

**Symbolic Public Goods and the Coordination of Collective Action:
A Comparison of Local Development in India and Indonesia**

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Abstract

Most economists think of common property as physical – a body of water, a forest – and as bounded within geographic space. In this paper, building on work in social theory, I argue that common property can also be social – defined within symbolic space. People can be bound by well-defined symbolic agglomerations that have characteristics similar to common property. I call these “symbolic public goods” (SPGs) and make the case that such constructs are central to understanding collective action. The point is illustrated by contrasting how conceptions of nationalism in Indonesia and India created SPGs that resulted in very different strategies of local development. Indonesia emphasized collective action by the poor that resulted in a form of regressive taxation, enforced by the ideology of *svadaya gotong royong* (community self-help) that was both internalized and coercively enforced. India emphasized democratic decentralization via the *panchayat* system driven by the Gandhian ideology of *gram swaraj* (self-reliant villages). This has resulted in an unusual equity-efficiency tradeoff; Indonesia has delivered public services more efficiently than India, but at the cost of democratic freedoms and voice. I argue that the challenge for these countries is to not undermine their existing SPGs but to build on them; Indonesia should retain the spirit of *svadaya gotong royong* but to channel it in an equitable and democratic direction, while India should build the capacity of the *panchayat* system by giving it fiscal teeth, while promoting underutilized institutions such as Gram Sabhas that encourage accountability and transparency.

Symbolic Public Goods

Most economists think of common property as physical – a plot of land, a body of water, a forest – and as bounded within geographic space. In this paper, building on work in social theory, I argue that common property can also be social – defined within symbolic space.² People can be bound by well defined social circles, creating agglomerations that have characteristics similar to common property. I call these circles and agglomerations “symbolic public goods” and make the case that such constructs are central to understanding collective action. Typically, when anthropologists discuss the functioning of CPRs, they contrast indigenous, local, meanings with routinizing state-level bureaucratic apparatuses, which circulate at the national and transnational level. However, national-level symbolic institutions can also percolate downward – shifting local constructions of identity and social organization and changing the incentives for collective behavior. As development policy becomes increasingly decentralized, this “production of locality” (Appadurai, 1997) plays a central role in shaping the institutions of decentralization. Thus symbols can have important tangible, material outcomes. The point is illustrated by a comparative analysis of constructions of nationalism in India and Indonesia, and the significant impact that they have had on local development and public service delivery.

Economists and social theorists think very differently about collective action³. Economists, at least since Olson (1965), have believed that when individuals make decisions about whether to participate in collective activities, a reasonable approximation of how these decisions are made can be provided by rational choice models of materially driven individual behavior. Typically, economic models focus on the costs and benefits of participation: How large a share of the collective good will the agent obtain by participating? Is it worth the loss in income and time? The power of game theory is then applied to examine how these choices are made strategically with others in the group. Such models can result in a range of outcomes, from Olson’s “free-rider problem” to Hardin’s “tragedy of the commons,” with the cards stacked against reaching an efficient outcome.

Later scholars, such as Ostrom (1990), have tried to correct this. Basing themselves on field observations that demonstrate the success of collective action in a variety of settings, they

² I am attempting here to inform economists’ notions of public goods and ‘signaling’ with the work of social theorists such as Arjun Appadurai and Pierre Bourdieu, who locate economic action within social and cultural arenas, to achieve a better understanding of collective behavior. In doing so I also rely on Michael Suk-Young Chwe’s recent attempts to bring game theoretic notions to bear on social theory.

³ See Bardhan and Ray (this volume), and Rao and Walton (2004) for more on this divide and ways to bridge it.

allow for social institutions which generate norms, impose sanctions and improve the incentives for collective action. Usually, these scholars have incorporated socially derived incentives that affect individual choices by explicitly modeling the sanctions that are imposed by communities, or/and have incorporated the effects of “social norms” directly into the preference set.

A second approach followed by economists who incorporate social effects has made the models dynamic, allowing for repeated interactions with the same group of actors. Under these circumstances, individuals have to consider how their behavior today may generate a reaction by others in their community tomorrow. So long as individuals value payoffs in the future more than payoffs today, and expect to interact on a regular basis, cooperative outcomes will ensue, and these may become “habit forming” (e.g. Seabright 1997; Bardhan and Dayton-Johnson 2002).

A third approach looks at the evolution of norms of cooperation (e.g. Sethi and Somanathan, 1999). Under certain circumstances, societies may evolve so as to select individuals who have a strong desire for collective activity, weeding out “mutants” who are more narrowly self-interested. This provides an explanation why norms of communal living may be internalized in some societies. The logic here is Spencerian – the core value is consumption, everyone is maximizing their economic welfare, and those who do this inefficiently are eliminated.⁴

Much of social theory follows a more collectivist logic, emphasizing views derived from Durkheim rather than Spencer, and in some ways all of it is about group action – though not necessarily about collective action in the strict sense. Communities can “think.” (Douglas 1986) Social norms, identity, “culture,” etc. are collectively determined – with individuals, subservient to the collective will, tied into the larger goals of the potlatch. This finds its ultimate expression in the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss, who emphasizes meaningful communication in trying to uncover the linguistic and symbolic structures that facilitate human interaction within society. A parallel stream of thinking, initiated by Weber, emphasizes the role of history, social organization, and what economists call “path dependency,” i.e. considering a broader set of motives than those focused narrowly on consumption. Talcott Parsons (it is interesting to note that both Weber and Parsons were originally trained as economists) attempted to integrate Durkheim and Weber by carving out a role for individual agency within this larger structural frame, and this has been taken by Geertz and others into the realm of symbolic anthropology. Here, the goal is to uncover the inner symbolic logic of cultures and communities: to understand via “thick description” the strategies that are used to make up the economic and symbolic exchanges that create a meaningful community.

⁴ See Baland and Platteau (2003) for a review of the literature on the role of institutions in collective action.

