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Reforming Village Governance in India Through Decentralisation: Looking Back & Beyond

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Reforming Village Governance in India through Decentralisation: looking Back and Beyond

– Prabhat Kumar Datta

The term 'governance' which has become a ubiquitous 'buzzword' in recent times, is a contested concept. But the fact remains that it is intertwined with the emergence of the state and government as the organized political community. In this sense it is as old as human civilization (Leftwich, A. (1994). Etymologically speaking, the Anglophone term 'governance' owes its origin to the classical Latin and ancient Greek words for 'the steering' of boats. It originally referred mainly to the action or manner of governing, guiding, or steering conduct and overlapped with 'government'.

As the term is still contested there is no generally accepted definition. For example, while World Bank (1989) defines it 'as the exercise of political power to manage nation's affairs', OECD (1995) perceives governance' as the combination of many ways, individuals, institutions, public and private , to manage their own affairs', the Canadian Institute of Governance looks upon it as "the traditions, institutions and processes that determine how power is exercised , how citizens are given a voice and how decisions are made on issues of public concern' Clearly the term 'governance' has much wider connotation than government.

Decentralisation : Conceptual issues

The key factor in its revival has probably been the need to distinguish between 'governance' and 'government'. Thus governance would refer to the modes and manner of governing, government to the institutions and agents charged with governing.The concept of governance envisages a shift away from well established notions of the way government sought to resolve social issues through the top-down approach (Stoker, 1998).

In India, the term governance began to be used by the scholars, politicians, administrators, journalists alike following the onset of liberalization in 1990s. By 1980s it came to be widely accepted that the planned strategy to achieve developmental goals had failed (Bardhan,2002), It was realized that all the

stakeholders have to be roped in the developmental processes of the state It is in this context that decentralization has assumed special importance

Decentralization is basically transfer of functions, finances, resources, structures and systems to sub – national (state, regional and local) governments to implement the goals. Reviewing decentralization practices on a global scale World Bank's *Rethinking Decentralisation* document contends that decentralization is particularly widespread in the developing countries for a number of reasons, namely, deepening of decentralization in Latin America, the need to improve delivery of local services for large population in the centralized countries of East Asia, the challenge of ethnic and geographic diversity in South Asia.. The World Bank concludes that some sort of political pressures probably drive most decentralizing countries (Livac, 1998). Thus decentralization is an important aspect of governance and the purpose of decentralization is to empower local governments with a mix of developmental and governance goals (Smoke,2014) In the case of local governance decentralization is understood in the sense of devolution of functions, powers and resources from the higher tier of the government to the lower tiers.

While dedcentralisation has been in the development discourse for about 60 years, in recent times decentralized governance has been at the center of policy making in many developing economies of the world such as Bolivia, Cambodia, Ethiopia, France, Indonesia, Japan, Peru, South Africa, South Korea, Uganda, United Kingdom and India including socialist countries like China (Faguet, Jean-Paul and Pal, Sarmistha (2023)

Perspectives on Decentralisation

The Western world sees decentralisation as an alternative to providing public services in a more cost-effective way. It is an instrumentalist perspective emphasing the role of the decentralized structures as effective vehicles for public service delivery timely and appropriately The developing countries are pursing decentralisation reforms to counter economic inefficiencies, macroeconomic instability, and ineffective governance (Bhattacharya 2004), Pranab Bardhan is of the opinion that the important reasons for the accelerating speed of decentralization in recent years

include loss of legitimacy of the central state and a corresponding belief that decentralisation can bring a range of benefits directly to the local people. Bardhan further argues that technological changes have made it easier to arrange supply of services in smaller market areas and transaction costs are less in decentralized operations. (Bardhan, 2002)

The developmentalists, including the mainstream development donors find in decentralization multiple benefits . It brings government closer to the people; improves service delivery; educates people to become full citizens; facilitates local participation especially of the poor, and thus allow government to better understand the people's needs. Referring to public policy they suggest it improves public policy design; reduces conflict by helping people to accept government decisions; socially integrates the community; and makes local economies more prosperous and more equitable'. (Olum (2014).

