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**EMPOWERING CONDITIONS IN THE DECENTRALISATION PROCESS: AN
ANALYSIS OF DYNAMICS, FACTORS AND ACTORS IN PANCHAYATI RAJ
INSTITUTIONS FROM WEST BENGAL AND KARNATAKA, INDIA**

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Abstract :

Decentralisation is often regarded as a viable alternative to centralised government. Yet the reality of devolution has often proved to be disappointing in practice. The failure of such experiments in the past can be attributed to a number of factors: political, economic, and socio-cultural. This study will explore the necessary conditions for an effective and accountable local self-governance system, in the context of the Panchayati Raj Institution (local self governance) in two Indian States, namely Karnataka and West Bengal. It will address two questions in particular: What are the institutional conditions existing and necessary for the successful implementation of the PRI? How does decentralisation aid in alternative development and especially in equitable development? By exploring these questions, the paper attempts to come up with a new interpretation of decentralisation.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

In many ways decentralisation has been regarded as a viable alternative to centralised government in that it enhances peoples' participation in the decision-making processes at local levels. Its increasing relevance is supported by the belief that the enhancement of peoples' participation accentuates democratisation and development of all sections of a given country in an egalitarian way. The experience of indirect democracy and centralised policy-making which characterised the Weberian model of nation-building and development failed to demonstrate the desired results. Disillusionment arose out of the general belief that social change and development are complex phenomena, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to plan and administer all development activities effectively and efficiently from the centre. 'Greater equity in the distribution of income and wealth, many development theorists argued, required wider participation in the economic, social, and political processes, through which wealth was generated and distributed' (Rondinelli and Cheema, 1983a:13). This argument advances the importance of decentralisation to capture the socio-political differences of a given society through wider participation in decision-making, which breaks the barriers existing in current development efforts. However, decentralisation has failed to live up to such expectations. In countries like Ghana and Tanzania, where it had been adopted in order to improve effectiveness and promote participatory democracy as well as accountability, decentralisation has proved to be disappointing¹.

Decentralisation *per se* is an insufficient condition for securing the basic objectives of democratisation and egalitarian development. The question is how to strike a balance between over-centralisation on the one hand and maldecentralisation (i.e. uncoordinated development widening disparities and distortions) on the other. In a society characterised by a high degree of diversity and inequality, representative democracy as per the demographic composition of society

¹ See Joseph R A Ayee, 'The Measurement of Decentralisation: The Ghanaian Experience, 1988-92, *African Affairs* (1996), 95, 35-50. The Ghanaian decentralisation experience, supports Rondinelli and Cheema's views, 'despite its vast scope, decentralisation has seldom, if ever lived up to expectations'. According to Ayee, it had reinforced existing power relationships without empowering the disadvantaged groups. R.C. Crook's 'Four Years of the Ghana District Assemblies in Operation: Decentralisation, Democratisation and Administrative Performance', *Journal of Public Administration* 1994; also pointed out that the democratisation process in Ghana produced deep frustrations at the institutional level, 'lack of tangible development outputs undermined the basic mission of the local assemblies, which was to create a more legitimate and responsive form of government at the local level'.

can only be attained through legislation and law-enforcement intended to capture the representation of weaker and vulnerable sections. Therefore, the balance of power between centralisation and decentralisation, in so far as ensuring democratic representation is concerned, is not confined to the resultant effects of either options. The need for centralisation and the need for decentralisation are latent in any socio-economic and political situation. In fact, the socio-political situation tends to influence the extent to which decentralisation is critical. Asmerom, Borgman and Hoppe, in their study of decentralisation policies in Indonesia, Surinam and Ghana, support the view that a well designed policy of decentralisation cannot be adequately implemented unless a number of preconditions are met. These preconditions include genuine support and commitment of politicians at the centre and at the local levels; readiness on the part of the local community to participate; availability of financial and material resources; and the presence of trained manpower at the grassroots level to carry out the devolved activities (Asmerom, Borgman and Hoppe 1995: 739).

1.2 Empirical Background and Justification for the Study

With approximately 550,000 villages comprising more than 70 per cent of India's total population, served through its executive machinery, the central government cannot adequately appreciate local needs. This was widely debated even before the attainment of political freedom. Four decades of protracted structuring and restructuring of one of the traditional institutions of India, the Panchayati Raj System² (PRI), indicates the fragility of the system as a national political project. Only with the passing of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment and the institutionalisation of local self-governing organisations in 1992, namely Panchayati Raj Institution can decentralisation be said to have taken shape in India.

The move to make the local bodies truly the third level of governance in India has been incremental. The fact that district level planning responsibilities are also given to the local bodies is a major step in the right direction. Some states have proceeded to transfer powers to the panchayats in an unprecedented way. For example, about 30 to 40 per cent of Kerala's 9th Plan (1995-2000) consists of schemes formulated and implemented from below. In this new drive for decentralisation and local development two pertinent questions, in my view, require attention. Firstly, how can decentralisation be made an efficient and effective institution of self-governance? Secondly, how can it be made an accountable system of governance? These questions call for an inquiry into the various conditions which affected and still affect decentralisation, either positively or negatively³.

² Panchayati Raj Institutions consists of a four tier structure with *Gram Sabha* (GS) at the lowest level in the village. The assembly of all adults in the village is called *Gram Sabha*. The structure above GS, at the village level, is known as the Gram Panchayat or Mandal Panchayat (GP/MP). It is the elected council of village representatives. The term 'Gram' in Sanskrit means village and 'panchayat' means council of five members. The structure above Gram Panchayat, i.e., the block level is known as *Panchayat Samiti*/Block Panchayat Samiti. The *Zilla Parishad* (ZP) is the apex organisation located at the district level.

³ Several studies in the past have, in fact, inquired into the Panchayati Raj and of the various factors, which either hindered or facilitated its working, in the past. These studies have pointed out various ways and means by which the functioning of PRI can be strengthened. For example, as early as 1957, the Balwantrai Mehta Committee, appointed to study the Community Development and National Extension Service programmes, recommended the creation of democratic institutions as a condition for securing 'participation'. Since the PRIs were functioning more or less as agents of higher levels of the government, the committee recommended a proper climate of genuine decentralisation at all levels. (Balwantrai Mehta Committee, 1957, cited in FRCH: 1996: 135-59). Based on the suggestions of the committee, PRIs were introduced in most parts of the country.

Later Committees, such as the Ashoka Mehta Committee (1978), the Santhanam Committee, the G.V.K. Rao Committee (1985) and the L.M. Singhvi Committee (1986) were also set up to inquire into the working of PRIs, and to suggest measures for strengthening them to enable them to evolve into

Whilst efficiency and effectiveness relate to a set of preconditions, accountability deals with a number of instrumental conditions. In relation to the former, it is advanced that, through decentralisation, many of the evils arising out of over-centralisation can be eschewed. By according power and autonomy to local bodies - the vital constituent of devolution - it is hoped that adequate impetus could be given to local government to pursue goals in its own right. It sets the scene for political equality and widens the scope for participation and development.

Autonomy is comprised of : a) legitimate powers to make decisions without interference (from the centre); b) powers to plan and implement programmes suited to local needs, with powers to raise revenues and to expend them; c) powers to create systems and institutions. There are several conditions such as political will, appropriate structure and systems which are necessary for transfer of autonomy to take place.

However, relating to the latter, if decentralisation is viewed as a means by which the state can be made more responsive and adaptable to regional and local needs than is possible through centralised administrative power and responsibility, then it entails a high degree of legitimacy. Thus it is necessary to take into account the instrumental conditions which will legitimate the effective functioning of the system. These instrumental conditions are accountability, democratic participation and empowerment.

Importantly, it is essential to reject idealistic perceptions of autonomy as a panacea for all ills. Thus, it is necessary to take into account the other conditions required to make autonomy legitimate. In addition to autonomy, accountability, democratic participation and empowerment are further instrumental conditions. In the context of the PRI, these instrumental conditions will be critically examined in the light of their relevance to building an accountable decentralised system i.e. the PRI.

1.3 Objectives of The Study

The various committees set up to examine Panchayati Raj in post-independence India were largely confined to exploring the numerous constraints and problems encountered by this institution from the point of view of an 'enlightened' state, interested in correcting its shortcomings. In other words, these earlier studies circumscribed the conditions necessary for a viable functioning of PRI as part of a statist model of development. They did not look into those aspects which would inculcate the base of PRI into (civil) society, making it mutually accountable to both the people and government. Therefore, the objective of this study is to validate those measures and conditions necessary to make PRI an effective and mutually accountable system of governance, as tested against the experiments in the West Bengal and Karnataka states. It aims to link together the conditions of state-model and civil society-model. Further it intends to define the broad parameters which will not only help establish the Panchayati Raj system in India, but decentralisation in general.

effective decentralised systems of development (See FRCH 1996)³. The general tenor of their recommendations pin-pointed the need for creating enabling conditions - whether they be political, administrative or financial - with the state playing the role of the enabler.

1.4 Methodology

For the purposes of this study, two states have been selected as testing grounds for examining the above questions - Karnataka and West Bengal. The reasons for selecting Karnataka and West Bengal are: 1) Karnataka's decentralisation experiment has widely been acclaimed as a model because of its radical transfer of powers (Meenakshisundarm, 1994: 61, Mukarji, 1986: 65-66); 2) West Bengal is one state which has been to some extent successful in implementing land reforms, thereby breaking the rural inequalities, which have been one of the major criticisms levelled against PRI implementation; 3) The political ideology of the ruling government has been stable in West Bengal for over two decades, whereas in Karnataka there has been different governments; 4) Compared to other states, Karnataka and West Bengal have experienced decentralisation for a relatively longer period. The study will assess the local structures in one district from each state, concentrating in particular upon the extent to which the different situations and characteristics of these districts have impacted upon the decentralisation process.

1.5 Research Paper Structure

Chapter Two outlines a conceptual and analytical framework which helps analyse and define decentralisation, its goals, types of decentralisation and its distinguishing characteristics, various issues levelled for and against decentralisation and various critical elements necessary for making local governance an accountable system. The critical elements which form the basis of accountable governance are autonomy, accountability, social capital and participation and empowerment.

Chapter Three is an historical overview of the evolution of the PRI in India. The main purpose of this chapter is to narrate various characteristic features of the PRI as a traditional institution at different points in the history, in order to serve as a background to the analysis of the present day PRI.

Chapter Four analyses the workings of the PRI in Karnataka and West Bengal, using the four critical elements described in Chapter Two. The examination of the relevance of these dimensions in the functioning of the PRI helps to either reaffirm or reject the utility and importance of such aspects in decentralisation. It also highlights the conditions that make PRI an accountable system of governance.

Chapter Five revisits some of the old debates surrounding decentralisation and raises some new issues. The author concludes that the conceptualisation of decentralisation, as articulated in these debates, is inadequate to explain the scope and content of 'decentralisation'. In order to encompass all critical dimensions, it is necessary to achieve a mid-path between centralisation and decentralisation to make it an accountable system.

CHAPTER 2

CONCEPTUAL AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to cast a conceptual premise to be used as an analytical tool for unravelling the decentralisation problematic in the context of devolution in India, with reference to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI). 'The rapidly increasing global interest in the issue of decentralisation and local government',⁴ has, in the words of Schuurman become, 'the decentralisation euphoria' which entails 'a concept which analytically and pragmatically ties together the main conceptual winners of the present development decade'. The closely related topics enmeshed in this subject are local government, local democracy, municipal democracy, devolution, *autonomous development*, and decentralisation. (Schuurman, 1997: 150-51, words in italics mine). The *naissance* of the decentralisation concept can be ascribed to very different reasons at different epochs of history⁵. Taking cognizance of the very logic upon which the project of decentralisation is advanced by its proponents is a core aspect of investigation.

The core issues in the decentralisation process that I wish to focus upon are based on a number of fundamental assumptions. These encompass the domain of 'power' and 'development'. Decentralisation as a concept intertwines both power and development into one concept. This makes the project of decentralisation more attractive to many policy-makers, planners, development actors, academics, political leaders, etc. This unique intertwining characteristic is believed to have a transforming potential and therefore, 'decentralisation appear[s] to be at least a partial solution to their [ie, policy makers'] growing problems' (Rondinelli and Cheema, 1983b:7). Looking at decentralisation, from its universalistic values, it is certainly concerned with according legitimate powers to make decisions at institutions of lower levels, in most cases realised directly by democratic elections. The power to make decisions provides considerable 'autonomy' or, as Carmen defines, 'the right to invent one's own future' (1996). Decentralisation provides this opportunity to those who hitherto played minimal or no role in the decision-making process. Implicit in holding this position is the idea that autonomy is critical for improving the existing conditions of the people. In other words, it assumes that the key to development is individual autonomy to make right and important decisions. The debates and issues in the decentralisation are centred around the question of autonomy.

The juxtaposition of decentralisation and centralisation is a starting point for addressing these debates. The question of decentralisation arises because of the fact that there are already structures, systems, individuals or institutions which enjoy excessive or virtually authoritarian or

⁴ Francis J. Schuurman in his '*The Decentralisation Discourse: Post-Fordist Paradigm or Neo-liberal Cul-de-Sac?*' substantiates that just as, for example, the preferred concepts in the 1980s were environment, gender and sustainability and towards the end of the decade globalisation, democratisation, civil society and decentralisation has become a popular policy tool among policy-makers, political parties, international financial organisations such as World Bank and IMF, Northern NGOs engaged in development aid, grassroots organisations, and, of course, social scientists in the 1990s.

⁵ Francis J. Schuurman (opcit:1997) and Isaac Thomas (1997) *Planning for Empowerment: People's Campaign for Decentralised Planning in Kerala (EPW, Jan. 4-11, 1997)* considers decentralisation as a part of globalised neo-liberal project to disempower collective social intervention and thereby jettison remaining barriers in the road to the global presence of capitalism which Schuurman characterises as "preferred concept" of 90s. According to him decentralisation in 90s is guided by the Neo-liberal philosophy. According to Rondinelli and Cheema (1983) in *Decentralisation in Developing Countries: A Review of Recent Experience*, decentralisation during 1970s was guided by the rationale of the international development strategies, i.e. Growth with redistribution.

“illegitimate” powers. This particular characteristic of decentralisation tends to produce in varying degrees, the content and scope of the decentralisation. For example, despite the attempts made in Kenya, Tanzania, and Sudan during the 1970s to decentralise development planning and administration, these countries remain highly centralised today. The proliferation of public corporations, para-statal enterprises, and quasi-public institutes in Latin America has actually expanded the power and control of the national governments at the expense of local governments (Harris 1983). In other words, the specific context determines matters such as : to what extent power is to be transferred to local institutions; how much autonomy should be conferred upon local bodies; the extent to which control is to be exercised over decentralised structures, and; what kind of check and balance mechanisms are to be introduced in order that the supremacy of the central government is not by-passed. Therefore, decentralisation suffers from the biases of the existing power holders. In that respect, it can be said that it has its roots in the political will. The extent to which this political will represents the genuine interests of the people is the precise question of this research .

The question to focus upon is, ‘who decides and who controls within the structures of decentralisation?’. It is necessary to make a distinction in terms of fairness and legitimacy that carry weight in the “decisions made”, and in terms of the powers to make decisions *per se* at the lower levels. The existing characteristics of the decision-making and control-exerting process with its vertical and horizontal legitimacy could reveal whether a system is accountable or otherwise. This analysis is essential in order to understand the necessary mechanisms and conditions for the effective exercise of power. The manifestation of the exercise of power in its various forms is analysed later in this chapter.

2.2 Goal of Decentralisation

‘Decentralisation is widely regarded as a necessary condition for social, economic and political development. Whatever its ideological foundation or level of intervention, the contemporary state must localise its government apparatus’ (Smith 1985: 3). The values of decentralisation have wide appeal, regardless of ideology or political theory (Furniss, 1974 cf; Smith 4). Despite this appeal, one of the most disturbing characteristics of contemporary society is the increasing concentration of power in fewer and fewer organisations, whether public or private.

The attraction of decentralisation is not merely that it is the opposite of centralisation and therefore capable of remedying the latter’s defects. The protagonists of decentralisation enumerate a number of positive sides of devolution associated with a wide range of economic, social and political objectives which can be advocated universally both in developed and less-developed countries. Economically, decentralisation is said to improve the efficiency with which demands for locally provided services are expressed and public goods provided (Shepard, 1975 cf .Smith 1985:4). Market models of decision-making view decentralisation as a means of expanding the scope and choice of consumer goods. It reduces costs, improves output and provides for a more effective utilisation of human resources (D K Hart, 1972; cf: Smith :4).

