

Draft: Not to be quoted

**CHANGE IN KARNATAKA OVER THE LAST GENERATION:
VILLAGES AND THE WIDER CONTEXT**

**James Manor
Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex**

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper examines changes that have (and have not) occurred – at the village level in Karnataka where most of the state's residents live, and at higher levels when they impinge upon villages – since 1972. Throughout this discussion, we often encounter an oddity. Substantial changes have occurred on many (though certainly not all) fronts, but most of them have not resulted from conscious decisions by political leaders to induce dramatic change. With a small number of exceptions, political leaders have been distinctly reluctant to attempt marked changes of any description. They have not remained inert - nearly all governments have introduced changes. But almost all have proceeded quite cautiously, concentrating almost exclusively on incremental change.

Four exceptions to this tendency are worth briefly noting here at the outset -- because they were important, but also to indicate how few of them there were.

- a) This story begins at a point – in 1972 – when Chief Minister Devaraj Urs (with the help of Karnataka's voters) achieved a substantial, startling change. He broke the dominance that Lingayats and Vokkaligas had exercised over state-level politics since Independence.
- b) In 1983, the state's party system changed when the Congress Party lost a state election for the first time. Since then, the alternation of parties at state elections has (with one notable exception) been then norm.
- c) After 1985, a Janata government generously empowered and funded *panchayati raj* institutions.
- d) Within a short period after the late 1980s, a remarkable boom in software and out-sourcing occurred in greater Bangalore.

Only two of these (the first and the third) occurred as a result of conscious decisions by political leaders to induce change. And note that in the last two decades, no decision to seek dramatic change has occurred. Incrementalism looms large in the history of Karnataka's governance in this period. It looms especially large when we consider economic policy, since on no occasion has a state government sought dramatic change on that front. This is broadly consistent with the cautious approach of national governments in the

economic sphere.¹ Finally, while the first three of these changes have had some impact in villages, only one -- *panchayati raj* -- has made a significant difference there.

One change which might be included in the list above but which has been left out was Devaraj Urs' land reform during the 1970s. It has been omitted because it was radical neither in its intent nor in its impact. As Urs himself recognised, it failed to address the issue of landlessness.² It dealt only with tenancy, and that was a far less serious problem here than in other parts of India because owner-cultivators constituted a much larger proportion of Karnataka's rural population than in other regions.

Change has come to Karnataka gradually. We have seen little to resemble the redistributive initiatives that have occurred in West Bengal since 1977, or Digvijay Singh's pursuit of the Dalit Agenda in Madhya Pradesh in more recent times.³ Karnataka's leaders have moved more cautiously than their counterparts in West Bengal because they have been – without exception – centrists, not leftists. Ideology has counted for almost nothing in Karnataka. The most leftist among them have been 'centrist reformers', not radicals.⁴ They have been progressives for pragmatic, not ideological reasons.⁵ Digvijay Singh was (and is) also a centrist reformer, not a leftist – so he bears a closer resemblance to leaders in Karnataka (especially Devaraj Urs) than to those in West Bengal. But Karnataka's leaders have held back from the kind of audacious gamble which Digvijay Singh took with the Dalit Agenda.⁶

¹ J. Manor, "The Political Sustainability of Economic Liberalization in India" in R. Cassen and V. Joshi (eds.) *India: The Future of Economic Reform* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1994) pp. 339-64.

² Interviews with Devaraj Urs, Bangalore, in August 1978.

³ Digvijay Singh invited Dalit intellectuals from across India draw up a list of measures that could benefit Dalits. He then accepted all 21 proposals and incurred great risks in pursuing them.

⁴ For much more on this distinction as it plays itself out in the political arena, see W. Ascher, *Scheming for the Poor: The Politics of Redistribution in Latin America* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1984) and M.A. Melo, N. Ng'ethe and J. Manor, *Against the Odds: Politicians, Institutions and the Fight against Poverty* (forthcoming). The first of these examines politicians in Latin America during the 1970s and early 1980s. The second compares the machinations of three centrist reformers in recent times – former President Cardoso in Brazil, President Museveni in Uganda, and former Chief Minister Digvijay Singh in Madhya Pradesh.

⁵ J. Manor, "Pragmatic Progressive in Regional Politics: The Case of Devaraj Urs", *Economic and Political Weekly*, annual number, 1980, pp. 201-13; reprinted in G. Shah (ed.) *Caste and Democratic Politics in India* (Permanent Black, Delhi, 2002) pp. 271-94.

⁶ The pursuit of the Dalit Agenda, which (so far at least) must be judged a substantial failure, is examined in detail in Melo, Ng'ethe and Manor, *Against the Odds...*, chapter three..

These things have been true because the architects of change in Karnataka have tended to be tentative, even conservative – a word that they will not like. But to ease their discomfort over that term, it should be added that much of what we have seen has been enlightened conservatism – a tendency to pursue incremental changes which anticipate potential future problems in order to defuse them before they become acute and destabilizing. That tendency is consistent with the traditions of government in this region since the British returned control of old Mysore state (roughly the southern half of what we now call Karnataka) to its princely rulers in 1881. So is an accompanying tendency towards caution lest powerful interests become dangerously alienated, and lest leaders become the victims of the law of unintended consequences. And yet incremental change has been pursued persistently enough to have a significant cumulative effect.

To say this, and to call most of Karnataka's leaders 'enlightened' conservatives, should be read as a statement of fact rather than as a celebration of this tendency. One result has been that certain actions which might have served the interests of all rural dwellers – or of disadvantaged villagers – have not been taken. That is regrettable. But other actions have been – for the most part – beneficial. Karnataka has thus avoided the extremes of inaction seen in places like Orissa, and of brutish governance seen in certain north Indian states and, recently, in Gujarat. Anticipatory changes – beginning with the Miller Committee report in the 1920s and accelerating with Devaraj Urs' mobilization of disadvantaged groups – ensured that this state experienced little conflict after V.P. Singh's endorsement of the Mandal Commission's recommendations in 1990. And incremental actions to promote communal accommodation prevented Hindu nationalists from producing the kind of polarization that occurred in many other states after 1990 over Ayodhya or other issues.

It may seem odd that a paper that is preoccupied with rural Karnataka focuses – here and at many points below – on the state level. But many decisions at and even above that level impinge on village life. Indeed, one of the main

themes in what follows is the increasing impact of high-level decisions and events upon people at the local level over the period since 1972.

Why is 1972 used as a point of departure for this discussion? In part it is a selfish choice by this writer – his studies of Karnataka began just before that. But more to the point, in 1972 the ‘old politics’ of the state gave way to something distinctly different. The rules of politics changed so that Lingayats and Vokkaligas could no longer dominate at the state level as they then did in most villages – and that change has not been reversed. In its place has come a strong tendency among Karnataka’s politicians to develop broad ‘rainbow’ coalitions at cabinet level in which positions of genuine importance were given to leaders from every numerically powerful social group.

When we speak of this change in the rules of politics in 1972, we encounter one further, important aspect of this story. When changes have occurred in Karnataka, however incrementally, they have for the most part endured. Much of the explanation for that lies in the very incremental nature of most of the changes. They do not produce sufficient dislocation to allow opponents to muster the support needed to restore the status quo ante.

To speak of changes is to imply a comparison of the present with the past, but we need to be more specific than that. With what are we comparing the Karnataka of today? The main answer here is ‘mostly with its old self’, but this analysis also contains occasional comparisons with other parts of India, with India as a whole, and with other less developed countries. Such comparisons are based on the view that we only fully see Karnataka for what it is if we consider other cases as well. “What do they know of Karnataka who only Karnataka know?”

To illustrate the point, it is worth noting that the caution and gradualism that we have seen in Karnataka resemble patterns found at the national level -- at most but not all times -- over the last three decades. But it has been more evident in this state than in New Delhi. There have been times when Karnataka’s leaders sought to insulate the state from the impact of dramatic

initiatives at the national level. This was true, when Devaraj Urs carefully avoided excesses during the Emergency – for example, he reported ever increasing and quite massive numbers of forced sterilizations to Indira and Sanjay Gandhi when next to none were in fact occurring.⁷ And it has arguably been true of some decisions by this state’s governments to proceed more slowly with economic liberalization than some national leaders wished.

This paper asks more questions than it answers. There is much that we still do not know. This implies two things. First, disagreements with the comments in this paper are very welcome. Second, this discussion should be read not as a final, definitive statement on what has happened, but rather as an appeal for more research on these issues so that the inadequacies in what follows may be addressed.

This discussion largely omits two major elements in Karnataka’s story over the last three decades. It pays little attention to the urban sector -- which this writer has studied, but which cannot be adequately addressed in a study of this length. And it does not say much about the economy – since others attending this conference are far better equipped than this writer to analyse it.

The remainder of this paper is divided into five parts. Part II asks whether society in Karnataka is as ‘cohesive’ today as it was in 1972, and indicates that the answer to that question varies somewhat if we consider the state level or the village level. To explore those variations, Part III analyses patterns of change on a number of fronts at the state level, and Part IV considers changes at the village level. Part V addresses links between the state and village levels, in part to demonstrate that there is greater vertical integration between the state-level and the villages. Part VI serves as a conclusion.

II. VARIATIONS AT DIFFERENT LEVELS: HOW ‘COHESIVE’ A SOCIETY?

To illustrate the different patterns of change that we find at different levels, let us consider the answers that emerge at the village and state levels when we

⁷ For more detail on Urs’ handling of the Emergency in Karnataka, see J. Manor, “Where Congress Survived:

ask one important question: ‘how cohesive is this society?’ Two decades ago, this writer published a study of Karnataka which described it as a ‘cohesive society’.⁸ The point was not that society there was as cohesive as more homogeneous societies – in for example, Denmark – but that it was more cohesive than the societies found in other regions of South Asia.

It argued that this was true despite invidious hierarchies and injustices within society in Karnataka. Several factors were cited as part of the explanation, including the legacy of the Veerasaiva movement and the very small proportion of the state’s population classified as ‘Scheduled Tribes’. But more important was the exceedingly low incidence of landlessness in old Mysore, which had two key implications.

First, it meant that hierarchies and inequalities there were not as extreme as in other regions of South Asia – so that we encountered less of the harsh exploitation found elsewhere, and less of the deep alienation among the exploited. Second, since old Mysore did much to set the political tone for the enlarged state after 1956, it meant that accommodative politics which offered at least something even to disadvantaged groups – and which offered them more substance after Devaraj Urs changed state politics in 1972 – took root there more firmly than in most other Indian states. This was in part the product of pre-existing cohesion, but it also lent itself to the maintenance of that cohesion.

We need to ask ourselves whether society in Karnataka today is as ‘cohesive’ as it was twenty years ago when that study appeared. The simple answer to this question is ‘no’. But simple answers are insufficient – because of the variations that we find when we consider different levels. These are explored in detail in Parts III and IV of this paper, but for a small taste of this, let us briefly consider the issue of social (and, to a degree, political) cohesion at the village and higher levels.

Five States in the Indian General Election of 1977”, *Asian Survey* (August 1978).

⁸ J. Manor, “Karnataka: Caste, Class, Dominance and Politics in a Cohesive Society” in F.Frankel and M.S.A. Rao (eds.) *Dominance and State Power in Modern India: Decline of a Social Order*, volume one, pp. 322-61.

Let us begin with the former. As we shall see in Part III, the old caste hierarchy in Karnataka's villages has undergone considerable erosion over the last two decades. This and other changes – all of them incremental but persistent enough to have a potent cumulative effect – have made rural society less cohesive than before. And since the old hierarchy brought with it objectionable practices, there is much about this change that can be seen as 'progressive'. But the situation is more complex than that since another result is a decline in social cohesion, and in the limited sense of mutuality and even community, which – alongside the vile implications of hierarchy – offered certain protections against uncertainty and risk. This takes some explaining.

