

From the One Foot Model to the Giant Buddha – Exploring the Potential of Democratic Decentralisation of the Local Planning and Development Process in West Bengal, India

'The strategist makes small things into big things, like building a great Buddha from a one-foot model. I cannot write in detail how this is done. The principle of strategy is having one thing, to know ten thousand things.'

- Miyamoto Musashi, 16th century Japanese strategist.

'Democratic decentralisation is the process of devolving the functions and resources of the state from the centre to the elected representatives at the lower levels so as to facilitate greater direct participation by the citizens in governance.' (Isaac: 2000, p - 1) The main principle behind the concept is that of 'subsidiarity', i.e. matters that are best resolved at a certain level, should be resolved at that level and not passed on to higher levels.

The wave of decentralisation which we are familiar with today, started in the 1980s. Many countries in the third world started experimenting with some form of decentralisation or another during this period. According to a study by Dillinger, by 1994, 63 out of 75 developing countries with a population of over 5 million had experimented with some form of decentralisation. (Dillinger: 1998, p - 8, in Franke and Isaac: 2000, p – 230) However, democratic decentralisation or devolution is only one of the three forms of decentralisation that the various experiments have been categorised into. It is important because it is the most radical of all the three forms, which are listed below -

- Deconcentration - This is the weakest and least radical form of decentralisation and involves just an 'administrative re-shuffling' (Thorlind: 2000, p - 36) where 'the central offices of line ministries transfer certain decision-making authority to regional or sub-regional offices.' (Franke and Isaac: 2000, p - 232)
- Delegation - In this form of decentralisation some government authority for undertaking specific tasks is transferred to 'semi-autonomous or independent organisations' such as 'state-owned enterprises, public utilities, or private firms.' (Ibid.)
- Devolution or Democratic Decentralisation - This is the most radical form of decentralisation and is described as '...reciprocal and mutually benefiting relationships between central and local governments (that) are not merely subordinate administrative units, but...have the ability to interact reciprocally with other units of government.' (Rondinelli et al.: 1984, p - 20, quoted in ibid. p - 233)

According to Franke and Isaac, deconcentration is the most frequently occurring type and devolution the most rarely occurring type of decentralisation been experimented with in different countries. (Franke and Isaac: 2000, p - 232)

It is interesting to note that this was the second wave of decentralisation to hit the third world. The first wave had come in the 1950s, in the period immediately following the gaining of political

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independence by many of these countries. According to Crooke and Manor, 'by the 1970s, most of these initiatives had been vitiated by distrust and interference from above, and by infighting and shortages of resources and expertise in elected councils and local communities.' (Crooke and Manor: 1998, p - 1 and 2)

Yet, the failure of the first wave didn't prevent the second one to be ushered in with great enthusiasm. Different researchers provide different reasons for the renewed thrust on decentralisation on decentralisation from the 1980s onwards. Crooke and Manor described how the notion of decentralisation appealed to different sets of people 'who often disagreed on other issues.' (Ibid. p - 1)

'Economists who had been influenced by neo-liberal ideas saw it as a way of shifting power away from the centralised state which had discredited itself in their eyes through voracious rent seeking and other abuses. Advocates of pluralist, competitive politics regarded it as a device for prying open closed systems, to give interest groups space in which to organise, compete and otherwise assert themselves. Enthusiasts for efforts by village communities to achieve things through co-operation rather than competition viewed it as a means to that end. The leaders of some autocratic regimes in Asia and Africa saw it as a substitute for democratisation at the national level, as a safe way to acquire much-needed legitimacy and grass-roots support. Democratic politicians in less-developed countries regarded it as a way to make government more responsive to local needs and preferences. Taken together, these diverse groups represented a potent coalition for change.' (Ibid.)

The authors further elaborate that by the 1980s, 'every sort of critique of the state - Friedmanite, Gandhian or whatever - seemed plausible.' (Ibid. p - 2) It is acknowledged by the various researchers, that the reasons for undertaking decentralisation are specific to the nations where they have been undertaken and regimes, which have implemented them.

