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Ambiguous Institutions: Traditional Governance and Local Democracy in Rural South India

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ABSTRACT *In India, 'customary village councils' are generally believed to be disappearing vestiges of a pre-democratic, hierarchical socio-political order. However, while remaining informal and maintaining a low public profile, in Karnataka state they are actively taking on new roles, adapting to the democratic, competitive political environment, becoming more representative and pluralist, and providing a wide range of services that are highly valued by the populations they serve. The relationship of customary village councils to the formal, elected local councils (Grama Panchayats) – and to electoral democracy generally – is more synergistic and complementary than competitive.*

I. Introduction

Are 'traditional' local governance institutions compatible with modern citizenship and formal electoral democracy? In a wide variety of specific manifestations, that question has, over much of the past century, cycled in and out of the public policy agendas of the many countries whose contemporary political institutions were shaped by combinations of colonial rule and political mobilisation against colonialism. The most vivid and least ambiguous answer to that question lies in Mamood Mamdani's (1996) characterisation of those Africans who languished under the authority of 'traditional chiefs' as mere *subjects*, in contrast to the *citizens* who benefited from a direct, unmediated relationship with formal state institutions. Mamdani's position is certainly preferable to that of authors who romanticise 'traditional authority' (for example, Keulder, 1998; Oomen, 2000). However, his dichotomy does not stand up well in the face of empirical research: formal state institutions may be more repressive and less responsive than 'traditional chiefs'

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(O’Laughlin, 2000; Logan, 2009). During the 1999–2001 and 2002–2003 rounds of the Afrobarometer public opinion surveys, information was collected from over 35,000 respondents in 15 African countries in face to face interviews. Analysing the data, Logan (2009) found that about two-thirds of respondents acknowledged a ‘traditional leader’. Respondents generally valued their traditional leaders, and had a slightly better opinion of them than of formal governance institutions. Even more interesting from our perspective is the positive correlation she identified between attitudes to traditional leadership and the quality of formal governance. Comparing across countries, the better the opinion people had of their formal governance institutions, the more highly they thought of their traditional leaders. Further, individuals with positive orientations to democracy were just as likely to value traditional leaders as those with negative orientations. Logan summarises: ‘Rather than finding themselves trapped between two competing spheres of political authority, Africans appear to have adapted to the hybridisation of their political institutions more seamlessly than many have anticipated or assumed’ (2009: 101–102). Williams’ (2004) conclusions on chieftaincy in South Africa point in the same direction.

In this paper, we present analogous conclusions, from deeper and more focused field research, about what we term ‘customary village councils’ (henceforth CVCs) in the South Indian state of Karnataka. In India, CVCs generally are represented and understood, by outsiders, as archaic, illegal and tyrannical bodies that exist to enforce caste and gender hierarchies, have no place in a modern democracy, and anyway are disappearing (Ananth Pur, 2007).¹ We continually observed and measured the activities of CVCs in 30 villages in Karnataka state between 2001 and 2005, and in this paper use the data to explain variations in activity levels. Our two main conclusions parallel Logan’s on traditional leaders in Africa: traditional local institutions are valued by the people they govern, and they interact synergistically with formal local democratic institutions. There is an important difference between these two categories of traditional institutions: African traditional leaders are individuals; CVCs in India are corporate, representative bodies, not radically different in character from the formal, elected local councils with which they interact. We find substantial detailed evidence of the organisational hybridity about which Logan speculates: in Karnataka state, CVCs are becoming more like formal elected local councils: less hierarchical and exclusive, and more representative and pluralistic. They are also often very formal in procedure, and almost always highly accountable, especially for the ways in which they use money. There is little reason to fear that these putatively ‘traditional’ councils are undermining democracy at local level, and good reason to believe that they are helping to extend and sustain it.²

The overview in Section II of some variants of local non-state territorial governance sets the context for our research. In Section III we describe the data collection process and outline what CVCs are in Karnataka and how they function. Section IV provides details of how we measured CVC activities and presents the results of our statistical analysis. We conclude, in Section V, with a discussion of why CVCs are thriving in Karnataka, that is, why they remain active and function in relatively benign, pluralistic and inclusive and accountable ways. There are two main components to our explanation. One is that CVCs can be trusted to exercise considerable local authority because the opportunities for them to abuse these

powers for personal or small-group gain are limited. Their clients have exit options. CVCs in India do not control access to land or other valuable assets, and, in relation to their judicial functions in particular, they face a competitive, pluralist, institutional environment. The second part of the explanation is that CVCs have increasingly significant roles as gatekeepers between their populations and the higher-level electoral and bureaucratic institutions that offer access to growing volumes of public money. CVCs have adapted to, and found a niche within, India's competitive, clientelistic democratic politics. To effectively represent their populations in political activity above the village level, they have to make themselves legitimate in the eyes of those populations, and actively earn their support.

II. Local Territorial Governance in Comparative Context

Modern states tend to engage in direct, unmediated relationships with their citizens. The less mediated that relationship, the more inclined we are to think of them as 'modern' (Waldner, 1999: 21). Yet no polity can entirely succeed in abolishing intermediaries between households and the state, and dispensing completely with a degree of informal, non-state provision of local territorial governance. Populations that occupy a common local space have common interests and needs. Resources need to be mobilised, allocated or managed; disputes resolved; threatening intrusions repelled; external authorities dealt with; and ceremonies and collective celebrations organised. All polities need to reach an accommodation between the authority of the formal state apparatus and the influence of local, non-state institutions. In poorer countries, the character of informal (or quasi formal) local territorial governance is likely to be contentious, because more is at stake.³

First, in agrarian, pastoral, mining or poor urban environments, there is more overlap between location of residence and location of livelihood and of routine social interaction, and therefore more local material, status and symbolic issues to be resolved: irrigation systems to maintain; fishing practices to be agreed; rangelands to police; property and interpersonal disputes to be settled; collective services to be organised; and status competitions to be resolved or negotiated.

Second, in poorer countries the state apparatus is often less extensive. Agencies of the state are less likely to have the resources, staff and organisation to penetrate to the very local level, and there to enforce state law, collect taxes, allocate mining rights and liquor licences, resolve disputes, register births and deaths, provide relief to the poor, dig drains, or promote national identities. The relationship between distinctively state organisations and citizens is more likely to be mediated by some other institution with a fuzzy or ambiguous status, which to some degree performs the local functions of the state without a very clear or formal mandate. To the extent that these informal institutions are rooted in local social, economic and political hierarchies, and operate undemocratically, they can generate scepticism, contention and hostility.

