
FEDERAL ARRANGEMENTS AND THE PROVISION OF PUBLIC GOODS IN INDIA

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and Richard Sisson

Abstract

Current intellectual trends advocate devolution of authority from national governments to local governments and civil society, especially for the provision of public goods. This paper, based on a large national survey conducted in India, shows that most Indians still look to the state, and state governments in particular, to address the problems that they face.

The focus of discussion in policy-making circles in India, as elsewhere, has shifted over the last decade or so to transferring economic decision making to institutions that are more directly responsible to citizens. The devolution of power to subnational governments is widely advocated by economists, political scientists, and policymakers. Devolution is promoted for a variety of reasons, as the lower levels of government seem better

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equipped to tailor policies to meet local needs. Bringing the government closer to the people, it is argued, will lead to a more efficient delivery of public goods and thereby make for better government.

In India, the decentralization of authority away from the national government has taken three forms. First, the increasing importance attached to state governments has resulted primarily from a reduction of the role of the central government in the economic life of the nation. Coalition politics at the center, where the survival of central governments is dependent upon their ability to form coalitions with state-level political parties, has furthered the process of the devolution of authority to state governments. Second, the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments (1992–93) were passed with the express purpose of transferring some authority to local governments. Third, civil society is seen to have a wide impact on political life in contemporary India. Civil society, especially in the form of voluntary organizations, has not only made the government more responsive to local needs and thereby provide a better range of public goods,¹ but it has also fostered democratic development² and political participation,³ and even promoted civic peace.⁴

While reducing the role of the national government and allowing citizens to take more responsibility are laudable goals, it is unclear whether Indian citizens share the view that local governments and civil society are better able to provide the public goods they deem necessary. There is little national-level evidence to guide our understanding of this issue or to answer the following questions: What public goods are deemed important by Indian citizens? Do Indians look to the state or to civil society to provide public goods? Which level of government should provide these goods? And are there salient demographic differences in the perception of what goods are important and who should provide them?

To consider these questions, an all-India survey was conducted in 2001–02 that examined the quality of life of Indian citizens and their perception of individual and collective needs. The survey was conducted as part of the “State and Society Project,” jointly coordinated by Bangalore University, Ohio State University, and the University of California, Berkeley, with Dr. Pradeep Chhibber, Dr. Sandeep Shastri, and Dr. Richard Sisson as principal coordinators. A rigorous scientific methodology was employed to generate the sample for

the survey. A target sample of 8,388 citizens was identified, and detailed face-to-face interviews were conducted. The survey was conducted in 18 states of India, which covered nearly 97% of the nation’s population. Seventy-three districts were identified, spread across 18 states in which the survey was conducted, keeping in mind the relative populations of the states, while ensuring that a minimum of two districts was surveyed in each state. The districts in which the survey was to be conducted were selected by circular sampling (PPS: probability proportion to size). Once all the 73 districts were selected, the Lok Sabha (lower house of the Indian Parliament) constituency covering the district was identified. If the sampled district had more than one Lok Sabha constituency, the constituency that covered the largest number of voters in the district was selected. The next stage in the sampling process was selecting two State Assembly (lower house of the State Legislature) constituencies in each of the 73 sampled Lok Sabha constituencies. Circular sampling (PPS) was employed once again. Thus, 146 Assembly constituencies in the 73 Lok Sabha constituencies (in 73 districts) were selected.

Subsequently, two polling booths in each of the 146 sampled Assembly constituencies were selected by the simple circular sampling method, resulting in the identification of 292 polling booths. The number of respondents to be interviewed in each state was determined on the basis of the proportion of the state’s share in the national population. This was equally divided among the polling booth areas that were sampled in the state. The number of respondents in each polling booth area was the same within a state, but varied from state to state. In a polling booth area, the respondents were selected from the electoral rolls (list of voters) by circular sampling with a random first number. The field investigators were required to interview only those respondents whose names had been selected from the electoral rolls as per the procedure outlined. No replacements or alterations in the list of respondents were permitted. If, in spite of the best efforts of the investigator, a respondent could not be interviewed, only the reason for this was recorded. As a result, around 76% of the target sample was actually interviewed. Such a rigorous method of sampling was followed in order to obtain as representative a national sample as possible. The analysis of the sample profile clearly indicates that the detailed and objective sample-selection methodology that was followed eminently served its purpose, since the sample mirrors the nation’s social, economic, cultural, and religious diversity. Besides the three principal investigators, the research team consisted of a state coordinator and research assistant in each of the 18 states, and 146 field investigators (two for every district). The questionnaire was developed after detailed deliberations spread over several months. The final Hindi draft of the questionnaire was translated into nine other Indian languages. After a pre-test of the regional language questionnaire, it was translated back to Hindi for verification and corrections. Researchers took

