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## Petty Corruption in Women’s Activism in South India : Metaphor for Critique or Skilled Practice?

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In: *Discourses on Corruption : Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Perspectives*, Kalpana Kannabiran, Bettina Hollstein and Florian Hoffmann (eds.), pp.143-164

Series: Politics and Society in India and the Global South

Year of Publication: 2022


Publisher: Sage (New Delhi)

URL: [https://perspectivia.net/publikationen/psigs/kannabiran\\_corruption/vogl\\_activism](https://perspectivia.net/publikationen/psigs/kannabiran_corruption/vogl_activism)

Year of Publication on perspectivia.net: 2022

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# Petty Corruption in Women's Activism in South India

*Metaphor for Critique or Skilled Practice?*

Janna Vogl

## 7.1. Introduction

To openly discuss practices of corruption in non-governmental organizations (hereafter, NGOs) in the Global South is dangerous, at least in the higher layers of such organizations, due to their international financing. This situation is exacerbated, of course, when a foreigner researches such organizations, who is conceived as being positioned somewhere near the funding agencies.<sup>1</sup> Officially, thus, the women's rights NGOs in South India in which I conducted research for years

<sup>1</sup> Regarding my own position, it shall be enough to mention that two local NGOs facilitated my entry to the field, and that I was not affiliated to either of the international funding agencies. Nonetheless, some people from the 'target groups' conceived of me as 'one of the foreigners coming through the NGO'. I cooperated with two female research assistants, among other things, to be able to partly reflect the effect of my own positionality.

(2011–2018) condemned corruption.<sup>2</sup> The public opinion about local NGOs in South India, which was noticeable, for example, during private conversations with friends, was totally opposed to this: NGO founders were generally seen as frauds, NGOs were rather understood to be convenient channels to corrupt foreign funds than organizations aiming at the transformation of society or aiming at helping the needy.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, corruption in the higher layers of such organizations has been discussed in a number of studies in India and beyond (Ahmad 2004; Smith 2010). Practices of corruption have been reviewed not only in a critical thrust but also as an unavoidable part of setting up such organizations. Ahmad (2004: 12), for example, argues that two types of corruption were paramount and had to be differentiated among the NGOs he researched in Bangladesh: (a) paying bribes to officials, for example, in order to register an organization; and (b) misappropriating international funds for own purposes. Smith also describes the first type of corruption: He shows that even well-intentioned activists in Nigeria who try to set up local organizations are forced into practices of corruption if they want to succeed (Smith 2010: 253–255). This sort of corruption, I assume, is also what some NGO staff in the higher layers as well as leaders and directors hinted at when talking to me about the difficulties of not being corrupt in a society which, in large parts, functions on the basis of practices of (petty) corruption. The second type of corruption Ahmad talks about is potentially more visible, and it may conjure up suspicious questions: How did the NGO presidents pay for their huge houses? Why do their children visit such fancy schools?<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The insights presented here are based upon four field stays between 2011 and 2018 in South India during which I visited and interviewed staff in nearly 20 NGOs. A first field research for my master's thesis was focused on the perspectives of the founders of such organizations, the other three field stays for my PhD evolved around the interest to better grasp the perspectives of 'target groups' and the effects of such NGOs' programmes on their everyday lives (see Vogl 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Such a negative perception of locally founded NGOs seems to be a widespread phenomenon (with regard to Nigeria, see Smith 2010).

<sup>4</sup> An interesting question would be to ask how those people in NGOs who misappropriate funds legitimize such actions: How do they manage to deal with the arising contradictions between the normative endeavours they officially pursue with their NGO work and their own actual practices? I do not primarily deal with this question in the present chapter because this chapter is focused on perspectives of the 'target groups' of such organizations.

That the actual practices in the field might not adhere to the official anti-corruption agenda is no surprise, especially having in mind the latest academic discussions about development cooperation (e.g., Artner 2018; Mosse 2005; Rottenburg 2009). Mosse (2005: 663), for example, argues that those aspects which render development policy into 'good policy' make it at the same time 'unimplementable':

Policy discourse generates mobilizing metaphors ('participation', 'partnership', 'governance', 'social capital') whose vagueness, ambiguity and lack of conceptual precision are required to conceal ideological differences, to allow compromise and the enrolment of different interests, to build coalitions, to distribute agency and to multiply criteria of success within project systems.

Others theorize similar results with reference to established organizational sociological vocabulary, arguing that the gap between policy and practice is a result of a 'loose coupling' (Weick 1976) between the organization's official agendas and their unofficial practices (Rottenburg 2009). Rottenburg (2009: 68) suggests that such a loose coupling results from the exigencies of development cooperation, such as the necessity to adhere to a narrative of emancipation (participation) and a narrative of progress at the same time. Mosse's study details this insight by showing that while the official policy and narratives may centre around 'participation' and respective programmes, structures of patronage are often much more effective in sustaining the commitment of the 'target groups' (Mosse 2005: 103–131). In a similar vein, it can be argued that 'corruption' is a dominant metaphor for critique among the here researched NGOs, which relates to the global relevance of the anti-corruption narrative. However, the reference to 'corruption' as a metaphor for critique may not really connect to an effective realization of an anti-corruption agenda and respective practices—more precisely, as I show throughout this chapter, its function as a metaphor may not lay herein.

