Seeking the Local State: Gender, Caste, and the Pursuit of Public Services in Post-Tsunami India

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Summary. — How do ordinary citizens access the state in the world's largest democracy? This paper examines a critical case from India, exploring the channels—formal and informal—through which residents of two tsunami-affected villages pursued public services following the 2004 disaster. External shocks, such as the proliferation of aid and NGOs, created moments in which individuals interacted differently with public agencies. Different village-level groups attempted to access state resources through distinct sets of intermediaries; marginalized groups (women and caste minorities) appeared most willing and likely to utilize *formal* government channels, while men from the locally dominant caste turned to *informal*, non-state channels.
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1. INTRODUCTION

Access to essential public goods, such as drinking water, roads, and health and education services, is not only integral to human welfare but is an important indicator of governmental performance and legitimacy (Putnam, 1993; Tendler, 1997). The ability to seek and receive such goods and services is an essential element of citizenship, which following Marshall's (1964) conception, encompasses both the civil and social rights that enable a "life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society" (74). But how are citizen–state relations structured at the local level? What are the various means through which citizens seek and ultimately access public goods and services? How, in particular, do politically marginalized members of society pursue and secure public resources?

To shed light on this set of questions, this paper examines the channels through which groups of citizens—set apart by characteristics such as caste and/or gender—sought essential services from public agencies in rural India, exploring the case of the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. The tsunami and its aftermath represent critical moments, as people necessarily interacted with frequency and intensity with a range of public agencies in order to access the public services and infrastructure essential to the disaster recovery process. The case of the tsunami thus offers a unique window into citizen–state relations and the institutions—both formal (state) and informal (non-state)—that mediate citizen–state engagement at the local level.

Those familiar with the humanitarian response in India often comment that the affected coastal region in fact experienced "two tsunamis." First, tsunami waves devastated lives and livelihoods, while second, a wave of aid pumped unprecedented amounts of money, materials, and personnel into the affected region. As such, the tsunami represents a series of exogenous shocks that that set in motion changes at the micro level. The rapid influx of not only resources but also new actors and ideas played a significant role in shaping the local institutional environment, altering—at least temporarily—the context in which citizens sought public goods and, by extension, the protection and services of the state.

Researched 3 years after the tsunami, this paper is primarily concerned with the *late recovery period* during which residents sought a quotidian but essential bundle of public goods and services such as drinking water, lighting, housing, and health and education services. Examination of such day-to-day services sheds light on patterns of citizen engagement with the "everyday" state (Corbridge, Williams, Srivastava, & Veron, 2005), while the "two tsunamis" set the context for this engagement. The physical tsunami created acute need for infrastructure and service delivery systems; the "aid" tsunami shook up the local institutional landscape, creating moments in which some citizens came to interact differently with state agencies.

Two coastal villages in Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu—India's most tsunami-affected district—provide the setting for this paper. [1] Village-level research, carried out 3 years after the disaster, was primarily qualitative, consisting of over 70 interviews with officials, elected representatives, NGO staff, village leadership, and focus group discussions with men and women from different caste communities. Qualitative research was supplemented by a small household survey, as well as secondary sources including ethnographic studies of Nagapattinam's fishing community prior to the tsunami and NGO-led studies of the region post-tsunami.

Evidence drawn from a study of two villages is not conclusive, yet highlights issues important to an understanding of service delivery in complex institutional environments. First, the study reveals that different village-level groups, set apart by caste and gender, relied on distinct sets of local institutions in attempting to access state resources. Second, those groups typically portrayed as having the least voice (women and caste minorities) reported that they were most likely to turn to *formal* government channels such as elected village councils and the District administration, whereas those with greater voice

(men from the locally dominant caste) reported a greater reliance on *informal* non-state channels such as traditional caste associations. Third, the study highlights the role of external actors such as NGOs and donors in shaping the discourse and practice of public service delivery. The effects of the "two tsunamis," however, may be short-lived; whether or not they have created a window of opportunity for lasting institutional change remains an open question.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses the region's formal and informal governance institutions in the pre-tsunami period. Section 3 describes the scale and scope of "two tsunamis," while Section 4 examines the effects of these shocks on the local governance environment. Section 5 examines the late recovery period, examining the channels through which village groups reported seeking public goods and services to rebuild their communities. Section 6 discusses these findings in light of the opportunity structures that shape citizen–state engagement. Section 7 concludes, looking beyond the case of the tsunami to reflect on what these findings suggest for an understanding of citizen–state relations in rural India.

2. LOCAL GOVERNANCE

A large literature, developed primarily in the West, examines a range of institutions—political parties, interest groups, unions, civil society organizations—that link citizens to the state. Comparatively little is understood about how citizens in less developed countries, where the formal institutions of democracy are often less widely accessible, seek and access the state in their day-to-day lives (Houtzager, Collier, Harris, & Lavalle, 2002). This is particularly true in a country like India, where political parties lack deep roots at the local level (Kohli, 1990; Krishna, 2007; Migdal, 1988), where levels of formal organizational membership remain relatively low (Chhibber, 1999; Singh, 2008), and where formal democratic institutions co-exist alongside a wide range of informal institutions, including caste and religious associations and, increasingly, non-governmental organizations (AnanthPur, 2007; Corbridge *et al.*, 2005; Jayal, Prakash, & Sharma, 2006).

How, in this context, do citizens of the world's largest democracy access the state? To explore this question, we must first understand the range of institutions that together comprise the local governance environment. By institutions, I refer to norms and rules embodied by actors and organizations that constrain and structure social and political behavior (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004; North, 1990). "Formal" and "informal" institutions are defined here along state-societal lines (Manor, 2001) to reflect two distinct local governance bodies: (1) constitutionally recognized, elected village councils and (2) customarily selected, officially un-recognized "traditional" councils.[2]

(a) *Formal and informal local institutions in India*

Local governing councils ("*panchayats*") have been officially recognized in some form in most Indian states since the 1950s. These local bodies gained new legal status following the 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution in 1993, which established the framework for three-tiered elected government at the district, block, and village levels. The lowest tier is the *Gram Panchayat* (GP), a unit that typically comprises several villages. GP members, including a "president" and ward representatives, are formally elected every 5 years and oversee a wide range of local administrative activities including public goods provision and implementation of development projects. A minimum of 30% of seats are reserved for women, while additional seats are reserved for members of Scheduled Castes and Tribes in proportion to their percentage of the local population.

