

# Dynamics of Local Governance in Karnataka

*Informal local governance institutions such as caste panchayats, street panchayats and customary village councils are often neglected in discussions about local government and are assumed to have lost their relevance after the introduction of panchayati raj institutions. The author takes a close look at these institutions in Karnataka and finds that, in particular, CVCs have not been marginalised by the formal elected bodies. On the contrary, they continue to play an active role. There are also strong interactions between the two sets of institutions, and CVCs have an influence on village politics and grama panchayats with positive as well as negative elements.*

**KRIPA ANANTHPUR**

Governance discourse tends to focus strongly on formal political institutions. This is particularly true at the local level where decentralised governance has become synonymous with local governance. Given this strong focus on formal decentralised structures of governance, the role of customary village councils in local governance often gets overlooked. There are two reasons for this. It is generally believed that formal institutions are (a) quite distinct from the customary institutions and are relatively free of “traditional” influences that bear on them; and (b) more powerful than the customary ones, and so tend to “drive them out”. However, the extent to which these assumptions are consonant with local reality is debatable. Decentralised local government structures such as grama panchayats coexist with customary village councils and often interact with them. Development outcomes, either positive or negative, at the local level are often determined by these interactions.

Karnataka has a fairly long and impressive history of decentralisation. Democratically elected local government structures were institutionalised and political space created for marginalised groups long before the 1992 amendment that made panchayati raj institutions (PRIs) constitutionally mandatory.<sup>1</sup> Despite this, local governance in Karnataka has not become fully formalised. At the village level, elected grama panchayats continue to coexist with customary village councils (CVCs), which are rooted in traditional practices, values and power relations. It is widely believed that customary institutions are instruments of caste dominance, oppressive in nature and shrinking in the face of modernity, especially with the introduction of formal, elected, local grama panchayats. While these perceptions are not completely wrong, the research indicates that the picture is more complex.

In reality, CVCs

- (1) generally are inter-caste institutions consisting of caste leaders of different caste groups represented in the community and act as forums of deliberation with an emphasis on compromise rather than simple rule enforcement.
- (2) in addition to enforcing “traditional” rules and norms, also perform a range of useful functions at the village level, often in a non-repressive manner.
- (3) rather than disappearing in the face of modernity, often interact in a positive manner with the so-called modern, formal local institutions that are said to be replacing them.

This indicates that local governance in Karnataka is a complex and contested site where formal and informal local governance institutions complement each other in some instances and are in conflict in others.

The objective of this paper is to unpack the dynamics of local governance in Karnataka by studying the interaction between two sets of rural institutions, (a) the formal, elected “grama panchayats” (GPs), mandated by the 73rd amendment to the Indian Constitution in 1992, that typically cover a group of natural villages; and (b) the informal, long standing, village level CVCs, which undertake dispute resolution and a wide range of other activities at the level of the individual natural village. On the basis of field research in 30 villages in Karnataka, this paper tries to present a more holistic picture of CVCs, including their role in village governance and service delivery (Section I) and the ways in which they interact with grama panchayats (Section II). The concluding section analyses the implications of this interaction and its influence on local democracy in Karnataka.

## I

### Local Governance in Karnataka

Karnataka is one of the better developed states in India. Land reforms and other developmental initiatives and opportunities aimed at backward classes and dalits in the 1980s created a society that is not as polarised as in some of the other states in India. This has led to the formation of a fairly cohesive society [Manor 1997]. A less well known fact about Karnataka relates to its long experimentation with decentralisation. Attempts to devolve powers to local bodies had been initiated even before independence [Natraj and Ananthpur 2003]. A serious effort to decentralise political structures in Karnataka came about in the 1980s. The first major landmark in Karnataka was the 1983 Act, which introduced a two-tier, elected sub-state level governance structure. A notable feature was 25 per cent reservation for women in these bodies even before this was mandated by the Constitution. Elections under this Act were held in 1987. The 1983 Act was substituted by a new law in 1993 (the Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act, 1993) to accommodate the mandatory provisions brought in by the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution. The 1993 Act provides for a three-tier structure –

zilla panchayat (district level), taluk panchayat (block level) and grama panchayat (village level).

### **Grama Panchayats**

Of the three tiers of PRIs, grama panchayat is the most important tier as it is directly involved in local governance, especially given its proximity to the rural population.