British Rule in India and the Context of Decentralizing Governance

With this conceptual background in mind let us look at the decentralised governance structures in village India which shelters 67 per cent of the total population. The main stay of rural economy is still the agriculture. Modern India was born out of long colonial rule preceded by a fairly long period of the Muslim rule who came from outside the country .The credit for building institutions for rural governance in India goes to the British colonial rulers after the First War of Independence in 1857 when the Sepoys reacted against the colonial rulers in different camps around the major centres of the country like Kolkata , Lucknow.. It opened their eyes as to the dangerous administrative implications of the highly centralised rule in a hugely big multicultural, multilingual country like India.

Decentralisation in India: Looking back

In ancient India

The distinguished historians like Romiila thapper have shown that as early as in the Vedic period around 15 BCE there had existed sabha and samiti

(Thapar, R. (2004). These institutions used to take key decisions through collective consensus which impacted the society (Majumdar, R.C. (2022).The concept of 'village republics' goes back to 6th century BC. In 1806, Thomas Munro, later Governor of Madras, first described the *Indian village* as a "little republic" and *India* as "a mass of such *republics*."In ancient India panchayats which form the keystone of the modern democracy, played an important role in the everyday life and governance of the villages administering justice and village disputes (Singh. (2016)

One of the most compelling examples of the democratic spirit at the grassroots level comes from the village of *Lothal* in the Indus Valley Civilisation, around 2500 BCE. Archaeological evidence suggests that the city was also governed by a council that operated similarly to a *Panchayat*, with elected representatives managing the affairs of the community (Naqvi, S. A. (1993).

The Colonial Phase

The need for decentralised governance was felt by the colonial rulers after the infamous Sepoy Mutiny in 1857. The idea of decentralised governance gained ground thereafter although the most momentous landmark was the Resolution of Lord Ripon formulated in 1882 . As a close disciple of Benthamite philosophy he tried to create a model of limited participatory decentralised governance and perceived decentralisation as a school of democracy.

But he failed because the village society at his time was dominated by the hierarchical caste system and controlled by police and thus the objective conditions were not conducive for the working of grassroots democracy based on egalitarian ideas. He failed but his dream excited the colonial rulers as evident from the constitution of the Royal Commission on Decentralisation I909 to suggest how the decentralised governance system could be reformed. But the sudden intervention of the First World War coupled with growing nationalist movements stood in the way. The colonial perspective on decentralisation was broadly guided chiefly by three intertwined considerations, namely regime maintenance, regime expansion

and regime consolidation, though persons like Ripon tried to deviate from this perspective in a slightly different way.

India's struggle for freedom led by Gandhi laid stress on making villages as the starting point of Indian democracy. Gandhi believed that India's democracy should start from the villages and he developed his comprehensive perspective of decentralisation (Datta , 2017)

The Constituent Assembly Perspective

Strangely enough, the chief architects of the new Constitution for Independent India did not demonstrate their deep concern for decentralisation in rural India . It is evident from the reactions of the chairman of the Drafting Committee Dr. B.R Ambedkar. Largely influenced by his personal experiences in the early years of his life in the village he looked upon villages as 'the sinks of localism , ignorance, narrow-mindedness, communalism" .Another leading member Jawaharlal Nehru kept mum when Ambedkar's observation led to heated exchanges . Nehru who studied in London might have been influenced by the British ideas of individualism. Thus after prolonged debate and deliberations village governance was exported to the legally least important part of the of the Indian Constitution known as the Directive Principles of state Policy. These principles are not enforceable by the Courts of law and the subject was left to the state list. As a union of states India has two governmental structures, namely, union and the states. The Constitution has three lists, namely Union, state and concurrent which specify powers and functions of each tier of the government

The Perspective of the Independent Indian State

The post colonial Indian state had to focus on rural reconstruction as the immediate agenda because the colonial rule had done devastating damage to the villages. The state led by Jawaharlal Nehru initiated rural reconstruction by means of community development programme as advised by the American experts but the community did not participate. It was essentially a top down bureaucratic model of development where people were just invitees—a top down initiative.

