

Role of Democratic Decentralisation towards responsiveness in India

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Abstract: This paper concerns with the extent to which democratic decentralisation has helped to make government in India more responsive. It also explores why poor people, who tend to participate more actively in electoral politics than wealthier people and shows that government appears most responsive in states with the highest newspaper circulation. The central functions of government are often performed with exceptional competence – but the delivery of basic services is generally very poor. Democratic decentralisation, through the panchayat system of local government, remains controversial as to its implementation and long-term outcomes, but achievements thus far have been limited.

Key words: Amendments, Constitution, Decentralisation, Democracy, Governance, Panchayati Raj.

1 INTRODUCTION

Government in India presents a number of striking paradoxes. India is – as we are quite often reminded – both the largest and one of the more robust parliamentary democracies in the world. India is unique amongst parliamentary democracies in that poorer, more disadvantaged people often seem to be more likely to turn out to vote than their wealthier and more highly educated neighbours. Historically the presumption has been that policy decisions, made by the executive of the state, whether it has a democratic or an authoritarian regime, are implemented by the state's administrative arm, the bureaucracy. There is a model of bureaucracy, developed by the great sociologist Max Weber, that provides a template for existing bureaucracies. The decentralisation of government is held to have the same advantages and should encourage the participation of citizens in the management of their own public affairs.

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2 Patronage Democracy and the Failing State

India is of course a long way from being a failing state, and in regard to many of its functions the Indian state performs very well indeed. The macro-state, responsible for the major instruments of economic policy, has generally done very well indeed even in the period of low rates of economic growth when India at least avoided the disasters of high rates of inflation that so badly affected other developing economies.^{[15], [16]} The Failed States Index for 2010 shows Pakistan at 10th, Bangladesh at 24th, Sri Lanka at 25th and Nepal at 26th, while India is ranked 87th. In regard to the criterion of progressive deterioration of public services, however, India does little better (with a score of 7.2, where 10 would mean complete breakdown) than its neighbours Pakistan (7.3) and Nepal (7.6), and worse than Sri Lanka (6.4) ^[25].

From the point of view of the politicians, being able to control selective benefits through patronage using the resources of the state seems to be a more reliable way of ensuring continued support and of

realising rents for themselves, of course than standing on a policy platform including promises about the delivery of *public* goods. Keefer and Khemani's argument, therefore, seems to point to the significance of long run trends of political mobilization.^[17]

Abhijit Banerjee and Rohini Pande have shown in a test using data from Uttar Pradesh, if voters are concerned about the group identity of political candidates, then if this group has a majority in a particular political jurisdiction the quality of the candidates can be very poor and yet they will still win. In such circumstances, a strengthening of group identity on citizens political preferences worsens the quality of political representation.^{[2],[3]}

Lucia Michelutti's rich ethnography of political leadership amongst the numerically powerful Yadavs of northern India – the caste grouping from which there have come the two powerful political leaders Lalu Prasad Yadav, long-standing actual then *de facto* Chief Minister of Bihar and later a very successful Railways Minister in the Central Government of India (2004-09), and Mulayam Singh Yadav, three times Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, and once Defence Minister of India – adds to this picture. Michelutti shows that Yadavs, building in part on the idea of their claimed *Kshatriya*, warrior heritage, commonly value qualities of physical strength and toughness in their leaders, and may even celebrate their violence and criminality (*goonda-ism*).^[19] Such cultural constructions influencing political leadership go to enhance the tendencies that are analysed by Banerjee and Pande. Political leaders like both Lalu Prasad and Mu-

layam Singh Yadav owe much of their sustained political support to their ability to represent themselves as fighting successfully on behalf of the dignity of their people and this has clearly outweighed the limitations of their governments in regard to development and service delivery. As a distinguished senior civil servant, N.C. Saxena, once wrote: the model in which the politics will continue to be corrupt, casteist and will harbour criminals whereas civil servants continue to be efficient, responsive to public needs and change agents, cannot be sustained indefinitely.^{[21],[22],[23]}

There are other factors, too, that make for India's character as a failing state. With regard to measures to reduce poverty, in particular, there is a problem of the proliferation of programmes. New administrations at the centre and in different states are eager to become identified with particular programmes and this has contributed to proliferation. As new programmes are introduced old ones, even if they had very similar objectives, are rarely if ever closed down. A visit to clusters of government offices in district capitals, taluk towns and even block headquarters, sometimes reveals a kind of an archive of successive programmes. And there are now very many schemes sponsored by central government, which makes grants for their implementation to the states – but as Devesh Kapur says, Few states have the administrative capacity to access grants from 200 plus schemes, spend money as per each of its conditions, maintain separate accounts and submit individual reports. Large amounts of budgeted central state expenditures actually go unspent not only in Bihar. It is a some-

what ironic fact, too, that over-bureaucratized though it is in so many ways, the Indian states are often chronically under-staffed in key departments. [15]

The factors discussed here relate mainly to the supply side of public services. On the demand side, adding to the limitations that follow from the significance of clientelism in India's patronage democracy, there is the fact that middle class people, usually those most capable of ensuring the accountability of politicians, have increasingly withdrawn from using public services at all – going to private clinics and hospitals and sending their children to private schools. They have little interest, as a result, in exercising their voice in the cause of improved public services. They may be withdrawing, too, from participation in electoral politics. The Court threatens to become an „*imperium in imperio*, the creation of which the drafters of the Constitution specifically wished to avoid. [24]

These, then, are some of the critical problems affecting governance in India. What is now being done about them? Is government becoming more responsive?