Some of the key features of grama panchayats in Karnataka are as follows:

- Democratically elected bodies
- Elections conducted once in five years
- Constituted for a group of villages (5,000-7,000 population) with one representative for every 400 population
- Thirty-three per cent seats reserved for women and 33 per cent seats reserved for OBCs
- Reservation of seats for SCs and STs in proportion to their population
- Reservation for the posts of president and vice president
- Tied and untied funds from the state and central governments
- Vested with powers of taxation

Given that grama panchayats have become institutionalised and influential, one would expect CVCs at the village level in Karnataka to have become defunct and faded away. In fact it is generally believed that the “traditional” village panchayats, studied and documented by Ishwaran (1968), Srinivas (1987) and others no longer exist in Karnataka. Village elites, instead of the village panchayat, are now seen as mediators of power relations and influencing the process of local governance [Inbanathan 2000]. But field research in 30 villages from three different districts<sup>2</sup> of Karnataka indicates that CVCs are not only prevalent but also quite active in all 30 villages. Rather than declining, CVCs continue to be ubiquitous and influential.

### **Customary Village Councils<sup>3</sup>**

CVCs are one among a variety of local institutions, structured mainly around caste, that exist in Indian villages. This is true of Karnataka also. The type of local institutions range from caste panchayats and street panchayats to CVCs. Of all these local institutions, CVCs are the most important category of institutions from a democracy and governance perspective mainly because intra-village caste panchayats and/or street panchayats<sup>4</sup> (for a single street or a group of streets) operate at sub-village level and have limited authority – restricted to a caste group in the case of caste panchayats or limited to the population of a street or few streets in the case of street panchayats. But the CVC is an apex body with jurisdiction over the entire village. These are not formal political institutions which have a set of clearly delineated responsibilities. Rather they are better comprehended as a “pattern of dialectic, decision and action” [Mandelbaum 1970]. CVCs play a central role in village governance by maintaining social order and ensuring community harmony and thus fostering village solidarity. CVCs are long standing institutions that draw their legitimacy from traditions and customs and are quite distinct from the modern associations that are formed as part of external interventions such as user committee groups and micro credit groups for a specific purpose. However, leaders of the CVC are often found represented in “modern” local bodies such as watershed committees, water and sanitation committees and forest committees.

Customary village councils go under a wide variety of local names in Karnataka. In the southern part of the state, particularly in Mysore district, CVCs are known locally as ‘panchayati’ (council), ‘halli panchayati’ (village council), ‘nadu’ or ‘nadu panchayati’ (regional council), ‘nyaya panchayati’ (justice council) or even ‘nyaya samiti’ (justice committee). In northern Karnataka, particularly in the area covered by the former Dharwad district, the terms ‘pancharu’ or ‘hireru’ (village elders) are prevalent, while in one village the CVC is known as the ‘civic board’. In Raichur district the normal term is ‘daiva’ (god). However, for the purpose of this paper I will refer to them as customary village councils (CVCs).

Unlike grama panchayats, CVCs function at the village level and a CVC has authority only over the “natural” village within which it operates. Typically the jurisdiction of a single grama panchayat may include those of several CVCs. In contrast to grama panchayats, the basic structure of CVCs is rooted in tradition and customs. Srinivas (2002:81) describes “village councils” (CVCs) as being “informal and flexible” bodies with “no hard and fast rule about who should constitute them”. He has also observed a variation in membership over space and context. Mandelbaum’s (1970) detailed study of “village panchayats” from different parts of the country indicates a similar flexible pattern of representation. Basically there are two types of CVCs based on the caste composition of the village: (a) in a single caste village the caste panchayat also operates as the CVC; (b) but in a village with multi-caste population, the CVC is a broader forum that includes the caste leaders of all caste groups. Essentially all CVCs have a core set of leaders of various caste groups represented in the village. However, the variation is visible in the extent of inclusion of other members such as SC leaders, GP members and new leaders. Caste leaderships tend to be hereditary titles but the inclusion of new members is based on more modern criteria such as education, mobility, their political linkages, and ability to interact with government officials. There are instances of corrupt or discriminatory CVC leaders being replaced with those that have the respect of the entire village community [Ananthpur 2004].

CVCs broadly have a similar pattern of representation – a set of members or ‘panchas’ headed by a leader, ‘yajamana’. The membership of CVCs is intrinsically embedded in caste and gender. Virtually all panchas are men and are usually the caste leaders<sup>5</sup> of individual caste groups present in the village. The size of a CVC is broadly proportional to the number of caste groups present in a village. Although headed by yajamanas, CVCs are rarely, if ever, controlled by a single, dominant caste leader or big landowner of the village. The CVC is perceived as a more deliberative forum, where decisions are arrived at after discussions and consensus. This egalitarianism is not unique to Karnataka CVCs but also found in the village councils of Rajasthan where “panchas (representatives) of all caste groups sit as equals on the central platform” [Krishna 2002: 136].

