

Chapter - IV

DECENTRALISED PLANNING, DISTRICT ADMINISTRATION AND PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTION : A CRITICAL REVIEW

Section - A : Decentralised Planning : Its Impact

The creation of a decentralized organisational structure is one of the important social inventions of this century¹. With ethical roots in democracy, decentralisation has become an idealistic concept, a way of life, and an end in itself. It suggests a system in which people will be given an opportunity to perform their individual goals to the maximum. Local authority, beginning with the individual, this is an important credo of decentralisation. It has emerged as a philosophy of corporate life whether political or non-political, civil or military, commercial or non-commercial, with a set of organisational values along with sociological, psychological and spiritual facets².

Throughout the third world decentralisation has long been regarded as a necessary condition of economic, social and political development. Ideologically, it has proved an indispensable concept. Perhaps not surprisingly, the developmental burden which has been placed on the idea of decentralisation has been too great for it to bear. Third World states find much promise in decentralisation. According to W. Hardy Wickwar, "democratic decentralisation, or local government that has been the object of much optimistic attention in the Third World, particularly since the second world war". Wickwar, in fact, identifies an 'unbroken thread' running through the history of modern local government - a tradition of 'corporate patrimony'. Democratic decentralisation in the Third World, he argues, is a continuation of this.

The Promise of Decentralisation

There is the idea of that democratic decentralisation is a more effective way of meeting local needs than central planning. It has been shown that in Zambia, Tanzania, and Papua New Guinea, among other new states, decentralisation, especially in rural development programmes, has been set the objective of making decisions more relevant to local needs and condition by having them taken by local people³. Nigeria's return to civilian rule after thirteen Years of military government was preceded by a fundamental

reform of the country's local government system, itself a testimony to the importance still attached by Third World regimes to viable local-level institutions. A principal aim of the reform was again to make appropriate services and development activities responsive to local wishes and initiatives by devolving or delegating them local representative bodies. Thus decentralization is designed to reflect unique local circumstances in development plans and their implementation.

Secondly, decentralisation has been as particularly relevant to meeting the needs of the poor. Decentralisation is especially needed to enable the rural poor to participate in politics. Their political as well as their material position would thus be strengthened.

Thirdly, decentralisation is said to improve access to administrative agencies.

Fourthly, forms of decentralisation in which people can participate are said to soften resistance to the profound social change which development entails. Participation in local institutions should help overcome the indifference, pessimism and positivity of rural people. Decentralisation can secure commitment to development needing a change of attitudes - It is seen as a means of 'penetrating' rural areas. Support for development can be mobilised by decentralisation.

Fifthly, decentralisation should reduce congestion at the centre. It provides for greater speed and flexibility of decision making by reducing the level of central direction and control.

Sixthly, there is a persistent belief that local democracy is necessary for national unity. In large countries with great social and economic diversity it is felt necessary to satisfy the legitimate political aspirations of sub-groups, particularly those which are ethnically distinct.

Seventhly, Participation in such institutions is supposed to enhance civic consciousness and political maturity. People learn more quickly when they have to take responsibility for the decisions of local officials. They obtain an invaluable training in resource allocation. Thus a close association is perceived between local political institutions and political development. Through experience in local government people learn to choose between priorities and leaders. They gain experience holding those in office accountable. After all, only local people 'know where the shoe pinches'. Such

an education should ultimately enrich government at the centre as better-trained politicians emerge from the grassroots.

Finally. The state needs to mobilise support for development plans. Popular energies need to be harnessed to the task of economic regeneration. Local government allows the maximum utilisation of local resources which has an efficiency value quite apart from the other benefits, such as political education, which it may bring to society. Hence the close association between democratic decentralisation and community development which tries to harness a capacity for self-help to the aim of improving the economic and social well being of 'communities. Governments have to persuade people that they can achieve more by relying on their own contributions of labour and money than by relying on state interventions.

Henry Foyal puts it, "Everything that goes to increase the importance of the subordinate's role is decentralisation, everything which goes to decrease it is centralisation", with its ethical base in democracy, decentralisation has come into use as an convention of popular appeal against all forms of authoritarianism in corporate life, public or private, commercial or non-commercial which suffers from monolithism, excessive centralisation, bureaucratisation, authoritarian staff relations etc.

In most new states field administration has been used as a institute for local government (Cheema and Rondinelli, 1983). Field administration has its own rationale and protagonists. It in not uncommon for arguments advocating decentralisation within central departments and development agencies to be conveniently confused with arguments for the devolution of power to localised governments. It may be politically useful for a government to create the impression that it is strengthening the autonomy of a local community when, in reality, it is strengthening the hand of its own bureaucrats in the field.

Administrative decentralisation is said to sharpen the planner's awareness of developmental problems (Rodinelli, 1981). It is also said to increase the efficiency of officials at the centre by relieving them of routine decisions. It facilitates the coordination of specialised programmes at the point of implementation. However, the experience of the Third World with this form of decentralisation has not been altogether successful.

Decentralisation programmes have not been noted for smooth relations between bureaucrats and elected representatives. The dependence of local authorities for their administrative personnel has often led to conflicts of values between officials stationed in the localities and local politicians.

Two other factors relating to the performance of decentralisation in the Third World needs to be considered. One is the poor level of administrative performance by local authorities. Most studies of decentralisation include a catalogue of defects in budgeting, staffing, revenue collection, maintenance work, financial control, information and honesty, shortages of trained personnel, difficulties in intergovernmental co-ordination and low levels of managerial and professional capability.

