



Empowering through entitlement? The micro-politics of food access in rural Maharashtra, India



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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examine the interplay of entitlement and empowerment through qualitative research on the micropolitics of two social protection programs in rural Maharashtra, India. The case study assesses the implications of the expansion of state space into a rural society through such programs and argues that hitherto existing social relations and micropolitics in villages produce differentiated biopolitical outcomes. Extending Amartya Sen's entitlement and capabilities frameworks, we contribute to the discussion on the relationship and distinctions between entitlement and empowerment by situating social protection programs within the ambit of technologies of biopower that are aimed at sustaining "make-live" conditions for certain populations. Our fieldwork in western India in 2012–2013 demonstrates the following: first, entitlements must be claimed and the ability to realize one's entitlements requires a minimal form of empowerment in village society vis-à-vis the local administration that administers entitlement programs. Second, we claim that state-led entitlement programs when introduced at the village level, encounter micro-politics that produce patronage relationships and blur the distinction between legal and extra-legal means of accessing food entitlements. We conclude by outlining the limits of an entitlement approach to social protection, especially in relation to the potential for empowerment of marginalized social groups.

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1. Introduction

Once derided as unnecessary market distortion, social protection has emerged rapidly over the last decade as a key tool of mainstream development policy at least in part because of its palatability from a range of development perspectives (Devereux, 2001; Norton et al., 2001). Economic liberals frame social protection as an alternative to wider "safety nets" that could moderate inequality without fundamentally altering a growth-oriented approach to development (Holzmann et al., 2003; World Bank, 2011). A stronger state interventionist perspective views social protection as a concrete extension of a rights-based approach to development, with potential for wider transformation and empowerment (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler, 2007). With mainstream social protection framed primarily around prevention of deprivation through delivery of entitlements, the potential for

social protection programs to contribute toward empowerment of the socially and politically marginalized is the subject of considerable debate globally (Cecchini and Martinez, 2011; Devereux and White, 2010).

In this paper, we examine the expansion of state space into rural societies through transfer entitlements and argue that hitherto existing social relations and micro-politics in villages produce differentiated biopolitical outcomes. We begin by examining how rights, equity, and power are implicated in the making and evolution of entitlement set in rural India. Following Foucault (1997), we understand biopolitics as the state's control apparatus over a population using "technologies" that allow populations to live (or not). In contrast to other technologies of power examined by Foucault, biopower is concerned with forms of power employed to manage the health and well-being of populations (De Larrinaga and Doucet, 2008). Since the 18th century, biopower can be observed in the administrative management of living conditions through interventions in a broad range of social and environmental domains (e.g., public health, family planning, crime management). We situate social protection programs within the ambit of these

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technologies of biopower that are aimed at sustaining “make-live” conditions for certain populations (Li, 2010). Through an analysis of the micro-politics of entitlement, we show how biopolitics encounters the messy world of peasant society. Drawing on Sen’s entitlement framework (Sen, 1993, 1977), we seek to demonstrate how entitlements are reconfigured under social protection and state support for agrarian modernization and how those reconfigured entitlements are asserted within local micro-politics. We argue that a biopolitical lens on entitlements is useful in assessing the limits of social protection programs that focus on expanding entitlements without explicitly addressing questions of rights and power that are central to empowerment. Viewing entitlement programs as biopolitical technologies allows us to observe the operationalization of political society (Chatterjee, 2008) within which we see limited progress toward the empowerment of marginalized rural laborers.

We analyze the workings of a social protection program at the local level – the longstanding subsidized food grains distribution program known as the Public Distribution System (PDS). PDS has served as a primary example of large-scale entitlement protection for many other countries. In focusing on this program, we examine the local micro-politics of social protection programs that derive primarily from initiatives of national government rather than donor agendas (Hickey, 2009). More broadly, our analysis of the interplay of entitlement and empowerment through a biopolitical lens responds to the call from many development studies scholars to “bring politics back in” (Bebbington et al., 2008; Whitehead and Gray-Molina, 2003). While greater attention has been paid to the role of the state in shaping development (Corbridge, 2005) and broadly to the role of institutions in development processes (Houtzager and Moore, 2005), there is an enduring need to examine the various roles of the state in mediating patron-client relations within evolving rural moral economies. Through qualitative research on the local micro-politics of the entitlement program, our paper assesses the empowerment potential of social protection programs, especially their ability to address questions of rights and equity (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler, 2007).

