



Building Local Democracy: Evaluating the Impact of Decentralization in Kerala, India

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Summary. — Historically, local rural governments in India have enjoyed very limited powers and citizens have been afforded very few opportunities to shape local development. In 1996, the state government of Kerala initiated the “People’s Campaign for Decentralized Planning” devolving new authority and resources to panchayats and mandating structures and processes designed to maximize the direct involvement of citizens in planning and budgeting. In both its scope and design, these reforms represent the most ambitious effort to build local institutions of participatory democratic governance ever undertaken in the subcontinent. This paper provides a detailed evaluation and analysis of the formative period of the reforms based on extensive survey data collected in 2002 from a sample of 72 randomly selected panchayats.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Historically, local rural governments in India have enjoyed very limited powers and citizens have been afforded very few opportunities to shape local development. The 73rd Constitutional amendment passed in 1993 aimed to remedy this democratic deficit by granting local rural governments new powers and making them more accountable to citizens. Implementation was however left to the states, and as is always the case in India, inter-state variation has been pronounced. The most determined effort at democratic decentralization has been in the state of Kerala. In 1996, a coalition of left parties led by the Communist Party of India—Marxist (CPI(M)) returned to power and immediately fulfilled one of its most important campaign pledges by launching the “People’s Campaign for Decentralized Planning.” All

1,214 local governments in Kerala—municipalities and the three rural tiers of district, block, and gram panchayats—were given new functions and powers of decision making, and were granted discretionary budgeting authority over

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35–40% of the state's developmental expenditures. In addition to devolving resources, state officials sought to directly promote participatory democracy by mandating structures and processes designed to maximize the direct involvement of citizens in planning and budgeting. In both its scope and design, the campaign represents the most ambitious and concerted state-led effort to build local institutions of participatory democratic governance ever undertaken in the subcontinent. This paper provides a detailed evaluation and analysis of the first four years of decentralization based on extensive records and survey data collected in 2002 from a sample of 72 randomly selected panchayats.¹

2. DEMOCRATIC DEEPENING

The debate on democracy has shifted from the study of transitions to formal democratic rule, to the study of democratic deepening (Lin & Stepan, 1996). Of the many conceptual reformulations this has called for, none has been more central than a reexamination of the question of political participation. Going beyond the traditional focus on electoral participation, increased attention has been directed toward the importance of direct participation—that is, direct forms of engagement with public decision-making entities and processes—in determining the quality and depth of democratic institutions. In the developing world, participation is seen as critical to increasing the overall capabilities of citizens (Drèze & Sen, 1995), strengthening fragile democracies, improving the quality of governance, and countering the influence of organized and powerful dominant groups (Avritzer, 2002).

The challenge of promoting direct participation is particularly acute in contexts where the authority of the modern, rational-legal state is contested by various forms of social power (Migdal, Kohli, & Shue, 1994). Under such conditions, even when representative democratic institutions are well established, basic rights of association are distorted by pervasive vertical dependencies (clientelistic relationships), routinized forms of social exclusion (e.g., the caste system, *purdah*) and the unevenness and at times complete failure of public legality. In many democracies, the public authority of the modern state radiates out unevenly, and “the components of democratic legality and, hence, of publicness and citizen-

ship, fade away at the frontiers of various regions and class, gender and ethnic relations (O'Donnell, 1993, p. 1361).” The resulting disjuncture between formal and actionable rights is reflected in the predominance of oligarchical parties and patrimonial bureaucracies. The resulting institutional matrix favors vertical, back-door, and elite-based forms of participation, over horizontal, transparent, and citizen-based forms of participation. This problem becomes even more acute when one considers the weakness and even complete absence in much of the developing world of *local* democratic government.

Any theory of democratic deepening must as such explicitly take into account how unequal social relations and uneven institutional environments impinge upon the exercise of citizenship. Yet when one considers that this point has achieved axiomatic status in the literature on democratic deepening in the developing world (Huber, Rueschemeyer, & Stephens, 1997; O'Donnell, 1993), it is surprising just how thin the empirical literature remains and how little we actually know about the variability of citizenship densities. In large part the problem stems from the myopias of disciplinary specializations. Much of the political science and macro-sociology literature take national institutions as the unit of analysis, neglecting as such the vast underside of local political life. Conversely, the literature that explores social relations and politics at the local level usually pays scant attention to the larger institutional context and, based as it is on case studies, does not lend itself to generalization.

In this light, the recent wave of decentralization initiatives in the developing world presents a new and critical opportunity for research and theory. This is especially true in India, where the passage of the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments marks a natural experiment of sorts: a single treatment of basic institutional reform (empowering local governments), to be carried out by varied political units with different political configurations (states) across an extremely heterogeneous social landscape.² The opportunities for empirical evaluation are all the more tantalizing because of the relatively low starting point: weak, if not altogether absent, local democratic institutions.

One of the defining characteristics of post-colonial democracies is that they have comparatively centralized states, with few, if any local arenas in which citizens can meaningfully participate. In the case of India, even though

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