Finally, decentralisation seems unable to function without fiscal dependency. Local authorities in less-developed countries seen increasingly to be dependent for revenue on higher levels of government. Studies of Korea, the Philippines, India and Taiwan all show local governments with weak tax powers and tax effort becoming financially dependent on grants and other forms of transfer. (Rondinelli and Mandell, 1981, p.196)

There is search for new administrative mechanisms, legal instruments and financial procedures to resolve the problems of emanating from central control. It is being increasingly felt that appropriate institutional arrangements must be found at the intermediate district level, and that they will only be effective by concurrent improvements are made in the skill and working procedures of the personnel working in these institutions. Decentralised planning should be part of an overall institutional rearrangement which must be decided upon through negotiations between the

- (a) Centre and the states.
- (b) District and their state governments.
- (c) Local communities and their district bodies.

Decentralised planning can be defined as “planning at different levels” or “multi-level planning”. This may consist of planning at National level, State level, District level, Block level, Panchayat level or Could be planning for a region. In other words. Decentralised planning is a system through which planning is attempted at different administrative and executive levels so that there is greater integration between the developmental needs and priorities of smaller areas and different social classes with the sub-national and national levels development policies and goals. Decentralised

planning is in fact a two way process which began both at the top level as well as the bottom and merge with each other at a point below which centralised planning becomes irrelevant and above which micro-planning becomes meaningless. In the Indian context, the territorial equivalent of macro, meso and micro levels of planning are broadly national, state and the district. While macro level planning provides policy perspective for national growth pattern and resources to achieve them, the meso level planning provides regional development goals in consonance with national policies and goals. The micro level planning begins with the analysis of the needs of the people as well as small areas and demand for future and provides a framework which rationalises and integrates them with the state and national goals. The three important characteristics of planning in India are that it is taken in democratic framework, operating through a system of federation involving concurrent planning and operating within the framework of mixed economy⁴.

The following extract from the Report of the Working Group on District Planning, set up by the planning commission in September, 1982, gives a good idea of the rationale of introducing decentralised planning in India: "Decentralization enables a better perception of the needs of local areas, makes better informed decision making possible, gives people a better voice on decisions concerning their developments and welfare, serves to achieve better co-ordination and integration among programmes, enables the felt needs of the people, serves to build up a measure of self reliance by mobilising resources of the community in kind or money, making development self-sustaining and enables better exploitation of local resources and growth potentials of the local area for improving productivity and increasing production"⁵. Thus to ensure better 'trickle down' benefits of development to the poorest section of people living in villages and to the smallest area decentralised planning is necessary.

Decentralisation of the planning process has become, of late, a matter of world wide concern, whether in socialist or mixed economies. Decentralisation through the involvement of local level representative institutions in the formulation of plans for development as well as their implementation is being advocated in the interest of efficient utilisation of resources and for ensuring more equitable sharing of benefit from development. In the case of public enterprises, decentralisation of de-bureaucratisation is advocated in the interest of efficient utilisation of sources and for ensuring more equitable sharing of benefit from development⁶.

An essential prerequisite for success of decentralised planning at the sub-state level is the presence of democratic institutions at grass-roots level, endowed with powers, functions and adequate financial resources. When the planning process was initiated in India during the early fifties planning was largely a centralised affair. As development proceeded, the importance of and the need for decentralised planning was keenly felt. The planning commission advocated the concept of planning from below and people's participation in the planning process. Of course, the emphasis has varied. The First Five Year Plan, for instance, talked about breaking the national and state plans into local units based on district, town and villages⁷. It did not, however, elaborate the manner in which this idea of decentralisation would be put into operation, how the activities were to be disaggregated and how coordination was to be achieved. The community Development Programme was the first experiment in this regard.

During the Second Five Year Plan, two important steps were introduced. On the one hand, there was talk of village plans and District Development Councils. On the other hand, there was the idea of the popular participation through the process of democratic decentralisation. It was clearly stated that district would be the pivot of the structure of democratic planning. In emphasising planning at the district level and below, the objective was to carry the district and state plans as close to the people as possible, to make these plans as means of solving the pressing problems of each local area and through local community participation and cooperative self-help to augment the total effort and provide greater scope for local initiative and leadership.

The Second decade of planning 1960-70 witnessed the establishment of Local self-government institutions under the Democratic Decentralisation scheme recommended by a study team constituted by the planning commission. The Panchayati Raj Institutions started off well and actively participated in development activities. The euphoria of PRI, however, did not last long and these democratic institutions were almost obliterated during the decade 1970-80 when centralising tendencies prevailed in the governance of the country. Revival of interest in PRI, and the Government's Keeness to rejuvenate them were in evidence in the next decade 1980-90. Sporadic attempts were made during Seventies and eighties to revitalise the PRI, but the success was limited and a to a few states such as Karnataka and West Bengal. The planning Commission had shown sustained interest in decentralising the planning process. Every conceivable unit below the state level was considered for the purpose. The Economic

Advisory Council (1983) proposed Divisional level planning. The Dantwala Committee (1978) recommended Block Level Planning. Ashok Mehta Committee on Panchayati Raj Institutions (1978) strongly put forth its arguments for adopting 'District' as the unit of planning. The Planning Commission constituted a working group, under the chairmanship of Dr. Ch. Hanumantha Rao, which came out with a blue-print for operationalising the District Planning concept. By now, district has come to be generally accepted as an ideal unit for planning below the state level. The idea of creating 'District Government' as a third tier in our federal structure has also been mooted by some eminent persons. India has now reached a land mark in the progress towards democratic decentralisation in 1991 with the introduction of two Constitution Amendment Bills (72nd and 73rd) in the Lok Sabha. These Bills are aimed at providing the much needed and long awaited constitutional backing for local bodies and ensuring their continuity and effective functioning⁸. Though the constitutional provision by itself is not a sufficient condition for the success of decentralisation, it is considered a necessary one and it is to be followed up by a series of serious and sincere efforts by both central and state governments. What India is now attempting through the constitutional changes regarding Panchayat could be described as a major scheme of decentralisation of powers. Amendment to the constitution is only the first step towards a long journey. It would be worthwhile to take note of lessons from the experience of implementing decentralisation scheme in some states within the country which have implemented democratic decentralisation such as Karnataka, Gujrat, Maharashtra, West Bengal and Kerala. I would try to focus light on these state in the following chapter.

