IMAGO
Global Grassroots

Seeing like a State or Seeing the State? A Qualitative Study of a Government Program to Support Women's Self-Help Groups in Madhya Pradesh, India

Arundhita Bhanjdeo, Nivedita Narain, Surili Sheth, and Michael Walton

April 2, 2025

Seeing like a State or Seeing the State? A Qualitative Study of a Government Program to Support Women's Self-Help Groups in Madhya Pradesh, India

Arundhita Bhanjdeo, Nivedita Narain, Surili Sheth, and Michael Walton[1]

Abstract

This paper explores the interactions between state and society in rural India within a major community-based development program. We use guidelines of the state, transcripts of 90 interviews and focus groups amongst representatives of actors of all major groups, and field team workshops to construct an in-depth view of the processes and interactions within the ecosystem of six National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) self-help groups (SHGs) in the state of Madhya Pradesh. These SHGs are linked to credit and market related services and support systems provided by the state. We argue that in design, and even more in implementation, the program exemplifies two substantive tensions. The first tension is between a top-down, "engineering" approach to state delivery on the one hand, and a stated intention to mobilize community and create "institutions of the poor" on the other. The second is between a primary reliance on existing village hierarchies on the one hand, and a goal of empowering poor women from disadvantaged social groups on the other. We argue that these tensions generate an internal logic to state functioning and to on-the-ground processes that lead the SHGs and their federations in our case studies to be stuck at a low level of functioning, and in some cases to become dysfunctional. This study has implications for understanding functionality as the product of relational processes within and between state and society, and home in on a key actor at the interface of these processes - Community Resource Persons (CRPs).

---

[1] Bhanjdeo was with PRADAN during the field research and is now with World Resources Institute, India, Narain was with PRADAN during the study period and now at the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi, Sheth is at the University of California, Berkeley and Walton at the Harvard Kennedy School and Imago Global Grassroots. The design and implementation of the field work was undertaken under the auspices of Imago, jointly with the Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST), and we particularly thank Monika Banerjee and Mubashira Zaidi of ISST for their role in design, implementation and interpretation, and Risha Ramachandran, Shraddha Jain, Siddhi Pathak, Vishakha Khetrapal, and Vivek Tripathi for their excellent work in the field, including on initial reflections. We are grateful to Ana Singh and Ayesha Pattnaik for providing valuable additional research assistance. We thank the organization Kalptaru Vikas Samiti for providing support for the field visits and data collection. Financial support was provided by 3ie, thanks to Bidisha Barooah, Chandan Jain and Ritwik Sarkar for their support and guidance. We thank Anirban Ghose, Scott Guggenheim, Madhu Khetan, Gayatri Rao and Vijayendra Rao for their comments and advice, officials of NRLM and the Madhya Pradesh SRLM for their time and insights, and especially to Soledad Prillaman for advice during the research. We also thank Mekhala Krishnamurthy and the Centre for Policy Research's State Capacity team, Gabrielle Kruks-Wisner, Rachel Brulé, Pradeep Chhibber and the Berkeley South Asia Colloquium and Gilles Vernier for comments on earlier drafts and presentations. This paper draws on the report to 3ie, that is available as Bhanjdeo et al (2021). The study was conducted under IRB protocols 19-1899 and 2019-11-12724.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction 4
   1.1. Study design 6
   1.2. Conceptual approach and related literature 11
      1.2.1. Top-down prisms versus systems thinking 11
      1.2.2. Literature on SHGs 14
      1.2.3. Local hierarchies 16
      1.2.4 Texts of the state 17
2. A systems sketch of the NRLM in Madhya Pradesh 18
3. Research design 20
   3.1. Case selection 20
   3.2. Respondent selection 23
   3.3. Transcription and analysis methods 25
4. Findings 26
   4.1. Societal actors: How societal actors see the state and experience the program 27
      4.1.1. SHG core women 27
      4.1.2. Husbands of SHG members 29
      4.1.3. Local women leaders 31
      4.1.4. "Active Men" 33
   4.2. State actors: How they see society and experience the program 34
      4.2.1. Front line bureaucrats in the District and Blocks. 34
      4.2.2. Other state actors 37
      4.2.3. Panchayat leaders 37
      4.2.4. Bank officials 39
      4.2.5. Between state and society–the "doubly-embedded" Community Resource Persons 41
5. Texts of the state: a top-down state designs a community-based program 49
6. Conclusion and reflection 58
References 63
Annex 1. Interpretative narratives of the six self-help groups 69

1. Introduction

A classic approach to tackling local development challenges is through encouraging local participation in the policy-making process. This is often framed in terms of decentralization and "empowering" the poor or other marginalized and disadvantaged groups, especially when the focus of public action concerns increasing the allocation of benefits to these groups. Such interventions have a long history in India. This often originated through the social mobilization of groups through activist or civil society engagement. Iconic examples of women's mobilization and engagement include the work of MYRADA (founded in 1968), SEWA (the Self-Employed Women's Association, founded in 1972) and PRADAN (Professional Assistance for Development Action, founded in 1983).

Governments around the world have often proactively sought to foster such participatory engagement in "community-based development" programs through organizational and international funding support for local groups. However, such "induced participation" has had mixed and contingent results for poverty targeting, public service delivery, strengthened social cohesion, and government accountability (Mansuri and Rao 2013). This has been due to weaknesses in genuine participation and resistance to change, whether from local societal structures or state agents. Poverty and illiteracy among marginalized groups can lower participation rates compared to richer, more educated, and more well-connected populations. Without attention to the types of social capital that exist to mobilize in a community and the capability of the state to respond to such social mobilization, such programs are hindered from functioning as intended. Our study on the ways that women's self-help groups (SHGs) in Madhya Pradesh function within the wider system of the state and society sheds light on these issues.

Women's SHGs in the Global South have varied goals, including more efficient service provision, encouraging savings and group-based borrowing, and the enhancement of individual and collective agency. The programs generally posit that increased agency occurs through either change in critical consciousness through group-based interactions or through practical gains in organizational strength from group-based activities (see Kabeer et al, 2019, 2023). Recent meta-surveys of research on these groups find mixed results: there can be positive gains in

terms of service delivery, but with much less clear general impacts on women's agency (Diaz-Martin et al. 2023).

This paper presents in-depth analysis from one of the largest programmes oriented to women's (or any) groups in the world–the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), an Indian government program that forms women's self-help groups (SHGs) in rural areas, which has a primary goal of supporting economic and social development of relatively disadvantaged groups. In this programme, government front-line actors help form groups of women in villages, who follow a set of group management procedures (such as regular meeting and bookkeeping), and are provided with layered access to low-interest loans via the state banking system. SHGs are federated into Village Organizations (VOs), that are in turn federated into Cluster Level Federations (CLFs), representing VOs in many villages in the local geography. The CLFs are envisaged to gradually take over some governmental support functions and develop their own enterprise activity.

While SHGs have often been studied as "interventions" to study the impact in India, the aim of this paper is different: we open the black box of SHGs as institutions that function within the state-society nexus. A motivating question for our study is to answer the question that we suggest comes before any impact evaluation of SHGs themselves: how do we even determine whether these small, rural groups of women - which the government intends to institutionalize to deliver services through - are "functional?" And what is meant by this in any case?

To answer this question, we study the SHG ecosystem in one district of Madhya Pradesh. This study is the first that we know of to investigate the groups with the distinct lens of the institutions and social structures that they are embedded within. Our initial motivation for the study came out of an empirical puzzle that arose out of one empirical observation from a large-n, quantitative analysis of National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) SHGs in nine states in India[2] (Kochar et al. 2020): many of the SHGs on the administrative rolls were observed to be not functioning, or "defunct," and Madhya Pradesh had a relatively higher proportion of such defunct SHGs, compared to the other states.

[2] The survey included approximately 27,000 respondents from 5000 SHGs.

1.1. Study design

We chose to limit our study to the state of Madhya Pradesh as both a design and a practical choice. Each state had its own unique base of "social capital" (existing civil society or government-mobilized SHGs, along with adjacent civil society organizations) before NRLM began to unify these bodies under its purview in 2011-2012. Even though NRLM is becoming ever more centralized, sharing blueprints and strategies between states,[3] conducting case studies and comparisons helps us glean insights about challenges that are systemic, rather than individual, in nature. By conducting an in-depth assessment of a specific area, our study design inductively uncovers aspects of state and society ecosystems that may matter for SHG functionality and sustainability over time, as well as processes of dysfunction.

In Madhya Pradesh, we observed from the Kochar et al. (2020) dataset that SHGs classified as "functional" were often located within the same district, and even the same block and village, as those that were classified as "defunct." Based on this insight, we decided to focus on two administrative areas (blocks within a single district) with these characteristics to understand how processes of defunctness and functionality co-occurred in the same ecosystem. This design choice allowed us to analyze how SHGs fit into both state-society relations, how they function as institutions, and how cadres of frontline actors created by the state operate within these systems.

We randomly sampled six SHGs to study in two blocks of the same district and stratified "defunct" and "functional" SHGs, picking equal numbers of both "types." Once we sampled SHGs, we used semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to explore the perspectives of actors in each SHG ecosystem with the aim of understanding their "cognitive maps"[4] in different parts of the system. We complemented these interviews with analyses of the texts of the state: policy documents that include guidelines on the NRLM, as well as discussions with higher-level officials in Madhya Pradesh and in the central government.

A key strength of our study design is that it delves deeply into all relevant actors inside and around the SHGs in one part of the system. These people, who designed, trained, mobilized,

[3] For example, states whom the government or World Bank deem successful in their running of livelihoods programs - such as Andhra Pradesh - often send implementers to other states' SRLMs to help train them.

[4] See Mehta and Walton (2014) for discussion of the concept of cognitive maps.

ran, and helped SHG members to meet various benchmarks to keep the group functional according to government guidelines – helped us form a picture of "functionality."

After over 90 in-depth interviews and focus groups with all the actors surrounding these six SHGs, we find that a functional-defunct dichotomy fails to explain how SHGs operate and why they operate in the ways they do. It does not help us proxy whether the groups are running according to the institutional and programmatic goals of the program and the state. In fact, such a cross-sectional classification is a snapshot of "functionality" of groups that may move easily from one classification to another on the dichotomy, and yet stay at the same relatively low equilibrium of outcomes for women. This leads us to suggest a reframing for how we ask questions about such large entitlement programs.

We first open the dichotomy of functional/dysfunctional labeling of groups. Groups may be classified as "functional" as measured by programmatic and implementation indicators, but actually operate at a low level. In this case, an "institutional quality" measure such as adherence to key program guidelines - *panchasutra*[5]- is used to document variations in measured institutional quality between "functional" groups through grading which then determines release of revolving fund from the program, and other appraisals and approvals thereafter. However, it often fails to diagnose actual quality, whether that is conceived in terms of financial and economic performance of the SHG and its members, in terms of the development of collective or individual agency, or potential for change over time. In other words, we find that even SHGs that meet all five criteria of the *panchasutra* may be of low quality, in the sense that there is little sign of revolving funds leading to economic gains or broader impacts on awareness and agency of members. To understand this disconnection between measure and reality, we delved into the transcripts of our interviews. Overall, while many would suggest coming up with new measures that "accurately" measure quality, we find that instead, the solutions to this issue lie in finding alternatives to a top-down "deliverology" framework for measuring program impacts. Our core findings are as follows.

We find that up and down the ecosystem of citizens, front-line workers, and bureaucrats, actors have distinct "cognitive maps" about how the nature of the state, of society, of their position with

[5] This means "5 guiding principles" to be followed by the SHGs. They are measured by: 1) regular weekly meetings, 2) regular weekly savings, 3) regular weekly internal lending, 4) regular recovery of loans, and 5) regular weekly maintenance of books of accounts (Kochar et al., 2020; MoRD, 2012).

this, and possibilities for action and effecting change. These cognitive maps are shaped by relations with others—within their nexus and in interactions with others, especially in this context at the state-societal interface. In particular, citizens "see the state" through their experience of interactions with government actors; while the state "sees'' societal actors through the personal histories and current vantage point of bureaucrats; bureaucrats in turn have a cognitive map over how the state works.[6] Their cognitive maps are also shaped by histories and relations within the state and within the complex socio-cultural and power structures of local society. The citizens and bureaucrats then act within the framing of these cognitive maps.

The degree to which each actor is embedded in the state and societal system varies, and thus so does the position from which they see the relationship between the citizen and the state. Bureaucrats - full-time workers in the government - are most embedded in the state itself. Consistent with other work (Dasgupta and Kapur 2020, Aiyer and Bhattacharya 2016, Mangla 2015) we find that these bureaucrats are primarily beholden to upward incentives and benchmarks, overburdened, and under-resourced. The top-down, target oriented ecosystem that they operate in can also be thought of in terms of an economic "principal-agent" framework, in which each layer of bureaucracy has to be incentivized to deliver its instructions from above. The state in India (as in many parts of the world), does not encourage lower-level workers' capacity to solve problems through their intrinsic motivation and resources. In addition, bureaucrats are mostly from "general" or "other backward classes" (OBC), that respectively represent upper and middle parts of the socio-cultural caste hierarchy.[7] They have a pragmatic bias toward engaging with local elites: as an "efficient" way of achieving targets, and we believe through cultural affiliation. This also leads bureaucrats to have a particular perspective of local society, often suspicious of citizens from disadvantaged groups having the capability for individual and collective action.

We also interviewed two other groups with a direct, or indirect relationship with the state. First, the SRLM seeks to engage with village *sarpanches,* the elected village leaders, when they start a mobilization within a village. However, these leaders generally viewed SHGs as being unrelated to their interests. They had little contact, except in a few cases where a family

[6] The idea and metaphor around how "the state sees", and how citizens "see the state", are, of course, taken from Scott (1999) and Corbridge (2005).

[7] Probable caste was inferred by names of respondents, and coded into the data.

member became an SHG leader. It is noteworthy that resources flowing into the SHG system does not pass through the Panchayat, unlike, for example, MGNREGA). Second, bank managers in charge of channeling state money to SHGs generally viewed this activity as a transfer. Bank accounts for SHGs are created, but managers interviewed do not see SHGs as a promising source of banking business.

Amongst citizens, the core SHG members are poor or near-poor women, deeply embedded in local village socio-cultural structures, that are patriarchal and casteist. SHGs are created by the government with the goal of bringing marginalized citizens into the process of dynamic, autonomous change. However, most of these women typically view the institutions that they are mobilized into as a simple source of transfers, from which to draw the most benefits that they and their families can. These women typically treat SHG membership as a vehicle through which to obtain what meager benefits that they can from the state. There is little evidence of any group consciousness or solidarity through their monthly meetings, though in at least one of the groups studied there seemed to be support for continuing group meetings. With this lack of solidarity, and critical consciousness, and this view of the state, no level of meeting quality benchmarks (such as *panchasutra*) can result in solidarity-based, democratic, strong institutions as imagined in NRLM guidelines.

Through our systems analysis approach, we then explore the particularly interesting position of one group of actors – front-line workers, or Community Resource Persons (CRPs) – who are at the very cusp of both state and society. They generally have more complex cognitive maps. CRPs are pulled in one direction by the state, which often provides the main, or only, tenuous source of their livelihood. However, they are not street-level bureaucrats - they do not have "wide discretion over the dispensation of benefits or the allocation of public sanctions" (Lipsky 1980, p. xi). Rather [most of] the CRPs in our sample have massive constraints on their discretion and their routines. Importantly, they are not permanent workers of the state, though they may play multiple roles for the state. For example, one CRP in our sample provides agriculture support, training on bookkeeping, and is an SHG president. Some may also do "government gig-work": another CRP in our sample also paints walls for the Swacch Bharat Abhiyan, or toilets-building program. CRPs, unlike mid-level bureaucrats, have no clear growth trajectory within the hierarchy of the state. Finally, CRPs are part of the communities and often of SHGs that they serve; however, *where* in the local societal hierarchy they are located is integral to the

structure in which they make choices. They are thus "doubly embedded": as workers embedded in–and economically reliant on–the state, and as citizens embedded in–and reputationally reliant on–their relationships with particular communities. Understanding these front-line workers as doubly embedded actors who have doubly motivated stakes in SHG programs highlights the need to account for both the two structures that motivate and constrain their behavior. Our study locates and describes the tensions this creates for CRPs, and descriptively illustrates why these matters in the context of SHG quality and functioning.

To complement the field work, we then examine the "texts of the state", the many documents of guidelines, particularly focusing on documents written in the preceding few years before the study. This reveals that the tensions we observe in the field are already present in the state's text, especially in the implementation guidelines. We specifically emphasize the two tensions:

- First, between top-down, target and rule-driven, principal-agent thinking of state behavior *versus* participatory engagement facilitated by adaptive front-line state actors; and
- Second, between supporting village development through supporting existing societal structures, *versus* seeking the transformation of local power structures through mobilization and conscientization of disadvantaged groups, especially women from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

We interpret these tensions not as the contrast between nice rhetoric and the messy reality of implementation, but more fundamentally in tensions *within* the thinking of the state, both in terms of goals in tension with each other and different cognitive maps as to how the world works.

This is a case study of a small part of the state of Madhya Pradesh's SRLM program. However, we believe it provides insights into an in-depth understanding of a systemic perspective on the behavior of SHGs in their interactions with the state. One theme is aligned with previous work on are overburdened and understaffed state actors. However, it also illustrates why a principal-agent or top-down incentives-based framework, alone, is inadequate to the interpretation of state-society relationships at play, which are at the crux of understanding SHG functionality and institutional equilibria.

1.2. Conceptual approach and related literature

Our point of departure is in analyzing SHGs as social organizations embedded within a complex adaptive system (Meadows 2008, Gokhale and Walton 2023, Ang 2024). This system includes relationships between governmental actors, front-line workers, local political leaders, village leaders, caste groups, the women in SHGs, leaders within the SHG movement, banks and microfinance institutions. The system behavior is shaped by relations of power, resources, information, and reciprocity, as well as inequalities, patriarchal, casteist and other hierarchical norms.

