Is Government in India Becoming More Responsive? Has Democratic Decentralisation Made a Difference?

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The series is supported in part by The Simons Foundation.

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Abstract:
This paper reviews evidence and argument concerning the quality of government in India, especially provision of basic services, and the extent to which democratic decentralisation has helped to make government more responsive. As Lant Pritchett has put it, India appears in many ways to be a 'flailing state'. India is quite clearly *not* a 'failing state' – the central functions of government are often performed with exceptional competence – but the delivery of basic services is generally very poor. The paper explores why poor people, who tend to participate more actively in electoral politics than wealthier people, and who would greatly benefit from better public health, education and other services, do not hold politicians (or the bureaucrats in charge of service delivery) democratically accountable for poor public provisioning. Why has the implementation of progressive social legislation been left substantially to judicial activism? Answers to these questions are found in the idea that India is a 'patronage democracy'. In these circumstances, government appears most responsive in states with the highest newspaper circulation and a history of lower-class political mobilisation (Kerala, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal). Democratic decentralisation, through the panchayat system of local government, remains controversial as to its implementation and long-term outcomes, but achievements thus far have been limited.

About the author:
John Harriss is a social anthropologist and Director of the School for International Studies at Simon Fraser University. He has published extensively on the politics and the political economy of South Asia, and of India in particular. Before coming to SIS in 2006, he headed the Development Studies Institute (DESTIN) at the London School of Economics, where he was the Institute's founding Programme Director.

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Government in India presents a number of striking paradoxes. India is – as we are quite often reminded – both the largest and one of the more robust parliamentary democracies in the world. Political participation, as given by such indicators as turn-out rates in elections at different levels of government, compare favourably with those in most other democracies, and in some parts of the country at least, and at some times, the turn-out is inversely related to measures of socio-economic status (Alam 2004, chapter 2). This is to say that India is unique amongst parliamentary democracies in that poorer, more disadvantaged people often seem to be more likely to turn out to vote than their wealthier and more highly educated neighbours. Both state-level and national elections in India have more often than not been characterised by 'anti-incumbency' – incumbent governments have tended to be turfed out of office by voters, even if they have had a reasonable record of public service. Survey evidence shows that Indians generally still expect their state to supply solutions to common public problems, such as those of access to electricity and to water, to sanitation, or to decent roads, to health care and to education (see Chandhoke 2005, citing data from a survey in Delhi)**.** And yet the quality of service delivery, across the country, is very often abysmal. Studies show, for example, that although the country has a well-designed system of public health care, staffed by quite well trained and technically competent personnel, that can provide care more cheaply than private medical practitioners, the public system is widely distrusted by people. People, even very poor people, prefer to seek health care from private providers, even though (research shows) the private practitioners whom they seek out may be technically less competent than those in the public system as well as costing more. An important part of the reason for this is the very high levels of absenteeism that prevail amongst doctors and nurses, so that people cannot rely on local health centres being open when they should be, or on actually having access to a doctor when they go to higher level primary health care centres. Research has shown that absenteeism may be institutionalised, with health service managers actually conniving with junior staff to sanction and so to perpetuate absenteeism (Banerjee and Duflo 2009). How and why is it possible that voters should be ready to tolerate such failure? How is it possible that they should tolerate a

public education system that fails to teach very large numbers of children who have come through several years of schooling to read even a very simple text, or to perform the most basic arithmetic? (Banerjee et al. 2008) Why are even poor people ready to pay for private schooling, rather than exercising their voice to demand a better public service? (Jeffrey et al 2008) Why do voters apparently tolerate high levels of corruption in these and other public services, and on the part of their politicians – quite a high proportion of whom have criminal records? In the first part of the paper we review explanations for the often egregious failures of government in India. Why isn't government more responsive? Why is it that the drive for progressive social legislation has come through judicial activism rather than through a political process? Why is India experiencing 'the judicialisation of politics'?

