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Ambiguous Institutions: Traditional Governance and Local Democracy in Rural South India: Mick Moore and Kripa Ananth Pur.

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Introduction

This research in Karnataka state, India challenges assumptions that customary village councils (CVCs) will disappear with the introduction of formal elected local government structures, or will undermine or compete with them. Instead it finds that CVCs are valued by local people, and are adapting to a more competitive democratic environment by taking on new roles and becoming more representative and pluralist. They are interacting synergistically with formal institutions. This finding has a parallel in Afrobarometer surveys that suggest that people continue to value traditional leaders in Africa, and that the better their opinion of formal governance institutions, the more highly they value traditional leaders.

Context and Research Approach

Informal local governance institutions in poor countries often have their roots in forms of indirect colonial rule. But in India the colonial state extended right down to the village level through a highly organised land revenue system. There was therefore no need to incorporate traditional local level village institutions into the formal state. Individuals from elite landed families were recruited to exercise indirect authority at a local level, but their role was formally abolished following Independence as part of extensive land reform programmes. Meanwhile CVCs which had gone unrecognised by the colonial authorities were also overlooked by post-Independence governments. This was in contrast to much of Africa where 'traditional authorities' (tribal chiefs) had been the lowest tier of the colonial administration and vested with considerable powers in relation to land allocation and dispute resolution.

The research was conducted in 30 villages, each with a CVC, and selected to capture variations in population size, literacy levels and distance from a main road. The 30 villages are divided equally among 3 districts of Karnataka state, with different pre-Independence governance arrangements (Mysore, 'old Dharwad' and Raichur). The lowest tier of elected formal government, the Gram Panchayat, covers 5-8 'natural' villages. Politics in Karnataka, relative to other Indian states, are pluralist and democratic, and the state enjoys relative socio-economic and political equality.

Customary Village Councils (CVCs)

CVCs are effectively autonomous. They have identifiable members who are leaders of individual caste groups in the village. More recently, elected male members of the Gram Panchayats have been co-opted to sit on CVCs in 24 of the 30 study villages, reflecting the emergence of a new type of younger leader whose power is rooted in their education and ability to inter-mediate between villagers and outside actors, sometimes independently of their caste identities. Dalits are mainly excluded except in Mysore where in some villages they comprise large fractions of the population. Women participate only in 2 villages as

elected members of the Gram Panchayat. Meetings are held regularly, in public, and follow clear procedures. CVCs are highly accountable over financial issues, presenting detailed accounts annually to a general village assembly.

CVCs engage in a wide variety of activities, including some (dispute resolution, organising religious activities, providing social welfare and local infrastructure) that would be expected where formal state authority is limited. But others (raising matching grants for state funded development projects, and seeking to influence Gram Panchayats through elections and other means) pre-suppose the existence of a state actively involved in promoting rural development, in relatively democratic ways.

Main Findings

There are considerable variations among CVCs in their type of functions and levels of activity. Statistical analysis undertaken to explain that variation shows that:

- i) Overall, the more wealthy and developed the district, the higher the average levels of CVC activity. Gram Panchayats are also more active in wealthier districts;
- ii) Contrary to expectations in some of the literature, measures of CVC activity are not higher in smaller, poorer, more remote villages. CVCs are more active in villages with larger populations;
- iii) CVCs tend to be more active when a) they are located close to the headquarters village of the Gram Panchayat under which they fall, and b) the Gram Panchayat is more active in revenue raising.

These results suggest two broad conclusions:

- i) Prevalent ideas that CVCs are disappearing but clinging on mainly in more 'traditional' or 'backward' areas are substantially wrong;
- ii) In Karnataka at least, there are powerful synergies and interactions between CVCs and elected Gram Panchayats. They appear to stimulate and nurture one another.

Interviews, surveys and focus groups discussions are consistent with the hypothesis that CVCs are actually becoming more rather than less significant in response to the strengthening of democratic governance and expansion of public programmes for rural development. They also show that in villages where total activity levels are high, levels of awareness and satisfaction with Gram Panchayat programmes are also relatively high. Women are more enthusiastic than men, and illiterates more than literates. In villages where CVC activity is low, there is less satisfaction with CVC activities and more reports of corruption by Gram Panchayat members.

Why Are CVCs Thriving?

The research suggests two reasons why CVCs are interacting more with higher level, formal institutions and becoming more pluralistic in composition:

- i) Opportunities for abuse of power are limited: CVCs do not control access to land and other valuable assets, and they face a pluralistic, competitive environment in which villagers have options (for example taking disputes to the police or courts). CVCs therefore need to work hard to retain their trust, and actively earn their support.
- ii) Changes in formal governance structures, and the role of Gram Panchayats in channelling public resources for development have created a niche role that CVCs are well placed to fill: to gain access to resources for projects specific to the village, in competition with other villagers; and to influence elections to the Gram Panchayat. This involves a shift towards a more collective, externally oriented role for the CVCs, that involves representing the village community to higher levels of government, and helps to make CVCs more pluralist and inclusive.