1.2.1. Top-down prisms versus systems thinking

A central part of our approach expands the analytical framework of a top-down perspective on state attempts to influence development outcomes in society. This relates to three distinct but parallel traditions in the literature.

First, Scott (1999) offers an interpretation of a dominant mode of what he calls "high modernist" thinking, in which the state "sees" human and social actors as objects to act upon, with development as a task of making society "legible", so it can be manipulated for state control. He offers a profound critique of state practices of simplification for legibility, arguing that local understanding, practical knowledge, and mutual interactions should be central to the state's interpretation of, and engagement, with society.[8] We also share with Scott's assessment that the top-down mindset is *empirically* relevant to the state's "thinking". We use the concept of "cognitive maps" to elucidate the modalities that actors in the SHG ecosystem use to see the world (Mehta and Walton, 2014). By a cognitive map we mean the internalized conception of how the world works for different actors, including how they see the behavior of actors and organizations in other parts of the system. We reference Scott's seminal phrase "Seeing Like a State" in our title.

[8] Local activists and scholars in India have often offered similar critiques: "over the past fifty years of development history, we have seen the repeated distortion of good ideas and innovative practices as they are lifted out of the political and historical context in which they evolved and rendered into formulas that are 'mainstreamed.' This usually involves divesting the idea of its cultural specificity, its political content, and generalizing it into a series of rituals and steps that simulate its original elements, but lacking the transformative power of the real thing [...] A good example of this syndrome is micro-credit, originally developed in the South Asian cultural and political context by pioneers like SEWA in India and Nobel laureate Grameen Bank in Bangladesh. Their idea was to give poor women access to credit to unleash their latent entrepreneurial skills and eventually raise their household incomes. But in the last decade, micro-credit has been converted into a 'movement,' a universal anti-poverty and women's empowerment panacea. It is increasingly force-fed by development finance agencies into every poverty context, regardless of local culture, gender relations, social structure or political history. [...] No surprise then, that the results have been so mixed." (Batliwala 2007)

Second, such top-down thinking also pervades the more applied literature on state action that pervades development practice. This has been described as the "linear model of implementation" by Thomas and Grindle (1990). Here, after a policy decision has been taken, "implementation is thought to be a matter of carrying out that which has been decided upon, and successful implementation is viewed as a question of whether or not the implementing institution is strong enough for the task." It is manifested in the popular "deliverology" approach to effecting change in society that emphasizes targets and logframes of implementation. This approach was popularized in the UK in the 1990s and adopted, especially by consultants, into development practice. It is documented in management literature e.g. from the Boston Consulting Group and Birch, Lisa, and Jacob (2019).[9] The conceptual counterparts to this framework in political science are in rational legal bureaucracy and hierarchical principal-agent theory (Pepinsky et al. 2017). This theory explicitly models the challenge faced by state policymakers and high-level bureaucrats seeking to control the behavior of subordinates, focusing on issues of moral hazard and adverse selection (Dixit 2002).[10] It is theorized in terms of the different motivations down the hierarchy, of which rules, incentives and information delivery are the crux of the logic, due the focus on imperfect (and asymmetric) information on subordinate behavior.[11] Solutions in this realm are explicit performance pay, increased monitoring, rotations, and reassignments of bureaucrats (e.g. Duflo et al. 2012).

However, empirical work also shows that some of these solutions can generate other problems within the wider system: for example, Rasul and Rogger (2015, 2018) find that increased autonomy of subordinates correlates with higher productivity of bureaucrats in the Nigerian civil service, compared to increased monitoring, which lowers it. This hierarchical, delivery approach also shapes thinking and practices within the Indian state, especially in the pervasive emphasis on targets for actors at lower levels of the hierarchy. Problems with these benchmark-based approaches are compounded by the challenge of overburdened or multitasking actors throughout the system (Gulzar and Pasquale 2017, Dasgupta and Kapur

[9] BCG: https://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/assets/documents/Deliverology-briefing-bulletin.pdf

[10] As Pepinsky et al. (2017) critique: "Principal-agent approaches [...] often narrowly cast bureaucratic politics as an internal management problem while ignoring the wider context of citizen-bureaucrat interactions. To further interrogate these shortcomings, we discuss the role of street-level bureaucrats and the concept of embeddedness as central to understanding most accounts of bureaucratic efficacy in developing country contexts."

[11] (see for example Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2006)

2020). They are also amplified by identity-based hierarchies in gender, religion, and caste (Meier and Dhillon 2022, Purohit 2023). In the realm of SHGs, this is reflected in the detailing of observable indicators of institutional performance in the *panchasutra* measure and the subsequent dichotomous labeling of SHGs as "functional" or "defunct.". Defunct SHGs are defined as those that were once functioning but were no longer doing so at the time of our survey, or if they had not adhered to *panchasutra*. By this logic, functional SHGs are those that were functioning at the time of the SHGs and were adhering to the *panchasutra*.[12]

Third, we speak to the methodological tradition of program evaluation approaches to understand impact, particularly within complex institutional and social ecosystems. This classically involves investigating whether a specific intervention has a statistical causal relationship with an outcome of concern, identified via a randomized control trial (RCT) or quasi-experimental techniques. This approach to program evaluation does well at comparing material inputs or directives from the top with some kinds of measurable outcome at the end of the hypothesized causal chain. It brings a coherent empirical focus to development analysis and has been highly fruitful in assessing specific development impacts. However, it is weak precisely in assessing system effects, and in exploring mechanisms for change within a system. Information is often lost when measuring how the resources put into the system are in fact used by the citizens at the bottom of it. We thus add to a body of work in this tradition that supports the need for a systems approach. As Muralidharan and Singh (2020) show in their study of a large-scale school management quality reform, despite adherence to global-standard "best practices," a coherent program design with buy-in from technocrats, political and bureaucratic leadership, and rigorous, customized, and adhered-to assessments, the program reform failed to improve the quality of schools as measured by changes in school practices or in student learning. They find an explanation by looking more deeply at how the key functionaries who knew about the program - teachers - "saw" the program. Instead of summarizing their understanding of the program's core objectives as being about leading up to action related to better pedagogy, "they primarily recall[ed] the program as a source of paperwork (and logistics associated with uploading reports)" (Muralidharan and Singh 2020). In other words,

[12] This is further described in Kochar (2020).

implementing the tools for measuring quality on a micro-program evaluation basis were the very tools that undermined program quality systemically.

A systemic approach allows us to integrate, the top-down mindset of cognitive maps outlined here, but also traditions in both the literature and in the actual workings of state-society relations that are outside of the field of vision of such "seeing": those that explore how things work based on relations within the state, within society, and at the state-societal interface. In an Indian context, at the state bureaucrat level, this includes work by Dasgupta and Kapur (2020), that explores the idea of the "overburdened bureaucrat" who struggles to respond to multiple demands from higher-ups with inadequate resources. Aiyer and Bhattacharya (2016), working on frontline education bureaucrats, find that they see themselves as "post boxes" for government directives as opposed to as development agents. Mangla (2015) develops a theorization of alternative bureaucratic behaviors, contrasting the "legalistic", rule-following, education bureaucracies of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand with the "deliberative" bureaucracy in Himachal Pradesh's education system, in which lower-level bureaucrats are problem-solving, engaging with a variety of social outcomes and actors. These deliberative practices in Himachal Pradesh contrast with many Indian bureaucracies in which government orders are a necessary condition for any action and lower-level state and societal actors seek to respond.

1.2.2. Literature on SHGs

The scholarship on SHGs provides more specific context for this study. Recent reviews are in Lakshmi Ratan (2021) and Deshpande (2021), while of particular relevance is the study by Kochar et al (2021), that involved a multi-state quantitative assessment of government SRLMs, that used differential timing of program implementation to assess impacts of the programmes. Overall, they found effective targeting, a substantial reduction in dependence on high-cost credit and partial implementation of the measures of government criteria for functional performance (the *panchasutra*). However, there was no measurable impact on consumption, assets, and a negligible proportion of women engaged in entrepreneurial activities after participating in the programme. There was an increase in income, but this was due to increased male earnings, with unclear mechanisms. They found no significant average effect on gender norms, as measured by household decision-making, or engagement in market or political activity outside the home. These results are consistent with other assessments of large-scale

rollouts of SRLM programmes, notably in Jeevika in Bihar, for which Hoffmann et al. (2021) found a large reduction in dependence on high-cost debt. The lack of any average impact on gender norms is consistent with the broader review of women's groups in Diaz-Martin et al (2023).

However, there are complementary findings that provide evidence of distributional impacts and for differential impacts based on institutional support structures. First, Attanasio et al. (2023) finds that effects of SHG program facilitating risk-sharing within communities were specifically concentrated in regions where the program had greater institutional capacity and was better implemented. Second, in another state, more intensive support of the SHG program, with explicit attention to engaging with patriarchal norms, are influential, notably in Prillaman's (2023) study of a group of PRADAN-supported SHGs across 152 villages, that finds significant effects on critical consciousness and a doubling of women's attendance at Gram Sabhas (public village meetings). Also relevant is an early intensive phase of Jeevika's rollout in Bihar, involving active engagement of front-line social workers, that was associated with significant shifts in gender norms around decision-making, mobility and participation in public meetings (Datta 2015); see also Sanyal, Rao and Majumdar (2015) on such cultural effects. Finally, the initial motivation for the present study is the finding in Kochar et al. (2022) of high levels of apparently non-functioning SHGs, with, for example, almost half SHGs formed in Madhya Pradesh no longer functioning, according to their assessment.

In the SRLM manifestation of the SHG ecosystem, the interface between state and society is central. Here, we draw on Heller's concept of the "surface area" between state and society, that is both porous and complex. Here we are especially interested in Community Resource Persons (CRPs) in the SHG ecosystem. As noted above, these agents are "doubly embedded" both in the state (in a contractual relationship) and society (where they are often leaders in the SHG movement, and almost always members of the SHGs themselves). Studying CRPs thus contributes to a more nuanced understanding of agents who are called, in different literatures, "representative bureaucrats" or "embedded bureaucrats" (Meier 1975, 2019, Bhavnani and Lee 2018), frontline workers as bureau-political actors (Kalkman and Groenewegen 2019), and street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980). These literatures, however, do not focus on the gendered dimensions of these actors, which our analysis of the cognitive maps of CRPs includes – which of other types of front-line agents that live on this boundary (e.g. *anganwadi* workers, ASHAs, and ANMs).

A newer scholarship on brokers in India also touches on agents at these boundaries: rather than thinking of brokers as those with shared ethnic identities with clients, they show that clients (in this case, residents who lived in slums) strategically and actively chose brokers who had high capabilities to make claims on the state (Auerbach and Thachil 2018). In the reverse case, brokers' cognitive maps about clients (i.e. citizens) mattered in how responsive they were as well: "slum leaders [brokers] on average prefer residents whose support helps project an inclusive image, and who occupy socially central positions" with no evidence for co-ethnic clients (Auerbach and Thachil 2020). Finally, this scholarship also shows the importance of such agents in the transmission and framing of information – giving information in meaning in local contexts and speaking to and between different audiences (Kruks-Wisner 2022). Thus our work on CRPs - who occupy a position of representing the claims of SHG women to the wider SHG system (including the upper levels of the state as well as to banks and financial institutions), and in communicating information and resources from the state and financial actors to these SHG women, sheds light on this growing understanding of agents at the interface of state and society who have relationships and cognitive maps about both state and society. Understanding these actors as those who are embedded in both community and bureaucracy has important implications for distributive politics and economics (Kruks-Wisner 2022).

A final lens with which we illuminate CRP roles is that of gender. Because most CRPs are women, they navigate, and help SHG women navigate, the patriarchal state and society relationships they are embedded in.

1.2.3. Local hierarchies

There is a vast literature on village society within the broader Indian societal structures, focusing on gender and caste relations in an essentially hierarchical system (Chandra 2012, Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004, Hathi et al. 2018), and on the interaction of these social hierarchies with decentralized development programming, generally in the form of elite capture (Bardhan and Mookherjee 2000, Rao and Ibanez 2003, Powis 2007). A newer literature has begun to examine links between the political and the bureaucratic systems using both principal-agent and caste and gender relations frameworks (Purohit 2022). Our study demonstrates that the principal-agent framework and the caste and gender relations framework are not oppositional – different aspects of the SHG ecosystem are described by various aspects of these two frameworks. While the principal-agent framework models

hierarchy on discretion, transactions, and incentives, and focuses on the output of productivity, the caste and gender relations framework focuses on the relationships, trust, and networks aspects of hierarchy and focuses on the output of distribution or allocation. The cognitive maps that different actors in a system use are informed by both of these frameworks. From the perspective of SHG women citizens, the state as experienced and "seen" from these lenses: how they see the state, their expectations based on their experiences and information, and what they expect of state offers and behaviors–that are elements of *their* cognitive maps. This is the source of the other part of our title "seeing the state" that is taken from the work of Corbridge et al (2005).

1.2.4 Texts of the state

The final way in which we analyze cognitive maps up and down the SHG ecosystem hierarchy is by examining the texts of the state: the policy and implementation manuals and program design documents that are written and disseminated from the top levels of the state, and then interpreted by the lower-level actors in the hierarchy. In particular, as other scholars have done with the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGA) we examine what comes out of the tensions between intended program objectives of NRLM and citizen perceptions about uses of the program (Mathur's (2016) texts of the state,[13] Dréze's (2019) observation of the social distance between government officials and citizen workers,[14] and Veeraraghavan's (2021) focus on the interactions between the different types of embeddedness and practices of upper-level and lower-level development program bureaucrats[15]) .

---

[13] As Mathur (2016) puts it, in analyzing the texts of the state's NREGA program: "The guidelines and other social audit manuals […] meticulously lay down how the state is turning a scrutinizing gaze on itself." Using a principal-agent framework in analyzing these texts, Mathur (2016) also describes: "Agents of the state know that rules can never be followed to the letter. Their energies are directed instead at making it appear as if the illegibilities have been overcome, as if orders have been followed, as if the NREGA has been made real."

[14] "[The lack of accountability of the state to rural workers] reflects a deep contradiction or at least tension with NREGA: it is a pro-worker law implemented by an anti-worker system - a system pervaded by indifference if not hostility towards marginalized people in general and rural workers in particular. This may sound like a harsh statement. There are, of course, many committed individuals at all levels of the Indian administration. In general, however, a huge social distance separates government officials from NREGA workers. A junior engineer, say, is far more likely to seek ways of siphoning off NREGA funds than to work overtime for the benefit of NREGA workers. The resilient problem of delayed wage problems also relates to this feature of the system: the hardships endured by the victims are of little consequence to those who might be able to speed up the payments - the panchayat secretary, the block development officer, and so on" (Drèze 2019, p. 143)

[15] "I refer to the administrators of NREGA in Andhra Pradesh as upper-level bureaucrats, and government employees who carry out NREGA implementation at the last mile as lower-level bureaucrats. These two layers of authority matter because they are often at odds with each other. Lower-level bureaucrats are often part of (or have to deal with) the local power system that seeks to subvert the distribution of state goods and services to citizens. Similarly, while upper-level bureaucrats were determined to implement the program to its specifications, they also were constrained structurally and politically in ways that limited the success of the program. ***Lower-level bureaucrats are often caught between demands from the upper-level bureaucrats and the local power system that they both benefit and suffer from***" (Veeraraghavan, p. 3, emphasis ours).

Our framework also helps bring together two parts of the large women's self-help groups literature. On the one hand, there is a strand of the literature, often built upon studies of smaller, grassroots, and non-bureaucratized women's groups, which analyzes processes of transformation, especially of gender relations, or "women's empowerment", building on thinking of conscientization (Freire 2020), of associated psychological shifts (Lewin, 1947), or building aspirational capacities as a cultural activity (Appadurai 2004). This work points to increased social capital, capabilities, and solidarity as key outputs of such a transformational process (Putnam 2001, Sanyal 2014, Prillaman 2023). This is specifically of interest, since it is explicit in civil society traditions of women's groups, notably in SEWA and PRADAN, that are part of the origin history of the state-mediated SHG movement that is the focus of our work here. However, other work, which examines scaled-up and often bureaucratized versions of self-help groups, finds mixed results on these types of outcomes, particularly given the targeting of poor women who are first and foremost joining microfinance groups to become borrowers within a larger financial and social ecosystem (Rogaly 1996, Batliwala 2007,[16] Radhakrishnan 2021, Guérin et al. 2023).

2. A systems sketch of the NRLM in Madhya Pradesh

We study state-society relations in the context of the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM),[17] a federal rural development program that has created and supported more than 8 million SHGs across the country at [April, 2023].[18] It has an explicit theory of change with the stated goals of expanding women's incomes and empowerment through the formation and

[16] "Over the past fifty years of development history, we have seen the repeated distortion of good ideas and innovative practices as they are lifted out of the political and historical context in which they evolved and rendered into formulas that are 'mainstreamed'. This usually involves divesting the idea of its cultural specificity, its political content, and generalizing it into a series of rituals and steps that simulate its original elements, but lacking the transformative power of the real thing. Thus good ideas, evolved to address specific development challenges, are altered into universally applicable panaceas. Transferring the correct rhetoric – buzzwords and catch phrases emptied of their original meaning – is a vital part of this legerdemain [...] A good example of this syndrome is micro-credit, originally developed in the South Asian cultural and political context by pioneers like SEWA in India and Nobel laureate Grameen Bank in Bangladesh. Their idea was to give poor women access to credit to unleash their latent entrepreneurial skills and eventually raise their household incomes. But in the last decade, micro-credit has been converted into a 'movement', a universal anti-poverty and women's empowerment panacea. It is increasingly force-fed by development finance agencies into every poverty context, regardless of local culture, gender relations, social structure or political history. Many of the systems developed by the early pioneers have been mechanically replicated without critical reflection on their viability or equivalents in other contexts. No surprise then, that the results have been so mixed."

