

# IDS RESEARCH SUMMARY

Research findings at a glance from the  
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## Ambiguous Institutions

### Traditional Governance and Local Democracy in Rural India

New research challenges the view that Customary Village Councils in India are bastions of caste and gender inequality. This paper highlights the variety of such councils, their dynamism and their increasing pluralism.

#### Introduction

Customary village councils (CVCs) in India were once written off as disappearing relics. However, recently it has become apparent that they remain alive and well and are adopting new, more pluralistic and democratic, roles. They are operating effectively alongside and within the new formal state apparatus, and providing valuable public goods and services. Although CVCs are widespread throughout India, there are enormous inter-village variations in activity levels. This paper sets out to describe, quantify and explain those different activity levels. It also examines why CVCs are so buoyant in at least one part of modern India.

#### Main findings

After considering the conceptual and historical background to local, non-state, territorial governance in general, in colonial societies, and in contemporary India, the paper looks in detail at the form and function of CVCs in the southern Indian state of Karnataka, and at why they are proving so successful.

CVCs are non-state, unofficial, village-level *panchayats* (councils). They are male-dominated and caste-based, and have traditionally exercised distributional authority within the village arena and acted as arbiters and enforcers of caste and gender dominance. Social scientists researching in rural India, including prominent Indian academics, still tend to see CVCs in this light and to regard them as not important, as a disappearing residue of tradition, as essentially caste-based, and as coercive and supportive of caste and gender inequalities.

The reality, however, would appear to be that, post-Independence, rather than disappearing, CVCs have remained active but have changed form and focus. In particular, they interact intensively with the new, higher-level, elected local councils (*Grama Panchayats*). Instead of looking inwards and concentrating on intra-village affairs, CVCs have become more focused on exercising influence on behalf of the village, and in competition with other villages, with the local *Grama Panchayat*. In this process they have

become more pluralistic in composition and are taking on a wider range of local government functions, providing collective goods and services that are much valued by villagers. Women are, for instance, occasionally invited to participate in CVC meetings, particularly when there are agenda items of specific interest to women. And as well as more traditional roles such as dispute resolution and the organisation of religious activities, CVCs may now also raise funds to match state funding of development programmes or even engage in autonomous development projects.

The type of functions performed, however, and the level of activism vary enormously among CVCs. The authors studied 30 villages in Karnataka, south India, investigating the number of categories of activities undertaken by each CVC and the intensity of engagement in each activity. The clear pattern emerged that levels of activity, in all categories, increased in line with greater wealth and levels of development. In seeking an explanation for this association, variables

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drawn from what may be loosely labelled ‘collective action and peasant economy’ theories were applied to the analysis but no observable linear connection between CVC activity levels and such variables could be established. However, CVCs were found to be most active when located close to the headquarters of their local *Grama Panchayat* and when the *Grama Panchayat* was more active in revenue-raising. It would seem, therefore, that the availability of desirable resources tends to stimulate CVC activity in competition for those resources.

## Key research findings

- Customary village councils have been written off as anachronisms, and as being coercive and supportive of caste and gender inequalities.
- CVCs are becoming more, not less, significant in response to strengthening democratic local government.
- CVCs are becoming more pluralistic and democratic, and provide valuable public goods and services.
- CVCs are most active in wealthy areas and where interaction is greatest with the local *Grama Panchayat*.
- CVCs are successful because their authority and control over material resources are limited, and they therefore have to earn their authority.

## Conclusions

Social scientists researching in rural India since 1980 seem to have overlooked how widespread, active and important CVCs are. Even many prominent Indian researchers still see CVCs as caste organisations serving caste purposes. In fact, assumptions that rural society is still deeply caste-based obscure observations of collective action overcoming such traditional restrictions. In reality, CVCs are becoming more rather than less significant in response to the strengthening of democratic local government. While *Grama Panchayats* are a channel for public resources, CVCs are an obvious potential instrument to influence access to those resources. And in order to effectively represent their populations in political activity above the village level, CVCs have to make themselves more representative of those populations. They have had therefore to become more pluralistic and democratic. And they are so successful because their authority and control over material resources are so limited and so contingent upon performance that they can be trusted with power.

## Credits

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