

ABSTRACT

The idea of decentralised governance was conceived in the nineteenth century by some leading European thinkers like Mill, Bryce, and Tocqueville both as a politico-administrative arrangement for weakening power and authority of the national state along with effecting improvement in administration and as institutions of participatory democracy. During India's struggle for freedom Gandhi stood for it strongly. In village India it has taken the forms of panchayats. The new Constitution of independent India embodied it in the chapter on Directive Principles of State Policy which is not enforceable in the courts of law. An attempt was made to implement the concept in the 1950s on the basis of the recommendations of the Balvantrai Mehta Committee. But the experience has not been encouraging as institutions had either lost their momentum leading to the unavoidable decline in course of time or 'killed before they were truly born' in almost all the states. The Constitution was amended in 1992 to give the panchayats a new lease of life. But again, the future does not seem to be bright as they seem to stand at the crossroads. The paper will try to look back to trace the historical development of the institutions for the purpose of developing a comprehensive perspective and to assess the current state of affairs with special focus on the challenges being confronted. Another objective of this study is to search for silver lining, if any, and to suggest what needs to be done to strengthen the process of decentralised democratic governance in rural India. The study will be based on the secondary source material including illustrative case studies to build up and sharpen arguments.

Keywords: Decentralised Governance, Panchayats, Constituent Assembly, Balvantrai Mehta Committee, Constitutional Amendment.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of decentralised governance was conceived in the nineteenth century by some leading European thinkers like Mill, Bryce Tocqueville both as a politico-administrative instrument for weakening power and authority of the national state along with effecting improvement in administration as well as institutions of participatory democracy (Muttalib and Khan, 1983; Kim and Datta, 2015). The emergence of decentralisation as sort of buzzword in recent times may be attributed to its acceptance across the Left-Right divide. Broadly speaking there are two key perspectives on decentralisation which can be termed as developmentalist and democratising. (Litvac, 1998). The developmentalists including mainstream development donors, social activists support decentralisation as it brings government closer to the people, and thus secures legitimacy for governance which is now facing challenges in many capitalist countries. The democratisation perspective argues that it enhances greater citizen input in governance, making governance more inclusive. These two perspectives have some points of convergence. The present-day scholars find decentralisation as the most important institutional device to promote good governance which holds an important place in the modern development discourse.

The heart of decentralisation is self-governance, and India has a fairly long tradition of self-governance as demonstrated by Altekar. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* bears ample evidence of it as well (Kaur, 2010). But this tradition suffered a big jolt during the rule of the Sultanate and Mughals in Delhi when centralisation became the cornerstone of Indian administration. And the British rulers followed the footsteps of the immediately preceding regime. But the unprecedented challenges resulting from the unforeseen and sudden Sepoy Mutiny in 1857 forced the rulers to review the highly centralised system of government and to think afresh. And decentralisation

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formed part of the colonial agenda of governance as evident from a number of landmark resolutions developed by Lord Mayo and Lord Ripon and followed by the appointment of the Royal Commission on Decentralisation (Tinker, 1967; Haldipur and Pasramhansha, 1970). The matter came to a halt abruptly following the intervention of the World War (Bhattacharyya and Datta, 1992). The so-called democratisation was very limited because the franchise was restricted to local magnates and their cohorts. Secondly, the local government institutions set up by the colonial rulers were imposed from the above and as Bandyopadhyay and others observe, remained loosely grafted to the indigenous rural society. They continue that the old community based self-governing institutions and the newly created and superimposed bodies of local government failed to develop any creative relationship (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2003).

The Indian nationalist movement led by Gandhi focused on *village Swaraj* as a sort of future framework of post independent polity and governance. Incidentally, he had varied experience of dealing with state systems in Europe, Africa, and Asia. He was not happy with the modern liberal state as it represented violence in a concentrated form. He argued that the individual has a soul, but the state is a soulless machine, and can never be weaned from violence to which it owes its very existence (Datta, 2017).