At first glance, the whole concept of decentralisation seems very effective in making any system more efficient, accountable and participatory. In economic theory, the argument in favour of decentralisation is that 'only by providing services consistent with the spatially differentiated tastes and preferences of the people can welfare be maximised.' (Franke and Isaac: 2000, p - 2).

Many believed the process to be able to invariably increase the participation of local people and especially of the poor in the political and developmental process. James Manor, who is no blind admirer of the process, lists all the things that the process can lead to if it works well. 'When it works well', he writes, 'popular participation in the policy process and in local politics almost always increases. More people participate, more often and in more ways – campaigning, contacting bureaucrats and elected representatives, protesting, petitioning etc. Civil society is galvanized – more people join voluntary associations which become more active and numerous and do more things...transparency increases.' (Manor: 2003, p –5). However, in the very next page of the report he claims that 'democratic decentralisation often fails to work' (ibid. p – 6)

In the context of developing countries, the same logic quickly builds up to the claim that democratic decentralization makes governments more responsive to the needs of the poor. Crook explains this connection by writing, that, 'insofar as the majority of the population in developing countries is both poor and excluded from elite politics, any scheme that appears to offer greater political participation to ordinary citizens seems likely to increase their 'voice' and

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hence (it is hoped) the relevance and effectiveness of the government's policy.' (Crook: 2003, p – 77)

The evidence collected by various authors on the subject divides them into two camps. The first camp, comprising of the proponents of decentralization, argues that 'because decentralization brings government closer to the governed, both spatially and institutionally, government will be more knowledgeable about and responsive to the needs of the poor'. (Ibid. p – 77) The other camp argues that, 'decentralisation schemes cannot be treated as technically neutral devices which can be 'implemented' without constraint...different governments have different political purposes and motives for introducing decentralisation' and 'these intentions are embodied in the structure and form of decentralisation, or more subtly, are revealed in how the system functions after it is introduced.' (Ibid. p – 78)

However, the point on which both the camps agree, is that there isn't substantial data on the process so far to say conclusively which claim is true. Jean-Paul Faguet, whose research findings certainly put him in the first camp, writes that, '50 years of research has failed to establish clearly whether decentralisation makes government more or less responsive to citizens.' (Faguet: 2002, p – 869). After undertaking a detailed study, using econometrics, of the Bolivian decentralisation experiment, he concludes, that 'decentralisation significantly changed public investment patterns in Bolivia...and these shifts are strongly and positively related to local needs...decentralisation thus led to higher investment in human capital and social services as the poorest regions of the country chose projects according to their greatest needs' (ibid. p – 886)

Interestingly, Crook and Sverrisson seem to have given a pre-emptive rebuttal to Faguet's claim when they explained the essential difference between, what they categorised as the successful and unsuccessful examples of decentralisation, by writing that, 'the essential difference, therefore, between West Bengal and the Brazilian states on the one hand, and Bangladesh, Nigeria, Mexico on the other, is *not* that the latter countries did not allocate sufficient funds to the decentralised authorities, or that they lacked centrally-funded development and anti-poverty programs. The real difference was that the latter group failed to ensure that central funds were used in a responsible and accountable manner, and failed to ensure implementation of pro-poor policies, where they existed, if only formally.' (Crook and Sverrisson: 2001, p – 27)

What then could be a reasonable framework for understanding the link between democratic decentralisation and the needs of poor people, according to the researchers of the second camp?

To answer this question Crook describes, what he terms as the 'West Bengal' model, and writes that, 'decentralisation is most likely to result in pro-poor outcomes where it has been designed by a central government (including a state within a federal system) intent on challenging conservative local elites, and which has a strong ideological commitment to anti-poverty politics.' (Crook: 2003, p – 85) Thus, according to Crook, the politics of local-central relations creates the proper framework for understanding the link between democratic decentralisation and the needs of the poor.