It is obvious that hierarchy and community are substantially incompatible concepts – substantially but not entirely. In places where inequalities are not especially severe -- as has long been true in much but not all of Karnataka -- the damaging impact of hierarchy upon those at lower levels is somewhat muted. Social ties develop between those at different levels within the hierarchies, characterised by a significant degree of interdependence that results in a limited sense of mutuality. To say this is not to claim that people at lower levels in the caste hierarchy did not suffer acute injustice. They did. But the system also brought with it collective arrangements that offered even low status groups limited advantages (as we see early in Part III), even though these were far less important than were the iniquities of the old system.

That system proved remarkably durable. This was true partly because inequalities were less marked in Karnataka, but also because the ties that bound different groups together within the hierarchy were adaptable rather than unchanging. They evolved incrementally as conditions changed, so that they tended to bend without breaking – until recently. For evidence of this durability, consider for example a survey of social attitudes conducted in the early 1980s by K.C. Alexander. He questioned village respondents in Alleppey District of Kerala, Thanjavur District of Tamil Nadu and Mandya District of Karnataka. In the first two of those places, the old hierarchies had

been so extremely unjust that they had broken down – so he found very little deference to higher castes there. In Mandya District, however, the old hierarchies were far less inequitable – so he found that much of the old deference to higher castes lived on, as did the hierarchies themselves.⁹

Over the two decades since he conducted that survey, much has changed in Mandya and other parts of the state. These changes are discussed in more detail in the early sections of Part III, but they can be briefly summarised here. For a diversity of reasons, ‘caste’ has come to denote difference more than hierarchy. The bonds linking higher and lower status groups have become more tenuous, and deference has therefore become far less salient than before. People look for help less to persons who have high ascriptive status than to people who (in G.K. Karanth’s words) “can get things done”. And those who can get things done are often not people of high caste status.¹⁰ If someone replicated Alexander’s survey in Mandya today –and someone should – it is likely that the result would be very different. Thus – as we see in greater detail in Part III -- at the village level over the last 20 years, Karnataka has become a much less “cohesive” society.

The people who can “get things done” usually achieve this by making use of connections and channels to higher levels in the system. Such channels have, as we shall see, proliferated over the last two decades. Indeed, it is that proliferation more than outright challenges within villages to the old hierarchy – although we have seen some of these -- that has eroded the old social order. This has also made people within villages less inclined to try to solve problems through their own collective efforts. They tend increasingly to look beyond the village for assistance.¹¹

Does this proliferation of channels mean that society in Karnataka has become more “cohesive” in another way – in terms of vertical ties between

⁹ K.C. Alexander, “Caste Mobilization and Class Consciousness: The Emergence of Agrarian Movements in Kerala and Tamil Nadu” in Frankel and Rao, *ibid.*, volume one, pp. 392-400.

¹⁰ Interview with G.K. Karanth, Bangalore, 5 March 2005.

villages and higher levels? The answer is 'no', because "cohesive" is too strong a word. Society is, as we shall see, more vertically integrated. But the bonds that connect the villages with higher levels are too impersonal, contested, impermanent and unpredictable to yield anything like "cohesion". So we have seen a decline in social cohesion at the village level, and an increase in (mostly political and economic) integration between the local and higher levels, but the latter does not suffice to compensate for the loosening of bonds at the grassroots.

When we look at other topics in the discussion that follows, we will again encounter different patterns of change at different levels. For that reason, the remainder of this paper deals separately with the state level, the village level and the space between them

III. THE STATE LEVEL

A number of changes at the state level need to be explored. Those examined below have impinged, at least modestly, upon rural arenas.

Deteriorating Standards?

In Karnataka today, it is common to hear people – especially those over the age of 50 -- say that standards in public life have deteriorated. This writer has been hearing such comments from such people for over 30 years, but that does not mean that they are merely predictable grumblings from grumpy old men and women. There is some substance in their claims. To take just one example, in March of this year, a distinguished and highly credible former Chief Secretary of the state told this writer that when civil servants inform ministers (as they routinely do) that an action under consideration would be illegal, ministers sometimes – and increasingly -- disregard this advice and proceed.¹²

¹¹ See for example, the arguments of G.K. Karanth, V. Ramaswamy and others in chapters 11 to 14 of R. Baumgartner and R. Hogger (eds.) *In Search of Sustainable Livelihood Systems: Managing Resources and Change* (Sage Publications, New Delhi, Thousand Oaks and London, 2004).

¹² Interview, Bangalore, 6 March 2005.

So if we compare the state with itself three decades ago, standards have clearly slipped. But to understand how serious this problem is, we also need to compare this state with others – and when we do so, things look less discouraging. In many other states, especially in North India, civil servants no longer warn politicians of potentially illegal actions because they have been intimidated by their masters to a far greater extent than in Karnataka, and because they know that such comments would have no effect. In Karnataka, such advice is still conveyed regularly – and sometimes it is heeded. And here, when institutions and the rule of law have taken a battering under certain leaders, steps have repeatedly been taken to restore them. To get a fuller sense of the comparatively modest slippage in standards, let us consider three things -- there are others, but these will illustrate the point. First, Karnataka has had less experience of destructive Chief Ministers than have many other states. Second, although corruption has increased, it is not as serious as in some other states. Finally, institutions there have retained much of their substance.

Mercifully Few Destructive Chief Ministers

One of the reasons that standards in Karnataka have deteriorated less than in most other states is that the state has had fewer destructive Chief Ministers. Since 1972 (and indeed, since Independence), only two such leaders have held power in Bangalore – R. Gundu Rao (1980-1983) and S. Bangarappa (1990-1992).

Gundu Rao became Chief Minister because he offered Indira Gandhi the kind of slavish loyalty that, by 1980, she demanded – and because he was a favourite of her son Sanjay. He centralised power in his own hands to an unprecedented degree and imposed ‘civil servant raj’ of a kind seen only in the pre-Independence period. It is for this reason that older bureaucrats in the state regard his time in power as a golden age. This had one minor advantage – civil servants tend, for the most part, to maintain certain minimal standards when given their head. But it was outweighed by serious disadvantages. Corruption was centralised so that the Chief Minister left office with an estimated 100 to 150 crores of rupees in his possession.

Legislators, who in those days were the only elected representatives with any significant powers, were unable to exercise any influence on behalf of their constituents. They were often unable to get appointments even with middle-ranking bureaucrats. So the process of democratic government was stifled under Gundu Rao.

Other, things happened in that era which ran the gamut from the comic to the outrageous. Gundu Rao drank champagne every day that he was Chief Minister. He became – very publicly – a bigamist. His serious lack of education – he had risen to high office from his days as a ticket tout at a bus stand because he provided the Congress Party with ‘muscle’ – meant that he was incapable of reading more than two sentences in a government file at one sitting. He brought his ‘musclemen’ with him into the cabinet, and brutalities were sometimes meted out to opponents. When farmers were late in repaying government loans, he had the police seize moveable property – something which a sensible Chief Minister would have regarded as an act of political insanity. He kept in his cabinet a minister who was credibly accused of (to put it politely) holding a young woman against her will for a long period – despite unprecedented street demonstrations by women’s groups. And so it goes on.¹³

S. Bangarappa did greater damage. He was the only utterly normless Chief Minister in the state’s history. He systematically placed the least principled and most pliable civil servants in key posts, and exiled the best to obscure postings. (The latter were glad of this under such a vile government. One of the most distinguished of these recently spoke with gratitude of the fact that his posting was so unimportant that he was able to perfect his golf game during the Bangarappa years.¹⁴) Illicit ‘fund-raising’ was a central – perhaps the central – preoccupation of that government. Bangarappa became the only state-level leader in the last 150 years to encourage parochial conflict – in his

¹³ His government is discussed in greater detail in J. Manor, “Blurring the Lines between Parties and Social Bases: Gundu Rao and the Emergence of a Janata Government in Karnataka” – which appeared both in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, 15 September 1984, and in J.R. Wood (ed.) *State Politics in Contemporary India: Crisis or Continuity?* (Westview, Boulder and London, 1984) pp. 139-68.

¹⁴ Interview, Bangalore, 4 March 2005.

case, between Kannadigas and Tamils. When this led to rioting in Bangalore, the Chief Minister's aides rushed to inform him, only to find that he refused to consider their urgent pleas for action until he had completed his daily badminton game.¹⁵ It was that sort of government.

Two destructive Chief Ministers is too many, but several comments are worth making by way of mitigation. First, two is a smaller number than is the norm in several other states. Second, and crucially, since neither of these Chief Ministers served a full term, they were unable to institutionalize the damaging practices in which they indulged. (They did not, for example, have a full five years as the BJP-Shiv Sena government in Maharashtra did in the 1990s – which was long enough for their wanton corruption to throw what had been the most fiscally sound state government in India into a fiscal crisis that persists to this day.) In both cases in Karnataka, the destructive Chief Ministers were thrown out – Gundu Rao by the voters (who are mainly villagers) in 1983, and Bangarappa by a revolt of legislators in his own Congress Party – so the system there proved self-correcting. And once they were ousted, they were thoroughly discredited. (Consider by contrast the re-election after five years in opposition of Jayalathaa – as she now spells it after consulting a numerologist – despite her plunder of the state in her first full term.) In both of the Karnataka cases, their successors restored standards – which has not always happened in other states.

Corruption

This discussion assesses corruption at the state level, and that problem at the local level is assessed in Part IV below. The amounts of money illegally diverted by state-level politicians and bureaucrats have increased markedly since 1972. We have no accurate measurement of this, but reliable testimony from well informed people over 30 years consistently indicates that this happened.¹⁶ The story is, however, a little complicated. There are some limitations on this trend, and some correctives to the excessive pursuit of it,

¹⁵ Interview with an official who took the news to Bangarappa, Bangalore, 9 March 1999.

both at the state and at lower levels. We will come to these shortly, but it is first necessary to consider why corruption has increased.

There are several reasons for the increase in corruption. First, politicians believe that by amassing illicit funds for political purposes, they can strengthen their hands and possibly enhance their chances of being re-elected. They have sometimes been right about the first of these ideas. If a senior minister possesses substantial funds to distribute among his subordinates or even among politicians from other parties, he¹⁷ may be able to buy some cooperation. If he distributes some of those funds to potential groups of supporters (or their leaders), he may be able to strengthen their organisational capacity and bind them more closely to him. This was apparent under Devaraj Urs between 1972 and 1980 when corruption first took off in Karnataka. He used illicit funds to establish and then build up caste associations among disadvantaged groups that had previously been poorly organised or entirely unorganised. He felt compelled to do this to prevent Lingayats and Vokkaligas who had previously dominated state-level politics from combining against him to re-establish their influence.¹⁸

If a senior politician allows his subordinates to enrich themselves, he will earn their gratitude and cooperation, and he may distract or dissuade them from taking actions that are inconvenient to him. One senior minister in a recent Karnataka government told this writer that two recent Chief Ministers were for these reasons decidedly “relaxed” about profiteering by their subordinates, and that corruption grew apace as a result.¹⁹ Two features of this state’s politics – the low levels of discipline within the main parties, and the tradition of power-sharing within cabinets which usually gives ministers considerable autonomy – have (despite significant benefits which follow from the second of these) encouraged the growth of corruption.

