

Vijayendra Rao -- The Grammar of Gram Sabhas: Understanding the Anatomy of Deliberative Democracy in Rural India

Wednesday, November 12, 2008 at 5:00 PM

Colloquium on Comparative Research

"The Grammar of Gram Sabhas: Understanding the Anatomy of Deliberative Democracy in Rural India," with Vijayendra Rao, Lead Economist, Development Research Group, The World Bank. Presented by the Colloquium on Comparative Research.

Every Indian village council (gram panchayat) is now democratically elected, with regularly held open village meetings (gram sabhas) where important decisions are made - such as budgetary allocations and the selection of beneficiaries for anti-poverty programs. Thus, there are now over two million little democracies in India that function under a mix of electoral and deliberative modalities that govern the lives of 700 million rural residents.

This talk will present some results from an analysis of transcriptions of 300 gram sabhas held from 2004-2006 in rural South India. The transcriptions have been coded and are econometrically analyzed to understand broad patterns - such as whether they are dominated by a sub-group, and the impact of literacy and political reservations. They are also qualitatively analyzed as text to understand the new deliberative culture that is emerging in this unique "state-sponsored" public sphere.

Location: McKinney Conference Room, Watson Institute, 111 Thayer Street

Vijayendra Rao is a Lead Economist in the Development Research Group of the World Bank and combines his training in economics with an interest in anthropology and social theory. He calls his approach to research, which blends economic and ethnographic methods to study the social and cultural dimensions of poverty, "participatory econometrics". He has published papers on a wide variety of topics using this interdisciplinary approach including dowries, domestic violence, sex worker behavior, festivals, and the political economy of village democracy. More recently he has been thinking about how incorporating a "cultural lens" into development theory and practice can help address problems of persistent poverty and has co-edited a volume, *Culture and Public Action*, on the topic published by Stanford University Press. An important theme in this effort is to evaluate and improve the quality of community based development, and to understand the process of democratic decentralization. Dr. Rao holds a PhD in Economics from the University of Pennsylvania, was a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Chicago, and taught at the University of Michigan and Williams College before joining the World Bank. He serves on the editorial boards of *Economic Development and Cultural Change* and *Journal of Development Studies*.