Another movement integrating structure and agency is Bourdieu's notion of practice theory, which focuses more on "what people do rather than what they say." The idea here is to see how human action is embedded within a general realm of *habitus* —the set of durable principles, - practices, beliefs, taboos, rules, representations, rituals, symbols, etc. that provide a group of individuals with a sense of group identity and a consequent feeling of security and belonging.⁵ For Bourdieu, cultural markers within habitus, provide a way of classifying hierarchal relationships between groups – not only classifying *other groups*, but for members of a group to differentiate *themselves from others*. By positioning a group within the social hierarchy, culture affects the sense of the possible. For those at the high end of the hierarchy, it provides the means to maintain their high position; while for those at the low end it limits aspirations, creates discrimination, and blocks mobility. Bourdieu argues, therefore, that culture is a form of capital and situates symbolic action in the center of the struggle for power and domination within groups

This divide between economic and social theory provides an entry point for the present paper. Economists emphasize material rationality and methodological individualism, and social theorists, as methodological holists, tend to be far more concerned with how social organization is structured and contested.

Recent work by economists has attempted to bridge this divide. An important effort is the work of Michael Suk-Young Chwe (1999, 2001), which demonstrates how collective action has to distinguish between *structure* and *strategy*. Chwe's basic argument goes as follows: Most models of collective action assume, implicitly, some pre-existent "common knowledge."⁶ That is, when a group of individuals plays a collective action game, whether static or dynamic, it is assumed that individual A knows the payoffs, information sets, costs, incentives, possible moves, etc. faced by individual B. Individual B, in turn, knows all this about individual A, and further knows that individual A knows everything about individual B. Individual A, in turn, knows that Individual B knows that Individual A knows, and so on. This common knowledge assumption then permits games of strategy to be played with a common understanding of the rules of the game—everyone knows what everyone else is playing. For instance, a cricket player persuaded to play baseball will be quickly confused – enough to not be able to understand or appreciate the skill, strategy, and actions of the other players. It is this aspect of coordination and common

⁵ This is my imperfect account of Bourdieu's definition of *habitus*: "a system of durable, transposable dispositions... principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them." (Bourdieu, 1990, 1998).

⁶ Also see Bardhan (1993) on this point.

understanding that common knowledge attempts to capture – it plays a coordinating function that is a precondition for collective activity and collective cannot occur in its absence. Common knowledge is arguably the core concept behind such amorphous notions such as “social capital” which figure prominently in the discourse on development collective action, and have come under some criticism (Mosse, this volume).

Chwe goes even further, arguing that much of what we call “culture” is about the generation of common knowledge (Chwe 2001) – about turning “weak” ties into “strong” ones. (Granovetter 1973) Public rituals, sites and events, such as festivals, celebrations, churches, temples, even the Olympic Games, help people to build a sense of community. In this sense, Chwe is simply borrowing from symbolic anthropology. Victor Turner (1982), for instance, describes festivals as "generally connected with expectable culturally shared events." He suggests that when a social group celebrates a particular event it "celebrates itself" by "manifesting in symbolic form what it conceives to be its essential life." Thus, festivals and other such shared collective things serve to build social cohesion by reinforcing ties within a community. David Mosse (1997), in work examining the management of common property resources in Tamil Nadu, makes a similar point⁷. He argues that both symbolic and material interests matter in collective action, and that “Tanks, like village temples, are public institutions expressive of social relations, status, prestige and honor.” They are not only physical inputs but also “repositories of symbolic resources.”

Thus, in order to understand collective action it is crucial to understand its social context via the common knowledge generating processes that underlie it. Yet such processes are themselves the product of strategy and contestation. They can take a variety of forms — Intangible processes of identity formation such as “nationalism”, physical entities like mosques and temples, and periodic ritual events like festivals. All these share characteristics of public goods – in the sense that they can be simultaneously “non-rival,” or capable of being simultaneously “consumed” by many individuals; and sometimes “non-excludable,” wherein it is not possible to deny anyone access to the good . For these reasons, I will call all such goods “*symbolic public goods*.” There are important cases where excludability may be built into the consumption of the good, in which case they might more accurately be described as club goods.

An important function of symbolic public goods (henceforth SPGs) is coordination —to generate common knowledge. There are all manner of public goods and activities that serve this purpose, and many have both symbolic and material functions. This is true in particular of common property resources, which serve an important material purpose but are also often sacred

⁷ See also Mosse (This volume).

spaces or symbols of royal or colonial power. But separating these functions permits the identification of two linked but separate sources of strategic behavior. Some public goods – such as village festivals – may be more uniform in their symbolic function, while others, such as a clinic or a school, may be more hybrid. I will, therefore, call public goods that have a primarily symbolic function “uniform;” and those that have a mixed function “hybrid.” “Pure” might have been a better adjective than “uniform”, but it could be confused with the “pure” in “pure public goods,” the latter being completely non-rival and non-excludable. Therefore, SPGs may be either uniform or hybrid and, at the same time, pure or impure. All are, I would argue, essential to an understanding of the role of “community” in collective action.

Such SPGs are often repositories of memory and identity – testaments to major binding events in the community. In this sense they may be closely linked to the evolution of social norms and may serve as the symbolic embodiment of those norms – i.e. the public acknowledgement of a shared perspective. Norms need reinforcement mechanisms. Identity is not some fixed and exogenously provided entity which people either choose or inherit, as economic models tend to assume (e.g. Akerlof and Kranton 2000). It represents strategic interactions within a community that are usually embedded within SPGs. A feeling of kinship or commonality with another person needs to be expressed and reinforced in concrete ways in order to be stable. This could happen via reciprocal gifts when only two people are involved, or, when the size of the network increases and gifts are not enough – it needs a potlatch – a whole system of gift exchanges with coded and structured meanings may come into being. When such a system of exchange serves a purely material purpose within, for example, an expanding economy, it will quickly transit into a market based system (e.g. Kranton, 1996). However, communities cannot exist in the absence of common knowledge and the exchanges could also be purely symbolic – strengthening networks and establishing “trust.” When the network becomes dense enough via intensified interaction, or becomes large enough via increased membership size – systems of reciprocity become embodied within SPGs which serve as repositories of collective identity and historical memory.