A major criticism against CVCs is that they reinforce caste and gender hierarchies. The pattern of representation in the CVC, to a certain extent, confirms this view. This is particularly visible in the marginal representation, in CVCs, of scheduled castes<sup>6</sup> (SC) in some villages and the complete exclusion of women in all the 30 villages. However, there is evidence that many CVCs are adapting to the changing socio-political context. For instance, there is a better representation for SCs in villages with dominant SC population (at least in three villages SC and scheduled tribe

members were the yajamanas of the CVC) and in a couple of villages, female elected members of the formal grama panchayat sometimes were invited to join in the deliberations of the CVC for specific purposes.<sup>7</sup> Krishna finds that in Rajasthan, “though representatives of the scheduled castes (previously known as untouchables) sit some distance apart or even at a lower level from other panchas, they have equal say in the decision, particularly when a person from their own caste group is involved as a party” [Krishna 2002: 136]. In Karnataka, particularly in some villages of Mysore district, SC leaders sit together on the same platform with other caste leaders while resolving disputes. This ability to adapt has made CVCs more pluralistic (with limitations) and also able to project a more modern image to outsiders.

Many CVCs have also begun to widen their base of representation in an attempt to adapt to local democracy. Apart from the core membership (caste based), CVCs include other members many of whom are members of the elected grama panchayats. The emergence of new and parallel leadership at the village level is not a new phenomenon and is commonly found in most rural areas [Bailey 1960; Beteille 1971; Krishna 2002]. But Karnataka seems to differ in that the “new leaders” often find a place on CVCs and play active roles there [Ananthpur 2002].

CVCs do not have any permanent source of income. Donations collected for religious activities and fines imposed on villagers found guilty during dispute resolution processes are the two main sources of income. CVCs’ ability to raise local resources is reported in greater detail elsewhere. In Karnataka CVCs perform a wide range of useful, collective activities. With the formal elected grama panchayat taking care of the development needs of the villagers, CVCs have not become redundant as they provide valuable services to the rural citizens that are not offered by the formal grama panchayats. The following is a list of activities/functions that CVCs generally perform at the village level. CVCs may perform some or all these functions depending upon their influence and degree of activism.

(1) All 30 CVCs were involved in *religious activities*, such as organising religious festivals, rituals and processions (‘jathre’), temple construction, repairs and maintenance. In some villages a separate temple committee is constituted to oversee the preparations for the village jathre. Such temple committees tend to be much more broad based and consist of leaders of the CVC along with other village notables. Most CVCs collect donations – in cash or kind – from the villagers for these activities.

(2) CVCs were involved in *dispute resolution* in all 30 sample villages. They not only arbitrate disputes but also help maintain local law and order and thus play a key role in the internal regulation of villages. The types of disputes that come before the CVCs include petty disputes, thefts, encroachment issues, minor property disputes, drunken brawls and marital problems. Criminal cases are handed over to the police. Villagers do not necessarily see dispute resolution by CVCs as an end point, but rather as the first opportunity for justice because it is quick, affordable and accessible.<sup>8</sup> In most villages, villagers have the option of approaching the police station or the formal legal system if disputes are not satisfactorily resolved there. On an average 80 per cent of local disputes are resolved by the CVCs in these 30 villages. There are also a few instances of pending disputes being brought back from the law courts to the CVC for resolution.

(3) CVCs also provide *social services and support* to those in need. There are a number of cases of CVCs helping destitute or widowed women to get a share of their husbands’ property,

helping widows in the village to get widow pension and/or ration cards, collecting funds from the villagers to help accident victims (generally from poor families), arranging funeral rites for insolvent people, organising mass marriages for the poor, donating stationery to local schoolchildren, or supporting the education of gifted students. CVCs have also played a significant role in maintaining communal harmony in villages with substantial Muslim populations. CVCs in 24 out of 30 sample villages were involved in providing various forms of social support to the villagers. However, these activities are not part of their regular functions and are taken up as and when required.

(4) Some CVCs have also taken up *development activities* using their own initiatives and resources. CVC members have donated or solicited donations of land from villagers or neighbouring villagers for building roads, schools, anganwadis (pre-schools), community halls and/or living quarters for village government functionaries such as local nurses, teachers, doctors. CVCs in 23 out of 30 sample villages were involved in some sort of development activities but the degree of activism varied significantly. CVCs are not always successful in mobilising cash resources for development purposes but are more influential in soliciting donations of land or labour from the villagers for development purposes. This is mainly because there is a general feeling among the villagers that development activities are the responsibility of grama panchayats and should be funded by the government. However, a couple of CVCs have managed to raise resources for their own development projects. Some of the innovative activities of these two CVCs are listed below.