Scholars of political economy have studied the effects of India's decentralization on local public goods delivery, examining the competitiveness of local elections, the characteristics of elected officials, and local political geography in the distribution of such goods (Besley, Pande, & Rao, 2004, 2005; Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Foster & Rosenzweig, 2001; Krishnan, 2007). Scholars in this tradition focus almost exclusively on formal governance structures. Yet anthropological literature has documented a complex array of both formal and informal actors and institutions active in India's villages (Bailey, 1960; Beteille, 1969; Cohn, 1987; Rudolph & Rudolph, 1967). Despite predictions that informal institutions would whither away under modernization, traditional village councils, caste associations, patron-client networks, and other informal governance bodies persist alongside formal state institutions (AnanthPur, 2007; Jayal *et al.*, 2006; Krishna, 2002).

(b) *Case study: the Coromandel Coast*

How do these various institutions interact at the local level, and how do citizens navigate this complex environment to seek the services they require? The case of Tamil Nadu's tsunami-affected villages illuminates these questions, allowing us to examine the interplay of formal and informal institutions at a critical moment of economic and social flux coupled with an increased need for public service delivery.

The Coromandel Coast located on the Bay of Bengal is home to a chain of more than 60 fishing villages (Bavinck, 1996, 2001; Bharathi, 1999). These villages are predominately settled by members of the Pattinavar caste whose primary occupation is fishing. The Pattinavar are the locally dominant caste in terms of their population, relative affluence, and control of local marine resources.[3] Within the Pattinavar community, each fishing village is governed by a traditional council selected in a village meeting open to adult men of the Pattinavar caste. The first responsibility of these "traditional" *panchayats* (TPs) is to manage common marine resources, overseeing fishing rights and the distribution of income from the catch. The TP is also responsible for dispute resolution, and can issue judgments, levy fines, or—in extreme cases—ostracize members from the community. In these relatively closed communities, it is rare for external bodies such as the police and the local courts to interfere in the adjudication of disputes (Bavinck, 2001). Political parties are also seen as "external" actors, as are other state offices and agencies (Gomathy, 2006).

There is a strictly observed gender division of labor in the Pattinavar community. Men go to sea, while women are responsible for the sale of the fish and handle most household financial transactions. Only adult men are considered true "members" of the fishing community, so designated by their payment of informal taxes and their participation in community meetings called by the traditional *panchayat* (Bavinck, 1996). Women have no formal voice within the TP. At the same time, strong norms of reciprocity require that women and children are cared for by the community at large; the TP collects a tax for redistribution to women and families in need (Gomathy, 2006).

The fishing villages also observe a strict caste division of labor (Bavinck 2001; Bharathi, 1999). While the Pattinavar

make up the majority caste, small numbers of other castes reside within the villages. These minority groups (herein referred to as "caste minorities" in the context of the fishing villages) are not permitted by the Pattinavar to fish. Some work in enterprises related to the fishing industry, such as shop-keeping, ice-vending, and sanitation work. Others, primarily from the Scheduled Castes (SC), are engaged in coastal agriculture, often as day laborers. Most SC live on the outskirts of the village at some distance from the fishing community, sometimes in distinct hamlets.

The fishing villages' traditional *panchayats* exist alongside the elected *Gram Panchayats*. Given the local dominance of the Pattinavar caste, it is no surprise that a substantial number of GP seats are also filled by members of the fishing community, often with strong ties to the TP. However, reservations for members of the Scheduled Castes ensure that seats, including the position of GP president, are regularly filled by caste minorities. Quotas also ensure that one-third of GP seats are filled by women.

Within India, Tamil Nadu is moderately decentralized but lags behind other states in terms of fiscal devolution (Chuadhuri, 2006; Sivagnanam, 2007). As a result, local bodies in Tamil Nadu have extensive administrative mandates but limited autonomy and resources, rendering them little more than "paper tigers." As observed by an NGO representative familiar with the region: "In Tamil Nadu, the elected *panchayats* have received very little support from state or district level. They are 'dummy bodies', and decentralization is incomplete." [4]

The perceived weakness of the *Gram Panchayats* stands in contrast to the portrayed power of the traditional *panchayats*. In the words of one village resident, these informal bodies are the "supreme power" at the local level. [5] A Nagapattinam District official observed:

> They [Pattinavar] have very strong leadership in the community. The advantage to this is that they lend discipline and maintain order. The disadvantage is that they are not always focused on equity or legality, so people can be excluded. We need to acknowledge that this parallel body exists with even more power and authority than the *Gram Panchayats*. [6]

In sum, a picture emerges of an effective, and at times exclusionary, system of informal governance side-by-side a constitutionally mandated, yet weak, formal village government. However, as the remainder of the paper suggests, this picture is not static.

3. TWO TSUNAMIS

The December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami was a disaster of epic proportions, leading to nearly 300,000 deaths across a dozen countries. India suffered the third highest death toll in the region; 16,000 people were killed, 150,000 families lost their homes, and upward of 645,000 households lost income and assets (World Bank, 2006). The global response to the tsunami was remarkable not only in scale (it was the largest response to a natural disaster to date) but in scope (involving the largest recorded number of organizations, both public and private) (TEC, 2006).

(a) *The tsunami in Nagapattinam*

Within India, the state of Tamil Nadu was most affected by the tsunami. Loss of life and damages were concentrated in the coastal district of Nagapattinam. With over 6000 deaths, Nagapattinam alone accounted for more than 75% of tsunami-related mortality in the state. Approximately 200,000 residents of Nagapattinam were directly affected by the tsunami through loss of their homes, income, assets, and livelihood (GOTN, 2005a). The fishing community bore the brunt of this loss, with over 9000 boats and 7500 fishing nets destroyed (Bedroc, 2009). Losses in the fishing community affected the local economy as a whole; thousands of people—traders, cleaners, net menders, boat makers—all found themselves without a source of income. The tsunami waves reached up to three kilometers inland, killing livestock, destroying crops ready for harvest, and leaving behind heavily salinated soil (GOTN, 2005a). Agricultural workers and day laborers—the majority of whom come from the Scheduled Castes—were left in a precarious position; some estimates suggested that it would take 3 years or longer for the region's coastal agriculture to recover (World Bank, 2006). The tsunami also took a heavy toll on local infrastructure. The Government of Tamil Nadu reported US$57 million in damages to infrastructure in Nagapattinam district alone, including roads, ports, public works, and education and health infrastructure (GOTN, 2005a). Thousands of homes were destroyed, creating a need for over 50,000 units of new housing (Bedroc, 2009).