First Generation Decentralisation Reforms through Panchayats

But by 1950s it was realised that the bureaucratic model of development where the bureaucracy emerged as the agent of change and nation building, had failed. This realisation led to a search for an alternative developmental model for rural development and following the recommendation of the Balvantrao Mehta committee the some state governments launched first generation governance reforms through the creation of democratic institutions. The institutions were born out of state legislations as the subject is on the state list and there was no constitutional mandate to introduce it

But institutions in most of the states were killed before the truly born. A number of factors was responsible for this unhappy culmination namely, domination of the high caste and rural landed gentry in the villages, lack of effective awareness on the part of the villagers , and most importantly, reluctance on the part of the political leaders and the bureaucracy to fuel the democratic engine at the grassroots

The Constitutional Amendment to Regenerate the Panchaat system

The second phase of India's rural governance started when India accepted neoliberal policy. In tune with emphasis in the policy of democratic decentralisation of this new policy the Constitution was amended in 1992 to give the institutions of village democracy a new lease of life by arming them with constitutional authority.(Datta, 2017)

Now we have a new crop of decentralised governance structures in the villages backed by the Constitution. The constitutional amendment mandates *inter alia* holding of elections at regular intervals, advises the state governments to devolve 29 functions, provides for institutionalisation of participation of the villagers by creating institutions at the doorstep of the people, attempts to make governance more inclusive by introducing quota for women and other marginalised sections of the population in rural society.

Decentralisation as Gift of the Powerful National Government

The introduction of decentralised democracy through the amendment of the Constitution is a gift of the powerful central government which cuts at the roots of decentralization. It is not a product of bottom up initiative but a top down imposition from the centre to the states.

There is a view that the amendment was necessitated by the compulsion and demand of the neo-liberal policy, and significantly the amendment idea was mooted after the paradigmatic shift of the Indian policy in 1990. It is argued that propagation of the new policy message necessitated creating institutions at the local level to tame the immediate adverse reactions of the villagers to the policy which is premised on reducing the role of the state.. Thus the compulsion of the neoliberal policy and global pressure fuelled by globalization created the objective conditions for reforming decentralised governance in India. It was not in any way an indigenous initiative.

Democratizing Participatory governance

While the critics differ on this issue it cannot be denied that the grassroots democratic institutions set up at the instance of the mandate of the Constitution have created participatory structures and democratize the governance through regular elections They are no longer very weak because they are constitutional bodies and devolution of 29 functions as per the constitutional mandate has taken place. Democratization processes have some inherent impact on the people. It sensitizes and empowers the villagers and the central and the state governments have to rely on these democratic structures for delivering all kinds public services. The amendment has defined the role of the village bodies without which it generated a lot of confusion earlier

Autonomy Question

The question of the extent of autonomy, more particularly functional and financial autonomy continues to be a matter of concern and debate. In an age of globalization where the autonomy of the nation state is in question

complete autonomy of grassroots democratic bodies seems to be a far cry In my book I have demonstrated full autonomy is neither possible nor desirable. (Datta   2000)   But some amount of autonomy with regard to taking decisions of local significance has to be given to them to ensure that they are legitimate democratic bodies and apart of the larger democratic state

Most of the staff members are on deputation. They are state government employees. Evidently they work under the state government and will act on their instructions. Thus it hits at the autonomy of the panchayat bodies in taking decisions and implementing them. Added to it is that fact

