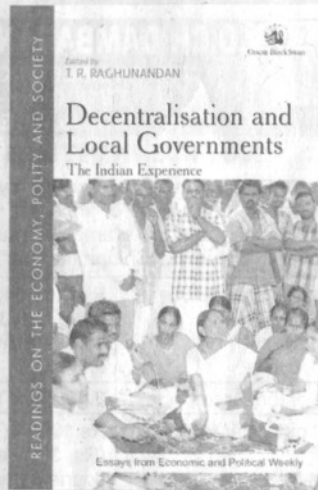


Thinking national, acting local



Decentralisation and Local Governments

The Indian Experience: Edited by T.R. Raghunandan; Orient Blackswan Pvt. Ltd., 1/24, Asaf Ali Road, New Delhi-110002. Rs. 695.

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The importance of local government in the development process hardly needs any emphasis. Even during the Raj, its importance was fully understood by many leading figures in public life. In the late 1950s, panchayat raj institutions (PRIs) received focused attention, a spell of interest that lasted 15 years or so until States created function-specific organisations such as Water Boards that rendered local bodies irrelevant. It was only after the Congress lost power in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka in the early 1980s that the political class began another round of engagement with the PRIs.

By then, West Bengal had a model in place. States had essentially based their schemes on recommendations of the Asoka Mehta Committee, which was constituted by the Janata government in December 1977. Eventually, in the early 1990s, the passage of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendments on local governance was a major milestone.

A 35-year history of the Indian experience with local government, this compilation of articles edited by T. R. Raghunandan, a former civil servant who was in charge of panchayat raj both at the State level (Karnataka) and at the Centre, provides very many valuable political and policy perspectives on the subject of decentralisation of power. Comprising 25 pieces written between 1996 and 2012, the issues they raise remain relevant. For example, as early as 1966, V. M. Sirsikarin talked of how oligarchic

politics could be democratised through democratic decentralisation. Compared to the mid-1960s, the composition of oligarchy in the country has undergone changes but what is indisputable is that the base of oligarchy has only grown since then.

A wide range of issues — functional devolution, impact of reservation, role of women, the implementation of the two-child norm in panchayats, and citizen participation in urban local governance — has been covered. There are some state-specific articles such as the experiment of “gram swaraj” in Madhya Pradesh, poverty alleviation efforts in West Bengal and the “second wave of decentralisation” in Andhra Pradesh.

The publication contains articles of well-known personalities including C. H. Hanumantha Rao, Nirmal Mukarji, B. K. Chandrashekar and Mani Shankar Aiyar. West Bengal, was discussed threadbare by PRI specialists in “Local Democracy and Clientelism,” first published in February 2009. It had predicted a trend of decline in vote share for the Left in panchayat polls. All elections since then, either to Lok Sabha or the State Assembly or panchayats, have proved the authors right.

In 2002, Mr. Aiyar, who was Union Minister in charge of panchayat raj from 2004 to 2009, talked of corruption at all levels in panchayats across the country. M.A. Oommen’s critical analysis of the Union Ministry of Panchayat Raj’s ranking of States in 2009 on the basis of performance in empowering PRIs was sharp and well-reasoned. It is pertinent to point out that the evaluation of States was one of the favourite schemes of the Ministry during the

Aiyar period. The findings, as pointed out in the article, on the two child norm being implemented in panchayats in five States were disturbing apart from delivering the core message that the norm did not achieve the intended outcome. The move, which might have been well-intentioned, was inherently anti-women. This should serve as a lesson to policy makers to analyse rationally and dispassionately before taking decisions that may have direct bearing on women.

Citizen initiative

The book also deals with urban local bodies, an area that does not get as much attention in the overall discourse on local governance as panchayats do. By including the experiences of Janaagraha, a citizen-led initiative in Bangalore, and those of the Residents Welfare Associations in the 2007 Delhi municipal elections, the publication has thrown much light on the dynamics of urban local governments.

One aspect that ought to have been included in any debate on local governments is the desirability of continuing with the existing system of direct participation of political parties. Apart from many other things, the involvement of parties makes the entire election process far more complex, given the fact that State Election Commissions are not that powerful and effective as the Election Commission of India. It is time to migrate to a party-less system at every layer of local bodies, rural or urban, an idea that none of the articles in this book explore.

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