India has now reached a stage of development area specific approaches and solutions are called for. Decentralisation may also lead to a more equitable regional development since every district will receive a minimum quantum of attention and resources. This will be a marked improvement over the present system under which certain pockets tend to flourish at the cost of other some of which are completely neglected. It is true that, taking the nation as a whole, decentralisation need not always result in optimal solutions. It may not result in the most efficient scale of production and the best possible location. However, this is not guaranteed even under centralised planning, if the objectives do not take into account the felt needs and preferences of the people if the data to be used are of doubtful reliability⁹.

District Planning

District level planning is expected to result in better planning because the local people have a better awareness of their needs and fuller information on the conditions and possibilities of their areas. District planning would obviously become more meaningful if the process of decentralization is carried forward to lower levels like the block, mandal and the village. However, it would take time before viable mechanisms at these levels can be created. Hence the focus of attention for the time being has to be on district.

District planning is essentially a horizontal planning. It is a spatial plan which concentrates on the analysis of local resources and works out measures for maximum utilisation of these resources for the production of socially needed goods and services. Horizontal planning combines geographical, demographical and economic approaches within its orbit. It is essentially area based sub-state planning¹⁰.

The main objective of the decentralised district planning is to achieve 'growth' and 'distributive justice' by linking local needs and priorities with the national developmental goals. However, at the district level these objectives need to be made more specific and have to be linked with local needs. Hence the objectives of district planning are.

- (1) Increasing production through efficient utilisation of local resources, which includes absorption of modern technology;
- (2) Generation of employment opportunities particularly for agricultural labourers, rural artisans, small and marginal farmers and other weaker sections of the area;
- (3) Removal of poverty and improving the living conditions of target groups, and
- (4) Equitable sharing of benefits of development both among the people and the regions¹¹.

In order to achieve these specific goals, it would be necessary to spell out broad strategies which could be as under:

- (i) To assess development potential and identify thrust areas to optimise utilisation of local resources by designing feasible projects and integrating functional and

spatial aspects of resource development for maximisation of growth in all sectors of production;

- (ii) To assess the needs of the people as well as the areas and integrate them with development process, with bias to provide more benefits to socio-economically poor sections of population and resource scarce areas to achieve greater equity and regional balance;
- (iii) To develop a rural urban continuum by identifying Rural Growth Centres and developing them as focal points;
- (iv) To assess existing gaps and future demand for socio-economic infrastructure and plan for them to accelerate socio-economic development;
- (v) To assess financial resources for implementation, phasing of multisectoral projects and designing appropriate monitoring system to ensure effective and efficient use of resources to achieve the stipulated developing goals;
- (vi) Linking the credit plan of banks and financial institution with district plan;
- (vii) To achieve greater degree of peoples participation for and effective management of planning, implementation and monitoring of development programmes in the district¹².

The conceptual design of district planning process shows that district planning as a bottom up process of planning is a complementary effort to link local needs and development priorities with the overall developmental objectives of states and the country as a whole. In other words, the focus of the district plan would be mostly on such projects which have direct relevance to local people and can be planned, executed and managed by the machinery available at the district level¹³.

The methodology of district planning should be simple and the district plan itself concrete, specific and practical. According to the working group Report, these are the important stages of district planning:-

1. Pre-Planning phase;
2. Planning Phase;
3. Implementation phase; and
4. Monitoring and evaluation phase.¹⁴

Pre-Planning Phase

Various actions to be taken prior to the introduction of district planning are also known as creating a base or pre-requisites for district planning. The pre-requisites must include apart from political commitment, some measures for the disaggregation of allocations, delegation of administrative and financial powers, evolution of new patterns of administrative behaviour, a reorientation of attitudes and relationships, building up capabilities and instruments of control, establishment of participatory structure and continuous training and retraining of personnel. The working group (1984) has suggested the following pre-requisites for district planning.

- i) Defining the scope and content of a district plan;
- ii) Disaggregation of plan funds from the state to the district level on appropriate criteria viz population, area, level of development, special problems, etc.
- iii) Establishing a suitable organisational structure consisting of a minister of the state as chairman, President of Zilla Parishad as Co-chairman, Chairman of some panchayat samities, MPs, MLAs, MLCs representing the district, the District collector, Departmental District Heads etc.

Planning Phase

The Working Group Report on District planning has suggested the following steps for the formulation of the District Plan :

- (i) Fixing the Major objective of the District Plan :- The basic objectives of district plan are three i.e., raising production, creating more employment opportunities and removal of poverty. In order to achieve these objectives, the district plan must consist of integration of development activities in primary, secondary, tertiary and infrastructure sectors.
- (ii) Compiling Data for District Planning : Necessary minimum amount of data and information essential for planning and decision making at district level should be identified and collected by the planning team. Data should cover areas like resources

base, demographic position, agro-economic condition, Socio-economic position, level of infrastructure development, position and progress of sectoral programmes etc.

(iii) Bringing out the Profile of the District and Suggesting Strategy for Development: The profile would broadly indicate the nature of economic and agro-climatic conditions. This would help in suggesting strategy for development which is particularly relevant for the district.

(iv) Analysing the Existing Programmes and projects with Reference to strategy outlined : The existing on-going schemes must be put to very close scrutiny in terms of suitability of these schemes to the specific conditions of the district. District plan should also provide for replacement of the existing schemes with new schemes. Interlinkages between various programmes and projects are extremely important.

(v) Assessment of Resources for Allocation to various programmes and projects: The resources which are generally expected to flow for financing district plan are : (a) The state plan fund for particular projects, (b) The state plan fund for general nature local schemes, (c) Funds from local bodies, (d) funds from credit institutions and (e) Voluntary effort.

(vi) Determination of Intra-District Disparities : It is essential to examine the growth potential and level of development of each block and then special programmes be launched for backward blocks.