Third, informal local governance institutions in poor countries often have visible roots in forms of indirect rule under colonialism. The literature on European colonial rule in Africa, Asia and Latin America is replete with studies of how these local – and mainly rural – mediating arrangements were constructed and how their existence in turn reflected back on local society (Frykenberg, 1965; Baker and

Washbrook, 1975; Breman, 1982; Mamdani, 1996). Recall accounts of how European colonial rulers ‘invented’ territorial chiefs in parts of Africa (for example, Ranger, 1983; Mamdani, 1996). Look at the emergence of ‘pluralistic legal systems’ in West Africa, where modern state law competes with the continuing authority of ‘traditional rulers’ to allocate land rights (Crook, 1986; Ntsebeza, 2003a; Ray, 2003). Analogous ‘traditional authorities’, sometimes individuals and sometimes institutions, are found in South Africa (Keulder, 1998; Goodenough, 2002; Ntsebeza, 2003b; Thornton, 2003), Malaysia (Rudner, 1979), Fiji (Watters, 1969), among the indigenous people of the Andes, and elsewhere (Logan, 2009).

In South Asia, toward the end of the colonial period, the agents recruited to exercise indirect state authority at the local level were dominantly individual rather than collective in character: landed families, typically labelled *zamindars*, *jagirdars*, *mudaliyars*, *mirasdars*, and *jotedars*, rather the corporate communities recognised in much of the Andes or in Fiji. One reason was that, in South Asia’s relatively hierarchical and differentiated societies, there were plenty of local elites eager to occupy these intermediary roles to preserve and enhance their own authority, prestige and material status under colonial rule. Another was that, in most of South Asia, the formal state apparatus did in fact extend down to the level of the individual ‘natural’ village for a set of purposes central to the character of colonial rule: the assessment and collection of land revenue. Land revenue was the dominant source of income for the Indian colonial state, and the node around which the administration was organised (Frykenberg, 1965, 1969; Cohn, 1971; Kessinger, 1979; Washbrook, 1981; Smith, 1996; Madan, 2002). By the end of the colonial period, each village typically possessed a ‘headman’ who was recognisably a state official; a set of land records, with sketch maps, that in principle documented the potential productivity and tax liabilities of each parcel of land and identified the person responsible for paying the tax; and an official responsible for maintaining those records. For a society so very poor and agrarian, the extent of the penetration of localities by the formal state apparatus was remarkable.⁴ Important as the ‘traditional village community’ was to the ways in which intellectuals, colonial officials, and colonial historians imagined the (recent) pasts of South Asian societies, in most of the region there was no compelling reason to conscript that ‘traditional community’, as a territorial entity, into the structures of colonial rule.⁵

After the end of colonial rule in 1947 and 1948, the countries of South Asia diverged in various ways. We deal here only with India. A few more or less stylised facts relating to its polity, political culture and public policy provide essential background to the story we tell below about CVCs. First, those putatively ‘traditional’ institutions that had been incorporated into the colonial system of rule – notably *zamindars*, *jagirdars* and other ‘landlords’ – were legally abolished fairly quickly after Independence in 1947, generally as an element of land reform programmes. Unlike in parts of Africa until today, the independent Indian state positively rejected the ‘traditional institutions’ that had been associated with local territorial rule during the colonial period. Second, as a result above all of the cultivation efforts of Mahatma Gandhi, albeit on fertile and well-prepared soil, the notion of the essential ‘villageness’ of Indian society and culture became embedded in political culture and discourse (Madan, 2002: 7–8). Congruence with this ‘villageness’ became a yardstick through which political attitudes and public policies

were evaluated. India was imagined as a land of villages. Many of its ills could be traced to some kind of deformation of village society and economy by colonialism or other (malign) external influences. Find a way to unlock the natural dynamism of village society, and the gateway to a new world would be opened. Third, this yearning to reinvigorate the village mingled with strong commitments to democracy, secularism (as a rejection of caste as well as an attempt to restrict the influence of religion), legalism and modern formal state institutions to generate an insistent demand for *Panchayati Raj*. In its milder form, *Panchayati Raj* equates to local democratic governance, especially at village level. In its more radical form, can be interpreted as a call for extensive devolution of government down to elected village councils – India as a land of democratic village republics (Mandelbaum, 1970). The term *Panchayati Raj* resonates positively in India to much the same degree that the phrase ‘local government’ evokes a dull thud in British minds. Fourth, the politicians elected to the state assemblies that have existed in India since Independence have in practice been reluctant to cede power to elected local governments. While some states passed *Panchayati Raj* legislation, few powers were given to elected local bodies, and elections were often suspended for long periods. It was only in 1992, at the initiative of the central government, that legislation was passed mandating all state governments to establish a hierarchy of elected local governments. Fifth, India is indeed in a visual sense a ‘land of villages’: the most widespread pattern of rural settlement is a nucleated village, which is associated with a distinct area of land – the land covered by the village land revenue records. This is the ‘natural village’ we refer to below. Finally, even though the lowest tier in the post-1992 *Panchayati Raj* system, the Grama Panchayat (village council), is far too small a unit to manage significant revenue raising, it is nevertheless much larger than the ‘natural village’. In 2000, the average Grama Panchayat in India served a population of almost 3100 people. The figure for Karnataka state was 6100 (Rajaraman, 2003: 16). In Karnataka, the typical Grama Panchayat encompasses five or more natural villages.

From the official perspective, one could sketch a realistic account of local rural administration in India in the later colonial and post-Independence period with barely a mention of the ‘traditional *panchayats*’ that were known to exist in the villages. Because official colonial India never inducted these ‘traditional’ local institutions into the penumbra of the formal state apparatus, post-Independence governments had no compelling reason to repress or outlaw them. Assumed anyway to be only vestiges of the past, they were left alone by policymakers and largely ignored by researchers.⁶ This was different from much of Africa, where ‘traditional authorities’ (‘tribal chiefs’) formally had been the lowest tier of colonial administration, and had been vested with considerable powers, especially in relation to land allocation and dispute resolution (Keulder, 1998; Goodenough, 2002; Ntsebeza, 2003b; Ray, 2003).

Most of the social science literature on traditional or informal local governance emphasises the extent to which these intermediary structures serve as mechanisms of dominance and the pursuit of the particularistic interests of those who dominate. Yet nearly all governance institutions simultaneously combine the exercise of dominance with the provision of collective goods to at least some sections of subordinated populations. Without losing sight of the dominance dimensions of CVCs, we see

ourselves as presenting the other, largely hidden, side of the coin: the extent to which one variant of these non-formal intermediary institutions exercises local authority in a relatively representative, legitimate and productive fashion.