Politically, decentralisation is said to strengthen accountability, political skills and national integration (Smith, 1985: 4). Implicitly, democratic decentralisation enhances the opportunity for

local people to participate in decision-making. In this way the government is brought closer to the people. Local self-government, if organised according to the democratic principle, gives power equally to all people. If so, then the greater the degree of decentralisation, the greater the opportunity for the masses, through their elected leaders, to redress socio-economic inequalities. The principle of one-person-one-vote places all on a politically equal footing enabling the majority, who are the less privileged members of society, to prevail. Under these conditions it should be possible for the majority to effect changes for the better.

2.3 The Concept of Decentralisation

'Decentralisation is concerned with the delegation of "powers" to lower levels (institutions, organisations or bodies) in a territorial hierarchy or sub-units" (Smith, 1985:1). According to Rondinelli and Cheema (1983b:18), '[d]ecentralisation is defined quite broadly, to mean the transfer of planning, decision-making, or administrative authority from the central government to its field organisations, local administrative units, semi-autonomous and para-statal organisations, local governments or non-governmental organisations'. Smith's definition characterises devolution of power to definite territorially organised local bodies. Although the form and nature of these bodies are not specified, it implies political characteristics denoting autonomy of the local institutions by means of delegation of power in order to confer authority to make independent decisions. By contrast, Rondinelli's definition has nuances of administrative delegation buttressed in pursuance of "development". The transfer of planning, decision-making, or administrative authority from central government to field organisations basically involves administrative delegation of powers. On the basis of the different meanings and interpretations camouflaged in this concept, decentralisation can be categorised into four types: I) deconcentration, ii) delegation, iii) privatisation and iv) devolution (Rondinelli et al, 1983b:14). These distinctions determine the manner in which power is conferred to lower level organs. Apart from showing the manner in which power is derived, these delineations also indicate how power is constituted and exercised in a system.

2.3.1 Deconcentration

Deconcentration is the handing over of some amount of administrative authority or responsibility to lower levels within central government ministries and agencies. It is an administrative reorganisation which gives some discretion to field agents to plan and implement programs and projects, or to adjust central directives to local conditions, within guidelines set by central ministry or agency (Rondinelli et. al, 1983b:15). Here, power is derived from the central bureaucracy in the form of discretionary responsibilities and duties making sub-unit bureaucracy primarily accountable to central ministries. In other words it is not 'democratically accountable' (Manor, 1995:81). The central authority may set aside a percentage of the national budget to allow central government agents at lower levels to identify, formulate, and implement programmes that further the national government's objectives. Power is exercised by pre-set administrative standards, guidelines, rules and regulations. The checks and balances of power are wielded by the legitimate right to give orders and get orders done.

2.3.2 Delegation

Delegation means 'transfer of managerial responsibility for specifically defined functions to organisation that are outside the regular bureaucratic structure and that are only indirectly controlled by the central government' (Rondinelli et al, 1983b: 19). In delegation, ultimate accountability lies with the sovereign authority. Certain specified functions and duties are transferred to agents with a broad discretion to carry them out. For example, in developing countries, responsibilities are delegated to public corporations, regional development councils or para-statal organisations which operate under central government regulations. There are, in many cases, government representatives on the boards of directors of these bodies. As I noted earlier, each type of decentralisation is espoused for varying reasons and compulsions, and delegation is looked upon as a way of removing important functions from inefficient bureaucracies. It is assumed that delegation will free patronage-ridden bureaucratic functions and is hoped that it will assist in promoting high priority development objectives (Rondinelli et al, 1983b:19-25). Although there is considerable autonomy accorded in this type of delegation, it is still controlled by the central government directives.

2.3.3 Privatisation

The term 'decentralisation' has sometimes been referred to as privatisation when it denotes the transfer of tasks formerly performed by state agencies to the private sector. Its advocates argue that since power is being transferred from the central government to private firms it is decentralisation and since it increases customers choices it is democratisation (Manor 1995: 81). Moreover, decentralisation may be implicit in the concept of "debureaucratisation," that is, decisions are allowed to be made through political processes that involve larger numbers of special interest groups, rather than exclusively or primarily by government through the legislative, executive degrees, or administrative regulation (Ralson, Anderson and Colson; Friedmann 1983 as quoted by Rondinelli and et al 1983b:28). Some governments have divested themselves of responsibility for certain functions and transferred them to voluntary organisations or private enterprise. For example, in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, voluntary organisations have come to play an important role in delivering services such as day-care centres, nursery schools, health clinics, old-age homes, vocational training, non-formal education, etc. Since this is partly delegating certain functions and responsibilities to private organisations, it can be regarded as administrative reform rather than decentralisation.

2.3.4 Devolution

'Devolution is the creation or strengthening - financially or legally - of sub-national units of government, the activities of which are substantially outside the direct control of the central government. Under devolution, local units of government are autonomous and independent, and their legal status makes them separate or distinct from the central government. The central government frequently exercise only indirect, supervisory control over such units'. (Rondinelli et al, 1983b :24-25). Devolution implies a transfer of decision-making powers, resources and tasks to lower level authorities which are democratically elected and largely, or wholly, independent of the

central government (Manor, 1995: 81-82). Devolution has a statutory or constitutional status because the transfer of powers takes place through constitutional amendments and legislative enactments (Smith, 1985: 9). This makes local governments more than merely subordinate administrative units. Normally, within their jurisdiction, and legally recognised geographical boundaries, local governments have exclusive and clearly defined authority to perform their functions. They also have statutory authority to raise revenue and incur expenditures.

The distinction between deconcentration, delegation, and privatisation on the one hand, and devolution on the other is that, once powers have been vested upon local bodies by constitutional amendment, the ultimate power within the local bodies comes from the democratically elected councils and not from the central government's directives. Technically speaking, this feature provides local bodies a measure of autonomy to make decisions that do not surpass their clearly spelt out jurisdiction. The following matrix illustrates the above distinction. The Panchayati Raj system in India is clearly a devolution and therefore I focus on the issues centred around the democratic devolution. Hereafter the term 'decentralisation' is used with reference to democratic devolution.

2.4 Limitation of Decentralisation

The ability to influence local policy-making and gain access to the concessional provisions states make, will depend on many factors quite apart from the right to vote, even if that right can be exercised. (Smith, 1985: 192). According to Dahl, '[O]ne of the most elementary principles of political life is that a political resource is only a potential source of influence. Individuals with the same amounts of resources may exert different degrees of influence because they use their resources in different ways. One wealthy man may collect paintings; another may collect politicians'. (1964: 271). This dichotomy constitutes one of the core issues in making inroads into decentralisation processes.

That is why '...it is important to reject a romantic view of decentralisation. It is not an absolute good in its own right. Decentralized administration and local government may be used for a variety of ends, just as central government can be. How decentralisation is evaluated should depend on the purpose for which it is employed. Centralisation may be a preferable strategy if it leads to territorial justice or redistribution of wealth' (Smith 1985:190).

The institution of local self-governance *ipso facto* doesn't lead to effective systems. Local bodies are just as susceptible to manipulation by dominant classes as national governments. A different view of power is to be recognised in these institutions apart from the power latent in the egalitarian democracy founded on the principle of universal suffrage. Far from guaranteeing political equality, local bodies may be accused of perpetuating maldistribution of rewards and influences. It is important to recognise that where decentralisation is given the official objective of mobilising the poor in development efforts, it may actually be enabling already powerful elites and propertied interest groups to acquire even more resources and power.

The protagonists and opponents of decentralisation equally need to examine the deposition of power in these structures. This addresses the need for analysing the domain of power in the functioning of local self-governing institution. It is said that all institutions are an embodiment of

power. Institutions are defined as ‘those rules, norms, and customs and their enforcement characteristics, which define rights and responsibilities in economic transaction which is shaped by political, social, cultural, religious and legal conditions’ (Roy, 1995: PE-65). In other words institutions integrate the interest of different groups. Thus, these groups shape and are in turn shaped by institutions. The pattern of decentralised institutions are shaped by dominant political values within states functioning with different ideological presuppositions. (Smith, 1985:132). If that is so, a number of institutional conditions are prerequisite for the effective functioning of the local structure.

TYPE OF DECENTRALISATION AND ITS DIFFERENT CHARACTERISTICS*

Type of decentralisation	what type of power	power to where	who controls	how control is exercised	sources of finance	results or outcome
Deconcentration	administrative authorities, and responsibilities	within central governments ministries/agencies	hierarchy of bureaucracy, personnel	standards, rules, norms, accountability to central ministry/department.	central government budget	avoids delay, bureaucratic procedures, freedom to plan routine matters, pursue national government's objectives
Delegation	managerial responsibilities	outside regular structure, corporation, para-statal bodies	indirect control by centre, government personnel in the board of directors	central government regulations	raised through the delivery of goods and services	efficient administration, avoids patronage driven bureaucratic functioning
Privatisation	delivery of services	voluntary organisation	indirect control by centre regulations	through guidelines, criteria	grants from the centre	better delivery of services,
Devolution	political/ legislative, executive, Judicial , financial	local bodies elected or nominated	people/voters, some extent by state	election, dissolution, accountability	raising own revenues, allocation from the centre	Participation in decision-making , bottom-up development, autonomy, democratisation

* Matrix devised by the author

2.5 Enabling conditions

The prerequisites for an effective decentralisation system include *autonomy, accountability, social capital and participation and empowerment*.

2.5.1 Autonomy

Autonomy is one of the vital components in the decentralisation process. Most debates in decentralisation, whether in favour or against, revolve around the question of autonomy. For several decades, centralisation was the ideal and norm that pervaded the sphere of political,

economic and administrative organisation in most countries of the world. This could be ascribed to the emerging need for consolidating the nation-building process in newly independent countries which inherited the administrative units of the colonial legacy. In some other countries centralised economic planning and intervention and control have been viewed by national authorities as the correct path to follow (Rondinelli et al, 1983b:1).

The undesirable consequence of the policy of promoting centralisation is that it materially and politically rewards dominant elites and reinforces their political control and rule⁶. 'In nearly all the societies the needs and preferences of the wealthy and powerful are well reflected in official policy goals and priorities' (World Development Report 1997:110). The power that emanates from the centralised system, naturally, ensures the perpetuation of these relations of power and domination. The concept of power as 'a simple capacity to act' as Hindess (1996: 2) puts across, is that people employ power in their dealing with things and in their dealings with each other, and that the wishes of those with more power tend to predominate over those with less. Similarly, Weber identifies power as 'the chances of a man or a number of men to realise their own will even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action' (Weber 1978: 926 cf Hindess 1996). This conception of power suggests that there will be an unequal relation between those who employ power for their own purposes and those who are subject to its effects. Power, in this sense, is used as an instrument of domination. Similarly, Giddens gives an all embracing meaning of power - 'the capability of the individual to "make a difference" to a pre-existing state of affairs' (1984:14 c.f Hindess, 1996).

Normatively speaking this makes progression of societies imbalanced and unequal, to say the least. Since most development today occurs through intervention emanating from the institutions which hold power, the legitimacy of such intervention is brought into question. In the words of Carmen, 'development is commonly defined, in its most elementary form as a process of change mediated by some form of human intervention' (1996:5). This being so, the 'autonomy to set one's own goals and realise them as far as possible through one's own efforts, using own forces including economic' (Galtung, 1980:22) becomes important. Conceptually, autonomy means, among other things: 'the development of their [the poor's] bargaining power to an extent that [interveners] cannot unilaterally impose their conditions and regulations upon the poor as passive recipients, but that the terms and conditions of collaboration are the outcome of a process in which both parties are respectful of each other's priorities and specific interests' (Verhagen, 1987:13). This appears plausible with the transfer of power (autonomy) from central government institutions to local bodies which theoretically widens the scope for autonomy. Autonomy is essential because it should act as a 'counter -power to challenge the taken for granted policy' (Carmen, 1996 :207) and to gain endogenous ownership and control. It ought to be understood as a political counterforce.

The domain of autonomy/power that is encompassed in decentralisation includes a number of areas considered from the point of view of a counter force against the unilateral impositions of conditions from the centre. They are: i) autonomy in political sphere (ownership and control), ii)

⁶ See Sukhumoy Chakravarty (1987: 84), *The development Planning: The Indian Experience*, (Clarendon Press) "radical economists of varying persuasions see in Indian Planning an attempt by the ruling elite to deprive the masses of the surplus product they themselves generated. Indian planning has been an exercise in primitive accumulation..."

autonomy in cultural sphere (literacy and communication), iii) autonomy in organisational sphere (management literacy), and autonomy in economic sphere (self-reliance) (Carmen , 1996: 6) .

2.5.1 a) Political Autonomy (Ownership and Control)

Political autonomy refers to the opportunities for democratic participation in the actual business of governing by creating an element of democratic power to make decisions (Panter Brick, 1953 cf Smith 1985 : 20). A local government which provides extra opportunities for political participation, both in electing and being elected to local office, and for people who otherwise would have few chances to act politically, establishes political equality. Political autonomy is said to be complete when local bodies are conferred with the legitimate power to make decisions concerning their well-being, power to plan and implement development programmes, power to raise and expend necessary resources and power to settle disputes arising within the jurisdiction of local bodies. In other words there ought to be legislative, executive and judicial powers conferred, in order to enable local institutions to function autonomously. Autonomy, here, doesn't mean autarky. Political autonomy refers only to the power of self -governing. At this level, autonomy is meant to break the monopolisation of power and authority conglomerated at the centre. In the absence of devolution or political autonomy, it is not possible to divest the rule of the elites and their control.

Sometimes, autonomy of the local government is undermined by the imposition of various control mechanisms which normally arise from a conflict of interests. It is said that dependency on resources from the central government and autonomy are interrelated. However, according to Ashford (1980), there is no correlation between the level of dependency and the level of control. Grants or resources do not undermine autonomy. Conversely, control may still exist even in the case of self-sufficient local governments. For example, in the UK there are less grants but a greater degree of control. Governments can by law, control local governments in many ways. What is required is a political will to transfer autonomy, resulting in the creation of decision-making institutions. (Smith, 1985: 112-22).The underlying choice is a political one between power and the state. If local bodies have to be autonomous, they have to be open to citizens' participation, achieve accurate representation of citizens' interests, and be especially capable of responding to varied local conditions (Bowen,1980 241 cf smith :134) .

2.5.1 b) Autonomy in the Cultural Sphere (Literacy and Communication)

The relevance of cultural autonomy in decentralisation is deep-rooted. Its importance is related to sifting myth from realities in the perceptions that govern every effort of contemporary society. History is written by dominant groups, embodying their values, beliefs and perceptions to suit their interests . 'Ethnocentrism, the belief that "the other", the ugly outsider, lacks most or all of the qualities that the civilizer, the trainer, the proselytising missionary, the communicator and the 'agent' recognise in themselves, is as old as mankind' (Carmen, 1996:96). This is what Foucault calls "'discipline and normalisation'. And this is what I would call genealogy, that is, a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects, etc. without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in

relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness through out the course of history' (Foucault, 1980:117).

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it does not only weigh on us as a force, that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, and produces discourses. The power of knowledge lies in its 'concrete' and 'precise' (truth of scientificity) character - the grasping of a multiple and differentiated realities. (Foucault, 1980:119-25). The significance of the method of disciplining (conditioning and normalisation) is that it succeeds in tempering behaviours of highly complex systems of manipulation. It is in the incorporation of power to gain access to the bodies of individuals, to their acts, attitudes and modes of every day behaviour that it becomes possible for institutions (which consist in the codification of a whole number of power relations) to render its functioning. In the absence of cultural autonomy to envelop what is legitimate, the overarching hegemony and control extended through the superior values of the dominant groups will continue to reign and it will make decentralisation an unrealisable end.

2.5.1 c) Autonomy in Organisational Sphere (Management Literacy)

It is important to bear in mind that we are talking about the institutions of the modern times . These institutions are characterised by a number of mechanistic organisations : a) a clearly distinguished hierarchy of authority throughout the organisation, b) a set of rules and regulations which govern procedures and practices, c) tasks and duties executed along the lines of specialisation and division of labour, d) impersonality in relationship between the system and the individual and e) human relations formalised in terms of offices and functions. The pyramidal structure with power accumulated at the top is justified by the efficiency rationale. (Carmen, 1996:117). It is a fact that the decentralised structure is also expected to operate with the same complexities and intricacies. Most critiques of decentralisation argue, on the basis of the organisational efficiency, that decentralisation is seldom feasible because local institutions lack the expertise and requisite knowledge and skill to manage the affairs efficiently .

Rondinelli and Tendler refer to the above as the deterministic view of scientific management, which is dominated by the principle of efficiency and control. (Rondinelli, 1992:7 cf Carmen 118). The knowledge-power domination in terms of organisational effectiveness, is often used as a tool for control by the central government.

The experience of Ghanaian decentralisation indicates how bureaucracy controlled local structures.⁷ The question is : should local institutions be governed by the criteria of efficiency set to match the expectations of the ruling elite ? Shouldn't local institutions be backed up by necessary skills? Shouldn't the system be left to the condition of the local reality ? Who controls and who decides on what system is best suited to the situation?