¹⁶ It is worth noting in passing that a Karnataka IAS officer has produced a useful book on corruption which was surely informed by his work in the state. See S.K. Das, *Publics Office, Private Interest: Bureaucracy and Corruption in India* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2001).

¹⁷ Very few senior politicians in Karnataka have been women.

¹⁸ These comments are based on discussions with Devaraj Urs in Bangalore in 1978.

The notion that massive 'fund-raising' will help to secure re-election has little substance, however. Money almost never wins elections in Karnataka, or in India more generally. This is easy to demonstrate. Parties in power always have far more opportunities to amass illicit funds than do parties in opposition. They therefore almost always go into elections with more money to spend than their opponents. And yet at the vast majority of state elections in Karnataka since 1983 – and in other states as well – ruling parties has been thrown out by the voters. If money could decide elections, this would not happen. This has not stopped politicians in power from pursuing 'fund-raising', but they do so in the vain hope that it will help them be re-elected.

This inability to win re-election is well enough known among ministers and legislators within ruling parties to persuade many of them that they had better maximise personal profiteering while the opportunity exists -- because their time in power is likely to be limited.

Illicit 'fund raising' for political parties has also occurred in Karnataka – especially when the Congress Party has governed there – because state-level leaders have been required to provide their parties at the national level with substantial sums. There is evidence to suggest that some of the funds passed to MPs in the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha in the mid-1990s originated from the Congress in Karnataka, but this process was well established much earlier, in Devaraj Urs' time. Such payments have on numerous occasions been made by Congress leaders in Karnataka to persuade the party's national leaders not to intrude unhelpfully in the state's politics.²⁰

The amounts of money which have been illegally diverted have also increased in Karnataka because economic growth in the state – especially but only in greater Bangalore – has enhanced opportunities to raise funds. It is far more difficult to amass huge sums in poorer states where, like the tax base, the potential for significant profiteering is more limited. Economic growth has also increased the need to develop infrastructure to keep pace with other

¹⁹ Interview, Bangalore, 3 May 2004.

prosperous states, and major infrastructure projects offer enticing opportunities for kickbacks to senior figures in government. There are, as we shall see below, some signs of restraint on this front in Karnataka. But restraint has been a relatively minor theme in recent years.

This reference to restraint reminds us of the need to consider the other side of this story. Notwithstanding the comments above, there are in Karnataka some limitations on excessive corruption, and certain important correctives have emerged both at the state and lower levels. These warrant attention, in part because they are less evident in many other Indian states.

At the state level, most leading politicians have recognised that if corruption runs to extremes, it can damage their hopes of re-election – by giving them a bad reputation and by undermining the capacity of the government to deliver goods, services and funds to rural areas where most voters live. This has not served as a major check on malfeasance, but it has imposed some limitations upon it. As a result, the excesses which occurred under Gundu Rao and Bangarappa were sharply curtailed by their successors, since they were seen (correctly) as politically suicidal. Nor has Karnataka witnessed anything like the looting seen in Tamil Nadu under Jayalalithaa, or the systematic extortion practiced in Maharashtra under the BJP-Shiv Sena government.

The limitations on corruption in Karnataka have, however, been modest. This writer recently told an official in a major international development agency that an investigation of the Naidu government had found evidence to suggest that kickbacks of more than \$1 million dollars had occurred in Andhra Pradesh on more than 100 occasions. The official – who was extremely well-informed – replied that in recent years, Karnataka has not lagged very far behind.²¹ But kickbacks do not occur at every opportunity.²²

²⁰ In interviews with this writer in 1978 and 1980, Devaraj Urs stated this explicitly.

²¹ Interview, New Delhi, 9 September 2004.

²² For example, in the mid-1990s, private companies on a short list for a contract to build a sizeable utility sent representatives to Bangalore to make their final presentations before those who would make the decision. After one company's spokesman had finished, he was taken aside by a senior bureaucrat and told that to secure the contract, he would need to pass Rs.600,000 through the bureaucrat in question to the authorities. The businessman said nothing in response and immediately contacted an analyst of the state's politics to ask whether

The overall picture in the state is thus ambiguous. Corruption has increased substantially, but the process has involved some restraint and correctives that are absent in many other states.

Institutions Still Matter More than Individuals

In many Indian states, political institutions have taken a battering from powerful, self-aggrandising individuals – usually politicians – over the period since 1972. Personalised patronage networks predominate over impersonal processes. Bureaucrats have been so thoroughly browbeaten that they and the institutions which they inhabit retain little substance or autonomy. Supposedly independent or semi-independent institutions beyond the bureaucracy have been subordinated to the political interests and will of potent leaders. We have seen some of this in Karnataka, but less than in many other states. And when excesses of this kind have occurred there, they have tended to be short lived and to be followed by periods in which institutions have undergone at least some regeneration.²³

This is explained by several features of Karnataka's politics – of which two are especially important. First, the need to construct and maintain rainbow coalitions at the state level has compelled leading politicians to forge accommodations of real substance (and not just tokenism) with ministers from a diversity of social groups – so that collective leadership has almost always predominated. This has curbed the power of individual leaders to go to excess, and spared institutions – formal state institutions and informal party institutions -- much of the damage that they have suffered elsewhere.

this sounded like a genuine overture. If so, it would have killed his company's chances, since it did not pay bribes. The analyst quickly checked with reliable contacts close to the government, and was advised that it was probably not a genuine demand, for two reasons. The figure of Rs.600,000 seemed too low for such a substantial project. And given the likely identity of the bureaucrat -- the businessman refused to name him, but the number of possible candidates was quite small – he was probably not in a position to affect the decision. This looked more like a free-lance attempt by that bureaucrat to make some money for himself. The analyst was advised to tell the businessman to telephone the Chief Minister's office and explain what had happened. The word was passed and the businessman did this – and his company then secured the contract without paying a bribe.

Most senior politicians in the state have risen to the top through the ranks of their parties, so that they do not loom larger than the parties. It is thus unusual to find a party in Karnataka of which it can be said – as has always been said of the Telugu Desam Party, under both of its leaders – that it is “a party of heroes and zeroes, and the number of heroes is one”.²⁴ We saw signs of this in the Congress Party when it was led by Gundu Rao and Bangarappa, but they were soon ousted. And we again see signs of it today in the Janata Dal (S), but it has lately met with some resistance there. The norm is collective leadership which is institution-friendly.

The second feature is the alternation of parties in power at every or – depending on how you look at it -- almost every election over the last two decades. (The only possible exception was the 2004 state election. But it is impossible to say that the incumbent Congress ‘won’ that election, and it only governs now in an uneasy alliance with the Janata Dal (S).) The alternation of ruling parties implies that no leader has been so successful at the polls that s/he becomes more important than the party and can do whatever s/he pleases – as for example M.G. Ramachandran (but few other state-level leaders) could. This again has spared institutions in Karnataka the kind of damage which untrammelled leaders can do.

Nor – in the main – have individuals or particular social groups been menaced or injured by governments in which individuals exercise overweening power. Karnataka has seen less brutish government than several other states. It has seen nothing remotely like the excesses witnessed under the present Gujarat government, or in Haryana under Bansi Lal, or the systematic use of state government machinery to promote extortion rackets run by a party that was subject to personalised control which occurred under the BJP-Shiv Sena government in Maharashtra during the 1990s.

²³ For more on this process, see J.Manor, “Political Regeneration in India” in A. Nandy and D.L. Sheth (eds.) *The Multiverse of Democracy: Essays in Honour of Rajni Kothari* (Sage Publications, New Delhi, Thousand Oaks and London, 1996) pp. 230-41.

²⁴ I owe this quote to the late, much lamented G. Ram Reddy.

But we need not look that far afield for brutishness. Under the Naidu government in Andhra Pradesh – the state which in most ways is most like Karnataka²⁵ -- deaths in police custody soared. Senior civil servants in Karnataka speak with astonishment and disapproval of the “brutal” way that the Andhra Pradesh government has dealt with ‘naxalites’ – in the jails and in so called ‘encounters’ with police.²⁶ Nor have we seen anything like the acid attack on an official of the Tamil Nadu government, and other brutish acts there -- which were the result either of encouragement from on high or of fanatical devotion to the leader. No Karnataka leader – not even Gundu Rao (a former ‘muscleman’ with more ‘musclemen’ in his inner circle) or Bangarappa (who fomented conflict between linguistic groups) – has gone that far. And no Karnataka leader has ever got close to inspiring fanatical devotion.

This has meant that the bureaucracy in Karnataka has maintained greater autonomy, greater institutional substance, and greater potential for constructive action than its counterparts in many other states. That has enabled successive Karnataka governments to develop more intelligently crafted policies than many of their counterparts elsewhere – including policies that affect the rural sector. So the state has had not just greater policy continuity (a theme discussed below), but better policies.²⁷

²⁵ J. Manor “Explaining Political Trajectories in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka” in R. Jenkins (ed.) *Regional Reflections: Comparing Politics across India’s States* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2004) pp. 255-84.

²⁶ Interviews with two such people, Bangalore, 6 and 7 March 2005.

²⁷ The importance of this institutional capacity can be illustrated by a brief account not of policy affecting the rural sector, but of the interactions between Karnataka governments and major international development agencies. Three years ago, a senior World Bank official in New Delhi told this writer that Karnataka was the only state government in India that with an impressive capacity to develop its own detailed negotiating positions in its dealings with the Bank. This required the government to generate complex socio-economic analyses and proposals on its own, without help from the Bank which routinely provided such assistance to other state governments – a process that compromised their autonomy. Karnataka could achieve this not because it had more good economists among its senior bureaucrats – several other states have similarly impressive civil servants available. Karnataka achieved this because it managed its bureaucracy in ways that enabled those economists to make crucial contributions to policy making. (The state government also had the wit to seek advice from formidable analysts available within the state – not least at ISEC.)

By giving bureaucrats greater autonomy, and by providing them with an enabling environment, successive governments have enhanced their own autonomy in their dealings with major international development agencies. This approach to senior civil servants has ensured that the state’s finances have been prudently managed, so that Karnataka does not share the desperate need of some other states for donor funds – something which can lead state governments into agreements which undermine their autonomy. Thus when the World Bank offered the J.H. Patel government substantial funds, he was able to take advice from sophisticated advisors and – when they and he found the attendant conditionalities unpalatable – he was in a position to refuse the offer.

The strength of these institutions within the Government of Karnataka has not always endeared it to international donor agencies. In recent years, Chief Ministers of Uttar Pradesh (Kalyan Singh) and Andhra

A Limited Dispersal of Power at the State Level

Before leaving the subject of institutions, we need to pay a little attention to one thing which has – for the most part – not happened in Karnataka in recent times. At the national level since 1989, when it became impossible for any single party to win a parliamentary majority, we have witnessed a substantial dispersal of power, horizontally, away from the Prime Minister's Office which had been dominant under Indira and Rajiv Gandhi.

This process has both informal and formal dimensions to it. The necessity after 1996 to construct broad, multi-party coalitions to capture and hold power in New Delhi has entailed a dispersal of power from the party leading the coalition to other parties in it. This is an 'informal' process, since parties are informal institutions – they are not formal institutions of state, named in laws or the Constitution. But power has also flowed since 1989 to formal institutions at the national level – to Parliament and parliamentary committees, to the Election Commission, to the judiciary, to the office of the Comptroller and Auditor General, etc.