1. Anirudh Krishna, *Active Social Capital: Tracing the Roots of Development and Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

2. Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, “Civil Society and the Realm of Freedom,” *Economic and Political Weekly* (May 13, 2000).

3. Krishna, *Active Social Capital*.

4. Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

care to ensure that terms and phrases used in the questionnaire were translated into the regional language in such a manner that the essence and flavor of the issues being investigated were retained. Prior to the commencement of the survey, an intensive training workshop was held for the field investigators. As the workshop deliberations were in the language in which the interviews would be conducted, as many as 14 workshops were organized in different parts of the country. At these workshops, the field investigators were exposed to the objectives of the study, the methodology adopted, and the rationale behind the questions. They were also trained in sampling and survey techniques. The fieldwork was conducted between January and March 2001, immediately after the completion of the regional workshops.

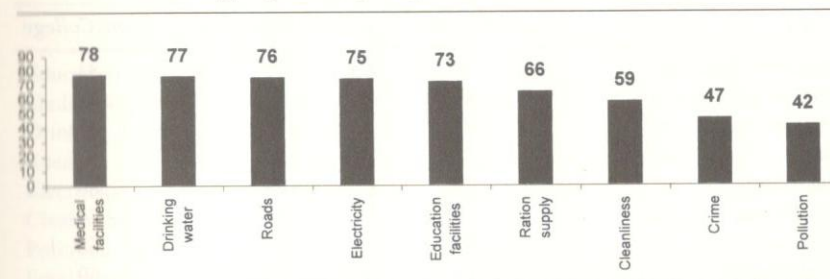
The analysis herein is the first presentation of some of the data generated by the study. This article first lists what public goods are seen as important and whether the state or civil society should provide these goods. We find that most Indian citizens still rely on the state to provide these public goods. The second part of the article takes up the question of the prevalence of voluntary associations in India and shows that membership in voluntary organizations is very low and that few Indians have any contact with non-governmental organizations (NGOs). A multivariate analysis reveals that not all segments of Indian society look to the state to resolve issues related to public goods. The third section shows that citizens have a clear sense of which level of government is responsible for the provision of particular public goods. State, not local, governments are seen as responsible for providing most public goods. The article concludes with a recapitulation of the findings.

Which Public Goods Are Important and Who Should Provide Them?

In an effort to determine citizens' perceptions of what public goods are important to them in their daily lives, respondents were asked the following: "All of us face several problems in our daily life. I am going to mention some of these problems and would like you to tell me whether people like you consider these problems to be important, somewhat important, or not important." The problems concerned (a) educational facilities; (b) medical facilities; (c) drinking water; (d) roads; (e) electricity; (f) neighborhood cleanliness; (g) pollution; (h) food supply through the public distribution system; and (i) crime.

The survey found that a solid majority of citizens assign importance to health care facilities, basic amenities such as drinking water, electricity, and roads, and access to educational facilities (see Figure 1). A smaller proportion of respondents views neighborhood cleanliness, pollution, ration supply, and crime as important. One out of every five respondents (20%) assigned no importance to problems of neighborhood cleanliness, pollution, and crime.

FIGURE 1 *Citizen Perception of Problems Relating to Public Goods as Being Important (in %)*



Indeed, for each of these areas, a significant proportion of the sample did not find these issues either important or somewhat important, especially when compared to matters such as drinking water, electricity, roads, education, and medical facilities, which were consistently regarded as not important by less than 5% of respondents.