[17] By way of context, the NRLM is an exemplar of a long tradition of "community-based" or "community-driven" development, that became favored (or rather returned to favor) in the global development community in the 1990s. This was apparent amongst both development aid providers, such as the World Bank and the UK's aid agency, and many governments. A major review within the World Bank research department, by Mansuri and Rao (2013) found ambiguous results of this movement, arguing that the challenge of "induced participation" from above, especially by government action, is qualitatively different from organic participation movements. In India the latter are exemplified by the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India, or the adaptive, catalytic and supportive engagement of women's groups by a CSO such as PRADAN.

[18] https://nrlm.gov.in/shgReport.do?methodName=showIntensiveStateWiseReport

operation of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) of below-poverty line (BPL), rural women in villages. Groups are mobilized by frontline state actors, supported by contracted community resource persons (CRPs). Socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, often historically oppressed caste or tribal groups are especially targeted for inclusion in the program. The SHGs are supported through training, protocols and—subject to following the protocols—phased access to funds, that are distributed from the CLF to the VO and then to the bank account of the SHG. The initial transfers do not require repayment, and the state banks' role is initially to open the SHG's account. As they mature, these groups may undertake additional borrowing from the banking system, with the intention that the women invest in productive activities. Leveraging credit from the bank is desirable, but not required by the SRLM. Bank loans involve joint liability. The eventual transfers to the SHG involves repayment, but hardly enforced and the SHG member circulates the amount among themselves.

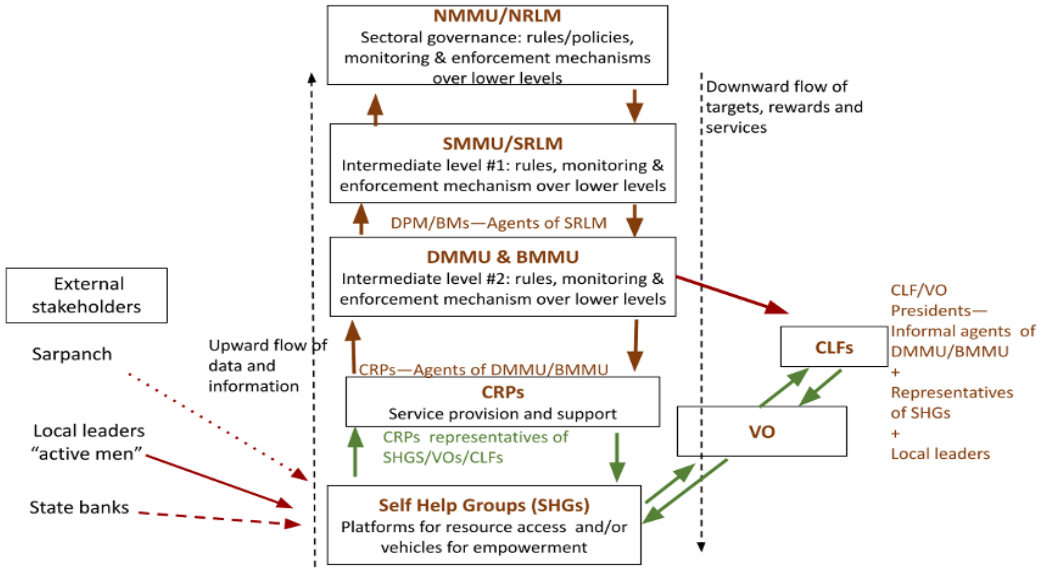
The support system for SHGs is designed to shift over time from state actors to federations of SHGs, in the form of village organizations (VOs) that comprise several SHGs, and cluster level federations (CLFs) that represent several VOs. In addition to being a channel for funds, the vision is that mobilized SHG and federative structures will serve as a broader platform for development, both as a source of claim-making and delivery for other government programs (under the "Convergence" goal) and for engagement with the panchayat, the local political body in rural India (MoRD, 2012) (COM, 2016).

On paper the SRLM has a clear linear sequence of actions and responses, from state level formation of groups to group development practices, linkages to finance and beyond. However, it is much more accurate to describe it as a complex system, with a wide range of interactions between different actors, and unpredictable behaviors typical of a complex system. This applies within the many layers of societal structures in villages, within and between households, within and between caste and tribal groups, and in the interactions with the local political system. It is also true within the state bureaucratic system: while this has a much more structured "linear" hierarchy, actors within it are also interacting with other groups, and hold the influence of different mindsets.

Thus, as emphasized in the introduction and conceptual description, the whole picture is of state and societal "subsystems", in which the "surface area" of the state is itself diffuse and porous, most vividly in the person of the Community Resource Person, who is partially

embedded in both state and society. Figure 1 provides a simplified visualization of the system, including the main actors around the SHGs, corresponding to those interviewed for this study.

Figure 1. A simplified sketch of the state-society system for Self Help Group



Source: Authors

In this context, using in-depth interviews and focus groups to study SHGs - their functionality, their public service delivery machinery, and the actors embedded in their day-to-day functioning - allows us to understand important, and often hidden, points of the complex interactions between the state and its citizens. It also enables us to understand what societal, political, and economic factors shape variation in the outcomes that the SRLM program is ultimately interested in learning about.

3. Research design

This section outlines the selection of cases and empirical methods.

3.1. Case selection

The original research question concerned an apparent puzzle of why some SHGs became defunct while others continued functioning. To study this, we picked so-called "defunct" and "functional" SHGs from an original survey of NRLM SHGs from Kochar et al. (2022) as our sampling frame as our case study sample. We then assessed these in the context of the local

institutional and social systems in which they operated (or didn't operate). Our state, district, block, and SHG selection was purposive based primarily on the relative mix of those SHGs labeled "defunct" and "functional" within a state, budget and fieldwork logistics, and variations in the institutional linkages that each SHG had. .

First, we selected Madhya Pradesh out of the nine states[19] covered by the study because it had the greatest mix of so-called "functional" and "defunct" SHGs - with approximately half of all SHGs falling into each category. Next, rather than picking a mix of districts and blocks from the sampling frame of six districts, we selected a single district and two blocks to study. This decision was aligned with the fieldwork budget and logistics, but also with the objective of undertaking an in-depth assessment of how the system functioned in one area. This choice was further supported by mapping the locations of the SHGs in the sampling frame: we discovered that there was substantial variation in SHG functionality not only within districts but also within blocks and villages. In other words, functionality and defunctness were not clustered at a higher-level administrative level, and often happened together within the same villages.

Finally, we purposively picked a mix of SHGs that were linked and unlinked to federation structures - Village Organizations (VOs) and/or Cluster-Level Federations (CLFs). This is because some SHG outcomes may be linked to its ties with federations. Being linked to a Village Organization for a longer period is associated with getting more loans, household productive assets and expenditures on education and food - indicating that linkage with a federation structure (VO and/or CLF) may be a possible and important avenue of local variation in SHG functionality (Kochar et al. 2022). Using this criteria, we thus selected six SHGs whose local ecosystems and local-level group dynamics we could study in-depth (see Figure 2).

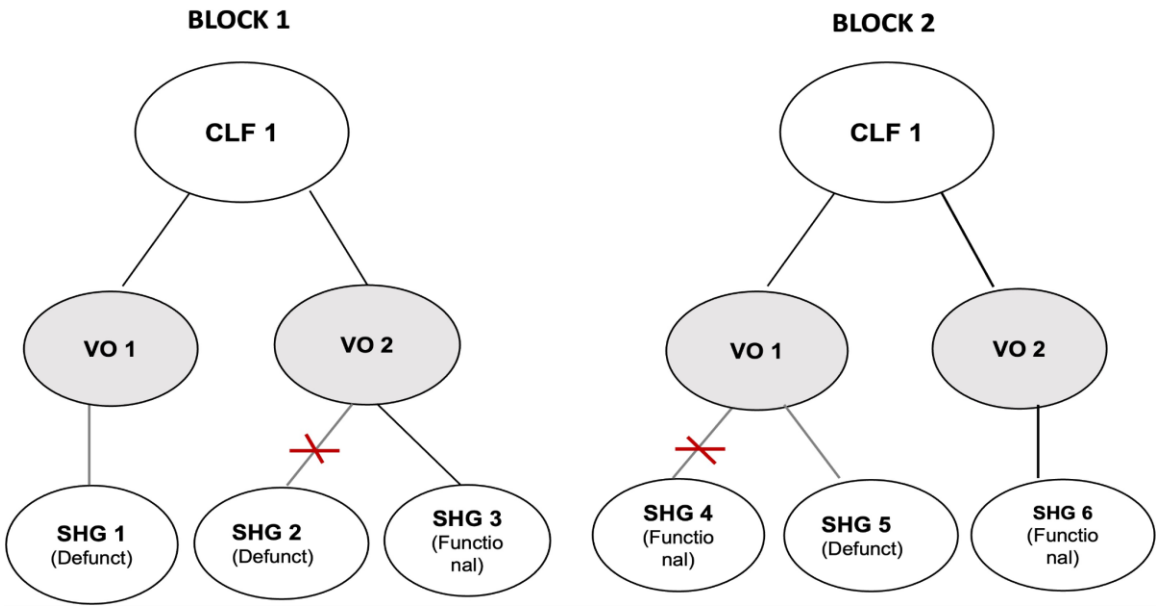
The district we selected[20] is categorized as one of the current national administration's 100-odd "aspirational districts" - one of the poorest districts in India. Within this category, based on government criteria it is not atypical with respect to observable characteristics—it is neither in the top nor bottom quartiles of the aspirational districts according to the government's socio-

[19] Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan

[20] We do not name the district to keep the identities of those interviewed private.

economic criteria. Our Madhya Pradesh sampling frame included 581 SHGs, of which 305 (52%) were functioning and 276 (48%) were non-functioning at the time of the quantitative survey. Each SHG had between 11-12 members on average, and approximately three SHGs were located in[21] a single village. The six SHGs we selected for our case studies were all between two to four years of age. Of the functioning SHGs, 84% were affiliated to some Village Organizations, of which 155 were affiliated to a Cluster Level Federation.[22] After prioritizing villages with both functioning and defunct SHGs, our sample is composed of six SHGs across four villages (and thus four Village Organizations) in two blocks, with all three functional SHGs and one defunct SHG (D3) linked to a Village Organization (VO), and three of the four VO's linked to a Cluster-Level Federation (CLF)(see Figure 2).[23]

Figure 2. Selection of "functional" and "non-functional" SHGs in the research



Source: Authors

[21] The SHGs in Kochar et al. (2020) were formed in two phases (see Figure A3.1, in Annex 1), and for this research we selected six from the 2015 to 2017 phase of creation so that they were neither too told (and thus more likely to have just stopped functioning because of age or moving), nor too young (and thus without enough time to have started their activities and institutionalization). In the dataset, there are on average 11.4 members per SHG and 3.3 SHGs per village.

[22] In background work for this research, we compared our sample with the quantitative patterns for Madhya Pradesh: this suggests that the selected SHGs were not atypical in terms of potentially influential variables, such as distance to the local center. The functioning SHGs selected had a measure of performance (the *panchasutra* - see below) in line with the broader pattern of SHGs surveyed in the 3ie sample in the state.

[23] The fact that both functional and defunct SHGs in our sample were linked to a VO allowed us to study factors other than just linkage to federations that may link to the quality of functioning.

Notes: The top layer of circles indicates Cluster Level Federations (CLFs) in our sample, the middle layer indicates Village Organizations (VOs), and the final layer indicates self-help groups (SHGs). The SHGs are labeled by "D" for "defunct" and "F" for "functional" according to the Kochar et al. (2020) data. Red X's indicate the institution is not linked to the federated entity above it. The differential shading is explained more in the findings section - though some SHGs were labeled in the Kochar et al. (2020) study to be functional, our follow-up qualitative study indicated that functionality is not a dichotomy, and we did not find all of them to be fully functional based on a range of characteristics.

3.2. Respondent selection

The design, implementation and initial interpretation of the qualitative data collection was jointly undertaken with the Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST). Our principal empirical instrument was a set of semi-structured interviews of actors in the SHG and associated state ecosystem, along with focus group discussions with SHG women. A sample interview protocol is in Annex 2.

In addition to understanding the current state of SHG functioning, retrospective views of respondents were also gathered to construct a picture of changes over time. In total, 90 semi-structured interviews were conducted with SHG members, SHG leaders, husbands of members, VO and CLF leaders, members of the community cadre (Community Resource People, or CRPs) hired under the project, bank officials, panchayat officials and SRLM frontline district and block level staff.

To select respondents to interview, we used snowball sampling, starting with "sampled SHG," "sampled VO" and "sampled CLF" members, and building out to other actors in the system. This ensured that we talked to a wide range of actors across the local ecosystem, including those whom we would not have met with had we only sampled actors laid out in NRLM guidelines. For example, SRLM instructs CRPs to meet with key influencers in the village, including representatives of the *panchayat*, local youth volunteers, "active women," local leaders, community volunteers, leaders of existing community-based organizations or civil service organizations, and elderly people with social legitimacy and authority from caste or religious groups (MoRD, n.d.a: p. 12). However, in our study villages, we did not find any active women, and instead met local influential men (who we call "active men") who were effectively selected by the SRLM during the mobilization stage. We also conducted meetings with state-level SRLM staff and national level NRLM staff to ask how they understood the implementation guidelines, viewed the role of federation, SHG and community members, and guided the bureaucrats under them.

We complemented our in-depth interviews with six focus group discussions with SHG members. The focus group discussions enabled new actors and themes to emerge, while interviews with individual actors helped us understand their self-described roles and their views of the state and community involved in their SHG ecosystem. The final sample of respondents in the six SHG ecosystems studied is listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Interview sample

Role	n
Sampled SHGs – members, leaders, husbands, office bearers, "active men"	45
Sampled VO – VO member, Office bearer	5
Sampled CLF -CLF member (VO rep), Executive Committee member	5
Community Cadre/Community Resource Person /mobilizer	10
Panchayat member/Sarpanch; Jaati panchayat member	9
State/District/Block bureaucrats implementing SRLM	6
Bank officials/MFI staff	4
Snowball respondents (CRPs, local leaders)	6
6 focus groups of SHG members	45

Annex 1 presents the "story" of each of the six SHGs, compiled during a workshop between the researchers and fieldwork team. This includes discussion of what we learned about how and why defunct groups stopped meeting, and the extent to which groups categorized as functioning were, in fact, working effectively. The SHGs in our sample were only 2-4 years old but had passed through multiple phases of the program. While some groups continue to function—and might even take off in the future—overall group performance is weak. While

every group has its own story, there appears to be no sharp distinction between the functioning and defunct groups, rather all (but one) had had some low level of functioning at some point, and this tipped into just stopping in the case of the defunct groups. Overall, while the original motivation of the research was to explore an issue of "performance," as discussed further in Bhanjdeo et al. (2021), the focus of this paper is on describing and interpreting how the system functions based on the vantage points, incentives, and interactions of the actors within it

3.3. Transcription and analysis methods

First, following data collection, ISST transcribed and translated each interview into English transcripts from audio recordings. Second, the research team and ISST field teams met in a series of workshops to map the full team's understanding of each SHG's story, ecosystem of actors, timeline of growth and functionality, and life cycle to understand functionality and defunctness holistically. Finally, the research team made a template to extract core themes from the transcripts as well as the workshop maps aimed at understanding core themes around functionality and defunctness.

In the course of both the workshop and careful reading through of each transcript, we found new themes to emerge - specifically, we found that functionality and defunctness are better understood as processes rather than stagnant states of SHGs and SHG federations. First, we found that actors were embedded in the state and community to different extents. These relationships mapped onto this new understanding of functionality as a spectrum rather than a dichotomous outcome to be measured about SHGs and SHG federations.

Based on these observations and discussions, the research team designed templates to document our findings across SHGs. We entered the transcripts into a data matrix designed to juxtapose responses across key themes and respondent categories. Table 2 lays out themes and dimensions used to analyze the transcripts. These were designed based on our initial literature review and fine-tuned based on the emerging insights from the field transcripts and workshops.

Table 2.

Theme	Dimensions
Mobilization and women's individual interests	Stage of SHG functionality based on its mobilization mechanisms, its capacity to deliver benefits, capacity to lend legitimacy to its members, and/or its capacity to fulfil the expectations and needs of the members.
Group dynamics	Status of functionality of SHGs based on internal group dynamics. This included formal and informal rules and norms, SHG leadership, trust, conflict resolution and differential access and experiences of members cutting across parameters like caste differences, age and positionality in the village.
Household dynamics	Status of SHG functionality based on the support or lack of it from their spouses and other household members.
Horizontal linkages	Status of SHG functionality based on competing linkages to other groups or actors in the local area. This includes *panchayat* (PRI) members, local elites or SHG community resource persons (CRPs) that are a part of the enabling ecosystem at the local level that help sustain the SHGs. Women's participation in the PRIs are also considered. Conflicts in the villages also act as another determinant of functionality.
Vertical linkages	SHG functioning is determined by support from the upper-level (block and district) bureaucrats, SHG federations and banks or micro-finance institutions.

4. Findings

This section presents the empirical findings from the analysis of the transcripts of the interviews and focus groups. An interpretative summary is presented for each actor, based on a

systematic analysis of pattern and frequency of themes from the transcripts, illustrated by selected, illustrative quotes.

4.1. Societal actors: How societal actors see the state and experience the program

4.1.1. SHG core women

These women come from a strongly patriarchal, and resource-poor context, with many illiterate or semi-literate. Most belong to the Scheduled Caste or Other Backward Caste categories and are poor. Those from SC backgrounds are lower status, live in different hamlets, and have weaker connections with local and state influential actors. The SHG women "see" the state as a source of potential material gains – usually modest transfers or resources–and join groups to secure potential benefits. The most-reported expectations from these groups were: flexible access to loans, getting the amount they wanted, opening small individual businesses, starting collective SHG "business" enterprises such as government contracts to run a local Midday Meal Scheme or a Public Distribution Shop; and creating a large savings corpus to be used for future need. Thus, one SHG woman:

"We joined thinking we will receive some monetary benefits and will be able to start our own businesses or open a shop. We don't have much land, so we don't earn much from farming." (SHG member; COMM:SHG:F1OB1:F:OBC).