Little of this has happened at the state level in Karnataka, or in most other states. Coalition politics has come to Karnataka only very recently,²⁸ and at this writing, the new government is still struggling to find its way and to settle into a stable pattern of behaviour. Two formal institutions in the state have acquired greater power since 1989 – mainly as a result of the horizontal flow

Pradesh (Chandrababu Naidu) have gone to extraordinary lengths to cultivate major donors at a personal level. When teams from donor agencies arrived in their state capitals, they had very extensive access to these Chief Ministers who played the dominant role in negotiations. By contrast, when such teams reached Bangalore, they dealt mainly with Chief Secretaries, Finance Secretaries and their teams of economic advisors. At best, they might be given lunch or a cup of tea with Chief Ministers. (The use of the plural is crucial, since it indicates that these practices were followed under successive governments.)

This caused some dismay in donor agencies. Egos were not massaged so assiduously in Bangalore, and it inspired suspicions about whether the real leaders there were serious about development. At one point in the late 1990s, an analyst stressed to a major donor agency that when they negotiated with governments in places like Andhra Pradesh they were dealing with individuals, while in Karnataka they were dealing with institutions. This should have made Karnataka more attractive since it indicated that policy continuity when governments changed was more likely, but that message was not fully taken on board.

This account focuses on high politics and on events that do not bear intimately upon the rural sector, but the same processes – creating conditions in which civil servants can contribute constructively to policy making – have had positive benefits for rural development as well. [This note is based on interviews since 1998 with senior officials of the state government and at the World Bank in New Delhi.]

²⁸ In 1983, Karnataka had a coalition government, but the two parties swiftly merged and became a single force.

of power at the national level. The Election Commission in Karnataka has acquired greater leverage, thanks mainly to the assertiveness of its counterpart in New Delhi – although it had long possessed considerable autonomy in this state. And the judiciary in Karnataka has gained some additional power, partly as a consequence of a more activist judiciary at the national level (a process which started before 1989). But beyond these changes, we have seen little in the way of a horizontal dispersal of power at the state level. (New legislative committees have been created, but have not become particularly powerful.)

How does this affect people in rural areas? If power had been more widely dispersed horizontally at the state level, this might have led to the creation of at least some new links or channels connecting the state and local levels. Little of this has happened. The only faint indication of change was a set of comments by lawyers at the Karnataka High Court in early 2005 -- that they perceived a modest increase in cases coming up to the state level from the grassroots, which is in small measure explained by the strengthening of the judiciary in the state.²⁹

This does not mean, however, that no new channels between the state and district levels on the one hand, and the village level on the other have developed since 1971. They have in fact proliferated – but for other reasons. We shall see in Part IV that one key reason for this (there are others) has been the decision of the state government to empower and fund *panchayats* more generously than most other state governments in India and most governments elsewhere in Asia, Africa and Latin America. But that is a vertical (downward) dispersal of power.

Fiscal Constraints

State governments all across India have faced cruel dilemmas in recent years because awakened electorates make a huge number of heavy demands upon them and – especially since the early 1990s – they have found it difficult to

²⁹ Interview, Bangalore, 8 March 2005.

respond adequately because they face acute fiscal constraints. Karnataka is not immune from this problem, but fiscal constraints there have not been as severe as in most other states -- because senior figures (politicians and bureaucrats) have managed financial resources with greater prudence than their counterparts in other states.³⁰ This matters to villagers since it means that the government is not prevented from pursuing rural development programmes by fiscal problems.

How has this happened? It has something to do with the technocratic sophistication within the upper reaches of the Karnataka cadre of the IAS. A World Bank official in New Delhi recently told this writer that it was the only Indian state that had been consistently capable of generating its own formidably detailed calculations and negotiating positions when major agreements were being discussed. All other state governments tend merely to react to (and often to accept) the World Bank's own proposals.³¹ (That of course means that Karnataka is able to retain more autonomy in negotiations – and on at least one occasion, this led to a decision in Bangalore to decline a major World Bank proposal.³²)

But technocrats are less important in this story than politicians who make most of the crucial decisions about financial matters and everything else – a blatant fact which is largely ignored in most of the development literature.³³ Their comparatively sensible actions, under successive governments, have long made Karnataka one of the three most fiscally sound state governments (along with Maharashtra and Gujarat). And today – after wildly irresponsible financial mismanagement in Maharashtra under the BJP-Shiv Sena government in the mid-1990s – Karnataka stands at the top of the table.³⁴

³⁰ To say this is not to deny that major problems persist – for example, in the electricity sector. But the comparison made here is with other Indian states.

³¹ Interview, New Delhi, 16 March 2002.

³² Interview with a former senior official of the Karnataka government, Bangalore 6 March 2004.

³³ Three of us have recently written a book to stress this point by examining cases from Uganda, Brazil and Madhya Pradesh: Melo, Ng'ethe and Manor, *Against the Odds...*

³⁴ Interviews with an official at the Planning Commission, New Delhi, 17 April 2004; and with an official at the World Bank, New Delhi, 28 February 2005.

Thus, one does not encounter difficulties in Karnataka such as this writer has discovered on recent visits to certain other states. For example, in 1999, he called upon a friend in Jaipur who was Secretary to Government in a major development ministry. When asked how he was enjoying the job, the official said that Rajasthan had been on a “plan holiday” for many months, and was likely to remain in that situation for a long spell yet. This implied that once he had paid his staff their salaries, there was no money left for anything else. He was paralysed. And on a visit to Hyderabad in early 2000, this writer was told by senior IAS officers that the government was then so bankrupt that they could not afford even to purchase petrol for their official vehicles.

We hear nothing of this sort in Bangalore. Over the last seven years – most recently in February 2005 -- this writer has repeatedly probed senior Karnataka IAS officers in efforts to discover examples of fiscal constraints undermining their capacity to pursue development. In department after department, no significant evidence of this has emerged. In this state, such constraints have consistently been tight – especially since the implementation of the Firth Pay Commission Report -- but far from crippling.

The Changing Party System

Many readers will be familiar with changes in the state’s party system – a term which means the totality of the parties which contest seriously for power in any given arena. The party system has passed through four phases.

- a) From Independence until 1983, Karnataka had a ‘dominant party system’ with the Congress Party dominating at every state and national election – although there was a meaningful contest between Congress-R and Congress-O at the parliamentary election of 1971 and the state election of 1972.
- b) Soon after the 1983 state election brought them to power, the two non-Congress parties which prevailed against the Congress merged into the Janata Party (later renamed the Janata Dal). That gave rise to a two party system (Congress versus Janata).
- c) This lasted until 1991 when (at a parliamentary election) the BJP began to emerge as a serious player – although for many years, it remained a marginal force, incapable of aspiring seriously to power at the state level.³⁵ This opened a third phase characterised by a two

³⁵ J. Manor, “Southern Discomfort: The BJP in Karnataka” in T.B. Hansen and C. Jaffrelot (eds.) *The BJP and the Compulsions of Politics in India* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1998) pp. 163-201; and (on India more generally)

party plus' system, with Congress and Janata still the only real contenders for power at the state level, but the BJP playing a somewhat significant role – sometimes as the official opposition.

- d) Finally, at the state election of 2004, the BJP finally ceased to be marginal – winning the largest minority of seats in the state assembly. So we now have a three party system.

There is no reason to expect this latest system to survive for long. As so many previous changes indicate, the situation is quite volatile. It appears unlikely that a further party will emerge. (There is none in sight at present.) But it is entirely possible that one of the three parties now contending for power will fall into decline – the most likely candidate being the Janata Dal (S). So we may return to a two party or a two party plus system.³⁶

Does any of this make a major difference to rural voters? The answer is 'yes'. But note that the biggest difference was made in 1983, when the electorate summoned to power – for itself, out of exasperation with the over-centralised, unresponsive and downright bizarre government of Gundu Rao -- a realistic alternative to the Congress Party. That enabled rural voters, who decide election outcomes, (a) to exercise a meaningful choice when they go to the polls, and (b) to throw out ruling parties that have displeased them. Since then, they have almost always done so. Once multi-party competition became the norm, it made severe alienation with the political order less likely since voters always had a choice.

But what sort of choice? Does this merely entail the alternation of different sets of scoundrels in office? The answer this time is 'no'. Most governments have had their fair share of scoundrels. But only one of the ten chief ministers since 1983 (if we count Hegde twice, since he was re-elected) qualifies as a scoundrel, which is not a bad average by all-India standards. And all but that one government contained a substantial proportion of ministers who sought to achieve constructive outcomes, and in most cases, they succeeded to a

J. Manor, "In Part, A Myth – The BJP's Organisational Strength" in K. Adeney and L. Saez (eds.) *Hindu Nationalism and Indian Politics* (Routledge, London, forthcoming 2005).

³⁶ The best analysis of the 2004 election found that "neither the BJP nor the Janata Dal (S) has been able to present itself as a viable alternative to the Congress across the state". Shastri and Ramaswamy, "Karnataka: Simultaneous Polls...", p. 5486.

degree – to a considerable degree by all-India standards. (And whatever Indian readers may think of their own politics, “all-India standards” compare favourably with standards in most other countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America.) In other words, except in one of ten cases, rural dwellers in Karnataka were not ruled by a wretched state government. And on no occasion did they elect one – since Bangarappa was not elected but imposed. This is not an utterly happy story. Painful ambiguities have attended every government, as they do in every democratic system on earth. But it could be far more depressing.

One of the reasons that it is not more depressing is that politicians who hold power in Karnataka are acutely aware of the likelihood that they will be thrown out at the next election. This has ambiguous implications. It inspires some to maximise their personal profits while in office. But more importantly, it also compels governments to seek to perform as constructively as they can – since they know that voters – mainly villagers – are difficult to please.

Policy Continuity amid the Alternation of Ruling Parties

Since 1985, the alternation of ruling parties at state elections has been the norm in Karnataka. In some Indian states – most notably Uttar Pradesh since the early 1990s – when governments alternate, huge changes ensue. The policies of previous governments are uprooted and contemptuously discarded, key administrative posts are systematically purged of civil servants who served the previous government, and so on. We have seen very little of this sort of thing in Karnataka over the last 30 years.

This is partly explained by the mostly incremental nature of policy changes that state governments there have undertaken. This offers a striking contrast to Uttar Pradesh where dramatic policy shifts by one government, which are introduced with extravagant histrionics, are shredded when a new government takes over -- with even more histrionics -- and new policies are then introduced with a great theatrical flourish. It is also explained by the inclination of the parties which have alternated in power in Karnataka to

appeal to the same social base – a theme which is considered in the next section.

Thus when a new government takes over in Bangalore, it tends to sustain most of its predecessor's policies – with some adjustments in emphasis or scale but little uprooting. This has produced broad policy continuity from government to government, which has enabled the incremental changes that nearly all governments have introduced to have – over time – a considerable cumulative effect that has often been felt at the village level.

Continuity in Social Coalitions Underpinning Ruling Parties

Nearly all state governments in Karnataka since 1972 – no matter which party has held power -- have sought to construct and maintain a broadly inclusive rainbow coalition of all numerically powerful social groups. Once again Uttar Pradesh differs radically, with contending parties seeking votes from much more limited and largely distinct slices of society. To ensure their support, those parties magnify the differences between social groups and seek – with some success -- to encourage antipathy between them. Hence the histrionics, and hence the dramatic changes in policy there. The politics of division and spite that have predominated in Uttar Pradesh for over a decade have almost never been pursued in Karnataka – the sole exception being Chief Minister S. Bangarappa who sought to inspire antipathy between Kannadigas and Tamils.

These comments about 'rainbow coalitions' refer to more than the representation of different social groups within the state cabinet. It is possible to have relatively fair representation at the same time as informal devices are used to ensure that leaders from certain social groups receive only tokenism – unimportant posts, or inadequate influence over the ministries that they supposedly control. But the tendency in Karnataka since 1972 has been to provide leaders from a broad array of social groups with genuine influence over reasonably important ministries.