Social Distinctions and the Delivery of Public Goods

Do all segments of Indian society feel similarly about the importance of these public goods? It could be asserted, for instance, that respondents who are more educated and live in cities have a unique profile of what public goods are important to them, compared to persons with less education and a rural background. To assess whether such differences exist, we examined the impact of gender, level of education, caste, place of residence, and class on which public goods were deemed important. Those respondents who answered "did not know" to the question asking them to identify the significance of these public goods were dropped from the analysis. Hence, the figures in Table 1 average a little more than the figures reported in Figure 1. There was no significant variation between men and women in their perception of which public goods were more or less important, while significant variations were noticed in other variables.

There is a consensus on the importance of particular public goods, regardless of the level of education (see Table 1). While those who are more educated, i.e., have some college education, are more likely to stress the significance of educational facilities, the difference between the educated and the illiterate is not that large (7%). The largest differences between the college-educated and the illiterate lie in the importance assigned to problems of cleanliness in the neighborhood and pollution. The probability that importance is assigned to these particular public goods increases with education (14% and 19% for

TABLE 1 *Level of Education and Perception of Problems Relating to Public Goods as Being Important (in %)*

	Illiterate	Some Schooling	Some College
Education facilities	74	78	81
Medical facilities	81	82	82
Drinking water	78	80	81
Roads	77	80	82
Electricity	79	79	80
Cleanliness	60	68	74
Pollution	49	57	68
Food supply	71	71	69
Crime	51	60	57

cleanliness in the neighborhood and pollution, respectively). Forward Castes, in contrast to the other caste groupings such as *dalits*, tribals, and the Other Backward Castes, are also more likely to notice a problem with neighborhood cleanliness and pollution (Table 2).⁵

The differences between those with and without education could be attributed to the fact that a larger proportion of the educated population lives in cities, where pollution and cleanliness are more salient than in rural areas. When place of residence is taken into account, a significant difference is found in citizen perceptions of what public goods are important. Consistently, a smaller percentage of urban residents assigned importance to those public goods judged important by over 70% of those in rural areas (Table 3). The distinction is reversed, however, with respect to neighborhood cleanliness, pollution, and crime, as citizens in urban areas are more likely to assign importance to these problems than are their rural counterparts.

In addition to place of residence, it appears that the social class of a respondent has a bearing on what public goods the respondent deems important. Once again, we find that upper-class citizens are more likely to view as important the dearth of educational facilities and questions of neighborhood cleanliness, pollution alleviation, and crime control (Table 4). There appears to be a consensus across class groups with regard to the importance of the other public goods.

5. Using the government terms for classifications based on caste, respondents were asked to identify whether they belonged to the Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes, Backward Castes, Other Backward Castes, or Forward Castes. This self-identification was used in this analysis. Members of "Scheduled Tribes" are known as *adivasis*, or aboriginals; members of the "Scheduled Castes" were formerly referred to as Untouchables and now are known as *dalits*; "Backward Castes" and "Other Backward Castes" include low-caste *sudras*; "Forward Castes" generally designates the upper castes.

TABLE 2 *Caste Perceptions of Problems Relating to Public Goods as Being Important (in %)*

	Dalit	Scheduled Tribes	Other Backward Castes	Others
Education facilities	74	74	75	79
Medical facilities	79	86	81	83
Drinking water	74	83	80	80
Roads	76	84	78	81
Electricity	78	84	78	80
Cleanliness	61	53	65	71
Pollution	51	45	57	60
Food supply	69	68	71	72
Crime	53	43	58	63

TABLE 3 *Rural/Urban Perceptions of Problems Relating to Public Goods as Being Important (in %)*

	Village	Urban
Education facilities	77	74
Medical facilities	83	76
Drinking water	79	78
Roads	80	77
Electricity	80	77
Cleanliness	63	72
Pollution	51	66
Food supply	71	68
Crime	55	63

TABLE 4 *Class Perceptions of Problems Relating to Public Goods as Being Important (in %)*

	Lower Class	Lower Middle	Middle	Upper Middle	Upper Class
Education facilities	71	73	78	84	81
Medical facilities	79	79	82	85	85
Drinking water	76	77	78	83	82
Roads	76	74	80	85	83
Electricity	78	75	79	83	79
Cleanliness	55	59	67	76	78
Pollution	44	49	58	67	69
Food supply	67	73	72	75	69
Crime	46	51	58	69	72

