

# Local Informal Autonomous Bodies and Gram Panchayat at Work - A Study from Tank-based Villages of Semi-Arid South India -

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Place of fieldwork: India

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## ● Research background

The purpose of this study is to understand the basis of agricultural villages and their social structure, in tank-based semi-arid parts of Tamil Nadu, India, through an analysis of both formal and informal local government.

In India, formal local government known as 'Gram Panchayat' extends to the tail of rural areas, putting development work into practice and collecting taxes as resources. Apart from that, local informal autonomous government has existed in every caste, i.e. jathi, of villages from time immemorial. It works to arbitrate quarrels in daily life and host village festivals yearly by collecting tax in the form of farm products, imposed on various forms of business within the village. The system is locally referred to as 'Magemai'. Studying autonomous local government in such detail will lead to a deeper understanding of how rural social capital is accumulated.

## ● Research purpose and aim

The research activity was conducted in X. Panchayat near Thirumangalam, Madurai District of Tamil Nadu. Data acquisition was carried out on the aspects of income and expenditure to elucidate the functions of local informal autonomous bodies. In addition, data on the household economy was collected through enquiry whilst additionally interviews with gram panchayat members were conducted to grasp the breakdown of the revenue and expenditure of the body.

## ● Results and achievements of fieldwork

From the fieldwork, the activities and financial structures of both 1) the local informal autonomous body, and 2) gram panchayat were analyzed.

- 1) As for the local informal autonomous body, the following things are carried out in the area studied; a) a security guard is hired to keep eye on farmland, b) a village festival is conducted differently from each temple, c) small loans to marginal households are given if needed. Particularly, revenue collected by the Magemai system is mostly spent on the village festival. If unnatural crop damage is picked up on and regarded an offence then at a village meeting for adult male villagers, a penalty charge is decided upon and the offender has to pay the fine to a village common fund.
- 2) Apart from receiving state government subsidy, the gram panchayat collects tax from each house, library cess, water tax from all households in the gram panchayat and professional tax is also collected from teachers, PHC workers and VAOs working in the area. According to the account statement in a single fiscal year, the revenue is mostly composed of state government subsidy and taxes collected as mentioned above. As for the

expenditure, it is mainly composed of salaries for panchayat workers, stationary for the panchayat office, maintenance or repair costs for OHP tanks, submersible pumps, street lights, pipes, hand pumps and other costs associated with development work.

- Implications and impact on future research

As a research finding we can conclude that the budget of supporting gram panchayat activity depends on subsidies from state government as well as independent sources derived from local tax collection, whilst the expenditure is mainly for the purpose of developing village infrastructure. Regarding the local informal autonomous body, its activities are based on business tax collection through the Magemai system in villages and the expenditure is largely for the purpose of village festivals.

This time I could obtain some statistical data but could not analyze it in full without attempting further interviews. Another drawback was that the number of household economy samples was very small. Next time I would like to prepare sufficiently in order to conduct precise data acquisition that can reflect the real facets of these agricultural villages and their social structures.



Fig. 1 (left) and Fig. 2 (right) Scenes from a SHG meeting conducted by NGO specialists.



Fig. 3 Merchants visiting a village for buying agricultural commodities.



Fig. 4 Former President of Gram Panchayat and Villagers.