The consistent failure of state governments to win re-election suggests that the main determinant of contests for the greatest political prize at the state level is the performance or non-performance of incumbent governments rather than differences in the social coalitions that sweep new governments to power. The two things cannot, of course, be neatly separated. But the key point to note here is that new governments have sought to appeal to roughly the same social coalitions as their predecessors, and that these coalitions have all been quite broad. Indeed, once governments take power, they tend to construct state-level cabinets which are more broadly representative than the coalitions which voted them into power.³⁷

That is not the end of the story, however. Things are a little more complicated than that. It has become increasingly difficult, especially in recent years, to build and sustain extremely broad coalitions because tensions and contradictions between various social groups have grown more acute. This becomes evident when we consider Muzaffar Assadi's stimulating arguments that two competing social coalitions have contended for power in the state. He identifies two such coalitions: MOVD (Muslims, OBCs, Vokkaligas and Dalits) and LIBRA (Lingayats and Brahmins).³⁸ There are several points to make about that analysis.

First, if those two coalitions held together reasonably coherently, MOVD would always defeat LIBRA. The former contains far more voters than the latter. And in practice, every government that has been elected since the alternation of parties began in 1983 has tended to appeal mainly to the MOVD groups. But "tended" and "mainly" are words that admit variations, and we have often seen variations in this trend.

³⁷ This has become especially apparent in the period since the mid-1990s when data from the National Election Study have shown that the social coalitions which elect governments have sometimes been less broad than the array of groups represented in cabinets. But it appears to have been true in earlier periods as well. On the 2004 election, see Shastri and Ramaswamy, "Karnataka: Simultaneous Polls...", p. 5487.

³⁸ M. Assadi, "Muslims and Politics of Social Coalition: Some Experiments in the Electoral Politics of Karnataka", *Social Action* (April-June 2003) pp. 145-58; and "New Political Alignments of Social Groups", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 21 February 1998, pp. 382-83.

Several governments since 1983 have reached out to Lingayats and Brahmins as well as the MOVD groups. One of them was headed by a Brahmin (Ramakrishna Hegde) and two were headed, at least for a time, by Lingayats (S.R. Bommai and Veerendra Patil). Note also that those Lingayats came from both of the major parties – Bommai from Janata, and Veerendra Patil from Congress. Since 1983, neither of those parties has failed to give significant representation to all numerically powerful social groups. All cabinets have been broadly representative. Both major parties have had Vokkaliga Chief Ministers, and though only Congress has had OBC Chief Ministers, Janata has also given them prominence – indeed, its current Deputy Chief Minister is from the OBCs. All Chief Minister have also sought to include leaders from the two numerically powerful groups that have not placed leaders in the Chief Minister’s chair – Dalits and Muslims -- although there has often been a severe shortage of Muslim legislators to choose from.³⁹

It is nevertheless true that the BJP, which has made enough gains in recent years to move in from the margins of the party system, has tended to appeal to the LIBRA bloc. This became especially apparent after Ramakrishna Hegde aligned his version of the Janata Dal with the BJP. He was a Brahmin, and Lingayats and Brahmins have loomed large in the leadership of the state unit of the BJP. But he and the BJP recognised that they needed support from a broader array of groups. Thus we have seen the BJP seeking to mobilize elements of the MOVD bloc around communal issues – with only limited success. And we saw the BJP and Hegde, until the latter’s death, making greater headway by appealing to regional resentments in northern Karnataka. So here again, the dichotomy between MOVD and LIBRA blurs at the edges.

It is possible that tensions between social groups will bring to an end this tradition of ‘rainbow coalitions’ by making it impossible for politicians to

³⁹ The main reason for this is that Muslim voters are spread unusually evenly and thus thinly across the state. They form a very substantial bloc in only three of the 224 assembly constituencies (interview with E. Raghavan and Imran Qureshi, Bangalore, 9 March 2005).

sustain the broadly accommodative approach that has long prevailed. But that has not happened yet. It is also possible, and perhaps even likely, that the BJP will gain power after the next state election – because they are the only alternative to the present coalition government of the Congress and the Janata Dal (S). But if that occurs, it will not be because the LIBRA bloc brought the BJP to power – it lacks the numerical strength to do so. It will be because many voters outside that bloc turned to the BJP out of frustration with the current government. And that will impel a new BJP government to reach out to those people once it takes power – to pursue, in other words, yet another broad coalition.

V. THE VILLAGE LEVEL

Karnataka's villages have experienced a diversity of social and political changes in the last three decades. Most of these have occurred gradually, but over time, many have had very considerable cumulative effects.

Social and Economic Change in the Villages

In the years since 1972, agriculture has gradually declined in importance – to some extent economically (as people have come increasingly to depend on non-farm incomes), but more crucially in social terms (as the interdependence and hierarchical bonds that grew out of old patterns of agricultural production have been eroded). Change in this sector has been incremental but persistent, so that in many rural arenas it has, over time, resulted in something close to the disintegration of the old social order. It is vividly apparent from a recent set of studies by G.K. Karanth, V. Ramaswamy and others, which indicate that there is a great deal less order of any kind in village society, and that old rituals – and the collective arrangements for the management of agricultural and natural resources with which they were bound up – have, to a considerable degree, withered away.⁴⁰

For a cogent explanation of the background to these changes, we can turn to an analysis by G.S. Aurora, which deals mainly with Kolar District but which

⁴⁰ See in particular chapters 11 to 14 in Baumgartner and Hogger (eds.) *In Search of...*

can stand as a profile representative of most of Karnataka.⁴¹ He notes a decline in the number of larger land holdings and an increase in the number of medium, small and marginal holdings – especially the last of these which grew from 43.68% of all plots in 1970-71 to 54.88% in 1990-91. The numbers of marginal farmers and of landless labourers both increased in this period. These changes have been the result of the sub-division of lands among farmers' off-spring, but also of the privatisation of land as encroachers upon sizeable plots of common land have assumed ownership of small parcels of such lands. Many artisan households have also been “forced to join the ranks of the rural proletariat” as goods used by rural dwellers have come increasingly from industrial enterprises outside the village.

The commercialisation and, to a degree, the ‘urbanisation’ of rural economies have also played a role here. The proportion of lands put to non-agricultural uses in the state has risen from 4.2% in 1956-57 to 6.7% in 1997-98. More importantly, the commercialisation of agricultural household economies has become a “dominant pattern”. In former times, farmers concentrated on growing cereals, partly because these were used as payment under the old *jajmani* system. Now, as that system has fallen substantially into disuse, they cultivate other crops for sale to the market. The proportion of land in Kolar District under coarse cereals has fallen from 49.84% in 1956-57 to 26.29% in 1997-98. This has undermined the self-sufficiency and food security of households and villages.

Commercialisation has brought greater monetisation as farmers who grow crops for sale pay workers in cash (as many of the latter prefer), loosening the old, hierarchical social ties between the two groups. This has made poorer families increasingly dependent upon rice provided by the Public Distribution System.

As interdependence within villages has diminished, the dependence on external market forces – which carries serious risks -- has grown. The use of

⁴¹ G.S. Aurora, “Core Issues in the Agrarian Economy and Society of Karnataka” in *ibid.*, pp. 247-64. His focus

high yielding varieties has increased, and with it the need for costly inputs such as fertilisers, seeds and pesticides. To obtain these, farmers must assume heavy debt burdens, and when crops fail, this has led to farmers' suicides. (Far fewer of these have occurred in Karnataka than in neighbouring Andhra Pradesh, but the total in the former – over 400 – is still alarming.) Farmers have tended towards mono-cropping (another important change) which does far less than older mixed cropping patterns to replenish soils.

Four themes from Aurora's analysis – which is echoed by others⁴² -- recur often in the present paper.

- a) The potency of hierarchy has declined, as has interdependence within villages.
- b) At the same time as this has been happening, links to and dependence upon external forces have increased.
- c) Individuals now count for more than collectivities within villages – which implies an increase in both the liberty and the vulnerability of individuals.
- d) These changes have yielded a society which is more open and democratic, but in which people face greater risks -- since the old hierarchical order entailed not just injustices but also certain collective protections against uncertainties.

Changes in the Role, the Importance and the Materiality of Caste

Given what was said just above, it is no surprise that caste (in this context, *jati*) has diminished in importance, especially in one crucial respect. It has increasingly come to denote 'difference' more than 'hierarchy'. This has caused certain invidious practices to decline, but it has also inspired tensions and conflicts that are more severe than we have seen for many decades – between (and to a degree, within) caste groups. We see this not just in Karnataka but in other parts of India as well. Adrian Mayer discovered it

was on Kolar District of Karnataka, but his comment apply to nearly off of the state.

⁴² See G.K. Karanth, *Change and Continuity in Agrarian Relations: A South Indian Case Study* (Concept, New Delhi, 1995); S.R. Charsley and G.K. Karanth (eds.), *Challenging Untouchability: Initiative and Experience from Karnataka* (Sage Publication, New Delhi, Thousand Oaks and London, 1998).

during in 1992 when he revisited the Madhya Pradesh village in which he had done field research 40 years earlier.⁴³

In most regions of the country, certainly including Karnataka, this has occurred gradually. It is easy to overlook this if we focus only on the magnitude of the change. After reading Mayer's study and hearing of similar changes in Karnataka from M.N. Srinivas (who was drawing upon research by ISEC colleagues) in 1998, this writer discussed these matters with Krishna Raj, then editor of the *Economic and Political Weekly*. The latter rightly stressed that what surprised him was not the scale of the change but that "it took so long".⁴⁴

One reason that "it took so long" has been the cautious, incremental nature of economic liberalization in India. Leaders at the state and national levels have carefully avoided radical changes of the sort witnessed in China and parts of Southeast Asia – because in a democratic polity, they are unwilling to risk massive social dislocation. In China, something like 200 million peasants have been induced or forced off the land. Many of them live precariously round the major urban centres, seeking (sometimes in vain) for work. This poses serious risks of political disorder, although the Chinese leaders possess such formidable coercive power that they are prepared to countenance this. Nothing remotely like that, or like the "social change in fast forward" seen in Indonesia,⁴⁵ has happened in India.

But despite the gradualism, an immense change has occurred. One key indicator of its magnitude is a decline in the material utility of caste. Two decades ago, this writer argued that caste (*jati*) in Karnataka existed not just at the level of ideas, sentiments or identifications – that is, in the mind – but that it also possessed materiality. A villager's caste status and caste connections played a major role in determining whether s/he could (or could

⁴³ A. Mayer, "Caste in an Indian Village: Change and Continuity, 1954-1992" in C.J. Fuller (ed.) *Caste Today* - (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1997) pp. 32-64. See also D.L. Sheth, "Secularisation of Caste and Making of New Middle Class", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 21-28 August 1999, pp. 2502-10.

⁴⁴ Interview, Mumbai, 27 September 1998.

⁴⁵ This phrase belongs to Anne Booth, an Indonesia specialist at the University of London.

not) gain access to the concrete opportunities and assets. Today, this remains true to some extent. But the changes that have occurred imply that high caste status offers fewer material advantages, and low status offers at least somewhat fewer disadvantages than before. And as we shall see below, other things have gained in importance in providing or denying opportunities to villagers.

