

## **A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.**

*a brief reflection of decentralisation processes in India.*

**By Siddhartha**

India is a country with a billion people, seventy percent of whom live in villages. Most are very poor, especially those without land, eking out a living that gives many of them about half a US dollar per day. India is also a democracy, the largest in the world, which means that representatives are elected to parliament and the state legislatures. This creates a highly centralised and non-accountable system of governance. The only way to change this scenario is to strengthen the Panchayat Raj institutions working at the level of the village (the smallest unit of development), the taluk (intermediary level) and the district. These are the decentralised bodies that directly matter to the people who live in the approximately 500,000 villages of India. The Panchayat raj institutions are meant to promote grassroots democracy and development. They are meant to initiate a process of 'development from below' and replace the highly centralised method of 'development from above'.

Each state government fixes the amount of financial resources to be directly administered by the panchayats. In the state of Karnataka the government allocates 25 % of its annual resources to the panchayats. A village in Karnataka varies in the size of its population. Some villages may have ten thousand inhabitants while others may have a few thousands. Each village has between 15 to 20 elected members in its panchayat. On an average these panchayats receive about Rupees 500,000 ( about 11,300 US \$ ) per year for development purposes. A small part of this comes from local taxes and the rest from the government. The money is meant for village development and goes for providing drinking water, school buildings, houses, adult education, health camps etc.

The money available is not substantial, but even this amount can help if it is used properly. But widespread corruption has seen to it that, by and large, this money is only partly used for what it is intended for. Most of the panchayat officials end up being building contractors and enter into agreements to construct small school buildings, health centres, roads etc. The construction projects undertaken by panchayat officials (despite the fact that they are prohibited to function as contractors) leads to substandard work that does not last very long. It has been argued by James Manor, from the Commonwealth Institute of Studies in London, that decentralisation would reduce corruption. But that has not been the case in the Indian context. Usually the panchayat meetings are poorly attended, and often they are held in the house of the president or vice-president, effectively keeping out the general village public. There is little transparency in the way decisions are taken and how money is spent. (The only thing that can be said is that decentralised corruption is better than centralised corruption because at least some money gets to stay in the villages!) But it is generally acknowledged that Dalits (India's former untouchable castes) have benefited from the panchayat system. In Karnataka, the government has reserved 20% of the panchayat funds for their welfare. It is not an uncommon sight to see ugly small houses constructed for their use in the villages. The

Dalits are also getting more and more organised politically and, compared to earlier times, they are in a better position to press for their rights.

One third of the panchayat seats are reserved for women. Here again it was hoped that the measure would strengthen the position of women in the countryside. The results are however mixed. Occasionally one hears of a woman leader who has acted decisively and boldly. Consider the following report: “ In Koppashikoppa village of Dharwad district, Yallava ( an ‘untouchable’ harijan widow ) began to take more interest in social work, after entering politics. In her Harijan colony she formed a group of fifteen women members and advised them about the advantages of savings. Initially there was reluctance due to ignorance, but now the women make it a point to save 5-10 Rupees per month. They have saved 10,000 Rupees and are planning to buy sheep with the money.” But in Tumkur district the vice-president of Shivapura village, a woman, is a mere proxy for her husband. She says, “I do not do anything. My husband takes care of my duties and activities in the panchayat. He accompanies me to all the meetings.” It is certain that some women have grown with their responsibilities and are able to use their office to do some good to the local community. But in general this is not the case and there are usually other people (meaning men) who make the decisions for the women.

The only state in India where the panchayat institutions seem to function somewhat effectively is Kerala. The marxist government of Kerala has allocated forty percent of the state resources to the panchayat institutions. Although the programme may not be as effective as the government claims, there is some evidence to suggest that it is the most successful programme in India. For example, in the Karakulam Gram panchayat a village resource and training centre has been set up that specialises in decentralisation, planning and resource management. The first of its kind in the country, it also encourages information technology and promotes art and culture. Courses are offered and about forty students have trained here. The panchayat has also built a small bridge across the Killiyar stream. The estimated cost was 450,000 Rupees (10,200 \$ US). But it was completed with only 375,000 Rupees (8500\$ US). The villagers did not use a building contractor but organised the construction on their own. In the case of Kerala the marxist party cadres are generally seen to be socially motivated and much less corrupt than those from other political parties. This has helped immensely to keep morale and commitment high at the panchayat level.

Decentralisation, in the case of the panchayat raj institutions, has been far from successful if one takes the country as a whole. Political and bureaucratic interests have unfortunately played a role in minimising their impact. But it has still permitted a small measure of local democracy and has created the potential for women and harijans to be partially empowered. As the saying goes, a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.