During India's freedom struggle he rejected the alternative of *suraj* - good government – to *Swaraj*-self-government. He believed that exploitation of the rural masses can end only when an average villager recognises his own strength and becomes conscious that he is the maker of his own destiny. Hence the task is to awaken the villagers themselves and make them capable of tackling their own problems. The real task is one of empowering the people. He finds the route to such empowerment of the average villager in decentralisation -a decentralised polity and economy. In Gandhi's scheme of decentralised polity and governance power does not flow to the people from the central parliament but resides in the people themselves and is entrusted for the time being to those whom they choose as their representatives. *Panchayati raj* is thus not a gift of the all-powerful state to its citizens. Thus, in Gandhi's vision two perspectives on decentralisation, namely developmentalist and decentralising seem to have converged, and the convergence has been done in keeping with Indian tradition.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE ARCHITECTS OF THE CONSTITUTION

The architects of the Constitution appear to have been hesitant to create a system of decentralised form of governance as they were probably haunted by the horrible experiences following partition. The objective resolution introduced by Nehru in the Constituent Assembly reflected his preference for the Western state model where Individual holds pivotal position and did not visualise the village as the basic unit of the new political system. While moving the Objective Resolutions for the draft Constitution panchayats were not mentioned. And significantly Nehru "preferred to maintain silence during the heated debate following the scathing attack on the villages as sinks of localism, ignorance, narrow mindedness communalism and ignorance levelled by Ambedkar (Association of Voluntary Agencies, 1966).

The architects of the Constitution, to quote, "paid a lip service to the local self-governing institutions in India" (Singh, 2009). The consensus that emerged after prolonged deliberation on this subject was that decentralised village government was not the priority, and therefore a space for it was provided for in the backyard of the Constitution. Therefore, local government was made a part of the Directive Principles of State Policy which is not enforceable by courts of law.

THE RISE OF THE NEW GENERATIONS OF PANCHAYATS

There are two distinct phases in the evolution of the village panchayats in post-colonial India. In between there had been a very short stint of another brand of panchayats. The first-generation panchayats started in 1950 in pursuance of satisfying the recommendations of the Balvantrao Committee, but it failed to evoke people's initiative. And the engine of decentralisation came to a screeching halt within a very short while. The MPs cooled off their enthusiasm as they faced a strong challenge from the newly elected panchayat leaders and the bureaucracy grown under

the colonial tradition, was unhappy from the very beginning as it calls for sharing power with people. They were lying in waiting to hit the baby. When they found lack of interest on the part of the political leaders at the higher levels, they extended their support to weaken the institutions. Parallel bureaucratic bodies were set up, primarily for channelisation of funds from the central government, the peoples' panchayats starved off funds. Thus, the first-generation panchayats declined and became insignificant in the course of time. "They were killed before they were truly born", to use LC Jain's stronger words (Jain, 1986). These institutions were not seen as institutions of peoples' participation that played a role in deepening democracy, but rather seen as instruments to facilitate the implementation of national policies (Mathur, 2013).

The most significant development in the rural local self-government in post-colonial India took place in 1992 when the Seventy Third constitutional amendment was passed. The amendment defined panchayats as institutions of self-government, but not "as units of self-government" conceptualised in the Directive Principles of State Policy. The amendments constitutionalised local governance and sought to ensure democratisation of the governing processes by making it mandatory to hold elections to local bodies at regular intervals under the aegis of a constitutional body called the State Election Commission. The other key features *inter alia* include the mandate to create *gram sabhas* at the doorstep of the villagers for institutionalisation of their participation and introduction of the quota system for political and administrative empowerment of women, provision for formation of State Finance Commissions for augmentation of the funds of the panchayat institutions.

The introduction of decentralised democracy through the amendment of the Constitution is a gift of the powerful state which Gandhi would have disliked. There is a view that it was necessary to promote neo-liberal policy and significantly the idea of amendment was mooted after the paradigmatic shift of the Indian policy in the 1990. It is argued that advocacy of the new policy called for creating institutions at the local level at the doorsteps of the people to pre-empt adverse reactions of the people to the policy and to sensitise them about their new role in governance. In this sense the constitutional amendment may be looked at as an attempt to re-invigorate local government in the villages to regain legitimacy (Datta, 2023).

