

Looking back at the Proceedings

Bangalore was host to a special conference at the Institute of Social and Economic Change (ISEC) from June 10th to 12th 2005. The theme was Social Science and Development in Karnataka: Vision for Public Action. This multi-disciplinary conference was organised by Prof. Gopal Kadekodi (ISEC), Prof. Ravi Kanbur (Cornell University, USA) and Dr. Vijayendra Rao (World Bank) with the idea of providing a forum where research on a wide range of issues related to Karnataka could be shared with policy makers, researchers and civil society. Participants representing a range of social science disciplines came from different parts of India and also from Norway, Germany, UK and USA.

Karnataka has had a long history of forming and implementing progressive and innovative policy changes. These in turn have resulted in fairly positive impacts on economic development. However, when compared to the fifteen other major states of India, it still occupies a fairly average position as far as the human development indices are concerned. Moreover, growth in certain sectors has been accompanied by reversals and stagnation in others. The organisers hoped that the presentations and debates at this gathering would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the reasons behind these discrepancies and stimulate ideas for renewed public action.

The conference was inaugurated by the State Minister for Industry Mr PGR Scindhia, who also conveyed a written message from the Chief Minister, Mr. Dharam Singh. This set the tone for the papers presented over the next two days.

A variety of papers looked at the question of political, economic and social dynamics in Karnataka both historically and in the context of events which have taken place in the more recent past. Others looked at Karnataka in comparison to the neighbouring southern states and to India in general. Ideas presented were also linked to topical issues in other parts of the world especially in relation to globalisation. Many of the papers looked at issues in relation to political change especially in terms of decentralisation and local governance. These were largely in the rural context with relatively smaller inputs on the urban situation. Evidence from a study on *Gram Panchayats* (GPs) in the four south Indian states analysed who was elected to village public office and how they targeted resources once they were in power. Other papers looked at the changes in rural Karnataka over the last generation, at state dynamics, state policy, questions of caste and identity, political leadership and its impact on economic development in Karnataka. One of the papers looked at the question of instability in party leadership and tried to explain how political transactions at the state level in Karnataka have been related to notions of personal status, honour and self-respect. On the question of local development, discussions centred around issues relating to the role of informal local government institutions, the influence of their interactions with GPs, examining participation in watershed development and the lacuna in implementation strategies. One of the presentations looked at institutionalizing citizen participation and used Bangalore as an example to suggest ways in which urban governance could be improved.

On issues relating to projects and policies, participants evaluated the incentive based Learning Guarantee Programme, questioned agrarian land reforms in the context of liberal economic

policy and debated its implications for poverty alleviation. Other papers assessed the Karnataka Yeshasvini Health Insurance scheme, analysed implications of its expansion to new areas or other states, examined heterogeneity in the unorganized sector with respect to social security and suggested strategies that could help promote social security initiatives. In the context of civil society and the public sphere, topics included the importance of understanding the nature of the public sphere in contemporary Karnataka, trends in NGO-state relationships in Karnataka and the effectiveness of NGOs in poverty reduction especially when they interact with *Panchayati Raj Institutions* (PRIs).

Quite a few papers also commented on issues relating to gender, population and health in Karnataka. One paper looked at questions relating to the value and role of women in public policy and suggested that new insights on how to redress inequalities have to come from women themselves. Using the example of Koppal district in Karnataka, one participant analysed how systematic hierarchies of economic class, caste and gender coupled with systemic failures can affect health outcomes for women. A comparative study of three states looked at measuring efficiency of governance in geographically contiguous areas in relation to education, health and family planning. Another paper examined reproductive health service provision in rural Karnataka, the role of GPs and the various factors that influenced the effectiveness of these services. The discussions highlighted the inadequate devolution of funds, functions and functionaries to PRIs and the crucial role that state governments can play to bring about long term and effective change. The last presentation on this theme examined social mobility, poverty and the factors that impinge on the health of workers in the silk reeling industry using a case study from rural Karnataka.

On the question of information and communication technology, participants debated the role of social capital, culture and other factors in influencing the location of the IT industry in south India and Bangalore in particular. The concluding paper of the conference estimated the contribution of ICT sector to economic development in Karnataka. The discussions which followed examined the implications of the growth in the software industry and the important role of the state government in bringing about equitable change.

To sum up, this well-attended and well-managed conference highlighted the serious difficulties that various development sectors face in Karnataka while also providing some insights as to how this could be tackled. It flagged up the importance of leadership in private and public spheres in terms of providing direction and orchestrating change, the role and relevance of the state, impact of regional and national government policies, the importance of supporting and nurturing local governance in both urban and rural areas. It also looked at issues of sustainability, under-utilisation of existing resources, addressing disparity within regions in Karnataka, empowering PRIs and following a multi-pronged approach which would ensure change at various levels. The state government has evinced an interest in following up on the proceedings of the conference and we look forward to this next chapter of public action and change in Karnataka.