Communities are not, of course, always formed through tedious evolutionary processes. They can be created far more quickly. A major exogenous event – e.g. a terrible famine or a devastating war – can bring people together to cope with the hardship that ensues. A church or temple may be built to mark the event, an annual commemoration or celebration which serves to reinforce a group’s sense of community may be instituted. SPGs thus play an important role in establishing the structures and rituals that help define collective identity. In a stable equilibrium

they define the “conjuncture”⁸ of social life and are associated with what Appadurai (1997) calls “pragmatic” rituals that help reproduce and reify communities. But, as Appadurai argues, it would be a mistake to view this in a static context because communities themselves can be “produced.” Shifts in the relative power of groups, or in information technologies, or in the nature of the state can result in the formation of new SPGs that compete with existing forms to establish new circles of power. So, SPGs may be the result of endogenous decisions and their construction a potent method of rallying people into a movement by forming a dense, cohesive network. This is particularly true when the value signaled by the SPG resonates deeply with a large enough group of people. Several examples come to mind: consider for example the calculated imitation of classical Roman martial rituals and architecture symbolically used by the Nazi party to express nationalist imperial pride (Burleigh 2000), or the construction of the Petronas towers in Kuala Lumpur in the heyday of the East Asian “miracle.” In more micro settings, the construction of large and flashy churches by evangelical American Protestants in certain poor areas of developing countries serve as potent symbols associating a religion with the promise of wealth and mobility.

In other words, SPGs are not only symbols of established power, they can be volleys shot in an attempt to acquire power. The (sometimes literal) construction of a SPG results in the symbolic construction of a community, and this process of construction generates power by establishing control over a body of people. Power is not only acquired by constructing a new SPG, it can also be the result of power dynamics within it. Moving up or down in the hierarchy of an SPG’s power structure is closely associated with status mobility. Thus, SPGs can result in publicly observable competitive expenditures that can be quite substantial – for instance in the celebration of temple festivals. (Rao 2001) As in a competitive potlatch, this can sometimes be a sustaining equilibrium wherein a high level of expenditure on symbolic activities is essential to maintain status within the community. Thus, games of social status may be symbolically acted upon with actions involving public or club goods (Basu 1989; Bloch, Rao and Desai 2004). Not all communities may be centered on one SPG. Just as identities can be varied and overlapping, so can communities and their binding symbols. And nor do only individuals compete for status within the context of one SPG: the same village may have competing sources of symbolic power and social status. SPGs can, in this way, prove to serve as the fulcrum around which endogenous coalitions of individuals are formed within a community.

⁸ This is a crude inversion of Alfred Marshall’s use of this word to describe the social context of economic behavior.

SPGs can, as is obvious from the discussion above, both unite and divide. A well defined geographic area can have several intersecting SPGs within it. These can in turn sometimes cooperate and sometimes compete to create a logic of overlapping communities and identities. A village, for instance, may be a “community” in one sense with SPGs – common land, a well, a post-office –that span its population cohesively and thus help define a space of common knowledge within which individuals act. But these individuals may also be subdivided into several other communities – for instance, by religion. Consider a village with Hindus and Muslims, with their associated SPGs (temples and mosques) and rituals. The Hindus may themselves be subdivided by caste and become identified by caste-specific SPGs (e.g. caste associations, caste-specific wells and shrines), and the Muslims by different types of mosques (e.g. an old mosque constructed by a long-forgotten zamindar, newer mosques constructed by newly wealthy and radicalized migrants to the Gulf).

SPGs are, in these ways, centrally related to the acquisition and maintenance of power. And the actions that involve the creation or construction of a new SPG can be potent signals of a new power dynamic. But sometimes the publicly observable destruction of a SPG serves as a signal for the formation of a new one: think of the symbolic destruction of the Babri Masjid and its effectiveness as the signal of a new, muscular Hindu nationalism; or the World Trade Center. Thus, in situations of asymmetric information, such as when a new and relatively unknown group wants to communicate a shift in its political intentions, or when a newly wealthy family wants to demonstrate its wealth and thus use its new-found economic status to acquire social leverage, the construction (or destruction) of an SPG can serve as a very effective signal.

While SPGs are collectively defined, strategy and contestation within them depend on individual agency. But individuals can also drive *resistance* to them: if the control of an SPG is indicative of elite status, less powerful individuals who have reason to disagree or oppose such elites (but who do not have the physical and symbolic resources to create competing SPGs) may react with what Scott (1995) calls “weapons of the weak.” Instead of abiding by the rituals of SPG participation, they may “foot-drag,” abscond, hide, and otherwise decline to participate in a manner both subversive and less than overt. Such resistance too can help define a community of the disenfranchised via its relatively invisible rituals and symbols.

For instance, in Suharto’s “New Order” Indonesia, young women often expressed their opposition to his dictatorial authority—which was for a long time dedicated to obstructing organized Islam—by covering their heads with a *jilbab* (*hijab*), causing this headgear to become a fashionable symbol of resistance to Suharto’s rule. (Hefner 2000) Conversely, women in Iran often wear designer clothes and make-up under the *chadors* imposed upon them by Islamic

authorities. Such covert forms of resistance can lead to social movements – in Indonesia wearing the *jilbab* became a symbol of the pro-democracy movement that ultimately led to Suharto’s resignation; and the sartorial resistance in Iran could well augur a similar result. Note that when the rules and rituals of SPGs are blatantly and overtly violated, this can —as with SPG destruction—be a signal of power. The satyagraha movement in India used symbolic resistance against SPGs associated with British rule as a central element of its strategy. And the South Indian sandalwood smuggler Veerapan’s legend was built on his ability to blatantly violate conservation laws while eluding the police.

In short, as much as SPGs “create” communities, they do not supplant or suppress individual agency. In fact, individual action plays an important role in how SPGs are strategically positioned, interpreted, and consumed.