Our fieldwork in rural Maharashtra state, India in 2012–2013 demonstrates the following: first, entitlements must be claimed and the ability to realize one’s entitlements requires a minimal form of empowerment in village society vis-à-vis the local administration that administers entitlement programs. Conversely, Sharma (2011: 973) has claimed that “for those who subsist and struggle on the edges of society”, empowerment is meaningless in the absence of minimal entitlements. Drawing on both insights, we argue that entitlement and empowerment are indeed entwined but the particular experience of reconfigured entitlements that we present in our case study site produces a truncated version of empowerment. Second, we claim that state-led entitlement programs when introduced at the village level, encounter micro-politics that produce patronage relationships and blur the distinction between legal and extra-legal means of accessing food entitlements. By illuminating the multiple sources of power that play a role in negotiating access to entitlements, our qualitative research provides further evidence that people do not experience the state as a monolith (Gupta, 2012), but rather encounter the state as an assemblage of interests, experts, techniques, and discourses (Li, 2005: 386). We conclude by outlining the limits of an entitlement approach to social protection, especially in relation to the potential for empowerment of marginalized social groups.

2. The making of entitlements

Theorization of the causes of famines and hunger has placed a particular importance on the study of entitlements (Sen, 1981;

Devereux, 2001). Entitlements are a “set of alternative commodity bundles, over which a person can establish command, given the prevailing legal, political and economic arrangements” Sen (1984: 497). The entitlement approach aims to describe all legal sources of food that can be grouped into four categories: “production-based entitlement” (growing food), “trade-based entitlement” (purchasing food), “own-labor entitlement” (working for food), and “inheritance and transfer entitlement” (being given food by others). Importantly, transfer entitlement include both culturally-based forms of transfer (e.g., kinship-based food sharing networks) and the kinds of politically-based transfer entitlements provided by governments via social protection programs. Individuals starve if their full entitlement set does not provide them with adequate food to live. Analysis of major instances of 20th century famine from West Africa to South Asia has demonstrated that loss of entitlements often reflects caste, class, and gendered dimensions of food access among differentiated peasant and pastoralist populations (Sen, 1981).

Empirical work from this perspective has highlighted the inability of specific groups of people to acquire food through their entitlement set, even when food production and overall availability of food are sufficient on a per capita basis (Devereux, 1988; Sen, 1981). Such results have informed the recent growth of social protection programs designed to buffer populations suffering from chronic food security from loss of food entitlements. Entitlements may be seen as politically constructed in at least two ways. They reflect local inequalities in endowments such as access to land and water, the availability of wage labor opportunities, and the cultural politics of solidarity and food sharing. Secondly, through particular state interventions, social protection has expanded the range of entitlements ostensibly for those who are most vulnerable to the loss of all other means of accessing food with varying impacts at the local level and without explicitly addressing the underlying structural features that put them in this position.

Given these political dimensions of entitlements, individuals who are legally entitled but incapable of benefitting from their entitlement set exist in a certain relational sense with those who retain sufficient food entitlements. Following Watts (1991), in other words, if socially differentiated lack of command over food is made visible during famines or in everyday existence of hunger, attention needs to be paid to power, politics, and rights that are situated in a multiplicity of arenas that range from the private space of household to the nation/state. Specifically, we interpret Watts’s critique of the entitlement framework as a call to more carefully examine the micro-politics of politically-based transfer entitlements, which we understand to reflect a concern for differentiated and sometimes latent strategies to subvert, modify, or adapt to policies or institutions in a local context (Corbridge, 2005).

Our research examines the functioning of entitlements in a democracy with a less pronounced donor presence and a strong civil society, and where it is claimed that social protection is key to shaping the social contract between citizens and government (Devereux and McGregor, 2014). Indeed, the role of the state in making “surplus” populations live by activating various biopolitical technologies – interventions to enhance the well-being and health of populations – has been discussed previously (Li, 2009). We do not wish to posit the rural laborers and farmers of Maharashtra as hapless subjects of biopolitics, but we do wish to point to the political society that envelope the objects of that state’s social protection programs. We are attentive to the critiques of biopolitics as applied to theorizations of the state in rural India, especially to the claim that a biopolitical optic depoliticizes poverty and the class character of differential entitlements (Harriss and Jeffrey, 2013). Rather than depoliticize entitlement, we use the notion of biopower to better understand the complex interplay of entitlement

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