Villages A and B, the subjects of study in this paper, are typical of the affected coastline. In both villages, with populations of roughly 500 and 400 households respectively, about one-half of homes were damaged or destroyed. Each village lost about two-thirds of its fishing boats. The fishing community experienced the heaviest losses in both villages. The agricultural community—consisting primarily of SC households, of which there are between 40 and 50 in each village—also suffered loss of livestock, and lost days of work due to salination of land. In one village, a SC hamlet located along a river estuary was also severely flooded, destroying homes (Praxis, 2005).

(b) *The "second tsunami"*

Among the tsunami-affected countries, India stands out as having the most state-centered response. India did not join international appeals for humanitarian assistance, but rather self-financed the bulk of tsunami relief. While international donors and NGOs also contributed substantial amounts, these funds were primarily channeled through or directed by the central and state governments.

The Indian government released over US$155.5 million in immediate relief funds, of which US$44.4 million were allocated to Tamil Nadu. The Rajiv Gandhi Rehabilitation Package allocated US$809.8 million for relief and recovery, including US$521.6 million for Tamil Nadu (Singh, 2005). The government of Tamil Nadu (GOTN) coordinated relief operations, including removal of dead bodies, and establishment of relief centers and temporary shelter. The state government was also heavily involved in long-term recovery efforts, including livelihood rehabilitation programs through its Fisheries and Agriculture Departments and through government-funded Self Help Groups. State and local government also took responsibility for the reconstruction of roads, bridges, ports, and community infrastructure.

At the local level, most residents in Villages A and B reported receiving cash and food from the central and state governments. Surviving next of kin received cash compensation of Rs. 1 lakh (US$2200), and fishermen also received additional compensation for damaged boats and nets. Three years after the tsunami, most residents who had suffered damage to their homes had received titles to new permanent housing. The new homes were located at some distance from the original village

sites, following government regulations prohibiting building closer than 500 m from the coastline. The vast majority of these homes were built by NGOs under a public–private arrangement on land purchased for this purpose by the state government. Public amenities and services in these new housing colonies—drinking water, lights, community halls, public toilets, access roads—remained the purview of local and state government.

Although the Indian government did not appeal for external aid, international financial institutions provided substantial support by expanding existing programs in India and allocating additional funds for tsunami aid. United Nations agencies, the World Bank, and Asian Development Bank collectively provided over US$705 million in relief and reconstruction funds. [7] International NGOs (INGOs) also played a significant financial role. A study carried out a year after the tsunami calculates that the eight biggest INGOs in India alone allocated over US$160 million to the tsunami response, an amount on par with the government's National Relief Fund (EPC, 2007).

In Nagapattinam district NGOs played a significant role in the local recovery process. A GOTN study 1 year after the tsunami documented over US$220 million in "rehabilitation" assistance to the district. Of this, approximately 40% took the form of NGO assistance, while the remainder came from a range of state and central government relief funds (GOTN, 2005b). NGOs provided immediate relief in the form of temporary shelters, food aid, and household supplies. In the recovery period, NGOs were heavily involved in the housing sector, and in livelihoods programming including skill training, support of Self Help Groups, and donations of new fishing equipment.

In Villages A and B, a range of NGOs (both domestic and international) set up shop. In the year following the tsunami, nine NGOs were active in Village A, and 15 in Village B; of these, only one had any history in the villages prior to the disaster. At the most local level, NGO assistance sometimes overshadowed government assistance. Village B, for example, received a total of US$1.5 million in rehabilitation funding in the year following the tsunami, of which roughly 85% took the form of NGO aid and programming; of this amount, the lion's share (over 80%) was allocated to the construction of new housing (GOTN, 2005b).

(c) New actors and norms

As noted, the "two tsunamis" ushered in a wave of actors—from central and state government, to international donors, to NGOs—who, prior to the tsunami, had little or weak presence in the relatively isolated fishing communities. State-appointed teams of officials, including members of the elite Indian Administrative Service, were assigned to the affected villages. The Nagapattinam NGO Resource and Coordination Center (NCRC) calculates that over 500 NGOs were active in tsunami relief, mushrooming practically overnight from just seven NGOs registered in the district prior to the disaster. [8]

In addition to material aid, these state and NGO actors brought with them ideas and norms intended to shape both the discourse and practice of aid delivery. This was particularly true with regard to gender norms. GOTN, for example, required that title of new homes be given to husbands and wives jointly, making many women first time property owners. In some cases, this was little more than a symbolic act. In other instances, however, the act of owning a house—and of engaging with officials in the process of receiving the title—had a potentially transformative effect. A woman in Village B explained, for example:

> See, now we have the [home] titles. We have signed the papers, we have met the officials, we have gone to the meetings. We are coming outside. Many of the men, they complain. But they must learn to accept it. [9]

NGOs also played a role in pushing for more equitable gender relations within the fishing community. For example, a number of NGOs insisted on providing fishing boats to women, a practice previously unheard of. In Nagapattinam, this NGO practice generated substantial opposition from the Pattinavar leadership. Where informal leaders did permit women to become boat owners, critics suggested that the traditional panchayats simply paid lip service to the NGO's demands while women's husbands and fathers became de facto owners. Others, however, were optimistic about the potential for incremental change. As one NGO fieldworker commented: "Really it's just symbolic, but this symbolism is important." [10]

The traditonal panchayats came under fire from local media and NGOs for their treatment and exclusion of women post-tsunami, and in particular the practice of denying aid to widows. [11] Other NGOs were more supportive of gender norms and practices within the traditional panchayats, arguing that they represent a legitimate form of local governance not easily understood by outsiders. The director of an NGO that worked closely with the fishing community stated:

> The traditional panchayats have a tremendous sense of equity. I stress that it is their own sense, not ours. For example, they may not give money to widows. But they say, "we are taking care of them." How can outsiders argue with this? A NGO is there for one intervention, but the traditional panchayat is there for a woman's whole life. If we tell her to fight for her rights now over tsunami aid, who will be there to take care of her later? NGO interventions can disturb the delicate social balance. [12]

The speaker warns that "urban" or "western" notions of women's empowerment may have the perverse effect of making women more vulnerable in the long run. What looks like overt discrimination may, in fact, be better understood as part of a system of reciprocity and kinship in which women are cared for in times of crisis by their families or by the community at large.