(vii) Formulation of Programmes and projects : This task should be handled by different administrative departments by their technical experts. The planning machinery would, thereafter, coordinate them based on the objectives, priorities, needs and resource availability.

(viii) The other suggested methods consist of statements of physical and financial components of district plan, preparation of spatial dimensions and of relationships and links between the district plan and regional and state development plan.

Implementation Phase

This task has to be performed by the individual departments with the help of technical experts and as per the directives relating to allotment of tasks, responsibilities assigned to various departments and agencies, order of priorities and time schedule prescribed.

Monitoring and Evaluation Phase

Monitoring of the execution of programme can be done by the departments concerned with the execution of programmes and also by a nodal department concerned with the coordination of plan implementation. Evaluation of the programmes should always be done by an outside agency. It could be undertaken after the programme has made some headway and also on the completion of the project.

In a vast and populous country, like India with its diversity in socio-economic scene, uneven resource endowments and characterised by wide spread poverty and unemployment, the task of planning to bring about significant improvement in levels of living of the masses is undoubtedly difficult but not insurmountable. The Working Group (1984) has rightly stated that to make decentralized planning a success, it has to be backed up by sound practices, the capabilities have to be assiduously built, right procedures and suitable structures have to evolved, necessary administrative, technical and attitudinal changes have to be brought about at all the levels and institutional mechanism have to be made more broad based with active involvement of local representatives. There have been welcome development in 1991 and the measures taken by the central governmental to tide over the economic crisis have been widely acclaimed. The agenda for reforms should include new policy initiatives for democratic decentralization. Since awareness to this type of planning has been aroused in the recent past, necessary pre-requisites are being provided, the time is now more ripe for launching district plan as an important component of Eighth Five Year Plan. The Constitution Amendment Bill (72 and 73) introduced in the Lok Sabha in September could be considered as a first Step in the direction towards decentralisation.

Decentralised Planning, its Experience

In the discussions on decentralised planning it is readily assumed that our growth performance would have been distinctly better and the distribution of benefits from development far more equitable if only we had effective planning at the sub-state, particularly at the grassroots levels. However, it is necessary to examine the validity of this proposition in the light of the factors or elements contributing to growth in the post independence period and the competing claims, under the prevailing social structure, on the gains of development at the grassroots levels.

Political and burcaucratic resistance at the state level to sharing power and resources with the local level institutions for planning from below, is often cited as the single most important reason for the failure of decentralised planning to strike roots.

In view of this those who see decentralised planning as a means for improving the socio-economic condition of the weaker sections are sceptical about the prospects of decentralised planning unless structural changes are brought about to ensure the rise of the rural poor to a position of dominance in these institutions.

It is true that lack of political will at the state level and the dominance of the rural elite at the grassroots level basically responsible for the failure of decentralised planning to materialise and the non fulfilment of its avowed objectives in most cases where it is on ground. But what is overlooked is that lack of political will at the grassroots level is equally responsible for these failures. It is puzzling to observe that despite the improvements in educational levels, general awareness and political consciousness over the last few decades, the pressures for decentralisation is coming now not so much from the grassroots as from the central and the state governments. Lack of initiative from the grassroots in this regard introduces in measure of scepticism about the prospects for decentralisation in planning¹⁵.

Though the states have full freedom to prepare their own plans keeping in view the national priorities and objectives, but they have little freedom and allow room in this sphere because of heavy dependence of states on centres for resources for development. This dependence has further increased because of the demands of development. The centre's share in the form of central plan assistance is a substantial portion of the total plan outlay of the states.

The heavy dependence on centre and the dominant role of the planning commission - a non-constitutional and non-statutory organisation- has greatly increased the central control over the states. The increase in the number of centrally sponsored schemes is yet another example of trend towards centralisation. The most notable part of these centrally sponsored schemes is that these relate to the subjects which fall approximately within the purview of states.

In this limited sphere of planning, the states, therefore, come in conflict with the centre and this conflict becomes more sharper when the political leadership at the state level is ideologically different than the political leadership at the centre. In these states, the centre uses the institutions of Planning commission and the clearance of projects of importance as a mechanism of control over these states.

Experience

The effective decentralisation in planning in India exists to-day at the state levels vis-a-vis planning at the central level. The effectiveness of decentralisation at this level did seem to affect growth and where institutions reforms have been successful, it did seem to make an impact on social justice also. The effectiveness of decentralisation in planning at the state level seems to depend very much on the size of the state. The smaller the size of the state, the greater seems to be its ability to take decisions quickly and implement the programmes effectively by promptly reaching the grassroots levels and responding to their felt needs. Similarly, decentralisation at the sub-state levels seems to be effective and percolation of benefits to the poor satisfactory wherever land reforms have been effectively implemented. The validity of the size of the state and structural changes brought about seem to have had a greater impact on growth and social justice than formal decentralisation of planning below the state level¹⁶.

The experience of Punjab and Haryana illustrates how smaller states with progressive land tenure systems can grow faster with more equitable sharing of benefits of growth even without decentralised planning at the sub-state levels. The per capita income of these states is highest among all the states of the country and the growth rate in income has also been about the highest among states, the system of land tenures is progressive and the proportion of people below the poverty line is the lowest in the

country. There is hardly any decentralised planning worth the name below the state levels nor is there any enthusiasm visible among the politicians and administrators for decentralised planning, e.g., district planning in those States. Indeed, they seem to be somewhat sceptical about the need for decentralised planning, as bulk of the resources are committed for the development of irrigation and power so that there is already a clear lag between the development of such infrastructural sectors and sectors of social development which can be planned at the state level. In view of the ease with which various Government functionaries are able to communicate with grassroots levels, decentralisation in planning does not appear as an immediate felt need in these states¹⁷.