Public Service Delivery and Decentralised Goveranace

Public service delivery issue received a new dimension and great momentum during the COVID Pandemic. One Indian state Kerala which emerged as the best performing state in the first phase of COVID 19, has fairly long tradition of vibrant village democratic institutions. The studies including mine (Datta, 2022) brought out that it was possible because of active presence of vibrant decentralised structures and women's groups known as Kudumbashree on the ground. They work in close unison with village panchayats. They invented new methods of reaching out to the affected people quickly and engaging the children in playful activities. They used social media to propagate information and sensitize the people (Datta and Kotchegoda, 2022)

Challenges To Grassroots Democratic Institutions

But there are some very formidable challenges which raise questions about the future of these democratic structures .Despite constitutional mandate regular elections are not being held. Incidentally this was one of the basic threats to the pre-constitutionalised rural local bodies. But it has been happening after the clear constitutional mandate .There are cases when the State Election Commission or the civil society originations have to move the Court to compel the state governments to hold elections as per the constitutional mandate. Thus there is dearth of political support and initiative which is the lifeblood of all kinds of democratic institutions.

The Seventy Third Amendment defines panchayats as institutions of self-government and instruments of planning for economic development and social justice. There is a provision for devolution of functions by the state governments to the panchayat bodies. The Seventy Third Amendment listed 29 functions and it was mentioned that the states 'may' transfer these functions to panchayats. The drafters of the amendment bill had to be cautious because the local government is not in the Union list but in the state list and hence the word 'may' to avoid the charge of encroachment on the state list

Devolution of functions to be meaningful calls for clubbing it with funds and functionaries. The latest study done in 2014-15 by Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in 25 different states bring out the objective situations. The findings make it clear that while all the states have transferred functions to panchayat bodies there is no corresponding transfer of funds and functionaries coupled with lack of interest on the part of the officials to work under the panchayat institutions (Datta, 2019,)

The growing numbers of the centrally sponsored schemes have harmful consequences. Some of them encroach upon the constitutionally defined domain of the village bodies as enshrined in the 11th schedule. And all schemes and their guidelines are framed by the central government and the village bodies are asked to implement turning them merely as implementing agencies rather than as constitutionalised democratic structures in the villages with required autonomy to decide on their course of action .

There is scheme for funding members of Parliament called Members of Parliament (MP) Local area Development(MPLAD).(Datta and Sodhi,, 2022) The MPLAD schemes are formulated by the MPs and there is no mandate to take the panchayats into decision making or even into consultation process. The amount for each member is now raised to 5 crores per year . We have 745 MPs . Thus a fairly huge amount of money is spent every year in a parliamentary constituency but over this expenditure the local bodies do not have any say. The study done by the Centre for Budget and Governance indicates that a large amount of money remains unspent which finally defeats the very purpose off decentralization. (Sezhian 2007).

Added to it is the rise of parallel bodies in some states which are engaged in developmental activities in the villages. They are traditional bodies like Khap panchayats (Kumar, 2012 Hooda, 2024) or Gavkis in Maharastra (Lele ,2001) which are patriarchal bodies or village development societies as in Haryana which were created by the local people to engage in the work of village development . They encroach upon the constitutionally mandated zone of the panchayats and some time clash takes place impeding the processes of development

The amendment provides for the setting up of the State Finance Commissions as an institutional arrangement to strengthen financial autonomy of the panchayats. But the crux of the matter is that the funds of the state government which have to be distributed among the local bodies , are very limited due to constitutional provisions. It has turned out to be a routine work to appoint Finance Commissions and a close study of the reports tend to show that no Finance Commissions have so far been able to recommend transfer of such funds as to strengthen the financial base of the panchayats because of the inherent structural limitation.

The Seventy Third amendment has institutionalized participatory democracy in the villages through Gram Sabha. While the constitutional amendment makes it mandatory to establish *Gram Sabha* at the village level, it does not stipulate any details regarding the structure, powers, and functions of this institution. Any attempt to uniformise the structures and processes through constitutional mandate might have been disastrous in a multicultural country like India but the lack of it allows the states to make such bodies coterminous with gram panchayats.