I will now briefly illustrate the salience of SPGs by comparing the very different local development and decentralization strategies followed by India and Indonesia. Data for this comes from several rounds of fieldwork, collaboratively conducted with several coauthors, in Java, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu over several rounds since 2002.⁹

Links to Local Development

Development is fast decentralizing and development agencies and government are increasingly relying on the presumed power of collective action to increase “voice” and equitably deliver public services (Bardhan, 2002). The “Community Driven Development” (CDD) portfolio of the World Bank for instance has risen from \$250 million since the mid-1990’s to more than seven billion dollars today. Much of the justification for this has come from the premise that tapping into a community’s “social capital” is “empowering” for the poor. Critics have contended that this emphasis on community development can result in the capture of resources by elites (Abraham and Platteau 2004), which has led to an increased focus on the role of inequality on collective action (Bardhan and Mukherjee 2003, Bardhan and Dayton-Johnson 2002).

Other critics have begun to ask what “participation” really means and whether “participatory development” is, in fact, leading to the empowerment of the poor (Mosse 2001; Mansuri and Rao 2004). A crucial issue here is not just inequality of wealth in a community, but social heterogeneity and the consequent inequality in power. (Abraham and Platteau 2004) The

⁹ My co-investigators in Indonesia are Vivi Alatas, Victoria Beard, and Menno Pradhan. In India they are Radu Ban, Tim Besley, Monica Das Gupta, and Rohini Pande.

empirical evidence on the impact of social heterogeneity is mixed, with the evidence suggesting that it is bad, irrelevant, or even good for collective action. (Mansuri and Rao 2004) The role of heterogeneity and inequality in collective action, and the extent to which community-based approaches are truly participatory and empowering, depends crucially on how well collective action is coordinated. This requires an understanding of the critical role of SPGs, the distribution of status and power within the village and communities that they represent, and the distribution of control within them. The relative impact of inequality and social heterogeneity may work via the mediating influence of SPGs.

India and Indonesia are both culturally and geographically diverse countries that achieved independence within two years of each other. They have had centuries of social and economic exchange. They have important cultural similarities. Yet they have followed very different strategies of political and economic development, with Indonesia turning increasingly autocratic soon after independence – till its turn towards democracy at the end of the Suharto era in 1998. India, on the other hand, has been a stable democracy since its independence, with a vigorously independent election commission. Both countries have begun to increasingly decentralize since the 1990s, with Indonesia devolving powers to state and district governments, and India doing the same to village and district panchayats (governing councils) which are elected.

Both countries have survived ups and downs in their economies, but as of 2001 their per capita incomes were very close with India's at PPP \$2570, compared to PPP \$2990 in Indonesia.¹⁰ Yet Indonesia has been far more successful in providing public services to the poor. One indicator of this is that while 76 per cent per cent of children complete primary school in India, 91 per cent complete it in Indonesia, even though India spends 7.2 per cent of its GNP on primary education, while Indonesia spends only 3.2 per cent. Such stark differences in human development indicators occur for health as well, with India spending 0.9 per cent of GNP on health while Indonesia spends 0.6 per cent, yet India's under-5 mortality rate is 93 and Indonesia's is 45. Indonesia has therefore not only been more effective at providing public services, it has also been far more efficient. What accounts for this stark difference in performance? I argue below that SPGs have played an important role.

Collective Action and community development in Indonesia

Any discussion of Indonesian society has to start with the work of Geertz and his monumental work, *The Religion of Java*, which laid out many of the themes that have played a central role in

¹⁰ All data in this paragraph are from the World Development Report 2004.

understandings of Javanese culture. Geertz's work may have even shaped how Indonesia's nationalism, with its strong Javanese flavor, has been articulated and imagined.

Geertz outlined several competing categories of groups, ideologies, and cultures within rural Javanese society. The first was the existence of three major sub-traditions – the Abangan – who are nominally Muslim but stress a more traditional form of Javanese religion consisting of rituals such as the *slametan*—more on this later—spirit beliefs, magic and sorcery. Next, the Santri —pious Muslims who tended to be the more wealthy traders who identified with the ulema and so emphasize pilgrimage to Mecca, prayers, the Fast, and such things. And finally the Prijaji, upper-class Javanese who derive their identity from Hindu–Javanese courts of the pre-colonial period, and who identify with the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and other traditions that derive from Hinduism and Buddhism.

Geertz's village was defined by interactions between these groups and the sub-groups within them. For instance the Santri were further subdivided into Mohamadiyahs, who were Islamic reformists intent on modernist social change while keeping within Islamic traditions; and the more conservative Nahdatul Ulama (NU), who believed in establishing a political presence for Islam within Indonesia while connecting to the larger Islamic world. Neither, however, were Wahhabi. They represented a more civil version of Islam derived from Indian (primarily Gujarati) traders who had introduced the religion to Indonesia.

Applying the idea of SPGs to these groups and assessing their implications for collective activity, we should first note that the Prijaji barely figure in the politics of Geertz's village, where the primary action is between the Abangan, Mohamadiyahs and NUs. The Abangan's main SPG is the tradition of the *slametan* – a ritual where a group of people (almost always male heads of households) get together to sanctify an auspicious event – a birth, a funeral, etc., where, typically, a village elder recites some religious (Koranic) verses, others make ritualized speeches, and a meal is begun but not completed (people take the food home and consume it later). *Slametans* are required for so many activities that there is a reciprocity associated with them. One has to belong to the *slametan* circuit to belong to the community, and this can be a very expensive proposition.

The Santris, on the other hand, socialize primarily through prayer meetings and Koran reading groups. To quote Geertz: “For the santri, the sense of community – of *ummat* – is primary. Islam is seen as a set of concentric social circles, wider and wider communities – spreading away from the individual *santri* where he stands: a great society of equal believers constantly repeating the name of Prophet, going through the prayers, chanting the Koran.” The Islamic community is centered around mosques and prayer groups. Santris in Geertz's reading of his village, were the globalized community. Links via commerce and religion

connected them closely to the world outside the village. They were also – via the Mohamadiya – the modernizers; and, via the NU, the democraticizers. The NU were themselves in conflict with the Mohamidiya. They were far more keen to modernize the education system and force Indonesia into the modern world, but wary of direct political engagement.