4. SHIFTING DYNAMICS IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE

The "two tsunamis" shocked Nagapattinam's coast, introducing a flurry of aid and an unprecedented number of new actors, ideas, and practices. Taken together, these altered the local political economy, shifting—at least temporarily—the balance of power between formal and informal institutions at the village level. The desire for increased social standing or fear of social sanction may compel local leaders—formal or informal—to be more responsive to local demands, and are a form of "soft power" at the local level (Tsai, 2007). As such, tsunami aid presented both a stick and a carrot to local leaders, who faced public opprobrium if they could not "deliver the goods", and enjoyed increased social standing when they successfully tapped into external resources.

(a) Informal local governance

While they held no formal position in the hierarchy of disaster response, the traditional panchayats acted as "gatekeepers" between the affected community and both governmental and NGO sources of aid. As an official of a state relief coordinating body observed: "The fishing villages are a very closed community, so it was impossible for relief organizations or even

the district government to access the villages without first going through the traditional *panchayats*." [13]

Yet tsunami aid acted as something of a double-edged sword for the TPs. Some traditional leaders were able to successfully navigate state and NGO networks to deliver aid to their villages and, in so doing, increased their influence in the community. This was particularly true for more educated members, who found it easier to interact with donors and state agencies (Gomathy, 2006). In Village A, for example, younger members of the fishing community who had completed higher levels of schooling were promoted to positions of authority within the TP. However, other TP members who were less "shrewd" in accessing aid came under increased public pressure. The period after the tsunami saw particularly high rates of turnover as old members of the TPs resigned or were forced to quit and as new members—those who appeared best able to negotiate with the state and NGOs—were selected in their place (Gomathy, 2006). A TP member in Village A explained:

> If people are dissatisfied, they can change leaders. Here one member [of the TP] was found to be distributing boats to his own family, not to the whole community and not to affected people. He was removed. We have brought in new leaders with *nalla* [good/honest] qualities who can talk to the NGOs and who can talk to the district. Here honesty and education are most important. [14]

The influx of material aid also created tensions that called into question the authority of the traditional *panchayat*. Because of their experience in managing common pool marine resources, the TPs tend to view resources in the villages as collective goods (Bavinck, 1996, 2001). A palpable friction emerged between the collectivist practices of the TPs and the government and NGO aid distribution that targeted individual households. In the words of a TP member: "People are more individualistic since the tsunami. It is destroying our unity." [15]

An example from Village B, referenced in multiple interviews, serves to illustrate. As part of a tsunami relief package, a government scheme to provide bicycles was made available to the Pattinavar community. However, because of the bureaucracy entailed, only 50 families successfully applied for and received bicycles. The informal leadership declared that those 50 families should turn the bikes over to the TP which would auction them and distribute the proceeds among all Pattinavar households, regardless of whether they had qualified for a bike or not. The 50 families resisted this demand, stating that they had individual rights to government aid, and took their complaints to the police. The TP members, considering this an affront to their authority, resigned in protest. As observed by an NGO fieldworker: "Before the tsunami, people very rarely engaged the police in village affairs. Post-tsunami, the traditional system is being challenged by the legal system."

The traditional *panchayats*, however, have shown themselves to be highly adaptive institutions and, despite these challenges, have reconstituted themselves—often with new leadership. A study of the region one year after the tsunami found that more than 50% of villages had experienced unscheduled turnover in TP membership directly related to the tsunami aid experience (Gomathy, 2006). The high rates of turnover within Nagapattinam's TPs may be a sign, in the words of one NGO worker, of a "crisis of legitimacy" within these informal institutions. [16] Alternatively, we may be witnessing, in the words of a more optimistic observer, the "power of recall" as villagers unhappy with the leadership clamor for change; that the TPs have responded by changing their leadership may be evidence of "local, informal democracy at work." [17]

(b) *Formal local governance*

Legally, the *Gram Panchayats* represent the lowest tier of local government and as such were responsible for a wide range of recovery activities, including beneficiary selection for aid packages and programs. New resources flowing to the local level increased, at least briefly, the activity and visibility of these elected local bodies. The flow of tsunami aid breathed life into previously moribund local government offices that, prior to the tsunami, had paper mandates but little fiscal or political autonomy.

While I am unable to precisely measure the capacity of the *Gram Panchayats* before and after the tsunami, multiple studies of the coastal region have underscored the relative weakness of these institutions *vis a vis* the traditional *panchayats* (Bavinck, 2001; Bharathi, 1999). As noted, a commonly cited reason for the relative weakness of the GPs in Tamil Nadu is the decentralization of responsibility without a corresponding devolution of funds. The scale of the tsunami response, however, temporarily relaxed the budget constraint, and the GPs found themselves administering unprecedented levels of funding and programming.

Even where the GPs did not directly hold the purse strings, their social standing increased through their association with external visitors to the village such as NGO staff, donors, and district and state officials. The president of the *Gram Panchayat* in one village, for example, became a minor celebrity. One hundred percent of village survey respondents knew him on a first name basis, as did senior district officials and NGO staff. Much of this has may have to do with the leadership qualities of this individual. However, in his own words: "After the tsunami, my work increased. I go everywhere now. I meet the NGOs, officials, and dignitaries." [18]

The increased resources and visibility of the *Gram Panchayats* took on special significance for women and members of the Scheduled Castes, for whom constitutionally-mandated seats were reserved. The GPs emerged as something of a protected space open to those excluded from the traditional *panchayats*. Of course, the influence of men from the dominant caste cannot be overlooked in local politics, and many seats within the GP (including the presidencies in both Villages A and B) were filled by men from the fishing community. Nonetheless, as an electoral space that constitutionally guarantees spaces for the participation of marginalized groups, the GP emerged as an important medium through which women and SC engaged state agencies.

Increased local funding and programming allowed other formal actors, beyond the GP, to establish a presence in the fishing villages which, prior to the tsunami, had been isolated from the interventions of the "external" state (Bavinck, 2001; Gomathy, 2006). State officials, literally carrying bags of money, were seen combing the affected communities, assessing needs, and interacting directly with people. Villagers who had never before seen district officials now met them regularly, and the financial resources at the officials' fingertips (and the high degree of public and media scrutiny of the tsunami recovery process) created an environment of responsiveness to public demands. The Nagapattinam District Collector (the senior-most district official) also personally visited affected villages on a daily basis and intervened directly on behalf of many of the people he met. This, in the words of one observer, "brought government literally to the doorsteps of villagers," and created a new set of expectations *vis a vis* the district administration. [19] The local police and the courts also saw increased engagement from members of the fishing community,

as disputes over aid and dissatisfaction with the decisions of the traditional *panchayats* propelled individuals to seek redress from formal state institutions.