At the other extreme are big states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan where decentralisation of planning at the sub-state levels is highlighted as a felt need and one finds a visible concern among politicians and the administrators for decentralised planning. However, it is precisely in these states that decentralised planning is least successful, it appears if the very largeness of size which necessitates decentralisation militates against it. These states account for the lowest per capita income among all states and their rate of growth on income has in general been lower than the national average. The proportion of people below the poverty line among these states is highest when compared to other states in the country. There is, therefore a severe resources crunch in these states in relation to the essential requirements for infrastructure development and poverty alleviation. The scarcity of available resources also militates against their adequate sharing with units at the sub-state levels¹⁸.

Even states like Gujrat and Maharastra which have pioneered decentralised planning at the district level in the country, find the area of freedom for the allocation of resources at the district level extremely limited. In Gujrat, for instance, where about 30 per cent to the state plan outlay is accounted by district level schemes, a bulk of it is accounted by the departmental schemes and only about 20 percent of it or about 6 percent of the total state plan outlay is account amenable to free allocation at the district level. Besides, as much as 80 to 90 percent of the outlays on district level schemes are accounted by the expenditure for on going schemes and very little is left for the new schemes to be undertaken.

It is wrong to expect that decentralised planning at the district level by itself can go a long way in reducing regional disparities in development. An integrated approach to the planning of infrastructure for each of these regions is required for removing

backwardness. This is necessary even for making district planning effective by providing infrastructure which is beyond the district level outlays.

It is interesting to note that states where decentralised planning at the district level is effective are precisely the states whose performance in respect of land reforms has been better, West Bengal, Karnataka and Jammu and Kashmir belong to this category.

The halting and inadequate towards genuine decentralised planning in the country inspite of repeated assertion of commitment to the same brings out sharply the pitfalls and problems of decentralised planning and the interplay of counter political forces inherent in the process. "The conflict between centralisation and decentralisation primarily centres around the issues of who wields control over the enormous and growing plan funds, with all its political ramifications. This conflict takes place at two levels - firstly, between the political leaders, and secondly, between the lower and higher echelons of political and bureaucratic hierarchy. The tussle is becoming increasingly fierce over the years. The emergence of regional parties is one manifestation of this conflict. A satisfactory and acceptable resolution of these conflicts is necessary in the national interest"¹⁹.

The political leadership as well as bureaucracy at different levels while talking of the ideology of decentralised development in principle, are unwilling in practice to allow greater say to local people in the planning process for fear of losing their influence and power.

Without a political support and administrative will democratic decentralisation can not hope to succeed²⁰. If the dream of democratic decentralisation has to be realised there has to be a determined effort both at political and bureaucratic levels to share power and resources with lower level organisations. Thus, a genuine programme of decentralised planning with people's participation in a real sense would require a radical departure from the existing planning mechanism and procedures and above all a new kind of attitude and approach based on an unshakable faith in the people and their capacity to help themselves. In this scheme of things, the role of state governments would be that of supporting and encouraging lower level institutions instead of that of controlling, directing and ordering them. Last but not the least, change in attitudes of both the bureaucratic and the local leaders and politicians is required to ensure smooth functioning of the decentralised planning.

Section - B : Panchayati Raj Institutions

The democratic system of government provides with the theory that people are political sovereign. The smooth and efficient running for the democratic machinery requires civic consciousness of the people as well as the capacity of the people to rule the country. From this point of view, the institutions of self-government, like the Panchayats, may be defined as the training centres for democracy. Moreover a country like India, whose population and economy are agricultural or rural, can not be developed rapidly without association of the people in the self-governing process²¹.

At the time of independence, India inherited a panchayat system which was ineffective on the one hand owing to incessant neglect and on the other to avowed policy of eyewash and whitewash²². A genuine attempt at restructuring village India and putting the political edifice at a stabler base started only after the dawn of the new era. However, a little later, both the central and state governments found in the three-tier structure a ready-made forum through which would be propagated the political philosophy and ideals of the new born nation. Attention to villages become more marked in the fifties when India launched its First Five Year Plan. The plan document itself emphasized:

“We believe that the panchayat will be able to perform its civic functions satisfactorily only if these are associated with an active process of development in which the village panchayat is itself given an effective part. Unless a village agency can assume responsibility and initiative for developing the resources of the village, it will be difficult to make a marked impression on rural life, for only a village organisation representing the community as a whole can provide the necessary leadership”²³.

Introduction of Panchayati Raj, following the Balwantrai Mehta Committee Report and its acceptance in 1958, by the National Development Council, of rural local government in India - at (i) the village, (ii) the block, (iii) the district level, with interconnected membership to provide for continuity in experience as well as programme formulation and its implementation. To this system has been given sufficient powers and authority of government as well as of plan formulation and execution. It also acts as the agent of the state government in the execution of all programmes of rural development. Panchayati raj has thus, three roles to play simultaneously : (i) as a unit of rural local government, (ii) as an instrument of community Development, and (iii) as an agency of the state government.

Balwantrai Mehta started with a few quotations from Gandhiji and Constituent Assembly debates to indicate the importance of villages in the schemes of Swaraj and the future of the country, "It is necessary," he said, "that our concept of panchayati raj should mean self-governing units of organisations at village, block and district level"²⁴.

Panchayati Raj, in other words, meant a more vigorous and decentralised system of local self-government, rather than the basis of a new polity. In modern states with vast territories the national government can not pay proper attention to all the local problems. The local needs and problems can best be understood by the local who are likely to be more efficient to solve these problems. Moreover, the problems are not common to all the areas or the degree of their intensity are also not the same, they vary greatly from area to area. So, the problems, which mainly concentrate in a particular region, can best be solved through the local bodies, i.e., the Panchayati Raj bodies, and in doing so it also motivate the people to do social services of his own region. So, panchayat institutions gives impetus to the rural people to do good works for his own uplift as well as his neighbors. That is why Lord Bryce comments, "it creates among the citizens a sense of their common interest in common affairs whoever learns to be public spirited, active and upright in the affairs of the village has learnt the first lesson of the duty incumbent or a citizen of a great country"²⁵.