Geertz's interpretation of rural Javanese life has been refined somewhat by more recent scholarship. In particular, anthropologists (Beatty 1999) have argued that the Santri do not represent a subtradition as much as a smaller group within a larger Islamic world; and that the *slametan* is not a pre-Islamic ritual but is based much more on Sufi traditions within Islam (Woodward 1988). The division, it is argued, is not between Abangan and Santri but between Kejawen (the pre-Islamic Javanese culture which subsumes both Abangan and Prijaji) and the more recent Islamicizing trends personified by the Santri. Since almost everyone in Java is Muslim, this is really a subdivision within Islam, and not really a chasm between Islam and other traditions.

Post-colonial Indonesia was dominated by upper-class Muslim Prijaji and its history in the decades following independence can be seen as being primarily about the “Javanization” of the country (Ricklefs 2001). The ideological basis of Javanese or Kejawen belief is that social interaction is “collective, consensual and cooperative,”¹¹ as exemplified by the *slametan*. Bowen (1986) argues, in an important article, that much of this is expressed in the term *gotong royong* or mutual assistance. This term has become the framework for Indonesian nationalism and the basis for construction of a national tradition. Sukarno, the “father” of Indonesia, attempted to use the notion to unify the diverse Islamic, non-Islamic, Nationalist and Communist groups in the new country by calling for a spirit of *ke gotong royong* (or gotong royong-ness). *Gotong royong* provided a form of cultural legitimacy to state control.

With Sukarno's ouster in a coup in 1967, his successor Suharto's “New Order” economic policy had, especially in its initial phases, a two-pronged strategy – to lay policies in place that would enable high rates of growth, and to pass on the benefits of that growth to the rural poor. Part of the reason for this was a genuine desire on Suharto's part to help the rural poor — he saw himself as a son of farmers — but it was also part of a calculated strategy to minimize the influence of the Left, whose rise had been tolerated by Sukarno but which Suharto was determined to suppress (Hefner 2000). An important element in this strategy was to dictatorially force the spirit of *gotong royong* into hamlets and villages around the country. *Gotong Royong* became a key element in strategies for developmental interventions in rural areas, and particularly in the mobilization of rural labor. In order to protect the political and cultural unity of the

¹¹ Bowen (1986) page 545

Indonesian state, it had to be strongly authoritarian, and development had to proceed in a cooperative and collaborative manner. By the early 1970s the term *gotong royong* had been complemented by the Sanskrit word *svadaya* or self-help and mobilizing *svadaya gotong royong* was central to the implementation of development policy (Bowen 1986).

As Sullivan (1992) demonstrates in his detailed ethnography of local development in a Javanese community, the combination of an autocratic state and the principle of *svadaya* resulted in a form of forced labor. In order to be a good Indonesian, one had to contribute labor and cash for development projects. Collective action was the norm, not the exception. It was very straightforward to mobilize: grants received by the village headman (*kepala desa*) were low because they assumed that the mismatch between the size of the funds and the expected cost of the proposed project would be locally mobilized. The headman whipped up contributions from the community which were actively mobilized by ward leaders – *kepala dusun* in rural areas, *RW/RT* in urban areas. Everyone was expected to contribute free labor – else people felt they could easily be labeled unpatriotic or uncooperative and consequently face social, political, material and even physical sanctions. It is never wise, in a dictatorship, to disobey the wishes of the dictator – and decentralization in pre-*reformasi* Indonesia was essentially a set of concentric circles of dictatorial rule justified by appealing to a sense of forging a strong Indonesia united by the beliefs of *gotong royong* and *svadaya*. There was no choice except to participate. Bowen and Sullivan both point out that this model had much more to do with patterns established during the Japanese occupation of Indonesia than traditional Javanese traditions.

In this manner, nationalism was the symbolic public good constructed by Indonesian political leaders, deploying “imagined” traditional beliefs that made the individual subservient to the community. It is not surprising that Benedict Anderson conceived of “imagined communities” largely from his deep understanding of Indonesian history (Anderson 1991). Since most of this was undertaken in the context of a military dictatorship – there being not much room for individuals to dissent – it laid the foundation for the coordination of collective action.

Suharto’s two-pronged strategy had spectacular results for over two decades, with very high rates of growth and substantial improvements in the living standards of the poor. As we have seen, these improvements in living standards were achieved in a cost-effective way by, in effect, taxing the poor in the name of community participation. In other words, under Suharto’s dictatorial rule there was a suppression of freedom, an implicitly regressive tax structure, but also, relative to India, excellent consequences for human development. There was also a sharp

increase in corruption and cronyism, and, ultimately, this led to the creation of an economy based on shaky macro-economic foundations. The East Asian crises which started in 1997 shored up anti-Suharto and pro-democracy forces in Indonesia, leading to his ouster in 1998 and to the emergence of a democratic order which has culminated in the recent political defeat of Sukarno's daughter Megawati Sukarnoputri.¹²

Along with democracy has come a concerted effort to decentralize the political and fiscal authority of state and district governments. At the village level, this has had several implications for SPGs. The authority of the *kepala desas* and *lurahs* is increasingly questioned. But, as recent survey data demonstrates, the spirit of *gotong royong* has by no means disappeared. Rather, it has been so deeply institutionalized that not abiding by it is sensed by people as a violation of a communitarian ethic, which remains even now part of the foundation of what it means to be a good Indonesian. A recent survey shows that levels of participation in public goods construction remains high at 47 per cent, and 59 per cent of respondents say that they participate primarily because of "tradition" or "obligation." This has real consequences – 37 per cent of the cost of village public goods are contributed by the community, with 60 per cent coming from the government.¹³

However, life is far less dictatorial now, and other important political players have emerged to compete with state authority. Much of this can be seen in the profusion of mosques all over the countryside – some with shiny stainless steel domes, others painted blue or white, some with particularly large loudspeakers attached to their minarets,¹⁴ others, more traditional, made of stone and brick with large tree-lined courtyards. As Hefner (2000) shows, much of the resistance to Suharto was led by Islamic groups – in particular by NU and the Mohamediya. To compete with these movements, Suharto attempted to create a "regimist Islam" with state-funded mosques staffed by government employees belonging to the Ministry of Religion. Often, all three types – NU mosques, Mohamediya mosques and "Golkar"¹⁵ mosques – exist in Indonesian

¹² Her first name was given her by an Indian—Biju Patnaik a close friend of Sukarno. Patnaik had participated in Indonesia's war of independence as a fighter pilot, and went on to become one of India's most prominent, and colorful, politicians.