Some women expected the money they were saving/depositing would get doubled over time:

"The people who asked us to join told us that once our group savings reached Rs 60,000, the government will give us Rs 40,000 and make it 1 lakh [100,000] (SHG member; COMM: SHG: F1:W2:OBC)

However, the women do not see state actors, or the program, as a source of support for mobilization beyond the resources. This is consistent with the finding from the quantitative nine-state survey that found that participation in the NRLM program is associated with an improvement in the amount of savings (or reduced "negative savings" for a household), but was not associated with changes in measures of agency (Kochar et al. 2020). Furthermore, the women are almost always disappointed with the scale of support and material benefits

received by them were also considered to be low and below expectations. Another women said:

"There is no advantage. I have received Rs 2700 only once, used it in household expense as we had to buy something….I returned it, with interest. Nothing else I got. Now we can't put a shop or poultry shed in this much money. (COMM: SHG: F1:W1:ST).

Hence, they do little with what comes from the program—and some even have to supplement RF loans from other household resources for small scale projects. In one case, a woman bought hens and a goat from her share of the equally distributed RF but had to leverage the rest of the money from her husband.

A mismatch of expectations was both a cause and consequence of failure to move beyond a basic level of measured "functioning" for the groups – which we define as fulfilling some or all procedural target requirements of the state and thus receiving some resources, […not the more demanding] but not developing into sustainable institutions with collective voice. None of the six SHGs we studied had received the Community Investment Fund (CIF) in totality. This perception of a very low level of support from the state among SHG members agrees with the frontline managers' statement below that the funds they receive to run the program on the ground are insufficient.

Another unfulfilled expectation the women had from the state was the hope that they would receive training and assistance in market linkages in their micro-enterprises. For example, in two of our study villages, women bought sewing machines for themselves using funds from their SHGs. However, they did not receive any assistance from SRLM after that. Highlighting the absence of support promised by the program, one woman shared,

"We were told by the mobilisers that we would be supported in our livelihoods, but it has been three years we haven't received any training or marketing support. So I bought a small sewing machine and I am learning sewing from you tube. I want to set up my business. Two of my group members have opened small vegetable shops/carts outside our village but I don't want to do that." (COMM: SHG:F2:W3:OBC).

One of the VOs was given a rented shop in a market complex in the block for SHGs, but no customers visited, and the women were unable to sell any of the products they had produced,

such as soaps or incense sticks, and so there was no money for paying the rent. There were a few efforts to work with the women's traditional skills in animal husbandry and agriculture, and a low availability of *krishi sakhis* (agriculture CRPs) to support any of these skills. Our interviews show that this led to low motivation for participation among SHG members.

In some cases, CRPs were viewed by the women as playing an important role in the program, as both frontline workers of the state, and connected with the community. One of the women shared,

"If Rashi didi would not have convinced my mother-in-law I would not have joined the group and saved so much money..... Once, we had a confusion regarding who will write the register, she only helped us resolve the issue..." (COMM:SHG:F2W1:F:OBC).

However, many of the groups studied by us did not receive active CRP support. Respondents from such groups did not share similar positive experiences, and they remained unaware that any support for gaining market-valued skills existed in the form of a CRP, or otherwise. Below we provide a more detailed analysis of CRPs role and positionality in the program.

4.1.2. Husbands of SHG members

Perspectives of most husbands of SHG members were not very different from that of the women. We outline here how the men 'see' the state. These men's gaze is separate from the influential male members of the villages or 'active men' who were *also* husbands of SHG members, but had a greater role to play in the mobilization and functioning of the groups and in the larger ecosystem of the village (see below).

Husbands of SHG members saw the program as a platform for receiving small monetary benefits from the state that would help them set up some business or shop and hence supplement their household income. The following quotes from two of the men we interviewed illustrate their perception towards the benefits they could garner from the state through NRLM:

"We set up a small vegetable cart from the money we received from the group. Now if we receive more money, I will convert the cart into a good shop." (COMM:SHG:F3H1:M:OBC).

"The mobiliser also told us that if you want to take a loan for cattle, for dairy, numerous things she told us then you take from that. That is why my wife joined" (COMM:SHG:F2H3:M:OBC).

Similar to the women's responses, husbands experience a mismatch of expectations between what was promised by the state. The same respondent (COMM:SHG:F2H3:M:OBC) shared that:

"My wife believed the mobilisers and joined thinking we will get loans but nothing came out of it. We could have taken the loan and sold the milk of goats and sheep. But nothing."

Another man said,

"Nothing they had said will happen actually happened. They had said that if someone requires loan of 10 or 20 thousand, then that person will get a loan. So we thought it will help us in our work. Women would have got subsidies on interest from the government which they could have divided amongst themselves, but nothing yet." (COMM:SHG:D2H2:M:OBC).

He further remarked on the lack of understanding level of the block staff and shared his experience with the BMMU staff involved during social mobilization in the village:

"…One man from the block told us about the benefits we will receive but when we asked anything else, he only doesn't know everything. He did what he was told to and now we did not get anything."

Men also saw the NRLM program as having the potential to bring improvement in their villages through "convergence", or linkage, with various existing government schemes and entitlements. For example,

"The group was formed so that children in the village could get food in their school through anganwadi. We agreed to join because of that. The group ran for one year. We are facing losses due to the closing down of the group. The kids could have benefited from the money and the food." (COMM:SHG:D1H1:M:OBC)

Hence, an overall mismatch of expectations, a lack of clarity from the program mobilizers and lack of information provided an impression of men in the villages being disinterested and unaware about the program's processes and details. In some cases they did not let their wives participate as a result. For example, one man shared,

"Sometimes some government officials come to the village. They say things like, be part of it, there will be less interest on your loan and it will be nice. No one has ever come to tell us anything about the group. They just gather women and say men are not part of this group….how will my wife go to meetings if I don't have information?" (COMM:SHG:D3H1:M:SC).

4.1.3. Local women leaders

This is a diverse group, mostly with prior leadership or relatively higher status in the village, including women and men. They typically have more proactivity and more connectivity, primarily because of their higher social status in the local areas. They also "see" the state as a source of resources, and seek to use the SHGs as platforms to leverage gains, either specifically to get hold of RF or CIF resources, or as a source of potential influence over the SHGs.

Women leaders in the SHG system include the SHG office bearers (President, Secretary and Treasurer), VO members (who are SHG office bearers) and VO office bearers, and CLF members and CLF office bearers. These leaders operate at distinct levels of the system, and this influences how they see the state and communities. Overall, they display more capacity to engage with the state and other actors, with often multiple roles. This is in part by design, but can lead to consolidation of pre-existing hierarchy.

Leaders of the SHGs, VOs and CLF saw the BMMU as consisting of state agents who would support them if they faced issues in the day-to-day running of the SHGs, VOs and CLFs. For instance, one of the CLF leaders reported that when their CLF was formed, its office was in a place far from their area and they could not travel regularly. After sharing this issue with the BMMU staff, the office was then shifted to a nearby town where the women leaders from CLF and VO could easily travel to. The following quote from a CLF leader illustrates how they see the block office of the SRLM:

" from the block… a sir comes. If there is an issue, we can write a complaint and keep it. When an official comes from the block level then he is told about this. Till now there has been no issue. But in case any problem would arise…we would write it and he will help us. This much we definitely learned. " (COMM:CLF:D2F1OB:F:Gen).

Another VO leader shared that the block staff are their primary source of information and guidance in running the VOs and SHGs and face challenges if they are unavailable. She says,

"Sirs from the block give us all the information and direction on what to do and when to do. But sometimes it takes time as they keep getting transferred. This sir has joined recently so we haven't

met him many times– the one who came before this stayed for a few days. He did not know which group is where…and then he was transferred." (COMM:VO:D3F2:OB2:F:OBC)

The VO and CLF leaders saw the women (including SHG leaders) in the village as largely unaware of the two institutions or why the federation structure exists; in fact, the leaders' main understanding of the federation structure is articulated in terms of procedures that need to be followed:

"….women are not sure what is the purpose of VO and say that why should we give you Rs 50 per month. But attending the meeting is very important to get their SHG entries done."

She goes on to highlight the lack of information flow from the SHG leaders who attend VO meetings in the SHG meetings:

"SHG President should make the group members understand the importance of Gram Sangathan and the discussions we have in VO (or CLF, if they are CLF members), but that doesn't happen." (COMM:CLF:D2F1OB:F:Gen).

Sometimes, even when CLFs do work with SHGs, the SHG members demand benefits that the CLF office bearers find difficult to respond to; and in instances where the SHGs do not repay or revolve the funds, the CLF members seem to feel helpless. Here is an account of CLF's support to SHGs by a CLF President:

"Some groups do not even work for one month and they start asking for loans. The Rs 10,000 (RF) is too little for them and they don't repay it. It should be returned…because government's money is being wasted if it is not returned and the group stops meeting, then I try to go myself to conduct a meeting to discuss the issues with them. When I go there, all of them say that we will restart the group meetings and deposit the money in the group this time. There are some groups which I have managed to restart, but most of them, even after a lot of convincing, won't start meeting until they receive more benefits". (COMM:CLF:D3F2:OB:F:OBC)

Elaborating on the above CLF member's perspective, another CLF leader shared that when villages are remote and very far from the CLF office, it becomes difficult not only for the women in those villages to travel to the CLF office and banks, but also for the CLF leaders and any CRPs to visit the villages which leads to the groups not functioning properly and the program not working in these villages.

4.1.4. "Active Men"

Given the constraints of reach that the program faces, the SRLM staff have had to prioritize making local connections with, and relying on, established local leaders during the mobilization stage. We refer to these actors as "active men" (on the lines of "active women" who are appointed by the SRLM) because they function as intermediaries. These leaders generally have a higher social status than the average SHG member and have established social capital both in the village and in existing ties with the state. Playing a de facto leadership role in three out of six of the SHGs in our sample, they were effectively selected by the SRLM mobilizers, or sometimes proposed by the sarpanch.

Active men are typically influential or well-networked individuals and, in our context, emerging development entrepreneurs who see the (NRLM) program as an opportunity to get resources from the state to help further their private goals. Our study found that an active man typically places his wife (and other female relatives) in leadership positions in the SHG, provides support in the running of the SHG, for example in bookkeeping, and is especially present in interactions with the bank. These men considered themselves as a bridge between the state and the women in the village. The following excerpt from an interview with an active man illustrates his role in initiating an SHG, and also his feeling of ownership towards the group:

"Respondent: ..... when I initiated the group, I only managed everything. Then, first of all, when CRP Madam visited, I had actually formed the group.

Interviewer: So, did you receive any help from the government during the formation of this group?

Respondent: No, I didn't get any help from the government, I feel privileged and happy to help the people around me. I also know people around, they listen to me

Interviewer: "Like some kind of monetary help?

Respondent: No, none of it

Interviewer: How did you come to know about the necessary arrangements and the paperwork including all the documents that will be required to initiate a group?

Respondent: I am a wanderer and I like to go places and know about things; I know a bit of politics as well so I have some knowledge of what is to be done and what not, about the basic formalities

today like the aadhar card, voter card and the ration card which are needed every time. I can get things done. Once a woman official came from the block with some regulations, as these days mostly all the regulations and schemes are there for the betterment of all. The person who is the more aware in the village gets associated with the group earlier than the one who is not. I spoke with her then and she was happy with me to help…….. Another thing is that the women here are not literate, and no one among them are free from their household duties, they are not concerned about what things are taking place around them, so they don't know much." (COMM:SHG:D3AM2:M:Gen)

Another active man remarked on his indispensability in the SHG system,

*"How will the woman manage without our guidance? Anyone can come and fool them. Even though this is the government, we never know. And the block people also- how can they come and talk to the women like that only… They also need someone guiding them. That is why I have made my wife as President. She is educated but mute. So I help her." (*COMM:SHG:D3AM1:M:Gen)

4.2. State actors: How they see society and experience the program

4.2.1. Front line bureaucrats in the District and Blocks.

In this section, we interpret how bureaucrats situated at an intermediate position in the NRLM organisational hierarchy perceive their work in villages and see the needs of SHG women in the programs they manage. Out of the six frontline bureaucrats we interviewed, all are male and in a higher-status position in terms of caste and educational status than the villagers that they worked with. Three are general caste and three belong to the OBC category. Three of the six officials have a Master's degree: one is an MBA and a Post Graduate Diploma in Rural Development, the second has an MPhil in Social Work and the third, an MA in Politics. The remaining three have bachelor's degrees. Overall, these officials perceive the villagers as extremely poor, with no education and awareness, and perceive their own roles as catalysts in bringing people out of poverty.

A recurrent theme is of state actors reporting being overworked and under-resourced. Evidence of under-resourcing comes from comparing staffing relative to the number of positions envisaged by the design of the DMMU and BMMU, the number of programs existing staff are expected to implement, and the kinds of outcomes they are expected to deliver (also found in Dasgupta and Kapur, 2020) These bureaucrats have multiple responsibilities, leading

to gaps in the organizational capacity of the local state to implement the program. While SRLM bureaucrats acknowledge implementation gaps, they remain conflicted about completing their time-bound targets and firefighting problems. One of the frontline officials elaborated on the focus on quantitative targets:

"If a target of 300 SHGs in a year is set for our block, we have to fulfill that target otherwise those who do not complete their numbers won't get their salaries."

They "see" village and SHG women as having low levels of empowerment, and often stuck in a state of low resources and social conflict. They describe the cash shortages in village households and the prevalence of distress migration. They perceive villagers as being primarily motivated to join their program in order to receiving financial and material benefits from the government:

"The poor class joins only from where they get money" (FM2:DMMU:IB:M:Gen)

"ST/SC families that are extremely poor if they join the groups, they will be in a better place in terms of their financial situation." (FM3:BMMU:BM:M:Gen)

"Migration is prevalent in these areas, but remittances are only enough for sustenance. With no reserves for (medical) emergencies, these villagers borrow money from financial intermediaries or local moneylenders paying high-interest rates and hidden charges. They are hence in need of development and benefits from the government." (FM4:BMMU:BM: OBC)

Official also describe how people, especially women, in the area are illiterate, lack awareness and are bound by restrictive social norms which prevent them from actively participating in the program. This poses a difficulty for the frontline bureaucrats to implement the program - not only in terms of women's participation but also to achieve positive outcomes for the whole program in the long run. This is illustrated in the following quotes from the frontline officials:

"Because of the lack of education, people don't even understand the benefits and losses of the program, they do as they are told by others and are often misguided" (FM5:BMMU:SP:M: OBC)

"In rural MP, women stay in purdah, it is a challenge for us to make them come out and form a group and also to make them part of a system and independent. Hence, social mobilization gets difficult." (FM2:DMMU:IB:M:Gen)

"Many people/women are just not interested in forming SHGs or doing any work in these villages, so it is difficult to work with them. But they also don't follow rules or do regular (SHG) meetings." (FM4:BMMU:BM:M:OBC)

"No, you must have seen that in one village, for bookkeeping, 8th or 10th pass, at least 8th pass is required. In a village, in every Gram Panchayat, we are finding it difficult to find someone who is tenth pass". ((FM1:DMMU:DPM:M:Gen)

The officials, however, shared that the younger women who are educated have more potential to understand the benefits of the program and continue with it. One of them narrated:

"Younger women are smarter and sometimes better educated and they are able to represent the group then that SHG runs well. I think SHGs should be mixed-age groups. Then there will be balance and effective running of the program" (FM3:BMMU:BM:M:Gen)

Though the bureaucrats recognize that younger educated women in these regions have more potential in advancing the program, they also talk to the low proportion of such women. This creates a challenging situation while recruiting frontline workers (FWs) from the community (the Community Resource Persons) to expand state engagement. Due to the shortage of educated women who are ready to work as FWs and travel to different, often remote, locations, the existing FWs end up being overstretched and the program is slow in delivering progress.

"CRP work is a travelling job. It is difficult to find women who are ready to travel to different villages every day. Some have two-wheelers of their own, some have supportive husbands who pick and drop them off. But the number of such women is less" (FM4:BMMU:BM:M:OBC)

In addition to low levels of education, a lack of exposure to people beyond their family makes it hard for women in these villages to trust people on the outside. According to the officials, regular support and guidance from the officials and FWs play an important role in building trust amongst the women.

"Women in these areas don't understand the benefits of such programs. A CRP plays an important role in convincing the women and regularly telling them to have meetings" (FM1:DMMU:DPM:M:Gen)

Following quotes from two officials narrates how a vacuum is created in the community due to the often short-term involvement of young women as FWs who migrate after marriage or are transferred to another location by the state:

"In these villages, it takes time to build trust, especially for women to trust outsiders. It takes a long time to build trust and then people are transferred or get married and then the community suffers. New FW [front-line worker] is appointed but it takes time." (FM2:DMMU:IB:M:Gen)

"Because we train them here, we create a resource and then they get married so then all our efforts go to waste"(FM1:DMMU:DPM:M:Gen)

The officials also recognize villages as rife with conflicts especially related to property matters and land sharing, making implementation of the program difficult.

"There are many kinds of arguments in the village. For example, arguments because of property, when the land is divided especially in large families… so when something happens because of some clash people don't meet or want to form groups." (FM5:BMMU:SP:M: OBC)

Overall, state actors are caught between upward pressures to reach measurable targets (e.g. with respect to the number of SHGs created) and lack of resources, including personnel, to reach and support groups. While they speak in terms of genuine commitment to the program, they refer to groups in terms of their core performance, and they do not refer to the more complex challenge of nurturing and supporting group dynamics.

4.2.2. Other state actors

There are two other groups of actors that have some connection or perspective on the SRLM institutions—Panchayat leaders and state bank employees.