Consequently, the present chapter is not interested in detailing the gaps between NGOs' self-representations and their actual (organizational) practices. It is even less interested in following everyday reasoning—in the Global North or the Global South—by dismantling NGOs, in general, or individual organizations, as corrupt. This also means that the chapter is more interested in the first type of corruption

differentiated by Ahmad above and disregards the second type: It does not ask whether or not NGO staff and directors misappropriate funds. Irrespective of such concerns, many studies show that these NGOs bring positive changes. Smith (2010: 255), for example, summarizes his research on NGOs in Nigeria: 'Much as the local NGO sector is rife with corruption, it is also a sphere of dynamic social and political ferment.' What seems more intriguing than dismantling NGOs as generally corrupt is the fact that the academic discussions about the exigencies of development organizations and the way such exigencies are solved through a loose coupling of the official policies and the unofficial practices go hand in hand with the need for a reassessment of the effects of such organizations on their 'target groups'; in other words, their effects on local changes. In this perspective, the first type of corruption Ahmad differentiates—the paying of bribes to officials—becomes especially central: Practices of petty corruption come to mind, which, supposedly, are paramount in everyday interactions between the 'target groups' of such NGOs and the local state—interactions which the NGOs aim to assist in and improve. Officially, such NGOs aim at enhancing the target groups' access to welfare measures or to their rights; or they aim at improving the target groups' chances for democratic participation and 'autonomy'. An anti-corruption agenda is often seen as a vital part of such programmes, especially for the poor who are depicted as unfairly exploited by a corrupt local state. Against this background, 'corruption' may be naturally pictured as a metaphor for critique that unites NGOs and 'target groups'. This is especially the case since a negative view of a corrupt local state is widespread among 'target groups' as well. It is widespread, as will become visible further, among the 'target groups' of the NGOs researched in the present chapter. Of course, it is not generally wrong to assume that poor people would have better access to the local legal apparatus, welfare measures or just general public services (like water), if this would not entail the payment of bribes. However, the above-mentioned insights about how development organizations (unofficially) function lead to justified doubts regarding the self-evident connection that is drawn between an anti-corruption agenda and the standardized narratives of empowerment, 'enlightenment' and progress, which are so preponderant for development cooperation. It becomes visible throughout this chapter that the ideal-typical scenario of a close connection between anti-corruption and 'empowerment' also remains

partial because it often operates with an impoverished account of petty corruption. In light of the reassessment of mechanisms of local change that result from development cooperation, a different approach to practices of petty corruption in women's activism in South India becomes plausible. This approach does not right away oppose 'empowerment' and petty corruption but searches for more ambivalent connections: Does the participation in NGOs come with possibilities to oppose or circumvent corruption, and in which instances does petty corruption remain a severe barrier to women's 'empowerment'? Is it possible that the skilful handling of practices of petty corruption is part of the practices that 'empower' women?

The present chapter discusses these questions with reference to ethnographic material as well as qualitative and narrative interviews conducted with women from the target groups and the lower layers of staff of women's rights NGOs in Tamil Nadu, South India.<sup>5</sup> A distinctive perspective is enabled by an ethnographic approach and, more specifically, by the close analysis of transcribed and translated narrative interviews.<sup>6</sup> The close analysis of narrative interviews allows to not only single out sequences or sentences in which, for example, interviewees speak critically of petty corruption or the local state, but it also becomes possible to embed these notions and references in wider societal narratives that (de-)legitimize petty corruption and represent images of the local state.

<sup>5</sup> I intentionally forego a more detailed description of these NGOs, the localities they work in or the respective women, since the delicacy of the topic calls for a very careful anonymization. Details about the NGOs' programmes together with their approximate location, for example, would make them easily identifiable. Such details are also not of import in regard to the general research interest of this chapter: This chapter is not meant for criticism of few individuals or organizations. It is rather a reflection about the exigencies of such NGOs more generally: They have to adhere to an official anti-corruption agenda to maintain relationships with donors and, at the same time, need to successfully navigate the interactions with 'target groups' and officials.

<sup>6</sup> The translations were produced collaboratively, in face-to-face translation sessions with native speakers, so that the translation was already a first step in the analysis of the interviews. The discussion about, for example, multiple possible translations or the inadequacy of literal translations enabled insights in regard to my own presumptions and first ideas about wider societal structures of meaning.