III. The Research

CVCs are widespread in rural India. There was a CVC in every one of the 30 villages in Karnataka selected for the research reported here. Similarly, Anirudh Krishna (2002) found CVCs functioning in each of the 69 villages he studied in the North Indian states of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. However, social scientists who have conducted research in rural India in recent decades generally seem not to have appreciated how widespread, active and important CVCs are. Our field research experience suggests that one reason is that CVC members are aware that much of official, urban India disapproves of them. They do not publicise their activities to casual visitors, and generally tend to keep quiet about them. This helps explain why we do not have an accurate picture of the role of CVCs for India as a whole. What we do know, at least for Karnataka state, is that CVCs are active and valued providers of a range of local services; they do not seem to be disappearing, but rather are adapting to electoral democracy and the introduction of elected local government; while still rooted in caste and run almost entirely by men, they have become more inclusive in composition and provide many public services in a relatively impartial fashion.

By the standards of Indian states, politics in Karnataka is pluralist and democratic, albeit factionalised and fragmented. The state is marked by relative socio-economic and political equality, and a long tradition of democratic contestation and decentralisation. It experienced progressive reforms, including land reforms, before many other Indian states (Manor, 1997; Harriss, 2005). We guess that CVCs there are likely to operate in a more pluralistic fashion than in many other parts of India. However, the research to test that proposition has not been done.

The research reported here was largely conceived and directed, and partly conducted, by Ananth Pur.⁷ It was carried out during the period 2001–2005, in 30 ‘natural’ – and generally nucleated – villages divided equally among three contrasting districts of Karnataka state. Karnataka extends from the Arabian Sea coast in the west to the interior Deccan plateau. It comprises three distinct geographical regions: (a) the narrow coastal belt along the Arabian Sea; (b) the Western Ghats hill range that runs parallel to the coast; and (c) the interior Deccan plains, where most of the population is located. The three districts selected for the study – Mysore, ‘old Dharwad’⁸ and Raichur – are all located in the Deccan plateau: Mysore to the south and Raichur and Dharwad to the north of the state. Prior to Independence in 1947 and the subsequent creation of Karnataka state on the basis of the Kannada language in 1956, Mysore district was part of the princely state of Mysore, one of the most progressive political jurisdictions among those ruled indirectly under the Raj. Dharwad was ruled directly by the British as part of the Bombay Presidency. Raichur was part of the domain of the Nizam of Hyderabad, one of the more despotic of the princely states. As the figures in Table 4 illustrate, current levels of prosperity differ widely among the three districts. Average incomes in Mysore are about twice those of Raichur.

Within each of the three districts, 10 villages were selected to represent as equally as possible all lower level administrative units (*taluks*), to exclude single-caste settlements, and to capture variation in respect of: (a) population size (from 100 to 800 households, with the exception of one village of 1774 households); (b) literacy levels; and (c) distance from a main road. Taking these criteria into account, the selection of individual villages was done randomly, from a range of existing data bases. Data collection was carried out in four main stages. First, a complete household census was conducted in 2001–2002 using one male and one female field investigator in each district. This provided information on family size and composition, literacy, education, landholding and occupations. Second, the census information was used to draw a sample of 2183 adult villagers (51% males), who were interviewed by the field investigators in 2002–2003 for information on their attitudes to, perceptions of, and knowledge about CVCs, Grama Panchayats, and the relation between the two. Third, over a two-year period, 2002–2004, Ananth Pur undertook detailed investigations in each of the 30 villages, using individual interviews and group discussions, to understand how CVCs worked. Fourth, in 2004, Ananth Pur and three research assistants conducted focus group discussions in each village to determine the extent to which poorer people were aware of the activities of Grama Panchayats, and how they evaluated them.⁹ In addition, we collected a range of secondary data from official sources.

It is central to our story that the lowest tier of formal elected local government in Karnataka, the Grama Panchayat, typically constituted for a population of 5000–7000 households, covers between five and eight natural villages. The Grama Panchayats that featured in our field research encompassed an average of five natural villages – and an equal number of CVCs. Natural villages constitute one or more of the electoral wards for Grama Panchayats. Grama Panchayat elections tend in part at least to be contests between natural villages for influence at a higher level.

Individual CVCs are effectively autonomous; they are not part of any broader institutional network, and answer to no one but to themselves or their constituents.¹⁰ CVCs differ in composition and procedure from village to village. There is however a clearly defined common format. They have identifiable members – *Panchas*, who are almost always male – and a leader, who is generally termed the *Yajamana*. There were between five and twelve *Panchas* in our sample villages. Representation of castes is the main constituent principle. *Panchas* are the acknowledged leaders of individual caste groups within the village. There is however another, newer category of *Pancha*: elected male members of the Grama Panchayats have been recruited to sit on the CVCs in 24 of our 30 villages. In this way, CVCs are enlisting members of a group that is becoming very significant politically at village level in India: ‘new leaders’, whose power is rooted in their education and ability to intermediate between villagers and external political and bureaucratic actors, sometimes independently of their caste identities (Krishna, 2002). Partly because they now include these co-opted ‘new leaders’, *Panchas* are on average younger than the title ‘elder’ would imply. Typically they are not youths: in our 30 villages, only 1 per cent were younger than 35 years. But 67 per cent were in the 35–55 years age category. Only the 32 per cent of them older than 55 years might in principle begin to conform to the image of the grey-haired elder. Only 15 per cent were illiterate. The other 85 per cent had some

record of formal education, ranging from second standard at primary school to a master's degree. Four of the Yajamanas had higher education qualifications, including two law degrees. Dalits (members of scheduled castes; former 'untouchables') were by tradition excluded from CVCs. We found them represented only in some villages, only in Mysore district, where they comprised large fractions of the village population. Yajamanas almost always belonged to the highest caste in the village, although three were Dalits or members of Scheduled Tribes, in villages where these groups dominated. The only female representation we found occurred in two villages, where elected female members of Grama Panchayats were sometimes invited to CVC meetings for specific agenda items.