¹³ All data from UPP2 Evaluation baseline survey 2004.

¹⁴ Some Imams are particularly proud of their loudspeakers. I went to interview one in an empty but large mosque in the middle of the afternoon. The Imam insisted on conducting the entire interview – which was mainly about the role of the mosque in local development activities – speaking directly into the live microphone, presumably to demonstrate to the neighborhood that he was important enough to be interviewed by a World Bank official.

¹⁵ Golkar was Suharto's political party. It remains an important force in Indonesia.

villages, with competing spheres of authority. In addition, immigrants to Malaysia or the Gulf signal their new-found wealth by building their own mosques. And neighborhoods get together sometimes to construct community mosques – which are usually more in the nature of small prayer rooms. Even though these are physical entities, they symbolize different symbolic spaces – political alignments, religious differences, and even personal conflicts. Mosque prayer groups are often the site of development activity — arenas where the beneficiaries of targeted programs are decided about or where a new project that requires volunteer work is publicized. Mosques are also, often, the site of political activity, attracting charismatic speakers who attempt to mobilize their flock towards one political position or another.¹⁶ In addition to such religiously driven SPGs, there are alternative sources of secular authority. These include NGO-driven credit circles, women’s groups, and governing councils associated with different development schemes that are specially designed to counter traditional government authority structures with more decentralized and accountable institutions.

Interestingly, donor agencies – particularly the World Bank – in a radical departure from practice, have structured their some of their Indonesia assistance in a manner that takes cognizance of SPGs. This was done consciously via a series of Local Level Institution studies that attempted to measure the level of “social capital” in Indonesia. In effect, these surveys (not unsurprisingly) uncovered the extent to which *svadaya gotong royong* played a role in the life of Indonesian communities. Legitimized by this, there was a conscious attempt to design projects that tried to steer community participation in a less dictatorial and more accountable direction via the multi-million dollar World Bank-assisted rural-focused Kecamatan Development Project (along with Urban Poverty Project, its urban counterpart: see Guggenheim 2005) that journalists have lauded as “stars” of the World Bank’s portfolio (Mallaby 2004). While previous projects had attempted to build on participatory institutions, they had largely placed authority in the hands of local officials and thus worked within the institutional confines of the New Order regime – with the associated negative externalities of corruption, cronyism and graft. KDP’s logic was to attempt to retain the spirit of *svadaya gotong royong* but create new spheres of authority within SPGs who were more associated with reform: such as elected village committees and watchdogs drawn from local journalists and NGO workers¹⁷. Thus, an SPG optic was consciously employed

¹⁶ Note that while I am focusing on divisions within Islam, in some parts of Indonesia churches, both Catholic and Protestant, may also play a role, and in other parts Hindu temples and Buddhist viharas may provide alternative sources of authority.

¹⁷ A quantitative analysis of the LLI data show that a household’s participation in village government SPGs has an adverse effect on the voice and participation of neighboring households – demonstrating the

to remake the approach of local development so that it was better aligned with the spirit of the Indonesian reform movement. This represents an important attempt to make development more ethnographically informed and place the design of interventions squarely within cultural contexts¹⁸.

This style of development works because it has a long-term horizon, careful monitoring, constant learning by doing, all of which go against the myopia inherent within old-style development. Old style development is technocratic: predicated on excessive reliance on a “model” – either based on a “best-practice” framework (a project design that worked wonders in one place would have the same impact another), or on methodologically individualist rational-choice modeling that is totally ignorant of symbolic, social and cultural logic. Bringing in an SPG optic reveals the real challenge of development, its role as an agent of cultural and political change. Dealing with these challenges, which have always been present but rarely confronted, requires a new way of doing development that is more decentralized, more difficult, more honest, and – arguably – more sustainable¹⁹.

Democracy and Local Development in India

India’s nationalist SPG is rather different, and so is its experience with local development. Unlike Indonesia its democratic roots date back at least to the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms of 1919 (which provided for regular elections to governing bodies and the federal, state and local levels), and to the consequent creation of political parties competing for political power. Also, unlike Indonesia, India’s struggle for independence was dominated by Gandhi’s nonviolent satyagraha movement. Armed resistance, while symbolically important, was never at the center

“chilling” effect of SPGs that have their origins in the New Order (Alatas, Pritchett and Wetterberg - 2002).

¹⁸ Not surprisingly, KDP’s founding “task manager,” Scott Guggenheim, was trained as an anthropologist. He has written a fascinating account of KDP’s origins, its struggles, and current mode of operation (Guggenheim, 2005).

¹⁹ As an ironic illustration of a clash of civilizations within the changing culture of development institutions KDP’s success has caused it to be categorized it as “best-practice”, with its final design pitchforked into entirely different cultural contexts. Viewed through the optic of SPGs, the illogic of this becomes starkly obvious.

of power.²⁰ Despite the trauma surrounding the partition of British India into India and Pakistan, when India achieved independence in 1947 the army was subservient to political authority. The Indian constitution, written by lawyers trained in the US and UK, was predicated on making India a “sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic.”²¹ India’s first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, was deeply influenced by Soviet models of development, but was also a democrat to the core. In Nehru’s India, as in Sukarno’s Indonesia, state action was the key, and included centralized planning to promote economic growth and equitable development. But Gandhi held deeply held beliefs that the key to India’s problems lay in village *swaraj* – village self-rule (Gandhi 1962), i.e. in devolving power to autonomous village councils and making them self-sufficient. The parallels with *svadaya gotong royong* are obvious and not necessarily coincidental.