In the following sections, the argument is developed in three steps: First, I discuss an intervention of women from a slum in Chennai—the capital of Tamil Nadu—against a brutal sexually violent assault which led the victim to commit suicide. I show how attempts to bribe the local police to pressurize an investigation may not necessarily be successful, especially for the less affluent party. I discuss why, nevertheless, it is not enough to ‘let them do whatever is possible through the law’, as one interviewee formulates. In a second step, I consider in more detail how NGOs assist women from the ‘target groups’ in accessing the local state: NGOs promote, among other things, female brokers who mediate interactions with the local state and in return may receive shares of the bribes otherwise commonly paid to the officials. In a third step, I show that NGOs are also places where women learn the intricacies of successfully interacting with the local state, which may mean to skilfully handle practices of bribery.

## 7.2. Why It Is Not Enough to ‘Let Them Do Whatever Is Possible through the Law’?

I start by considering an incident of failed intervention, where corruption played a determining role. Women in an urban slum in Chennai, which I will call Arangkarai,<sup>7</sup> intervened and protested after a brutal sexually violent assault which led the victim to commit suicide. A group of 20–30 women blocked a much-frequented road junction that was near the slum on the day after the victim died. They aimed at pressing charges against the perpetrators and wanted to bring them behind bars. Their main argument: What happened to the victim could happen to them as well; the case, therewith, was seen to be a ‘public matter’ (for details regarding the case, see Vogl 2018). They were not successful in doing so: Three years after the incident, the perpetrators had still not been arrested. A court case was pending, but the perpetrators had sought an anticipatory bail<sup>8</sup> and were arguing that women in the slum were trumping up charges. The local perception was that

<sup>7</sup> All names of places and persons have been replaced with pseudonyms.

<sup>8</sup> Under the Indian Criminal Law, Section 438 of the Criminal Procedure Code grants the provision of anticipatory bail. Usually, a person will seek an

the perpetrators had 'bought' this anticipatory bail by paying a large bribe to a local police officer who subsequently got transferred. The NGO previously had helped the women by advising them to hand in petitions and complaints in the name of the 'common people' of the slum at different offices, like the Tamil Nadu State Commission for Women and high-ranking representatives of the police. Sarvitha, one of the women active in the protest, narrates her view of what happened thereafter.

*Sarvitha:* Only after giving all these letters, they got their anticipatory bail. As this case escalated to the *Commissioner's*,<sup>9</sup> level, she gave three lakh [₹300,000], it seems. That's why that person got a transfer....<sup>11</sup> Because of that letter... [*T:* Is it the lawyer?] Not the lawyer! *Police* people. She bribed them to the extent that she won't be arrested. As the letter came directly through the *Commissioner*, they transferred the guy itself. That guy, the *police* guy itself got transferred. [...] Probably this guy got himself a transfer after getting the money [bribe].

*T*<sup>12</sup>: Is it a new *inspector* now?

*Sarvitha:* Yes, a new person. [...] As he got money, he would have thought that if he stayed there, this case would become a headache for him. [...]

*T:* He would get a transfer to somewhere else, with that his headache will end. His successors will have to deal with the case.

*Sarvitha:* Yes, he will not know what happened exactly. That will be in their [the perpetrator's family] favour, right?

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anticipatory bail when awaiting to be arrested upon charges of having committed a non-bailable offence but queries these charges to be false.

<sup>9</sup> Terms that were originally used in English are emphasized in italics in the translations.

<sup>10</sup> Sarvitha refers to the commissioner of police.

<sup>11</sup> To capture and maintain the style of the narrations to the greatest extent possible, omissions in the original narrations are marked with three dots, and incomplete sentences are usually not concluded.

<sup>12</sup> I use the abbreviation 'T' to mark the passages in which my research assistants speak. I once again want to express my deep gratitude to S. Padmavathy and Lourdhumary for their valuable support in so many ways.

This bribe from the side of the perpetrator was countered by something that could be called an ‘attempted bribe’ from the side of the victim. The victim’s son-in-law narrates:

*Thanappan*: If you go to them, they’ll make you do this thing, that thing, and then they’ll snatch your money. Even for conducting the *kariyam*,<sup>13</sup> we have borrowed money. [*T*: Yes, how can one afford to bribe the police these days?] Also, you have to meet him alone.... He said he was in some place. When we reached that place, he asked to take an auto [auto rickshaw] and come to some other place. We had to spend ₹1,500 just for that auto. Apart from that, money for his food, his tea and everything else. Finally, it came to ₹5,000.

He later summarizes:

*Thanappan*: We should approach through the law. She [one of the perpetrators] creates new problems all the time and now one life is lost. If things happen like this, then if one has a problem, no one else will bother about it. And then things like this will happen again and again. [*T*: Correct.] Let them do whatever is possible through the law. But these guys are utilizing this as a chance to snatch money from us. [*T*: Yeah, that is the mentality of the police.] Ok, snatch money from the people who are rich. What will the poor do? [*T*: Yes, people....] You see, they are snatching from the people who are poor and who are facing lot of difficulties already. Rich people are very safe. The police instructs them: ‘Take this anticipatory bail for this much money’ ... and done. [*Laughing*]

Thanappan’s disillusioned description of the procedures at local police stations is, quite obviously, not idiosyncratic. Such a disillusionment with regard to the local state has been discussed with regard to India (e.g., Parry 2000) as well as other countries. Shehabuddin’s (2008: 75–110) research in Bangladesh, for example, reveals similar results. She describes the situation in villages in Bangladesh as follows:

<sup>13</sup> *Kariyam* is a common ritual in Tamil Nadu on the 14th day after death.