- Constructed an approach road to the village. Villagers also donated tractors, labour and some adjoining land to widen the road.
- Purchased four acres of land for the construction of a high school building in the village, ensuring that female students had easier access to higher education.
- Purchased land for building a small hospital in the village.
- Built a community hall which is available free of charge for local weddings.
- Organised a health camp in the village.
- Repaired and modernised the local school by donating a TV and a sound system.
- Organised a legal awareness camp in association with grama panchayat members, local youth club and women’s groups.<sup>9</sup>
- Concerned with the receding groundwater table in the village, one of the CVCs has purchased 1.5 acres of land, for Rs 50,000 from its own contributions, for constructing a tank. Subsequently, the CVC collected funds from higher tiers of local governments and local MLAs<sup>10</sup> and MPs<sup>11</sup> and further extended this tank by another 2.5 acres. This tank has not only regenerated the water table in the village but also provides a regular source of water for the villagers.

These two are rather exceptional cases as not all CVCs exhibit the same level of innovativeness in initiating development activities. But reports from different parts of the state indicate that CVCs do play a significant role in local development activities and either substitute or complement formal development initiatives.

(5) Another area where the CVC is becoming an important actor in local governance relates to *informal resource mobilisation*. CVCs, in all the villages studied, were involved in some form of informal resource mobilisation. The amount raised per year may range from a minimum of Rs 1,000 to a maximum of Rs 1,00,000. Informal resource mobilisation may include

donations or contributions in cash and kind. Many CVCs maintain bank accounts and submit the expenditure statement to the villagers once a year. Apart from raising resources for religious purposes, CVCs also play an important role in mobilising resources for development projects. Increasingly a number of development projects initiated through the GP now require matching contributions from the villagers. It is here that the CVC's ability to raise local funds comes into play. One such programme is the rural water and sanitation programme, which requires 10 per cent matching grants to be raised by the community. While in a few villages, the CVC has been successful in raising this matching grant, in others the project was not initiated, as the CVC was not involved in the process. Some CVCs have also donated money collected through fines (from the process of dispute resolution) and additional or leftover funds collected for religious festivities for this purpose. However, as mentioned above, there were just two cases of CVCs mobilising local resources on their own for village development.

How are CVC decisions enforced? The CVC leaders I interviewed agree that their decisions, particularly regarding dispute resolution, are not absolutely enforceable. One or other party to the dispute has the option of accessing formal police or judicial channels. CVCs still manage to enforce most of their decisions through social pressure. For example, a person who has openly violated the dictates of the CVC does not find support in the village in times of need or distress unless he or she openly tenders an apology to the CVC for violating its dictates. However, the legitimacy of CVCs and the extent to which they are able to enforce their decisions are somewhat contested. There is a general perception that they no longer enjoy the influence they once did when formal local institutions were relatively weak. But they remain very influential. Villagers, especially women, believe that in a context where they are still distant from the formal law and order mechanisms like the police and the judiciary, there is a need for locally rooted institutions that provide justice and maintain local law and order.

While the institutional structure of CVCs embodies an inherent contradiction to democratic principles, their functional characteristics complement the functions of local democratic institutions. But despite their progressive and functional aspect, as an institution dominated by the village elite, CVCs are largely seen as vehicles for "elite capture" of local democratic institutions and processes. The extent to which this proposition is valid is tested in the next section where I explore the different ways in which CVCs interact with and influence grama panchayats.

## II

### Interaction with Grama Panchayats

In India, the constitutional amendment that mandates local governance has remained silent on the role of informal/customary institutions in local governance. It does, however, make provision to accommodate the tribal laws and customs for tribal dominated regions. In fact special constitutional provisions have been designed to protect the tribal governance structures by bringing the tribal dominant regions under the fifth schedule of the Constitution and providing them a central role in local governance. In 1996, a national level legislation – The Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act 1996 – allowed for the accommodation of the tribal laws and customs in tribal dominated regions.<sup>12</sup> This development came in the wake of objections and

protests that formal, local governance structures as mandated by the Constitution would impede and destroy the tribal ways of life [Mahi Pal 2000]. CVCs do not get similar recognition in the constitutional amendment mandating local governance. This makes the role of the CVCs in formal, local politics in the Indian context somewhat unusual, as they do not have any legally or formally assigned role to play in the process of local democracy. The interaction between CVCs and grama panchayats has remained largely unexplored as these two institutions occupy different spaces, mainly state and non-state spaces. They also operate at different levels – formal and informal. This makes the interaction almost invisible not only to the outsiders but also to the villagers.

CVCs interact with and influence GPs various ways. I have grouped these interactions into two main categories.