4.2.3. Panchayat leaders

Out of the nine panchayat members we interviewed, three belonged to the General caste and six from Other Backward Castes (OBC). Four were women. In general, the panchayat leaders see the SRLM as a parallel channel of government action and resources and have little interest or enthusiasm in the program. They tend to look down on the women's groups as being of low capacity and run by illiterate women. The exception is when a family member is in a position of influence or availing benefits from the groups.

Panchayat members, particularly some of the male Sarpanchs take credit for introducing SHGs in their panchayats. Relatives and wives of the male Panchayat representatives were also members of SHGs, and often in leadership roles. In this sense, the panchayat members viewed the SHGs as platforms for receiving government benefits and played their role in supporting the introduction of another government program to their constituency. The following quotes of the Panchayat members point out this:

"In the beginning, Ajeevika mission people came to take support from the panchayat as one has to before operating in the village. Panchayat called the women and encouraged them to assemble. That was the first-time women in this village came and gave their names for groups." (PAN:WP1:M:Gen)

"SHGs give these women training for setting up new businesses, e.g. sewing work, running mid-day meal scheme etc. They also give loans to the women if they want to start business….some other benefits also they provide" (PAN:WP3:M:OBC)

Though the panchayat members acknowledged the benefits of groups, they were often dismissive of the effectiveness of the program on the ground and considered a lack of trust amongst the group members and low levels of literacy as the factors behind it. Some panchayat members saw women as not following the rules and protocols of the program by not repaying their loans and not attending meetings. The poor repayment behavior creates mistrust among members vis-à-vis the leader of the group and leads to women losing interest in the program. One of the panchayat members shares:

"They don't know how to function that is why groups are breaking, and the ones that run do so as they want the benefits" (PAN:Sarp1:M:OBC)

"I have no knowledge of SHGs and their day-to-day work. Nobody in my family is a part of it and I don't know what are its benefits. I think they generate livelihood options for poor women." (PAN:WP1:M:Gen)

In addition, some of the panchayat members posited elite capture as one of the important factors leading to mistrust amongst group members:

"Some powerful members take large amounts of money as loans, buy something for their house or set up business. They are not regular in returning the money too. Other members see this and start losing interest" (PAN:Sarp2:M:OBC)

"When 1-2 women don't repay their loan, others see this and they also don't repay the loan. It is not like the private moneylenders who take stuff from the house and force them to return money. Nobody asks for it" (PAN:\WP5:\W:ST).

In general, panchayat officials see no advantage from the SHG system except as a channel for receiving government funds and benefits pertaining to the livelihoods and enterprise development of women. However, they also see women from their community not utilising the benefits of the program due to their lack of exposure. In this sense, the panchayat perceives the SHG system as a parallel, potentially competitive, route to benefits coming through the Panchayati Raj system. Many also do not recognize the role of SHGs in channelling other government benefits such as schemes and programs (beyond credit for the members). One of the sarpanches put it bluntly:

"They will grow only when there is development, and one gets employment. But no benefits are coming. I think best is to not make such SHGs as there is no benefit". (PAN:Sarp1:M:OBC)

"It is the panchayat's job to ensure that people get their pensions and toilet and other schemes. What will the SHGs do? It is not their work to deal with government work. They can run from pillar to post." (PAN:Sarp3: Gen)

4.2.4. Bank officials

These are quasi-state actors as they essentially channel state resources to the groups in the form of the Revolving Fund, Community Investment Fund and other funds (for those that qualify). In this sense, the bank officials see the SHGs as platforms through which the women receive fund transfers from the government, and not as potential viable bank clients, either as groups or as individuals.

Bank officials were aware of the SHGs and the importance of credit linkages of these groups with the bank. However, they seemed to be playing a largely passive role in transmitting the funds, as opposed to seeing this as central to their credit strategy.

"Condition of women has improved with loans from microfinance institutions and banks at less rates of interest as compared to earlier when they took loans from sahukars (money lenders) or powerful people in the villages. They used to ask for arbitrary rates of interest. Women used to be scared of these moneylenders if they didn't have money to return" (BAN:MFI:M:An)

"Women have started small businesses of sewing, making baskets and mats from bamboo etc. after taking loans from banks. Sometimes they earn, and sometimes they are not able to. They can make better use of it" (BAN:BM:M:OBC)

"Government sends money and we have to send it to the groups which have underprivileged people. We can't deny them money. What is our benefit in that anyway? But we do all the verification before transferring money. Social cause doesn't mean we throw away money. " (BAN:BM:M:SC)

They expressed low expectations of economically viable activities and did not appear optimistic about the financial or economic transformation of SHG women. One of the important factors pointed out by the bank officials was the poor track record of repayment of loans in the SHGs. One of the bank officials shared:

"In a group, if one has repaid the money and the other hasn't then some other woman thinks that she has not paid yet so why should I pay? So they default on their payments … and once 1-2 people default others also follow them and don't repay. So it directly affects the bank. There are some groups who repay on time and are working well but in many cases, repayment is an issue."

*"We seek help from SRLM staff and panchayats, Sarpanch especially to recover loans, but it is not very effective" (*BAN:BM:M:OBC)

Another bank official pointed out the ineffective usage of the loans by the groups:

"They are taking the loans as a group but then instead of creating some business, they are distributing the money amongst themselves. There are so many businesses that SHGs can take up that we keep hearing from other districts, but here in this district, they are not. Some do individual business while some spend it on their house"

"One group said that we want to buy cattle – goats. They said that such and such person bought it, so we also want to do that. Afterwards, they did not know how to take care of the goats, the

goats died, thus the loan money was wasted. There is a lack of guidance or training on where to put their money."(BAN:BM:M:SC)

In addition, not following the rules and processes was also pointed out as a challenge for the groups in getting linked to banks and therefore, in generating positive outcomes for the SHG women.

"When we visit SHG meetings for inspection and check the books, we see that registers are not being maintained properly. Only 50% of people maintain it or just pretend people maintain it. Most of them don't have interest…. They can't just get loans if they open bank accounts. They have to follow procedures…. There are also groups where things are good only because they follow processes and do interloaning and manage funds properly. But not many" (BAN:BM:M:SC)

4.2.5. Between state and society–the "doubly-embedded" Community Resource Persons

Community Resource Persons (CRPs) form a cadre of intermediaries between women and the state. They are agents intended to expand state engagement at the grassroots, while also being representative of the community. They are thus "doubly embedded" in the community and in the state. Other examples of such agents for women are CLF leaders, ASHAs, some para teachers, *anganwadi* workers, as well as family dispute mediators. These are often the more mobilized and connected women in the community, which is correlated with their social status. Most CRPs are women with a 6th to 10th standard education. We find that such agents are also often leaders of their own community's SHG group, or related to the SHG leaders.

Though these doubly embedded agents are intended to balance citizen and state interests by creating a flow of information and resources between the state and women citizens, we find that their location of embeddedness in each entity leads to them embodying the larger tensions within the system both in facing conflicting imperatives as well as taking on different roles of representation. While CRPs are often higher status members of the community, they are simultaneously at the bottom of the hierarchy of the state apparatus responsible for NRLM programming. Because of these differing status locations, rather than integrating state and marginalized citizen needs, they rather acutely embody tensions both within the state and between state and society.

CRPs are beholden to delivery targets in order to keep their jobs. This makes them substantially over-extended, while also suffering payment delays due to a lack of state capacity. They hold on to the work for the potentially higher pay and status than they may be able to obtain in their local labor market. CRPs are envisioned in state documents to play a central role in representing and working with communities, but they are also renewed for work against top-down performance assessments. The Model Community Operational Manual demonstrates this tension well, stating: *"Community cadres are identified, from amongst us in general and from our poorest and vulnerable members in particular and engaged by our Institutions....The Cadre is accountable to us and our institutions. The services of the Cadre are renewed against satisfactory objective performance assessments."* Thus while CRPs have strong incentives to meet inclusion targets and maintain the functioning of SHGs on the books, they may have weak incentives to create an upward flow of information about SHG members' needs or to represent the collective interests of SHG members to the state, given their personal interested in being renewed for a job.

We assess how CRPs describe their roles on these two dimensions: their roles as workers who need to meet upward benchmarks on the one hand, and their roles as community-level representatives on the other. CRPs are divided into functional roles: those providing bank linkage-related services (*bank sakhi*), those helping with livestock-related information and entitlement dissemination (*pashu sakhi*), those helping with agricultural information and entitlement dissemination (*krishi sakhi*), social mobilizers, and master trainers. Many CRPs play multiple roles - doing one of these, as well as being master trainers for other CRPs, being a bookkeeper, or leading an SHG, VO, or CLF themselves.

The state is an important source of income for CRPs, whose alternative daily wage would generally be significantly lower than their CRP rate.[24] CRPs are often women who have never been employed outside of the household before and do not have alternative sources of formal employment. Because they are contract-workers, and the wage is an important source of

[24] For example, one (male) CRP specified that he receives Rs. 361 per day for his CRP work, while his daily labor wage work earns him Rs. 200-250 per day (FW2:CRP:BK:M:ST).

income, CRPs' sense of job security is precarious. In the pressure to perform, they often work above and beyond the period of days that they are paid for (10 days):[25]

"We have to cover it [referring to 10 villages], doesn't matter how many days it takes, be it 10 days or be it 15 days. Not less than 15 days ma'am. Because we'll tell about agriculture, and who will come and we'll fill their Parpatra, will make the list, will explain to everyone that in just two days work is not done. Will check their records, and will check all of their entries. So there comes problem in two days, so usually it takes three days. So let's say it takes around 18 or 20 days. We get money for only 10 days in that." (FW4:CRP:KS:F:Gen)

In addition, their salaries are only released once in multiple months making it difficult for them to meet their daily expenses – including travel. CRPs must work in and travel to several villages, many of which are far from their places of residence. They do not have access to any transport facilities or allowances to cover the costs of travel. At times, they face difficulties in finding transport and sometimes must walk more than five kilometers to reach the villages. One CRP, for example, indicated that it had been three months since she had received a payment. Work conditions are also precarious - some CRPs interviewed reported being unsure of their work hours and job conditions: was it daily, do they get any days of leave and what cuts could occur? Fearing cuts in an already meager and irregular salary, some reported working for two months continuously without a single day off and being paid for ten days a month.

Across CRPs, we find ample evidence of incentives to meet state targets communicated by the SRLM bureaucrats who hire them and to whom they report. In particular, they are focused on inclusion goals, and maintenance of records to show that SHG structures are functioning. For example, one CRP noted:

"Grading is done at block level, by three people at least, sir will do and rest two sirs will come. And after coming after three years or one year the grading is done. Whether the guidelines are being followed or not." (FW3:CRP:BK:M:OBC)

When asked what activities were checked and monitored for SHG functioning, the CRP responded meticulously, laying out each task in accordance with a state target, but noticeably

[25] The maximum number of days they get paid for is 10 to 15 days per month; however, they are often assigned to support SHGs in at least 8-10 villages (often due to understaffing of the community cadre), and the visits in fact take them 15-20 days every month.

devoid of indications of trying to actually help SHG functionality or understand SHG members' needs:

"So the first thing we check is whether the groups have been made or not. And if the groups have been made then their record is complete or not, they are conducting the meeting or not, they are doing some saving or not, their transaction should be appropriate, all the entries are valid or not. Actually the Panchasutra are they following or not. This is the first thing we check in the group. If all these things are alright then we ask them, you're running this group from so many days, have you done any activity or not. […] In Panchasutra, we arrange the meeting of all the groups. In meeting their registers are checked, how much transactions have been done. Like we check the register, they must have done some transaction, then they must have written in it, and if some has returned then their entry should also be there. And if the meeting has been conducted then there must be the signature of those women, and the money also must have been written there. This is all we check from the register. (FW4:CRP:KS:F:Gen)

We do find that many CRPs are motivated to work, active and key to SHG formation and local support, even as their positions are understaffed. CRPs perform multiple support roles even if they are officially designated only one role, and they are under-resourced - for example lacking vehicles to travel around their catchment area. In our sample, many CRP positions lay vacant and four SHGs (D1, D2, D3 and F1--see Annex 1) did not have the support of all the different types of CRPs. CRP support via a *bank sakhi* is particularly conspicuous by its absence in our sample. Women CRPs, who make up a majority of the cadre, also face gender-related constraints, particularly geographical mobility required of the position, and sometimes family surveillance of activities outside of the home. Quoting a CLF Office Bearer who typifies the interviews conducted:

"Banks (relating to opening of bank accounts) are a huge trouble for women sometimes in terms of paperwork. Women come from faraway places, and they get tired with all this. Bank Sakhi is there but she has to handle so many SHGs. Women complain to us and we have tried talking to the bank, but to no good" (COMM:CLF:D2F1OB:F:Gen)

The DMMU staff attributed this shortage to a lack of educated women in the area, and the mobility required on the job. The CRPs also reflected the difficulty in travel as required by the job as a barrier:

"I have to go alone to the villages and banks. I go to the villages that are around here. We face challenges also when villages are too remote inside jungle areas. My husband sometimes supports me or comes along."

"I do not go to very new villages. I haven't even visited all the villages assigned to me."(FW6:CRP:BS:F:OBC)

Some CRPs have supportive families, while others do not -- this is especially important given that the women CRPs do not receive any facilities like maternity leave, creche facilities and other entitlements provided to salaried women in India, even though they work for a state program. For instance, one of the respondent's husband and mother-in-law share the care responsibilities and household duties when she is away for work or duty. Her husband also accompanies her to remote villages and helps her by counseling men in the villages about the benefits of the SHG. In contrast another CRP experienced constant surveillance from her husband, who called every hour to check where she was. Another CRP had to constantly vouch for her.

The staffing shortage of local cadres also leads to switching roles and tasks as required and lack of clarity about their roles and information on deliverables. For instance, one CRP was initially trained as a pashu or livestock CRP but then was switched to the bank CRP role due to the needs of the group. On the other hand, a krishi sakhi describes her workload and role-switching. When asked to describe her responsibilities, she reveals that she believes that doing extra work and switching roles is what enables her to keep her original employment in the first place:

"It is not fixed. If any help is required in any other group we go and help. […] There are approx. 40 groups in [a nearby panchayat] and we are only two krishi sakhi. […] We monitor whether the money transaction is happening on time or not, registers are filled or not. It's the duty of bank sakhi and I do it without it being my duty because I go to villages regularly. […] Bank sakhi is responsible for looking after other things like books. We don't mind doing this because ***till the time the group is doing well our krishi work will also continue. It's important to get a better final result even if one has to do some extra work."*** (FW5:CRP:KS:F:Gen, emphasis added)

Despite all these challenges, the CRPs interviewed were motivated to continue their work– being a CRP seemed to give many of the women CRPs a sense of identity and confidence.

"My in-laws love and respect me double than before because I am treated nicely outside and get known. When I am out they ask if I am off to duty. My husband also comes home and tells me that people in the village are talking so highly about me. My husband is known from my name. He really likes it. People come and talk to him and ask him to give documents to me." (FW5:CRP:KS:F:Gen)

"*People appreciate that I work and send my kids to school. They tell me that I have a lot of knowledge and I am doing a very good work by giving women employment and money."* (FW6:CRP:BS:F:OBC)

In addition to grassroots service provision, CRPs are also meant to play the role of representing the local community in which they work – forming the "community cadre" envisioned in the NRLM program design. All of the women CRPs we interviewed are also SHG members – thus drawn from the population that they are working in. But complicating the notion of a cadre of "representative bureaucrats" (Keiser et al. 2002), CRPs are generally drawn from relatively higher-status households of these communities. In our sample, we find that they also continue to function as elites within the SHG system. First, they occupy, or have family members occupying, leadership positions in the SHG ecosystem. Out of six CRPs interviewed, four were female, and three of them occupied leadership positions such as VO President, CLF Secretary, and SHG founder and current secretary; another is a member of an SHG in which her mother is the president (CRP Transcripts FW1:CRP:BS:F:OBC, FW4:CRP:KS:F:Gen, FW5:CRP:KS:F:Gen, and FW6:CRP:BS:F:OBC). Of the two who were men, both had family members in the program – one was an informal village dispute arbiter, and the other had multiple members of the family who was responsible for mobilizing women into the first SHG in his village (CRP Transcripts FW2:CRP:BK:M:ST and FW3:CRP:BK:M:OBC). Because of their key roles as mobilizers and "trusted members" of the community (as frontline managers reported seeing them), CRPs who already have many connections are likely to be recruited by the state; but they also then have more power to place or maintain their own family members or themselves in leadership positions in the SHG ecosystem and to be invested in SHGs continuing to function according to the measures provided by the state, in order to benefit from the NRLM program.

CRPs serve a larger community than the specific one they are embedded in, and they are not necessarily resourced or given state legitimacy when approaching new communities. They face difficulties owing to frequent turnover and lack of a streamlined training and induction program -- many CRPs had been trained for some roles that they were de facto playing but

not others. Though the CRPs reported that they felt the BMMU staff acknowledged the difficulties they faced, they do not have much support from the DMMU or the BMMU as they enter the village, and neither are they provided with ID cards or uniforms (which some asked for) - thus not having any legitimacy of being a state or community representative unless or until they establish a rapport. This lack of state resources often makes it difficult for many CRPs to establish trust with the local community when they go to a new village, and their proximity is perhaps not as much of a boon as the frontline managers reported it to be. SHG members and their husbands sometimes doubt CRPs' credentials and wonder if they are from private microfinance companies (FW6:CRP:BS:F:OBC). CRPs also face opposition from the local community if they are viewed as security threats. For instance, a krishi CRP described how a local youth stopped her from conducting a meeting on this basis. Because different villages have very different local castes and other kinship-based hierarchies and CRPs are responsible for multiple villages, their local representativeness on this key dimension may again be limited.