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES: HOLDING OF ELECTIONS

The life blood of democracy is elections at regular intervals, and lack of it was one of the basic maladies of the first-generation panchayats. One of the principal objectives of amending the Constitution was to put an end to the practice of holding elections to the local bodies according to the sweet will of the state government after making assessment of the political consequences.

Significantly, despite the constitutional mandate regular elections are not being held in some of the states and the politicians have already evolved different tactics of delaying elections. It cannot be denied that delay in holding regular elections has serious negative implications as it deprives the rural voters of their democratic rights. More importantly, it impacts on timely devolution of funds recommended by the State Finance Commissions. From the very beginning several states have postponed panchayat elections: the ignominious list of such states includes Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Jammu and Kashmir, Bihar, and Orissa. But the judiciary has come to the rescue in this regard.

For example, in 2022 the Karnataka High Court imposed a fine of Rs. 5 lakhs on the state government for its alleged "delaying tactics" over conducting the Zilla Panchayat and Taluk Panchayat elections. The Bombay High Court came down heavily on the Government of Goa and quashed the decision to postpone elections to panchayat bodies. The matter was taken to the Supreme Court which declined to interfere with the decision of the High Court. The Madhya Pradesh government wanted to delay elections on grounds of making reservation of seats for other backward castes, but the apex court struck it down citing the order in Maharashtra. The instances are not few and far between.

Gujarat set a unique example a few years ago. The State Government announced incentives to the extent of Rs. 1 lakh to those *panchayats*, which would be able to hold elections on the basis

of consensus. The scheme called *samras gram* (harmonious village) was completely anti-democratic. It is regarded as a recipe for reward-induced guided democracy (Datta, 2019). In 2017, the ruling party in West Bengal bagged 36 per cent of the seats without any contest as the opposition parties reportedly were not allowed to contest elections. In 2019, in Tripura the ruling party bagged 86 percent of the seats as the opposition parties were allegedly prevented from filing nominations. Besides, in a divided society like ours, so called spontaneous consensus in the interest of a large section of people, is a myth. If there is at all any consensus, it is that of caste, religion etc, and basically class. It may be recalled that not long ago the Diwakar Committee (1965) examined the scope of unanimity in panchayat elections. The Committee came across villages where the anxiety for unanimity and consensus meant the continuation of the traditional authorities and suppression of the new spirit of the youth.²

Interestingly, what had happened in some states in the name of achieving unanimity is a cause of serious concern. Mention may be made of the panchayat elections in Karnataka held a few years ago. Some of the seats were auctioned. The Election Commission could not interfere on the ground that if the voters arranged among themselves to ensure unanimous election it was beyond the legal competence of the Commission to intervene. In order to augment the resources some of the seats were put to bidding in Andhra Pradesh in 2001. Even the reserved seats were not spared. The highest amount for the post of the Sarpanch in Velpur village under Guntur district was 10.10 lakh (Mukherjee, 2008). Violence during and after the panchayat elections is not rare. Recent instances include pre-poll and post-poll violence in West Bengal in 2018 and 2023 and in Haryana in 2022. Added to it is the large-scale distribution of gifts and allurements offered by the candidates in elections.

AUTONOMOUS PANCHAYATS: A MYTH ?

The Seventy Third Constitutional amendment defines panchayats as institutions of self-government and instruments of planning for economic development and social justice. The key to opening the door of this brand of panchayats lies in the extent of full-fledged devolution of powers and functions to the panchayat bodies. Devolution is reflective of genuine decentralisation as it provides “the most direct link with democracy, ensures popular participation, and seeks to achieve empowerment of the local citizenry” (John and Chathukulam, 2003).

The Eleventh Schedule appended to the constitutional amendment lists 29 functions, and it has been mentioned that the states ‘may’ transfer these functions to panchayats. The crux of the matter is that devolution of functions to be meaningful calls for clubbing it with that of funds and functionaries. The latest study done in 2014-15 by Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in 25 different states, took into account two indices for all the levels. The findings make it clear that while all the states have transferred functions to panchayat bodies there is no corresponding transfer of funds and functionaries in almost all the states.