⁷ In a study conducted by Ayee (1996:36) on the effectiveness of decentralisation in Ghana, he pointed out that District Assemblies were dominated by the bureaucrats who are nominated by the government. The elected members respected the views expressed by the nominated members, who had a comparatively better educational background

2.5.1 d) Autonomy in the Economic Sphere (Self-reliance)

Autonomy of a local government is also dependent on the soundness of its resource base. The financial resources of most local governments come from transfers from higher-level authorities. Yet these transfers are seldom adequate to meet the requirement of local government, due to a lack of resources and weak allocation policies (Rondinelli 1982: 52),. This undermines the autonomy of local governments.

The power to explore development from within could essentially be regarded as the autonomy in the economic sphere. In the words of Max-Neef, 'people are, as they always have been and ought to be, the real protagonists of their own development' (as cited in Carmen 1996: 139, Max-Neef et al 1989:12). Development cannot be built on impositions, on transfers, plans or interventions. The essence of development is creation - not just pre-planned and pre-targeted economic growth. The four decade-long developmentalism was dominated by the ethnocentric sciences. This has always resulted in a top-down imposition of what ought to be right for others without thoroughly understanding local, social, economic, physical and organisational conditions. The ability to provide what people demand rather than what is thought to be good for people places autonomy in the economic sphere. It does not imply withdrawal from interdependence or impossible autarky.

Although it is an important element, it would be misleading to accept that autonomy in the four dimensions, described above, will bring forth vantages in the functioning of a decentralised system. In fact, experience shows that it has, on the contrary, produced negative outcomes. The studies on decentralisation conducted by Ayee (1996), Rondinelli and Cheema (1983), Smith (1985) support the view that, decentralisation has reinforced the existing power relations without empowering the disadvantaged. Social inequality both retards balanced development and distorts the logic of democracy (decentralisation). It is precisely this distorting logic of democracy in an unequal society that necessitates protection of the vulnerable, for the concerns of distributive justice cannot be achieved by (good) governance alone (Jayal, 1997: 407). That is why it is essential to look at decentralisation from different angles such as accountability and participation.

2.5.2 Accountability

What is accountability in the decentralised system? It refers to 'holding individuals and organisations responsible for performance measured as objectively as possible in accordance with coherence to public policy, *social goal*, public action and optimal use of public resources for common good' (Mohanty, 1995:20; italics mine). In a decentralised system, accountability is to be viewed as an important instrument to establish power balances. There has to be vertical and horizontal accountability in order to avoid the misuse of power. The effectiveness of accountability mechanisms depend on the ability of various stakeholders to make consensual decisions. There are, mainly, three groups of stakeholders - the public, the political leaders and service providers. The legitimacy of the decisions and actions of the three groups of stakeholders makes the decentralised system accountable . In my view this makes for good governance.

I would like to focus here on the relationship between accountability and good governance in order to highlight the crucial conditions for securing good governance (I would call this

accountable governance). The concept of good governance is associated with efficient and effective administration in a democratic framework, while governance normally may also refer to a political system whether democratic or not. 'The World Bank and Overseas Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have become great proponents of this (governance) concept' (Bandyopadhyay, 1996: 3109). In the conception of the World Bank good governance is primarily associated with capacity building, and the exercise of political power needed for efficient and effective management of concrete national programmes, regardless of whether the political system is democratic or otherwise (Asmerom et al 1995:736). The Bank identifies three distinct aspects of governance: a) the form of political regime; b) the process by which authority is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development; c) the capacity of a government to design, formulate and implement policies and discharge functions. (Bandyopadhyay, 1996: 3109).

The OECD gives a more comprehensive view of good governance than that of the World Bank. In its conceptualisation, important instrumental elements that would intrinsically ensemble good governance, such as participatory development, human rights and democratisation, form a core part of the definition of an accountable system of governing. This conception enjoins legitimacy of government (degree of democratisation); accountability of political and official elements of a government (transparent decision-making, administrative accountability mechanisms); competence of governments to make policy and deliver services; and respect for human rights and the rule of law (individual and collective rights and security, framework for economic and social activity, and participation). Within this framework, good governance refers to a liberal democratic state with a pluralistic polity, in which representatives to the bodies are chosen by free and fair elections. Such a system should protect and guarantee human rights and be able to control executive powers by separating legislative powers. Transparency and accountability become also concomitant part of good governance (Jayal, 1997 :407; Bandyopadhyay , 1996 : 3109).

Accountability can only evolve if there are adequate checks and controls by an active, articulate and organised citizenry. This is achievable, in the words of Hyden, by creating conditions that facilitate sound management, mainly in three spheres : (1) Citizen influence and oversight characterised by: a) degree of political participation; b) means of preference aggregation; and c) methods of accountability; (2) Responsive and responsible leadership characterised by: a) degree of respect for the civic public realm b) degree of openness of public policy making; and c) degree of adherence to rule of law; and (3) Social reciprocities characterised by: a) degree of political equality, b) degree of inter-group tolerance, and c) degree of inclusiveness in associational membership. (Hyden, 1996 : 14-16 cf: Asmerom and et al, 1995: 737). Thus, good governance consists of all the processes of conflicts, co-operation and negotiation involved in the use, production and distribution of resources (Leftwich, 1995: 17). The conventional practice of equating accountability to the notion of accurate adherence to financial and administrative norms and standards is, in fact, a narrow perception of accountability.

The meaning of accountability in good governance encompasses attributes such as legitimacy of political system, financial adherence, easy access to information, popular participation in

decision-making and implementation, responsiveness, efficient delivery system of services and goods, enforcement of the rule of law supplanting the rule of whims and caprices of rulers whether stipendiary or elected, client/citizen satisfaction and an overall caring and humane ambience promoting an egalitarian and equitable social and economic order (Bandyopadhyay, 1996 : 3111).

Technically, political accountability can be established by holding regular elections and performance auditing by the electorate. From the point of view of political consideration accountability would refer to the legitimacy of the system (whether it represents the interest of all) and the subscription of the decision-making process to universalistic values such as equity and social justice . In the absence of such legitimacy there can be no genuine accountability; and therefore, no good governance. By legitimacy what I mean is a system of government that relies on the consent of the governed; where the means exist to change government and policies; where the government's respect for the governed can enforce constitutional order and the rule of law (Smillic, 1995:218 ; Hindess,1996:96).

This can be institutionalised only if there are adequate checks and balances mechanisms in place. Horizontal and vertical systems ensuring accountability are essential. Horizontal political accountability is established by regular elections and performance of audit by the electorate. One may question the validity of this condition for securing accountability on the ground that it is not dependant on the ideology of democracy or representativeness. A sound accountability system can exist even without a democratic system, for example in a 'soft authoritarian' system like Japan, Taiwan, etc. as pointed out by Dunn and Jefferies (as cited in Asmerorm et al ,1995: 736). This is not a tenable viewpoint because their conception of accountability is camouflaged in the 'good-will' of the government which can ensure the well-being of all sections. It is an economic conception of the legitimacy and of accountability. What is the opportunity for self-determination and realisation of one's own goals even if welfare and security is ensured for all? Where is the freedom for all to decide what is good for themselves? Is there a possibility to make choices as to decide what one wants? Under such conditions, can the system be called an accountable system?

The concept of accountability is all pervasive. It must exist within and between systems. Within a system, in a narrow sense of administrative lineage, accountability can be established by : (1) developing suitable incentive -penalty systems to induce performance, (2) facilitating availability of alternative choices to the public by promotion of competition, and (3) evolving a transparent system of checks and balances to regulate the strategic behaviour of different stake holders (Mohanty, 1995 : 22).

Accountability between systems, refers to the checks and controls forged in relation to decentralised and centralised structures. By constitutional amendment and concrete transfer of responsibility to the local bodies autonomy and simultaneous accountability is premised. It is important to stress that autonomy without accountability and vice-versa are detrimental to effective functioning if the relationship between a centre and a local system is not bridled in response to the forces of power at play. In other words, the system of accountability is shaped as per the contextual reality which accords primacy over what is appropriate and legitimate.

2.5.3 Social Capital

Besides the politico-administrative factors mentioned above, the factors that contribute to an effective decentralised system include : characteristics of local power structures, social and cultural characteristics of groups involved in policy making and administration, the degree to which beneficiaries are organised, national political structures, political will and the dominant ideology (Rondinelli et al 1983b:27). I would refer to all these characteristics as 'social capital'. Social capital is the value of a set of ethical behaviours in which each actor has conventional obligatory control over certain actions which serve as a resource to achieve each other's goals or interests. It consists of some aspects of social structures which facilitate certain actions of actors within those structures. Social capital constitutes differential outcomes at the level of individual actors and in society (Coleman 1994:98-101). In the context of devolution, it includes aspects such as civic engagement, the legacy of active community organisation, respect for democratic practices, the degree of respect for the civic public realm, the degree of openness of public policy making, the degree of adherence to the rule of law. Social reciprocities are characterised by the degree of political equality, inter-group tolerance and inclusiveness in associational membership (Hyden, 14-16 cf: Asmerom et al 1995:737).

Putnam, for example, argues that the regional government in Northern Italy has been successful in providing public goods because of its long history of civic engagements and active community organisation (1993). Similarly, a study of more than 200 rural development projects sponsored by the United Nations Development Programmes, confirmed that the ability of rural communities to influence the priorities of public agencies and to obtain efficient service delivery depended on effective local organisations (Rondinelli et. al, 1983b: 77).

Lack of political commitment was responsible for weak implementation of decentralisation policies in countries like Tanzania, Kenya and Sudan, despite the earnest promulgation of devolution. The reason for such contradiction lies in historical (social capital) factors.

Rondinelli points out :

The weakness in political commitment to decentralisation should not be surprising, given East Africa's tradition of highly centralised and authoritarian governments. Under both colonial regimes and independence movements, national and local political leaders benefited from centrism and paternalism. Thus, the commitment of even those political leaders who ostensibly supported decentralisation was often shallow and limited to deconcentration, which allowed them to maintain their influence over local activities . (Rondinelli et al, 1983b : 97)

Resistance of the central government bureaucracies to transfer responsibilities for fear of losing power also deters decision-making from below.

The existence of active community organisations can make a difference in creating good governance. The World Development Report 1997 (p.115) in a recent study of villages in rural Tanzania pointed out that households in villages with high levels of social capital (degree of participation in village level social organisations) have higher income compared to the household in villages with low social capital. It concluded that 'although no general conclusions can be drawn

about the impact of social capital on government performance, the study points to a number of important linkages. The implication is that where parents can organise to monitor and pressure local government into maintaining local schools, school quality is enhanced'. The relevance of social capital is amply evident from this conclusion.

2.5.4 Participation and Empowerment

The instrumentality of participation and empowerment in the effective functioning of the decentralised system stems from several considerations. Participation is regarded as an important element of responsive, democratic government. It promotes equality by providing a voice for ordinary people and by involving them in decision-making. By means of popular participation opportunities are provided for the disadvantaged to exercise control over and ultimately take responsibility for things which affect their lives. Participation produces 'a new breed of pressure groups representing people whose interests had not been articulated before' (Smith, 1985 : 170). A lack of participation, which I have equated with inequality of power, can be regarded as one of the primary causes of deprivation.

Participation and empowerment are considered as tools for enabling the poor who are in normal circumstances subject to vulnerability and powerlessness. Anisur Rahman in his recent book 'People's Self-Development' refers to participation as people's power. According to him, people's power needs organisation for purposeful action (through the means of participation) and it needs to be reasserted as a countervailing power within its own formal organisation (Rahman, 1993: 40).

It is important to understand that participation is genuinely about power - about people's ownership and control. UNRISD elaborates upon participation 'organised efforts to increase control over the resources and regulative institutions ...on the part of groups and movements of those hitherto excluded from such control'. Viewing participation essentially from the people's point, it is related to two type of powers - '*power over*' and '*power to*'. '*Power over*' means gaining power (influence or control) over the other groups which currently enjoys or dominate over the others.

The second type of power is '*power to*'. It is to be understood as increasing one's ability to resist and challenge '*power over*'. It is concerned with the processes by which people become aware of their own interests and how these interests relate to those of others, in order for both to participate from a position of greater strength in decision-making and actually influence such decisions (Wolff, 1996:50). Developing self-confidence should start at the individual level and from there people can decide to form a collective and work together to achieve a more extensive impact than each could have done individually. Friedmann (1992) describes this as an interrelationship between psychological empowerment, social empowerment and political empowerment. Participation (empowerment) in the above respect is defined as gaining collective control over resources, decision-making processes and institutions, development of critical consciousness and ability among the actors to transform their present life situation, to negotiate for their own benefits and question the status-quo. In the context of organisation, participation has a component of organising people to act collectively in decision-making to negotiate for benefits, to

question the undesirable and unjust status-quo and to protest against development designed at the top and implemented below. This is the key to the attainment of an autonomous development process.

In the present development drive, Edwards and Hulme's definition of empowerment is very relevant: They view empowerment as 'a process of assisting disadvantaged individuals and groups to gain greater control than they presently have over local and national decision making and resources, and of their ability and right to define collective goals, make decisions and learn from experience' (Edwards and Hulme, 1992:24). Edwards and Hulme's definition places emphasis upon assisting disadvantaged individuals and groups. Disadvantaged and vulnerable groups require external support and concessions for their development and empowerment. Very often they are excluded from opportunities to meaningfully participate and benefit from the advantages of development. By decentralising and establishing local democracy, communities will have the opportunity to participate according to their individual needs, and hence alter the course of events and decisions which affect them. Further, taking the centre of power to the local level not only enables the community to have access and control (through participation), but also engenders greater accountability and transparency in the system of governance.

Participation is, as well, important from the point of view of accountability. Understanding the importance of participation from that perspective requires recognition of prevailing local conditions. Even in a local situation there are high degrees of diversity, needs, interests and constraints. In this context, the provision or opportunity that the community can gain from participation, offers greater potential for self-transformation and change.

Gaining internal strength (power to) is just as important as gaining control or influencing processes outside one's own group (power over). Community participation is important as a mediating and negotiating mechanism. It helps to build sensitivity to local problems, needs and interests. Very often, the needs and interests of the community are articulated by the people who hold power, normally the local elites. As such, the interests represented are not of the community but of them. In a participatory process, there is a strength that emanates from collectivisation of forces other than one individual's forte. (This condition is possibly realisable only if internal confidence (empowerment) is attained). It helps establish accountability and legitimacy. Proximity to the general public and influence of groups is likely to induce responsiveness to local problems, optimal use of local information, and fiscal responsibility.

Community participation is also a countervailing power - a consciousness and vigilance against the possibility of misuse of power. In other words, participation is a collective consciousness-making process. In fact, through collective actions and assertions, the power balance will be made more legitimate and unequal distribution of power in the society could in the long run be minimised. Political representation becomes truly democratic.

The instrumental utility of participation comes from its ends, such as learning, organising, deciding, planning and acting, whether quickly or slowly, easily or painfully, and with or without a specific end so that people are in a position to define their own goals and act on them. The unprecedented victory over nature by the power of knowledge and scrupulous accordance of the

supremacy of that knowledge to determine to 'conduct the conduct of others'⁸ has, in fact, deterred participation on an equal footing. The supremacy of scientific knowledge in the form of 'invention-led control' has distanced people with knowledge (superior) from those who do not have such knowledge (inferior). In the words of Carmen, 'modern science, in the guise of a universal, value-free system of knowledge acquisition and production, has continued to displace all other pre-existing systems of knowledge, in particular popular and empirical knowledge which was inherited through centuries by oral tradition' (Carmen, 1996:56). In this respect, then, participation becomes a tool for transformation and a bridge between knowledge-power and traditional wisdom-power.

At an economic and social level, community participation ensures development of local specific plans, generates additional resources and encourages more specific use of existing resources, promotes flexibility in decision-making and raises people's confidence and self-esteem. When plans are made with the participation of the community, local needs and priorities can be better accounted for since the people who are familiar with the local environment are more likely to represent local interests than central planners. This is particularly important for regions where there is a high degree of social diversity. More over, the plan that is formulated from below has greater chances of success. First of all, it represents the needs of the locality, secondly, since it serves the needs of the locality there will be greater chances of ownership. From the administrative and efficiency viewpoint as well, community participation is still an important consideration. In a narrow sense, participation is a cost reduction mechanism especially in the service delivery programmes .

Finally, assertion and exercise of people's power implies self-reliance. Over a period of time a community can become economically, socially, politically, culturally and psychologically independent.