- (a) Influence over GP elections (IGPE)
- (b) Involvement in GP activities (IGPA)

*Influencing GP Elections: CVCs try to influence the GP elections*

*by:* (1) Trying to influence the choice of candidates for GP elections – in 29 out of my 30 research villages, CVCs have played a role in influencing the selection of candidates for GP elections held during the years 2000 and 2005. However, the data reported here pertains to the 2000 GP elections. The process of influencing the choice of candidates for elections may take place either before nominations are filed or when they are being finalised. There have been instances of CVCs asking some candidates to withdraw in favour of their own candidates. However, the dictates of the CVC may not always be accepted, as contesting local elections has become a "prestigious" issue to the villagers. This is especially true of the village youth. The CVC, as a village forum, not only exhibits caste and gender monopolies but also has an inherent ageist bias. Village youth, while allowed to participate in the CVC meetings, cannot speak unless permitted by the CVC leaders. Thus the village youth, traditionally excluded from the CVC, have begun to use the GP elections and membership to establish their influence in village politics while the CVC tries to utilise GP elections to extend its sphere of authority. These tensions rather than dissipating are likely to exacerbate in the future. But in situations where contested elections have taken place, villagers admit that most of the successful candidates were those originally chosen by the CVCs.

(2) Trying to contest elections themselves or through their relatives, thus leading to overlap of leadership in both institutions – in 26 out of my 30 villages, some form of overlap of leadership exists. For example, the yajamana of the CVC in one village is also the president of the GP. In another village, a CVC leader was the previous president of the grama panchayat. In the same village, the son of the CVC yajamana is presently a member of the grama panchayat. In a number of villages, panchas are also members of the grama panchayat. The extent of overlap of leadership for all 30 villages is around 32 per cent of all GP seats. Overlap of leadership also occurs with higher tiers of local governance such as taluk panchayats and zilla panchayats. However, this aspect has not been included in our research as elections to taluk and zilla panchayats are contested on the basis of party politics and I have not investigated the influence of party politics on the choice of candidates.

(3) Ensuring that their candidates hold the positions of president or vice president of GPs where possible – CVCs have played an important role in ensuring that elected GP members from their village get access to the positions of president or vice president

of the GP. Even in cases where CVCs have not been fully successful in influencing the choice of candidates for GP elections, they have played a decisive role in ensuring that the position of president or vice president is allocated to their village. However this is mainly dependent upon the type of reservation that is applicable to the particular GP. In 13 out of 30 sample villages the CVC had played a role in securing the position of president and/or vice president for the candidates from their village. Overall, about 28 per cent of positions of president or vice president were held by either CVC leaders or candidates selected by them in 30 sample villages.

(4) Trying to control election outcomes by encouraging uncontested elections—CVCs have tried, where possible, to concretise their choice of candidates by trying to ensure “unanimous” (uncontested) elections. In 18 out of my 30 sample villages “unanimous” elections took place in 2000: In four cases all the seats were uncontested, and in 16 villages at least one or more seats were uncontested and a total of 38 per cent of GP seats were filled up through uncontested elections in the 30 research villages. This appears to be in accordance with the general trend in Karnataka. In the 2000 grama panchayat elections, 26 per cent seats of all GP seats in Karnataka were filled by “unanimous” elections [*The Hindu* 2000]. However, CVCs’ influence in controlling election outcomes by ensuring unanimous elections is not absolute but subject to a range of factors both external and internal. Involvement of political parties, reservation of seats, village youth aspiring for leadership positions, and increased awareness in local political participation and representation have all contributed to a visible decrease in the percentage of unanimous elections. A preliminary look at the results of the 2005 GP elections reveals that the number of seats filled up through uncontested elections in these villages has come down significantly.

*Involvement in GP activities:* In almost all the villages I studied, the CVC leaders play an important role in negotiating with the formal, local representatives and institutions for benefits to the village even where they have had little involvement in the selection of formal local representatives. CVC leaders and members play an important role in the (1) implementation of development projects and (2) selection of beneficiaries for anti-poverty schemes. (1) Implementation of development projects: By and large the CVC supports its GP members in ensuring that development projects allocated through the grama panchayat are delivered to the village. Consultations with the local leaders, regarding the implementation and location of development projects in the village, by the GP members are most common. Often the CVC influences decisions related to the location of roads, street lights, water taps or drainage. The CVC leaders constantly put pressure on the elected members for development projects such as construction or repairs of school buildings and community halls, provision of drinking water, roads, and drainage. This was evident in all 30 study villages. CVC leaders also monitor their performance and erring or inefficient elected representatives are often pulled up.

In addition, the CVC leaders also try to improve the village infrastructure by soliciting donations, in cash or kind, for village development as mentioned above. The involvement of the CVC in the implementation of development projects can be a positive feature of local democracy as it encourages local participation and decision-making in the development process. But this intervention assumes negative undertones if these decisions are

biased in favour of the village elite as this has adverse implications for the welfare of the village poor.

