioned, that would only take place after participation was already in full swing.

³⁴ BAP internal evaluation reports also cited a lack of organizational and leadership skills among SHG members and other residents as an impediment to achieving program goals in some villages.

³⁵ During interviews, parents were often reticent to talk to me about their children working in carpet weaving until I provided sufficient assurance that I was not a labor inspector or representative from a non-state agency seeking to monitor and regulate their work.

³⁶ Residents in four separate villages informed me that “NGOs” claiming to provide credit services had defrauded them of hard-earned money.

³⁷ Even if these demands are not met, panchayat leaders may still have reason to support initiatives like BAP. For instance, they can take credit for helping to establish BAP’s alternative schools and any other positive changes experienced by village residents.

³⁸ For a theoretical elaboration of framing in social movements see David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford, “Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization,” in *From Structure to Action: Comparing Social Movements across Cultures*, ed. B. Klandermans, H. Kriesi, and S. Tarrow (Greenwich, CT: JAI, 1988). For a fascinating exposition of the interpretive process by activists frame injustices in the context of globalization, see Marcos Ancelovici, “Organizing Against Globalization: The Case of ATTAC in France,” *Politics and Society*, 30, no. 3 (2002): 427-463.

³⁹ Snow and Benford, “Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization,” 137.

⁴⁰ The CRC recognizes “the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child’s education, or to be harmful to the child’s health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.” Gupta, Houshidari and Mangla, “Preventing Child Labour in the U.P. Carpet Belt,” 11.

⁴¹ State legislation protects that view. India's Child Labor Act of 1986 carries an important legal caveat that work done by children at home or in conjunction with their families is not defined as child labor. In his classic study of child labor in India, Myron Weiner argues that political inaction by the Indian state to end child labor is rooted in widely-held beliefs based on the caste system regarding the need for poor children to work. Myron Weiner, *The Child and the State in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

⁴² Street plays in particular have emerged as a chief strategy. Outdoor theatre has long held an important place within Indian village life, going at least as far back to the performance of Hindu epic tales in the Sanskrit tradition (Awasthi 1974). Building on that tradition as well as anti-colonial protest theatre, grassroots rural development organizations across India have, over the last thirty years, made extensive use of street plays as a medium for education and social action (Prentki 1998).

⁴³ For a fascinating study of the cultural and instrumental value of public signaling by community members and public officials see Lily Tsai, *Accountability without Democracy: Solidary Groups and Public Goods Provision in Rural China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁴⁴ As Roger Petersen demonstrates in the context of political resistance and rebellion, mundane acts such as writing anti-regime graffiti, singing nationalist songs on busses, and accepting anti-regime literature, indicate who in the community stands for anti-regime principles and how far they are willing to put themselves at risk for those principles. Roger Petersen, *Resistance and Rebellions: Lessons from Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁴⁵ The task of initiating community participation could be understood in game theoretic terms as a coordination problem. Individuals only want to participate in moral reward and sanction if they are sure that others will do so as well. The act of public signaling provides assurance, which enables coordination. For the message "Let's all participate" to succeed, not only must each person know about it, but each person must also know that each other person knows about it. In fact, "each person must know that each other person knows that each other person knows about it, and so on; that is, the message must be "common knowledge." See Chwe, *Rational Ritual*, pg. 8.

⁴⁶ Throughout the performance I observed mothers and daughters in the audience exchanging smiles and knowing glances.

⁴⁷ Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1992).

⁴⁸ As Skocpol elaborates, “Yet even the most proper ladies in nineteenth-century America were not confined to the privacy of the home, despite the fact that their special virtues were deemed to be most fully expressed there.” (Ibid, 323-324).

⁴⁹ In focus group discussions, fieldworkers pointed out that street plays have been a far more effective medium for bringing up gender norms with community members than more direct communication.