There have emerged two kinds of structures in different states. In some states like UP, Maharastra there is Gram Sabha coterminous with the Gram Panchayat. But in states like West Bengal ,Odisha there are two participatory bodies , one at the level of the gram panchayat known as Gram Sabha and the other, down below closer to the villagers, in different names such as Gram Sansad, PalliSabha ,Ward Sabha (Datta,2023)

But hardly has any State Act empowered the Gram Sabhas or Ward Sabha to exercise control over the Gram Panchayats and to take final decisions in

matters of village development. In most of the states the functional domain of the *Gram Sabha* is limited to discussions of annual statement of accounts, administration report, and selection of beneficiaries for poverty alleviation programmes. Only in a few states like Haryana, Punjab and Tamil Nadu the Gram Sabhas enjoy the powers to approve the budgets.

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

The Seventy Third amendment took a progressive step forward by introducing gender quota for making local governance more inclusive and participatory. But women elected representatives are facing challenges from within and without making their participation what is euphemistically called 'tokenism'.

The researchers have identified the challenges at three different levels namely individual and family, social and political and legal –institutional. (Datta, 2023) At the individual and family level they are constrained by their lack of experience, education and self -confidence, financial dependence on the male members and unchanged domestic responsibilities. All these sometime stand in their way of attending meetings. At the social and political level they experience lack of effective political or community support after the elections. Women find it difficult to unite themselves even on a common cause in the meetings because they are divided along the lines of caste, community and political parties.

Interestingly, women's organizations are not yet as strong as to offer them necessary support and guidance .Traditional social perception about their political competence makes things worse. The dominant patriarchal social values continue to be a standing threat.

At the legal and institutional level male non-co-operation in the meetings and patriarchal values in the allotment of portfolios coupled with strong

bureaucratic resistance at action points and laws like two child norm have been causing serious concern for them. some of them feel discouraged to contest next elections(Buch, 2014)

Some states have enacted legislation which go against the very purpose for which the Constitution was amended to strengthen panchayats and to make governance more inclusive. Mention may be made of the legislation on two child norm and educational criteria It has been introduced in as many as nine states , the objective being to control the size of the family and it is premised on the belief that that the politicians would be setting example. (Buch, 2004) . It is modeled on the one child policy of China (1979) in terms of which couples were forbidden to have more than two children but China has been compelled to abandon it because of its negative demographic consequences

It may be observed that the latest sample Registration System data indicate that total fertility rate is linked up with education on which Gandhi laid considerable stress. There has been a significant fall in the total fertility rate in the southern states , Delhi and hill states Bihar which has high rate of illiteracy, reported the highest total fertility rate (*The Economic Times*, July 15, 2019)

The critics argue that it is not only a coercive measure impinging on the fundamental principle of human rights .It is also discriminatory because it seeks to penalise only elected representatives of panchayats ignoring the elected representatives in parliament and state assemblies. Used more as a powerful tool to settle personal and political scores, instances recur in every panchayat of blackmail and threats to unseat women and men representatives from vulnerable sections if they do not follow dictates of vested interests.

Dalit women are facing much greater brunt of patriarchy. There is empirical evidence that they are not allowed to unfurl national flag. The scholars have found that they are not allowed to sit along with high caste people. Dalit women have started realising that they should continue to play their roles in the interest of their empowerment despite challenges and difficulties (Kumar*, 2021*)

But there is a silver lining because women leaders themselves have started protesting against this kind of situation . They are organizing fellow women to fight against bureaucratic patriarchy.

Lessons from the working of the grassroots bodies

As democratic decentralization threatens the traditional power holders, higher level political actors and bureaucracy would try their best to arrest the process The traditional power holders and higher level political actors will fight tooth and nail to oppose decentralization if decentralization changes their power base and the patronage resources The members of the bureaucracy will join them if they find losing control over resource allocation and decision making powers. They may resist directly or through obfuscation. It is happening in our country

Second, political will is not always and in every situation the key variable for decentralization. Political incentives shape the decisions of policymakers more than political will. Incentives to decentralize may not be "noble" goals such as democracy and development. Incentives to decentralize can include maintaining a regime or extending power base, gaining electoral advantages for a governing party, extending patronage networks, and courting donor support.