Despite being rooted in caste, CVCs are deliberative fora, marked by a higher degree of egalitarianism in procedure than one would predict from typical images of inter-caste interactions in rural India. Decisions are almost always consensual and transparent. CVCs meet in public, following advance notification, in defined locations, to discuss, debate and sometimes to decide, following established and clear procedures. The meeting itself is expected to occasion respectful behaviour on the part of the public.¹¹ Some CVCs are procedurally very formal. In one village in Mysore district, the CVC meets every Monday morning for the purpose of dispute resolution. If no cases are notified by 7.30pm the previous day, the meeting is cancelled. Although not all CVCs meet this frequently or regularly, most of them in our sample villages meet at least once a month. Further, most CVCs are highly accountable to their village constituents over financial issues. Some CVCs have bank accounts in their own names. Every CVC in our sample maintains detailed financial accounts. This responsibility is normally shared among at least two or three Panchas. Some CVCs appoint an independent treasurer who is not a Pancha. In all cases, annual income and expenditure accounts are presented to a general village assembly on the day after the Hindu New Year, which normally falls in March.

What do CVCs actually do? They engage in a wide range of activities.¹² The activities of which we learned can be divided into six broad categories:

1. *Dispute resolution*: This is a staple activity of CVCs, and the one for which they are most widely known. All 30 of our CVCs engaged in this. Our detailed enquiries in the villages suggest that on average nearly 80 per cent of all local disputes are resolved by CVCs.¹³ The police in particular tend to recognise the judicial authority of CVCs. If the formal courts prove unsatisfactory, cases are occasionally brought back from there to the CVC.¹⁴
2. *Organising religious activities*: In all 30 villages, CVCs play an important role in organising religious ceremonies and festivals, in constructing and maintaining local temples, and in raising resources for religious functions.
3. *Social welfare*: Some CVCs are engaged in social welfare activities: providing material support to the disadvantaged and destitute, sponsoring mass marriages in the villages, aiding the local school with financial and material support.
4. *Matching development funds*: In contemporary India, there are a range of development programmes funded by state or central government that require matching contributions from the local level. CVCs had recently raised matching funds in 17 out of our 30 villages. CVC leaders or members typically are part of the local committee that oversees the implementation of such programmes.

5. *Autonomous development activities*: In 23 out of the 30 villages, CVCs recently have initiated their own development activities. This may involve simply organising the donation of land for building a local school, but might extend to raising substantial funds to construct school buildings, local hospitals, local roads, and maintenance and improvement of local ponds. A few CVCs are also involved in organising collective field patrols to prevent crop thefts and unauthorised grazing.¹⁵
6. *Interaction with Grama Panchayats*: CVC leaders and members interact with Grama Panchayats mainly by: (a) contesting Grama Panchayat elections themselves or deciding on the choice of candidates, including encouraging uncontested election in favour of their candidates; and/or (b) influencing decisions about development projects initiated by Grama Panchayats and selection of beneficiaries for government funded anti-poverty projects. We found such interactions in 29 of the 30 villages. When Grama Panchayat elections were held in 2000, at least one seat was filled without a contest in 18 out of the 30 sample villages; in four villages, no seats were contested.

Some CVC activities, like resolving disputes, organising collective ceremonies, and providing social welfare and local infrastructure, are those one might expect local non-state institutions to perform when the central state lacks authority at the local level. By contrast, some activities – the raising of matching grants and influencing Grama Panchayats – are predicated on the existence of a state that is actively involved in promoting development in rural areas through relatively democratic and participatory mechanisms.

There are considerable variations among our CVCs in the type of functions performed and the level of activism. We turn in the next section to explaining how we constructed quantitative measures of their activity levels and then set about explaining these variations.

IV. Explaining Variations in Activity Levels among CVCs

We measured the activity levels of CVCs by collecting, standardising, and expressing in quantitative form information on: (a) the number of categories of activities in which they had engaged over the previous five-year period; and (b) the intensity of their engagement in each activity. As explained in Table 2, we identified 11 specific CVC activities, and then measured the level of engagement of each CVC in each activity on a scale ranging from zero to one.¹⁶ Some of the measures are subjective and/or rather ‘lumpy’. That alone is reason not to try to explain variations among CVCs in their engagement in any of these individual activities.¹⁷ We have instead aggregated and averaged the scores on individual activities to generate a number of overall activity measures. The details are in Table 3. In sum, we have five different activity measures:

- A measure of the *total activity level* (TAL), that represents the simple average of scores on the 11 individual activities;¹⁸
- Two main sub groupings of TAL: the *autonomous activity level* of CVCs (AAL), and their *total influence over Grama Panchayats* (TIGP);

Table 1. Villagers' attitudes to local governance institutions

Respondents' preferences for Customary Village Councils (CVCs) and/or Grama Panchayats (GPs) (%)							
	<i>CVC only</i>	<i>GP only</i>	<i>Both CVC and GP</i>	<i>Neither</i>	<i>Don't know</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>N</i>
All respondents	27	32	27	9	5	100	2183
Female respondents	36	25	20	12	7	100	1067
Literate respondents	22	36	34	5	3	100	965
Female literate respondents	33	35	22	6	4	100	330
Illiterate respondents	30	29	22	12	7	100	1218
Female illiterate respondents	37	20	19	15	9	100	737

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.

- Two components of TIGP: *influence over Grama Panchayat elections (IGPE)*, and *involvement in Grama Panchayat activities (IGPA)*.

TAL scores varied widely among our 30 CVCs: from 0.90 for one very active CVC down to only 0.17 for a CVC that was involved only in dispute resolution, religious activities and securing the donation of land for a local school. Overall, five CVCs scored more than 0.75 and only one village scored less than 0.25 score. The average score was 0.60.

Can we explain why some CVCs are more active than others? We began by looking at average differences among our three districts (Table 4). A clear pattern emerges: the more wealthy and developed the district, the higher the average levels of CVC activity, across all our measures of activity. This pattern seems to be at odds with the conventional view from urban and intellectual India that CVCs are disappearing vestiges of tradition. We also calculated a measure of the activity level of the formal Grama Panchayats in the three districts: the total amount of revenue they raised themselves ('own revenues') as a proportion of district income. The figures are given in the last row of Table 4. Again we find that Grama Panchayats are more active in Mysore, the wealthiest district. The results of these district comparisons encouraged us to explore a wide range of potential explanations of differences in CVC activity level when looking at variations across our 30 villages and, in particular, to consider the possibility that CVCs and GPs might be complementary or synergistic rather than competitive.

Using a range of methods, varying from eyeballing the data to simple OLS regression analysis, we examined a range of possible explanations of inter-village variations in levels of CVC activity. In each case, we employed in sequence each of our five alternative measures of CVC activity levels – TAL, AAL, TIGP, IGPE and IGPA. Broadly speaking, we were seeking evidence of the effects of two main categories of potential explanatory variables.