The Proliferation of New Channels Linking Local and Supra-Local Levels

This topic is discussed more fully in Part IV below (where it mainly belongs). But it is important here to note it in passing, since it makes a major difference to dynamics within villages. Far more channels now exist to link individuals within villages to higher levels in the system, to other localities and to the wider world more generally. Some of these – the electronic media (especially satellite television,⁴⁶ but also telephones) mainly provide villagers with greater information than they could obtain 30 years ago. But others – improved roads, transport (public and private), *panchayati raj* institutions and other government structures (sometimes participatory such as ‘user committees’ or self-help groups, and sometimes not), civil society organisations, and again telephones – have also had a substantial impact. This latter set of channels enable individuals to develop links of some substance to higher levels in the system and to the wider world, which they can sometimes use to access new opportunities.

Individuals Matter More, and Social Institutions and Groups Less...

We saw earlier that caste (*jati*) had become somewhat less important in providing or denying opportunities to villagers, and that the old caste hierarchies had lost much of their grip on village life. Both *jatis* and those hierarchies are social institutions. To a considerable extent, they have gone into decline because villagers seeking opportunities have turned to individuals who can “get things done”. And those doing the seeking have also often operated as individuals rather than on behalf of the social groups from which

⁴⁶ See in this connection W. Crawley and D. Page, *Satellites over South Asia: Broadcasting, Culture and the Public Interest* (Sage Publication, New Delhi, Thousand Oaks and London, 2001).

they come. Thus, social institutions and collectivities matter less, and individuals matter more than before.

...But One Formal Political Institution Matters More – Panchayati Raj

At the same time as those things have been happening, however, the comparatively generous empowerment and funding of *panchayats* has given a formal political institution – the *gram* (village) *panchayat* – significant importance in most villages. This has had ambiguous implications on at least two fronts.

First, since the *gram panchayat* makes decisions that affect the well being of many villagers, it has counteracted somewhat the decline of institutions and the increasing importance of individuals – although what we see here is the rise of a formal, democratic political institution alongside the decline of informal, and substantially undemocratic social institutions. It has, in other words, acted as a counterweight to what might be seen as a tendency towards anarchy within villages. But since people interact with *gram panchayats* not just collectively but also as individuals, it has in part assisted the growing importance of individuals.

Second, the empowerment of *panchayats* has -- some of the time -- enabled villagers to solve problems on their own. *Panchayats* can make decisions and then take action on them without waiting for approval from higher levels of government, which in former times often entailed delays. But since *gram panchayats* must seek advice and administrative support from higher up to follow through on some decisions – for example, small building projects which they often undertake – villagers still need to reach out to higher levels. When that happens, individuals' connections to people at higher levels are often important. So here again, the results have been ambiguous. (*Panchayats* are discussed further in the section just below, and again in Part V.

Corruption At and Near the Local Level

Corruption at and just above the local level presents us a depressing but somewhat less grim picture than we found at the state level. In the urban

sector, recent state governments have taken steps to create correctives to malfeasance. The Bangalore Agenda Task Force – the methods of which might be applied to the rural sector – introduced processes which revealed improper deals between property tax inspectors and tax payers. For example, a showroom for expensive cars was found to be paying only a tiny annual amount in taxes. By ending such practices, the new arrangements put a stop to an estimated Rs.100-150 million per year in bribes.

In rural areas, the *Bhoomi* programme which provides land certificates through a computerised system, thus by-passing village accountants who took bribes for performing this service, is said to have reduced petty corruption to officials who provide these certificates by an estimated Rs.895 million annually.⁴⁷ Some readers may suspect that that figure is an exaggeration – and there is some evidence to indicate that in northern Karnataka, villagers prefer to pay the traditional bribes rather than incur the inconvenience of travelling to computer kiosks within their *taluks*.⁴⁸ But even if the actual figure were only half of that amount, it still represents a significant decline in corruption.

At and just above the village level, corruption occurs for a diversity of reasons. Candidates, even those seeking lowly offices, feel compelled to spend substantial funds – which often forces them to take loans that must be repaid out of money illicitly raised. The market in transfers impels bureaucrats – especially in lower-level posts – to find similarly large sums, with the same result. And when a nexus develops at the *taluk* level among a small number of government employees and elected politicians, development funds may be diverted into those people's pockets. We have, however, seen the development in recent years of significant correctives to this last type of malfeasance – as the result of the empowerment of *panchayati raj* institutions.

⁴⁷ J. Manor, "Successful Governance Reforms in Two Indian States: Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh", Report to the World Bank, 2004.

⁴⁸ This information comes from Narayana Gatty who is doing doctoral research on *Bhoomi*.

The impact of this change upon corruption at and near the village level has been ambiguous, but not entirely depressing. Here as in every arena on earth within which democratic decentralisation has occurred, the number of people involved in corrupt activities has inevitably increased. That was to be expected when the number of elected offices increased in 1987 from 224 (seats in the state assembly) to over 50,000 (seats on *panchayats*). The key question to ask is whether the overall amount of money stolen has declined. There is clear evidence from Karnataka to indicate that it has.

Before 1987, when development funds reached the *taluk* level, a group of four or five persons (the Block Development Officer, the Assistant Engineer and influential non-officials) would meet behind closed doors, rake off a substantial portion of that money – 40% has been given as an estimate by people involved in such profiteering – and the remainder would be presented to ordinary people as 100% of the development budget. After 1987, the system became so transparent that hundreds of people in every *taluk* knew what 100% of the budget actually was. As a result, such grand theft became impossible – indeed, some of those who made large sums from the old system complained bitterly to this writer about this. Estimates in 1993 placed the overall amount of fund stolen under the new system at around 5%.⁴⁹ That figure may have increased somewhat in the years since then – although there is no clear evidence to indicate this. But even if it has, the picture is still substantially brighter than before the empowerment of *panchayats*.

Increasing Political Sophistication among Rural Voters?

Voters in villages decide the outcomes of state and national elections in Karnataka. Indeed, we can be more specific by saying that voters in *maidan* (plains) villages determine those outcomes. This is apparent from their numerical strength which greatly outweighs that of voters in urban and *malnad* (hill) constituencies.

⁴⁹ This is discussed in more detail in Crook and Manor, *Democracy and Decentralisation in South Asia and West Africa: Participation, Accountability and Performance* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998) chapter two.

Have these voters become more sophisticated since 1972? The evidence that we have on elections before the 1985 is rather limited, and it is only since the early 1990s that the National Election Study has provided comprehensive and valuable details on voters preferences.⁵⁰ But it is still possible to develop a reasonably satisfactory answer to this question.

It is apparent that by the state election of 1985, village-level voters in Karnataka had become immensely sophisticated by Indian or international standards. That election occurred only nine weeks after the parliamentary election of December 1984 in which the Congress Party swept the state – winning 24 of the 28 Lok Sabha seats. The emotional trauma following the assassination of Indira Gandhi, which had strongly affected the parliamentary election outcome, still lingered when people went to the polls to choose a new state assembly. And yet, they restored the Janata government led by Ramakrishna Hegde to power in early 1985. They produced a swing between the two elections from Congress to Janata in no less than 105 of the state's 224 assembly constituencies.⁵¹ Only a sophisticated electorate which discerned the difference between state and national politics could have done this on such a massive scale.

It is thus possible to say that by 1985, village-level voters in Karnataka had developed considerable political sophistication. We do not at present have evidence to show when they acquired it over the preceding years – and perhaps we shall never know -- but it was a reality by 1985. More recent elections offer further evidence that – not surprisingly – they have retained their sophistication. For example, in 2004, “clear ticket-splitting” occurred when voters cast ballots simultaneously in state and national elections. 34 percent of BJP voters in the Lok Sabha election voted for other parties in the state assembly election. As a result, a hung assembly emerged alongside a Lok Sabha outcome that gave the BJP two-thirds of the seats. In half of the

⁵⁰ We owe a heavy debt to Sandeep Shastri and his colleagues in Karnataka – working with the *Lokniti* team at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi – for making immensely informative analyses available on recent elections. Nowhere is Asia, Africa or Latin America – or indeed, central and eastern Europe -- is such a formidable analytical effort available.

⁵¹ This calculation was made by E. Raghavan to whom I owe much of my education on Karnataka politics.

parliamentary constituencies, the party that won the Lok Sabha seat failed to win a majority of the assembly seats within the larger constituency.⁵² Ticket-splitting on that scale requires considerable discernment among voters. But it is impossible to claim that they had become still more discerning after 1985 when they demonstrated of sophistication that serves as the classic early case to indicate high levels of awareness among India's voters.

One change since 1985 has probably enhanced voter sophistication – the empowerment of *panchayati raj* institutions at the local and intermediate levels, and regular elections to these bodies. Voter turnout has generally been higher at elections for intermediate-level councils than at state and national elections – and higher still for local-level councils.⁵³ And over time, voters have become more adept at judging the performance of members of these councils. That is not unimportant, but it does not add up to a major increase in voter sophistication since the initial, dramatic demonstration of it in 1985.

V. BETWEEN STATE AND LOCAL LEVELS

This reference to events at the *taluk* level carries us into a discussion of what happens in the space between the state and local levels. The comments that follow are somewhat brief and tentative because very little research has been done on events in this space – especially the space which separates the district and village levels – in this or any Indian state. It is, substantially, a *terra incognita*. This writer intends to focus on this space over the next few years, and critical comments on the discussion that follows are therefore very welcome. Participants in the conference should also regard this space as a major research opportunity.

We saw earlier in this paper that the number of channels or links connecting villages to higher levels has multiplied over the last 30 years. We therefore need to consider an array of actors, institutions and agencies that operate in

⁵² S. Shastri and H. Ramaswamy, "Karnataka: Simultaneous Polls, Different Results", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 18 December 2004, pp. 5484-85.

⁵³ R. Crook and J. Manor, *Democracy and Decentralisation...*, p. 27.

this space. In the discussion that follows, we begin with state actors and then move on to non-state actors.

The Proliferation of Government Programmes and Actors

This trend is familiar enough to readers to be briefly stated. The national and state governments currently implement a vastly greater number of programmes in rural Karnataka today than in 1972. Thus, even though (as we see below) political parties' capacity to make their influence penetrate below the district level has not increased over the last three decades, we find far greater penetration by formal initiatives and agencies of government. These represent new channels linking villages with higher levels. And since many of these programmes entail the creation of 'user committees' to promote consultations with villagers or their representatives – and since in this state (unlike many others) *panchayats* exercise some influence within these new channels – there are some opportunities for local preferences to flow from the bottom up, into the policy process.

The Problem of the Taluk-Level Nexus among Officials

When close alliance or nexus develops among a small number of key figures at the *taluk* level, it can have a potent – and often damaging – impact on the well being of villages (unless someone in a village is well-connected to people within the nexus). The key figures are (i) the *Tehsildar* or Revenue Department representative who also plays important law and order roles, (ii) the Sub-Inspector of Police, and (iii) the state legislator or MLA. Former Chief Minister J.H. Patel once told the state assembly that “if the *Tehsildar*, the Sub-Inspector and the MLA form a nexus, it cannot be broken even by God”.

The MLA wields crucial influence here. Since 1983, MLAs have usually been permitted by Chief Ministers to determine the transfers of other officials within the *taluks*. This has enabled them to exercise powerful leverage over decisions by officials to assist *gram* (village) *panchayats* with development projects, to pursue (or to subvert) legal prosecutions, etc.

Efforts have been made, with some effect, to tackle this problem. The *panchayati raj* system introduced by Abdul Nazir Sab in 1987 empowered elected bodies at the district and local levels – partly in order to weaken the *taluk* level. Elected leaders at the district level possessed leverage over *taluk*-level officials, and the policy process became more transparent – both of which eased this problem somewhat (recall the section on ‘corruption’ in Part IV above). The subsequent system, introduced in 1994, left most of these provisions in place. But despite these changes, villagers still encounter serious problems at the *taluk* level.