2.6 Conclusion

By way of decentralisation, it is believed that many evils arising out of over-centralisation can be eschewed. Conferring power and autonomy to local bodies - the vital constituents of devolution, is hoped to provide the impetus for local government to pursue goals in its own right. The question is whether political equality and wider scope for participation is adequate to bring forth development. Is autonomy in itself a sufficient condition for effective functioning of local governments? Autonomy as a precondition is composed of (a) legitimate power to make decisions without interference (from the centre); (b) powers to plan and implement programmes suited to local needs with powers to raise revenue and expend it; and (c) powers to create systems and institutions. There are several conditions, such as political will, appropriate structure and systems necessary for transfer of autonomy to take place. It is important to recognise that many other conditions are required to make autonomy legitimate. The conditions that will make autonomy legitimate are accountability, democratic participation and empowerment. The pre-existing social capital such as civic engagement, respect for democratic practices and civil organisation are also crucial in the effective functioning of local government.

⁸ Foucault refers to this as 'power of consent' (Hindess, 1996:111) which gives the sovereign the right to govern its subjects and also it gives an agreement to follow sovereigns instructions, as giving the sovereign the capacity to do so .

CHAPTER 3

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE EVOLUTION OF PANCHAYATI RAJ IN INDIA

3.1 Introduction

This chapter sketches briefly the history of the Panchayati Raj Institution in India. Its main objective is to narrate the various characteristics and features of this institution at different epochs of history. While the previous chapter outlined a framework to analyse decentralisation, this chapter examines, what role and functions PRI played and was accorded, and what status (autonomy) and power it enjoyed under various historical conditions.

The tradition of rural local self-government in India can be traced back to its ancient history. References to the existence of a system of rural local self-government are found in the ancient *Vedic* literature⁹. Mention of rural local government is also fairly extensive and detailed in the imperial age of the Mauryas and Guptas¹⁰. Kautilya's¹¹ *Arthashastra* (Science of wealth/economics) gives a detailed account of the system of the village administration prevailing at that time. The prevalence of a full-fledged *panchayat*¹² system is evident from the description of the organisation of the size of the village, delimitation of hierarchy of structures, and clear-cut specification of powers and functions at different hierarchical levels¹³.

The legacy of local self governance continued even under the Muslim, Turkish and Mughal rules. The Hindu Kingdom of Vijainager in the South (now in the State of Andhrapradesh) had a well-developed system of rural local government based on Hindu norms and practices. The *Panchayat* was responsible for the administration of justice, executive work and providing police work (Jain, 1967: 99). A local system of governance enjoyed executive, judicial, and to some extent legislative powers at that point of time in history.

3.2 Local Self-government under British rule

The story of the impoverishment of the village community and the gradual ruin and decay of its best human and material resources is contemporaneously a story of the collapse of an institution which was the backbone of the villagers. After the East India Company Rule was taken over by the British Crown in 1858, administrative charges were gradually transferred to local bodies. This transfer was not primarily motivated by a desire to strengthen the bodies, but only to relieve the onus of imperial funds. The District Committee was constituted for discharging the functions of constructing roads, spreading educational and medical services. The committee consisted of influential landlords, lawyers and businessman under the chairmanship of a district magistrate who dominated the committee and used it as an advisory body. These institutions hardly acquired the legitimacy of a representative institution. The panchayat that functioned as a petty court was replaced by district courts. The system of a district court introduced by Lord Cornwallis under the

⁹ There are four books - Rigveda, Sama Veda, Yajur Veda, Atherva Veda - on Vedas (Teachings) which commonly refer to as Vedic literature. In this context, reference to it is intended to mark an ancient period (Vedic age dates back to 1000 BC). See Majumdar, RC and Pusalkar, AD., *The History and Culture of Indian People- The Vedic Age*, George Allen and Unwin Ltd. London, 1951, P-225.

¹⁰ Mauryas and Guptas are the names of two dynasty in the 6th century AD.

¹¹ Kautilya was a scholar in the court of King Chandra Gupta Maurya. *Arthashastra* is a book written by him which literally means science of wealth.

¹² Panchayat literally means a council which consists of five members who managed village affairs.

¹³ See S.C. Jain, *Community Development and Panchayati Raj in India*, Allied Publishers, Calcutta, 1967.

Governor-Generalship, tended to undermine the authority of panchayat arbitration (Jain, 1967: 108). The arbitration of panchayat was condemned and its decisions were not recognised. Accordingly, the local system of control and governance was estranged from the people and the balance tilted in favour of new elites, the upper echelons of society.

The vitality of the local government resumed, to some extent, when Lord Ripon introduced a resolution to 'revive and extend the indigenous system of the country'¹⁴ and 'to make full use of what remains of the village system'¹⁵ in 1882. Nearly 500 rural boards were created with a two-thirds majority of non-officials who depended on the favour of the magistrates for nomination. Despite its intentions for revival, most of the provincial legislation ignored them and the principle of elections was never adhered to. Nomination being the rule, only a few loyal devoted dignitaries could qualify to be a member. These were usually lawyers, businessmen and a few rural landlords. The collector continued to dominate the administration.

In 1907 the Liberal Government appointed a commission to enquire into the question of administrative and financial relations between the Government of India, provincial governments and subordinate authorities. The commission laid great importance on creating *Taluqa* (sub-division) boards, reinstating panchayats and the allocation of 50 percent of district funds for functions such as repair of minor roads, primary education, rural dispensaries, etc. The panchayat's functions included arbitration of petty disputes, civil and criminal, looking after village sanitation, supervision of village schools, etc. The panchayat, however, had no power to raise revenue and was under the direct supervision.

The Montagu-Chelmsford Reform (1908) brought new lights to local self-governance. Boards were to be constituted on the basis of elective principles. The new policy allowed rural boards to levy taxes and fees within limits. Representation of minorities through nomination became prevalent. The jurisdiction of panchayat extended over judicial, administrative and executive functions, thereby beginning to resume its vitality. However in the 1930s, owing to a combination of political, communal, financial and administrative factors, the performance of local bodies declined considerably. Although the panchayats did not flourish during British rule, neither did they disappear into oblivion. They were kept alive and there was a demand for their revival.

3.3 Panchayat in Independent India

In no other period of Indian history has the system of traditional self-governance been subject to such fatal distortions than in the post-Independence period. The framers of the constitution did not see in the panchayat system a vision of future India, as, in the first instance, there was no mention of Panchayat in the Draft Constitution. In response to the criticism that the village was not given a proper place in the Draft Constitution, a founding father of the Indian constitution, BR Ambedkar, observed: 'I hold that these village republics have been the ruination of India... What is the village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow mindedness and communalism?' (as quoted by Jain, 1967:128).

¹⁴ L. Wolf: Life of Ripon, (London, 1921)p:100 cf Jain 1967:109.

¹⁵ Resolution on Local Self-Government, May 18, 1882, para -5 cf: Jain, 1967:109.

The underlying causes for rejecting a romantic view of the village are understandable. Indian villages are characterised by the practices of social monstrosities such as untouchability and the caste system¹⁶. Under such circumstances, the values of equality and democracy cannot make a dent in the society.

After much debate on the issue in the Constituent Assembly, the general consensus was that the omission was a serious mistake and needed to be rectified. On the basis of Santhanam's amendment the provision on panchayat was incorporated in part VI of the Constitution in the Directive Principle of State Policy under Article 40 which is not justiciable.

Within four years after the adoption of the constitution in 1949, most states enacted legislation giving form to the directives contained in Article 40. Since the legislation was not based on any given direction nor structure, form and duration, the powers and functions varied in different states. It was only in 1959, after the assessment and implementation of the Community Development Programme (CDP), that local self-government began to be recognised as a vital institution for national development. The panchayat, which had formerly been associated only in an executive and advisory capacity to CDP was to assume full responsibility for its carriage. The turning point came with the publication of the Balwantrai Mehta Committee report in 1958 on the question of economy and efficiency for reorganisation of the CDP. The Committee pointed out that if CDP and National Extension Services were to evoke popular initiatives, community work should be organised through representative bodies: 'So long as we do not discover or create a representative and democratic institution which will supply the "local interest, supervision and care necessary to ensure that expenditure of money upon local objects conforms with the needs and wishes of the locality" invest it with adequate power and assign to it appropriate finances, we will never be able to evoke local interest and excite local initiative in the field of Development' (Balwantrai Mehta Committee Report, 1957:139).

By 1959, 12 years after Independence, all states had passed panchayat acts. By the mid-1960s the panchayats had reached all parts of the country organised on the principle of democratic decentralisation.

The reason for the 12 year delay in revitalising Panchayat Raj in the country is a vital question. One of the reasons can be ascribed to the Nehruvian model of development which aimed at rapid industrialisation and growth, through the modernisation project. In the Nehruvian era itself, Panchayati Raj witnessed a sea change. In 1978 the Ashoka Mehta Committee remarked that the Panchayati Raj seemed to have passed through three phases: ascendancy (1959-64); stagnation (1965-69); and decline (1969-77). Subsequent events have unequivocally shown that the phase of decline was coming to an end and a new phase started about 1978, which may be called "Panchayati Raj reform phase".

In the period of stagnation and decay in the PRI¹⁷ from 1964-1977, several forms of suppression weakened the position of the PRI. For example, in several states elections were held

¹⁶ The caste system is an Indian social institution which is a social stratification of society according division of labour determined by birth. The stratification provides exclusive privileges in accordance with ones status in the hierarchy of division. The Brahmin is at the top followed by Shetkrya, Vaishya and Sudra in order of their status. The community that does not fall into this category are called untouchables and they are subject to a number of discrimination.

¹⁷ Ashoka Mehta Report 1978.

only after 13 to 15 years¹⁸. The fund for Block development slowed down after the closure of CDP. The party in power felt increasingly threatened by the newly emerging leadership. The government of Maharashtra set separate district planning committees with the State Minister in charge of that district as the Chairman.

The decline of the PRI can be attributed to a number of reasons relating to conceptual and programmatic flaws during this period. Firstly, the bureaucracy and elected representatives apprehended the seizure of their power. In 1966-67, the Ministry of Community Development was reduced to the status of a department in the Ministry of Food and Agriculture¹⁹. The acute food shortage in the country and the introduction of high-yielding crop varieties which marked the beginning of the Green Revolution, necessitated an excessive concentration of powers at the centre. The result was the creation of special development programme²⁰ under direct supervision of the central government.

Another serious flaw was the treatment of political leaders, planners and bureaucrats of the PRI as agencies of development, not as units of self-government. The first Five-Year Plan of India emphasised creation of panchayats as vehicles for national extension and community development projects which undermined the autonomy of the PRI. There was also a feeling that PRIs were dominated by economically and socially privileged sections of the society; weaker sections were either deprived in the process or only benefited marginally²¹. 'Thus it is legitimate to conclude that a combination of the bureaucracy, commercial interests, the professional middle class, the police and the political elite "ganged up" against democratic decentralisation.' (Rajani Kothari 1985; cf Mathew 1994:13).

The appointment of the Ashoka Mehta Committee in 1977, under the new government²², set the stage for a new beginning in the history of the PRI. The Committee re-emphasised the importance of the PRI and recommended a two-tier structure - Zilla Parishad (ZP) at the district level and Mandal Panchayat for a group of villages, with a population of 20,000-30,000 (below the block level), with ZP playing the key role of popular supervision below the state level. The committee also recommended the official recognition of political parties at all levels of the Panchayat election. The reservation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in accordance with the proportion of the population was also recommended (Ashoka Mehta Report 1978: 161-93).

The significant change that characterises the historical evolution in Panchayati Raj system is the transformation of panchayats from mere development agencies to proper political institutions. It set the beginning for giving democratic and political autonomy.

3.4 The Need for Constitutional Safeguards

The PRI in independent India has a chequered history. After the show of initial enthusiasm, there was a period of prolonged negligence towards making the PRI a grassroots democratic

¹⁸ In Tamil Nadu, for example, the election was after a lapse of sixteen years in 1986. (Mathew 1996:10)

¹⁹ Later in 1971, Community Development was replaced by Rural Development.

²⁰ The parallel agencies created for carrying out special programme were Small Farmer Development Agency, Drought Prone Area Programme, Intensive Tribal Development Project etc.

²¹ BS Bhargava, Panchayat Movement in India, ISEC, Bangalore. 1985.

²² The Janata Party came into power under the leadership of Morarji Desai.

institution. Elections were due in many states²³. For example, panchayat elections took place after 15 years in Tamil Nadu and Kerala²⁴. The main reason for this delay could be attributed to the fact that there was no constitutional obligation binding on any state to strictly adhere to the principles of democratic decentralisation, since all aspects relating to the PRI were left to the state governments to work out. There was a growing realisation that in the absence of constitutional safeguards the institution of PRI would become moribund.

By the end of 1988, a sub-committee of the consultative committee of parliament under the chairmanship of P K Thungon, made recommendations for strengthening the PRI by way of recognising constitutional amendments. It was known as the 64th Amendment Bill, drafted by L M Singhvi, modelled in the light of the Ashoka Mehta Report and introduced in the Parliament in 1989. When the National Front government came into power in 1990 it introduced a combined bill for panchayat and municipalities (74th Amendment) but could not take it up for discussion due to its short term in office. In 1991, when the Congress (i) came into power, the 72nd Constitutional Amendment Bill was placed before the Parliament for consideration. After the Joint Committee of Parliament consideration, the bill was passed in 1992 as 73rd Amendment. The bill was ratified by 13 out of 25 states, and it came into force in 1993.

Whilst it can be considered as a move towards panchayat as an institution of self - government, the main draw back of the bill was its silence on the judicial, law and order aspects. Many still consider the Act to be unsuccessful in terms of elevating the panchayat from development agents to a political institution (Mathew, 1996: 132-34).

3.5 Conclusion

Reviewing the development of the democratic decentralisation process in India, it is not difficult to decipher a number of pertinent issues that surround any genuine attempt towards devolution. The urban and the rural elite, its representatives in politics from the time of the national freedom movement onwards and the bureaucracy, conditioned by its class character, had a disdain of the Panchayati Raj System. For fear of losing power with the emergence of a new leadership at the village level, the vested interests undermined the potential role that PRI could play in local development. Although the relevance of the PRI has been brought to light by various committee reports, why has it not taken full shape? The L.M. Singhvi Committee's Draft Concept Paper on revitalisation of the Panchayati Raj Institutions for democracy and development, submitted to the ministry of Agriculture in 1986, stated in unequivocal terms that local self-governments should be constitutionally recognised, protected and preserved by the inclusion of a new chapter in the Constitution. The Sarkaria Commission, set up to suggest mechanisms to strengthen local bodies, financially and functionally, recommended: '[R]egular elections and sessions of these institutions is a must, and means for ensuring the same in all the states uniformly should be evolved'. (Sarkaria Commission: Art. 177, 1988). The question remains as to why, then, elections to local bodies were not held in many states .

²³ CAARD(1985:41) reported that '[I]n fact , elections have become overdue in eleven states and in eight states even elections to Gram Panchayats are overdue . Elections have been put off under one pretext or another... and the term of the existing bodies have been extended or the bodies have been superseded' (cf.Mathew, 1996:11).

²⁴ After the 1963 election , it was only in 1979 the election to the panchayat was held.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS OF THE WORKING OF THE PANCHAYATI RAJ IN THE INDIAN STATES OF WEST BENGAL AND KARNATAKA

4.1 Introduction

Thus far, I have presented a conceptual framework for the study of decentralisation, with reference to the PRI system in India. I have argued that the feasibility of decentralisation is assessed against four basic criteria: autonomy, accountability, social capital and participation and empowerment. These criteria play a vital role in determining the effective functioning and sustainability of a decentralisation project.

This chapter analyses the working of PRI in two Indian states, West Bengal and Karnataka, on the basis of the above parameters. It examines the varied and different conditions that existed under these two, ideologically dissimilar governments with a view to ascertaining the accrued consequences of the presence or absence of the critical conditions mentioned in Chapter 2 upon their PRI experience. The aim of this examination is to determine the conditions necessary for effective functioning of the decentralised system. It does not aim to bring out the differences in the implementation through a time-series analyses; rather it concentrates on the experiential differences of two distinct governments in different periods of history. For the purpose of this analysis, I have concentrated on the period after 1978, at which point the panchayati raj had been fully implemented.

4.1 Autonomy

4.2.1 Issue of External Conditions

The question of whether adequate powers and resources will be “willingly” transferred to the local institutions by the ruling group or such transfer of powers requires internal compulsions and demands is debatable. Whatever the propelling forces of devolution, it is important to understand that successful functioning of a local institution is dependent on the extent to which power and autonomy is vested in that institution. In the absence of an adequate transfer of powers and autonomy, the purported decentralisation is merely a farce.

West Bengal :

The initiative of the West Bengal Left Front government substantiates the importance of the above aspect. The panchayati raj in West Bengal was in a moribund condition until 1977 when the Left Front Government came into power. The Left Front Government proceeded from the Act of 1973 and passed a series of Amendments which aimed at reorganising the system of panchayati raj, bestowing necessary powers and authority for it to function as a local government. The Act provided for a wide range of responsibilities and powers. The powers and duties of the Gram Panchayat are quite extensive, including public health, public assets, development works and administration.