Our interviews with villagers revealed a profound sense of disillusionment with the police, with a very disturbing response cropping up frequently: the police did nothing without a bribe, and since a corrupt policeman was likely to work for whomever paid the larger bribe, a poor villager was at an obvious disadvantage vis-à-vis a wealthier disputant. (79)

Shehabuddin (2008: 79), subsequently, brings these villagers' descriptions in connection with an editorial in an English-language daily in Bangladesh that talks about 'the citizenry' who sees 'the law enforcer [...] more as a predator than a protector'. In the originally much longer quote that Shehabuddin refers to, the connection to the generalized use of corruption as a metaphor for the critique of bad governance and illegitimate state power is even more obvious. I referred to Shehabuddin's example, even though it is from Bangladesh, to show how tempting it is to straightforwardly draw such connections between wider anti-corruption narratives and local contexts in research on petty corruption. In other words: Is it really so that people like Thanappan can easily relate to a more generalized anti-corruption agenda that NGOs are expected to pursue?

In fact, Thanappan would not attempt to bribe the police if he would (a) condemn corruption in general or (b) have been disillusioned entirely in regard to the possibility to successfully transfer a bribe before. Still, he fails to effectively pressurize his claim. One explanation is that he is unwilling, or unable, to pay more. However, the irritation of Thanappan points beyond this: He complains that the police fools around with poor people, sends them from one place to another place via expensive auto rickshaw drives and does not give them clear information and 'fair' prices in regard to their socio-economic position. This seems to suggest that there are other forms of resources, apart from money, which 'poor people' do not have access to. This connects to existing ethnographic research on the local state in India which complicates the picture of dynamics of petty corruption. A particularly interesting study in this regard is Jauregui's (2016) ethnography of the police in Uttar Pradesh. Jauregui's elaboration of the topic of petty corruption evolves around the notion of *jugaad*, which, she argues, does not have any equivalent

in English but can be understood to be about a ‘social practice of *provision*’ (Jauregui 2016: 35, emphasis in the original): It can be described as a ‘provisional agency’ (Jauregui 2014). Jauregui’s close descriptions of practices that people describe as *jugaad*—a term that, importantly, is not only used with reference to practices that, under a different vocabulary, can be described as corrupt—show that much more than just money is at stake: most obviously, kinship and other networks come to mind; the manipulation of legal procedures, for example, by filing ‘fake complaints’ (Vogl 2018: 39, 42); associations with powerful advocates, for example, the attempt to cooperate with the NGO in the case described above; collective enquiry at local offices; or the obstinacy of claim making in general. Jauregui (2014: 81) quotes a prospective police constable who talks about how he managed to get the job: ‘In addition to finding the right connection [...] one must also learn how much the bribe will cost, to whom it should be given, and the right time and place to give it.’

This brief excursion into Jauregui’s much more thorough discussion of *jugaad* helps to set Thanappan’s narration in context: The disadvantages of the poor do not only rely on having less or no money. A critique of corruption and a disillusionment in regard to the legal system, together with an interest in tackling these intricacies—which do not just hinge on money—more effectively become visible in a later narration of Sarvitha. I asked her a couple of months after the incident what she had learned, and she summarized:

*Sarvitha*: That is, even if you beat someone, you should never accept that you have beaten them! You should prove that you haven’t beaten them at all! [*laughing*] [...] I think one should be able to tell a lot of lies and act a lot. I understood that there is no value now for being truthful. [...] You should have money in your hands as well. You should have knowledge over people as well. If one has support of people, one can courageously get involved and fight for things like this. If no one is there to support you, they’ll make you run back and forth. Like what is happening now to that girl [the victim’s daughter]. This girl could take someone along with her, but she’s going alone and no one knows when she’s going or coming.

Thus, it not only needs the filing of a court case but more adamant and continued action, in the eyes of slum dwellers, to render this case effective. Bribery is one option of further pressing a case, and the narration of Thanappan above, as well as the quotes from Jauregui's research, shows that it is not really easy to bribe successfully. However, there are other options as well. More specifically, women collectively pressurize the police, and they argue that it is reasonable to bring forward demands and make enquiries in a group of women. The initial protest after the death of the victim aimed exactly at building up such kind of pressure.

