Introduction

Much has been written about India’s historic social policy, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), some celebrating but most criticising its implementation processes and outcomes as a pro-poor rights-based law. This chapter looks at the other end of the policy process – the making of this policy – in order to demystify both the mediators who were involved in the Act’s making and their actions that led to the Act being formulated in its present shape. In identifying the mediators, this chapter disaggregates ‘state’ and ‘society’ actors involved in the policy-making process and critically assesses their positionalities to posit that mediators sit within, outside as well as in between these two groups. In fact, as my analysis will show, mediation can be understood as a tenet of state–society interactions, through which the distinction between the state and society is reproduced.

Through the analysis of the case study and the actions of the mediators, this chapter highlights three objectives of mediation that were present during the different stages of formulation of the MGNREGA – mediation in generating and highlighting demand from citizens (bus yatra, media); mediation in negotiations with state (formal and informal mediation); and mediation in staking claim to implementation (participation in formal state committees and monitoring initiatives). It also seeks to identify strategies that mediators use in these different modes. This chapter also proposes that an assessment of the outcomes of mediation as positive or negative, especially for the most marginalised, implies examining the power dynamics that underlie positionalities of mediators, which may lead to the inclusion of some interests but also to the exclusion of others.
The chapter begins with a theoretical understanding of mediation and its application to the policy process literature. It then presents the role of different mediators during the formulation of the MGNREGA through four phases – genesis, articulation, negotiation and enactment. In reflecting on the processes of mediation within these phases, it is shown that both the type of mediators and the modes of mediation vary within and across these different phases. After analysing these modes of mediation and the strategies followed by mediators in the making of the MGNREGA, this chapter ends with reflections on mediation outcomes and processes within state–society relations in India’s policy spaces.

**Mediation in policy spaces**

The involvement of actors in policy processes has largely been conceptualised through the extent, type and nature of participation of actors, with mainly two types of actors, state and non-state actors. The literature on participation in policy processes distinguishes between different types of participation – functional/instrumental forms, self-provisioning approaches and more empowering approaches such as participation in activities related to democratic governance (Cornwall and Gaventa 2001). Participatory practices enable the opening up of ‘policy spaces’ (Grindle and Thomas 1991), which can be understood as the ‘the room for manoeuvre and influence’ (ibid.: 8). However, studying the policy process as simply a case of engagement between ‘state’ and ‘society’ misses out the crucial role of informal processes and mediating actors in these processes. There is a growing recognition that informal institutions and practices play a critical role in the everyday interactions between state and society (Harriss-White 2003; Chatterjee 2004; Corbridge et al. 2005).

However, these accounts relate to the everyday functions of the ‘administrative’ state, especially in India (Gupta 1995; Corbridge et al. 2005). This literature fails to explain the role of informal institutions in terms of policy processes, especially in the Indian scenario. This gap becomes bigger when focussing on a national scale rather than at the local level, which has typically been the focus of the everyday state literature. My work seeks to fill this gap by providing in-depth empirical data regarding the formulation of a contemporary national-level social policy in India. In so doing I make it possible to reflect on the workings of informality and mediation in the context of policy processes at a larger spatial scale.