At the block level, the Panchayat Samiti (PS) was vested with additional responsibilities, such as the power to monitor and supervise the work undertaken by the Panchayat. Each Panchayat Samiti is delegated a number of Standing Committees²⁵ to carry out specialised tasks of the Samiti. These committees include - Finance, Establishment, Development and Planning; Public Health, Public Work, Agriculture, Irrigation and Co-operatives, Education, Cottage and Small Industries, Relief and Social Welfare, Forest and Land Reforms; Fisheries and Animal Husbandry and Food and Supplies. The work of the Panchayat Samiti is monitored, and financially accountable to the Zilla Parishad, being the district level peoples' representative body.

The Zilla Parishad is responsible for organising and administering the development of the district. It is vested with powers to plan for the district and act as an interface with the state government and as a supervisory body over Panchayat Samiti and Gram Panchayat. The Zilla Parishad is ultimately answerable to the state government, its budget and accounts being submitted annually for auditing and assessment. Until 1985 the work of the panchayati raj remained primarily the local implementation of state policy and programmes. Prior to this, the panchayats did not possess an explicit planning function. The Zilla Parishad members had only a nominal role in the implementation.

In 1985, drawing from the past experience, the Left Front government introduced a new system of decentralised planning which accorded the panchayats powers to prepare their own statements of the pressing needs of the population and basic need plans. These are passed on to Block Planning Committees established by the Panchayat Samiti, which has the responsibility to prepare the development programmes within the budget limits. The panchayat was also conferred powers to raise revenues by levies and taxation. The consolidated plan is then submitted to the District Planning Committee which then forms the basis of an Annual District Plan. Within the new system, the president of the Zilla Parishad is the chairperson of the District Rural Development Agency, replacing the District Magistrate. The new measures introduced by the Left Front government have provided enormous impetus for effective functioning of the panchayati raj.

From the above description, it is clear that the Panchayats were empowered with political, administrative, financial, and planning powers to enable them to function as viable units in West Bengal under the Left Front government. It is doubtful whether the panchayats could ever function without commitment and continued support from the government. The two decade-long continuing rule of the Left Front government has paved the way for the panchayati raj to take a firm root in local self-governance.

Karnataka :

Karnataka is another state which has introduced the panchayati raj system in a radical form and it is interesting to contrast this experience with that of West Bengal in order to determine the effect of the presence or absence of certain conditions. Karnataka was ruled by the Congress Party, except for the period 1983-1988, when, the Janata Party was in power. With the passing of the Karnataka Zilla Parishads (ZP), Taluk (block) Panchayat Samitis (TPS), Mandal Panchayat²⁶ (MP)

²⁵ A Standing Committee has a President and up to 5 elected ex-officio members and a maximum of 5 government officers.

²⁶ Mandal Panchayat is the first elected tier of the panchayati raj system. It comprising of a cluster of villages with population ranging from 8000 to 12000 with an elected representative for every 400 persons.

and Nyaya Panchayat (small village courts) Act in 1985, a new beginning in the history of PRI in the state was created. Following the West Bengal experience, the Karnataka government assigned a number of functional areas to Mandal Panchayats such as sanitation, health, public works and amenities, agriculture and animal husbandry and welfare of the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Backward Class (BC)²⁷. The Mandal Panchayats were expected to prepare plans for the development of the areas, maintain records relating to the survey of village sites, public and private properties and organise and mobilise the villagers for productive purposes.

The Mandal Panchayats were given powers to raise revenues and expend them within their jurisdiction. Their own revenue came from the proceeds from the sales of dust, dirt, dung, etc. income from its property, proceeds from taxes on entertainment, buildings, professionals, vehicles, water rates, mineral rights and fees on markets, bus stands grazing lands, etc. Apart from these sources, the funds of MPs were comprised of amounts allotted by the ZP, and grants from the state government and its agencies. MPs were expected to identify and articulate the needs and aspirations of the people, formulate projects on the basis of these needs and implement them. For the first time MPs became part of the planning process in the state.

Apart from the power and autonomy assigned to the MP, the Taluk Panchayat Samiti was given the responsibility of advising and co-ordinating the activities of MPs, while the ZP was assigned the responsibility of supervising, co-ordinating and integrating development schemes at the Taluk and district levels and to preparing and implementing district development plans. The President and vice president were responsible for the supervision and control of ZP functions. The chief secretary is the administrative head of ZP, and he is assisted by administrative and technical personnel.

It is clear that under the 1985 Act, MPs were independent political units in a federal structure of decentralised government. They enjoyed a good measure of autonomy in respect of day-to-day functioning. What is striking in the experience of Karnataka is that the heyday of PRI lasted for only five years. The 1985 Act was amended by the subsequent government (Congress I). The five-year term of the MPs expired in Jan. 1992, but instead of holding the elections, the state government placed these bodies under the charges of state administrators. In 1993 a new Act was passed which drastically reduced the powers and autonomy of the Mandal Panchayats. MPs were replaced by Gram Panchayats (which cover only smaller units of 5000 to 7000 people).

The tendency of every new government to design and redesign the size and structure of the decentralised government bodies subverts the functioning of the institution. It undermines the potential role these institutions could play in the development of a local area. Apparently, the conclusion that follows from the above description is that in a federal state like India, where power undulates with varying degrees of ideology, a democratic decentralised system can take deep roots only if constitutional legitimacy is accorded. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment is certainly a recognition of this need. It is pertinent to emphasise in this respect that democratic decentralisation cannot become a viable entity unless the conditions of political autonomy and power are devolved in order to empower these institutions.

²⁷ According to the division of society as per the caste system, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are those sections of the society who fall outside the traditional social hierarchy. STs and SCs are socially discriminated as 'untouchables' within the caste practice. Backward Class sections belong to the caste structure, but they are socially belonging to lower status.

4.2.2 The Issue of Internal Condition

A long-standing criticism of local governments is that their power is weighted in favour of the elite in the society - dominated by landlords, members of "upper" castes or economically and politically dominant communities. In a country like India, where social and economic inequalities are extremely pronounced - the question of whether decentralisation can serve its basic purpose is pertinent. In order to look at these issues, it is useful to assess the composition of the internal power structure of the representative bodies under different situations in both states.

Table-1 shows the composition of panchayat members in the West Bengal elections of 1978. About 51% of the elected members came from the owner-cultivator category. In a study conducted by Webster on the above aspects in two GPs, he shows that about 58% owned land more than 2 acres (see Table-2). In assessing the economic status of the members elected, a person holding more than two acres of land is described as a small farmer. However, such small farmers often combine their income with other incomes such as shares in fish tanks, small shop or sweet businesses, or teaching. Hence, the household could in fact be quite affluent by local standards (Webster, 1990:62, 138).

TABLE-1

Distribution of Panchayat Members by Occupation West Bengal 1978 Election.

Occupation	Number	percentage
Owner-cultivators	743	50.7%
Teachers	206	14.0%
Unemployed	110	7.5%
Landless labourers	70	4.8%
Sharecroppers	26	1.8%
Artisans	23	1.6%
Shop owners	20	1.4%
Technical Workers	19	1.3%
Doctors	16	1.1%
Tailors	8	0.6%
Students	8	0.6%
Fisherman	6	0.4%
Others	211	14.4%
Total	1466	100.0%
Source: West Bengal, Dept. of Panchayat and Community Development, 1980.		

It should be mentioned that West Bengal carried out an elaborate programme of agrarian reform, including redistribution of land, after the Left Front government came into power in 1977. The aim of the agrarian programme was to reform agrarian relations through policies directed at (i) the distribution of the ownership of the land; (ii) the imbalances of power in the relationship between tenant and the owner; and (iii) the accompanying ties of patronage involved. In the context of decentralisation, the relevance of such reform is crucial, as it can safeguard against the vulnerability of weaker sections arising out of patron-client relations. Assessment of its impact on the working of PRI could demonstrate its relevance.

Examining the overall make-up of Kanpur II and Saldya GP membership, as shown in Table-2 below, Webster points out that although the landless or small land-owning cultivators appear to be quite well represented, the fact remains that for a relatively high incidence of households in the area, and particularly in Saldya village, the principal source of income is not from cultivation. Hence, the representation of weaker sections in GPs, as it appears in Table 2, is illusory (Webster, 1990: 71). Nevertheless, one can note a perceptible change in the composition of representation from weaker sections over the years in West Bengal.

Out of the 35 members in both the GPs in 1978 only about 11 members (31%) had land ownership above 2 acres, whereas the figure for the same category shows only 6 members (16%) in 1983 election. The land ownership of members for those above 2 acres in the 1988 election shows a slightly higher number compared to the previous term i.e. 10 members (26%).

TABLE-2
Kanpur II and Saldya Gram Panchayat Members' Land ownership in acres in West Bengal over 3 Elections

<u>Kanpur II</u> Years of Election	Landless	0.1-2.0	2.1-5.0	5.1-10.0	10.1>	Total
1978	3	1	5	3	3	15
1983	3	2	4	2	0	11
1988	3	2	4	3	2	14
<u>Saldya</u>						
1978	5	15	0	0	0	20
1983	4	17	0	0	0	21
1988	7	16	1	0	0	24

Source: Neil Webster, 'Panchayati Raj and the Decentralisation of Development Planning in West Bengal' 1990, pp 63-71

This means that, as a result of Leftist ideology, and agrarian reform, a large percent of vulnerable sections were able to be represented in the local bodies. However, the segregation of the same data on the basis of principal occupations illustrates that a considerable portion of the members were not coming from the truly vulnerable sections. Table-3 illustrates this point.

TABLE-3
Kanpur II and Saldya Panchyat -Members' Principal Occupation

<u>Kanpur II</u>							
Year	Teacher	Owner Cultivator	Share Cropper	Business	Govt. Service	Labourer	Total
1978	3	7	2	1	1	1	15
1983	2	4	4	0	0	1	11
1988	4	4	0	1	2	3	14
<u>Saldya</u>							
1978	6	10	0	2	0	2	20
1983	2	11	0	6	0	2	21
1988	5	10	0	6	0	3	24

Source: Neil Webster, 'Panchayati Raj and the Decentralisation of Development Planning in West Bengal' 1990; pp 63-72.

If we take the most vulnerable groups i.e. the share croppers and labourers, their proportion has only been 14 % in 1978, 21% in 1983 and 21% in 1988 which means the powers in the decentralised structures lay with the educated, propertied and business sections of the society.

In the Indian context, caste is synonymous with economic and social status. Therefore, it is relevant to look at the caste composition of the panchayat members. Table-4 indicates the representation of people by caste background. It is clear that the "general" caste tends to predominate the representative bodies.

On the basis of these figures, it is difficult to generalise as to whether agrarian reform has brought about any perceptible difference in the composition of the PRI in West Bengal by breaking the barrier and monopolistic control of power through patronage and clientalism. Nevertheless, there are a significant number of representatives coming from the so-called weaker sections of the society.

TABLE-4
Gram Panchayat Members by Caste in Kanpur II and Saldya

Kanpur II					
Year	Scheduled Caste	Scheduled Tribe	Muslim	General Caste	Total
1978	5	0	0	10	15
1983	3	0	0	8	11
1988	5	0	0	9	14
Saldya					
1978	4	0	2	14	20
1983	6	0	2	13	21
1988	7	0	3	14	24

Source: Neil Webster, 'Panchayati Raj and the Decentralisation of Development Planning in West Bengal' 1990; pp 65-73.

The study conducted by N. Sivanna on the working of Koratagere Taluk in Karnataka portrays a contrasting picture to the West Bengal experience. Karatagere Taluk is inhabited by different religious and caste groups. Of the castes, the Vokkaligas and Lingayats are the economically and numerically dominant groups who hold the political power. This is evident from the caste structure of the Koratagere TDB.

TABLE-5
The Cast Structure of Taluk Development Board in Koratagere

Caste	Number of Members	Percentage
Vokkaligas	7	46.66
Lingayats	1	6.66
Brahmin	1	6.66
SC/ST	2	13.34
Nayaks	1	6.67
Bovi	1	6.67
Kuruba	1	6.67
Banajigas	1	6.67
Total	15	100.00

Note: In the caste hierarchy, Brahmin ranks first, Lingayat, and Vokkaligas rank the second, Nayaks, Bovi, Kuruba and Banjigas third and fourth respectively.

Source: N. Sivanna, 'Panchayati Raj Reform and Rural Development' 1990, p-90

It is evident from the Table that out of the total TDB members, 7 (46.66%) belong to the Vokkaliga community, the dominant caste in the Taluk. Since the inception of TDB, this community has enjoyed a major share in the power structure. SC/STs only occupy the reservation quota though they are numerically next to Vokkaligas in the Taluk (Sivanna, 1990:90). Looking at land ownership conditions in rural areas, it shows that members of the upper castes, as per position in the caste system, wield a higher share than other caste members. Out of a total of 15 members, 20 per cent own land between 1-5 acres, whereas 40 per cent own land ranging from 11 to 20 acres. Ten members belonging to Vokkaligas, Lingayats and Brahmins own land, which come under the last three categories. The above-mentioned data supports the fact that the existing inequalities in the society tend to reinforce the power structure in a decentralised system. Table-6 illustrates the landholding pattern of the TDB.

TABLE-6

Land ownership of Taluka Development Board members of Karetgere in Karnataka

Land ownership in Acres	no. of members	percentage
1-5	3	20.00
6-10	6	40.00
11-15	3	20.00
16-20	3	20.00

Source : Sivanna, 'Panchayati raj Reform and Rural Development' 1990,p-94.

It is apparent that rural elites dominate in the PRI power structure. The inherent contradictions, as depicted in the above Tables, have to be corrected by measures such as land reform, as in states like West Bengal and Kerala, or through special reservation policies to ensure that all sections secure their legitimate representation. It is interesting to note that in the study conducted by K. Subha in Karnataka, after the reservation policy for representation of weaker sections in the panchayati raj system, there has been considerable shift in the constitution of local representation (see Table 7)

TABLE -7

Caste Composition of Panchayat Members in Karnataka 1995 Election

Caste	GP	TP	ZP	Overall
Adi Karnataka(SC)	503 (12.5)	23 (9.5)	35 (6.8)	561 (11.7)
Adi Dravid (SC)	80 (2.0)	1 (0.4)	5 (1.0)	86 (1.8)
Bhovi	76 (1.9)	2 (0.8)	10 (1.9)	88 (1.8)
Gowda/Vokkaliga	543 (13.5)	45 (18.5)	84 (16.3)	672 (14.1)
Lingayats	676 (16.8)	37 (15.2)	100 (19.4)	813 (17.0)
Brahmin	100 (2.5)	8 (3.3)	12 (2.3)	120 (2.5)
Bunt/Rai/Shetty	35 (0.9)	2 (0.8)	8 (1.6)	45 (0.9)
Kodava	14 (0.3)	-	3 (0.6)	17 (0.4)
Reddy	62 (1.5)	5 (2.1)	9 (1.7)	76 (1.6)
Madiwalar	16 (0.4)	1 (0.4)	3 (0.6)	20 (0.4)
Banajiga	29 (0.7)	1 (0.4)	1 (0.2)	31 (0.6)
Kuruba	275 (6.8)	22 (9.1)	60 (11.7)	357 (7.5)
Lambani/Soliga (ST)	71 (1.8)	12 (4.9)	16 (3.1)	99 (2.1)
Gonda (ST)	24 (0.6)	-	1 (0.2)	25 (0.5)
Maratha	73 (1.8)	2 (0.8)	11 (2.1)	86 (1.8)
Naik (ST)	177 (4.4)	12 (4.9)	20 (3.9)	209 (4.4)
Others	1,041 (25.1)	57 (23.5)	121 (23.9)	1,216 (25.4)
Muslims/christian	222 (5.5)	13 (5.3)	14 (2.7)	249 (5.2)
Total	4,017 (100)	243 (100)	515 (100)	4,775 (100)

Figures in parenthesis are percentage, Source: K. Subha, 'Karnataka Panchayat Election 1995' 1997, p-51-52

According to the study conducted by K. Subha in Karnataka, after the reservation policy for representation of weaker sections in the panchayati raj system, there has been a considerable shift in the constitution of local leadership. Out of 4,775 elected members interviewed, 1,938 belonged to the backward caste communities which form 40.5% of all members. This percentage demonstrates an upward trend. The percentage of representatives belonging to backward communities was only 39 per cent at Gram Panchayat level, 44.4 per cent at Taluk level and 50 per cent in Zilla Parishad level (Subha, 1997: 50). Two vocal and politically powerful castes in Karnataka - the Vokkaligas and the Lingayats²⁸ - constituted only 14 and 17 per cent respectively. The representation of STs at all three tiers has not exceeded 5 per cent which is proportional to the ST population in Karnataka i.e. 4.26%. The emerging pattern points to the fact that appropriate policy measures such as reservation can create empowering conditions and certainly serve to correct the internal unequal power equation which often distorts the logic of devolution.