Third, it is threatened when non-representative or unaccountable actors are empowered, taking authority away from democratic actors or from the public arena. It happens when party leaders decide everything

Fourth, when local authorities cannot deliver goods or respond to local needs they cannot gain respect and legitimacy or engage local population in public action. These threats are playing a big part in delaying decentralization across Africa. .

Fifth, the experiences of Uganda, Rwanda, and South Africa illustrate that decentralization may be demanded by the grassroots committees of the blacks as a way of dismantling apartheid as in South Africa. It may be supply-driven engineered from the top through consultations and pilot programs as in Uganda, or directly driven from the top as in Rwanda. But the fact

remains that it is difficult to arrive at consensus process on the exercise of shared power and authority

No matter through which route the journey of decentralization begins, support for decentralization comes through patient and sustained negotiation, sensitization, persuasion, demonstration of positive results and sometimes when necessary, through coercion

Sixth, it is a fact that decentralization is not one-shot action but an on-going process that constantly engages the relevant stakeholders and actors in order to produce the desired results.

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

Devolution issue cannot be isolated from the relevance of functional areas, its possible interconnectedness and the availability of infrastructural support. In this regard reference may be made to the concept of subsidiarity as indicated by Second Administrative Reforms Commissions' Recommendations.

The autonomy question cannot be resolved without amending the Constitution because our constitution has created a big bias in favour of the centre. The states are very weak. Local government is a state subject. A weak state government cannot deliver a strong and vibrant local government

There is need for strong state level association of all panchayat bodies well connected with a national network to work with concerned state governments and national government. They will form a network and will be working as some kind of pressure groups on the government at the respective level.

Decentralisation is fuelled by bottom up pressures. It is therefore necessary to keep on empowering the citizens through advocacy and

other programmes to be chalked out keeping in mind the local needs and situations

We need to devise legal institutional devices and safeguards to deepen and protect democratic decentralization and to create countervailing institutions that can strengthen civil society and counter bureaucratic influence as well. . Cooperatives, joint committees between users and government, user associations are examples of institutional pluralism that provide opportunities for improved collective decision making

Patriarchy continues to be a threat to effective realisation of 'politics of presence'. The hard rock of patriarchy cannot be broken overnight as it calls for a civilizational change and it is essentially a political question.

Rachel Brule writes that quotas have been found to be most helpful for younger women who are able to renegotiate resource distribution across multiple domains— specifically land and dowry—which reduces the cost to men and the subsequent backlash. Indeed, one of his important findings is to show how women's ability to leverage political power in the service of inclusion leads to enduring empowerment (Brule, 2020).

The fact, however, remains even today that woman's empowerment in rural India largely depends on breaking the hard rock of patriarchy. Additionally, as Batliwala reminds us: women's empowerment is essentially a political task. It cannot be achieved until and unless a critical mass of women access formal political power by entering political institutions on a large scale. We cannot dismiss the fact that the Seventy-Third Amendment of the Constitution is that one small step for women, which wisely and strategically exploited, could well become a giant leap forward for mankind. (Batliwala, 1997)And the Indian Parliament has also finally passed bill for reservation of one third seats in state assemblies and Parliament with prospective effect

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment has given women a space which belongs to them as a group. What Rabindranath Tagore wrote in 1929 remains valid in India even today that the crux of women empowerment is that they do not have a house of their own During their childhood, they live in the houses of their father; after marriage, they live in the houses of

their husbands, and therefore they spend their lives in houses which are not owned by them. It was this hard realisation of Mrinal who represents the community of women in Tagore's novel Strir Patra (Wife's Letter) and Kumudini who features in Tagore's novel, Jogajog (Communication). They badly need houses of their own, as Virginia Wolf hinted in 1929 in her A *Room of One's Own* where they will feel free to talk and decide things about themselves as far as possible within the existing other constraints in the society.