In both the successful cases in India (the Kerala and West Bengal experiments), the process was part of the political project of the Left parties, and especially of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Thomas Isaac, who was one of the architects of the famous 'People's Campaign for Decentralised Planning' in Kerala, writes that, as 'the Kerala experiment is part of a political

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project of the left parties, and because those parties hold to a program of ending inequalities to the greatest extent possible, we see in the Kerala experiment a far larger set of goals than to develop a mere administrative design.' (Isaac and Frank: 2000, p – 253)

Decentralisation and the Left Front in West Bengal

At this point it would be appropriate to look a bit deeper into the use of decentralisation as a political and planning strategy in West Bengal. It was in 1977 that a coalition of leftist political parties, led by the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM), came to power in this East Indian state. Over the years the radical policies and programmes of CPM had been sobered by the harsh reality of being a regional political party in a country, where the central government was under the control of right-wing forces and commanded far more power than the regional state governments. One of the primary agendas of the left parties in general, and of the CPM in particular was the reform of property relations in both urban and rural areas. Its initial radical attempts at seizing un-registered land from the propertied classes in rural areas led to punitive actions by the police and army units of the central government. Similarly, the active championing of the labour activism in urban areas led to quick and steady capital flight out of the state.

The realities of the twin tasks of political survival and economic development compelled the left front and CPM to change its primary ideological line from a radical/revolutionary one to a more reformist one. The idea was to replace confrontation with a critical compromise with the propertied classes to ensure a more equitable economic development in the state. (Kohli: 1987). The strategy undertaken was to revive and empower the local government institutions in the rural and urban areas, which would in turn become the institutional vehicles for the land reform process and consolidation of sympathy for the left front at the grass-root level.

The strategy was a clean break from the centralised structure of Indian government and planning systems. The Indian Constitution did not recognise the institutions of local government as the third tier of government. It was left to the respective state governments to devolve as much power and functions to the local government as they thought fit. The reluctance to share power with the local level became an unchecked trend, and in most states of India these vital organs of local democracy remained superseded by their respective state governments for years together. In the words of Franke and Isaac, 'Indian democracy was a parliamentary system at the central and state levels with bureaucratic governance at the lower levels.' (Franke and Isaac: 2000, p – 2). The consequence of this was the increasing influence and power of the centralised and bureaucratic line departments regarding all developmental aspects. In the large urban areas, specialised purpose agencies or para-statals, took on the major tasks of urban planning, development and provision of urban services.

The eminent development planner Arun Ghosh explains the Indian situation in the following lines,

'Invariably, (with political and economic centralisation), the power of the bureaucracy has also grown. Every 'elected' government has had to rely heavily on the bureaucratic establishment to carry out its directives, and with increasing centralisation of authority; effective power has passed on, from the elected representatives of the people, to the permanent civil service. This has been a powerful instrument for the maintenance of the status quo. While a major objective of planning has been to change the status quo, the increasing power of the bureaucracy has

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proved to be a major obstacle to any fundamental restructuring of society. In fact, of late, the concept of planning has been subverted, and has come to be equated with the regulation and control of the economy by the bureaucracy.’ (Ghosh: 1992, p – 21)

In Kolkata, the capital of the state of West Bengal, the Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority (KMDA), became the prime para-statal body, responsible for the implementation of the Basic Development Plan of 1966 and raising finances for urban development purposes.

In most states, the marginalisation of the local governments was cloaked by the logic that developmental issues in both metropolitan areas and the countryside were too vast and complex for the local governments to handle. However, over time it became clear that the line departments and the para-statals were not making any substantial improvements in the planning and development situation either. On top of that, they were causing the steady erosion of local democracy.

The left-front government decided to change this whole culture of centralisation and empower the municipal bodies and rural *panchayats* with relevant laws, adequate finances and regular elections. The problem of state supersession was brought to an end in West Bengal. At the time of municipal elections in the early 1980s, most municipal bodies had been urban supersession for as long as one to two decades.