We then go on to consider what is now being done in the country to improve the quality of 'governance'. This is a term that has come to be used very widely, partly in recognition of the fact that the effective management of public affairs must often involve other actors as well as 'the government'. It began to be used in the 1990s with recognition that development strategy must concern more than just the selection of appropriate policies. There was, and there remains of course fierce debate over whether or not the sorts of policies that have been urged by the international finance institutions – the so-called 'Washington Consensus' – are or are not appropriate (on which see Stiglitz 2002). What came gradually to be recognised, however, partly as a result of the failures of these policies in some countries, was that policy choice is only a part of the battle for development, and that the problems of implementation – 'how' questions, rather than 'what' questions – matter as much.

Historically the presumption has been that policy decisions, made by the executive of the state, whether it has a democratic or an authoritarian regime, are implemented by the state's administrative arm, the bureaucracy. There is a model of bureaucracy, developed by the great sociologist Max Weber, that provides a template for existing bureaucracies. They should be bound by transparent, impersonal rules, applied universally; they should keep records (in the 'bureau') and be accountable; they should have clear lines of authority (it should be clear exactly where 'the buck stops'), which means that they have a well-defined hierarchy of roles; and entry into them, and then promotion through the hierarchy, should depend upon ability. Recruitment

and career paths should be determined, in other words, meritocratically. Some recent research has shown that those developing countries that have such meritocratically recruited bureaucracies do tend to have better records of performance (Rauch and Evans 2000). India, famously, has a higher level bureaucracy which is quite fiercely meritocratic in terms of recruitment, and has many senior officials of exceptionally high calibre, but career paths in the civil service are much less clearly determined in the same way. And the recruitment of the very large numbers of lower level civil servants is rarely meritocratic, being subject to a great deal of personal and political discretion (Chandra 2004, chapter 6; Krishnan and Somanathan 2005).

The conventional approach to policy implementation has been that policy addresses a problem and a set of needs that have to be supplied through the instrument of the civil service, operating according to the principles of bureaucracy. But as Lant Pritchett and Michael Woolcock have argued in a paper with the intriguing title 'Solutions When *The* Solution Is The Problem' (2004), the conventional bureaucratic approach (*the* solution) often does not work at all well. This is not only because actually existing bureaucracies, modelled on the Western ideal, but implanted into very different social and cultural contexts, do not function according to the Weberian template, but also because bureaucracies – even those that approximate Weber's ideal type quite closely – may not be very good at dealing with certain types of problems. Pritchett and Woolcock distinguish between the many types of services for which governments are commonly held responsible, in terms both of the degree of discretionary decision-making that they involve, and of the numbers and frequency (the 'intensity') of transactions that they entail. Some functions of government involve a high level of discretionary decision making – setting the interest rate, for example – but very few transactions. In this case a small number of experts can operate very effectively. On the other hand there are services that can be highly routinised and that require very little in the way of discretionary decision-making, but that are 'transactions-intensive'. An example is that of an immunization programme. Such services can be supplied very well (though they aren't always, of course) by a centralised bureaucracy, supplying a top-down and uniform public service. The really difficult cases, however, are those of services – such as policing, teaching, and providing medical care – that involve both a lot of discretionary decision-making and large numbers of transactions. The conventional bureaucratic approach very often fails in regard to services such as these – '*the* solution', as Pritchett and Woolcock put

it, may become part of the problem. Many of the innovations in government in India and in other countries are aimed at finding a solution to the problems of delivering such 'discretion-and-transactions-demanding' services by overcoming the limitations of the bureaucratic approach. This is what is described as 'new public management', which can involve different elements. One approach is to resort to market solutions, by privatisation or by such means as the contracting out of services. But another is to involve members of local communities – through 'participation' – in the design, operation and monitoring of the delivery of public services. This approach should allow for the application of local knowledge and make the local agents of the bureaucracy ('street-level bureaucrats' as they have been called) more accountable to citizens. The decentralisation of government is held to have the same advantages and should encourage the participation of citizens in the management of their own public affairs.