The Progress of PRI and Local variations after 1959

The three-tier system was accepted as a model for rural development and established in most states' It was inaugurated first in Rajasthan in October 1959, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu followed suit in the same year by the end of succeeding decade, panchayati raj covered nearly 90 percent of the rural population. There were 262 Zilla Parishads and 4,033 panchayat samities in the country. The powers of these bodies varied from state to state as a consequence of the structural and operational variations in the pattern of panchayat raj institutions. Maharastra and Gujrat deviated from the Balwantrai prescription, since each adopted a three-tier structure that made the district level Zilla Parishad the effective point of decentralization. In Tamilnadu and Karnataka the Zilla Parishads do not have effective functions; Bihar constituted this body in eight districts, only to abandon it altogether very shortly. Andhra Pradesh has conferred limited executive functions upon the Zilla Parishad Kerala, Manipur, Tripura and Jammu and

Kashmir have only village panchayats. North-Eastern states of Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Sikkim so far opted for the panchayat raj system.

Mehta Team and Different patterns of panchayati Raj

The study Team on community projects and National Extension service, popularly known as Balwantraji Mehta committee, allowed variations in the structure and functions of the rural local bodies to suit the peculiar conditions that prevailed in the states. This does not, however, imply deviations from the fundamental principles and patterns envisaged in the report of the team. One of the broad principles in that rural local government must have democratic bodies at all levels with organic links. The Mehta Team visualized that of the three tiers, the body at the block level should be designed as the most effective one.

An examination of the organisational structure of panchayati raj institutions in various states reveals that though the basic objective of these institutions are somewhat similar in all the states, their powers, mode of representation of the people and the nature of relationships among them are not²⁶.

It was inaugurated first in Rajasthan in October, 1959, in toto as suggested by Mehta Team by making it responsible for the planning and execution of all the developmental programmes. Andhra Pradesh followed suit in the same year. The responsibility for planning and execution was entrusted to both the panchayat samity and zilla parishad²⁷. The pattern adopted by Maharashtra is different from that of Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan.

The functions entrusted to panchayats generally include provision and maintenance of civil services, public hygiene, maintenance of public works like tanks, local irrigation works, community wells, village roads and drainage etc. In some states they are also responsible for primary education, providing inputs for agricultural production, rural industries, primary health care and medical relief, women and child welfare, maintenance of common grazing grounds and other lands and property vested in them. The panchayat samities generally implement various local schemes entrusted to them and some works taken up from their own resources. The zilla parishads are generally advisory funds

distributing bodies, except in a few states where fairly substantial funds have been placed at their disposal for taking up locally needed scheme²⁸.

After the initial enthusiasm, following the creation of these institutions, there has been stagnation and later a decline in the functioning of these institutions in many parts of the country, while there are some notable exceptions. Apart from inadequate resources, elections to these bodies have not been held regularly. Panchayati Raj institutions came to be dominated by the socially or economically privileged sections in the local community with the consequence that the weaker groups - such as scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, and other poorer groups - were still deprived of its benefits. These institutions have remained convulsed in factionalism, and thus the developmental thrust expected from them was either distorted or weakened. Elected personnel have often ignored rules of procedure and indulged in favouritism.

Since the mid -1960s, Panchayati Raj has been largely deprived of central as well as state level patronage. As a form of local government, it has fallen out of favour everywhere, even in Maharashtra and Gujrat where it has been relatively more successful. The new national and state-level political leadership that emerged in the mid-sixties had much weaker links with the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi and thus a much weaker ideological commitment to Panchayati Raj.

The mounting food shortage of this period and the crop failures of 1966-67 led to a reshuffling of priorities in the community Development Programme itself resulting in an overriding emphasis on agricultural production. In the process a comprehensive concept of rural development was reduced to a mere agency to enhance agricultural production. The trend of the Indian political system has been markedly centralist since the mid-sixties, with the pace towards the centralisation of powers considerably accelerated since 1971. As a result, the state governments were made increasingly subservient to the central government. This is not the climate under which panchayati ran can grow and flourish.

It is generally accepted that various programmes of rural development will become realistic and meaningful only if people's representations are actively involved in the local level planning, design, formulation and implementation of these schemes and in selection of beneficiaries in the anti poverty and employment programmes. In order that the felt needs of the local people and the area are articulated for planning priorities

are established and effectively implemented, there is no better instrument to meet this need to be revitalized and endowed with necessary resources and powers to discharge the functions and responsibilities assigned to them²⁹.

The Ashoka Mehta Committee Report

While explaining its philosophy the Balwantrai Mehta Committee remarked that panchayati raj system establishes a linkage between local leadership enjoying confidence of local people and the government and translates the policies of the government into action. The committee thus saw Panchayati raj system as a means of involving people and their representatives in development programmes of the government. The Ashoka Mehta Committee was appointed in Dec. 1977 by the central government to suggest measures to strengthen the panchayati raj institutions, viewed the role of panchayati raj system somewhat differently. According to this committee, the panchayati raj system was not only meant for decentralisation of power and people's participation but also for supporting rural development and strengthening the planning process at the micro level³⁰. The committee commented, "It is imperative to decentralize power, planning process and developmental activities below the state level The urge for democratic control over administration at the local level, particularly in regard to management of rural development, is also an offshoot of the on going democratic process The growth and complexity of development programmes for rural areas also increasingly call for closer coordination at levels below the state. At these points popular supervision over the official machinery has the potential to become an effective instrument of coordination further, many of the multi-pronged developmental efforts need people's participation, but the initiative of the people can be uncoiled only through their involvement in the process of growth and change³¹. The major recommendations of the committee, therefore, included a two-tier panchayati raj structure, consisting of the zilla parishad and mandal panchayats, the latter with a coverage of 15,000 to 20,000 population. It regards the revenue district as the first point of decentralization below the state level in order to provide the high order of technical expertise required for rural development. The committee made specific recommendations about the composition of the various tiers of panchayati raj, each level with a combination of elective, nominated and coopted elements.