TABLE 5 *Citizen Perceptions of Responsibility in Solving Problems Relating to Public Goods (in %)*

	<i>People and Community (1)</i>	<i>Government (2)</i>	<i>Government and People and Community (3)</i>	<i>Cols. (2) + (3) (4)</i>
Electricity	3	93	4	97
Roads	5	85	10	95
Medical facilities	6	84	10	94
Education facilities	7	82	11	93
Ration supply	9	85	6	91
Drinking water	9	80	11	91
Crime	18	69	13	82
Pollution	36	50	14	64
Cleanliness	48	37	15	52

Who do citizens deem responsible for addressing these concerns? Which agency or government, social groups or individuals, should assume primary responsibility for providing these public goods? To examine this issue, all respondents who indicated that a problem with a specific public good was important or somewhat important were asked to identify who, in their opinion, was responsible for solving it. Respondents were presented with the following options: people like you, the community, and the government, and they were permitted to make multiple choices. For the purpose of the present analysis, all respondents who signaled that the state should be exclusively responsible for addressing the problem were placed in one category. Those who indicated that people or community or a combination of the two should be responsible were placed in a second category, and those who indicated that people and/or community in conjunction with the government were responsible were placed in a third category.

In the judgment of this national sample of Indian citizens, the government has an almost exclusive responsibility for dealing with problems that are deemed the most significant. People and the community are perceived to have a major responsibility for only two public goods—cleanliness and pollution (see Table 5). With the exception of electricity and the supply of rations, at least 10% believe that the people, community, and the government should act in concert to solve the problems that citizens face. The overall expectation for government, acting alone and with others, is overwhelming. Over 90% of the respondents ascribed a role to the state for solving the problems they face, except for cleanliness, pollution, and crime, the

three areas judged to be of least importance by the public among this range of public goods.

The finding that most Indians do not look to the community or community organizations to address the problems they face relating to public goods seems to run counter to the observations made by many scholars about the vibrant nature of communities, voluntary organizations, and NGOs in India. Why do most citizens still look to the state to address these problems, rather than turn either to community or voluntary organizations? The survey provided one answer—there are few community and voluntary organizations that people in India interact with.

Civil Society, the State, and Provision of Public Goods

Prevalence of Associations in India

The survey asked respondents whether there was an organization in their area working to address the problems they face relating to the provision of public goods. Of those who offered an answer to the question (64% of respondents), 88% said there were no organizations other than the government addressing such problems in their area. Less than 2% of respondents said that there were either national or international NGOs working in their areas to address these problems.

While the absence of NGOs and organizations devoted to people's welfare may not be surprising, given the size of the country, scholars have long pointed to the key role played by community organizations in India. To assess whether such organizations were influential, we asked respondents whether they were members of an association. Only 8% of respondents acknowledged associational membership, and less than 2% were members of caste or religious organizations. This empirical finding is consistent with the data drawn by large national surveys conducted by the Center for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS). In the largest national election study ever, of 8,903 respondents, conducted by the CSDS after the 1996 elections, respondents were asked if they were members of a social organization. Only 4% said they were, with 2% belonging to caste associations and another 2% to religious associations. Similar findings were obtained from the 1971 post-election survey conducted by the CSDS (Table 6).

Who belongs to these associations? We examined the demographic basis of associational membership and found that men and the more educated were more likely to be members of associations than were other respondents. Similarly, those who lived in towns and cities were more likely to belong than were rural residents. Caste differences in associational membership were less pronounced, with individuals from the Other Backward Castes and Forward Castes only slightly more likely to join associations than lower-status Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe respondents.

TABLE 6 *Associational Membership and NGO Presence in India*

	Yes
NGOs working in the area, 2002	13
Member of an association, 2002	08
Member of a social organization, 1996	04
Member of a caste association, 1996	02
Member of a caste association, 1971	02
Member of a religious organization, 1996	02
Member of a religious organization, 1971	03

SOURCE: CSDS, *National Election Studies for 1996 and 1971*; author's survey, 2002.