⁵⁰ As James Scott has observed, “The public declaration of the hidden transcript, because it supplies a part of a person’s character that had earlier been kept safely out of sight, seems also to restore a sense of self-respect and personhood.” James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990),

⁵¹ For a discussion of political patronage and caste politics in India see Kanchan Chandra, *Why Ethnic Parties Succeed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2004). For a political economy explanation for the poor quality of public service in India see Philip Keefer and Stuti Khemani, “Why do the poor receive poor services?”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, (February 2004): 935-943. Notwithstanding these caste (as well as religious and tribal) divisions, there has been growing convergence across communities in terms of access to public goods. See Abhijit V. Banerjee and Rohini Somanathan, “The Political Economy of Public Goods: Some Evidence from India. *Journal of Development Economics*, 82, no. 2 (2006): 287-314.

⁵² When I asked the same fieldworker what would happen if the Brahmins in the village come to know about what she did. Her response was telling: “I cannot tell the other Brahmins about this. If they came to know they would shun me. I had a hard enough time convincing my family that what I’m doing is ok.”

⁵³ The SHG members I interviewed felt it was too difficult to develop a system of savings and rotating credit between different castes as it would be harder to agree on monthly contributions and enforce loan repayment.

⁵⁴ The practice of creating caste-based SHGs is common among community-based initiatives in India. The Indian state has adopted the approach as a way to bring banking to the rural poor, granting formal recognition to SC, OBC and tribal groups. For an interesting study on the social composition of SHGs see Jean Marie Baland, Rohini Somanathan and Lore Vandewalle, "Microfinance Lifespans: A Study of Attrition and Exclusion in Self-Help Groups in India," *India Policy Forum* 2007, Draft Paper, The Brookings Institution.

⁵⁵ Parents I interviewed had faith in Sunila running the ALC. They saw in her the possibility for their own children to be educated one day.

⁵⁶ That is not to say that ALC instructors face no material incentives. Sunila, for one, expressed a desire to pursue a BA course and continue in the field of social work, and a recommendation from BAP project managers could be of great assistance. Similarly, another instructor I interviewed was able to set up his own private tutoring service once word got around that he ran a successful ALC.

⁵⁷ These observations parallel the findings of Judith Tandler's landmark study of good governance in Brazil. As Tandler demonstrates, a mix of recognition, trust and monitoring propelled health extension workers in Ceará to mobilize and assist local communities well beyond the call of duty. Judith Tandler, *Good Government in the Tropics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

⁵⁸ I do not mean to imply that upper caste individuals could not establish ties among lower caste communities, as I observed multiple examples of upper caste ALC instructors and government school teachers who succeeded in that regard. Nevertheless, as I discussed in the case of the BAP fieldworker who drank water from Dalit hamlets to build community ties, there is a price to flouting caste norms, particularly for Brahmin and other upper caste women.

⁵⁹ In other cases, community members offered space on more of an ad hoc basis, which quickly became public knowledge once children returned home and told their parents and siblings where classes were held that day. Such acts of generosity would often be reciprocated by other parents and community members.

⁶⁰ Recall as I had mentioned earlier that the school principal of Gandha complained about overcrowded classrooms and absenteeism among government teachers.

⁶¹ In the event that the children failed to walk as a group or the SHG member did not faithfully perform her escort duty, parents would find out about the infraction and bring it up in SHG meetings and other public gatherings.

⁶² Persuasion by SHG members and other residents can be vital. Many parents I spoke to did not see the benefits of child immunization. Some even viewed it as a government plot to sterilize their children.

⁶³ Interviews with IKEA executives revealed that the Cushion Project was primarily a business experiment. 100 SHGs were selected from villages in Jaunpur (comprising roughly 800 women) to participate in the Cushion Project. The criteria for selection were twofold: (1) the group's past performance as far as child education and health and (2) the group's being located in a village where IKEA suppliers had a network of sub-contractors that could supply. While the SHGs in Saharki made the first criteria, they failed to make the second.

⁶⁴ This finding is in line with research by Ashutosh Varshney, who demonstrates that the commitment to parochial identities such as caste can constrain the long-run capacity of groups to mobilize collectively in the pursuit of common objectives. Social ties built around more inclusive identities, on the other hand, particularly shared economic interests, can help societal groups advance collective goals such as economic development and communal peace. Ashutosh Varshney, *Democracy, Development and the Countryside: Urban-Rural Struggles in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

⁶⁵ Fieldwork in other villages that had not participated in the cushion project revealed similar practices among SHGs.