(c) *Institutional change?*

The tsunami and the subsequent humanitarian response altered—at least temporarily—the local institutional terrain. A member of a regional fishermen's association reflected on the position of the *Gram Panchayat* before and after the tsunami, stating:

> The traditional panchayats were generally stronger than the constitutional panchayats [GPs]. Even the police couldn't enter the communities. They [the TPs] are not legal, they are rough and one-sided, but they kept the peace. Now, though, we see this changing. People are looking to the outside. The authority of the TP is being challenged. In some places, we see the *constitutional bodies* are coming up [emphasis added].[20]

An NGO worker observed that the TPs had to operate in a newly competitive environment:

> Before the tsunami, all money to the community was directed through the [traditional] *panchayats*. But now, many groups receive loans and even grants directly. Everybody has access to agencies, to banks, to NGOs, to the government, and to the *gram panchayat* [emphasis added]. This has created new leadership. The [traditional] *panchayat* is still there, but so are many other groups.[21]

In a region previously dominated by the TPs, a more variegated local landscape was revealed as elected and state officials, NGOs, and traditional authorities all rubbed shoulders. Thus, as the traditional *panchayats* come to operate in a more "pluralist" setting, they may no longer enjoy a monopoly on power but will have to "earn the authority which they exercise" (Ananthpur & Moore, 2007, p. 3).

Whether or not these changes are sustained in the long-term, however, remains an open question. "Critical juncture" theories of social change would suggest that major shocks such as the tsunami are contingent events that, by shaking up actors and resources, have the potential to set in motion processes of institutional change (Pierson, 2000). Others, however, caution against the assumption that short-term shocks will lead to sustained change, arguing instead that most change takes place through a more gradual, incremental process of transformation (Streeck & Thelen, 2005).[22]

The available data do not allow for a long-term analysis of change and continuity in the villages studied. However, as the remainder of the paper documents, fieldwork carried out 3 years after the tsunami does suggest that residents were operating in a changed environment. Moreover, it appears that these changes were most significant for the region's most vulnerable groups—women and the Scheduled Castes—who lacked representation in the traditional *panchayats*.

5. SEEKING THE STATE: DIFFERENCES BY GENDER AND CASTE

In the late recovery period, as relief funds began to dry up and many NGOs packed their bags, residents turned their attention from issues of immediate relief toward more quotidian issues of public service delivery. New homes required public amenities such as water, sanitation, and lighting. Recovering communities required services such as public security, health, and education. This bundle of goods was, almost exclusively, the purview of local government. How, in the post-tsunami environment, did residents seek and obtain such services?

Field research 3 years after the tsunami revealed that individuals in villages A and B[23] sought assistance for a similar bundle of public services through different channels, depending on their caste, their gender, or both. Surprisingly, those groups that we typically think of as having the least voice in local politics (women and caste minorities) appeared more willing and more likely to turn to *formal* government channels than men from the locally dominant Pattinavar community who relied on *informal* channels. Their weak reputation notwithstanding, the *Gram Panchayats* emerged as a primary vehicle by which women and caste minority groups (and in particular the Scheduled Castes) attempted to access services in the post-tsunami context. Pattinavar men, in contrast, appeared more likely to seek services through the traditional *panchayats*, relying on them to interface with external agencies and government offices.

(a) *Qualitative evidence*

Differences across gender and caste first emerged through interviews and focus group discussions about where residents would turn for assistance with public service and infrastructure problems in the post-tsunami housing colony. Take, for example, the following statements made by Pattinavar women and men in separate group discussions.[24]

> MAN: The [traditional] *panchayat* is the supreme authority here. This is our discipline and our unity. All decisions are taken through the *panchayatars*. When there is a problem, maybe with water supply, then we must go to the government. But we start here [in the village]. We go to the [traditional] *panchayatars* and they meet to decide and plan. They will take up a petition, and they will meet with the government. They speak for the village.
> WOMAN: We do not approach the [traditional] *panchayatars*. That is for men. Most often we meet among ourselves to discuss social work and problems, such as lack of street lighting and water problems. We organize petitions. Our first call is the *Gram Panchayat* or the Village Officer [a district official]. We approach them, and tell them of our needs.
> WOMAN 2: Many women, most of us, are participating in self-help groups with the NGOs. We use these to approach government. For example, to undertake village improvements, we meet and discuss among ourselves. Often the NGO is there, and they help us to directly approach the officials.

These statements, representative of those made in other focus group discussions and interviews, underscore a qualitative difference in the frequency and manner in which women and men spoke about the role of formal government, the traditional *panchayats*, and NGOs. Women clearly did not approach the TP directly (although some mentioned seeking assistance through their husbands or brothers).

Women also referred much more frequently to the offices of formal government at either the village level (the *Gram Panchayat*) or other local administrative bodies (such as the Village Officer, the Block Development Officer, or the District Collector). Members of a women's Self Help Group in one village, for example, reported discussing concerns such as lack of adequate lighting. NGO representatives then facilitated meetings between representatives of the Self Help Group, the *Gram Panchayat*, and the district administration, going as far as to organize transportation to take the representatives of the women's group to the District Collectorate. As a result of this meeting, new lighting was installed. In the words of one woman, "For the first time, we met the [District] Collector face to face. *We called him by his name*" (emphasis added).

Qualitative differences were equally striking across caste. Men from the Pattinavar community, as demonstrated above, exhibited a strong tendency to approach the informal *panchayat* for

assistance. This was not the case among members of non-Pattinavar castes. Scheduled Caste men, in particular, frequently mentioned the *Gram Panchayat*, making reference to the seats reserved for SC members. In response to a question about where he would turn for assistance with an infrastructure problem, an elder gave the following example:

> Here [in the new colony], we have just one water pump, and it is in bad repair. We are hurting for water. We approached the [*Gram*] *Panchayat* president, but he is from the fishing community. We even approached the BDO [Block Development Officer.] But no one has helped us. Only the SC ward representative is there [in a reserved seat]. He is our hope. He listens to us.