Thanappan's narration could be read as an affirmation of the strength of legal procedures, as the NGO possibly would like it to have. However, not only his own quote but Sarvitha's quote as well reveal that it is more of a 'retreat', a surrender, to legal procedures: alternative interactions with local officials have failed. People from the 'target groups'—the rural and urban poor and therewith from the lower castes/classes<sup>14</sup>—may take up 'corruption' as a metaphor for critique. The populist distinction between 'rich' and 'poor', for example, which Thanappan refers to resonates with the official anti-corruption agenda in which the poor are pictured as unfairly exploited. But it is not yet clear whether they really mean the same as the NGOs. Or, more precisely, they may connect to such an agenda but at the same time lack other resources that would enable them to forego paying bribes and press their claims and interests in other ways in everyday interactions with state officials.

### **7.3. How NGOs Promote Female Brokers**

In this first instance, the NGO became active in supporting women in writing petitions, and this helps women to push the case to higher authorities. However, the intervention fails because the interactions with local officials, including the attempt to bribe them, are

<sup>14</sup> I use the notation caste/class to point to deep interferences between social inequalities due to caste and class. Far from being only a theoretical subtlety, this notation seems to resonate with definitions of people who experience discrimination due to caste/class (Roberts 2016: 54–80).

unsuccessful: The relevant officials make the women 'run back and forth' and make them get bogged down in official procedures. The case is prolonged and postponed and even when I came back again after three years, the case was still pending. The question is: Apart from hinting towards official procedures and assisting in actuating them, which roles may NGOs assume in interactions with officials?

In other instances, local staff of NGOs more directly assisted women from the 'target groups' in making these interactions with local officials work. At one point of my research, I had gotten into the habit of asking local coordinators or field staff in the lower layers of such organizations about their networks, for example, with local officials. I had realized that such women were essential, since they functioned as nodal points, mediating between local women and low-level officials. In some cases, they had, as a result of their regular support of women in approaching police stations or other local state offices, built up individual relationships with certain officials. This could be a close contact to a female police officer in a specific police station who was prepared to support this NGO staff and was available, if necessary, on a phone call. I remember a conversation which was totally incomprehensible for me in the beginning. The respective woman had stopped to work for the NGO. Since I had been acquainted with her over years, I visited her anyway. I was also interested to understand why she had dropped out. I asked her the usual question about her networks and the ways she helped women to get access to welfare payments like widow pensions or the so-called 'marriage assistance'.<sup>15</sup> She narrated that women still regularly approach her for assistance, even though they know that she quit her job at the NGO. She said that she refuses such requests, and she went on by justifying this with the argument that women used to receive payments upon her mediation but would not even inform her thereafter. At first, I did not understand why she was so outraged about the fact that women hid such received payments

<sup>15</sup> In 2011, the Tamil Nadu government launched the 'Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammaiyar Marriage Assistance Scheme' under which one daughter of poor parents is eligible to apply for a financial assistant of ₹25,000–₹50,000, varying with respect to the attained level of education, and 8 grams of gold shortly before her planned marriage.

from her—she was obviously seeking my approval upon her outrage. I did not understand why this mattered to her: Was it about failing to acknowledge her support?

In a later conversation with the same woman, as well as in subsequent conversations with other women, I understood the background of her outrage. She narrated that women frequently faced the problem that even after they had paid the demanded bribes, their requests were not met. This was the case in incidents much less pressing or dramatic than in the case referred to earlier, where Thanappan attempted to pressurize an investigation in a brutal sexual assault that led to his mother-in-law's suicide. Very often, staff of such NGOs first informs women about their rights to receive, for example, a widow pension or other welfare measures, such as 'marriage assistance' for the daughter's wedding. Subsequently, the staff helps to file the applications, approaches the respective offices regularly to follow-up on the process and pressurizes the officials to really process the application. While, as many of the women I talked to emphasized, they would not pressurize or explicitly ask the respective woman to hand over an amount after receiving the respective sum of money promised by the scheme, many of them would not reject sums offered to them. In fact, it transpired that there were customary sums of money that were expected. If, for example, you received a 'marriage assistance' of ₹25,000, a bribe of ₹1,000 was commonly expected by the respective officer. If the NGO staff mediated the case, ₹500 went to the officer and ₹500 to the NGO staff. In some of the so-called self-help groups—purely female micro-credit groups—organized by the NGOs, this was a widespread practice as well. NGO coordinators or local staff helped the groups to apply for credits, managed the interactions with the bank and when the credit was granted, received a share of it. These sums were already more substantial than the sums mentioned above: If, for example, the credit was amounting to ₹100,000, some of the local field staff or coordinators said that they usually received an amount of up to ₹10,000. It is important to emphasize that this is not an uncontested practice. Other women working in the lower layers of staff were outraged when offered a share of the received welfare payments, or they even openly condemned their colleagues who accepted the

money. Obviously, this shows how difficult a differentiation between legitimate and illegitimate payments may be: While many of the staff legitimate these ‘fees’ as ‘service charges’, the practice is condemned as ‘bribery’ by others. The NGO leadership, in turn, cannot officially acknowledge the existence of such payments exactly because they can easily be criticized as bribes.