The first category may be loosely labelled 'collective action and peasant economy' variables. Taking our cues from a wide range of literature, we thought it plausible that the level of CVC activity would tend to be higher in villages that were: (a) smaller; (b) more rural or agrarian (and remote from towns); (c) more homogeneous

Table 2. Measuring individual CVC activities

Activity number	Description of the activity	How was the level of activity measured?
1.	Resolving disputes	Percentage of local disputes resolved by CVC in a typical year, scored on a scale of 0–1.
2.	Organising religious activities	Scored as either Yes (=1) or No (=0).
3.	Performing social welfare activities	On a scale of 0–1, engaging in a single activity was scored as 0.25; two activities as 0.50; three activities as 0.75, and more than 3 activities as 1.
4.	Involvement in raising resources for externally-funded development projects that require matching local contributions	Scored as either Yes (=1) or No (=0).
5.	Initiating development activities in the village through raising local resources	On a scale of 0–1, engaging in a single activity was scored as 0.25; two activities as 0.50; three activities as 0.75, and more than 3 activities as 1.
6.	Influence over nominations of candidates for Grama Panchayat elections	Scored as either Yes (=1) or No (=0).
7.	Overlap of leadership of CVCs and Grama Panchayats	The proportion of members of the Grama Panchayat elected from the (natural) village who ‘represent’ the CVC, re-scaled from 0–1.
8.	Influence over securing positions of Grama Panchayat President and/or Vice President	Where the CVC has not played any role the score was 0. The score was 0.67 for securing the position of President; and 0.33 for the Vice President.
9.	Encouraging uncontested Grama Panchayat elections	The proportion of seats on the Grama Panchayat elected from the (natural) village that were uncontested in the last elections, re-scaled from 0–1.
10.	Involvement in Grama Panchayat development projects	Scored as either Yes (=1) or No (=0).
11.	Influence over selection of project beneficiaries	Scored as either Yes (=1) or No (=0).

sociologically or occupationally (especially homogenised around family farming); (d) poorer; (e) less educated; or (f) any combination of the above. We do not have perfect data sets to test for all these types of explanatory variables. In particular, we have no data specific to our sample (natural) villages on income levels or on the distribution of land holdings among those who actually own land. We do have, from our surveys, data on: (a) the percentage of households who own agricultural land (PER_LAND); (b) the percentage of people who are literate (PER_LIT); (c) the number of households in each village (NUM_HH); (d) the number of caste groups in each village (NUM_CG); and (e) a range of other data on each village, including its location in relation to various kinds of infrastructural facilities. Some of our (single variable) regression equations, employing these dependent variables, are reported in

Table 3. Constructing aggregate measures of CVC activity levels

Individual activities (See table 2 for details)	Activity levels by sub groupings	Total activity level
1. Resolving disputes	Activities 1–5 = Autonomous Activity Level (AAL)	Activities 1–11 = Total Activity Level (TAL)
2. Organising religious activities		
3. Performing social welfare activities		
4. Involvement in raising resources for development projects that require matching local contributions		
5. Initiating development activities in the village through raising local resources		
6. Influence over nominations of candidates for Grama Panchayat elections	Activities 6–9 = Influence over Grama Panchayat Elections (IGPE)	Activities 6–11 = Total Influence over Grama Panchayat (TIGP)
7. Overlap of leadership of CVCs and Grama Panchayats		
8. Influence over securing positions of Grama Panchayat President and/or Vice President		
9. Encouraging uncontested Grama Panchayat elections	Activities 10–11 = Involvement in Grama Panchayat Activities (IGPA)	
10. Panchayat development projects		
11. Influence over selection of project beneficiaries		

the first rows of Table 5. The overall conclusion is very clear: none of those explanatory variables that we have labelled ‘collective action and peasant economy’ is consistently associated with any of the measures of CVC activity levels. That result holds when we use various combinations of these explanatory variables in multiple variable regressions. Only one of the variables named above – the number of households in the village (NUM_HH) – is associated with activity levels (TAL and AAL) with any consistency and degree of statistical significance. However, the direction of the relationship here is the very opposite of the one we might have expected: it is in villages with larger populations where CVCs tend to be more active, especially in performing what we have termed *autonomous activities*, that is, activities that do not involve interaction with the Grama Panchayat. We can firmly conclude that, in this sample, there is no observable (linear) connection between CVC activity levels and any of the explanatory factors that we might derive from theories of collective action or peasant economy.

Table 4. Some comparisons among the three districts

Index	Mysore	Dharwad	Raichur	Average
Ranking of Karnataka districts in terms of a composite development index, 2002*	4	10, 15, 27****	16	
District per capita income, 2002–2003 (rupees)**	22,000	19,000	12,000	
TAL (for 10 CVCs studied)	0.66	0.61	0.53	0.60
AAL (for 10 CVCs studied)	0.68	0.60	0.59	0.62
TIGP (for 10 CVCs studied)	0.64	0.62	0.48	0.58
IGPE (for 10 CVCs studied)	0.50	0.50	0.45	0.48
IGPA (for 10 CVCs studied)	0.90	0.85	0.55	0.77
Total own revenue collection by Grama Panchayats as a % of district income***	0.10%	0.04%	0.04%	

Notes: *From: Government of Karnataka (2002: Annexure 4.1: 83). A low number indicates a high level of development. There were 27 districts in the state at that time. **From: Government of Karnataka, Economic Survey 2002–2003, Planning, Institutional Finance and Statistics and Science and Technology Department, March 2003, Appendix 5.5, District Income in Karnataka at current prices 2000–2001 (provisional). From website of the Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Bangalore, <http://www.des.kar.nic.in/mainpage.asp?option=14>. ***These figures are calculated from (a) data on own revenue collection by *Grama Panchayats* in Karnataka during 1999–2000 from http://stg1.kar.nic.in/samanyamahiti/SMEnglish_0506/default.htm; (b) statistics on the total number of *Grama Panchayats* in 2000 from <http://www.karnatkastat.com/administrativesetup/panchayats>; and (c) figures on district incomes for 1999–2000 from Government of Karnataka (2002: Annexure 4.1: 104).

****These figures refer respectively to the rankings of the post–1997 smaller Dharwad district and to the new districts of Gadag and Haveri carved out of old Dharwad district in 1997.