Women from the Pattinavar community also demonstrated a tendency to seek formal sources of assistance, as evidenced in the statements above. The picture is much less clear, however, for Scheduled Caste women. Most were unable to give examples of actively seeking assistance from *any* channel—formal, informal, or NGO. Focus group discussions with SC women typically involved scathing critiques of all public actors. For example:

> OF GOVERNMENT: "We are forgotten. They believe that only the fishing community was affected by the tsunami. But we too have suffered."

OF THE TRADITIONAL PANCHAYATS: "The fishing community has their own organization. But they do not help us. They do not include us."

OF NGOs: "They have given us poor houses, and weak cows."

(b) *Quantitative evidence*

The above anecdotes provide a qualitative sense of the propensity of women, men, and different caste communities to seek public services and infrastructure through formal and informal intermediaries. These are supported by evidence drawn from a small household survey, summary statistics for which are presented in Table 1. A systematic sampling approach was applied to randomly select 65 households across the two villages; approximately equal numbers of males and females were included, and the sample was stratified to ensure the inclusion of (non-Pattinavar) caste minorities.

The survey posed a number of questions designed to capture the self-reported likelihood or willingness of a respondent to seek assistance from different channels across a range of recovery and service-delivery issues. "Willingness to seek assistance" was measured as an index of the number of times respondents reported "yes" to whether or not they would seek assistance from a particular office or actor across a range of

Table 1. *Summary statistics*

Variable	Description	Metric	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Outcomes: propensity to seek assistance through						
Formal channels	Govt offices: *Gram Panchayat*, district officials, police	Sum of times answered YES to seeking assistance from formal channels across issues (water and sanitation, lighting, housing, transportation, health or education services, law and order, conflict management within and across villages)	3.71	1.67	0	7
Informal channels	Informal governance: traditional panchayats	Sum of times answered YES to seeking assistance from informal channels across issues (as above)	3.42	1.72	0	8
NGO channels	Non-governmental organizations	Sum of times answered YES to seeking assistance from NGO channels across issues (as above)	0.14	0.35	0	1
Predictors						
Caste	Caste dummy	0 = Caste minorities (SC, BC) 1 = Locally dominant caste (Pattinavar)	0.62	0.49	0	1
Gender	Gender dummy	0 = Male 1 = Female	0.54	0.50	0	1
CasteGen	Interaction of caste and gender (Caste $*$ Gender)	0 = Male and caste minority female 1 = Female Pattinavar	0.35	0.48	0	1
Controls						
Village	Village dummy	0 = Village A 1 = Village B	0.46	0.50	0	1
Age	Age of respondent	Numeric	36.70	14.58	18	75
Education	Highest level of schooling obtained	0 = None; 1 = Inc. Primary 2 = Primary; 3 = Inc. Secondary 4 = Secondary; 5 = Tertiary	1.88	1.48	0	5
Wealth	Index of wealth proxies	Index of pre-tsunami house material (thatch = 1; tiles = 2; concrete = 3) + weighted assets (radio, TV, bike = 1; house, livestock = 2; land, boat = 3) + reports eating 2 meals/day ($N = 0$, sometimes = 1, $Y = 2$)	7.89	2.64	3	14
Tsunami impact	Index of level of tsunami affectedness	Sum of times reported YES to tsunami-affected, loss of family, property, job, livestock, harvest, other loss, or damage to home	3.02	1.10	1	5

Table 2. *Multiple regression models predicting propensity to seek assistance through formal, informal, and NGO channels (n = 65)*

Predictor	Formal			Informal			NGO		
	Uncontrolled		Controlled interaction	Uncontrolled		Controlled interaction	Uncontrolled		Controlled interaction
	Simple	Interaction		Simple	Interaction		Simple	Interaction	
Constant	4.42*** (0.37)	4.85*** (0.43)	4.38*** (1.18)	2.80*** (0.38)	2.23*** (0.43)	2.29** (1.09)	0.02 (0.08)	3.89 (0.10)	−0.17 (0.27)
Caste (P = 1)	−1.27*** (0.40)	−2.02*** (0.57)	−2.34*** (0.62)	1.29*** (0.42)	2.30*** (0.58)	1.68*** (0.57)	0.08 (0.09)	0.12 (0.13)	0.14 (0.14)
Gender (F = 1)	0.13 (0.40)	−0.76 (0.62)	−0.99 (0.66)	−0.34 (0.41)	0.85 (0.63)	.68 (0.61)	0.13 (0.09)	0.16 (0.14)	0.27* (0.15)
Caste ∗ Gender		1.46* (0.79)	1.71** (0.81)		−1.95** (0.80)	−1.29* (0.74)		−0.07 (0.18)	−0.09 (0.18)
Controls									
Village (A = 1)			−0.78** (0.38)			1.14*** (0.35)			0.03 (0.87)
Age			−0.02 (0.02)			0.01 (0.01)			0.01 (0.00)
Education			0.08 (0.15)			−0.01 (0.13)			0.04 (0.03)
Wealth			0.08 (0.08)			0.11 (0.07)			−0.01 (0.02)
Tsunami impact			0.30* (0.18)			−0.48*** (0.16)			−0.05 (0.04)
R^2	0.14	0.14	0.35	0.14	0.18	0.38	0.05	0.05	0.14
F(df)	4.9 (2)	1.13 (3)	1.07 (8)	4.97 (2)	5.55 (3)	4.11 (8)	1.65 (2)	1.13 (3)	1.07 (8)
P	0.012	0.006	0.003	0.010	0.002	0.001	0.200	0.343	0.401

Notes: Cell entries are estimated regression coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses.
* Results significant at 10% level.
** Results significant at 5% level.
*** Results significant at 1% level.

issues. For example, the survey asked: "If there is a problem with water supply in this village, from whom would you seek assistance?" Respondents were given the choices (and could select more than one) of traditional *panchayat*, *Gram Panchayat*, District officials, the police, political party members,[25] and NGOs.

OLS regression analysis (Table 2) demonstrates strongly significant relationships between willingness to seek assistance through different channels and the caste and gender of the survey respondents. The data are presented as an aggregate of villager contact with different local institutions around *a range* of issues including: water and sanitation, lighting, housing, transportation, health and education services, and public security. Given the small sample size, I am unable to disaggregate particular sectors of service delivery. However, the data are revealing in aggregate form as they allow us to compare the degree to which different groups of villagers engage with different local institutions across the same range of issues. All of the issues examined are publicly-provided goods or services and, as such, fell under the jurisdiction of formal state bodies such as the *Gram Panchayat*, the District administration, or the police. However, qualitative evidence suggests that "informal" and non-state institutions, such as the traditional panchayats and NGOs, were also engaged in the procurement of such goods and services, acting as intermediaries or advocates and, as such, represented alternative or additional channels through which villagers sought public services.