The strategy was immensely successful for the ruling coalition and for the impoverished countryside of West Bengal. Despite having only 3.5 % of the arable land of the whole country, West Bengal accounts for 20 % of all the land that was distributed among landless and small farmers in India. Material poverty in the countryside declined by about 20 % in the first two decades of left front rule. (Athreya: 2004). The political base of CPM got so consolidated as a result of these developments that it has not lost a single election since 1977. One of the most important effects of the decentralisation exercise was psychological rather than material. Poor and landless peasants and social workers in the countryside were encouraged to seize control of the local government bodies by defeating the powerful local elites and propertied classes. Not only did the social character of the rural local government change after that, but also the land reform process and other development activities became effective and responsive. This gave the traditionally marginalized people the confidence that the elite could be beaten and pro-poor development undertaken.

From One Thing to Many Things

The experiment in West Bengal inspired the historic 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments of 1992, when the local governments were finally recognised as the legitimate third tier of government at the national level. The experiments in West Bengal had preceded the Constitutional amendments by over a decade, but new avenues for decentralised planning opened up after 1992. The Amendments provided for regular elections to be held for local governments, creation of finance commissions to oversee and guide the distribution of sources of finance between the state government and local governments, reservations for women and members of marginal social groups in leadership positions and the creation of district and metropolitan planning committees. The metropolitan planning committees would be comprised of the elected members of municipal bodies and rural *panchayats*, which lie within large metropolitan areas. The existing para-statals would have to function as technical arms of the democratic planning committees. The idea was to address the cross-boundary nature of most

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planning issues in metropolitan/regional contexts, without compromising the democratic nature of the larger planning institutions. Urban planning was listed as a function of the urban local government and emphasis was placed on preparing holistic socio-economic development plans rather than simply physical, land-use plans.

The first impact of the amendments was the tremendous widening of the democratic base of the country. According to George Mathew,

‘Today there are around 600 district panchayats, about 6000 panchayats at the intermediate level (block/taluka/ mandal) and over 232000 gram panchayats. In urban areas over 1500 city corporations/municipalities are in position, besides over two thousand *nagar panchayats*. Around three million elected representatives of people run these local government institutions of whom not less than one million are women and around 660 thousands belong to scheduled caste/scheduled tribe categories. At one stroke, the amendments have put in place over three million people’s representatives to take charge of public affairs in place of merely 5000 representatives constituting the parliament and the various state assemblies.’ (Mathew: 2004, p - 12)

In 1996 the next radical experiment at decentralised planning was launched in the state of Kerala in southern India; again under the political leadership of the left front. The idea was to abandon the top-down development planning process and replace it with a massive campaign for democratic planning. Again, the idea was to empower the local governments and use them as vehicles for preparing the development plan for the whole state. Richard Franke and Chasin, who documented the process, described the first phase of the process as follows,

‘The ward assemblies took place in September and October 1996 in all 14147 wards of the panchayats and urban neighbourhoods in Kerala. Three million people, 10 % of the state’s population, participated in these assemblies, airing complaints and identifying major problems in their communities. Imagine 1.8 million New Yorkers meeting for 6 hours, arguing, and electing problem solving working groups to plan strategies to overcome local problems. Imagine thousands of them continuing to meet for weeks to hammer out local plans for which a massive portion of federal and state funds would be allocated. Imagine technically trained retired people in their communities forming associations of experts to help make the plans technically sound. Imagine all these people being compensated only with bus fare and lunch.’ (Franke and Chasing: 1998, p – 2)

In 1994, Kolkata became the first city in India to enact the Kolkata Metropolitan Planning Committee (KMPC) Act. The Act envisioned a new system of bottom-top-bottom planning where the separate plans of the various urban and rural local bodies would be amalgamated into a wider strategic plan prepared for the whole metropolitan area. The Kolkata Metropolitan development Authority was to become the technical secretariat of the KMPC.