According to the latest round of the devolution index, constructed under the auspices of the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, four states namely, Kerala, Sikkim, Karnataka, and Maharashtra have done better in respect of the devolution of funds, functionaries, and finances to the PRIs. The other states like Bihar, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Telangana, and Jammu and Kashmir lag behind (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2015; Reddy, 2021).

TRANSFER OF FUNDS

A critical review of the provisions in the Acts of the different states regarding tax assignments, tax sharing, and non-tax revenues make it very clear that the PRIs at the level of the Panchayat *samiti* (PS an intermediate tier) and Zilla *parishad* (ZP, district level tier) do not have any independent taxing powers. Most of the taxes are assigned at the lowest tier, the Gram Panchayats.

²See Venkataranjyaa for the excerpts from the Report of the Diwakar Committee 1965.

Devolution of funds has assumed unexpected proportion as there is lack of clarity in devolved functions and paucity of qualified functionaries coupled with fiscal pressures at the state level. It has created a situation in which funding from the state budget has been uncertain and inadequate. As a result, as Lahiri says, “panchayat raj institutions in many states have been reduced to simple agents of the higher-level governments” (Lahiri, 2020). And strikingly many state governments have failed in appointing the members of the State Finance Commission (SFC) on time in conformity with constitutional mandate embodied in article 243(1). The failure on the part of the state governments to table the reports in the state legislature is also a matter of concern. “As of November 2021, 15 states out of 28 had not even constituted their Fifth SFCs; and Goa, Gujarat and Manipur were implementing that of their third SFCs”.

More importantly, the appointment of the SFCs does not serve purpose because it has turned out to be a routine work to appoint Finance Commissions. A close study of the reports tends to show that no Finance Commissions have so far been able to recommend transfer of such funds as to strengthen the financial base of the panchayats because of the inherent structural limitation. The resources of the state government are very limited due to highly skewed constitutional distribution of financial resources between the centre and the states.

TRANSFER OF FUNCTIONARIES

To function effectively as institutions of self-government the Panchayati raj institutions (PRIs) need to have power to recruit and control staff required for managing their functions. Strangely, Part IX and IXA of the Indian constitution remain silent on this vital aspect of institutional autonomy. The state governments have retained for themselves the power for inspection, inquiring into the affairs of the panchayats, suspension of panchayat resolutions and issuing directions. Besides in most states the key functionaries, namely, the secretaries and executive officers at all the three levels of panchayats are state government employees who are appointed, transferred, and controlled by the state government. Although the state government is accountable to the legislature for their performance, they cannot be left independent without any supervision and control. As it is a state subject, this power has to be used sparingly and very judiciously and in keeping with the autonomy conceived in the amendment of the Constitution.

Besides, the PRIs being under the direct control of the state administrative hierarchy they are often reluctant to work under the administrative control of the elected panchayats. In Odisha, for example, the doctors sat in *dharna* as they were asked to work under the panchayats at the block level. In West Bengal they have been associated with subject Committees of the Panchayat Samities, but they do not usually attend meetings (Chakrabarty, 2011; Datta and Sen, 2015). The present government of West Bengal has set up development monitoring committees consisting of the members of the bureaucracy, at block, sub-divisional and district levels. This is how the democratic system is being bureaucratised. Such examples are not few and far between. The scholar C. H. Hanumantha Rao has argued that the Collector-SP raj established by the colonial rulers “has been further entrenched during the post-Independence period as it became the engine of capitalist development at the local level” (Rao, 2023).

PARALLEL BODIES

The parallel bodies which have long historical roots are eating into the vitals of the so-called autonomous panchayats. Reference may be made to the traditional institutions like Gavkis which are active in the Konkan region in Maharashtra, customary village councils in Karnataka (Lele, 2001), widespread caste panchayats in northern parts of our country, village development councils in Haryana. The gavkis are dominated by the upper castes and landlords. Caste panchayats (Yadav, 2009) do not allow entry of women and are dominated by the upper castes. They have considerable political clout. These bodies though without legal sanction, are in actual terms, more powerful than the constitutionally mandated panchayats. They promote honour killings, impose ban on the use of mobile phones by unmarried girls and the like (Hindu, 2014).