Pattinavar men were most willing and likely seek assistance through "informal" channels (e.g., the traditional *panchayats*), whereas men from caste minority groups more often reported seeking assistance through "formal" channels, including the *Gram Panchayat*, District officials, party members, and the po-

lice (all results significant at the 1% level). Women report a greater willingness to seek formal sources of assistance compared to men, although this finding is contingent on caste.

Caste and gender are often linked to the extent that they together determine many aspects of socioeconomic status (Brewer, Conrad, & King, 2002; Kapadia, 1995). To explore this relationship, I introduced an interaction term for caste and gender. The coefficient for the term is positive and significant at the 5% level, suggesting that Pattinavar women are more willing to seek assistance through formal channels, all other things held constant, than Pattinavar men or non-Pattinavar women. Pattinavar women are also less willing to seek assistance from informal channels (significant at the 10% level). The sample of non-Pattinavar women, most of whom were SC, is too small to draw any firm conclusions, but the qualitative interviews—in terms of their content and the consistency of the responses—underscore the extent to which women from minority castes are disassociated from any channels of access, formal or informal. This is consistent with studies elsewhere in India that emphasize the extreme marginalization of lower caste women.

The survey also reveals that the rate at which women and men of all castes report seeking assistance from NGOs was very low, an unsurprising fact given that the survey explored access to *government* services. Yet, in qualitative terms, NGOs appeared to be of greater importance, often playing an intermediary role by linking groups of citizens to state agencies. One NGO, for example, developed a *panchayat* empowerment program specifically designed to increase training and resources to the *Gram Panchayats*. As part of this program, the NGO held village meetings to encourage people to directly approach the GP with their problems. Another NGO

established a system of "Village Information Centers" intended to bring district government closer to the villages, organizing fora in which villagers and officials could interact. Women in particular made extensive mention of NGOs when describing their strategies for accessing government services. The survey finds that women of all castes are more likely than men to seek NGO assistance (significant at the 10% level), a finding consistent with the fact that many NGOs have specifically targeted women in their programming.

6. DISCUSSION: SHIFTING OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES

Fieldwork reveals that citizens seek the state through different intermediaries, both formal and informal. These different patterns of citizen-state engagement can be attributed both to social and political structures that pre-date the tsunami and to a series of institutional changes post-disaster that—at least temporarily—created moments in which groups came to "see" and interact differently with the state. The nature of this engagement, however, varies by caste and gender.

Studies elsewhere in India have found that women are typically more isolated from formal government than men (Corbridge *et al.*, 2005), and that "non-elite" groups have lower levels of trust in government (Mitra, 2001). Indeed, the state is regularly portrayed as having been captured by "elite" interests, which in India are locally defined by gender, caste, and patronage structures (Chandra, 2004; Weiner, 2001). Following this logic, one would therefore expect marginalized groups in Nagapattinam to be excluded from *both* formal and informal channels of state access. Yet, in a somewhat counterintuitive finding, women and caste minorities showed the greatest willingness to seek assistance through formal bodies such as the *Gram Panchayat* and to voice their concerns directly to state officials. Another puzzle emerges as to why dominant groups (men from the Pattinavar community) relied on the traditional *panchayats* as intermediaries, demonstrating less willingness than other groups to call directly on the elected *Gram Panchayats*.

How are we to explain these puzzles? Women, men, and different caste communities face distinct opportunity structures, comprised of the local institutional climate and social structure (Narayan, Narayan-Parker, & Petesch, 2007); simply put, some doors are open to certain people that are closed to others. Many of the factors influencing opportunity structure—such as pre-existing gender norms in the fishing community and the reservation of seats for women and SC in the *Gram Panchayats*—pre-date the tsunami. A woman, for example, cannot directly approach the male-only TP for assistance. Similarly, a minority caste member does not have a voice in the fishing community's *panchayat*. Conversely, doors may open on the basis of gender or caste. The inclusion of women and non-Pattinavar representatives within the GP (in reserved seats) and within the district administration [26] has thus opened up potential spaces for marginalized groups within formal institutions.

Such spaces are not open or utilized to the same degree to Pattinavar men, who continue in large part to rely on the traditional *panchayats* to mediate their engagement with the state. The enduring influence of the traditional *panchayats* among Pattinavar men can be explained in large part by the integral role that the TPs play in the local political economy of the fishing community. As noted, the TPs exercise substan-

tial control over common pool resources, determining where and when people can fish, and much of their political and social authority stems from this role. Indeed, TP leadership has discouraged members of the fishing community from engaging directly with state agents such as the police and political parties (Gomathy, 2006).

Opportunity structures, however, are not static but are continually shaped and re-framed by changes in ideas and cultural practices (Swidler, 1986). The case of the tsunami offers a unique window through which to examine such changes and their effects on citizen–state relations at the local level. The reservation of seats for women and Scheduled Castes, for example, took on new significance in the post-tsunami period; as funds flowed to the local level, the power and visibility of the *Gram Panchayats* increased. A woman elected to the GP following the tsunami, for example, reflected: "I survived the tsunami. Now I am here, and women come to me for help. Elderly women come, and pregnant women. They come to access their pensions, to access government schemes. Since the tsunami, women are learning their rights." [27]

As noted, the tsunami also ushered in new actors and, with them, new practices and ideas. State and NGO requirements that women become house and boat owners, for example, challenged local gender norms. The introduction of individual, as opposed to collective, aid packages introduced new norms of distribution in the fishing community, causing a number of individuals to seek redress from the police and court system in defiance of the traditional *panchayats*. Indeed, there is evidence of a great strain on the authority of the TPs in the post-tsunami environment, as witnessed in the increased rates of recall and turnover within the TPs.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that while the formal institutions of local government appear to be particularly important to women and caste minorities in the post-tsunami environment, these traditionally marginalized groups have not come to exercise control over or to dominate these formal institutions. Pattinavar men navigated the same bureaucracy to lay claims on state resources, but did so through *different channels*. Mapping these channels and understanding how and why different groups approach the state through different means are central challenges in our effort to develop a bottom-up view of local governance and citizen–state relations.