4.2.3 Cultural Conditions

In the context of this study, the concept of cultural conditions²⁹ is used in a very limited sense, i.e., to examine whether the norms and standards of development changed. Although PRI is an age-old institution, it can no longer be considered an institution devoid of the dynamics and characteristics of a modern organisation. The structure, powers, functions and modus operandi of PRI require a proficiency and skill compatible with modern times. The question is, should the method and norm of development require a different frame or parameter in India, considering 46 per cent of its population³⁰ is illiterate? Given this reality, is it appropriate to follow the standard procedures defined by the 'literate'? Should there be reservation for the illiterate too, like the reservation for women and "backward" classes? Let us examine the educational background of the elected members of Taluk Development Board in Karnataka. The following Tables 8 and 9 show the profile of the elected members during 1978-83 and 1995-2000.

TABLE-8

The Educational Background of the Taluk Development Board Members in Karnataka 1978

Educational Level	Number of Members	Percentage
Lower Primary	6	40.00
Primary	-	-
SSLC	3	20.00
PUC	2	13.33
Graduate	3	20.00
Diploma	1	6.67
Total	15	100.00

Source : Sivanna, 'Panchyati raj Reform and Rural Development' 1990,p-94.

It is evident from Table-8 that TDB had no member without basic educational background. Out of 15 members, 40% had lower primary education, 20% had secondary school level, 13% had Pre University (equivalent to higher secondary) and 20% had degree education. The profile of the members of PRI in recent elections to the panchayat, held in 1995, in Karnataka (Table-9) indicates that 11.2 per cent at GP

²⁸ Lingayat and Vokkaligas belong to the upper castes sections occupying top in the social ladder.

²⁹ It is difficult to gauge the meaning and relevance of cultural aspects in the working of decentralised systems since it can encompass a range of spheres. Culture encompasses '...every aspect of life, know-how, technical knowledge, customs of food and dress, religion, mentality, values, language symbols, socio-political and economic behaviour, indigenous methods of taking decisions and exercising power, methods of production and economic relations and so on' (Verhelst 1990).

³⁰ India has almost 2.5 times more illiterate people than the whole of Sub-Saharan Africa (HDR in South Asia, 1997:31)

level, 2.1 per cent at TP level and 1.2 per cent at ZP level are comprised of illiterate persons. Hence, there are relatively fewer illiterates represented in proportion to their actual number. Here, one confronts the problem of under representation on one hand, and on the other, inefficient representation on account of the inability of members to actively participate.

Studies conducted on the participation of members in the working of PRI have shown that members with less or no education are often silent at meetings or their views are not respected. For example, the study of Webster on West Bengal PRI, reported that 'when the poor scheduled caste men were asked why they did not speak, the most frequent reply was "what would I have to say? I just listen to the others"' (Webster, 1990: 114). One can understand the difficulty of an illiterate person even in believing that he has something to say, let alone to try and express his thoughts in the same forum and on the same basis as a local educated person.

A study conducted by Webster on household male attendance at public meetings in two GPs in West Bengal indicates that, among the Scheduled Castes present in the meetings, only 2 percent actually speak, and none of the attending Scheduled Tribes speak. Compare this to the members present from the general castes, of whom 45 per cent speak (1990: 113). Faced with the dilemma of under representation of illiterate on one side, and inefficient participation on the other, education for all becomes a critical condition for effective operationalisation of a decentralised system.

The planning process can be cited as an example of how regular norms and standards can reinforce the above-mentioned problem. Usually, the block office obtains the framework for planning from the district planning office. As envisaged in the guidelines, under the block plans, it is expected to identify households in the block for the purposes of assisting them to raise their level of income and suggest schemes and projects for income generating activities. To achieve this purpose, the block level planners must conduct census enumeration of all households in the selected village of the block. The prepared scheme is submitted to Block Development officers and it is his or her responsibility to transmit the same to the district office.

TABLE -9
Educational Background of Panchayat members in 1995 Election in Karnataka.

Educational level	GP	TP	ZP	Overall
Illiterate	448 (11.2)	5 (2.1)	6 (1.2)	459 (9.6)
Literate	617 (15.4)	10 (4.1)	11 (2.1)	638 (13.4)
Primary< 4th std.	567 (14.1)	22 (9.1)	20 (3.9)	609 (12.8)
Upper Primary(4-7)	784 (19.5)	42 (17.3)	58 (11.3)	884 (18.5)
Secondary(Upto 10)	407 (10.1)	34 (14.0)	65 (12.6)	506 (10.6)
SSLC	538 (13.4)	48 (18.80)	107 (20.8)	693 (14.5)
PUC	247 (6.1)	32 (13.2)	72 (14.0)	351 (7.4)
Degree	311 (7.7)	36 (14.8)	123 (23.9)	470 (9.8)
Post Graduation	16 (0.4)	5 (2.1)	16 (3.1)	37 (0.8)
Law	23 (0.6)	4 (1.6)	17 (3.3)	44 (0.9)
Engineering	9 (0.2)	1 (0.4)	6 (1.2)	16 (0.3)
Diploma	24 (0.6)	2 (0.8)	8 (1.6)	34 (0.7)
Medicine	6 (0.1)	1 (0.4)	3 (0.6)	10 (0.2)
BEd/MEd	8 (0.2)	-	3 (0.6)	11 (0.2)
Any other	12 (0.3)	1 (0.4)	-	13 (0.3)
Total	4017 (100)	243 (100)	515 (100)	4,775 (100)

Figures in parenthesis are percentage, Source: K. Subha, 'Karnataka Panchayat Election 1995' 1997, p-54.

It can be seen that the above process is one based upon knowledge-based skills. The difficulties facing the majority (illiterate) population in becoming a part of this process are thereby evident. To quote Sivanna in his study of the working of PRI :

Although a lot is said, discussed and conceived about the planing from below or grassroots level, there has not been any serious effort on the part of the state governments to establish a planning machinery, nor at the block level. Neither has it evolved any machinery nor has recognised the participation of grassroots level organisation while formulating block plans. (Sivanna, 1990: 160-61).

It is apparent that the supremacy of technique and knowledge tends to overrule the procedures and therefore, the question is should the norms and procedure require change for enabling conditions like education?

4.2.4 Organisational conditions

Decentralisation is often criticised, for its lack of requisite knowledge and skills to manage the affairs efficiently. One can often observe conflicts and tensions over the intersecting boundaries of representative bodies and administration. The distribution of powers among the three tiers of PRI structures under different governments amply demonstrates these tensions and contradictions. The balance of power and autonomy will, at times lurch in favour of the representative bodies, and at times tilt towards bureaucracy depending upon the whims and fancy of the ruling government. Examining the nature and manner of the distribution of power among various tiers under different circumstances is of particular relevance here in order to recognise apparent limitations and weaknesses of a particular type of organisational arrangement for the effective functioning of a decentralised structure.

The first case described here refers to the distribution of powers and functions of panchayat during 1978-1983 period, before the new legislation on PR was brought in Karnataka. The Panchayati Raj system in Karnataka had, at that period, a three tier structure: the panchayat, the TDB and the District Development Council (DDC). The panchayat, the basic unit, membership of which consisted of not less than 11 and not more than 19 directly elected members, was considered an agency of government. According to the provisions of the Act, every panchayat was required to constitute three committees by election to carry out functions *entrusted and delegated* to it in respect of agriculture, public health, sanitation and promotion of village industries.

The next tier, i.e., the TDB, constituted members directly elected for each block. The TDB was also required to constitute four committees - Standing Committee, Audit Committee, Public Health Committee, and Social Justice Committee by election. But the functions carried out by the TDB were programmes under community development and Five Year Plans in accordance with the *orders* of the state government. The TDB could take up discretionary works, such as famine relief, public transport facilities, trade, etc.. but only with the approval of the state government. TDB's funds came mainly from the state government, making it an instrument in the hands of the state government.

The apex of PRI was the District Development Council (DDC/Zilla Parishad) which was constituted for each district. The DDC consisted of the president of all the TDB in the district; the members of Parliament and state Assembly, representing that district. A member each from the SC/ST and women were nominated by the state government during that period. The striking feature of DDC of the period was the placement of Deputy Commissioner (Head of District Administration) of the district as the ex-

officio President of the DDC. The state government could thereby directly exercise control over the district administration. Hence, the elected council had no role or little role in the affairs of district development. The DDC had not been assigned any independent sources of revenue. In the words of Sivanna '... the District Development Council became a bureaucratic organisation rather than an organisation of the elected representatives of the people'. (Sivanna, 1990: 56)

The second case concerns the PRI when the Janata government came into power in Karnataka, in 1983. The new Panchyati Raj Act, passed in 1985, conferred considerable powers and autonomy to the panchayat. The GS was expected to discuss and review all development programmes of the village, select beneficiaries, plan for local improvement, including minimum needs and welfare, and plan for production-oriented activities. At the Panchayat level, the president of the panchayat presided over the meeting and took the support of the administration in carrying out the tasks. The panchayat secretary, assisted by the bill collectors, managed the administrative affairs of the panchayat. Attendance of senior officers for every GS meeting, keeping records of discussion, was insisted upon. Similarly, the Mandal Panchayat was entrusted with obligatory, discretionary and transferred powers and responsibilities³¹.

The Mandal Panchayat functioned through the standing committees, namely a production committee, animal husbandry and rural industry; a social justice committee, and an amenities committee. A body higher was the Taluk Panchayat Samiti. This body was entrusted with advisory, supervisory, review and inter-Mandal co-ordination functions³². The body was 'deliberately designed to act as an advisory body, with no powers, functions or even legal identity in so much as it could neither sue nor be sued against.' (Meenakshisundaram, 1994:78). But the second directly elected tier of the model, i.e., Zilla Parishads were given maximum powers. Under this scheme, the ZP administered schemes and programmes transferred to it or evolved by it; maintained cadres for manning the ZP and Mandal staff; formulated district plans; framed and approved its budgets and approved the budget of its Mandals. On the constitution of the ZP, all the district rural development societies were dissolved and their functions transferred to the respective ZP.

This model gave relative freedom to each tier in the system. The state retained only the power of dissolution for excesses or abuse of their powers. The extent of autonomy statutorily ensured to the ZPs and Mandals is unique in the Karnataka system. For instance, no government officer can suspend a resolution of a Mandal or ZP; there is no government officer as controlling officer; there is no apex body above ZP as District Planning Board or Development council; the budget prepared by the Mandal are not amended by the ZP or State Planning Board. In other words, the PRI enjoyed considerable autonomy in its functioning and the system ensured a transfer of real powers to the people.

In the case of West Bengal, PRI was accorded considerable responsibility in organising and administering the development of rural areas. For instance, the ZP was primarily responsible for overall control of the district's development. It acted as the interface between a district's political institutions and state government since 1978 when the Left Front came to office. The overall management of its affairs was the responsibility of the chairperson. On the revamping of the PR in West Bengal, Webster

³¹ The duty of the panchayat on obligatory functions include: construction, repair and maintenance of roads, drains, bunds, regulation, of grazing lands of the villages and some regulatory functions such as regulation of building, shops, of the curing, tanning and dyeing of skins and hides. The discretionary functions encompass measures which will promote health, safety, education or general well-being of the people. The transferred functions were those assigned by the government, for instance, management of forests, wasteland cultivation, management of minor irrigation etc.

³² It is said that the relegation of the status of Taluk Panchayat Samiti was a political compromise since Karnataka Act was piloted by a minority government.

writes that it is notable for 'the ending of "rock departmentalism" with the establishment of a structured relationship between the locally elected politicians and the departmental officers, with the latter advising and executing the decisions of the former' (Webster, 1990:128).

The legislation provided the formal basis for co-operation in the panchayats and their committees, but in practice each began by holding the other in great suspicion and distrust. Before 1978, the technical and administrative officers had wielded considerable powers in the management of local area development. After the panchayati raj reform the departmental officers could no longer exercise their authority over respective domains in the manner in which they had been accustomed. The Block development officer found him/herself to be an ex-officio member to the panchayat samiti and was expected, with other block level officers, to implement the decisions it passed. Similarly the district level officers were required to work with elected bodies. There has always been tension between the elected representatives and government officers especially in the past. The study of Webster (1990 :131) pointed out that those elected to the new panchayat came with a political animosity towards the officers. This was based on a combination of bitter personal experience and ideological commitment to the reorganisation of local administration.

The superiority-inferiority complexes leading to the misunderstanding between the BDO and the president has also been pointed out in the study of Sivanna on the working of TDB in Karnataka. Addressing the question of the government officer's attitudes towards non officials, Sivanna reported that about 68.75 per cent felt that non-officials would use them for personal gains.(see also Shiviah 1979: 78).

The transformation of the relations between the elected local politician and the administrative service is crucial for the successful implementation of the PR. In the words of Bhargava, " It is widely felt and not wrongly so, that the success of the Panchayati Raj system depends largely on the balanced relationship between officials and non-officials". (Bhargava, 1979:324). A positive relationship between these two will have a direct bearing on bridging the gap between the role expectation and role performance of Panchayati Raj in rural development.

4.2.5 Conditions on the Economic Front

Despite conferring adequate political autonomy and independence, decentralisation may not succeed, especially in the context of the Southern countries, owing to lack of resources. Inadequate resources are, in some cases, the main cause for espousing decentralisation, while at the same time it is this lack of adequate resource base that has lead to its demise. Income constraints have been a major problem with the Mandal panchayat, for instance in Karnataka, even after the radical revitalisation of the PRI system when the Janata Party came into power. Table-10 indicates the income pattern of three Mandal Panchayats in Karnataka, during the most progressive period, i.e. 1987-1992. The table presents the Mandal income aggregated for five years. The average annual income of the Mandal is about Rs. 180,000. On the assumption that the average population size of a Mandal is 12,000, it is able to yield an annual per capita of Rs.15 which is meagre (less than half a dollar per person). Examining the sources of this income, one notes that two-thirds comes from the grant of the state government and the remaining one-third comes from the Mandal's own revenue. In the study 'Decentralisation in developing countries' (1996:81), Meenakshisundaram estimated that the general and united grant of a

Mandal is about Rs. 75,000 (\$3700) and the average collection of taxes and other sources of revenue is Rs. 20,000 (\$1000) per annum, which together constitute the main source of finance for a Mandal, i.e., about \$ 4,700. The resources of ZP on an average registered between 40-45 crores (about \$2 mn. per annum). Ray (1987) estimated the total receipts of ZP at US \$ 15-20 mn.(cited in Slater and Watson, 1989: 152). The extremely limited base of the Karnataka Mandal's resources impoverished their credibility and capacity to undertake any worthwhile development function, thereby defeating the basic purpose of PR in the state.

Due to a lack of resources, the elected representatives were unable to meet the demands of the people, and they began to countermand public meetings for one reason or another. Simultaneously, people began to lose confidence in their elected representatives, gradually leading to the erosion of the system. In many Mandals, the GS had not been convened regularly, for fear of being unable to meet the demands of the people on the one hand, and for lack of public interest (since their aspirations were not met) on the other. (Meenakshisundaram 1996:85). Since the number of projects suggested by the people, and the name of the beneficiaries identified in GS meetings were generally very large, a process of sifting and choosing took place in MP meetings. Thus, members could commit themselves to only a few projects and beneficiaries. This practice lead to complaints of favouritism and negligence, being levelled against MPs.

TABLE-10
Income Pattern of Mandal Panchayat in Karnataka 1987-1992 (in Rs)

Items of income	Hunasenahalli	Julapalya	Hinkal	N.Belthur*
Taxes and rates	181,635 (20.46)	79,699 (15.18)	6,237,544 (59.89)	256,000 (21.50)
Non-Tax revenue	26,950 (3.04)	10,933 (2.08)	2,236,591 (21.47)	252,500 (21.21)
Grants	646,237 (72.79)	368,759 (70.25)	1,276,981 (12.26)	484,152 (40.6)
Misc. deposit, bal.	32,791 (3.71)	65,540 (12.49)	664,445 (6.38)	198,000 (16.63)
Total	887794 (100)	524,931 (100)	10,415,562 (100)	1,190,652 (100)

Figures in Parenthesis are percentages *Data for this Mandal is for only four years.

Source: Aziz, Nelson, and Babu , "Power to the People: The Karnataka Experiment" , 1996 p-159

Another dimension to consider in relation to inadequate resources is elucidated by Webster in his study of West Bengal PR experiments. He points out that, the programmes administered by the panchayat are underfunded, and therefore, few of those in need of the benefits receive adequate employment or financial support to produce a significant transformation of their economic conditions. This is true particularly for landless labourers who rely on wage labour for income. While their conditions have changed, directly through government paid work and higher wage rates, they have no greater economic security and remain dependent on central and state government support (Webster, 1990: 135). This unfolds two problems: (i) the local body is not able to undertake any production/asset creating programmes, and; (ii) dependence on the programmes defined and designed by the state/central government.