CENTRALLY SPONSORED SCHEMES AND MPLAD

There are many centrally sponsored schemes (CSS) and programmes which are conceived by the centre and the panchayats work as agencies of implementation for which detailed guidelines are framed by the centre. The Eleventh Plan lamented that CSSs exist more as stand-alone interventions lacking integration and convergence with local governance. In a similar tone, the Expert Group on Grassroots Planning (2006) argued that CSSs are even coming in the way of real emergence of decentralised planning. In the process, the panchayats have been compelled to act merely as agents for channelising CSS funds rather than emerge as empowered institutions for development planning.

Besides the centrally sponsored schemes, Members of Parliament Local Area Development (MPLAD) schemes are strengthening the process of centralisation. The guidelines authorising the MPs to exercise their personal choice and decision in funding and executing the scheme, lead to usurpation of the power and responsibilities of the local bodies. And in many instances, the choice of schemes and amounts expected can significantly alter or distort local priorities as may be decided or desired by the local bodies. Most of the plans undertaken form part of the 11th and 12th Schedules incorporated in the 73rd and 74th Amendments of the Constitution and thus it is encroachment of the constitutionally mandated domain of the panchayats.

Reports of the Comptroller and Auditor General (2001) showed that the MPLAD was plagued not only by the inadequacy of funds but also by the increasing underutilisation, misuse and diversion of money earmarked for the project (Era, 2002). The matter has been repeatedly raised by some political parties and the researchers but without any results. And significantly the amount of the MPLAD has increased over the last few years (Tripathy, 2004) because it gives the MPs rich electoral dividends.

PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY THROUGH GRAM SABHAS

The Seventy Third Amendment has institutionalised participatory democracy in the villages through Gram Sabha. While the constitutional amendment makes it mandatory to establish *Gram Sabha* at the village level, it does not stipulate any details regarding the structure, powers, and functions of this institution. It seems to be a wise step because state governments are endowed with some discretion and in a country of India's size and diversity it is better to leave it to the hands of the state governments.

Two kinds of structures have emerged in different states. In some states like Uttar Pradesh Maharashtra Gram Sabhas are coterminous with the Gram Panchayat. But in states like West Bengal, Odisha, and Kerala there are two participatory bodies, one at the level of the Gram Panchayat (GP) known as Gram Sabha and the other, down below closer to the villagers, in different names such as Gram Sansad, Palli Sabha Ward Sabha (Datta, 2019). But hardly has any State Act empowered the Gram Sabhas or Ward Sabha to exercise control over the Gram Panchayats and to take final decisions in matters of village development. In most of the states the functional domain of the *Gram Sabha* is limited to discussions of annual statements of accounts, administration reports, and selection of beneficiaries for poverty alleviation programmes. Only in a few states like Haryana, Punjab and Tamil Nadu the Gram Sabhas enjoy the powers to approve the budgets (Datta, 2022).

More often than not, there is a tendency to conduct the meetings in an informal manner and finalize the proceedings in haste. The prescribed quorum is also not given due importance. Poor attendance of women folk in the meetings has been a common feature. The participation of the people belonging to the weaker sections has been marginal. Lack of literacy makes it difficult for many to effectively voice their demands in the meetings.

ENGENDERING GOVERNANCE THROUGH QUOTA

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act mandated 33.3 percent reservation for women in Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs) across the country. About 20 states have reserved 50 percent of seats in urban local bodies too. Approximately 46 percent of elected representatives of local

bodies in the country are women (Sinha, 2018). But women elected representatives are facing challenges internally and externally making their participation what is euphemistically called tokenism. The researchers have identified the challenges experienced by women from three different angles namely individual and family, social and political and legal – institutional (Datta, 2023) At the individual and family level they are constrained by their lack of experience, education and self-confidence, financial dependence on the male members and unchanged domestic responsibilities. These sometime stand in their way of attending meetings. At the social and political level, they experience lack of effective political or community support after the elections. Women find it difficult to unite themselves even on a common cause in the meetings because they are divided along the lines of caste, community, and political parties.