In India the economic model largely failed but the democratic model worked— at least at the federal and state levels. Elections were, and continue to be, run by independent election commissions, and the results are viewed as fair as those in any Western democracy. But at the local level democracy, till recently, was not institutionalized. Even though most state constitutions mandated regular elections and varying degrees of fiscal authority to village government, elections were rarely held and local governments were, for the most part, toothless. (Matthew and Buch 2000).

Gandhi’s vision of village *swaraj* led three states to attempt early democratic reforms at the local level in the 1970s and 1980s: West Bengal in the east, and Karnataka and Kerala in the south.²² In order to institutionalize and spread democratic decentralization to the rest of the country, two amendments to the Indian constitution – the 73rd and 74th - were passed in 1993. Among other goals, they mandated that elections to local village councils (panchayats) be systematized and supervised by independent election commissions and that they be given more fiscal authority and political power. Another important innovation was that *gram sabhas*, or village assemblies, be held at regular intervals throughout the year. These are open meetings which anyone in the village is free to attend in order to discuss budgets, development plans, the selection of beneficiaries, and to interrogate village panchayat and local administrative officials on any issue. A third key aspect is that seats on panchayats, including the position of the

²⁰ Subhash Chandra Bose, a former president of the Indian National Congress, formed the Indian National Army that attempted to liberate the country in collaboration with Japanese forces during World War II.

²¹ Preamble, Constitution of India.

²² For well documented studies of these state-level movements see Leiten (1996) for West Bengal, Crook and Manor (1998) for Karnataka, and Isaac and Franke (2000) for Kerala.

panchayat president (*pradhan* or *sarpanch*) be reserved for Scheduled Castes and Tribes (according to their size in the village population), and women (a third of all seats in the panchayat and all presidencies, on a rotating basis). I will not attempt here to evaluate the impact of the 73rd amendment –several research projects are attempting to examine this²³ – but will briefly illustrate how thinking about democratic decentralization in India via an SPG lens can provide some useful insights. I will focus on the South Indian states of Kerala, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh²⁴.

In the early 1980s the newly elected Janata government in Karnataka passed legislation experimenting with setting up structures of local governance. These later became the foundation of the 73rd amendment – including regular elections, the institution of *gram sabhas*, reservations for Scheduled Castes and Tribes, and women. This experiment largely ended in 1991 with the election of a Congress-led government in the state.²⁵ With the passage of the 73rd amendment, regular elections to panchayats continue to be held, but panchayats have very small budgets and limited fiscal authority. In Kerala, on the other hand, a series of Communist governments increasingly decentralized authority to local governments. The momentum of this process was vastly increased in 1996, when the Left Democratic Front passed legislation mandating that 40 per cent of total state expenditures be disbursed by local government institutions. This was accompanied by a concerted effort to introduce participatory democracy, not just by ensuring that *gram sabhas* were regularly held, but via links with “planning seminars” held at the ward, village, block and district levels to determine the allocation of budgets. A Left-led People’s Campaign for Decentralized Planning facilitated this process by supervising and disseminating information about decentralized planning. Consequently, Kerala’s panchayats have considerably more clout than those in any other part of the country (Isaac and Franke 2000). However, in recent years Kerala’s decentralization has seen serious setbacks as a consequence of the LDF’s loss of political power, coupled with a serious budget deficit in the state government’s finances. (Sethi 2004)

Andhra Pradesh (AP), on the other hand, tried to undermine the power of panchayats for almost ten years under the tenure of the Telugu Desam (Telugu Nation) party. The state, however, has also had a long history of decentralization: a series of legislations since 1958 have attempted to empower panchayats. Panchayats in AP were controlled, largely, by the Congress

²³ See Chattopadhyaya and Duflo (2004), Bardhan and Mookherjee (2004), Besley, Pande and Rao (2004b), Chaudhuri, Harilal, and Heller (2004).

²⁴ It is important to keep in mind that these states are relatively more developed and egalitarian than those in the North India. The analysis here would therefore be very different than if my data were Bihar or UP

²⁵ Though, ironically, it was a Congress-led government in the Center that passed the 73rd and 74th amendments.

Party. Consequently, when the Telugu Desam, led by Chandrababu Naidu, came to power in 1995 it instituted the Janmabhoomi (birth land) program. This attempted to give power to administrative rather than political authorities by making them directly answerable to villagers via *gram sabhas* unassociated with panchayats. Panchayat elections were not held till 2001, and their authority was further undermined with the formation of various village “users groups” which had budgetary authority under the Janmabhoomi program. This is a nice example of how a new government that wants to demonstrate the irrelevance of SPGs constructed by its predecessor can signal this by creating fresh SPGs that displace the old; Naidu’s Janmabhoomi program was introduced with a great deal of fanfare (press releases, public meetings, posters and manuals printed on high quality paper) supposedly heralding the dawn of a new era of “good governance.” Thus, of the three states, AP has made the least progress in implementing the 73rd amendment – but with the Telugu Desam’s recent electoral loss this is likely to change.

The *gram sabha* is a particularly important SPG introduced via panchayat reforms. In Kerala, which has high levels of literacy and political awareness, *gram sabhas* have become active institutions for the incorporation of public grievances into the planning process. In Karnataka and Kerala, on the other hand, *gram sabhas* are largely seen as yet another type of top-down development intervention – representing the power of the state to disrupt existing power relations. For this they are both resented and manipulated by entrenched elites – and used and appropriated for private benefit by disadvantaged groups. When *gram sabhas* were first introduced in Karnataka in 1993, many *pradhans* found them threatening and did not hold them, or made them ineffectual by holding them at unannounced times, or staged them in the panchayat office instead of in a public area. (Crook and Manor 1998) This unsanctioned violation of government authority was an important signal of their local power. In more recent data we find that, when they are held, *gram sabhas* largely serve to identify and allocate benefits targeted to mandated groups such as Scheduled Castes and Tribes (SC/STs). Not surprisingly, they are most often attended by SC/STs, and those SC/STs who attend them are also more likely to benefit from programs. (Besley, Pande, and Rao 2004c).