Finally, given that CRPs can be men or women, the gender dynamic in representativeness is important to note. On the one hand, men mobilizers can be important in getting the husbands and men family members of SHG members to trust the formation of new groups; "active men" may also be more likely to garner support in SHG activity endeavors from other local institutions, who do not converse with women. On the other hand, men and women CRPs may view their own roles as CRPs very differently and thus perform them quite differently. One man CRP, for example, shows his role vis-a-vis the community of SHG women in both gendered and elite terms, finding his role to be that of "polishing" the unpolished:

"Women are like diamonds, till the time diamond is a stone, it won't know its value but if it is polished and made into a diamond then it will know its value." (FW3:CRP:BK:M:OBC)

On the contrary, many women CRPs seemed to know their own value and the value of the women they worked with on a variety of dimensions, including the importance of their needs, autonomy and collective voice. One woman CRP, for example, talked about how she explained the importance of the SHG to women that she was mobilizing:

"I tell all the women to save. Save an amount of 10-10 rupees, money cannot be collected just like that. If someone is sick, unhappy, when it is needed, we can take money from the group and get our work done. Even in the middle of the night, if there is a need, you can take money from the

group and get your treatment done. If you go to someone to ask for money, they will say that we don't have now. If you go to the bank, it can be closed on holidays like Sundays. And if we have our money, our savings invested in the group, then we can get that and do any of our work with that money, for all the women. When we all join our hands, then we can get success." (FW1:CRP:BS:F:OBC)

A CRP's gender comes with its own constraints (e.g. in mobility, autonomy, and making connections with other male-dominated local institutions, for example) and benefits (in serving as role models and motivating women to join SHGs in a qualitatively different way). While simply having CRPs does not translate into representative bureaucracy for many structural reasons, our interviews show that both gender and social status markers may make a marked difference in the type of representation the CRP offers to SHG institutions and members.

****

CRPs in our study embody two key tensions of the NRLM program: first, they are at the very center of the bottom-up versus top-down programming nexus that comes with the state mobilizing groups of women at scale. CRPs are critical to state functionality as last-mile providers of the NRLM program. Even as the state undervalues their labor, they are invested in the SHG program as beneficiaries of it, ostensibly making them good "representative bureaucrats." However, because both the state and the local structures value their elite status position in the community, they reproduce existing power hierarchies in both systems by taking and maintaining leadership positions in the SHG ecosystem, and not necessarily representing the needs of those at lower rungs of the hierarchies to improve the state program's design. CRPs thus do not represent communities by creating a flow of information about the needs and demands of the SHG constituency up the rungs of the NRLM bureaucracy. Rather, we find that the community cadre of CRPs is understaffed, overburdened, and under-resourced (mirroring the frontline managers' position), works hard to take on functions of last-mile delivery, and is motivated to do perform extra tasks to keep SHGs functioning according to targets in order to keep their jobs.

Second, CRPs are not trained to represent their communities. Their training does not focus on the critical consciousness and agency-building of SHG members, but instead on logistics and benchmarks oriented. The CRPs instead draw their power from being relatively higher social

status compared to the other SHG members in their groups, and the state does not incentivize them to bring information about the community they ostensibly represent to provide feedback into improving state programming. Instead, the SHG ecosystem hierarchy leads to CRPs functioning as a group of frontline workers who try to keep SHGs functioning (if at a low level). They perform their function by using the social capital they have in the community to mobilize groups for the state and keep them running, while also not challenging or changing the state.

5. Texts of the state: a top-down state designs a community-based program

On paper the SRLM has a clear linear sequence of actions and responses, from state rules on group formation, to indicators of group practice, to linkages to finance and beyond. However, it is much more accurate to describe it as a complex system, with a wide range of interactions between different actors, and unpredictable behavior. This is also true within the state bureaucratic system. We have already seen that there are substantial tensions in the work of bureaucrats and CRPs. We now turn to the texts of the state.

The tensions that underlie the ways in which the system is underperforming, are manifestation of tensions within the state—reflecting internal dissonance within the state's cognitive maps—as evident in the texts, especially between top-down targets and bottom up philosophy, between hierarchy and support for women and disadvantaged groups, and between the (understandable) desire for rapid, major scale and the challenge of fostering complex change.

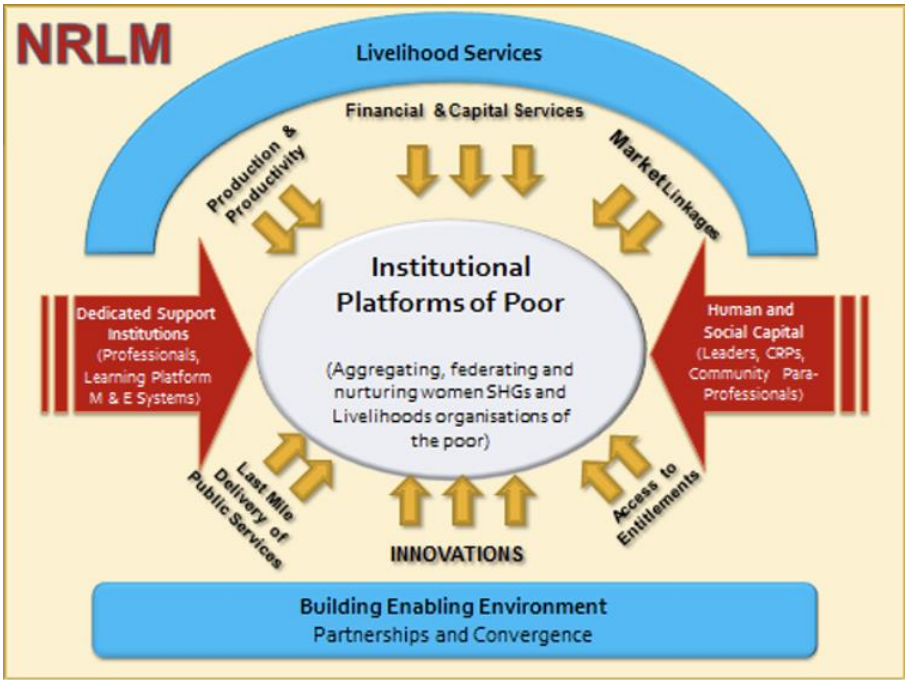
The NRLM bureaucracy has many layers and procedures, from national guidelines to state-level adaptations and practices, down through the administrative structures to districts, blocks (the subdistrict administrative level) and villages. While the main operational apparatus of the program begins at the state level (under the SRLMs), the national ministry has substantial influence providing both downward financial support and upward reporting incentives. In this section we look at NRLM's national texts.

We first present the theory of change in summary as laid out. The SHG institutional platform was designed and formally launched in 2011,[26] initially to provide financial inclusion services to

[26] Based on DAY-NRLM Mission Document, Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India 2012.

help group members strengthen and sustain their livelihoods. Figure 3 provides a sketch of NRLM's view of the system diagnostic. At the center of the system are "institutional platforms of poor" including SHGs and federations of SHGs, that include Village Organizations (VOs), grouping several SHGs and Cluster Level Federations (CLFs), that group several VOs. The figure also features a periphery comprising a range of "support institutions" and "human and social capital," including local leaders, the Community Resource Persons (CRPs), and community paraprofessionals. Finally, it envisions the core SHG institutions as being surrounded by not only support from this periphery, but also being thoroughly embedded within partnerships, specific services provided by the state system, and linkages to financial services (at least in part via state banks) and other markets.

Figure 3. NRLM's system diagnostic



Source: MoRD (n.d.a)

Figure 3 reveals a well-articulated theory of change, and an acknowledgement of internal tensions as discussed earlier viz., internal tensions within the state's cognitive map of its aims and how the world works, both inside the state and in its interaction with society. The two main tensions we highlight in the NRLM theory of change are:

a) between a top-down, engineering, or "delivery" approach, and demand-driven community-based action, including the creation of autonomous institutions of the poor
b) between working with communities as they are now, and mobilizing poor and lower status groups to transform power relationships, whether with respect to differences across households or gender.

These tensions are magnified by the expressed goal of universal reach amongst the poor, adding fuel to the goal of meeting observable targets, notably on numbers of SHGs created. Working toward this goal can work in opposition to the slower process of mobilization, formation and nurturing of SHGs that is required for groups to be viable (functional) and ultimately transformative.

We explore this through providing examples from the texts of the state. The first external review of the programme reflected these two tensions mentioned above. It explicitly emphasizes the need to to improve "empowerment"; and to tackle "exclusion" of the poorer, more vulnerable women in the villages". Quoting,

"the community institutions are expected to enable the poor to overcome three types of exclusions that perpetuate their poverty viz., social exclusion, financial exclusion and economic exclusion. The four key components of the Mission are therefore social mobilization and institution building, financial inclusion, livelihoods promotion, and convergence and social development. These strategies are designed to address the exclusions of the rural poor, eliminate their poverty and bring them into the economic mainstream. Additionally, the Mission seeks to facilitate access of the poor to their rights, entitlements and public services, besides diversifying risk and improving empowerment"

- (IRMA, 2017, P. 4).

Within the theory of change, community workers (or CRPs as we refer to them in this paper) are envisioned to play a central role in representing and working with communities. The "Model Community Operational Manual" has the following to say:

Community cadres are identified, from amongst us in general and from our poorest and vulnerable members in particular and engaged by our Institutions....The Cadre is accountable to us ***and*** *our*

institutions [read village institutions]. The services of the Cadre are renewed against satisfactory objective performance assessments.

- MoRD, 2016 (Community Operational Manual) p. 39

There is already a tension built in here between community workers being accountable to, or representing upward the issues faced by the women/community, and being subject to "objective performance assessment" (that is, by the local state) on tasks and indicators set at the higher levels. The texts do not provide any evidence of an "upward" flow of information or substantive representation, nor are there incentives to expect that such an upward flow would exist.

The texts quite clearly highlight the role of institutions, as key to creating space for poor and lower status groups to transform power relationships. The Community Operational Manual emphasizes increased voice and bargaining power of SHG members as a collective:

They [SHGs, their federations and livelihoods collectives …. .increase our voice, space, bargaining power and change of policies in our favor……Gradually, our institutions take charge of supporting us being in control of our livelihoods and lives, without falling back into poverty. [….] We specially get equipped to identify and reach out to these households to bring them into our fold as quickly as possible, with appropriate customization without undermining their identity, solidarity, dignity and self-esteem.

- MoRD, 2016 p.5

In its "non-negotiable" principles these commitments to shifting the community from how they are at present to a new set of values are further reinforced, explicitly prioritizing the voices of both the poorest and of women:

Non-negotiable principles include:

1. *Inclusion and Sensitivity – We include the Poorest of Poor and most vulnerable members (especially women) in our institutions.* ***We ensure that their needs have priority in our groups.*** *In decision-making, planning and resource allocation.*

2. *Participation –We have equal say in planning and decision-making and opportunity to participate in activities. All sections of us are adequately represented in governance and leadership, with every* ***representative*** *having equal say/space to voice her/his opinions.*
3. *Transparency and Accountability -We remain transparent in all our processes and activities…We also subject ourselves to peer audit and social audit.*
4. *Communitization. We take charge of all activities at our earliest,* ***with the support of our cadres, leaders and members.*** *We strive for self-reliance ab initio.*
5. *Empowerment –We strive for the empowerment of the poorest and most vulnerable people in our village. While* ***we fight for our rights, we fight for their rights and negate the conditions that disempower them.***

- MoRD, 2016. P.8 (EMPHASES ADDED BY AUTHORS)

These read as models of commitment to community-led engagement, using rights-based discourse, and with community leaders (CRPs, or "community cadres") playing an instrumental role. However, the earlier sections have already indicated the CRPs' ambiguous position, sandwiched between women and their communities, and the state. In relation to the literature on representative bureaucracy, the question here concerns whether simply recruitment from community groups leads to substantive changes in bureaucratic behavior, and in program design that is responsive to SHG members' or the local community's interests and demands.

The commitment to "sensitive" external support that eventually gets transferred into the internal structures of federations in the NRLM's framework for implementation, as described below, is strained by specific targets to be delivered annually.

Mobilizing the poor into their institutions needs to be induced by ***external sensitive support*** *structure. Government agencies, NGOs and civil society organizations, local governments, banks and corporate sectors can play this role. With time, as the institutions of the poor grow and mature, they become the internal sensitive support structures and institutions for the poor. Their successful members and empowered leaders take charge of and accelerate many of these processes. Thus, the programme for the poor becomes the programme by the poor and of the poor. Poverty is complex and multidimensional, and therefore, the institutions of the poor engage in many sectors and service providers. Their ability and effectiveness improve with time. However, after the initial learning curve, the progress picks up speed with quality.*

- MoRD, n.d.a. Framework for Implementation, p. 5 (emphases added by authors)

In the program design, then, there is clearly a commitment to "empowerment," voice and building institutions of the poor, including having the federated organizations take over the functions initially provided by the state. Furthermore, there are specific targets for reaching the disadvantaged:

NRLM would ensure adequate coverage of vulnerable sections of the society such that 50% of the beneficiaries are SC/STs, 15% are minorities and 3% are persons with disability, while keeping in view the ultimate target of 100% coverage of BPL families.

- MoRD, n.d.a. Framework for implementation. P. 8

This goal of universal coverage of the target group--BPL refers to "Below poverty line" --is referred to at various places. The BPL categorization of a family is in spirit linked to India's poverty line, but in practice varies from state to state, with families assessed by local authorities. It often has broader coverage than officially measured national poverty statistics. Additionally, it is important to note that such inclusion goals--especially 100% coverage--can often come into tension with "sensitive structure" goals, especially because the former is more easily quantitatively measurable than the latter. When goals are conceptualized and committed to in a government document, it is important to pay attention to which ones are easily converted into quantitative measures that form the foundation for upward-reporting in a vast bureaucracy, compared to which ones are less easily measured (or are improperly or only partially quantitatively measurable).

The different languages in these different portions of NRLM's framework for implementation guidelines again hold an internal tension. Other parts of the implementation guidelines demonstrated how stated commitments get transformed into targets and upward reporting emphasizing input-based measures of success, as below:

NRLM implementation is in a Mission Mode. This enables (a) shift from the present allocation based strategy to a ***demand driven strategy enabling the states to formulate their own livelihoods-based poverty reduction action plans****, (b)* ***focus on targets, outcomes and time bound delivery****, (c) continuous capacity building, imparting requisite skills and* ***creating linkages*** *with livelihoods*

opportunities for the poor, including those emerging in the organized sector, and (d) monitoring against ***targets of poverty outcomes****.*

The overall plans would be within the allocation for the state based on … poverty ratios. In due course of time, as the institutions of the poor emerge and mature, they would drive the agenda through bottom-up planning processes.

- MoRD, n.d.a. Framework for Implementation guidelines, p. 8 (emphases added by authors)

"Demand-driven" here refers to demand from Indian subnational states, not communities. Thus, the target and outcome focus is aligned with a delivery mode, as is monitoring against targets. While this may seem standard good practice for any organization, we highlight it here as targets become a central instrument of top-down delivery, with, as we will see, an important and outsized influence on the incentives faced by frontline managers and workers. Targets can, in principle, help solve the principal-agent problem of how to track and incentivize performance to align the behavior of "agents" with the goals of the program. However, the informational challenge is that what is tracked has to be observable. Numbers of SHGs formed, and their performance relative to SHG guidelines, such as bookkeeping and formation of federations and so on, are measurable. Shifts in norms, changes in power relations, critical consciousness are harder to track and take much longer to effect). They are also not specified beyond broad language on "empowerment" and commitments to rights. This raises a central question as to what degree, and when, should we expect transformation into collective action and increased voice through these new SHG structures.[27]

Performance and measurability are indeed good practices for a group. The texts refer to potentially observable "external" behaviors, and there is little evidence of assessing internal group functioning and dynamics, or any indicators of individual or collective expansion of agency. An example is the criteria for SHG grading, and eligibility for receiving the next level of financial support. The basic level of eligibility for progressing concerns the achievement of *panchasutra*, or the five practices of good group organizational behavior: regular meetings;

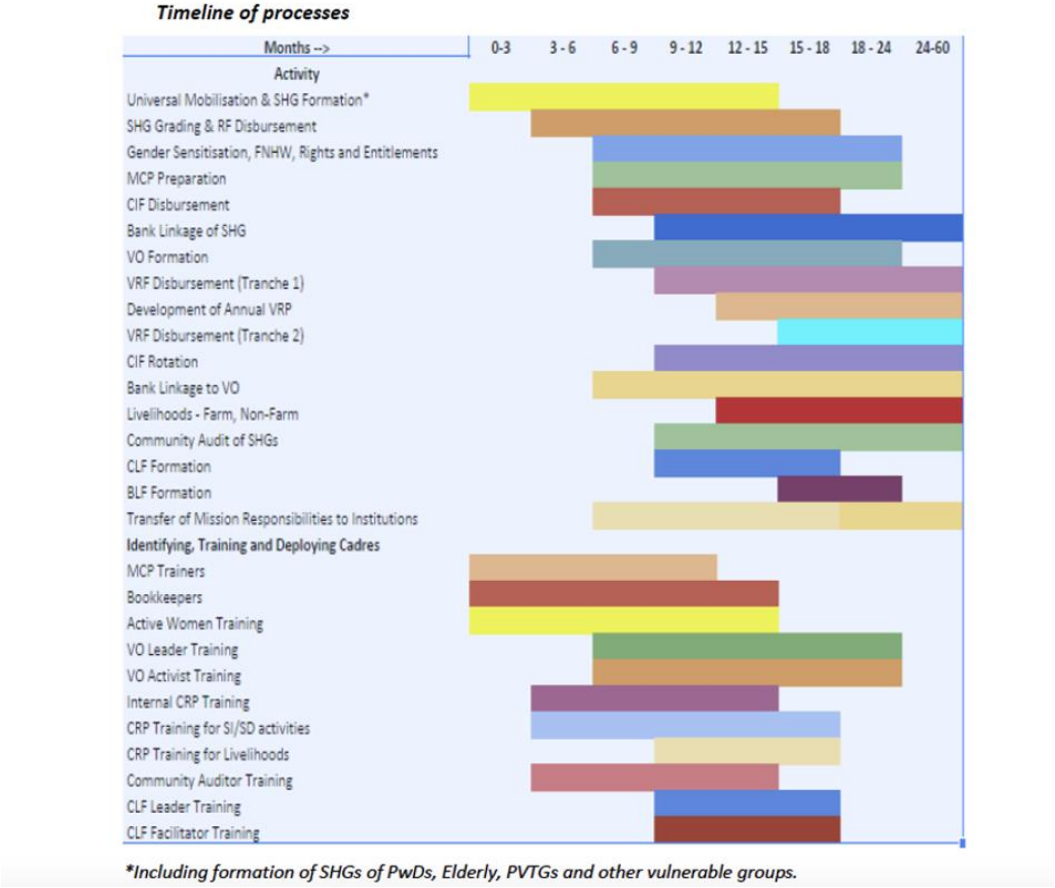
---

[27] Honig and Pritchett (2019), discuss this in terms of the problem of using such "thin" accountability indicators to measure performance of a "thick" complex issue of behavioral and normative change.

regular savings; receipt of loans; loan repayments; and bookkeeping. These are indeed good practices for a group but again refer to only potentially observable "external" behaviors, as opposed to an attempt to assess internal group functioning and dynamics, or any indicators of individual or collective expansion of agency.