In the second part of this paper, then, we consider India's experiences with these approaches to the improvement of governance, and we also ask the question of where, in this federal polity, government works best, given the possibility that there are ways of working in some of the more effectively governed states that might be applied elsewhere.

'Patronage Democracy' and the 'Flailing State'

India is of course a long way from being a 'failing state', and in regard to many of its functions the Indian state performs very well indeed. What Devesh Kapur (2010) refers to as the 'macro-state', responsible for the major instruments of economic policy, has generally done very well indeed even in the period of low rates of economic growth when India at least avoided the disasters of high rates of inflation that so badly affected other 'developing' economies. This is the sphere of the often highly competent upper echelons of the Indian Administrative Service. India does well, too, in regard to indicators of democracy. But the Indian government, as we have pointed out, actually performs very badly in regard to the delivery of services, even by comparison with its poorer and economically less dynamic neighbours. The 'Failed States Index' for 2010 shows Pakistan at 10th (i.e. there are only nine countries that do worse on this Index), Bangladesh at 24th, Sri Lanka at 25th and Nepal at 26th, while India is ranked 87th. In regard to the criterion (included in the Index) of 'progressive deterioration of public services', however, India

does little better (with a score of 7.2, where 10 would mean complete breakdown) than its neighbours Pakistan (7.3) and Nepal (7.6), and worse than Sri Lanka (6.4) (see *Foreign Policy* August 2010). The 'micro-state' has, for example, launched a long series of programmes to address different dimensions of poverty but with very little to show for most of them (Kapur 2010; and for an old but still penetrating account of how benefits from poverty programmes 'leak upwards', see Guhan 1980). These characteristics of the Indian state – high levels of competence and performance at the centre, but a distressing inability to deliver programmes and services to the mass of the people – have led Lant Pritchett to describe it, memorably, as a 'flailing state' (by analogy with a flailing human body when the brain loses control of the limbs: see Pritchett 2009). What accounts for this state of affairs?

An answer to this critical question comes from work by Kanchan Chandra, who describes India as a 'patronage democracy'. What she means by this is that India is formally a democracy, with free and mostly reasonably fair elections under a universal franchise, in which the state monopolises access to very substantial resources – the allocation of which is, however, subject to a high degree of individual discretion: 'elected officers have discretion in the implementation of laws allocating the jobs and services at the disposal of the state' (Chandra 2004: 6). Though under the impact of policies of economic liberalism the growth of public sector employment has been contained, there still are very many jobs in the public services and they are still very much sought after (as Craig Jeffrey and Roger and Patricia Jeffrey have explained with regard to wealthier rural people in western Uttar Pradesh, 2008). The allocation of most of these jobs is subject to the discretion of individual bureaucrats, usually influenced by politicians. The state, through its street-level bureaucrats, continues to control access to important inputs for agriculture, such as water and public sector credit, and to loans, rations of essential commodities (through the Public Distribution System) and to employment in public works (now through National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme [NREGA]) – and the allocation of these resources, too, is subject to political discretion. Politicians are able to exercise power over bureaucrats – even sometimes those at the highest levels of the civil service – through the mechanism of 'transfers'. Governments, and consequently politicians, have almost unfettered power to transfer a civil servant from one post to another, and to promote and to demote them (Krishnan and Somanathan 2005: 292-99). This, as Robert Wade has shown in several papers,

opens up huge possibilities for securing rents, on the parts of both officials and especially of politicians (Wade 1982, 1985) – as officials seek to avoid difficult postings and to secure ones in which there are significant opportunities for graft. It also means that even the most competent and uncorrupted officials – often especially them – are unlikely to remain in one position for very long. We have all met senior IAS officers who have seldom remained in a post for much more than a year, and there are notable cases where even, for instance, a Chief Secretary to a state government has been removed from his post quite arbitrarily when he stood in the way of senior politicians.