The provision for reservation of seats in the political institutions is like getting a piece of land or space for the construction of a personal house. Women have to construct their houses themselves. They need bricks, mortar steel, etc., to build their own houses. Given the strong patriarchal tradition of the society, the state has to come forward proactively to facilitate the processes of construction. Will the state come forward to extend the necessary support for the construction of the house? If the state does not come forward, will this project turn out to be a daydream? The answer seems to be in the negative because people and their practices and approaches which sometimes get hidden behind the state or 'tradition' may play an important role(Datta, 2023)

Happily, our judiciary appears to be working for promoting gender equality as enshrined in the Constitution. The beginning was made in 1999 in Geeta Hariharan case when mother was given the right of guardianship of the child. In 2018 the Supreme Court allowed the entry of women irrespective of age into Sabarimala temple and struck down the provision of the concerned state legislation .A recent Supreme Court judgment in favour of gender equality in armed forces is likely to have a cascading effect, and will go some way to eliminate patriarchy.

'Done correctly,' Faguet points out, 'decentralisation can improve the democratic accountability and responsiveness of governments by changing the incentives that local officials face' Done correctly, decentralisation should also lead to local governments better attuned to local economic conditions (Khan, Faguet, and Ambel 2017). 'The policies they implement should spur public sector efficiency in ways that boost economic growth.

Perhaps less obviously, Faguet argues, 'the creation of multiple levels of government can be leveraged by different social groups and minorities to defend their interests against an encroaching majority. This can help stitch a country together more tightly from the bottom up, draining wind from the sails of leaders who preach secession, decreasing the risks of conflict and civil war in diverse developing countries'.

Time is ripe to prepare a well thought out broad -based road map of decentralization in India taking into account our traditions imbued with diversities and pluralism, and arrive at political and administrative consensus before putting it into practice. And sooner it is done the better for the country. According to the latest Lancet study published India is likely to miss deadline for 50 per cent indicators on SDGs and 75 per cent of the districts will be off from some of the targets like poverty, malnutrition. It is matter of great concern. We need to strengthen grassroots democratic institutions to move forward in this regard at a much faster speed.

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Biography

Prabhat Kumar Datta who retired as the retired Centenary Chair of Public Administration, Department of Political Science, University of Calcutta, India is currently Adjunct Professor of Political Science and Public Administration , Xavier Law School, St. Xavier's University, Kolkata He worked as Adjunct Professor in the Centre for China Rural Studies, Central China University during 2016-2021. He has also served the Government of West Bengal as Honorary Advisor to different institutes namely, State Institute of Panchayats and Rural Development, Institute of Local Government and Urban Studies. and departments like Mass Education Extension , concurrently during his tenure as Centenary Chair Professor. Dr Prabhat Datta also served as Chairperson of the State Level Technical Advisory Committee, Jawaharlal Nehru Urban Renewal Mission. In 2008, he was awarded DAAD Professional Fellowship sponsored by the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany, at the University of Heidelberg.. He was also a member of the University Grants Commission Panel in Political Science and Public Administration, and of the Executive Committees of the Indian Political Science and Indian Public Administration Associations. He was elected to the Board of Directors of the Asian Association for Public Administration (AAPA) for two terms (2016-2018). Currently he is also Vice P:resident of the Executive Council of South Asia Network for Public Administration. He is also a member of the Editorial Board of the Indian Journal of Public Administration, Sage (2020-2024). He has authored and or co-authored 28 books and his articles have been published in distinguished national and international journals. His papers have been translated into Chinese and published in the Third Sector Research, Jiatong University, Shanghai. He has worked with scholars from Amsterdam University, Netherlands and Danish Institute for International Studies, Copenhagen, Wongsu University, Korea, Zhejiang University in Hanzhou, China Jaotong University in Shanghai, China and Schenzen University in Schenzen China and Nanyang Technonogical University in Singapore.