Webster's study reveals that although the share of the panchayat's own revenue shows upward growth (annual average growth rate 30%), the proportion of state/central grant constituting the part of the Panchayat's income increased almost 10 times (Rs.13,7252/Rs.13,855) compared with own revenue in 1987-88. It was 8 times more in 1986-87 and 1985-86 (Webster 1990: 164).

Because of this, at the GP level, it is not possible to clearly differentiate between participation in decision-making about implementing programmes that have been sanctioned by the higher bodies, and participation that generates control and ownership of decisions. The consequence of this reality is visible in various forms. For example, 'for the villager, the request for work, or for an IRDP loan, or for a tube well in their area is based upon their immediate needs and it is left to the GP to sort out, subject to eligibility, existing funds or to be included in the next year programme. The reality is that these are based on 5 per cent increase on the previous year's funding. As such, its planning proposals tend to be confined within quite specific financial parameters, and its input into planning at the higher level is mainly the data it supplies at their request' (Webster, 1990: 141).

The autonomy to pursue bottom-up development was severely constrained by lack of resources and over-dependence on the state's grants. Sivanna makes this point in his analysis of the work of TDB in Koratagere Taluk, Karnataka, and continues '...The functions assigned to are so many that unless sufficient provisions are made for the definite sources of income, the TDBs may not be in a position to discharge them satisfactorily...Though the government makes grants, which are development based, *the TDB has no control over them*' (Sivanna, 1990: 238; emphasis added).

The issue is that the Panchayats are not resource rich and hence, panchayats must depend on the grant transfers from the state/central governments. In a country like India, where there is a great deal of regional disparities (see for example Table: 10. Hinkal GP's own resources constitute about 80% of total revenue. This is because Hinkal is situated in an industrially rich belt), the policy of central pooling and redistribution is most appropriate. Two questions emerge: Are the resources adequately transferred? and; Does the transfer of these resources create conditions that would facilitate independent functioning of the GP? To date, the government is yet to act on the issue of earmarking funds.

4.3. Accountability

The stability of the edifice of the panchayati raj structure greatly depends on how firm the corner stone of accountability is laid in place. Holding individuals and institutions responsible for rendering services among its constituent stockholder on the basis of social justice and principles of equity is a critical condition for its success and it should become an important criteria in evaluating decentralisation. One difficulty in doing so relates to the conception of accountability as an outcome and as a process. This study, deals with analyses of various processes which could ensure accountability including checks and balance systems in practice.

One way to measure accountability is to assess distribution of benefits among the target groups, in terms of distributive justice. The case of the National Rural Employment Programme (NREP) and Integrated rural Development Programme (IRDP) are taken as examples for analysis, from the study of West Bengal and Karnataka. The former is a programme intended to provide work for those who need it most during periods when there is scarcity of work within certain localities. The latter is aimed at assisting poor families to become economically self-sufficient, through the provision of investment loans. The targets of both programmes are vulnerable groups. In the operationalisation of NREP, especially in the case of Saldya GP in West Bengal, there have been participatory and democratic procedures. The GP has played an overt role in administering

the work and deciding who should receive the work days. The GP would convene a meeting in which the proposed work is discussed and labourers are selected on the basis of criteria such as land ownership. The following Table shows the caste-wise break-up of receipt of wage days.

TABLE-11

Receipts of Work under NREP by caste in Kanpur II and Saldya GP in West Bengal

Castes	Kanpur II		Saldya		Total	
	Total HH	Work Rec'd	Total HH	Work Rec'd	Total HH	Work Rec'd
Gen. Caste	32	2	37	8	69	10
SC	37	31	34	20	71	51
ST	5	5	0	0	5	5
Muslim	1	1	4	3	5	4
Total	75	39	75	31	150	70

Source: Neil Webster, 'Panchayti Raj and the Decentralisation of Development Planning in West Bengal' 1990;p 94.

It is evident from the Table that most of the benefits of this scheme went to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes category (85 per cent of the total work received). According to Webster, this achievement was possible because the allocation of work was organised by the GP working in close co-operation with a local organisation, the Krisak Samiti, with which it identified beneficiaries and possible projects such as road repairs, culvert cleaning, and pond cleaning. The GP members, working with the Krisak Samiti, submitted proposals and carried out the work in the locality and submitted the accounts to the GP. The local organisation, with its Communist Party of India (CPI [M]) ideology, acted as a countervailing force against corruption. This is in Putnam's words, 'pre-existing social capital', which I shall deal with in the coming section. The linkage with the village people, through GS or local organisation like Krisak Samiti, sets conditions for the equitable distribution of benefits.

Contrasting experiences are illustrated by Sivanna, in his study on the working and accountability of TDB between 1978-83, taking the case of distribution of IRDP beneficiaries. The distribution of beneficiaries by broad categories is illustrated in Table-12.

TABLE-12

The distribution of beneficiaries by broad categories of benefits schemes provided in two cluster villages in Karnataka

Schemes	Kolala			Vaddagere		
	sc/st	others	total	sc/st	others	total
Animal hus.	9(36)	7(28)	16(64)	7(28)	9(36)	16(64)
Agriculture	2(8)	-	2(8)	3(12)	4(16)	7(28)
Rural artisan	-	7(28)	7(28)	-	2(8)	2(8)
Total	11(44)	14(56)	25(100)	10(40)	15(60)	25(100)

Figures in Parenthesis is percentage

Source: Sivanna "Panchayati raj Reform and Rural Development" 1990 p-198.

The number of beneficiaries who received assistance under the scheme indicates that a higher percentage of recipients belonged to other than SCs in both the villages. In Kolala, the number of beneficiaries belonging to ST/SC combined were only 44 per cent of the recipients, while the

number of beneficiaries belonging to other castes constituted 56 per cent. Similarly in Vaddagere village, while the beneficiaries belonging to the ST/SC constituted only 40 per cent, the other caste category constituted 60 per cent. What is the reason for this discrepancy compared to the West Bengal experience? According to Sivanna (1990:200) the reason was that the selection of beneficiaries was based on information provided by the Panchayat chairman and other influential leaders. As a result, many families who were quite well-off succeeded in having their names entered in the survey. Another major scheme implemented by the TDB is the Peoples' Housing Scheme (PHS); analysis of which also reveals similar conclusions. In the identification and selection of eligible beneficiaries, there were sharp differences between the non-officials of the TDB, including MLA and the chairman of respective panchayats. Though there was an official committee comprising of the BDO, the Assistant Engineer and the Officer of the Primary Health Centre, the entire task of selecting beneficiaries was carried out by the presidents of the TDB and MLA. They played a major role in having most of the houses allotted to their respective constituencies (Ibid, 206).

Several irregularities pointing to a lack of accountability and legitimacy in the working of TDB have been demonstrated in Sivanna's study. For instance there are many situations where conflicts were exposed by members of opposition groups over the allotment of works undertaken by the TDB. Despite opposition, the president and his allies allotted the work to members belonging to their own group. This has created despondency and frustration among opposition groups leading to indifference. In selecting contractors for works like the construction and repairs of shelters, buildings, culverts, tank *bunds*, schools and roads, etc., the president would put pressure on the BDO to assign works to his own henchmen. (ibid., 146). On one hand, one notices nepotism and corruption in the behaviour of the elected representatives, on the other, one sees the non-commitment towards works attitude of the officials for the welfare of the masses of the people. In the perception of elected representatives, officials are interested only in the exercise of power and authority.

Several perplexing questions arise: does decentralisation by itself yield the intended results without accountability? Does the right to make decisions at the local level automatically ensure principle of justice and equity? The argument that freedom to choose local representatives places every one on an equal footing, allowing each to have their interests represented equally, is only a farce in the absence of proper accountability. In other words, what conditions are necessary for the establishment of a system which meets the basic purpose of decentralisation?

The contrast between the working of PRI in Karnataka, in this case before the new 1983 Act, and West Bengal, after the reform of PRI in 1978, could be attributed to the linkage of the GP with the GS. In West Bengal, the GS has been a real weapon to command accountability in the local working of the PRI. In West Bengal, involvement of the rural population in the affairs of local government has gone beyond ballot boxes. Undoubtedly, the electoral process itself can also ensure accountability through electoral rewards or punishment. More important for the accountability process is that every panchayat holds a minimum of two public meetings in each village, i.e. GS, per year. In these meetings, the previous year's accounts, the budget and proposed expenditures, and work planned for the next year is presented for discussion. (Webster, 1990: 112).

The increasing transfer of responsibility for programme implementation to the GP has achieved qualitative changes in such development works in a remarkably short period. Prior to 1977, overt instances of corruption in handling development and co-operative funds, bribery, and work completed only on paper were reported. In 1989 complaints existed but they were in the nature of political bias in the allocation of funds and not amassing of funds by elected members or officials. There is general acceptance that GPs are not corrupt. (ibid, 1990:134). Earlier, corruption occurred without the people's knowledge. Since districts and Mandals are smaller units, but with a large number of people's representatives functioning as watch dogs, little can be hidden from the public view.

John Echeverri-Gent, of Virginia University, observed that in the context of West Bengal, while the political process provides avenues for corruption, it also creates mechanisms to contain corruption. Voters use electoral sanctions against panchayat members if found corrupt or despotic. The issue of accountability can, thus, be addressed through holding regular elections of the PRI.

4.4. Social Capital and its differentiating Impact

Although the socio-political characteristics and ethos present in a given society are critical factors, they are not usually recognised as tending to produce differentiating results in the working of PRIs.

Although it is difficult to ascertain precisely the degree to which cultural factors influenced the effective workings of the PRI, nevertheless, one can notice the effect of such factors in the functioning of local governance. For example, in West Bengal the implementation of PRI is part and parcel of CPI(M)'s core strategy to empower the poor to bring them collectively into the process of local government and rural development. The central element in this strategy is aimed at consolidating the party's political position, its organisation and mass support of a substantial section of the rural population, enabling it to organise and respond to its needs in the subsequent period. Whatever might be its ideological underpinnings, CPI(M) argues that the interests of the party and of these groups are one and the same. Thus, they suggest that a decentralised government, the devolution of the process of planning, the participation achieved through direct elections to the panchayats, and reforms that enable the poorest to participate as the poor and not as clients of the powerful, are all important steps towards political development, and a people's democracy (Webster). It is the strong political will of the Left Front Government which has led to the successful implementation of PRI in West Bengal, against a host of vested interests.

With a combination of its 'power to the poor' political ideology, and the introduction of direct elections to all tiers of panchayat, the CPI(M) was able to break the ties of vested interests that existed in the former GP. At the village level, it had been relatively easy for local vested interests to mobilise blocks of votes through dependency bondage, by way of loans, tenancy, networks of kinship and caste and the wide range of patron-client relationships which are usually found in village politics. While the relations that gave rise to these dependency ties certainly remain, it is more difficult for a patron to use these to mobilise political support because of the shift in state ideology.

Upon discovery, instances of misappropriation and corruption of funds by GP members are overtly punished; it is not necessary to wait for a term of five years to condemn the deed by electoral processes. In the course of his study, Webster (1990:134) points out that he only came across one instance of misappropriation of funds by a GP member. The CPI(M) punished the offender by removing him from office and forcing him to repay the amount pocketed. This was possible in the case of West Bengal because of the strong presence of an ideologically supported mass political base.

The importance of having strong community organisation in building accountability has been mentioned in the previous section, using the example of the Krisak Samiti. The differential impact of these community organisations upon local government accountability can be more fully explicated. In the early period of the Panchayat rule, the CPI(M) local activists would often resort to political tactics to challenge the administrative officers if they felt they were impeding the implementation panchayati decisions. In such instances, BDOs were stopped on their way to the village or office or blockaded in their office. Naturally, such demonstrations did little to increase co-operation between officials and non-officials. The role of Krisak Samiti, the mass front of CPI(M) is of particular relevance here. It asserts a strong control over its membership and active supporters, including those who are members of the panchayats. One thing that emerges from the above is that without the ideological commitment and the political dynamics, introduced by the party, the promotion and implementation of the PRI would not have been achieved.

Analysis of the working of TDB in Karnataka on factors such as respect for democracy and democratic values, indicates that the excess influence and interference by MLA and local leaders undermined the very fabric of the PRIs. The interference in the form of political pressure adversely affected the work efficiency of the officials because their promotion and rewards depended on the extent to which they satisfied the State politicians. Otherwise, any untoward incident would result in the untimely, or premature transfers. These interferences not only affected the officials but also non-officials in the form of defections from one party to another, toppling of the president and untimely changes of leadership (Sivanna, 1990:126). Several instances of misappropriation and nepotism by non-officials are also cited by Sivanna (ibid, p-4-50). It is noteworthy to point out that individual qualities and achievements had greater influence than the party, caste and education of the candidates in elections held in 1995, which has been pointed out in Subha's recent study. Table-13 below shows the reasons for voting for a particular candidate.

Table-13
Reasons for Voting for a Particular Candidate in 1995 Panchayat Election in Karnataka

Reasons	Number of Respondents	Per centage
Not Voted	268	7.66
Good Person	1,556	46.55
Interested in Social Work	246	7.36
Own Party Candidate	384	11.48
Own Caste/Relative	46	1.37
Own Village	64	1.37
Previous Performance	71	2.21
Educated	35	1.10
Efficient	747	22.30
Others	96	2.90

Source: K. Subha, 'Karnataka Panchayat Elections 1995', (1997) p-28.

Two important inferences can be drawn from the above Table. Firstly, a considerable percentage of the people (46.55), chose to elect a candidate on the basis of his/her rating of the individual's qualities as a good person, as opposed to party affiliation. Such a trend suggests the existence of political parties with weak ideologies and commitment. This conclusion is supported by Sivanna's explanations of the working of TDB. A weak political/ideological framework prompts people to look up to a candidate with a relatively sound ethical conduct and behaviour. If the institutional checks and balances mechanisms are not in order, they are, in this context, replaced by social capital such as good persons and efficiency criteria. Second, people have less preference to elect a candidate on the basis of caste/relative/parochial consideration which could be considered as the preferences embedded in the democratic style of functioning. Another indicator for the respect for democracy could be inferred from the report of violence during elections. In the same study, it was revealed that according to 96.2 per cent of the respondents no violence was reported.

Comparing the contrasting socio-political situations of Karnataka and West Bengal, it is clear that certain cultural and political factors made a difference in the working of the PRI. It also emphasises the fact that the project of decentralisation is never universally applicable. The existing institutional mechanisms and socio-cultural characteristics can either deter or augment the smooth functioning of decentralised system.

4.5 Participation and Empowerment

The instrumental utility of participation varies according to the context and purpose for which participation is employed. Accordingly, participation can serve as : a process of co-operation; a process of taking benefits from certain schemes or programmes; a countervailing force against oppression; a means of gaining control over resources and decision-making; a process of gaining confidence and internal strength and; a means of self-development (empowerment). The relevance of participation is found in all these dimensions in the working of Panchayati Raj.

The instrumental value of participation in the context of the PRI is apparent in the goal of decentralising decision-making through local government. The presence of inequalities, reinforced by caste and economic conditions, has obstructed participation of all sections, making democracy the privilege of a few. If this is so, the question is, how can decentralisation work? And how can participation be possible?

Since the logic of decentralisation favours numbers, it would open up opportunities for the oppressed majority to organise and capture power for itself. This is where the value of participation as a countervailing force becomes relevant. The organisation of the poor and the vulnerable becomes a precondition for the effective exercise of power. The case studies of Karnataka and West Bengal show marked differences in the scales of representation of weaker sections and levels of participation. Studies conducted by Ray and Kumpatla (1987), Sivanna (1990) and Subha (1997), of the socio-economic profile of the elected representatives in Karnataka GP reveal that a significant portion of the elected representatives belong to high-income and socially privileged groups (see Tables 5-9, 10). Only the recent study of Subha, throws light on a different trend, i.e., that a high proportion of the representatives (40.5%) belong to "backward" castes (see Table

7). The sudden leap in the proportion of weaker section's representation is not a result of their socio-economic advancement or empowerment, but the effect of the recently introduced reservation system.

The experience in West Bengal is very different. In the 1989 Panchayat elections, many people belonging to the landless and deprived sections of society were elected to different Panchyati Raj Institutions, and especially to Gram panchayats. What is the basis for these differences, despite the fact that inequalities and caste oppression is everywhere? The main reason can be ascribed to the strategy of CPI(M), rooted in the mobilisation of the poor at the local level. The empowerment of the poor, or the establishment of a 'people's democracy' as the CPI(M) prefer to call it, is intended to go beyond the passive act of voting : its goal is to mobilise the poor into active participation in all aspects of local government and politics. In the case of West Bengal, the poor peasant and agricultural labourers have proved their potential to effect changes in their representation. The relevance of participation and empowerment reflected in the mobilisation and organisation of the poor in the West Bengal tends to suggest that a mere transfer of power as envisaged by devolution process will not automatically lead to a democratisation process, both political and economic. Participation becomes a condition and a process for effectively capturing the impact of democratic representation. This is where the role of NGOs and other intermediary organisations become paramount in the decentralisation process.