Another example is illustrated in Figure 4, exemplifying the implementation process unfolding in meticulously planned steps. This is an impressively detailed sequence of actions, mapped to expected time. We see tasks of "mobilization" and "gender sensitization" in the sequence, plus more administrative activities, such as "bank linkage," "CIF disbursement" (the CIF is the community investment fund) plus a major schedule of training of SHG members, frontline workers (the CRPs), and federation leaders. But it is unclear how this detailed series actually maps onto the messy and varied realities of group formation, dynamics, interactions with state and other local actors, and federation formation.

Figure 4 NRLM's view of the sequence of activities for a functioning SHG system



Source: MoRD, n. da.

On the other side of the tension, note again the goal that the "institutions of the poor" would, over time, take over the role of the state. However, in this period of design of the NRLM, say in the 2011-2016 period, there was very little attention given to state protocols of support for the federation structures, in contrast to the very detailed protocols for SHG functionality levels.

A further observation on these texts is the contrast between frequent mention of the poor, or of targeting the poorest of the poor, and some references to gender sensitization, but little in the way of what would be structurally required to tackle entrenched hierarchies of power and practice, whether between households and groups in villages, or within households and groups, with respect to gender. This is in contrast, for example, to the ways in which organizations such as SEWA or PRADAN work, that either explicitly or implicitly put great emphasis on building awareness and behavior change through what amounts to the development of alternative cultural norms within the groups--including what in feminist writing is referred to as building of critical consciousness.[28] This is why a key scope condition of our structural description is that of government-mobilized SHG federations.

Yet again, this is best characterized as a tension. The NRLM's guidelines have a table and discussion on "barriers to social mobilization" that includes: resistance from husband, father or mother-in-law, cultural barriers due to the parda (veiling of women) system, caste hierarchy, village level norms, and hijack by dominant groups. These are accompanied by a range of strategies, from sensitization, to focus groups, mentoring, information campaigns, and identifying active women.

In similar spirit, the "Protocol for Gender Mainstreaming and Social Action under NRLM" (MoRD, n.d.b) has the following:

NRLM believes that ***gender sensitization and social action should be mainstreamed*** *in its framework, systems, institutions and processes. NRLM mobilizes poor women in general and also undertakes special mobilization efforts for reaching women in exploitative situations/ occupations (Single women, divorced, separated, survivors of violence, trafficked women, devadasis, HIV positive women etc.) in particular.* ***NRLM focuses on building institutions which support women towards gaining: Identity: Positive self-image and dignity; Solidarity: Voice, Decision-making and***

[28] These sometimes draw explicitly on theories of the practice of change, from Lewin (1947), and Freire (1970); see also Cornwall (2016) for a review of concepts and cases with respect to women's empowerment.

feeling of not alone; Capacity: Knowledge, Skills, Resources and Ownership; Access: Rights, Entitlements and Services; Well-being: Livelihoods and Lives; and therefore, Enhanced freedom and portfolio of choices.

- MoRD, N.D.B, EMPHASIS ADDED BY AUTHORS

This protocol also has a set of guidelines around gender sensitization and training, plus the formation of Social Action Committees in the VOs and CLFs with responsibility for preparing Gender Action Plans, working with a range of relevant government departments. Here again, there is clearly awareness of the challenges associated with group formation and empowerment of women in a deeply patriarchal society, but it is unclear if this is then accompanied by the kinds of support required of this complex, and often disruptive, process.

****

This section has illustrated how the texts of the state already hold internal tensions. The goal is community participation, but this is to be implemented in a mission mode, with time-bound targets and a highly structured sequence of activities. Targets themselves, and associated monitoring, are focused on "external" features of groups and the implementation process. There is explicit focus on the poorest, on support for women, on gender sensitization and tackling caste, patriarchal or other barriers, but little attention to how to support critical consciousness, help foster alternative norms, or attend to the consequences of changes that challenge existing hierarchies -- which would require more than a static set of "empowerment" measures.

6. Conclusion and reflection

This paper started with an apparent puzzle. According to an extensive quantitative survey of the NRLM system conducted in 2017-2018 across nine states, many sampled SHGs from government lists were not functioning at the time of the survey—they were not regularly meeting, nor did they satisfy other criteria for functionality by the NRLM standards (the *panchasutra*). The initial question was to use qualitative research to understand why some SHGs go defunct.

Inspired by both existing literature and field experience, the research question was reformulated. Rather than study an SHG's "performance" as a function of its own, or intrinsic

characteristics, the research undertook a systems analysis. It explored how the behavior and "functionality" of SHGs can be interpreted in terms of interactions between an array of actors within a complex system of state and societal groups. This is conceptualized as a set of relationships at the interface of state and society, but also within the state and within local society. On the one hand, these relationships are structured by formal and informal hierarchies of bureaucracy, caste and patriarchy. On the other hand, they further shape actors' "cognitive maps" of how the world works. Different groups in the system "see" the state and societal actors from their own position within this relational system, and this influences how they envisage possibilities for change (their strategic expectations), and the ways in which they do, or do not, participate in the system (their behavior).

This frame was used to design and analyze the core empirical work. It involved an extensive set of interviews and focus groups of the range of actors in a small geography, in order to capture the variety of perspectives on the local NRLM ecosystem, and its place within the larger NRLM ecosystem of Madhya Pradesh, and of India. This was then complemented by a review of governmental guidelines, mainly from the national ministry, that are studied as "texts of the state".

The core findings were as follows. First, the NRLM has extraordinary reach across India. It has truly gone to scale. It grew very fast in Madhya Pradesh. However, the maintenance of local institutions has not been evenly distributed. For the surveyed region, we found low levels of functionality for **all** SHGs: both those coded as functional and those coded as defunct in the original survey. There was little evidence of groups being on a path either of autonomous economic development or of shifts in individual and collective agency. We the process and relationships within the system to be core to understanding maintenance or lack thereof.

Our method to understand what was promoting or hindering maintenance was to create social maps within the system using a framework of cognitive maps within and between citizen and state. Using these themes to interrogate transcripts, texts of the state, and field team impressions about the SHGs studied, we were able to triangulate key perceptions and relationships around these themes. We interpreted unsustainability as reflecting the *interaction* between the patriarchal/casteist local socio-cultural system, a history of low-trust, transactional relations between lower caste/status rural women and the state, and a politically embedded PRI system. In terms of government behavior, we found internal tensions within the

state between the aspiration for bottom-up, inclusionary change, and a top-down, target culture. This tension was an important part of the apparent difficulties in transforming relationships within the system that would result in well-functioning - and maintained - SHGs and SHG federations.

This approach especially picked up on the structural disempowerment of front-line government agents who work at the key points of connection between the state and the community. The focal actors illustrating this tension were Community Resource Persons (CRPs), mostly women, who work on contract with the state. These CRPs are "doubly-embedded" - ensconced in both community and state. They often report having relatively high levels of personal agency within the SHG ecosystem. However, they are also at the interface of the underlying tensions within the ecosystem, and this undercuts the extent to which their personal capacities translate to systemic change.

While this is not a policy document, we conclude by reflecting on the implications of the diagnosis for public action. While this was a qualitative study of a small geography, it was designed to develop a much more granular understanding of processes that had been highlighted in a large-scale quantitative study. This allows a richer understanding of state-society interactions and the role of policy, that is we also see as extending interpretation in other literature in India.

There are two, potentially radical interpretations of what to do. One is that these observations illustrate the idea that a top-down, "high modernist" state is intrinsically incapable of fostering locally adapted participatory development processes. This is the essence of James Scott's (1998) perspective in Seeing Like a State, that gave us one half of our title. Alternatively, it might be argued that a state can be an effective agent of local change, but only if radically transformed. This is in the spirit of interpretations of the Kudumbashree approach to the SHG movement in Kerala (see Deshpande 2021), or the development of a "deliberative bureaucracy" that Mangla (2015) argues to be a feature of the state education system in Himachal Pradesh.

We see Scott's (1998) view as too pessimistic, and the view that the Madhya Pradesh state (or most of India's) could radically change to a deliberative alternative as unrealistic. Both the Kerala and Himachal Pradesh cases are products of long histories with deep political and social roots.

This takes us to the question of whether there are directions of change with feasible shifts in the existing system that could lead to SHGs evolving in the way envisaged in some of the texts of the state, and aspirations of the more optimistic observers. As this research did not involve observed, successful policy experiments, we would rather provide suggestions for directions of change that emerge from our work.

First, for the SHGs visited it is hard to imagine major change without significantly more support from frontline actors, across the range of issues from building of awareness, collective practices and critical consciousness to practical business plans and links to potential local value chains and market opportunities. This takes us to the system of Community Resource Persons, which we argue is a potentially effective model, but one that would need more resources (a higher density of CRPs, and payment in line with their work) with systemic recognition and support. Where frontline engagement has been more intensive there is evidence of substantive mobilization, and gains in both credit use and indicators of individual and collective agency. See, for example the work of the non-profit PRADAN in MP (and elsewhere (see Prillaman,2023)) or with more actively engaged front-line government workers in the first phase of Bihar's Jeevika program (Datta, 2015)

Second, a shift in the resources and support for CRPs within the existing system would then require changes within the state, not only in resource allocations but also with respect to the guidance and targets embedded in the government orders, especially those at the level of the MP state.

Third, while this study focused on the part of the state directly involved with SHGs—the State Rural Livelihoods Mission—SHGs will also need to engage with, and be supported by other parts of the state, including agricultural and economic sectors, and the Panchayati Raj system. This adds to the challenge of coordination, that is always hard within a state apparatus, but can work if the authorizing environment encourages this, without radical transformation of the state itself.

Subsequent developments in MP (that will be the subject of future research), are indicative of the intent to make the SHG movement "work", and to link it to the village and Panchayat planning system. We conclude with a final reflection in this context. Precisely because the SHGs are embedded in a complex system, from community to the different parts of the state,

effective change will be unpredictable. Parts of the system will resist, while some change may induce unexpected consequences. This requires a systematically exploratory approach, in which local innovation for a more inclusive engagement and implementation model are developed that can be potentially taken to scale. This is consistent with the spirit of MP targeting some districts or localities for pilot roles. Such local explorations typically require additional resources, potentially with non-government partners (such as PRADAN or Transform Rural India) who can do the additional effort required to work out what can work in a local context, often with adaptive and iterative processes and then distilled into to models of change that can be taken to real scale within the state's capacity. We believe the kind of in-depth qualitative work illustrated here can play a crucial role in interpreting sources of potential, resistance and design, within such an exploratory approach.

References

Aiyar, Yamini, and Shraavana Bhattacharya. "The post office paradox: A case study of the block level education bureaucracy." Economic and Political Weekly (2016): 61-69.

Ang, Yuen Yuen. "Adaptive Political Economy: Toward a New Paradigm." World Politics (2024).

Appadurai, Arjun. "The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition." In Culture and Public Action, edited by Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton, 59–84. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004.

Attanasio, Orazio, et al. Risk Sharing, Commitment Constraints and Self Help Groups. No. w31245. National Bureau of Economic Research, 2023.

Auerbach, Adam Michael, and Tariq Thachil. "How clients select brokers: competition and choice in India's slums." American Political Science Review 112.4 (2018): 775-791.

Auerbach, Adam Michael, and Tariq Thachil. "Cultivating clients: reputation, responsiveness, and ethnic indifference in India's slums." American Journal of Political Science 64.3 (2020): 471-487.

Bardhan, Pranab, and Dilip Mookherjee. "Capture and governance at local and national levels." American economic review 90.2 (2000): 135-139.

Batliwala, Srilatha. "When rights go wrong." *SEMINAR-NEW DELHI-*. Vol. 569. MALYIKA SINGH, 2007. https://www.india-seminar.com/2007/569/569_srilatha_batliwala.htm

Bhanjdeo, Arundhita, Nivedita Narain, Surili Sheth and Michael Walton. "Understanding India's Self-Help Groups: An Organizational Anatomy of Functionality in a District in Madhya Pradesh." *Working paper, 3ie and IMAGO Global Grassroots* (2021)

Bhavnani, Rikhil R., and Alexander Lee. "Local embeddedness and bureaucratic performance: evidence from India." *The Journal of Politics* 80.1 (2018): 71-87.

Birch, Lisa, and Steve Jacob. ""Deliverology" and evaluation: A tale of two worlds." *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation* 34.2 (2019): 303-328.

Chandra, Kanchan, ed. *Constructivist theories of ethnic politics*. Oxford University Press, 2012.

Chattopadhyay, Raghabendra, and Esther Duflo. "Women as policy makers: Evidence from a randomized policy experiment in India." *Econometrica* 72.5 (2004): 1409-1443.

Corbridge, Stuart. *Seeing the state: Governance and governmentality in India*. Vol. 10. Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Dasgupta, Aditya, and Devesh Kapur. "The political economy of bureaucratic overload: Evidence from rural development officials in India." *American Political Science Review* 114.4 (2020): 1316-1334.

Datta, Upamanyu. "Socio-economic impacts of JEEViKA: A large-scale self-help group project in Bihar, India." *World Development* 68 (2015): 1-18.

Deshpande, Ashwini. 2021. "Rural Livelihood Programmes in India: Lessons from the Past as a Guide for the Future". Proceedings of a workshop. https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/62141abf1152d94953e76c11345c869f-0310022021/related/SARL-India-Final-Report-Final-May22.pdf

Díaz-Martin, Lucía, Akshara Gopalan, Eleonora Guarnieri, and Seema Jayachandran. "Greater than the sum of the parts? Evidence on mechanisms operating in women's groups." *The World Bank Research Observer* 38, no. 1 (2023): 1-35.

Dixit, Avinash. "Incentives and organizations in the public sector: An interpretative review." *Journal of human resources* (2002): 696-727.

Drèze, Jean. Sense and solidarity: Jholawala economics for everyone. Oxford University Press, 2019.

Duflo, Esther, Rema Hanna, and Stephen P. Ryan. "Incentives work: Getting teachers to come to school." *American economic review* 102.4 (2012): 1241-1278.

Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th anniversary ed.; M. B. Ramos, Trans.). Continuum. (Original work published 1970)

Gokhale, Siddhant, and Michael Walton. "Adaptive Evaluation: A Complexity-Based Approach to Systematic Learning for Innovation and Scaling in Development." *CID Faculty Working Paper Series* (2023).

Guérin, Isabelle, Santosh Kumar, and Govindan Venkatasubramanian. *The indebted woman: Kinship, sexuality, and capitalism*. Stanford University Press, 2023.

Gulzar, Saad, and Benjamin J. Pasquale. "Politicians, bureaucrats, and development: Evidence from India." *American Political Science Review* 111.1 (2017): 162-183.

Hathi, Payal, et al. "Experiences and Perceptions of Discrimination among Dalits and Muslims." *Economic & Political Weekly* 53.42 (2018): 14-17.

Heller, Patrick. "Democratic deepening in India and South africa." *Journal of Asian and African studies* 44.1 (2009): 123-149.

Hoffmann, V., V. Rao, V. Surendra and U. Datta. (January 2021). "Relief from usury: Impact of a self-help group lending programme in rural India." *Journal of Development Economics*, 148.

Kabeer, N., Narain, N., Arora, V., & Lal, V. (2019). Group rights and gender justice: Exploring tensions within an indigenous community in India.

Kabeer, N., Narain, N., Arora, V., & Lal, V. (2023). Group Rights, Gender Justice, and Women's Self-Help Groups: Exit, Voice, and Loyalty in an Indigenous Community in India. *Social Philosophy and Policy*, *40*(1), 103-128.

Kalkman, Jori Pascal, and Peter Groenewegen. "On frontline workers as bureau-political actors: The case of civil–military crisis management." *Administration & Society* 51.7 (2019): 1148-1170.

Kochar, Anjini, et al. "Financial access and women's role in household decisions: Empirical evidence from India's National Rural Livelihoods project." *Journal of Development Economics* 155 (2022): 102821.

Kruks-Wisner, Gabrielle. "Social Brokerage: Accountability and the Social Life of Information." *Comparative Political Studies* 55.14 (2022): 2382-2415.

Lakshmi Ratan, Aishwarya 2021 "Scaling Convergence for Social and Economic Services and Programmes in Rural India: Conceptual Framework and Evidence Review" Working paper. https://imagogg.org/ideas-and-insights/convergence/

Lewin, K. (1947). Frontiers in group dynamics: Concept, method and reality in social science; social equilibria and social change. Human Relations, 1(1), 5-41. https://doi.org/10.1177/001872674700100103

Lipsky, Michael. *Street Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*. Russell Sage Foundation, 1980. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7758/9781610447713. Accessed 22 June 2024.