The Police

A diversity of well informed sources agree that in rural areas, policing has witnessed very little change since 1972. In urban Karnataka, some experiments with ‘community policing’ and other innovations, have produced significant improvements.⁵⁴ But no such programmes have had any meaningful effect in rural areas. *Panchayats*, the main institutional innovation in rural parts, have no responsibility for law and order, or the police. They sometimes exercise limited indirect influence by voicing complaints about serious problems which those responsible for policing find difficult to ignore. But this does not represent a major change. This might be deeply depressing news if for rural residents – like most urban slum dwellers in Karnataka – the police were the main state actors with whom they interacted.⁵⁵ But as we see elsewhere in this paper, villagers in recent times have encountered a greater diversity of state actors – greater than they encountered three decades ago, and greater than their counterparts in the urban slums encounter today.

Panchayati Raj Institutions and ‘User Committees’

⁵⁴ The most recent wave of these came as a result of efforts by the Bangalore Agenda Task Force to improve the performance of seven major municipal agencies, including the police. Independent surveys by the Public Affairs Centre found public satisfaction levels with the city’s police rose from almost zero in 1994 to 17% in 1999, and then to 83% in 2003. See, *Development Outreach* (March 2004) p. 12; and J. Manor, “Successful Governance Reforms in Two Indian States: Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh”, report to the World Bank, 2004.

⁵⁵ J. Manor, *Power, Poverty and Poison: Disaster and Response in an Indian City* (Sage Publications, London, New Delhi and Newbury Park, 1993) chapter 8.

Panchayats were very substantially empowered and funded by the Hegde government in 1987, and since then – despite the clawing back of some powers – they have remained reasonably strong by Indian and international standards. This system has proved more successful than many others in less developed countries, in part because accountability mechanisms within it are more reliable than in most others, in and beyond India.⁵⁶

Our concern here is with their role in providing links or channels between villages and higher levels. In certain respects, that role is rather limited. There are three tiers of *panchayats* at village, *taluk* and district levels, but this has not resulted in sustained interactions between elected members at different levels. That is true partly because *panchayats* at the intermediate *taluk* level – which might provide crucial links to the district level where *panchayats* have significant powers -- are comparatively weak. But it also owes something to the great distances between many villages and district headquarters, and to the large numbers of villages in most districts. These things have prevented much collaboration and solidarity from developing between *panchayat* members at the village and higher levels – and the limited capacity of parties to assist in bridge-building (see below) has compounded the problem.

Despite this, however, *panchayats* in villages have possessed significant powers -- and in very recent times, these and the funds devolved onto them have been substantially enhanced. This serves to integrate higher and village level to a degree – even if it occurs because of a one-way (downward) flow of powers and resources. And when we consider flows of information, we find that democratic decentralisation has produced massive increases in both directions. Governments find it far easier to transmit information to villagers because elected members of local *panchayats* can interpret government policies to ordinary people in ways that the latter comprehend. And officials at higher levels consistently indicate that far more information from below

⁵⁶ Crook and Manor, *Democracy and Decentralisation...*

reaches them through the *panchayati* system than before – so that they feel empowered and better able to perform their tasks.⁵⁷

Still more new channels have been provided by the establishment of ‘user committees’ or ‘stakeholder committees’ by a number of ministries to enable consultations to take place in their sectors (forestry, education, health, water, etc.). Such committees have proliferated in many less developed countries in recent years, and they often create problems because they are unconnected with and far better funded than elected local councils.⁵⁸ But we find fewer of these problems in Karnataka because *panchayats* are comparatively well funded, and because they exercise some influence over ‘user committees’ (see below).

Party Organisations’ Penetrative Capacity in Rural Areas

Another possible set of intermediaries between villages and higher levels are activists from the various political parties. (Those representing parties in power may be deemed, up to a point, to be state actors. Those representing opposition parties are plainly non-state actors.) We need to ask whether the three main parties in Karnataka – the Congress, the Janata Dal (S) and the BJP – have organisations manned by activists who enable their influence to penetrate down to sub-district and village levels. The answer is a little complicated.

Some of what we read in the press suggests that parties have this capacity. For example, a recent report on the nomination of party representatives to cooperative societies stated that the two parties which now rule the state in an uneasy coalition “have to be ready with a list of at least 5,000 party activists each for nomination”.⁵⁹ Does this not indicate that they have strong, penetrative organisations?

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, chapter two.

⁵⁸ J. Manor, “User Committees: A Potentially Destructive New Wave of Decentralisation”, *European Journal of Development Research* (Spring 2004) pp. 192-213.

⁵⁹ *The Hindu*, 10 March 2005.

Or consider another report on the outcome of elections to *gram* (village) *panchayats* in February-March 2005. Within 24 hours of the official announcement of results (which made no mention of parties), the state Congress Party provided the press with extremely detailed claims about the performance of various parties in the vast majority of contests.⁶⁰ Does this not also demonstrate that all three main parties have the capacity to make their influence penetrate to the grassroots?

The answer is 'not exactly'. These reports, especially the latter, clearly indicate that party identifications are clearly understood and reasonably strong among very large numbers of people at the village level. Indeed, they are stronger in Karnataka than in some other states. This writer has recently done research on politics at state and village levels in Madhya Pradesh. When villagers there are asked who among them is aligned with the Congress or the BJP (the two main parties there), they respond rather vaguely, saying that one or two local residents might be a backer of one or the other party. But they consistently indicate that most people in their village – including most of those who have been elected to village *panchayats* – do not have ties to any party. Things are very different in Karnataka where party identifications at the village level are stronger and much more widespread.

But such identifications are also weaker in Karnataka than in some other states. Researchers on local-level politics argue convincingly that a more intensely partisan atmosphere exists in villages in at least four other states – West Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and (at least since 1995) Andhra Pradesh.⁶¹ We therefore might place Karnataka somewhere near the middle of a spectrum of states, as follows.

The Strength of Village-Level Party Identifications

<u>Very strong</u>	<u>Somewhat strong</u>	<u>Moderate</u>	<u>Weak</u>
Kerala	Tamil Nadu	Karnataka	Madhya Pradesh

⁶⁰ *The Hindu*, 3 March 2005.

Note that because this spectrum lists only a small minority of states, it is somewhat misleading. If all major states were listed, most would appear along with Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh under the 'Moderate' or 'Weak' headings. Those two states are, in other words, fairly typical.

How do we explain the placement of these states along this spectrum? The four states in which 'Very' or 'Somewhat' strong identifications exist share one common feature that the others lack. They all have one major political party which has the organisational capacity – which mainly means a set of activists – to make its influence penetrative into or near most villages. In Kerala and West Bengal, the Communist Party of India-Marxist (and in pockets, some of its allies) possesses quite strong, disciplined, penetrative organisations organised round an ideology, with reasonably formidable human resources available to them.⁶² In Tamil Nadu, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (but not its main rival) has long had a reasonably strong party organisation which – despite many years out of power at the state level – retains a penetrative capacity across much of the state. It also retains something of an ideology which assists somewhat in maintaining discipline and in achieving penetration into lower-level arenas. In Andhra Pradesh under Chandrababu Naidu after 1995 (but not before then), a serious and semi-successful attempt was made to develop such a penetrative capacity for the Telugu Desam Party – bolstered not by an ideology (that party had next to none) but by the unusually systematic use of government programmes (most notably *Janmabhoomi*) for partisan purposes.⁶³

⁶¹ These comments and those which follow in the text are based on this writer's studies of governance and development in eight Indian states in the late 1990s, on additional visits to Kerala and West Bengal, and on intensive research in Andhra Pradesh in 2001.

⁶² In Kerala but not West Bengal, it is possible that the Congress Party also possesses such an organisation in some parts of the state – which makes it highly unusual among state units of that party, the organisations of which are usually rather weak and fractious.

⁶³ These comments draw heavily upon the doctoral research of Benjamin Powis at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex.

Karnataka has seen no such party since 1972. Nor have most other Indian states. Some readers may wonder whether the BJP possesses an organisation in some states which is capable of systematic penetration into rural areas. But a recent investigation has found that while that party's organisation is strong in many respects, it has not succeeded in penetrating much beyond urban areas and the district level in most states.⁶⁴ In Karnataka, the main parties can certainly concoct lists of several thousand people to occupy posts on cooperative societies from among the clients of various party leaders. But that is not the same thing as possessing reasonably disciplined and massive networks of activists who can project parties' influence into villages.

Two other things can – in the absence of penetrative party organisations -- produce strong party identifications in villages within Indian states. The first is the presence of a powerfully charismatic figure at the head of a state party. But the number of such figures in Indian politics has been grossly over-estimated by journalists. Only three qualify unambiguously, and all were film stars – M.G. Ramachandran, N.T. Rama Rao and J. Jayalalithaa (as she spells it now, on the advice of a numerologist). No film stars have achieved prominence in the politics of Karnataka and most other states. The second is spite – or, more specifically, a strident campaign to encourage popular antipathy between social groups. We have seen this in recent years along communal lines in Gujarat, and along caste lines in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. But again, we have seen very little of this sort of thing in Karnataka, despite the BJP's efforts in Hubli and Chikmagalur. Thus in this state, party organisations do not – for the most part – provide effective channels linking villages with higher levels.

Political 'Fixers'

Earlier references in this paper to the increasing importance in village society of people who can “get things done” compels us to pay attention to the large and growing number of people there who devote much of their time to efforts

⁶⁴ Manor, “In Part, a Myth...”

to arrange things – usually with persons who exercise governmental authority at the *taluk* or district levels -- for individuals and groups within villages. Such actors have played important roles in “getting things done” at and just above the local level in the state.

Two recent studies have dealt with ‘fixers’ in Karnataka – one by this writer who included the state along with seven others,⁶⁵ and another by Anand Inbanathan and D.V. Gopalappa which focused entirely upon the state.⁶⁶ The two papers have somewhat different emphases – in particular, the former places less stress than the latter upon payments for the services of ‘fixers’. But since the latter study is based on more extensive field work within Karnataka, this writer suspects that it is more accurate on this point.

One important thing to note from both studies is that many ‘fixers’ do not come from the traditionally dominant landowning groups, and that even those who do are usually not involved in cultivating patrimonial bonds in which beneficiaries of their actions feel a sense of obligation to them. In other words, they are developing very different types of relationships from those that we associate with the old village hierarchies and with the former Lingayat/Vokkaliga dominance of village life, and they have – for the most part -- eroded the influence of older, informal hierarchical structures.

Some ‘fixers’ perform services in order to cultivate political support for upcoming elections – where they may stand for office themselves or lend backing to others who do. But the relationships between ‘fixers’ and other village residents which result also differ in character from the old hierarchies and tend to undermine the latter.

⁶⁵ J. Manor, “Towel over Armpit’: Small-time Political ‘Fixers’ in India’s States” – published in a shorter version in *Asian Survey* (September-October 2000) pp. 816-35, and in a longer version in A. Varshney (ed.) *India and the Politics of Developing Countries: Essays in Memory of Myron Weiner* (Sage Publication, New Delhi, Thousand Oaks and London, 2004) pp. 60-86.

⁶⁶ A. Inbanathan and D.V. Gopalappa, “Fixers, Patronage, ‘Fixing’ and Local Governance in Karnataka”, Working Paper 112, Institute for Social and Economic Change, 2002. See also Anirudh Krishna’s research on similar actors in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, who he calls *naya netas* in for example, *Active Social Capital* (Columbia University Press, New York, 2002).