(2) Selection of beneficiaries for anti-poverty schemes: An important aspect of the influence deals with decisions impacting directly on the poor. The process of selection of beneficiaries for anti-poverty schemes takes place in the grama sabha – the village assembly. All adults in the village are members of the grama sabha and are allowed (and expected) to participate in this process. Those representing the CVC often use this formal space to influence decisions regarding the selection of beneficiaries. The CVC leaders feel they are better placed to identify beneficiaries as they are better attuned to the local reality. The involvement of CVCs in this process often makes it more transparent. But this democratic decision-making process gets subverted when it is used to strengthen the CVC leaders’ position in the village, by favouring those that support them. Field research indicates both these two types of outcomes.

A comparison of the interaction between CVCs and GPs in 30 sample villages indicates a wide inter village variation in the level of interaction. CVCs also seem to be more active in more developed districts like Mysore and Dharwad compared to Raichur, which is one of the backward districts. However, my sample is too sparse to analyse this statistically.

*Villagers’ perceptions of CVCs’ interaction with GP:* The field data depicts a rather negative view of CVCs as institutions undermining local democracy. People representing the CVC, it appears, not only influence the choice of candidates, but also try to control election outcomes by ensuring uncontested elections and where possible attempt to occupy formal positions. The impact of this influence is especially visible in women’s re-election to grama panchayats [*Ananthpur* 2002]. By denying rural citizens a chance to participate in free and fair elections, CVCs seem to be subverting the process of democracy and capturing local democratic institutions. This view, by implication, perceives rural citizens as mute, passive recipients of this process.

In order to assess the awareness and perceptions of villagers regarding the interaction between CVCs and GPs, a perception survey was carried out in all 30 villages. On the basis of random sampling, a total of 2,183 villagers (of whom 51 per cent were male and 49 per cent were female) were interviewed. Villagers’ awareness regarding the role played by CVCs in influencing GP elections as well as their involvement in GP activities was assessed. A series of cross tabulations was carried out to study the levels of knowledge of different groups of people regarding the interaction between CVCs and GPs. Variables such as gender, caste, occupation, age and literacy were cross tabulated with levels of knowledge. In general, cross tabulation indicates that independent variables such as literacy, occupation, caste, and landholding make little difference to the levels of knowledge. The perception survey of villagers from 30 villages indicates that villagers are quite aware of the role played by the CVC in local elections. Nearly 74 per cent of the surveyed villagers were aware that CVCs were involved in selection of candidates for GP elections. Villagers were not only aware of the CVC’s role in local elections but also, at times, supported and, at others, opposed the CVC’s influence over local elections. The role played by CVCs in the election process is perceived by the villagers in different ways: as making the democratic process more efficient; as reducing unnecessary expenditure on election campaigning; or maintaining community peace as elections are seen as fostering

factionalism within villages. Even the overlap of leadership is not perceived as “elite capture” by the villagers but a way of choosing effective and efficient leaders, those capable of performing and serving the village better by bringing development to the village. Unanimous elections were effected and accepted are seen by the villagers as reducing costs (campaigning expenses), time and effort.

Equally the influence of the formal processes and institutions on the informal cannot be disregarded. As grama panchayats have become institutionalised and influential, villagers have begun to consider contesting local elections as being important and prestigious. This has led to an increased interest in local political participation and representation. Consequently a slow resistance to CVCs’ influence over local election processes is emerging. In a couple of villages, the CVC yajamanas, who belong to the dominant caste groups, have little interest in controlling nominations as all the seats in the village are reserved for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. In another case, there was opposition within the village to the list of “consensus candidates” as there were a number of villagers interested in contesting elections. In yet another village, some people did not accept the unanimous choice of a CVC yajamana’s son as the candidate for the grama panchayat, and nominated another candidate. Although the CVC yajamana’s son went on to win, the show of dissent itself indicates the changes that reforms from above, in the form of reservation of seats and the process of democratic decentralisation, have initiated in the rural regions. This view is further substantiated by the fact that there are at least a couple of instances of panchas or their kin losing the elections to candidates who were not part of the CVC. This indicates the increasing importance of creating formal spaces as it has the potential to act as a counter to the local political monopolies that CVCs often represent.

Villagers do not view these two institutions as competitive but as complementary, each serving different purposes and needs. This view is clearly reflected in their institutional preferences.<sup>13</sup> Cross tabulation of different variables such as gender, age, caste, and education with preference shows some interesting results. In general, there is a clear gender difference in preference. (a) Women prefer CVCs more – 36 per cent as compared with 17 per cent for men. (b) 40 per cent of men prefer GPs to CVCs, but a slightly lesser percentage of men – 35 per cent – want both CVC and GP.