In an interesting demonstration of the hold that the village swaraj/democracy SPG has on Indians, democratically elected panchayat-like structures are often spontaneously formed in squatter settlements in slums (Jha, Rao and Woolcock, 2007). Squatter settlements, of course, are not officially sanctioned and therefore do not fall within formal institutions of governance. Yet, in work in Delhi slums, we found that immigrant squatters would have regular elections for members of panchayats and would also elect a *pradhan*. The elections were generally perceived

as fair even though they were organized by members of the community. Candidates were usually affiliated with political parties, and the winning candidate had electorally legitimized authority. This elected *pradhan* largely functioned as an intermediary between slum-dwellers and agents of the state – helping constituents obtain “ration cards,” voter identification cards, and other tokens of citizenship. They also helped them get access to jobs in government offices, and tried to persuade bureaucrats to provide public services – such as water trucks and toilets – to the slum. Thus, even though they had no fiscal authority they re-imagined existing SPGs to find a way to improve access to the state²⁶.

Thus, in India, as in Indonesia, power is largely a matter of controlling and accessing the apparatus of state. But unlike Indonesia, the strategies in India for manipulating power come via control of the political process. Therefore electoral turnout is very high –about 70 per cent for village panchayat elections. (Besley, Pande, and Rao 2004b) Public goods are almost entirely centrally funded – with only 24 per cent of households claiming that have made any contribution towards their provision (about half the percentage in Indonesia). Public goods, such as schools, roads and clinics, are therefore hybrid SPGs – symbols of the largesse of the state rather than “owned” by the community. As a result, they represent opportunities for private appropriation – manifested in high levels of absenteeism by schoolteachers, medical workers, and other state employees, and in corruption by panchayats when giving contracts. With the exception of Kerala, panchayats have very small budgets. Their funds are largely acquired from a small house tax, and petty taxes which validate transactions such as land sales. Most of a panchayat’s budget is currently derived from programs with targeted beneficiaries—such as housing for SC/STs and food for work programs—over which *pradhans* have very little discretion. Yet, success in panchayat elections is a stepping stone to higher elected office, and *pradhans* can control relatively lucrative contracts for village public goods. High positions in panchayats are, therefore, rather highly valued, and panchayat elections are often very competitive, being structured around the same party-based competition prevalent in state and national elections (even though some states officially ban party affiliations in panchayat elections). Despite this, panchayats do manage to get things done, often by acting as intermediaries to divert state government projects and funds to their villages. And *pradhans* provide public goods in a manner entirely consistent with the incentives of electoral competition – tending to take more care of their own constituents, their home village, and their caste (Besley, Pande and Rao 2004a).

²⁶ Appadurai (2004) describes a very different use of SPGs in Mumbai by slum-dwellers who strategically used rituals such *sandas malas* (toilet festivals) to bring their utter lack of sanitation facilities to the attention of government authorities and international organizations.

It should be apparent that the “nationalist” SPG in India is based on notions of liberty and universal franchise, coupled with Gandhian beliefs about village self-sufficiency. These have succeeded in bringing democracy and political competition to the lowest levels of government and given democracy deep roots. Yet, with the exception of Kerala, state panchayats do not yet have much financial power: the provision of public goods remains largely with officials at higher levels of government. Consequently, panchayats tend to be viewed as symbols of state government rule and are manipulated for private benefit. This lack of fiscal decentralization and the consequent symbolic lack of “ownership” of public goods, as well as the lack of accountability at local level, makes the delivery of public services very inefficient. An SPG lens would suggest that public policy should strengthen panchayat institutions to allow for greater local level control, which would then increase both symbolic and political accountability and improve the efficiency of public service delivery.

To briefly conclude: The comparison between India and Indonesia suggests a different kind of equity-efficiency tradeoff. Indonesia chose a vision of nationalism that emphasized local participation, in a manner that may have regressively taxed the poor. It was also coercive, and, being enforced by the power of military dictatorship, helped abrogate individual liberty. But it did result in the efficient delivery of public services. India chose a different path. It emphasized democracy and universal franchise even in village government. This, for the most part, resulted in inefficient public service delivery, keeping India well behind Indonesia in human development indicators despite similar levels of per capita income.

An understanding of Symbolic Public Goods provides a useful way of understanding why Indonesia and India had diverged so much, and also suggests some avenues for public action. It is crucial to understand how symbols of nationalism play a role in local governance and community action. These can have important material implications. On the other hand, material objects – such as mosques, temples, and less obviously, schools and clinics - also serve a symbolic purpose. Understanding their symbolic meaning can contribute towards a better understanding of how communities function, and of how to make public service delivery more effective and inclusive. However, these meanings can change – and sometimes change very quickly – both because they can be explicitly manipulated in contests for power, but also because they are influenced by the external political and economic environment. This ability of SPGs to change can provide guidance on how shifting their symbolic functions can lead to more effective, and equitable, local development.

Local development in Indonesia would be foolish to ignore the obvious advantages that can be gained from harnessing the value of participation. But the challenge is to do this less coercively, more inclusively and with greater electoral accountability. This is the task that KDP has taken on. Local development in India would be negligent if it ignored the tremendous achievement of thriving democracies at the village level. But these village governments need to be given fiscal teeth so that public goods can be brought within the purview of power exercised by locally accountable governments. But democracy needs to be “deepened” in the sense of giving excluded groups, such as slum dwellers and women, avenues to improve their access to the apparatus of government, and to external sources of support. The strategic use of SPGs – such as forming informal panchayats in urban areas, or accessing gram sabhas to improve access to public services, is one avenue. But these new SPGs can be threatening to existing power structures and have thus not been effectively institutionalized. This is where public action can make a difference by using fiscal and legislative means to strengthen institutions of voice, while using alliances with civil society groups, as was done in Kerala, to shore up the ability of gram sabhas to fulfill their potential to make panchayats more accountable and inclusive.

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