'Fixers', who are usually more accessible than dominant caste leaders in the old hierarchies,⁶⁷ provide villagers with some of the new channels that link them to higher levels in the system. And despite the tendency of many of them to accept payment for their services, they have helped the democratic process to work more effectively and they have helped government institutions which have been seeking to become more responsive to make some headway in that vein.

Criminals, Politics and the Policy Processes

How much influence do criminal elements have within the space between the district and village levels in Karnataka? The answer is – unless others have evidence to enlighten this writer – 'very little'. The state differs sharply in this respect from certain badly criminalised North Indian states, but also from its neighbour Andhra Pradesh. If we consider these two sets of contrasts, we will gain access to the two main dimensions of the story of what has largely not happened in Karnataka.

Let us start with North India. 15 or so years ago, an Indian fortnightly reported that 150 members of the Uttar Pradesh state assembly (out of a total of 425) had criminal records. After years of focusing on Karnataka, this writer found this number astonishingly high. He therefore asked Paul Brass, an authority on UP, if this figure was accurate. Brass replied that no, it was inaccurate – the actual number was 155. Karnataka has seen nothing remotely like this.

If we ask why this is so, we can discern the first part of the story of what has not happened in Karnataka. Voters in UP (and certain other states) turn to criminals because (i) the formal institutions of state have become so degraded there over time that unsavoury people are seen to offer at least some sort of responsiveness that those institutions do not provide, and (ii) because informal institutions such as parties have undergone severe decay as well. In Karnataka, the formal institutions are patently imperfect, and parties do not

⁶⁷ Inbanathan and Gopalappa, *ibid.*, p. 18.

have great organisational strength (as we saw above). But they have been eroded to a much smaller degree than their counterparts in UP.

If we consider Andhra Pradesh, another set of insights emerges. Until the early 1990s, the only urban centre in South India that had a well-developed criminal underworld such as we find in cities like Mumbai was (rather surprisingly) Vijayawada in AP.⁶⁸ During the late 1990s, however, those criminal organisations extended their influence from the coast across the region extending inland to Hyderabad (including rural areas). This occurred for two reasons. First, the economic boom that was occurring in Hyderabad created attractive opportunities for the underworld to make profits. Second, the ruling party in AP drew them into the public sphere beyond Vijayawada because it found them to be useful allies on multiple fronts.⁶⁹

The even greater economic boom that Bangalore has lately experienced has no doubt attracted the attention of some criminal elements. But interviews in early 2005 with knowledgeable people in Karnataka's government, police service and journalistic community consistently indicate (i) that criminal activities still fall far short of the levels found in (and between) Hyderabad and Vijayawada, and (ii) politicians in Karnataka have done far less to forge links with such unsavoury elements.

As a result, rural Karnataka has experienced very little of this sort of thing. Criminals play a distinctly minor role – and in many areas no role -- as mediators or actors within the space that separates the district and village levels in the state.

Civil Society Organisations

Civil society organisations also provide rural dwellers with far more opportunities – both within villages and by providing links between villages and higher levels – than they did three decades ago. Civil society – that is,

⁶⁸ Manor, *Power, Poverty and...*, chapter four.

voluntary associations that stand between the state and the household, and possess significant autonomy from the government⁷⁰ – had only a very limited rural presence in 1972. It was predominantly urban (as, to a lesser extent, it still is) and in rural areas it consisted mainly of caste and religious organisations, and associations of prosperous farmers.

Today, civil society organisations have proliferated, so that they can be found in many (though not necessarily most) rural arenas, even within under-developed districts of the state. Many of these associations originate at higher levels, and a substantial proportion of them pursue ‘development’ by some means or other, and some – far more than in 1972 -- seek to assist disadvantaged groups. But a sizeable number (we have no reliable figures) are rather informal organisations that have developed at the grassroots.

It is important that we not overstate their reach. It is unlikely that more than a modest minority of rural dwellers belong to or are reached by civil society organisations. (In Bangladesh, where national-level civil society organisations are more formidable than state-level equivalents in Karnataka, they estimate that they reach only around 20% of the rural population.⁷¹) But they still play a far more significant role than in that earlier period.

Many powerful people within the state government – including some who are quite enlightened on other issues -- take a rather ambivalent view of civil society organisations. But they have behaved largely tolerantly (and sometimes helpfully) towards them. In this respect the Karnataka government under both major parties has been less obstructive than some of its counterparts in other states. Civil society leaders in New Delhi indicate for example that the Naidu government in Andhra Pradesh – with its antipathy to

⁶⁹ These comments are based on a detailed, confidential and unpublished study of governance in AP undertaken by this writer in 2001, with the assistance of three of the best informed analysts in that state – whose evidence on this point was highly credible.

⁷⁰ Note that this neutral definition includes apolitical associations such as sports clubs, and extremist or reactionary organisations such as the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* – alongside progressive organisations. But it excludes government-organised ‘user committees’ and self help groups because they do not enjoy sufficient autonomy from the state.

⁷¹ Interview with the head of one of the two most formidable organisations, Dhaka, 7 March 1993.

all power centres independent of the ruling party – was the most hostile to civil society in India, and that until recently the West Bengal government was decidedly obstructive.

The devolution of significant powers and funds onto elected *panchayats* in Karnataka has also catalysed civil society in rural areas. This was for the most part unintended, but here as in all countries where democratic decentralisation has been seriously pursued, the activities of voluntary associations quickened as a consequence. The main explanation is that since decisions that affect the well-being of villagers are now taken at or just above the local level, people at those levels become more active in voluntary associations in order to influence those decisions.⁷²

Channels, links and interactions between villages and higher levels have clearly increased mightily in Karnataka since 1972, and some of them have considerable substance. This has promoted greater vertical integration of society, but that is not the same thing as social cohesion. This increasing integration offers little in the way of compensation for the decreasing cohesion, the loosening of social bonds at the village level. Indeed, the proliferation of channels to higher levels has actually accelerated that latter process.

VI. CONCLUSION

Some readers may feel that certain things have been omitted or under-emphasised in this paper. For example, the discussion in Part V above says nothing about certain actors and agencies that play mediating roles between the state and the local levels – for example, contractors or the leaders of castes or religious groups. Critical comments about these and other omissions are very welcome, since this writer plans to focus on the space between the village and district levels over the next few years.

⁷² J. Manor, *The Political Economy of Democratic Decentralisation* (World Bank, Washington, 1999) chapter six.

Readers (like this writer) may also conclude that too little attention has been paid to a number of actual or potential sources of conflict. This has occurred partly because this paper is already quite long, and partly because it has been impossible to gather adequate evidence on these themes. But let us briefly consider a few of them. There appear to be greater tensions and conflict both between and within castes – although some analysts argue that this is substantially explained by better reporting of such matters. There is clear evidence of at least a modest increase in suspicion between Hindus and religious minorities – despite the failure of Hindu nationalists to elicit much popular response through campaigns about Ayodhya or (closer to home) in Hubli and Chikmagalur.⁷³ Retreats by recent state governments on the issue of land reform may have inspired popular anger over concessions to globalization and private sector firms. And this discussion has not dealt with the spread of so-called ‘naxalite’ activity. This writer has found senior officials and some seasoned observers of state politics to be rather dismissive of this last trend, but it may (at the very least) indicate the need for greater care in policy making on common property resources.

Another bundle of issues may turn out to have more important implications. They may sharpen tensions along one or more of the fault lines noted just above – although the extraordinary complexity of society in this and other Indian states, and the tendency of people to shift their preoccupations (often and with great fluidity) from one to another of the many identities available to them have thus far prevented great tension from building up along any single fault line.⁷⁴ We see more resentment in rural areas about state governments’ urban bias than three decades ago. (This partly explains the success of the Janata Dal (S) at the 2004 state election.) We also see greater exasperation in northern Karnataka over regional disparities. And state governments are somewhat more preoccupied than they used to be with ensuring that benefits flow to Kannadigas rather than to linguistic minorities. On each of these

⁷³ See for example, M. Assadi, “Dargah Versus Peeta’: Hindutva’s Politics of Appropriating Syncretic Culture in Karnataka”, *Indian Journal of Secularism*, July-September 2003, pp. 93-109.

⁷⁴ For more details, see J. Manor, “Ethnicity’ and Politics in India”, *International Affairs* (July 1996) and J. Manor, “Changing State, Changing Society in India”, *South Asia* (August 2002) pp. 231-56.

fronts, we see growing impatience within a specific group -- rural dwellers, northerners and Kannadigas -- with business as usual, and thus with the grand political settlement that has emerged from the tendency of state governments to pursue incremental change in the pursuit of broad accommodations embracing a large diversity of social groups. These three groups are vastly powerful. Rural dwellers and Kannadigas constitute huge majorities, and one of the most perceptive analysts of Karnataka's politics⁷⁵ argues that northerners often decide state election outcomes (a view not shared by this writer).

Frustrations within such formidable groups raise serious concerns about the sustainability of two important themes in Karnataka over recent decades. The first is accommodative politics at the state-level, the tendency of leaders to construct broadly inclusive cabinets since 1972. The second is the 'enlightened conservative' tendency to undertake change in anticipation of potential conflicts – to defuse them before they become acute, in order to sustain accommodative politics.

Will the increasing frustrations and social tensions at lower levels undermine accommodation at the state level? Perhaps not, unless much greater antipathy develops between social groups than we have seen thus far – and maybe even if it does. Politicians at the state level have long believed that their ambitions to hold power are best served by developing broadly inclusive accommodations. It was that which persuaded leading Lingayats and Vokkaligas not to seek a restoration of state-level dominance after Devaraj Urs had changed politics in 1972. It was that which persuaded successive Chief Ministers to include in their cabinets leaders even from groups that had given them little electoral support – because such accommodations maximised their appeal. Even if social tensions grow more acute, that logic may still apply. The main potential exception to this is the BJP, which might pursue communal polarization if it took control of the state government. But

⁷⁵ This is E. Raghavan, editor of the *Economic Times*, Bangalore.

some analysts expect them to conform to the accommodative tradition if they take power.

Whatever happens, it should by now be apparent that certain important changes have occurred – mostly incrementally – over the period since 1972. Village society in Karnataka is less cohesive, but more integrated with higher levels, as a result of the proliferation of political and other channels linking the villages to those levels. It is a less self-regulating society (as a result of the decline of the old social hierarchies), but (as a result of *panchayati raj*) somewhat more self-governing.

It is a less quiescent and orderly society, which is characterised by greater (caste, regional, linguistic and urban/rural) tensions and, at times, conflicts. And the loosening of social bonds has made it possible, for the first time, that class conflict may become important in rural Karnataka. State-level politicians' preference for broadly inclusive accommodations, and the incremental changes that flow from them, have provided inadequate responses to interest groups caught up in these tensions.

And yet despite that, government has become more responsive. That is partly the result of the reasonably generous empowerment of *panchayati raj* institutions.⁷⁶ But it is also explained by the introduction of participatory mechanisms (mainly 'user committees' and self help groups) that promote at least some consultation in various developmental sectors. These have been introduced both by the government and by some civil society organisations.

These things are patent realities, but they and politicians' accommodative habits may not suffice to prevent greater tension and turbulence in the society and politics of the state. Because Karnataka has become more democratic – thanks in part to the decline of the old hierarchies -- it has become more difficult to govern. The instruments available to those doing the governing -- mainly formal institutions, agencies and programmes, since party

⁷⁶ Crook and Manor, *Democracy and Decentralisation...*, chapter two.

organisations have not grown stronger -- have not suffered the sort of damage seen in some other Indian states, and have increased in number and penetrative capacity. But this has not eased the long-standing difficulty of ruling parties at getting re-elected, and if tensions continue to intensify, they could eventually bring an end to the accommodative tradition in state politics.