Two of the main reasons cited for wanting “both CVC and GP” are that (1) the CVCs offer useful services not offered by GPs and (2) the CVCs make the formal process more transparent and accountable. Women prefer the CVC as they feel that it provides local law and order in the village. Women’s clear preference for CVCs, despite the fact that they find no representation in CVCs, and the general shift towards wanting both institutions with increase in literacy indicates that the important role played by CVCs in local governance is often not recognised by “outsiders” who view them as oppressive and moribund institutions.

In addition, qualitative and other data collected through interviews and focus group discussions illustrate the impact of formal processes in not only reforming CVCs but also producing better development and governance outcomes. For instance:

– CVCs with high and synergistic interaction with grama panchayats are also engaged in initiating their own development activities and engaging in public private partnerships with

formal institutions for development projects. CVCs are taking on new roles that involve interaction with formal institutions. Some do more than work with and through elected grama panchayats: in relating to higher levels of government and electoral politics, they have become significant actors in their own right. CVCs are supplementing and complementing formal development initiatives.

– The constructive interaction between CVCs and grama panchayats has also positive implications for local governance. Focus group discussions with poorer groups in the villages were carried out to assess their awareness and opinion about the programmes of the grama panchayat and the involvement of the CVC leaders in this. Awareness and satisfaction with grama panchayat programmes and activities were high in villages with high IIGP compared to others. In these villages, the villagers also reported that corruption, an important indicator of governance, was less because of the involvement of the CVC leaders in grama panchayat activities. Villages with low IIGP had high reports of corruption by grama panchayat members and less satisfaction with the activities of the grama panchayats.

### III Concluding Comments

Research in Karnataka indicates that CVCs play an important role in local governance not only as social institutions but also as agencies that impact the development process. In a context where local governance is being formalised and decentralised up to the village level, these institutions assume importance as they play a significant role in local governance.

Two key findings that stand out from this research are: (a) CVCs coexist with, interact with and influence GPs and this influence is not always negative. What we see in Karnataka is a “hybrid” situation. Villagers are not only aware of this interaction but also seem comfortable with this hybridity of having access to both institutions. Rather than conflicting, CVCs in Karnataka seem to complement the initiatives of grama panchayats.<sup>14</sup> (b) CVCs are more active in interacting with and influencing GPs in better developed districts compared to less developed districts. This indicates that CVCs are not disappearing but reinventing themselves with development and modernity.


The notion that development or progress is associated with defined patterns of institutional change has a long history. The modernisation theory of the 1950s and 1960s was but one highly articulated version of that general pattern. So too has been the recent insistence by most international aid and development

**Table: Villagers’ Attitudes to Local Governance Institutions**  
Respondents’ Preferences for Customary Village Councils (CVCs) and/or Grama Panchayats (GPs)  
(Per cent)

	CVC Only	GP Only	Both CVC and GP	Neither	Don't know	Total
All respondents	27	32	27	9	5	100
Female respondents	36	25	20	12	7	100
Literate respondents	22	36	34	5	3	100
Illiterate respondents	30	29	22	12	7	100

Source: Open ended question about adult villagers’ preferences were asked in the baseline survey conducted in 2002-2003. We have interpreted and grouped the responses.

agencies that “good government” in developing countries is in large degree a matter of adopting certain standard political and legal institutions. These assertions of the value of what is sometimes termed a form of “institutional monoculture” inevitably generate counterreactions. Some of the most productive counterreactions are based on empirical research. They demonstrate (a) that dichotomous notions of bad (= old) versus good (= new) institutions often leave us unable to explain effective institutional performance; and (b) that it is generally very important not to confuse the form of institutions with the functions that they carry out. Effective institutions can often be characterised in terms of “institutional dualism”: the combination of putatively “traditional” (= old) with “modern” (= new) norms, relationships and practices [Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith 2005]. CVCs in Karnataka could be viewed as an example of institutional dualism, and, for practical policy purposes, treated in the same way that Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith (2005: 2) enjoin us to think about the treatment of dualistic institutions generally: to distinguish those that “serve, or at least do not contradict, the majority’s needs and aspirations, from similar looking organisations that block or even reverse improvements in economic performance and social welfare”; and to recognise “the hidden positive functions of certain dualistic practices, such as giving poor people access to resources or allowing them an informal voice in the political system”.

The purpose of this paper is to present a clearer understanding of the local institutional arrangements in Karnataka and the ways in which they interact with each other. Evidence from the field indicates that the CVCs influence local democracy in many ways and this merits further enquiry, especially in the context where policy-makers, donor agencies and NGOs have been investing resources, both financial and human, to strengthen formal, elected local institutions. For this investment to be productive a better and deeper understanding of the dynamics of local governance is essential. 