Prior observations from fieldwork meant that this finding did not surprise us. We had noted the extent to which the performance and effectiveness of CVCs often seemed to depend on the activism and skills of a small set of leaders, including their capacity to engage effectively with the local Grama Panchayat leadership. It was for this reason that, in trying to explain CVC activity levels, we looked for explanatory variables that measured something about the Grama Panchayat itself. As the last two rows of Table 5 indicate, we have two such variables: (a) the distance from the natural village to the village where the headquarters of the Grama Panchayat were located (GP_DIST);¹⁹ and (b) the only measure of the organisational efficiency or activism of the Grama Panchayat that we could access: the amount of revenue raised by the Grama Panchayat in 2003–2004 in relation to the number of people it served (Grama Panchayat revenue raising – GPRR).²⁰ The last two rows of Table 5 indicate that, in single variable regressions, these two institutional variables were in most cases related in a statistically significant way to each of our measures of CVC activity levels. CVCs tended to be more active when: (a) they were located close to (or in) the headquarters village of the Grama Panchayat under which they fell; and (b) the Grama Panchayat was more active in revenue raising. When we combine these two

Table 5. Summary results of single variable OLS regressions to explain activity levels of CVCs (N = 30)

Independent variables	Alternative dependent variables = measures of CVC activity level				
	TAL	AAL	TIGP	IGPE	IGPA
'Collective action & peasant economy' independent variables					
PER_LAND					
Direction of relationship.	(-)	(-)	(-)	(-)	(-)
Significance	0.098	0.219	0.092	0.233	0.057
PER_LIT					
Direction of relationship.	(+)	(+)	(+)	(+)	(+)
Significance	0.189	0.635	0.083	0.353	0.021*
NUM_CG					
Direction of relationship.	(+)	(+)	(+)	(+)	(+)
Significance	0.086	0.021*	0.316	0.108	0.808
NUM_HH					
Direction of relationship.	(+)	(+)	(+)	(+)	(+)
Significance	0.036*	0.008**	0.187	0.104	0.434
'Institutional' independent variables					
GP_DIST					
Direction of relationship.	(-)	(-)	(-)	(-)	(-)
Significance	0.016*	0.022*	0.042*	0.092	0.041*
GPRR					
Direction of relationship.	(+)	(+)	(+)	(+)	(+)
Significance	0.038*	0.101	0.041*	0.093	0.038*

Notes: *p = 0.05; **p ≤ 0.01.

institutional explanatory variables in multiple regression analysis, we get results that are even more statistically significant (Table 6).²¹

The multiple regression equations reported in Table 6 explain no more than about a third of inter-village variation in CVC activity levels. We have a great deal left to explain. Differences among villages in the skills and commitment of a few individual leaders are certainly a part of the story.²² There is also a slight tendency, as the information in Table 7 indicates, for the Total Activity Level of CVCs to be higher in villages where one of the politically dominant castes of the region is relatively numerous. Overall, our statistical results suggest two conclusions that are consistent with some of our other observations. The first is that prevalent ideas about CVCs in India – that they are disappearing but clinging on mainly in more 'traditional' or 'backward' areas – are substantially wrong. The more active CVCs do not seem to be found in the poorest or least 'developed' areas (or in the smaller or more agrarian villages), but may indeed often be located in more prosperous or developed areas. The second conclusion is that, in Karnataka state at least, there are powerful synergies and interactions between CVCs and the elected Grama Panchayats. CVCs and Grama Panchayats appear to stimulate and nurture one another. It is possible that, at least for some period of time, the activism of the Grama Panchayats established under the 1992 amendment to the national constitution will actually invigorate what some people will continue to describe as 'traditional village

Table 6. Summary results of multivariate OLS regressions with ‘institutional’ variables to explain activity levels of CVCs (N = 30)

Independent variables	Alternative dependent variables = measures of CVC activity level				
	TAL	AAL	TIGP	IGPE	IGPA
GP_DIST					
Direction of relationship.	(-)	(-)	(-)	(-)	(-)
Significance	0.001***	0.004**	0.006**	0.029*	0.006**
GPRR					
Direction of relationship.	(+)	(+)	(+)	(+)	(+)
Significance	0.003**	0.017*	0.006**	0.029*	0.005**
R ²	0.42	0.33	0.35	0.24	0.35
Adjusted R ²	0.37	0.28	0.30	0.19	0.31
F ratio	9.82	6.76	7.35	4.40	7.53
Significance of F	0.001***	0.004**	0.003**	0.022*	0.003**

Notes: p = 0.05; **p ≤ 0.01; ***p ≤ 0.001.

Table 7. Relationship between degree of caste dominance and Total Activity Levels of CVCs in the sample villages

Degree of caste dominance*	Number of villages in which Total Activity Level (TAL) of CVCs was within the specified range:			Average TAL for each category of villages	Total
	Low TAL (Below 0.59)	Medium TAL (0.59–0.65)	High TAL (0.66 +)		
High dominance	3	5	3	0.64	11
Medium dominance	4	3	4	0.62	11
Low dominance	3	2	3	0.54	8
Total	10	10	10	0.60	30

Notes: *The degree of caste dominance is measured by the numerical strength in the village of caste groups that also enjoy economic and political power regionally – *Lingayats*, *Vokkaligas* and *Kuruba Gowdas*. We broadly follow Srinivas (2002: 57). High dominance indicates that a single, dominant caste forms 30 per cent or more of the population. Medium dominance indicates that two or more dominant caste groups together form 30 per cent or more of the population. Low dominance indicates that all the dominant caste groups comprise less than 30 per cent of the population.

councils’. To use a rather dated language, ‘modernisation’ seems to have energised these ‘customary’ institutions.

The interviews, surveys and focus group discussions that we organised in these 30 villages are consistent with the conclusions of the statistical analysis and with the hypothesis that CVCs are actually becoming more rather than less significant in response to the strengthening of democratic local governance in particular, and, more generally, the expansion of public programmes for rural development. We organised focus group discussions with sets of poorer people (Table 1). In those villages where the *total activity level* (TAL) of the CVC was high, levels of awareness of and satisfaction with Grama Panchayat programmes and activities generally were

relatively high. Women were more enthusiastic about CVCs than men, and illiterates more than literates. In the absence of easy access to institutions of justice, rural women in Karnataka particularly seem to value CVCs as they provide them with some semblance of security within the village. Literate respondents were particularly likely to see the benefit of having simultaneous access to both CVCs and Grama Panchayats. People believed that there was less corruption in Grama Panchayats when their 'own' CVC members were keeping watch. In villages where CVCs had low TAL (*total activity level*) scores, there were more reports of corruption on the part of Grama Panchayat members and less satisfaction with the activities of the CVC. Where TAL scores were high, the poorer villagers were more likely to see CVCs as undertaking activities that benefited the entire village. Seventy-four per cent of respondents were aware that CVCs were involved in selection of candidates for Grama Panchayat elections and approved of such involvement.