The described practices of local-level brokerage connect to an already well-researched field of the so-called ‘political fixers’ (Berenschot 2014) or ‘political brokers’ (Witsoe 2012) in India. Berenschot describes such ‘political fixers’ as ‘intermediaries who use political contacts and knowledge of official procedures to help citizens, particularly the poor, deal with state institutions’ (Berenschot 2014: 198). He also argues that women fixers in Gujarat were in disadvantaged positions compared to male fixers and were potentially seen as ‘loose’ (Berenschot 2014: 205f). This is obviously totally different in the environment of the here researched NGOs, where women make local state agencies more accessible for other women. Interestingly, there is another connection to research about ‘political fixers’: Such fixers understand their activities, at least in some cases, as ‘social work’ (Berenschot 2014: 198ff; for a less positive account, see Jeffrey and Young 2014).

Importantly, such practices of local-level brokerage in the NGO environment also relate to exigencies arising from the field of development cooperation. The wages in the NGO sector are extremely low, especially for these lower layers of staff who mostly comprise lower-caste/class women. This results, among other things, from the official agendas of development cooperation: Programmes related to ideals such as ‘help for self-help’ or ‘empowerment’ do not intend the professional and reasonable payment of staff from ‘target groups’. ‘Target groups’, after all, not only *work* at the NGOs, but they are also supposed to *get empowered*—a value that cannot be assessed in terms of money and that legitimizes the fact that women receive expense allowances instead of reasonable wages.<sup>16</sup> In this situation, receiving

<sup>16</sup> Mosse, in his insightful ethnographic account of development aid, quotes a development consultant, a colleague of him, saying: ‘[T]he problem with [such]

payments from women they assist in interactions with state officials is sometimes necessary to allow staff to continue their NGO work and go on with supporting women while at the same time earning a living.<sup>17</sup> This also explains why such practices are surely not admired by the NGO leadership, and even less officially acknowledged, but silently tolerated: Condoning local-level brokerage may help to stabilize their employee base, and it may even be supportive in strengthening relationships with 'target groups'.

## 7.4. Tackling Petty Corruption

In some cases, the brokerage practices of NGO staff had another result: It acquainted local women with the intricacies of successfully interacting with low-level state officials. Women had learned to pay bribes and pressurize and enquire regularly enough to make sure that such payments yielded the envisioned results. I talked to some women who explicitly experienced this as 'empowering'. These women connected the skilful handling of such practices to an increased 'awareness', and they argued that they had achieved this 'awareness' by being part of the NGOs' programmes.

I stumbled over this result in another conversation that, initially, resulted in confusion on my part. Sundari, a Dalit woman residing in a village in which one of the NGOs was active, narrated in detail how she successfully occupied a piece of common lands,<sup>18</sup> built a small hut house with a thatched roof on it, and fought against the attempts of her neighbour from a slightly higher caste (Vanniyar) to claim the

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regular payments [...] is that it begins to appear that [*sic*] the project is employing people rather than empowering them' (Mosse 2005: 122).

<sup>17</sup> Importantly, similar findings have been brought forward in regard to local state institutions. Jauregui describes how notoriously under-financed police offices collect bribes in a 'kitty' to finance, for example, the paying of informants (Jauregui 2014: 79f).

<sup>18</sup> Common lands, the so-called *poromboke*, are lands intended for public use, for example, used as grassland for the grazing of livestock. Officially, such land is government property. However, there exists a long but contested history of Dalit occupations in the here researched village which I cannot detail here. The topic has been discussed with regard to Tamil Nadu more generally (Yanagisawa 2008).

land for himself and have her removed from the land. The narration about the occupation of the land in itself lasted about an hour and was part of a more detailed biographical narration which I listened to over the course of three separate days. Sundari emphasized that this story is an example of her extraordinary boldness (*tairiyam*) and awareness (*arivu*). She also stated that it is illustrative of how she ‘always wins’: ‘Even without money, I’m always winning throughout my life. With my mouth and our *sankam* [Sanskrit for ‘meeting’ or ‘association’, referring to a local women’s group], with these two things everything is happening. I didn’t even spend one rupee for this land.’

Initially, I thought that this formulation was meant as a critique of corruption. I was all the more surprised when later, in the same narration, Sundari meticulously tallied up every single amount—including costs for food and tea for workers, bribes and proper bills—she had to pay throughout the process of being able to receive an electricity connection for the house as well as a lamp post along the roadside. It seems as if ‘winning without money’ does not hint towards a generalized critique of corruption. To get an impression of what it hints towards instead, I want to quote a summarized and excerpted but still long version of Sundari’s narration. It makes beautifully clear how tedious encounters with state officials may be, sums up the arguments made above and opens up another dimension.