Mangla, Akshay. "Bureaucratic norms and state capacity in India: Implementing primary education in the Himalayan region." *Asian Survey* 55.5 (2015): 882-908.

Mathur, Nayanika. *Paper tiger*. Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Meadows, Donella H. *Thinking in systems: A primer*. Chelsea Green Publishing, 2008.

Mehta, Pratap Bhanu, and Michael Walton. "Ideas, interests and the politics of development change in India: capitalism, inclusion and the state." *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2014).

Meier, Kenneth John. "Representative bureaucracy: An empirical analysis." *American political science review* 69.2 (1975): 526-542.

Meier, Kenneth J. "Theoretical frontiers in representative bureaucracy: New directions for research." *Perspectives on Public Management and Governance* 2.1 (2019): 39-56.

Meier, Kenneth J., and Anita Dhillon. "Gender and the state politics of policy implementation in education: the interaction of bureaucratic and legislative representation in India." *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 22.3 (2022): 344-370.

Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD),. National Rural Livelihoods Mission: Framework of Implementation. Government of India. (n.d.a.) 2013. Available at: https://aajeevika.gov.in/resource-center?subModule=Guidelines&_id=36

Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD). Protocol for Gender Mainstreaming and Social Action under NRLM. Government of India. (n.d.b.) Available at: https://msrls.nic.in/sites/default/files/gender-mainstreaming-and-social-action-protocol.pdf

Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD). National Rural Livelihoods Mission: Briefing Book

Government of India (2012). Available at: https://aajeevika.gov.in/resource-center?subModule=Guidelines&_id=36

Muralidharan, Karthik, and Abhijeet Singh. *Improving public sector management at scale? experimental evidence on school governance india*. No. w28129. National Bureau of Economic Research, 2020.

Pepinsky, Thomas B., Jan H. Pierskalla, and Audrey Sacks. "Bureaucracy and service delivery." *Annual Review of Political Science* 20 (2017): 249-268.

Prillaman, Soledad Artiz. The Patriarchal Political Order: The Making and Unraveling of the Gendered Participation Gap in India. Cambridge University Press, 2023.

Purohit, Bhumi. "Bureaucratic Discretion Against Female Politicians." *Working paper (2022).*

Putnam, Robert D. "Community-based social capital and educational performance." *Making good citizens: Education and civil society* (2001): 58-95.

Powis, Benjamin. "Systems of capture: reassessing the threat of local elites." *Social development* (2007).

Radhakrishnan, Smitha. *Making women pay: Microfinance in urban India*. Duke University Press, 2021.

Rao, Vijayendra, and Ana Maria Ibanez. The social impact of social funds in Jamaica: A mixed-methods analysis of participation, targeting, and collective action in community-driven development. Vol. 2970. World Bank Publications, 2003.

Rasul, Imran, and Daniel Rogger. "The impact of ethnic diversity in bureaucracies: Evidence from the Nigerian civil service." *American Economic Review* 105.5 (2015): 457-461.

Rasul, Imran, and Daniel Rogger. "Management of bureaucrats and public service delivery: Evidence from the nigerian civil service." *The Economic Journal* 128.608 (2018): 413-446.

Rogaly, Ben. "Micro-finance evangelism,'destitute women', and the hard selling of a new anti-poverty formula." *Development in practice* 6.2 (1996): 100-112.

Sanyal, Paromita. Credit to capabilities: A sociological study of microcredit groups in India. Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Sanyal, P., V. Rao, and S. Majumdar. “Recasting Culture to Undo Gender: A Sociological Analysis of JEEViKA in Rural Bihar, India.” World Bank, Policy Research Working Paper 7411. 2015

Scott, James C. Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed. yale university Press, 2020 (1998).

Thomas, John W., and Merilee S. Grindle. "After the decision: Implementing policy reforms in developing countries." *World development* 18.8 (1990): 1163-1181.

Veeraraghavan, Rajesh. Patching development: Information politics and social change in India. Oxford University Press, 2021.

Annex 1. Interpretative narratives of the six self-help groups

The SHGs in our sample were 2-4 years old -- young but having passed through multiple phases of the program. However, the results were substantially short of programmatic expectations laid out in the NRLM guidelines. None of the SHGs had crossed the minimal hurdles set in the guidelines, namely: (a) crossed the third grading stage; (b) received both the RF and the entire CIF due to them and repaid the CIF at least once; and (c) received bank credit at least twice and returned it. As a corollary, there was very little investment in productive activities. Additionally, there was no progress made toward achieving convergence with other government programs.

Though these are the overall findings, every SHG also has its own story, which needs to be examined to understand the variety of trajectories of functioning, as well as of ecosystemic interactions between SHGs, federations, banks, and local governments.

Table A1.1 summarizes their main features and Figure A1.1 then maps them on to phases in NRLM's guidelines. Letters have been substituted for the village and SHG names to ensure anonymity. All were formed in the recent expansion of the SRLM, between 2016 and 2017. Three were categorized as defunct in the 3ie quantitative survey (D1, D2 and D3), and three categorized as functioning (F1, F2 and F3). There was substantial variation in the social mix; in four out of the six an "active man" played a leadership role (discussed in the next section); all the three functioning groups had received both the initial revolving fund (RF) and part of the subsequent community investment fund (CIF), while only one defunct group (D1) had received an RF.

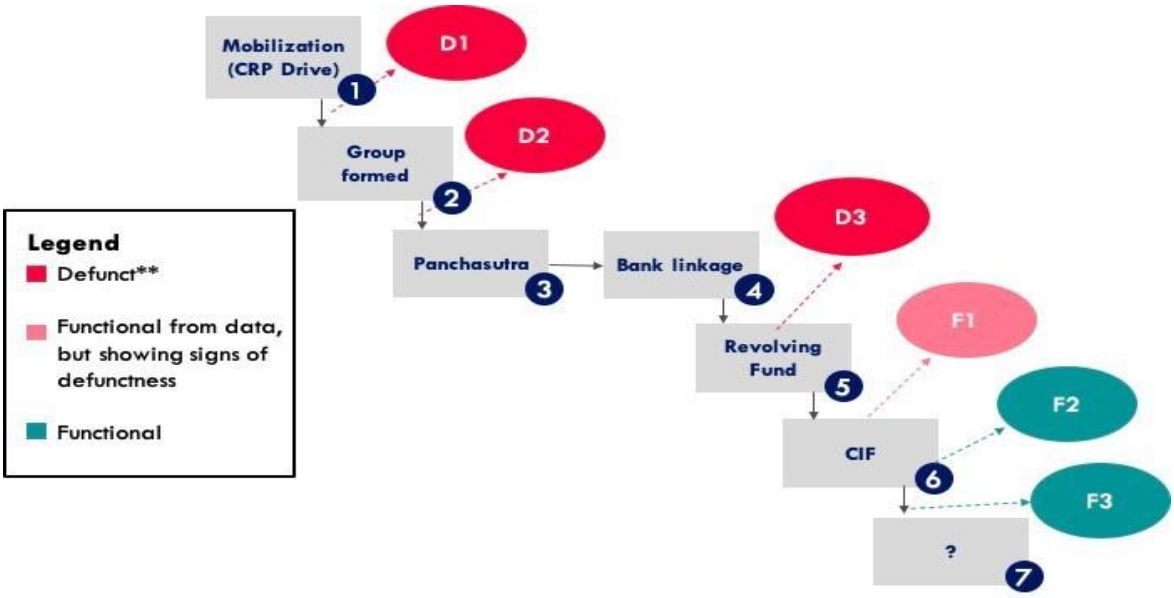
Table A.1.1 Main features of the research SHGs

	D1	D2	D3	F1	F2	F3
Stage reached	Pre- formation	Formation	Stabilization by formal criteria	Stabilization	Stabilization	Stabilization
Status	Never met	Stopped functioning	Never met	"Pause" in functioning	Functioning	Functionin g
When formed	2017	2017	2016	2017	2017	2016
Who mobilized	SRLM	SRLM	Anganwadi teacher	SRLM	SRLM & CRP	SRLM & CRP
Composition	2 Yadav families, 1 Brahmin	2 Goswami, 6 Harijan, 4 Chandel	2 Dalit, 10 Yadav	6 Kewat, 5 Sehariya	Kewatand Ahirwar	10 Jatav 2 Yadav
"Active man"	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
Bank account	Never opened	Never opened	Opened	Opened	Opened	Opened
Bank loans taken	0	0	0	0	1	0
Bank loans repaid	0	0	0	0	0	0
RF received	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
VO formation date	25/06/17	26/12/18	15/6/10	25/06/17	26/12/18	25/01/17
Linkage status with VO	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
CIF received	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: Goswami is a dominant caste, Yadav, Chandel, Kewat and Ahirwar are OBC, Jatav and Harijan are SC and Sehariya is ST

Source: Authors from field work

Figure A.1.1. The position of research SHGs in relation to NRLM guidelines



Source: Authors

The three defunct groups were not effectively mobilized, even though some elements of what was described in the implementation guidance note did occur.

D1 was in the pre-formation or social mobilization stage (see Figure A1.1). A team of two female, and one male, officials from the SRLM spent 2-3 days with key persons in the village and identified village level functionaries to lead the process of social mobilisation. A person from the dominant Yadav caste, an 'active man', helped the officials set up the SHG by mobilizing the women and creating lists of those interested in forming a group.

The SHG comprised almost entirely Yadav women from two nearby hamlets. The lone Brahmin woman member was the cook in the local anganwadi, and the SRLM officials nominated her as the President, since she could read and write. However, the Yadav active man insisted that his wife be the President, and an intra-group conflict arose.

Additionally, the active man and a few Yadav husbands of members did not approve of the Brahmin woman's character, because she had left her husband's home and, they said, was bringing a bad name to the village by returning (she was a daughter of a family in the village). Owing to this conflict, most Yadav men did not allow their wives to be a part of the group and it never took off after the first mobilization gathering.

The SHG never held a proper meeting. The research team found the SHG's books of accounts and other registers with the active man; he did not want to return them to the SRLM as that would mean that the group would then be considered officially defunct. He did not want to close the option of the group coming into existence and said that he was still trying to convince the women to come together under his wife's leadership. None of the other members however, tried to restart the group, neither did they join another group. The SRLM staff had not followed up, and neither had the VO followed up with this group since 2017.

D2. The second defunct group, D2, was in a mixed-caste village also formed by an SRLM official working with an active man in the village, this time from the single dominant caste Goswami family. Like the Yadav 'active man' in D1, the Goswami 'active man' also wanted his wife and sister-in-law as President and Secretary of the SHG. Unlike the Yadav 'active man' in D1, the Goswami 'active man' was successful in doing so and a group was formed with a mix of Scheduled Caste (SC) and OBC women from the Chandel jaati, both castes living in two separate hamlets. However, the SC women reported their names were forcefully (zabardasti)

listed. The four OBC members said that they approached the SC women and asked them to become members of their group because all the OBC women in their hamlet had already joined other SHGs and they had no other alternatives if they were to form a group.

The group conducted 2-3 meetings in the beginning and saved some money. However, very soon they stopped meeting. The initial meetings took place in the OBC hamlet at the Goswami office bearers' house with the presence of SC women on only one occasion. The SC women said that they were not invited to any subsequent meetings. Members of these two castes, from two different hamlets, seemed to generally avoid interacting with each other. There were restrictions on mobility as the OBC women did not visit the SC hamlets, even though the distance between hamlets was not more than 100 meters. The OBC members we interviewed did not consider the SHG to be defunct and hoped to re- start the meetings. On the other hand, some of the SC members had joined another group in their hamlet. The SC women reported issues of trust: they considered the intentions of the active man and the SHG leadership to be untrustworthy and they were concerned about how their savings would be deployed. This lack of trust was attributed in part to the interference of the active man in the day-to-day functioning of the group.

They reported that they had heard that he wanted to get some government schemes for the Chandels and himself through the SHG.

D3. While D1 and D2 were in the pre-formation and formation stage, respectively, when they became defunct, D3 was formally in the stabilization of benefits stage when it broke down (see Figure A1.1). An entrepreneurial *anganwadi* (pre-school) teacher effectively organized the group (D3) reportedly encouraged by a Block level official to "register" an SHG, apparently because this was seen as a means of getting access to midday meals, via another government program. Her door-to-door campaign led to women signing up for the midday meal delivery scheme. No meetings were conducted. She identified a President and Secretary and offered them Rs250 each to sign off as office bearers and visit the bank to set up an account. The pre-formation and formation stages being "successfully" crossed, the *panchasutra* was graded, allegedly by the SRLM (with fraudulent entries), and the group received the RF. Of the Rs 10,000 received, Rs4,000 were given to the block official and she retained Rs6,000. The VO did not intervene.

When interviewed, most members said that they were unaware of their membership in the SHG until they tried to join another group and were denied by the BMMU, as they were already SHG members. By this time the RF had been disbursed, and these members were upset that this amount had not reached them. Their husbands complained to the BMMU and panchayat, and action was taken to close the group and disciplinary action was taken against the anganwadi teacher.

F1. F1 was identified as functional at the time of the quantitative survey. However by the time we reached the group it had not met for over six months, and so was technically defunct by the definition adopted in the quantitative survey. The social mobilisation team had a similar formation to D1 and D2—an SRLM official (BMMU level) working through an active man , who was an OBC. The group consisted of a mix of women from the OBC and Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities. This active man placed his wife and sister-in-law in the office bearer positions in the SHG. It is instructive to note that an ST (Sehariya) male interviewed described his role as an active man in another SHG in the same village (VO): he had placed his wife and sister-in-law as office bearers in that group, thus "balancing" the distribution of power between the Sehariyas and the Kewats in the village. In F1, the Kewat women reported that they approached the Sehariya women because they were falling short of members. The Sehariya (ST) women, living in a nearby hamlet reported that though they were invited by the OBCs to be a part of the group, meetings were always held in the Kewat hamlet and at times the Sehariya women were not informed of the meetings.

This group was formed in 2017 and for a while. It received both the RF and part of the CIF, and these were divided equally between the members. Meetings, savings, inter- loaning and repayment activities were a part of the initial activities. However, the Sehariya women soon lost trust in the Kewat leadership. They reported lack of transparency in accounting, the active involvement of the President's husband (the "active man") in the book-keeping and other processes of the SHG, and complaints of Rs.5,000 from their CIF being taken by the President of the Village Organization (VO). Though the group had not met for several months at the time of interviews conducted for this study, most members (and the active man) did not even consider it defunct as they were still eligible for government benefits.

The social mobilisation team for the two groups in our sample that were still functioning (F2 and F3) comprised an SRLM official (BMMU level) and a community resource person. F2 comprised

a mix of two castes (Kewat and Ahirwar), both classified as OBC. Office bearers were from among the Kewat caste, that accounted for a larger number of members in the group and also in the two hamlets covered. The CRP, a bank sakhi, also interviewed for the study, was not from the local area. She paid regular visits to the SHGs during its mobilisation and initial months of formation and continues to visit as and when needed. Decisions about leadership and functioning of the group were taken in group meetings, which she facilitated. Although the two caste sub-groups lived in distant hamlets, the meetings were conducted at the Office Bearers' homes rather than in rotation across the hamlets. The Ahirwar members said that they did not like this aspect of the group functioning, however there were no reports of conflicts due to this. Activities related to the *panchasutra* (required to cross grade 1, Table 1) were being carried out in a disciplined manner, supported by the bank sakhi. She also helped them to overcome the problems related to opening a bank account and supported bank-related transactions. The daughter of the SHG President did the book-keeping. The group had received the RF and a part of the CIF and had paid it back. Amounts received from these funds were distributed equally to all the members; some used this to open vegetable shops and snack shacks and in purchasing livestock.

F3 was mainly made up of Jatav (Scheduled Caste) women, along with two Yadav (OBC) women. Office bearers positions were divided between the Jatav and Yadav women. The BMMU staff (Samuh Prerak) guided the group through its pre- formation/social mobilisation and formation stages, and the women were in regular touch with him. Members also reported ongoing support from the bank sakhi, a CRP. This group, an 'exemplar' in our sample, did well through the three stages of grading. They adhered to the *Panchasutra* guidelines with book-keeping assistance from the President's daughter. The office bearers also reported that they attended political rallies and training for painting the Swachh Bharat toilets in the villages. The group was functioning when we met them, and had received, and paid back, their RF and a partial CIF.

Overall, there are two broad empirical patterns in relation to the focus of this research. As depicted in Figure A1.1 and Table A1.1, with respect to "defunctness", the sampled SHGs barely got off the ground. Our defunct groups either effectively never got past the social mobilisation or pre-formation stage (D1), just got to the formation stage (D2 held one meeting) or got part of the way to stabilization, but on fraudulent terms, in a group that never met (D3).

With respect to the groups classified as functioning, F1 had stopped meeting after getting the RF and partial CIF, while the other two had at best a low level of transactional performance (F2 and the 'exemplary' case of F3). There was little activity with respect to bank borrowing and rotation of bank credit, nor with convergence with government schemes or connection with the panchayati raj. In addition, the women reported very little attention paid to deliberative processes or articulation of members' preferences.

In summary, all the six SHGs were at different stages of organizational functioning i.e. pre-formation, formation and stabilization. All three classified as functioning were linked to a VO, as was one of the defunct groups. However, in all cases, the VO was formed later (after the stabilization phase had begun and A grade groups had been "funneled") and therefore did not play a role in supporting the group formation process. Nor did any of the interviews refer to direct support from their VO. The date of CLF formation was also after the groups had been formed or stopped functioning. The three defunct groups, and the functioning group that had stopped meeting, were intrinsically unstable, with low levels of trust, typically formed opportunistically by local leaders. The other two functioning SHGs groups were functioning at a low level, receiving the transfers from the state, but without, yet, signs of proactive collective activity, on borrowing or livelihoods, nor on claim-making or measures of individual agency.