3 Problem affecting governance in India

The main critical problem affecting governance in India is that government is not much responsive and conventional bureaucratic approaches are particularly problematic due to lack of decentralisation and participation of peoples as also stated by Pritchett and Woolcock. [21],[22],[23] The first of these is expected to make government more responsive, by bringing it closer to the people, improving information flow both ways (from government to peo-

ple and people to government), and the second – related to it – to empower ordinary people in relation to the state so as to make it work better for them. Both fit, more or less comfortably, into policy ideas about governance that are associated with economic liberalism, because they represent alternatives to the centralised state. [9],[10],[11],[12],[13],[14]

Decentralisation, legislated for in India through the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution of India that entered into effect in 1993, involving the delegation of some authority to local levels of rural and of urban government respectively, is expected to make critical decision-making better informed about local needs and circumstances, and to make both politicians and bureaucrats more directly answerable to the people. These arguments led senior policy makers in the later 1980s to look to revitalising and strengthening the *panchayati raj* system of local government that had been initiated in the 1950s, partly in response to ideas of Gandhi's about village self-government that were enshrined in a Directive Principle of the Constitution of India. The political scientist James Manor, drawing on his experience of research on democratic decentralisation in a number of other countries as well as in different Indian states, argues that the three essential conditions for it to work well are: (i) that the elected bodies should have adequate powers; (ii) be provided with adequate resources; and (iii) be provided with adequate accountability mechanisms (so that bureaucrats are accountable to the elected representatives and the representatives to the people). He writes of his regret that most Indian states have failed to satisfy these conditions and

that they have consequently lost significant opportunities – given that in so many other ways India is well prepared for decentralised government by comparison with many other countries. ^[18]

Shubham Chaudhuri's detailed review showed that more than ten years after the passage of the 73rd Amendment fewer than half of the major states had satisfied the mandate regarding the holding of regular elections, and that some had failed to meet the requirements regarding the representation of women and of members of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The limited evidence then available also showed that very little progress had been made in regard to functional and financial devolution to the local bodies, which continued to be characterised by high levels of dependency for their revenues on the higher levels of government. Exceptions are Kerala and West Bengal – which according to Chaudhuri's analysis are the only states in which there has been any significant devolution of powers – and, to some extent, Karnataka (the state which, along with West Bengal, had a functioning panchayat system before the passage of the new legislation in 1993), and Maharashtra. The only other states in which Chaudhuri found that progress with devolution of powers had been other than minimal are Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. ^[7]

Indian politicians have long resisted the transfer of resources and authority to local bodies, because of the loss that it would entail of some of their powers of patronage. The political changes of the last two decades, which have seen regional political parties acquiring much greater influence, have increased

the powers of the states in relation to the central government and changed the character of Indian federalism ^[20], but they have certainly not increased the incentives for state politicians to decentralise. Indeed, if anything, the increasing volume of resources coming from the centre to state governments has increased the incentives for state politicians to control local administration ^[15]. Further, as Chaudhuri points out, even apart from problems of political will and of bureaucratic resistance, decentralisation is also extraordinarily complex administratively.

Tim Besley and his co-researchers, who studied panchayats drawing on a large sample from across the four southern states, found that having a reserved panchayat chairman does improve targeting towards SC/ST households, but were also concerned about bias in the allocation of resources to benefit chairmen's own villages. ^{[5],[6]} Two other scholars, Crook and Sverrisson, having studied analyses of decentralised government in several countries, and in West Bengal, concluded that decentralisation has been most successful in regard to poverty alleviation in the Indian state largely because in this case state-level politicians have intervened at local levels in support of poorer people against local power-holders ^[8]. Clearly as was often the case in India's earlier experiments with local government through panchayats, democratic decentralisation may easily go to enhance the opportunities of those who are already locally powerful, and work against the interests of the poor and the excluded. There is indeed a paradox of decentralisation – which is that effective decentralised gov-

ernment may actually require those in power at the centre to intervene *more* than before at local levels, against the manipulations of those who are locally powerful.

Studies of democratic decentralisation in India's cities, following from the 74th Amendment, or Nagarpalika Act, and of other participatory initiatives in the cities, have shown that while the state encourages these endeavours rhetorically and to an extent in practice, in others of its measures it has made it possible increasingly for powerful people to by-pass democratic processes over the vital matter of control of urban space. Solomon Benjamin, an urban planner who has both studied and been politically active in regard to urban space in Delhi and in Bangalore, argues that India's great cities are divided between what he refers to as the local economies, in which the mass of the people dwell, very often in circumstances of insecure tenure, and in which they try to secure their livelihoods, mostly through insecure, informal employment – and on the other hand, the corporate economies. [4]

4 Conclusion:

This paper explain that government is not more responsive, the drive for progressive social legislation has come through judicial activism rather than through a political process, India is experiencing the judicialisation of politics, the steps not taken in the country to improve the quality of governance, uneffective management of public affairs by the government. This paper also explains the India's experiences with these approaches to the improvement of governance, and the policies through which government works best. Further, decentrali-

sation and other ways of organising participation can, in principle, serve both the cause of democratic deepening and that of improving the responsiveness of government in India so that public services are delivered more efficiently and more equitably, their practical achievements thus far are quite limited, certainly outside two or three states. The practice of democratic decentralisation increase the capacities of poor people to express themselves and their grievances, so allowing the reproduction of patronage democracy.

5 References

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