Strong tradition of patriarchy has led to the emergence of new class of male village leaders called panchayat or sarpanch *pati* (males projecting themselves as the husbands of the elected women members and showing that they are the wielders of real powers). In states like Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh, Pretty Chaudhury and others demonstrated in their article that in UP women Zilla Parishad Adhyakshas elected in 2016 were mostly passive proxies championed by richer and powerful elites (Chowdhury et al., 2021). In such cases women have to act as rubber stamps. In the last panchayat elections in a number of GPs in MP, the husbands of the elected women took the oath (Sikdar, 2022). Another study conducted in Rajasthan find that “persisting patriarchal norms have emboldened ambitious husbands or fathers who were blocked by the gender reservation, or unable to win on their own, to seek power through their wives or daughters”. The study argues that in order to overcome these restraints and win elections most women fall back on the support of the males which has negative consequences as it encourages *parshad pati* arrangements (Turnbull, 2022).

The Khap panchayats in states like Haryana, western Uttar Pradesh, parts of Rajasthan, and Gavkis in Maharastra survive and dictate terms because they are backed by political parties as they have political clout and act as vote banks. In the villages where they operate, they decide things bypassing the constitutionally mandated panchayat bodies (Datta, 2013).

At the legal and institutional level, they are experiencing strong challenges. Mention may be made of the legally sanctioned two children norm which requires that a person having more than two children is ineligible to contest elections, have been introduced through legislation in some states. This norm is discriminatory, and women suffer most. One who has more than two children can be an MP or MLA but not a member of panchayats. It is also argued that the basic inspiration for this kind of legislation was derived from the experience of China, but the fact remains that in our country Tamil Nadu and Kerala have achieved much faster decline in fertility than China and literacy is cited as the primary reason.

Networks of the Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) now have a clearer vision of their needs and responsibilities in the PRIs. These networks promote solidarity among EWRs who are otherwise divided by caste, religion, and geographical boundaries. In this process of working together women also learn from each other and are exposed to each other's work, problems and private life resulting in solidarity. Second, it empowers women because the very act of going out of the village to attend the meetings of the network is itself an empowering process (Behar, 2003).

Reservation of seats for women has changed the social composition and domination pattern of the panchayats in terms of bringing in not only women from the lower stratum of society but also standing in the way of traditional domination of political families. The studies reveal that a good number of the elected women members belong to the families below the poverty line. And majority is from non-political families. Thus, it is breaking not only the monopoly of the rich and politically powerful but also domination of rural governance by some families having established political background.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS AND THE WAYS FORWARD

India continues to be one of the least urbanised countries in the world even today. In our country of villages, the size, scope and reach of the Panchayati raj institutions is enormous with 2,53,083 village Panchayats, 6717 Block Panchayats and 654 District Panchayats. India's development still depends on the development of the villages for which we need vibrant village self-government as the arm of development and democracy in the countryside. The constitutional attempt to break colonial tradition in 1992 does not seem to be working well on the ground because the threats to local democracy in rural India lie deeply embedded in the Indian constitution, polity, and economy (Mukarji, 1994; Datta, 2019). The demand though for restructuring of the centre-state relationship was first strongly put forward after the re-organisation of the country in the 1950s, as it created contradictions between decentralised polity and a centralised constitution. It was succinctly brought by the Rajamannar Committee (Rajamannar Committee, 1969) constituted by the DMK government. The Indian state had to appoint a committee to review this issue again in the 1980s. The United Progressive Alliance government could not make any breakthrough in this regard. The present National Democratic Alliance government has brought hegemonic rule although some state governments still remain beyond the purview of the NDA. The long awaited second round of constitutional amendments to strengthen the process of democratic decentralisation does not seem to be in sight. There is a view that single party rule has a tendency to strengthen the processes of centralisation.

Drawing lessons from Africa one can refer to some other threats. First, political will is not always and in every situation the key variable for decentralisation. Political incentives shape the decisions of policymakers more than political will. But this does not undermine the role of political will because without this the centralised command structure cannot be broken. The Kerala experience of People's Plan Campaign suggests the limitations of decentralised planning initiated from above and implemented with centralised command (Chhathukulam and Joseph, 2023).