And the guy from the EB [Electricity Board] office told that he won’t give current. I showed them the bills of ₹500 and that I had paid ₹1,000 for the lamp post, and still they were not giving. [...] Again, the seven of us [Sundari together with other women from the *sankam*] went to the electricity office in [name of village]. Kalai asked: ‘Why, sir? It is a hut house. The people who filed the case [to have Sundari removed from the land] are rich people. And you are telling that you don’t give current to her. What should we do so that you’ll give the current? You tell us, we will do, sir.’ He answered: ‘Go to the panchayat leader<sup>19</sup> and the VAO<sup>20</sup> and get those two people’s

<sup>19</sup> The panchayat president is the head of the gram panchayat, which is the lowest unit of the Panchayati Raj System, a system of local self-governance established in India in 1993.

<sup>20</sup> ‘VAO’ is the abbreviation for village administrative officer, who is the administrative head of the panchayat.

signatures. Then afterwards, I will give light to the place.' [...] Afterwards, the [panchayat] leader signed and gave it to me. When we approached the VAO, we heard that he will sign only when we give him money. What can I tell? Because of these ₹1,500, the process stood still again. The [panchayat] leader had sympathy with us, so he never asked for money to sign the document. [...] When I went to the [panchayat] leader again, he said: 'Whatever he asks, you should give him. This is an achievement for you. Whatever he asks, you'll give him and get the signature. I never asked any money from you because you are like my sister. He will expect a bribe.' Totally, I gave him around ₹1,500. And then he got transferred. Without signing, the guy who received the money got transferred. I took another ₹1,500 and went to the new VAO. He told that it's not enough. I spent ₹3,000 there. [...] I gave it to the officer at the EB. After submitting, he told that one signature is still missing. After I also submitted that document, he said that he will enter the number only after getting another ₹1,500. [...] One day, during Bogi,<sup>21</sup> I was working at a dye company nearby. One guy came running towards me and told me that the JAO [junior accountant officer] had sent him to give the electricity connection to my place. I told my supervisor that the man from the EB had come to give current to my house, so I have to go. He said very secretly: 'I'll give full wages. Go, Sundari.' [...] I bought one bunch of bananas, two packages of biscuits and tea for the people who were working. It was ₹300. I put these things in a cover and brought to them. And that sir scolded me: 'You yourself are in a bad condition, *amma*.<sup>22</sup> Why did you take so much trouble to buy those things without asking us? Anyway, you should also pay money to those guys. You could have told me before itself.' I told him: 'No, sir, spending is not a problem. You did the work very swift, that's enough for me.' They were standing, eating tea, biscuits and bananas. I also gave them ₹1,000. [...] He installed the wire immediately, that's all. But he never gave a connection to the house. For one and a half years I was struggling for that. [...] You went to my son's house, right? His son had scabies in his head at that time. One day, he carried his son, showed him to the JAO and told him: 'Sir, we are

<sup>21</sup> Bogi is the first day of a popular harvest festival in Tamil Nadu (Pongal) that lasts for three days.

<sup>22</sup> *Amma* literally translates to mother, but it is also used as honorific for elderly women.

keeping our children only in this darkness. Some insect has bitten my son. Only because of the lantern light the condition is like this, sir.' [...] Finally, after seeing the baby, he gave the current. [...] The light was glowing, that's all. [...] He is asking ₹2,000–₹3,000 for him. To give the current, again they are asking for money. And next, they are asking for monthly current bill. [...] It took ₹7,500 for the current to come over here. I have spent so much of money. The whole village was gaping in astonishment. That woman is so short and petite and she managed to build a hut and get electricity as well. Like that.... That was a good reputation for me.

As I said above, Sundari's statement that she 'wins without money', especially since it is followed by the emphasis that she 'didn't even spend ₹1 for this land', can be easily understood as attesting to a general anti-corruption agenda followed by the NGO on first view. The close reading of the whole sequence suggests another interpretation: Possibly, Sundari rather means to underline the fact that she occupied the land, and did not purchase it, when she says that she 'didn't even spend ₹1 for this land'. This interpretation would result in the assumption that doing so, she renders clear that her position towards state officials is that of a poor woman who needs to, and knows to, occupy a place. Her narration thereafter revolves around how difficult it was to receive an electricity connection. She can emphasize her success in this struggle so proudly because her relation builds upon the widely shared comprehension that the legal apparatus is more adaptive towards the rich. She successfully pushes her claims, which includes the successful payment of bribes, despite her obvious poverty—she 'wins without money'. While she emphasizes throughout the sequence that 'spending is not a problem', money, quite obviously, is a problem: Even years after these encounters, she remembers every single amount spent. Additionally, the huge amount of money she had to pay to maintain access to the land and receive an electricity connection is one essential reason why others are 'gaping in astonishment'.