*Providing Public Goods—the State
and the Community*

In Table 5, we observed that few respondents looked to the “people and the community” to provide most of the public goods they felt were salient to them. Given the historically large role played by the Indian state, it is no surprise that most respondents looked to the state to address issues related to electricity supply, the construction of roads, the provision of clean drinking water, education, and medical facilities. There were, however, three public goods—the maintenance of public order to control the extent of crime, the alleviation of pollution, and cleanliness—that many respondents felt could be addressed most meaningfully by the people themselves (though a substantial portion still looked to the state to address these concerns). Are there particular segments of Indian society that look to the state rather than to people and the community to resolve their concerns around these three public goods?

To determine the social basis of who looks to the state and who looks to the people/community to deal with issues of cleanliness, pollution, and crime, a multivariate model was estimated. Respondents' answers on whether the people/community or the state was responsible for these three goods were combined and recoded into a categorical variable that took on two values—zero, for those who said that the state should deal with these matters for all three public goods, and one, for any who said that the people/community were responsible for dealing with even one of the concerns.

The key independent variables related to significant demographic distinctions such as gender, age, whether a respondent lived in a city or a town, the education level of the respondent (EDOFR), whether the respondent belonged to the upper castes (UPPERS) or was a *dalit* (DALITS), and the social class (CLASS) of the respondent. In addition to these demographic variables, four other key independent variables were added to the model: whether the respon-

TABLE 7 *Who Looks to the Community to Provide Public Goods?*
(Logistic Regression)

Variable	B	Standard-Error	Significance
CLASS	.165	.047	.000
INFLTV	.093	.075	.217
INFLNW	.065	.069	.341
AGE	.031	.076	.687
GENDER	-.069	.108	.520
CITY	-.638	.146	.000
TOWN	-.372	.145	.010
EDOFR	.356	.084	.000
UPPER	.372	.126	.003
DALIT	-.098	.140	.484
ASSNMEM	.741	.191	.000
CONTGOV	.473	.107	.000
CONSTANT	-2.045	.400	.000

dents watched television (INFLTV) or read the newspaper (INFLNW), on the assumption that those who watch television or read the newspaper are more likely to be active in political life since they are better informed; whether they belonged to an association or not, since associational members are more likely to look to the community (ASSNMEM); and whether they contacted the government or not (CONTGOV). In addition, we controlled for the gender and age of the respondents and whether they lived in a town (TOWN) or a city (CITY).

The results reported in Table 7 show that respondents who belong to the upper class and Forward Castes, are more educated, belong to associations, and contact the government, are more likely to look to the people/community to address issues of criminal activity, pollution, and cleanliness, whereas city and town dwellers are more likely to look to the state to address these problems.

**National, State, and Local Governments
and the Provision of Public Goods**

In any federal system, the *state* can be represented by national, state, or local governments. It has been suggested that in federal systems, public goods are not delivered to the same extent as in unitary systems, as politicians at the national, state, and local levels can point accusatory fingers at each other for the non-delivery of these goods. For such a confusion to exist, voters should not be able to distinguish which level of government has responsibility for providing particular public goods. This claim is not borne out in India. Citi-

TABLE 8 *Citizen Perception of Role of Different Levels of Government in Providing Public Goods (in %)*

	Central	State	Local
Electricity	11	74	15
Crime	12	74	14
Education facilities	11	72	17
Medical facilities	13	70	17
Ration supply	13	67	20
Roads	11	57	32
Pollution	14	53	33
Drinking water	9	50	41
Cleanliness	7	37	56

zens assign differential responsibility to the various levels of government within the federal system, and express clear opinions about which level of government is responsible for providing what public goods. Respondents were asked which level of government they felt was responsible for addressing the problems they thought were important.