Villagers are well aware that CVCs have adapted to the more democratic environment, notably by recruiting into their ranks local political entrepreneurs who have no claim to membership on the customary criterion of caste leadership, but whose skill lays in their ability to help obtain resources from higher levels of government. As far as we can judge without specific time series data, CVCs are continuing actively to perform their 'traditional' functions, such as dispute resolution and organising religious activities, while also taking on new roles that involve interaction with state and electoral institutions.²³

V. Why are CVCs Thriving?

We have clear evidence that, in Karnataka at least, CVCs have in recent years begun to interact more with higher level formal state institutions, notably the elected Grama Panchayats. It is equally clear that CVCs have become more pluralist in composition, incorporating to a higher degree both representatives of lower castes and the people who are elected from the village to the higher level Grama Panchayat. They remain almost entirely male monopolies, but have in a few cases begun to allow women to become members for specific purposes. They are valued by their village constituents and accountable to them for the money they raise. We suspect, although we have no conclusive evidence, that they have on average become more active. Given the undoubted potential for similar 'traditional' local governance institutions to behave more hierarchically, exclusively and conservatively, we need to explain why Karnataka CVCs are different. Part of the answer is that they are not very 'traditional': traditionality is the lens through which they are conventionally viewed and presented, by villagers and outsiders alike. In composition and functioning, CVCs have moved quite a long way from what we believe constitutes traditionality. We can best explain that shift by answering two related questions. First, why have CVCs become so relatively representative, pluralist and accountable? Second, why has this particular multi-purpose organisation retained – and indeed expanded – the scope of its activities, rather than ceding ground to more specialist organisations?

Confident answers to those questions will require more comparative research in India and elsewhere. Our work in Karnataka suggests two complementary answers. One is that CVCs can be trusted to exercise considerable local authority because the opportunities for them to abuse these powers for personal or small-group gain are

limited. There are in turn two main reasons for this. First, unlike some similar institutions elsewhere, CVCs in India do not control access to land or other valuable assets (Section 2).²⁴ There are no strong incentives to take control of CVCs in order to obtain access to economic resources or to regulate the access enjoyed by other people. CVCs have no permanent sources of funding, and have to coax their income out of villagers or external agencies. Second, in relation to their judicial functions in particular, CVCs face a pluralist, competitive environment. On the margins at least, villagers can choose between taking cases to the CVC and referring them to the police or the courts (Section 3). CVC members are aware of the constraints within which they operate, and of the need to work to maintain the trust of their public if they are to retain their authority.²⁵

The second reason that Karnataka CVCs are thriving and modernising, as defined above, is prefigured in Mandelbaum's synthesis in 1970 of research on what he termed 'traditional panchayats' in India (1970: chapters 19 and 20). Mandelbaum pointed out a duality in the roles of CVCs. On the one hand, as regulators of relationships among their village constituents, they were caste-centric in constitution and procedure. On the other hand, as institutions of local territorial governance, they often transcended caste orientations when they represented the village as a collectivity in relation to external agents or threats (Mandelbaum, 1970: 327, 329–331, 370–371). It is in this latter role that CVCs in Karnataka have become more active. The reasons lie in changes in formal governance structures, that create niches which CVCs are well placed to fill. First, there has been a steady increase in the number of government-funded development programmes that make resources available to those local communities able to organise themselves actually to claim their formal entitlements, often to the extent of organising and overseeing project implementation locally on behalf of overburdened lower level public servants (Krishna, 2002). Most of these resources are for spatially specific projects: a new road, health centre, water pump, school or public works scheme, which will be allocated to this village and not to that one. Second, and more striking, is the effect of the 1992 constitutional change that mandated the introduction of a system of elected local government with real substance. The lowest level of the new three tier system, the Grama Panchayat, regularly receives income transfers from above, and now is a channel through which substantial public resources may be accessed. In Karnataka, a Grama Panchayat serves a handful of natural villages. Each of those natural villages has a CVC, and contains an average (in our sample of 30 villages) of six electoral wards each choosing a Grama Panchayat member. CVCs are therefore an obvious potential means for the populations of natural villages collectively to capture or influence Grama Panchayats. Shifting to this more collective, externally-oriented role, CVCs would automatically tend to become more pluralist, to include hitherto-excluded populations like Dalits, Scheduled Tribes and women, and to co-opt people elected to the Grama Panchayat independently of their social status. To effectively represent their populations in political activity above the village level, CVCs have to make themselves legitimate in the eyes of those populations, and actively earn their support.

CVCs have limited authority, and possess coercive power only to the extent that they can represent or mobilise the weight of public opinion. They are not subject to the same rivalries and distrust that would follow if they had more power or more

control over basic material resources. The new activism of CVCs, especially in relation to Grama Panchayats, reflects both constraints on the authority of CVCs, embedded in history, that make them plausible representatives of village communities in a democratic environment despite their roots in systems of highly structured caste and gender hierarchy; and the new opportunities for collective political action at the level of the natural village that arise from changes in the formal governance sphere.