7. CONCLUSION: A STUDY IN CITIZEN–STATE RELATIONS

This paper offers a number of insights into the interplay of formal and informal institutions in rural India, and the ways in which different groups of citizens navigate this complex environment. First, the study emphasizes the role of ascriptive identities such as gender and/or caste in shaping the channels through which people attempt to access government and services. In a context conditioned by the "two tsunamis," different segments of society relied on distinct intermediaries to access state resources. Failure to recognize such local diversity of experience may lead to one-size-fits-all policy and planning that fails to meet the needs of particular groups and subgroups.

Second, the paper contributes to the study of *state–society* relations in the developing world. This body of literature, while illuminating, remains largely state centered, studying the impact of societal actors on state capacity (Evans, 1995; Migdal, 1988) and the conditions under which a "synergistic" relationship between state and society allows for the

"co-production" of state services (Evans, 1996; Ostrom, 1996; Tendler, 1997). The study of local governance in the post-tsunami environment, as seen through the eyes of affected villagers, calls attention to the need for a deeper understanding of *citizen–state* relationships: how ordinary people perceive and navigate the state. The paper offers a bottom-up view of this complex set of dynamics, suggesting that the interface of state and society looks quite different to different groups of people at the local level.

Through their increased engagement with the *Gram Panchayat* and the district administration, for example, women and caste minorities came to further participate in the formal political arena. Men from the fishing community, on the other hand, continued to engage with the traditional institutions to which they have privileged access. Yet if men from the Pattinavar community continue to increase their engagement with the police, NGOs, and other "external" agencies, they may begin to make new demands on their traditional leadership. The long-term effects of the "two tsunamis" on local institutions, however, are unclear. Will nascent changes in participation persist in the long-term? Will the *Gram Panchayats* retain their vigor, long after the remaining tsunami funds dissipate? Will the region's traditional *panchayats* adapt, learning to compete in a more open and pluralistic governance environment? Given the important role that local governance institutions play in the lives of the poor, such questions are essential avenues for future research.

Finally, the study suggests avenues for research into broader questions concerning the practice of citizenship at the local level. The ability to secure public services is a critical dimension of "active citizenship," articulated by Houtzager and Acharya (forthcoming) as the "citizens' relationship to the public bureaucracy that has a duty to ensure equal access to public goods and service, and must do so in ways consistent with the democratic rule of law" (p. 4). Yet, as this paper has demonstrated, different citizens—set apart by caste, class, and gender—pursue myriad paths when seeking goods and services from state agencies. The channels—formal and informal, state and non-state—through which citizens engage the state represent a critical yet under-explored arena of democratic practice. The means through which claims for services are made (e.g., whether through direct appeals to an official at the level of the GP or District, through the advocacy or intermediation of a NGO, or whether brokered through informal structures such as the traditional panchayat) have the potential to shape an individual's understanding of what it means to be both a citizen and a subject of the state. This, in turn, may shape his or her expectations of government and the ways in which an individual does or does not participate in local politics. Understanding what drives such differences in citizen–state relations is critical to the study of local democratic governance, and to the study of the conditions that best promote the active engagement of citizens and responsiveness of officials.

NOTES

1. For the purpose of confidentiality, the villages, referred to as "A" and "B," are not named.

2. While a state-societal distinction cannot fully capture the relationship between formal and informal institutions (cf. Helmke & Levitsky, 2004), it remains a useful construct through which to portray the divide between the GPs and TPs. However, while distinguishing formal and informal local *bodies*, I do not intend to draw a strict line between formal and informal *practices*; "formal" institutions clearly operate through "informal" means, and "informal" actors influence "formal" bodies.

3. Here I follow the definition of M.N. Srinivas, who writes: "A caste may be said to be dominant when it preponderates numerically over the other castes and when it also wields preponderant economic and political power" (cited in Cohn (1987)). In Villages A and B respectively, 78 and 80% of households are Pattinavar. It is important to note, however, that the Pattinavar are labeled a "Backward Caste" by the state government, so designated because of their low socio-economic status. Their local "dominance" is in relation to other low-caste groups, such as the Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Castes.

4. Author interview, Chennai, June 25, 2007.

5. Author interview, Nagapattinam, January 9, 2008.

6. Author interview, Chennai, July 11, 2007.

7. This includes US$465 million through the World Bank Emergency Tsunami Reconstruction Project; roughly US$200 million through the Asian Development Bank Asian Tsunami Trust Fund; and approximately US$40 million allocated through a range of United Nations agencies (UN-WB-ADB, 2006).

8. Author interview, Nagapattinam, July 4, 2007.

9. Author interview, Nagapattinam, January 13, 2008.

10. Author interview, Chennai, January 21, 2008.

11. See, for example, "Katta Panchayats Denying Relief to Women" (Gautham, 2007).

12. Author interview, Nagapattinam, January 8, 2008.

13. Author interview, Chennai, June 28, 2007.

14. Author interview, Naptattinam, January 9, 2008.

15. Author interview, Nagapattinam, January 9, 2009.

16. Author interview, Nagapattinam, January 19, 2008.

17. Author interview, Chennai, January 21, 2008.

18. Author interview, Nagapattinam, January 12, 2008.

19. Author interview, Nagapattinam, January 8, 2008.

20. Author interview, Nagapattinam, January 17, 2008.

21. Author interview, Nagapattinam, July 4, 2007.

22. Whether disasters are catalysts for sustained change is a subject of long debate. See Passerini (2000).

23. Villages A and B are located approximately 10 km apart in the same block of Nagapattinam district. There are no significant differences between Villages A and B in terms of demographic features such as age or years of education, wealth, and impact of the tsunami.

24. All Focus Group Discussions were held in Villages A and B in January 2008.

25. Political parties were referenced so infrequently that they are not presented in Table 2. The lack of reference to political parties is, in itself, interesting as it runs counter to the expectation that tsunami relief would be distributed according to party patronage defined along caste lines (Chandra, 2004). A partial explanation may lie in the fact that political parties historically have had a weak presence within the region's fishing villages (see Gomathy, 2006).

26. The Pattinavar caste, while locally dominant, remains a "Backward Caste" in the wider context of Tamil Nadu's caste politics and, as such, has not captured the district administration. The position of District Collector is consistently staffed by elites, very often from outside the state from the Indian Administrative Service. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this point.

27. Author interview, Nagapattinam, January 13, 2008.

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