

**Research Summary #8 - Rivalry or Synergy? Formal and Informal Local  
Governance in Rural India**  
By Kripa Ananthpur (2004)

*This paper forms part of a five year research programme under the Centre for the Future State, based at the Institute of Development Studies. Below is a summary of principal findings. Further details are available at [www.ids.ac.uk/gdr/cfs/index.html](http://www.ids.ac.uk/gdr/cfs/index.html)*

**Introduction**

The paper examines the role played by traditional village organisations in the state of Karnataka (South India), which the author refers to as informal local governance institutions (ILGIs). Although often perceived as oppressive, the paper suggests that ILGIs also have progressive features, and perform a range of useful collective functions at village level. Rather than shrinking in the face of modernity, ILGIs have found ways to interact, often constructively, with the newer formal, elected local governance institutions - the *Grama Panchayats*. The paper explores the nature of this interaction, and considers the particular history of ILGIs in India which helps to explain why they remain active and retain legitimacy in spite of having no formal legal status.

**ILGIs in Karnataka: Composition and Functions**

ILGIs are informal, caste-based village organisations found throughout Karnataka (and indeed more widely in India). While they take diverse forms, they also have common features, and are highly institutionalised. The core membership is composed of village caste leaders (all men), but new members are also being included on account of their political connections, education and mobility. ILGIs can be oppressive, reinforcing traditional norms in relation to caste and gender; but the author suggests that they are also in some real sense representative bodies with procedures based on negotiation and compromise. They perform a range of functions including organising and raising funds for religious events; local dispute resolution; providing support for the destitute; promoting communal harmony with the Muslim population; and raising funds for state development projects or local economic development. There is evidence that their role in maintaining law and order is particularly valued by more vulnerable groups, including women.

**Interaction with Formal Local Governance Institutions**

The Constitutional amendment which created the elected local bodies, including the *Grama Panchayats*, gave no recognition to the existence of ILGIs. Villagers tend to view ILGIs as mainly social institutions, and *Grama Panchayats* as mainly political. However in practice there are high levels of interaction between the two, and the influence is two-way: ILGIs have an impact on *Grama Panchayats*, and vice versa. ILGIs influence elections to the *Grama Panchayat* by controlling nominations and trying to ensure, where possible, that elections are unanimous. The outcome can be positive (if effective candidates are selected) or negative (if ILGIs act to stop women being re-elected, and thus building political skills). ILGI leaders play an important role in negotiating with the *Grama Panchayats* over development projects, which can benefit the village as a whole, and keep elected representatives under pressure to perform. But widespread overlap of membership between the two bodies can also

weaken accountability, and enable ILGI leaders to influence decisions in their own interests. ILGIs play a role in the selection of beneficiaries for anti-poverty programmes, which can ensure that decisions are based on local knowledge, and that benefits go to those who really need them; alternatively it can provide patronage opportunities for ILGI leaders. *Grama Panchayats* also influence ILGIs. There is evidence that the creation of formal, elected local government bodies with reservation of seats for women and vulnerable groups has raised awareness and increased interest in local political participation, and in some cases has led to contested elections. The requirement to raise matching funds for state-led development projects may be stimulating the role of ILGIs in resource mobilisation. In short, ILGIs are responding to new demands and needs that have emerged with the creation of the *Grama Panchayats*. The interaction between them can be positive or negative, but either way it deserves more attention.

### **India in Comparative Perspective**

The paper considers why ILGIs have survived and prospered in India. Unlike similar organisations elsewhere they perform a wide range of functions; and they have adapted to long term social and political change, notably democratization. Positive interaction is helped by the fact that the jurisdiction of the *Grama Panchayat* encompasses a number of 'natural' villages, which therefore 'nest' neatly into the formal structures. India's long democratic tradition and popular acceptance of ILGIs has promoted tolerance of them by the state. They have limited authority (unlike traditional bodies elsewhere they are only marginally involved in decisions about land rights), which helps them to avoid controversy. The fact that villagers have access to formal justice institutions means that there are constraints on the way ILGIs exercise their authority. Finally, there is an element of pluralism and choice in the selection of ILGI leaders, helped by the multi-caste nature of villages in Karnataka, which makes them less likely than ILGIs in North India to become a mechanism for entrenching the interests of a dominant caste.

### **Conclusion**

ILGIs in India have two faces. While not ignoring some of their negative features, the paper concludes that better understanding of the nature of interaction between ILGIs and formal elected institutions would strengthen the ability of local policymakers and social movements to promote the interests of the poor and disadvantaged.