Notes

1. The prejudice against CVCs is often extreme. In 2003, a prominent judge in the southern state of Tamil Nadu responded to a report that a CVC had imposed a punishment by calling on the government to introduce legislation to outlaw all such non-state systems of justice (*The Hindu*, 2003a, b). The sense of confrontation intensified in the state after a CVC in a coastal fishing village enforced sanctions against five local families for not handing over to the community the compensation they had received for damage wrought by the December 2004 tsunami. The case was taken to the state High Court, where the Bench declared: 'The petition illustrates a new phenomenon which has arisen in the State, which is now gaining momentum, and which must be nipped in the bud. Otherwise, the *kattapanchayats* (CVCs – authors) which are illegal institutions, will mushroom creating a law and order problem'. 'The Chief Secretary must see to it that the *goondaism* (thuggery – authors) by the *kattapanchayats* is stopped throughout the State' (*The Hindu*, 2005a). Twenty-one criminal cases were then registered against the council members concerned (*The Hindu*, 2005b).
2. From the perspective of South Asian area studies, the broad outlines of our story are familiar: an informal, 'traditional' institution, that has largely been written off as disappearing into the dustbin of history, turns out to have considerable staying power, as a result of adaptation to the intensification of the democratic element in India's modern, formal political institutions. This was the account that Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph (1967) gave of the role of caste in Indian politics four decades ago. Caste was not disappearing in democratic independent India. It was instead changing function, and to some degree form, to become a primary channel for aggregating votes in elections.
3. There is a rich recent research literature on the processes through which the poor engage with the state in rural India; for example, Fuller and Benei (2000), Chatterjee (2001), Harriss-White (2003) and Corbridge et al. (2005). A common thread running through this literature – and through this paper – is the blurring of boundaries between the state and the society at local level. This manifests itself in a diversity of mediating structures connecting the state and the rural population. Described as a 'shadow' state by Harriss-White (2003) and 'political society' by Chatterjee (2001), this comprises an assortment of local level political fixers, middle men, contractors, the rural 'elite' and so on.
4. For example, when writing a history of a village in the Punjab, Kessinger (1979: 6) located the following official nineteenth century records: a household census conducted in 1848 as part of the first revenue survey; later decennial population censuses and quinquennial livestock censuses; the *Jamabandi*, revised every four years, that recorded official title to all land in the village, and thus served also as a tax list and evidence of all leases and mortgages, and agreements to pay rent on share produce among co-owners; the *Shajra Nasib* – the genealogical tree of all families owning or permanently renting land in the village – that was revised at the same time as the *Jamabandi*; and the *Lal Kitab* – the annual statistical record of the cultivated and irrigated area, the area used for each crop, the value of land sold and mortgaged, and the number of wells.
5. The main exceptions were in the frontier provinces of what is now Pakistan, and in the 'tribal' regions of contemporary Bangladesh and India, where the British found the imposition of direct rule to be very problematic, and ceded considerable authority to 'traditional authorities', especially in what are now termed the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan.
6. Insofar as researchers have investigated CVCs – for example, Mandelbaum (1970), Cohn (1971), Galanter (1989) and Srinivas (2002) – they focused mainly on their judicial activities.
7. Ananth Pur is a native of Mysore city in Karnataka, with long experience of conducting field investigations in rural parts of the state. During the initial year in particular, respondents were somewhat distrustful of the research. While willing to provide information, they were not disposed to allow her actually to observe CVC proceedings. This came only in the third year of the research. For

example, key respondents would sometimes telephone Ananth Pur with information about CVC meetings about half an hour before the event, knowing that it would take her at least two to three hours to travel there.

8. In fact, what we term 'old Dharwad' district was in 1997 divided into three: Gadag, Haveri and (new) Dharwad districts. Because the area is still widely considered to have a common character, we treated it as a single district.
9. The focus groups comprised: (a) men from Scheduled Castes and/or Scheduled Tribes; (b) women from Scheduled Castes and/or Scheduled Tribes; (c) other poorer groups in the village, mixed in terms of caste and gender; and (d) a general group. The general group acted as our control group and consisted of a randomly selected group of villagers.
10. The research did however reveal instances where CVC members known for their skills in dispute resolution would be invited to advise on cases before CVCs in other villages.
11. In most villages, CVCs meet in front of the village temple to resolve disputes. Villagers who attend the meeting are expected to remove their footwear as a mark of respect. In some villages, even passers-by have to do the same.
12. For a detailed description of the activities of CVCs, see Ananth Pur (2007: 406–408).
13. In 2003 we collected information in each of our 30 villages from CVC leaders, Grama Panchayat members, and villagers, about the proportion of disputes, which get resolved within the village, by the CVC, in an average year. Unresolved disputes include cases where one or both parties reject the decision of the CVC.
14. CVC leaders also appear to play a recognised proactive role in maintaining communal harmony in villages with significant Muslim populations.
15. For analysis of parallel cases, see Wade (1988).
16. Note that not all CVCs had the opportunity to engage in activity number 4 – raising resources for government development projects that required matching local contributions. However, we know that, in some cases at least, villages became eligible for these programmes because of the organisational and lobbying efforts of the local CVC leadership. The fact that some villages did not participate in these activities may therefore partly reflect the weakness or passivity of their CVCs. We have simply scored a 0 for all such cases of non-participation, recognising that this is a rather crude measurement procedure.
17. In response to a referee's suggestion, we did try, without success, to explain separately variations among CVCs in engagement in activity no. 1 (resolving disputes) and no.2 (organising religious activities). There was in fact very little variation in the latter: most CVCs engaged at a high level.
18. We chose finally to weight all CVC activities equally in generating these aggregate measures of activity, rather than giving more weight to those we thought might be more important. We did in fact experiment with an alternative measure of TAL: the average of the scores for AAL, IGPE and IGPA. However, the two measures were almost identical across the 30 villages, with a correlation coefficient of 0.98. Further, the statistical results obtained were virtually identical whichever measure of TAL was used. We have therefore stuck with the simplest measure of TAL: the simple average of the scores on the 11 individual activities.
19. In 14 of our 30 cases, the Grama Panchayat headquarters were located in the same villages as the CVC.
20. This figure refers to revenue raising, not to grants received from higher tiers of government. The data are from the official web site of the Department of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, Karnataka. Source: http://stg1.kar.nic.in/samanyamahiti/SMEnglish_0506/default.htm
21. We tried to see if we could capture statistically interaction between these two institutional variables by constructing an interaction variable and adding it to the multiple regression analysis. It was not statistically significant.
22. Anirudh Krishna (2002) was to some degree able to quantify the effects of individual leaders in the research he conducted on inter-village variations in 'social capital' in North India. His re-survey of the same villages, as yet unpublished, demonstrates that changes in leadership was a significant cause of changes over time in levels of social capital (Anirudh Krishna, private communication).
23. 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. For example, one CVC has organised a health and legal awareness camp. Others have negotiated directly with local members of the State Legislative Assembly, Members of Parliament, and area development boards for direct access to funding for local development projects.

24. By contrast, in parts of Africa, chiefs and other traditional authorities still have considerable authority to allocate unused land to existing residents or new arrivals, to authorise land transactions between ordinary citizens, and even to dispossess existing rights holders involuntarily (Mamdani, 1998; Goodenough, 2002; Keulder, 1998).
25. To quote one CVC member from Mysore District: 'We cannot afford to give wrong decisions as even if one person in the village questions our judgement, it damages the authority of the customary panchayat'. The slightest transgression on the part of CVC leaders is taken seriously as it undermines the legitimacy of the institution. In one of our study villages, a person who was a caste leader and a member of the CVC was ostracised by his caste group for misappropriating funds collected for a caste festivity. By losing his position as a caste leader, he also had to forfeit his right to sit on the CVC. Although he was re-admitted to the caste group after tendering a public apology, reimbursing the money and giving a feast to its members, he was not reinstated as a member of the CVC (Ananth Pur, 2004). Krishna (2002) cites cases from Rajasthan villages of CVC members being replaced, one because he was often found drunk in public, and another because he had solicited a bribe from a party to a dispute.

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