From the point of view of the politicians, being able to control selective benefits through patronage using the resources of the state seems to be a more reliable way of ensuring continued support – and of realising rents for themselves, of course – than standing on a policy platform including promises about the delivery of *public* goods. Even where public spending has not been directed at the supply of individual benefits, it has been focussed on delivering transfers to particular interest groups – as Pranab Bardhan has shown in his studies of the political economy of India, describing how public resources have been massively frittered away in often unproductive transfers (Bardhan 1984, 1998). Notable recipients, as well as private business groups, have been those labelled as 'farmers' who have been and continue to be the beneficiaries of public subsidies for fertilisers, irrigation water and electricity, and of subsidised prices for at least some of their output. It has been particularly the wealthier farmers who have benefited from such subsidies, and not so much the very many poor peasants of the country. Kapur notes that the benefits of subsidies on food and fertilisers (equivalent to about 1.25 per cent of GDP in the early 21st century) accrued mainly to surplus grain producers in Punjab, Haryana, western Uttar Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh (2010: 449). But there is still a puzzle as to why voters – who include, rather disproportionately, as we've noted, large numbers of poor people, who would greatly benefit from better provision of public health, education and other services – do not hold politicians (and through them the street-level bureaucrats who are immediately responsible for service delivery) democratically accountable for poor public provisioning.

Philip Keefer and Stuti Khemani have answered this question by suggesting that it is due to the lack of credibility of political promises to provide broad public goods. They attribute 'the

differential credibility of promises related to public goods versus private transfers' (2004: 935) to three factors – the history of electoral competition, the extent of social fragmentation of voters and to the limited information among voters about the quality of services. The first of these points involves an argument about historical path dependency. There are states – Keefer and Khemani give the familiar example of Kerala – where there is a history of governments being held to account because voters have been highly mobilised (in Kerala by the communist parties) over service issues. In the absence of such a history, as in Uttar Pradesh, it is difficult for any political leader or party to break from a path that has been determined by competition around selective benefits. The argument then shows up the significance of the second factor – that of social fragmentation. Public provisioning has generally been better in those states in which poorer people have been mobilised collectively, as by the communist parties in Kerala, or by the Dravidian parties in Tamil Nadu (see Harriss 2003; Varshney 2000). And this factor in turn ties up with the one to do with information. The point here is that it is easier for people to judge whether politicians have delivered on subsidies rather than on provision of health and education, and Keefer and Khemani offer a number of practical suggestions about how voters may be better informed about service provision – for example through the use of the 'report cards' that was pioneered in Bangalore. The argument is made in work by Tim Besley and Robin Burgess (2000) on variations in government responsiveness across the major Indian states. They examined public food distribution and calamity relief expenditure as measures of government responsiveness and showed that differences between states in their regard are only weakly related to variations in economic development, but that states with historically higher electoral turnouts and more competitive politics, and those with higher newspaper circulation are distinctly more responsive than others. It seems clear that higher levels of information among voters and higher levels of collective political mobilisation are mutually supportive and inter-related. The data that are given by Besley and Burgess show that the most 'responsive states' according to their measures are Kerala, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, which are also the states with the highest newspaper circulation, and states in which the lower classes have historically been most highly mobilised politically.