Only one in every 10 respondents deemed the central government to be responsible for providing public goods. For the problems perceived as being most important, Indian citizens clearly assign responsibility to their state government (see Table 8). This may explain the significant turnover in state governments over the last one-and-a-half decades. Voters see the state government as responsible for providing a set of public goods, and insofar as problems related to those public goods are still deemed important by a vast majority of citizens, state governments have failed to address voters' concerns. This is not surprising, given the increasing role assigned to state governments. There are, however, four exceptions. A significant proportion of the citizens felt that solving problems linked to drinking water, roads, pollution, and cleanliness was not the responsibility of the state government alone, but that the local government also had a significant role to play in these arenas. More respondents looked to the local government for the provision of these public goods than to the central government. Local governments were judged by a plurality of the sample as having responsibility for the cleanliness of the neighborhood, and a large proportion also looked to the local government to provide drinking water, pollution control, and maintenance of roads.

Who, it is important to ask, feels that local government has responsibilities for dealing with the provision of public goods? The results, reported in Table 9, are consistent with expectations, showing that respondents who are members of an association are more likely to look to local government to address problems

TABLE 9 *Who Looks to the Local Government? (Logistic Regression)*

Variable	Coefficient	Standard-Error	Significance
CLASS	.056	.047	.225
INFLTV	.171	.074	.022
INFLNW	.063	.065	.335
AGE	-.088	.075	.240
GENDER	-.172	.108	.114
CITY	.006	.155	.972
TOWN	.499	.139	.000
EDOFR	.090	.084	.284
OBC	.213	.123	.084
DALIT	.305	.149	.041
ASSNMEM	.236	.140	.093
CONTGOV	-.115	.107	.283
CONSTANT	-2.788	.380	.000

of neighborhood cleanliness and pollution. To determine the social basis of who looks to local government—vs. the state and national government—on issues of neighborhood cleanliness and pollution, a multivariate model was estimated. Respondents' answers were combined and recoded into a categorical variable that took on two values—zero, for those who tasked state and national governments, and one, for those tasking local government. The key independent variables in this model related to significant demographic distinctions such as gender, age, residence in a city or a town, EDOFR, Other Backward Castes (OBC) or DALIT membership, and CLASS. Four other key independent variables were added: INFLTV and INFLNW (presumed to be more likely to look to the people/community), ASSNMEM (also more likely to look to the community), and CONTGOV. The results suggest the powerful influence of television; avid watchers are more likely to task local government. Town dwellers also tilt toward local government, compared with villagers. Consistent with the hypotheses of the democratic revolution in India, we find that dalits and OBCs (at a lower level of significance) look to local government to address issues of neighborhood cleanliness and pollution, when contrasted with upper castes.

Conclusion

India is a community of citizens with opinions on the provision of public goods and on who or which agencies of the state have responsibility for the provision of these goods—though there are a few citizens with no opinion on these matters. In this survey, we found that citizens assign exceptional importance to the provision of medical facilities, drinking water, roads, and electricity,

as well as to avenues of mobility through education. We also found that there is strong sentiment among citizens that government bears exclusive responsibility for these public goods deemed most important. Eighty percent of the respondents look to the government for the provision of these public goods and an additional 10% believe that government bears responsibility in conjunction with people and the community.

Assignment of responsibility is greatest to state governments for the provision of the public goods judged important by Indian citizens. The local government is given second priority, while the central government comes in a clear third. In no category of public goods is the central government assigned significant responsibility. Among the more educated, urban, and those of higher income, greater importance is assigned to neighborhood cleanliness, reducing pollution, and curbing crime. The lower the caste and class status, the lesser the importance assigned to these public goods. For those living in villages and towns, education and medical facilities, drinking water, roads, and electricity supply are more important. By a modest proportion, the higher the level of education and caste, the lower the probability that the citizen will ascribe sole responsibility for the provision of public goods to the government.

Finally, while all citizens, regardless of their place of residence, assign primary responsibility to their state governments for the provision of public goods, those living in villages tend to assign greater responsibility to local governments than those living elsewhere. Two implications assume relevance. First, the rural citizen continues to attach significant importance to the role of the state in critical areas involving the delivery of public goods. This assumes significance in light of economic reforms and the emerging debate on the need to redefine the role of the state. Second, the limited yet significant impact of the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution can be seen in the level of confidence that rural citizens have in the capacity and potential of local governments to deliver public goods considered important by them. The survey also corroborates findings of earlier surveys by the CSDS that associational membership in India is limited. It can be reasonably assumed that since voluntary organizations are few and far between, citizens still rely on the state for providing public goods.