The role of local organisations in West Bengal, namely, the Krisak Samiti, in establishing "bottom-up" accountability has been pointed out earlier. The involvement of the rural population in the affairs of local government beyond the ballot box, by holding a minimum of two public meetings in each village every year where discussions and deliberations take place on scrutiny of accounts and future proposals, establishes control over the decision-making process. It has also contributed to reducing the incidence of corruption, favouritism and parochialism.

Webster's study on the electoral process in two GP in West Bengal showed that elections were highly participatory and about 95 per cent cast their vote in the 1978 election.

In the case of Karnataka, in the study of the functioning of the Mandal panchayat after its revitalisation, Aziz, Nelson and Babu (1996), point out that the Gram Sabha worked well in the first two years and meetings were held regularly. But in due course the number of meetings and villages in which the meeting were held gradually declined. Wherever meetings were held the attendance was not high.

According to Aziz et. al, the level of participation in the GS was reduced to the level of taking benefits from various schemes. The communities' participation revolved around the suggestion of location of amenities, such as health centres, drinking water, drainage, road construction and repairs, grant of loans, housing sites and lighting. Villagers were also consulted in the selection of beneficiaries for IRDP and Jowahar Rojgar Yojana (JRY).³³

This process of consultation in identification and location of projects is certainly far superior to the earlier method under the TDB system. Under the TDB, the decision was mainly influenced by one individual, i.e. the MLA or the chairman of the Panchayat. More often than not, MLA

³³ JRY is the renamed programme which earlier was known as the NREP which provided wage employment to those most in need of work throughout the year within close vicinity.

would take almost all the projects to his own or the villages of his close associates. As a result, projects were not equitably distributed across villages or regions of the Taluk. In the present system there is a wider dispersal of projects which in fact meets the equity criterion.(Ibid, p-155). Compared with West Bengal, the degree of participation in Karnataka is only nominal. There is a need for an awakening of the people from passive recipients to vigilant actors.

4.6 Conclusion

The analysis of the working of PRI in Karnataka and West Bengal reveals that the edifice of the structures of PRI rest on the stability of four main pillars, namely, autonomy, accountability, social capital and participation and empowerment. It has also unveiled that West Bengal's achievements in PRI functioning were not possible in Karnataka. It suggests that in the project of devolution, in the Indian context, the PRI cannot be a blanket policy for producing desired results. What is emerging is that the feasibility of the PRI depends on the existence of particular conditions.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: REVISITING DEBATES IN DECENTRALISATION

5.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to pull together a number of issues that have surfaced while analysing various conditions prevailing in the working of the Panchayati Raj in Karnataka and West Bengal, and to see whether those differences can serve as lessons, or feasibility criteria, for future decentralisation projects.

5.2 Lessons from the Past Experience

The foregoing discussion on the workings of the Panchayati Raj in Karnataka and West Bengal under different governments sheds much light on decentralisation. The findings and issues raised in this context relate to conditions which either obstructed or augmented the functioning of the Panchayati Raj. First of all, on the measure of autonomy, one of the vital elements for independent functioning - the Karnataka Panchayat Act of 1985, and the West Bengal Panchayat Act of 1978 - were epitomised as models of democratic devolution. In the transfer of power and autonomy for the local representative bodies, the initiatives of both the states were radical in nature. Autonomy, here, is neither referred to as autarchy nor as autarky. It means independence from the control and imposition from above, in so far as the right to make independent decisions at local levels. The analysis of the conferral of autonomy as external, enabling or facilitating conditions in both the states, reveals the following observation: whereas the accord of a bare minimum of independence to local bodies lasted for only one term of office, i.e. five years, from 1987 - 1992 in the state of Karnataka; in West Bengal it has continued to last. What are the reasons behind this? Does it mean that autonomy is not workable in some places? Is that the reason for subsequent governments to overturn the balance of autonomy? Does it mean that autonomy is incomplete, unless certain other conditions are fulfilled ?

The autonomy of these institutions from the clutches of patron client-relations, bondage, ties of caste, and kith and kin relations, as internal conditions, is equally important for their democratic functioning. From the analysis of these dimensions in the two states, it is difficult to deny the influences of the above features in the composition and functioning of the local representative bodies, although perceptible changes became visible in the case of West Bengal from the 1978 elections and in Karnataka to a great degree, only in the recent 1995 elections due to reservation. (See 4.2.2 above). The point is to recognise the fact that the existing social and economic inequalities influence the character and composition of the local structures to differing degrees. The study by K. Subha on the recent Panchayat Elections in Karnataka, for example, points out '...the role of caste as a factor influencing elections is reducing. Only 35.7 per cent said that caste influenced the election while 63.2 per cent reported that it did not have any influence on the election' (Subha, 1997: 26). The study by Webster revealed that although there are educated, propertied and business sections backing local representation, there is still a relatively significant number representing landless and weaker sections. The composition of representatives in the

panchayat studied showed that only 31% of the members owned land more than 2 acres in the 1978 election, 16% in 1983 and 26% in 1988.

What is pertinent to reflect upon here is the conditions under which these institutions can be empowered to function independent of the influences of caste and class. Shouldn't land reform be considered as one prerequisite for creating enabling conditions, as demonstrated to some degree in the experience of West Bengal? Shouldn't elections to the panchayat be held on a party basis³⁴, to minimise individual money-power and influences of caste and religion? Although the answers to these questions would support the positive trends, however limited, elaborated upon in this study, it would require further detailed studies in order to generalise.

At the level of cultural autonomy, the third aspect on the question of autonomy, the analysis revealed the following : (1) the standards and norms set for the local organisations to function are set by higher authorities, for example, the planning exercises which are mostly directed by line department and professionals; (2) the proportion of illiterate³⁵ representatives in the local bodies are relatively insignificant; (3) the illiterate who attend meetings are not able to speak or if they express themselves, their views are not respected. These realities raise the following issues: on one hand, one is confronted by the under representation of the truly poor and vulnerable; while on the other, there is ineffective representation of those who participate. The reasons for their ineffective participation in meetings can be ascribed to the *knowledge / power, hegemony* espoused by the educated representatives and officials. The agenda-setting by group dominating knowledge/power, discriminates against the voice of the voiceless. Under such circumstances, shouldn't the norms and standards be changed in order to enable the really vulnerable (46% illiterate) to participate effectively? If reservation policies are introduced for socially and economically backward sections in order to, at least, capture their representation numerically, shouldn't there be reservation explicitly stated for the illiterates as well, though there is no restriction for an illiterate to contest elections at present? Whether education or literacy is essential for accountable governance is contestable. For example, one of the successful chief ministers of Tamil Nadu in the sixties, Kamaraj, had no formal education. If literacy becomes an obstacle to the realisation of the goals of devolution, is it not then important to have education as a prerequisite for effective participation?

In defence of the above viewpoint, it can be argued that it is important to raise the status of vulnerable groups so as to facilitate a level playing-field. Bringing the poor on an equal footing with the economically strong carries with it a further implication that the poor would not be denied the opportunity of taking the future into their own hands. Hence, there is no 'price' required of the poor. Price, in this sense, refers to the cost involved in a democratic system which promotes the philosophy of a society ruled only by the educated and elite : a philosophy which operates at the expense of India's 46% of illiterates. Otherwise, the hegemony of the educated and the elite, who monopolise decision-making, would continue. The democratisation of development can take shape

³⁴ It should be mentioned that elections to the panchayats were not held on party lines. It was the Ashoka Mehta Committee Report of 1978 which unequivocally stated that political parties should be allowed to participate effectively at all levels. Following the recommendation, West Bengal was the first state to conduct elections on party lines as early as 1978. Karnataka followed the suit in 1987 election. The fact is that it is left to the state to "make provisions with respect to all matters relating to, or in connection with, elections to the Panchayat" (The Constitution of Seventy Third Amendment Act, 1992, On Panchayat ; Ministry of Rural Development Government of India New Delhi. p-7).

³⁵ Several studies have shown that there is direct relation between the level of literacy and the income of the household. In a strict sense, then, the real poor and vulnerable sections are those who are illiterate. See J. B. Knight and R. H. Sabot on "Educational Policy and Labour Productivity: an Out put Accounting Exercise", *The Economic Journal* 97, (Mar. 1987).

by this process of allowing the voiceless to pursue their own goals and agenda, suited to their interests and aspirations. Through this process, democracy begins to take on an entirely new significance : it is no longer the logic of the few and privileged sections of society, but a means of equitable justice. Thereby, democracy, in the former sense, become less relevant.

Another interesting dimension that emerges from the analysis of the working of the PRI in Karnataka and West Bengal relates to line of command in the relationship between official and non-official. The decision-making by the non-officials and the implementation of those decisions by the bureaucrats have been points of tension in both the states. These tensions can be characteristically portrayed as those of inferiority-superiority complex, misunderstanding, distrust and suspicion. Particular mention has to be made of the fact that the balance of power and autonomy of local representatives bodies over bureaucracy is, at times, affected by the inordinate treatment by the ruling government. Cordial and balanced relations between officials and non-officials is critical for the successful functioning of the PRI. The recognition of these facts has pertinence in the context of the criticism of lack of expertise or skills, a criticism commonly levelled against the implementation of decentralisation. The question of whether bureaucracy should supplement and complement the tasks of elected bodies or vice versa is a matter of debate and a subject of particular contextual reality. There can be no universal prescription. The lack of personnel to effectively manage the local affairs should be understood as a constraint which necessitates dependence on the bureaucracy as a role model. What is required under such circumstances, are appropriate and reciprocal checks and balances.

The repercussions of inadequate resources analysed on the working of the PRI in West Bengal and Karnataka revealed that the feasibility of decentralisation greatly depends on the strength of its resource base. The lack of resources contributed to the unfulfilled promises and programmes outlined by the people's representatives, which eventually reduced people's confidence in the local structure and representation.

The other aspect that has become clear from the study is that, due to the wide regional disparity in the income and resource-base of panchayats, most are dependant on grants-in-aid distributed by the state/central government. Problems arising from these allocations are: (i) they are inadequate and (ii) they create dependency and thus reduce autonomy. In a country like India, where there are high regional inequalities and disparities, the policy of central pooling and allocation helps in ensuring redistributive justice.

All the features described above, as dimensions of autonomy, are futile if there are no in-built measures of accountability. Autonomy and accountability are two sides of the same coin. What emerges from the analysis of the system of accountability, assessed in terms of the distribution of benefits among the target groups of NREP and IRDP, is that accountability-building can not be secured solely through the mechanisms of bureaucratic administration nor the elected representatives bodies. It pervades through all the arms of the PRI structures and therefore, downward and upward linkages are essential. The role played by Krisak Samiti in West Bengal, linking people and elected systems of representatives, demonstrates the point. The irregularities in the allocation of IRDP loans cited by Sivanna, iterates the fact that people's representatives, as well, did not adhere to equitable distribution of benefits, thereby undermining the principle of

accountability. This means that autonomy by itself does not ensure that the system becomes accountable. Mechanisms like regular elections, regular village meetings, active community organisation, acting as countervailing force against anomalies are essential conditions for the successful functioning of the PRIs.

The differentiating impact in the working of the PRI was recognisable in West Bengal, due to the strong ideology of CPI(M) and the presence of active community-based organisations. The political ideology of commitment to 'the power to the people' and the introduction of direct party-based elections has shown positive changes in reducing traditional ties and patronage. The existence of Krisak Samiti, the local area-based mass organisation, made a difference in the creation of a system of accountability, leading to vibrancy in the working of the PRI. It checked corruption and evinced wider participation in the affairs of the local government. The role of local organisation and 'inter-organisational co-operation' to solve social problems, as pointed out by the study of Brown and Ashman³⁶ supports this perception. By contrast, in Karnataka, the overt interference in allocation of benefits to the target groups by the elected local representatives and MLAs caused the degeneration of the effectiveness of the PRI. This differentiating impact is noticeable from the prevalence of distrust, suspicion and allegation of favouritism and corruption which existed between officials and non officials. It is clear that the contrasting socio-political characteristics have led to different consequences. Pre-existing social factors can either impede or propel the operationalisation of decentralisation, suggesting that decentralisation cannot be applied universally without looking into these socio-political characteristics. In a society where there is no respect for democratic values, respect for rule of law, social justice, etc. centralisation is more appropriate. Therefore, the condition that should precede the development of decentralisation should necessarily aim to substitute existing lacunae by enforcement of measures which will supplement the existing social capital. In other words, the decentralisation process should take into account the conflicting forces in operation in that particular context.

The analysis of the importance of participation and empowerment in the working of the PRI, analysed from the functioning of West Bengal and Karnataka, reaffirms the instrumental utility of participation as a process, a means and an end in contributing to shape accountable systems of local governance. Participation has made a difference in the case of West Bengal as a countervailing force against corruption. Participation also, in this case, became a tool for an accountability-building mechanism. Transparency of information and collective consciousness-raising have a definite role in the equitable distribution of benefits. The Balwantrai Committee, as early as 1957 pointed out that one of the reasons for the failure of the community development approach was its inability to 'create a representative and democratic institution which will supply the local interest, supervision and care' (cited in FRCH, 1996: 139). It still remains imperative for the effective working of the PRI.

³⁶ See LD. Brown and D. Ashman's "Participation, Social Capital, and Inter-sectoral Problem-solving: African and Asian Cases", IDR Reports Vol. 12; No.2; 1996.

5.3 New Understanding and Interpretations of Decentralisation and Conditions necessary for the PRI.

Drawing from the above analysis the following conclusions can be reached in understanding decentralisation and therefore, conditions necessary for its working. The definitions of decentralisation by Smith (1985 : 1) as ‘delegation of powers to lower levels in a hierarchy or sub-units’ or as defined by Rondinelli, as ‘transfer of planning, decision-making, or administrative authority from central government to its field organisation, local administrative units, semi-autonomous and para-statal organisation, local government or non-governmental organisations’ are inadequate to explain the meaning and scope of decentralisation in the light of the characteristics explained above. The basic elements of decentralisation should include democratically elected local bodies, conferring autonomy with accountability. Delegation of powers to a hierarchy of territorial sub-units, without democratic components, as explained by Smith, may mean deconcentration. Another important characteristic of decentralisation is the concept of good governance, which I prefer to call ‘accountable governance’. It is called accountable governance because it holds individuals and organisations responsible for the delivery of services in accordance with the principle of justice and equity, not only in the distribution of benefits, but also in the decision-making processes. Accountable governance thereby enshrines the democratisation of development. It means that the principle of equity is implied in the distribution of powers in the decision-making structures and processes which in turn places everybody on an equal footing, to seek development in coherence with one’s needs and aspirations as opposed to the current practice of making it a process, benefiting only a few who hold power. Good governance need not be, necessarily, based on a democratic style of governance. Therefore, in the present decentralisation context what we need is accountable governance.

5.4 Conclusion : New parameters

An overriding theme in this analysis is that ‘no form of institution can be detached from the composition of society’ (Dahl, 1989; Roy, 1995). Institutions are an incarnation of how powers are distributed in that society. To affect changes in these structures requires a multi-pronged approach. The debate in the Constituent Assembly over the introduction of the Panchayati Raj in the Indian Constitution raised the same dilemma : whether power should essentially remain with the centre or with the village, for the reason that transferring power to the village would mean reinforcing the existing unequal power structures. It was, therefore, considered that state control and distribution of benefits was the best mechanism to ensure distributive justice. Does the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution, which accords transfer of powers to local bodies, assume that the village power structure has changed over the last five decades? Basically there has not been much change. Hence, the success of decentralisation depends on the extent to which the state is able to ensure justice and equity. The reservation of 33 per cent of seats for women and the proportionate reservation in accordance with the size of the population of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are examples of state affirmative action. Had the state not intervened, in due course, such people may have been permanently excluded from both politics and the development process. On the one hand, if every control and check is left in the hands of states, it would not constitute democratic decentralisation,

but rather, bureaucratic deconcentration. On the other hand, it is essential for the people/civil society to keep a check on the excessive use of state power. It is, therefore, important to have a synergy of both state and people/civil society accountability. In the words of Pieterse, '[a] productivist approach to social development involves not merely investing in education, health, housing - the standard of human capital approaches - but also accommodating or investing in social networking across communities and *designing enabling institutional environments*; in other words, a social capital or participatory civic society approach' (Pieterse, 1997:145; emphasis added). That is why we need neither absolute decentralisation nor complete centralisation, but a mid-path between centralisation and decentralisation. From this point of view, it is also important to recognise that decentralisation can never be universally applicable. The conflicting forces, both impeding or augmenting, should shape the scope and content of decentralisation. The manner in which these conflicting forces operate is entirely contextual. Such a conceptualisation is a key, not only to understanding the necessary conditions for empowering the Panchayati Raj Institutions, but for any successful decentralisation project.

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