Email: kripa@mids.ac.in

## Notes

[This paper is the product of an ongoing research project ‘Formal and Informal Local Governance in India’ supported by the Centre for the Future State, Institute of Development Studies, Sussex, UK. Data analysis is in progress and the findings reported here are preliminary and tentative.]

- 1 The 1992 constitutional amendment (73rd) established an elected three tier government structure at the sub-state level known as panchayat raj institutions.
- 2 10 villages each from Mysore, Dharwad and Raichur districts were chosen to study the interaction between the formal and informal local governance institutions.
- 3 For a detailed description of CVCs, see ‘Rivalry or Synergy? Formal and Informal Local Governance in India’, IDS Working Paper No 226, June 2004.
- 4 I came across street panchayats in only one big village where the informal local governance institution (ILGI) was relatively weak.
- 5 Some caste groups in a few villages have a leadership, usually hereditary but at times elected, and accounts (of funds collected by that particular caste group for religious and other purposes) that are checked by the people belonging to that particular caste group around every Hindu New Year. Caste panchayats have jurisdiction over all families belonging to that caste in the village. These organisations are often quite formal and institutionalised.

- 6 Those belonging to caste groups previously considered as “untouchables”.
- 7 Especially disputes related to women.
- 8 While in most cases villagers respect the ILGI as an institution capable of delivering fair judgment, there are instances where ILGIs have been accused of being biased and corrupt.
- 9 One of the CVC leaders in this village, who is also a practising lawyer, initiated this legal awareness camp by linking up with the district legal cell, which gives free legal aid to the citizens. A range of issues such as Hindu personal law, Muslim personal law, legal aspects related to land revenue, vehicles and property rights were discussed. The villagers not only participated in large numbers but also were interested in making this an annual event.
- 10 Each member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) is given Rs 40 lakh as constituency development fund.
- 11 Each member of Parliament (MP) has access to Rs 2 crore for development activities in his/her constituency.
- 12 India has a significant tribal population. It is estimated that they constitute about 8 per cent of the total population. Quotas are provided for the tribal population in various spheres to make the governance and development process more inclusive.
- 13 I had asked an open ended question as to which institution people preferred and why. On the basis of the answers given I categorised them into five groups: (a) don’t know, (b) only ILGI, (c) only GP, (d) both ILGI and GP (wanting both the institutions), and, lastly, (e) neither.
- 14 Preliminary regression analysis indicates that ILGIs are most active and interactive where GP headquarters are located in the same villages as ILGIs and where these GPs are effective and efficient. Here GPs’ efficiency is measured by their revenue raising as assessed through their total own revenue collection and their outcomes/outputs assessed through people’s awareness and satisfaction with GP performance and activities.

## References

- Ananthpur, K (2002): ‘Interfaces in Local Governance in Karnataka’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XXXVII, No 42, October 19-25.
- (2004): ‘Rivalry or Synergy? Formal and Informal Local Governance in Rural India’, IDS Working Paper No 226, June.
- Bailey, F G (1960): *Tribe, Caste and Nation: A Study of Political Activity and Political Change in Highland Orissa*, Manchester University Press, Manchester.
- Beteille, A (1971): *Caste, Class, and Power Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London.
- Brinkerhoff, D W and A Goldsmith (2005): ‘Institutional Dualism and International Development: A Revisionist Interpretation of Good Governance’, *Administration and Society*, Vol 37, No 2, May, pp 199-224.
- Inbanathan, A (2000): ‘Power, Patronage and Accountability in the Panchayats of Karnataka’, Working Paper No 68, Institute of Social and Economic Change, Bangalore.
- Ishwaran, K (1968): *Shivapura: A South Indian Village*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.
- Krishna, A (2002): *Active Social Capital*, Columbia University Press, New York.
- Mahi Pal (2000): ‘Panchayats in Fifth Scheduled Areas’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XXXV, No 19, May 6-10.
- Mandelbaum, D G (1970): *Society in India*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay.
- Manor, J (1997): ‘Karnataka: Caste, Class, Dominance and Politics in a Cohesive Society’ in Sudipta Kaviraj (ed), *Politics in India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi.
- Natraj, V K, and K Ananthpur (2003): *Delegation to Devolution: Karnataka*, MIDS Working Paper No 184, February.
- Srinivas, M N (1987): *The Dominant Caste and Other Essays*, Oxford University Press, Delhi.
- (2002): *The Collected Essays*, Oxford University Press, Delhi.
- The Hindu* (2000): ‘Gram Panchayats Election Results Declared’, March 1, Bangalore.