

Analysing the panchayat elections and the outcomes of women participation in the same, the author visions this inclusive measure successful and considers the women as carrier and receivers of the developmental agenda. Last but not the least, the book highlights with the help of case studies the emergent opportunities within consumerism to support craft entrepreneurship among women with the utilisation of cluster approach.

Despite the deficiency of comprehensive conclusive section in the end of the book, scattered description of premises and methodology of the work, within the comprehensively growing literature on the issue of social exclusion and inclusive policies, the work has been successful in making its own space by raising indispensable questions, bringing insights from the grassroots and within that context suggesting pragmatic solutions to the stagnant lingering on problems of this domain. Thus, the work may prove its worth among scholars, policymakers and think-tanks.

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Drawing from the Gandhian trajectory of development, which emphasises a shift from the top-down to the bottom-up model of governance, the 73rd constitutional amendment act was enacted in the 1990s, which sought to deepen democracy in India by granting constitutional recognition to gram panchayats (GPs), through the establishment of a three-tier system—at the village, block and district levels. In this context, this work is an attempt to assess the performance of the Indian local self-governance or the Panchayati Raj model, primarily in two states of India, namely, West Bengal and Kerala, which were pioneers of the decentralisation process in the country, having taken the lead long before the constitutional amendments, and which are widely perceived as having done appreciably well in this field. The volume consists of twelve essays, comprising of contributions from academicians, policymakers and government personnel, which are classified into three parts. While part one of the volume deals with macro issues, part two analyses micro level studies, and part three is a reflection on sociopolitical concerns. The common thread that binds the miscellaneous chapters is that they successfully identify the bottlenecks to efficacious decentralisation in India, which involve one or more of the following factors—the absence of financial devolution, adequate record keeping, insignificant mass participation and the recourse to favouritism to capture political vantage.

The resolution of financial issues is fundamental to successful decentralisation, and in this context, Indira Rajaraman's article exposes the flaws of the fund devolution mechanisms of the Tenth, Eleventh and Twelfth Finance Commissions, which were based on performance-based rewards and which backfired owing to the misreporting of performances. This was rectified through the Thirteenth Finance Commission amendments, which set the entitlements for a year. Even a minimum fund assurance at the lowest levels could enhance institutional functioning, while conscious devolution enables inclusive and transparent self-governance, as highlighted by the comprehensive analysis of the Strengthening Rural Decentralization (SRD) Programme in West Bengal by Marine Mukherjee and Dilip Ghosh. Again, Amrish Dongre, Yamini Aiyar and Anirvan Choudhury demonstrate how the delay in fund transfers may result in periods within financial years wherein GPs are completely devoid of funds, which may have serious consequences on expenditure efficiency. Besides, there also appears to be a bias in expenditure towards road construction, rather than on provision of basic facilities such as drinking water, despite recommendations being in favour of the latter, while there seems to be an absolute dearth of real-time record keeping, which is a must for empowering GPs as well as citizens, while enabling the monitoring of fund flows and expenditure.

An interesting paradox exposed by the volume is the fact that although the Left parties have had a major role to play in the initiation of the decentralisation process in India, there exists variations in the success rates in the Left-dominated states. Thus, while Kerala is seen to have manifestly achieved majority of the indicators, the state of West Bengal, while under Left rule, failed on many accounts. This is attributed to the decisive role that the mass base of movements may have on the success or failure of a programme. In this context, Polly Dutta and Saibal Kar show how GPs in West Bengal run by Left parties were faring poorly in terms of participatory democracy, even while being in power at the state level. The undermining of the masses result in what Dipankar Sinha terms as the 'paradox of information', a situation wherein information is taken for granted or manipulated by the political elite, thereby giving rise to an information asymmetry. This phenomenon was observed in the state of West Bengal, wherein the ruling party, namely, the CPI-M, which is ideologically based on the Leninist doctrine of democratic centralism, manipulated information to project a pro-poor image of the party, while destroying information unfavourable to its image. This resulted in an 'inverse pyramid', which blurred the distinction between administrative decentralisation and political decentralisation and ultimately gave way to the outburst of public dissent in social movements, such as the Singur movement, which was itself a product of the bypassing of existing channels of communication by the ruling party, before taking over land for industrialisation. This point is further highlighted in Manabi Mazumdar's article which exposes as to how although the Left rule of West Bengal commenced by harping on the concept of social justice, through land and tenancy reforms and political decentralisation in the 1970s and the 1980s, it could not sustain the same, getting embroiled in the management of political support and failing miserably in human development.

This essay also exposes the existence of a ‘stratified welfare regime’ in India, with two modes of welfare—one which is pro-poor, while the other exhibiting an elitist bias, as the rich benefit significantly from publicly provided resources and subsidies, which is however rendered ‘invisible’ in the mainstream discourse. Thus, contrary to the claims that West Bengal fares the best as far as fair distribution is concerned, Chiranjib Neogi and Abhirup Sarkar show how this state has had the highest rural–urban inequality figures in the Planning Commission Report of 2002, while it ranked second highest in terms of starvation, according to the NSSO report of 2007. Through the analysis of a decade of Panchayati elections, the authors demonstrate that while the provision of a few public services positively affected the vote share of the incumbent Left party, services such as education and telephonic connections negatively impacted the support base of the ruling party. They conclude that the Left was engaged in the ‘selective doling out of political support to prospective voters’, whereas development uplifted the voters from such favours and in turn negatively impacted the vote share of the Left parties. Further, even in the state of Kerala, D. Narayana analyses a deterioration of the health scenario, owing to the failure of the local-level governments in mobilising participation of the masses in the public health movement. This situation is aggravated by the fact that the civil registration system in Kerala could not be made a part of the democratic procedures at the local level.

This volume is an important contribution to the genre of development studies, and to the discourse of political sociology, as it enhances our understanding of the field realities, strengths and limitations of the decentralisation process in India. The chapters enlisted in the volume present a systematic, critical, coherent and in-depth analysis of the phenomena of decentralisation, and are methodologically sound, although some of the sources used for analytical purposes are over a decade old. Besides, the book places a disproportionate emphasis on the state of West Bengal and is found somewhat lacking in terms of theoretical considerations. Nevertheless, this work has a broad appeal, and shall be useful for students and scholars of development studies, economics, sociology and political science, apart from policy framers and public servants, as it cohesively combines macro and micro perspectives on the much-debated phenomena of decentralisation, and its relationship with governance and development in the Indian democracy.

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