⁶⁶ As argued by James Scott, public shaming is a weapon often employed by the weak to make claims on the more powerful. James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

⁶⁷ Across the villages I studied, community members recounted cases where cases of parents who had complained about a school teacher's negligence, only to find out that their children had been intimidated or abused in school the teacher, often verbally but sometimes even physically.

⁶⁸ I do not mean to suggest that SHG members in Manakpur had fully overcome caste barriers. Despite BAP fieldworkers' attempts to establish a production center within the village, SHG members preferred to work on the cushions at home or designated worksites within their own hamlets.

⁶⁹ In his plea to incorporate social capital into development thinking, Putnam asserts, "we must focus on community development, allowing space for religious organizations and choral societies and Little Leagues that may seem to have little to do with politics or economics." The suggestion here seems to be that policymakers should build groups, irrespective of what developmental capabilities they have or do not have. Robert Putnam, "The Prosperous Community: Social Capital and Public Life".

⁷⁰ For a fine critique of how development agencies (mis)appropriate culture and informal ties as a means to bypass formal political processes, see Julia Elyachar, "Empowerment Money: The World Bank, Non-Governmental Organizations, and the Value of Culture in Egypt," *Public Culture*, 14, no. 3 (2002): 493-513.

⁷¹ A significant body of scholarship shows that the qualitative features of associations—how they aggregate their members, what forms of leadership and hierarchy they display, and what values and norms guide their activities—matter for achieving various social and economic goals. See, for example, Richard Locke, *Remaking the Italian Economy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Patrick Heller, *The Labor of Development: Workers and the Transformation of Capitalism in*

Kerala, India (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999). For an excellent theoretical exposition of what kinds of associations do (not) support democratic governance, see Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, "Secondary Associations and Democratic Governance," *Politics and Society*, 20, no. 4 (1992): 393-472.

⁷² Nazmul Chaudhury, Jeffrey Hammer, Michael Kremer, Karthik Muralidharan and F. Halsey Rogers, "Missing in Action: Teacher and Health Worker Absence in Developing Countries", *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 20, no.1 (2006): 91-116.

⁷³ According to a nationally representative study of teacher absence in India, among the teachers who were present in school during unannounced visits, only 50 percent of were found actually teaching. See Michael Kremer, Nazmul Chaudhury, F. Halsey Rogers, Karthik Muralidharan and Jeffrey Hammer, "Teacher Absence in India: A Snapshot," *Journal of the European Economic Association*, 3, no. 2-3 (2005): 658-667. For discussion of teacher and health worker absence in India, as well as some efforts to remedy it, see Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo, "Addressing Absence," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 20, no. 1 (2006): 117-132.

⁷⁴ As the case of BAP illustrates, the understanding that children have to work and go to school suggests that the goal of preventing child labor may not be realized, even by the most carefully crafted community-based initiatives.

⁷⁵ Several of these studies can be found in the special section of the journal *World Development*. See "Government Action, Social Capital and Development: Creating Synergy across the Public-Private Divide," *World Development*, 24, no. 6 (1996).

⁷⁶ Peter Evans, "Government Action, Social Capital and Development: Reviewing the Evidence on Synergy," *World Development*, 24, no. 6 (1996):1119-1132, 1125.

⁷⁷ Patrick Heller, *The Labor of Development: Workers and the Transformation of Capitalism in Kerala, India*.

⁷⁸ See John Harriss, *Depoliticizing Development*.

⁷⁹ It also raises the question of how far *any* form of bottom-up public action can achieve on its own. At least within the Indian context, access to public goods in appears to depend as much on “top-down” initiatives by the state. See Abhijit Banerjee, Lakshmi Iyer and Rohini Somanathan, “Public Action for Public Goods,” NBER Working Paper No. 12911 (2007).

⁸⁰ Arjun Appadurai, “The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition,” in Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton, eds., *Culture and Public Action*.