Three features characterise the Ashok Mehta Committee recommendations regarding the composition of the panchayati raj bodies. First, the elective element in each tier is to constitute the majority. Second, Seats in each tier are to be set aside for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, the basis of reservation being their population in the local community. Third, the members of the national parliament and those of the state level legislative assembly who come from the locality, would not be formally associated with these bodies, but would only be ex-officio members of the zilla parishad's committee dealing with planning.

The Ashoka Mehta committee's report confined the fact of confining variations in the structural and operational aspects of panchayati raj, a kind of unevenness that flowed from their historical exigencies inspite of a continued stress on uniformity, Assam, for instance, exhibited shifts in the tiers and functions assigned, the Mohukuma Parishad being recognised as a sub-divisional institution and the village panchayat and institution commanding a population of well over 15,000.

India, continues to face the gigantic problem of rural poverty and backwardness³². Balwantrai Mehta team was appointed to report on the community Development projects and National Extension Services. While Mehta committee was entrusted with the task of reorganising and revitalising the structure proposed earlier. The earlier team favoured administrative decentralisation for effective implementation of development programmes through three tiers, whereas the latter was only content with two tiers. Balwantrai Mehta team relied on block as the unit of decentralisation whereas Ashok Mehta committee favoured district to be a strong unit. Earlier, it was partyless democracy but Ashok Mehta committee favoured direct participation and involvement of political parties. While the first team was vague about the role of voluntary agencies, the latter committee wanted them to play definite motivations and promotional role.

A basic weakness of the Panchayati Raj system was its emphasis on planning from the village panchayat level upwards, a level devoid of both human and material resources. It was in some cases a result of ideological obsession and in most cases a political gimmick and sophistry to cover vested interests, economic or elitist .

The Report of the study Team on Panchayati Raj Finances (1963) had expressed concern which was even more serious as it applied to all states alike. It pointed out that panchayati raj Institutions were "in a state of flux", not only because legislation had not

yet been enacted in some states, but mainly because the pattern of relations between district officials and elected representatives was such that they vied with each other for power and patronage.

In view of the continued dominance of the bureaucracy and the deficiency of both expertise and staff strength at the lower levels of decentralized administration, the district headquarters came to be recognised as the effective centre of planning, a centre which could take care of block level planning also. Even the block level planning was in fact becoming district level planning in order to enable the planning team to take a broader perspective of resource potential in terms of personnel, expertise and finance. As regards implementation, the agency entrusted with the task involved the whole gamut of district administration, its departmental hierarchies vertically organised, its line of command invested with co-ordination on a horizontal principle, its administrative and financial accountability, and above all, its rules and procedures which at time overlooked the development goal itself. However, the most serious difficulty of district administration as an executive agency for the implementation of development plans was, as said before, the problem of the vertical and horizontal co-ordination of the programmes formulated at different levels. It is here that district administration called for a radical change in both structure and attitude.

In order to revitalise the system, a new conceptual framework suited to the emerging reality and the seeds of change has to be evolved. Pluralistic perspective will need to guide different approaches and the panchayati raj system should not continue to be viewed as a sectoral arrangement but a political manifestation of the will of the rural people³³. The system which has to be relevant to the local situations must have commitment to provide for :

- (a) equality of access to economic resources;
- (b) equal rights for all political, social and cultural;
- (c) wider scope for peoples' participation and
- (d) end of the division between mental and manual labour and the use of technology appropriate for this purpose³⁴. It requires committed leaders and bureaucrats to use whatever power and authority they have - Political power or power of ideas to bring about the necessary changes and a solution to the real local problems.

India of tomorrow which would usher in an information rich and technology intensive stage calls for new approaches to look at the institutional arrangements at grassroots level. According to World Bank estimates, India would have the largest concentration of illiterate population in the world by the year 2000 A.D. Due to rural-urban differential, much impact will be seen in rural India. Panchayati Raj institutions have to promote strategies and programmes for removing poverty and increasing productivity which require widespread acquisition of relevant information for creating motivation, behavioural changes and exercise of choices necessary for the success of development efforts³⁵.

The Panchayati Raj System has to work in a new dialectical process requiring perception action-reflection-conceptualisation as a continuous process. The ultimate determinant for success or failure in Panchayati Raj, is the commitment of society to it. People, if they are dedicated and committed to achieve the goals, can rise above the limitations of their environment and accomplish their objectives. Through development of attitudes, values, capabilities, the state must provide strength and resilience to people to respond to changing situations and enable them to cause and contribute to societal development.

With the commencement of the Seventy-third and Seventy-fourth Amendments to the constitution, the structure of administration at district and sub-district levels would undergo substantial change. Though Panchayati Raj bodies are in existence for decades, yet, the past experience has shown that they have more often remained as showpieces of democratic decentralisation. States have generally created parallel institutions for implementation and monitoring of development programmes, leaving the PR bodies as a notional entity. In many cases, the PRIS have been reduced to the status of a glorified petitioner, representing the cause of their constituency before even petty government officials³⁶. The Amendments are also to endow panchayats at every level with such powers and authorities as may be necessary to enable them to function effectively as institution of self government.

The 73rd constitution Amendment mandates the entrustment of the following functions commensurate with authority to the three tier structure of Panchayats at Village, Block and District Levels :

Article 243 G : “Subject to the provisions of the constitution, the Legislature of a state may, by law, endow the Panchayats with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable to them to function as institutions of self-government and such law may contain provisions for the devolution of the powers and responsibilities upon Panchayats at the appropriate level, subject to such conditions as may be specified therein, with respect to :

- (a) The preparation of plans for economic development and social justice ;
- (b) The implementation of schemes for economic developments and social justice as may be entrusted to them including those in relation to the matters listed in the eleventh schedule

The 74th constitution Amendment, provides for District Planning:

Article 243 3D : “There shall be constituted in every states at the District level a District Planning Committee to consolidate the plans prepared by the Panchayats and the Municipalities in the district to prepare a draft development plan for the district as a whole. Every District Planning Committee shall, in preparing the draft development plan:

- (a) have regard to -
 - i. Matters of common interest between the Panchayats and the Municipalities including spatial planning, sharing of water and other physical and natural resource, integrated development of infrastructure and environmental conservation;
 - ii. The extent and type of available resources whether financial or otherwise
- (b) consult such institutions and organisation as the governor may by order, specify:

The chairperson of every District planning committee shall forward the development plan, as recommended by such committee, to the government of the state”.