The Challenges of Decentralised Planning

Despite all the achievements in the area of democratic decentralisation in India, one cannot avoid the conclusion of Crooke, provided in the first section of the paper, that the decentralisation process led to pro-poor development only when it was part of the political project of an ideological committed political party. Moreover, it must not be forgotten that the

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primary goal of the left-front coalition in West Bengal was not to strive for democratic decentralisation but to survive politically in the face of a reactionary central government and yet undertake as much reform of the existing property relations as possible. Obligated to work within the Constitutional framework of the Indian republic, democratic decentralisation was the most effective strategic tool available to them to pursue their modified goals.

One of the major challenges, currently facing the advocates of democratic decentralisation, in both West Bengal and Kerala, is the question of economic development. Despite its remarkable achievements in social development and local democracy Kerala remains economically backward, with a lingering unemployment problem. In fact, one of the main reasons for initiating the People's Planning Campaign in Kerala was to create a democratic alternative to the neo-liberal path to economic development. However, Crook's explanation was proved correct again, when the decentralisation drive of Kerala was substantially curtailed when the left front lost political power in 2001.

In West Bengal, a similar challenge of economic development exists. This has had a direct effect on the urban planning interventions in Kolkata. The political leaders of the state have realised that the political and economic potential of the re-distributive policies of the left coalition would soon be exhausted if radical steps were not taken to speed up the economic development of the state. This has led to massive investments in improving the poor infrastructure of Kolkata and undertaking large-scale environmental improvement and city beautification projects. It is in the case of these large-scale improvement projects, geared towards making the city investor friendly, where the existing institutions and strategies of democratic decentralisation face their biggest challenge.

My analysis of two large-scale environmental improvement projects, as part of my PhD research, showed that the agents of the local government at the lowest levels i.e. ward councils and wards committees, feel completely over-shadowed by the scale and extent of mega-development projects. This is a far cry from the confidence of the rural local bodies, when they undertook and land reform and local development process in the countryside. Neither does one find the kind of citizen engagement seen in the different phases of the Kerala campaign as described by Franke and Chasin. The citizen engagement in local politics in Kolkata is very strong and in the last municipal elections in 2005, the left front has consolidated its position very strongly in the city. However, this high degree of local political participation doesn't translate into an active participation and engagement in the planning, development or at least a constructive criticism of the large development projects using the vehicles of ward councils and committees. Even before the metropolitan planning committee has put its bottom-up-bottom process in place the presence of large projects, which don't arise out of the democratic planning process, are exerting an overwhelming influence on the cityscape and the lives of scores of informal residents who face involuntary resettlement from the shacks they have occupied for many years.

In one of the projects, which was funded by the Asia Development Bank (ADB) and executed by multiple local government and line department agencies, there was a mandatory requirement for citizen consultation. However, this consultation process was a requirement on the part of ADB and involved participatory rapid appraisal techniques at a time when all major decisions regarding the goals, objectives, funds, time-horizon and even the time allotted to the consultation process had already been taken. Being consulted only about the local details of physical improvements in their particular site, the citizens had no idea of the total scale of the project or the overall impacts it would have on the city. This has nothing in common with the characteristics of citizen engagement in democratic decentralised planning which were

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experimented with in Kerala. Local participation in the decentralised planning campaign in Kerala was aimed at creating a broader consciousness and conception of the overall development planning process in state. In contrast, the cosmetic participatory process in the mega project in Kolkata restricted the development consciousness of the local citizen to his or her local area alone.

The national level structure for local democracy and decentralised planning, established through the 1992 amendments, therefore, have put in front of the nation the possibility for initiating a truly democratic and deliberative planning process. Isolated attempts in Kerala and West Bengal have shown the massive potential that such a strategy has in encouraging mass citizen participation in the planning and development process. The metropolitan planning committees and the new system of bottom-up-bottom planning, that they envisage, can play a tremendous role in democratising the planning process. However, that calls for a massive mobilisation for the creation of a development consciousness that would match the political consciousness that is characteristic of the city of Kolkata.

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