Even if money is, quite obviously, central to the way Sundari remembers these interactions, the act of receiving an electricity connection for the house and a functioning lamp post on the land near the roadside is also in a more general sense symbolic of the persistence with which she successfully tackles interactions with officials. Moreover,

she is successful against a wealthier counterpart who is of higher caste status. The paying of bribes is an ineluctable aspect of these interactions for Sundari and sits on the same level as paying proper bills or arranging courtesies for the electricity workers ('And next, they are asking for monthly current bill.'). However, paying bribes in itself is not what renders these interactions successful. Other aspects become visible in Sundari's lengthy narration. First of all, Sundari emphasizes her good relations with one of these officials, the panchayat president, who did not ask for a bribe.<sup>23</sup> It is also him who familiarizes her with the common procedures, and he straightforwardly encourages her to accept paying a bribe as normal. Second, she emphasizes, something that Sarvitha suggested as well in the quote earlier, that it is important to approach officials collectively (Sarvitha: 'If no one is there to support you, they'll make you run back and forth.'). The NGO, and especially the affiliated local women's groups, make available such networks of support: Other women accompany Sundari to the various offices and pressurize officials by bringing forward demands in a group. Another strategy can be described as shaming: Sundari's son accuses the officers of being responsible for the sickness of his child. This framing, at the same time, ceases on structures and ideals of patronage: It renders the problem into one of benevolence towards the poor.<sup>24</sup> Overall, Sundari experiences the way she tackled these interactions with officials not only as successful, she even understands this whole episode as being essential for her subsequent 'good reputation': The episode testifies her adamant commitment to the local women's groups, which is attached to an NGO, and therewith legitimizes her prominent position as one of the two leaders of the group.

<sup>23</sup> During another occasion, Sundari narrated that the panchayat leader knew her because she had gotten upset in a gram panchayat meeting and had used extremely vulgar language in her anger. She assumed that this impressed the panchayat leader.

<sup>24</sup> Sundari's narration, therewith, also offers insights into the usefulness of the notion of 'political society' (Chatterjee 2004), especially with regard to women's activism. One aspect that her narration seems to reveal is that the existing research centred around this notion as yet fails to acknowledge that diverse legitimizations—like the reference to ideals of patronage or the reference to rights discourses—do interact in a single situation. For the sake of brevity, I do not elaborate this point here.

## 7.5. Conclusion: ‘Corruption’ between Unifying Metaphor for Critique and Skilled Practice

The above observations about the role of (petty) corruption in women’s activism in South India can be related to recent anthropological studies with parallel findings (Anjaria 2011; Jauregui 2014, 2016). Jauregui (2014: 86), referring to some of this research, formulated as a central result the insight that

illicit exchanges of material goods and favors [...] constitute, if not perfectly level horizontal exchanges, then at least moments of empowerment and possibility, indicating that something more significant and complex is happening than a top-down exploitation of, or extortion from, poor subalterns by state power holders.

With regard to the field of development cooperation, it became visible that ‘corruption’ indeed functions as a metaphor: Target groups, NGO leaders and international funding agencies are enabled to ‘enrol’ (Mosse 2005: 663; see quote at the beginning of this chapter) under the same agenda. This is possible, however, only because huge differences in meaning attached to this metaphor are ignored. Official anti-corruption policies quite often reduce the problem to one that ‘distinguishes [...] those who have (more) from those who have not (or have less), and the takers from the givers of material resources or future favors’ (Jauregui 2014: 82). This differentiation becomes plausible due to an impoverished account of petty corruption as a top-down exploitation, which is dominated by the transfer of bribes. In contrast to this, the narrations of the interviewees cited throughout this chapter revealed that, as Sundari formulated it, ‘spending is not a problem’. The difficulties for women from the lower castes/classes in accessing the local state may rely on not having the financial resources to pay bribes. However, mobilizing (scarce) financial resources is only one of the difficulties that arise when interacting with local-level officials. Sundari, in the quote that I just referred to, goes on: ‘No, sir, spending is not a problem. You did the work very swiftly, that’s enough for me.’ In fact, her narration reveals that nothing has been done ‘swiftly’: The simple demand to receive an electricity connection, to a hut on contested land, took years to be met. It turns out that when, for example,

Thanappan differentiates the options of the 'rich' and the 'poor' vis-à-vis the local state, not only the question whether bribes are affordable resonates (as my research assistant formulates: 'How can one afford to bribe the police these days?') but also a more general disappointment.

When women want to intervene in problems they perceive as 'common' or 'public' problems that concern all women, when they want to get access to promised welfare schemes, or when they simply want to have an electricity connection, they have to tackle occasionally extremely tough negotiations with officials. 'Empowerment' here is not about the development of 'practices of citizenship' and not necessarily about claiming rights. Rather, it is about learning to more effectively tackle the intricacies of bureaucratic interaction, and this explicitly includes practices of bribery. Paying a bribe, however, is often also no guarantee of really achieving the demanded service, especially for the deprived sections of society. Tenacious following-up, collective pressurizing, and repeated and urgent appealing to common values and ideals, for example, of patronage, is necessary as well. Women in development cooperation—women as 'target groups' of women's rights NGOs—do not necessarily, despite their obviously critical stance towards the corruptness of the local state, learn to embrace an anti-corruption agenda. It seems more adequate to assume that they learn to tackle the intricacies of petty corruption more effectively and more adamantly, for example, by bringing forward enquiries in a group. Such practices, indeed, ameliorate their position towards local state agencies.

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