It is thus possible to provide this committee with necessary capabilities to arrange for effective planning and coordination at the district level among various line

departments within and outside of the PRIs as well as those under the Municipalities. Probably a cabinet Minister of the state government could be nominated as the chairperson of this committee. As it is, most states have designated a minister of the state government as in-charge of a district, for overall review and coordination of administration. The same minister could be nominated as chairperson to the DPC. This will provide for a functional link between the state government and the PRIs, municipalities and other line departments³⁷.

To fulfil the requirements of the 73rd Amendment, it is necessary to create conditions for the formulation of area plans by Panchayats, starting from village level and for the integration of these village area plans at panchayat samiti and zilla parishad levels.

The first step in that direction is that in relation to the subjects to be covered by the area plans (as per the Eleventh schedule) upto the district level, administrative, technical, financial (and legal powers, if any) exercised by the sectoral departments or directorates at the state level should be listed and invested in the zilla parishads (ZPs) etc., unambiguously³⁸.

In respect of the subjects and functions entrusted to ZPs, etc., the related field level functionaries of the sectoral departments or directorates should be placed under the control and supervision of the Chief Executive Officer of the ZPs.

In relation to the subjects and functions transferred to ZPs etc, the departments or directorates however would be expected to provide, on request technical assistance or suggestions which would help the ZPs improve productivity and efficiency of resources and services.

To perform such function effectively, it is necessary to reorient the role of at least two nodal departments at the state level, namely, planning and Finance Departments.

Planning process at the state level faces the most exciting challenge of absorbing the area plans into the state plan on a magnitude not attempted hitherto in any state. The nature of harmonisation required between area plans emanating from Mandals to zilla parishads on the one hand, and sectoral plans emanating from sectoral departments at the state level on the other, would call for a new methodology and greater degree of

expertise in the planning Department. The practice of merging area plans into sectoral plans will need modification. Identification of area plans will also be need to be maintained and expressed in the state plan.

The planning machinery should be strengthened in the first place by drawing upon the resources of all available technical, educational, research, voluntary and other agencies through a systematic networking with panels in specialised disciplines.

It may be appropriate to state that the PRIS would be totally independent of their state governments and would not be answerable to the latter at all. The powers, authority and responsibilities of the PRIs would be defined by the state legislature (Article 243 G), which obviously calls for answerability of the PRIs to the state governments and the state legislature. The state Government would continue to be answerable to the state legislature for the respective departmental budget. As a result the state government would need, with full justification, the physical and financial progress reports of the various programmes and schemes that are transferred to the PRIs for implementation.

A majority of development programmes in sectors such as agriculture, rural development, social welfare, health and education etc. involve in the form of manpower, implements, credit, etc. apart from construction of buildings etc. Most of these programmes are people or beneficiary oriented and involve efforts at local or area levels for effective implementation without leakages in the delivery system.

The main deficiencies in the implementation of these programmes have been:

- (i) wrong selection of beneficiaries or type of assistance, without considering their needs, capabilities and skills;
- (ii) Lack of flexibility, straight - jacket guidelines issued centrally often ignore local needs, situations and variations;
- (iii) Inadequate delivery mechanism, pilferages, malpractices etc.,
- (iv) Lack of coordinated approach, with many sectoral organisations working independently for different components of the programmes; and
- (v) Lack of commitment on the part of agencies/agents responsible for the delivery of the programmes⁴⁰.

During the Eighth plan, it is proposed to initiate a number of steps to overcome these deficiencies and to ensure effective implementation of the programme, achievement of targets and realisation of intended benefits by the beneficiaries. Some of these are as follows:

- (i) Strengthening the people's bodies at local levels, i.e., District Boards and Gram Panchayats,
- (ii) Integrated area developing approach by bringing about a convergence of all the sectoral agencies concerned at micro-level.
- (iii) Introducing flexibility in the programmes by giving more autonomy to the local bodies and panchayats to plan according to the needs and resources available at the local area level.
- (iv) Handing over the management and supervision of local service centres like health centres schools, etc., to district boards and Panchayats⁴¹.

To ensure continuous qualitative improvement and innovation in decentralized planning and implementation, the planning and the Development departments at the state level should sponsor programme innovations and research especially through voluntary organisations, arrange for an independent assessment of results, and their widespread diffusion among the decentralized institutions and the rural population at large.

For a systematic diffusion, the state should develop a communication network with video and other audio-visual techniques, to be set up with expert help. While the state will no doubt-devolve sizeable financial resources to the local bodies, it would be total to the spirit of decentralisation if the latter were to depend entirely on finances given by the state⁴².

It is important to emphasize that in the ultimate analysis, decentralisation, like any other instrument, can serve both positive and negative ends. If decentralized remains confined to the political level without its constructive component of area planning, the negative aspect of decentralized working of the political institutions would doubtless emerge. Similarly, decentralisation would both produce positive results in the absence of the thorough restructuring of the planning process and in the absence of the

appropriate adjustments on the part of the state level power structure and the bureaucracy in terms of their attitudes, practices and parameters of operation.

The most vital role is played by the two major groups in the process of decentralisation namely, the politicians and the bureaucracy. Both these groups would have to act in an enlightened and mutually supporting fashion to reinforce the positive aspects of the process of decentralisation⁴³.

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