And significantly incentives to decentralise may not be "noble" goals such as democracy and development. Incentives to decentralise may include maintaining a regime or extending power base, gaining electoral advantages for a governing party, extending patronage networks, and courting donor support. In West Bengal the Left Front government found decentralisation in the villages a good political incentive because it made it into an instrument of political mobilisation of the masses (Datta, 2003).

The decentralisation process gets threatened when non-representative or unaccountable actors are empowered, taking authority away from democratic actors or from the public arena. It happens when party leaders in the villages decide everything in the party offices (Chatterjee, 2009). In West Bengal during the long regime of the Left Front it was seen that powers remained with the party offices. My study had demonstrated that it was one of the reasons why gram sansad meetings could not attract good number of villagers despite efforts on the part of the state government (Datta, 2003).

The experience of Uganda, Rwanda, and South Africa illustrate that decentralisation may be demanded by the grassroots committees of the blacks as a way of dismantling apartheid as in South Africa. It may be supply-driven engineered from the top through consultations and pilot programmes as in Uganda, or directly driven from the top as in Rwanda. But the fact remains that it is difficult to arrive at consensus process on the exercise of shared power and authority.

If decentralisation has to be successful it needs to be conceived not merely as the transfer of power and authority to local governments but also to the people because it is the initiative of the people which sustains it, which fuels the engine. This requires innovative ways of inventing, re-inventing, and institutionalising the interface between the people and their local governments.

In India, local government continues to be in the state list but the state governments in India are very weak. Can a weak state government deliver a healthy baby of local self-government? The point was hinted at by E.M. S Namboodiripad who gave a dissenting note in the Report of the

Ashoka Mehta Committee. The panchayat bodies have been entrusted with the developmental functions, but they have been given no control over the regulatory machinery of the state at the village level. This distinction weakens the base of local democratic bodies and retards their functioning.

It has been repeatedly stressed by the protagonists of local governance that there is need for bottom-up pressure for lubricating the local government machinery. It calls for adequate awareness on the part of the local electorate. The active movement of the citizens can generate bottom-up pressure. It is absent in our village society. Political issues do not figure much in the discussions in the traditional forums of the villages.

The fact however remains that the constitutionalising of the local governance has changed the legal profile of the Panchayati raj system. Panchayati raj is no longer an idea but a practice. The constitutional provisions have laid the foundation stone of local government the superstructures of which have to be built up for which what is urgently needed is spontaneous initiative on the part of the people. There is some ray of hope following the rise and growth of the civil society organisation in India working for democratisation of governance at the grassroots. They are trying to generate awareness among the villagers in various ways. The Right-to-Information has strengthened their hands.

It is high time to initiate the process of making another round of constitutional amendments to give a greater push to decentralisation process. It seems useful to appoint a committee which will conduct an exploratory study of the present situation, identify the bottlenecks, and suggest necessary changes in the Constitution to ensure that panchayat institutions emerge as a genuine new tier of Indian governance (Datta and Sodhi, 2021).

The existing provision relating to the discretionary devolution of functions needs to be made mandatory. It calls for the amendment of the entire structure of centre-state relationships. Mapping of functional items seems to be the need of the hour for facilitating proper devolution among tiers of panchayats. Shyam Roy (1919) suggests that in this exercise the erstwhile Planning Commissions' concept of minor heads of development may be followed as an acceptable guide. The devolution issue cannot be isolated from the relevance of functional areas, its possible interconnectedness, and the availability of infrastructural support. In this regard, reference may be made to the concept of subsidiarity as indicated by the Second Administrative Reforms Commissions' Recommendations. The principle of subsidiarity stipulates functions should be carried out closest to citizens by the citizens at the smallest unit of government possible and delegated upwards only when the local unit cannot perform the task. It is also necessary to take into account the load bearing capacity of the first tier of local government and its institutional limitation.

There is a need for state level association of all panchayat bodies which will be having a sort of national level network. They will be engaged in dialogue and consultation of the concerned state governments and national government. They will be working as some kind of pressure groups on the government at the respective level.

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