Keefer and Khemani's argument, therefore, seems to point to the significance of long run trends of political mobilisation and so it poses a further question: why is it that poorer people

have not been mobilised collectively to any great extent around public provisioning in most Indian states? We turn back to Chandra's analysis, which is couched in the frame of rational choice-making. She asks how benefit-seeking voters in a patronage-democracy like India select politicians to vote for, and how politicians on the other hand decide which groups of electors to pitch for. The decisions both of voters and of politicians are subject, she says, to severe information constraints, and that these 'force voters and politicians to favour co-ethnics in the delivery of benefits and votes (resulting in) a self-enforcing and reinforcing equilibrium of ethnic favouritism' (2004: 12). What matters to voters is not what a party or a political leader says, but *who* it, or she is. The basis for such ethnic favouritism may be caste, language or religion, or a sense of a 'national'/regional identity that is perhaps only rather loosely linked to linguistic difference (as in the Telengana region of Andhra Pradesh), and it is always subject to reconstruction. This is the reason why, according to Chandra's analysis, ethnic voting does not lead to permanent electoral majorities, because rival politicians can reconstruct salient identities (as, for example, 'Rajput' politicians in Gujarat – from a numerically small group – succeeded in extending the category of 'Kshatriya' to a very wide group. See Chandra 2004: 289). Ethnic parties are likely to succeed when they have competitive rules for intra-party advancement, and so are open to elites from across the possible sub-divisions of the ethnic category around which they are organised, and when voters from the target category are sufficiently numerous to take the party to a winning or at least to an influential position. Once the equilibrium of ethnic favouritism is established it is not easily broken down.

With the decline of the Congress party as an 'encompassing interest', embracing many different actually or potentially self-conscious groups of people (on which see Corbridge and Harriss 2000, chapter 3-6), so Indian politics has become much more of a field of contestation over ethnic identities – often involving claims about dignity or 'self-respect' as well as over resources – which has reinforced government failure. As Abhijit Banerjee and Rohini Pande have shown in a test using data from Uttar Pradesh, if voters are concerned about the group identity of political candidates, then if this group has a majority in a particular political jurisdiction the quality of the candidates can be very poor and yet they will still win. In such circumstances 'a strengthening of group identity on citizens' political preferences worsens the quality of political representation' (Banerjee and Pande 2009: 2). The two authors developed a

data set, from a field survey covering a sample of 102 jurisdictions, on legislator corruption in Uttar Pradesh over the period 1980-96, when it is generally recognised that ethnic voting became increasingly significant (the standard source on this is Yadav 1996). They then demonstrate both that increased legislator corruption over this period can be attributed to legislators from the party that shared the ethnic identity of the dominant population group in a jurisdiction (Congress or BJP for upper caste voters, Samajwadi Party or Bahujan Samaj Party for lower caste voters), and that increased corruption was largely concentrated in those jurisdictions with substantial high or low caste domination. Jurisdictions with the more biased caste distributions showed the greatest increases in corruption.

Lucia Michelutti's rich ethnography (2008) of political leadership amongst the numerically powerful Yadavs of northern India – the caste grouping from which there have come the two powerful political leaders Lalu Prasad Yadav, long-standing actual then *de facto* Chief Minister of Bihar and later a very successful Railways Minister in the Central Government of India (2004-09), and Mulayam Singh Yadav, three times Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, and once Defence Minister of India – adds to this picture. Michelutti shows that Yadavs, building in part on the idea of their claimed *Kshatriya*, warrior heritage, commonly value qualities of physical strength and toughness in their leaders, and may even celebrate their violence and criminality ('*goonda*-ism'). Such cultural constructions influencing political leadership go to enhance the tendencies that are analysed by Banerjee and Pande. Political leaders like both Lalu Prasad and Mulayam Singh Yadav owe much of their sustained political support to their ability to represent themselves as fighting successfully on behalf of the dignity of 'their people' – and this has clearly outweighed the limitations of their governments in regard to development and service delivery. As Lalu Prasad has said on different occasions to me 'What is this "development" that you people talk about? I want respect for my people'. In circumstances such as these attempts at bringing about administrative reform as the way of improving the delivery of public services are likely to be set at nought. Only for so long can there be maintained a gap between the actions of politicians and those of administrators. As a distinguished senior civil servant, N.C. Saxena, once wrote: 'the model in which the politics will continue to be corrupt, casteist and will harbour criminals whereas civil servants continue to be efficient, responsive to public needs and change agents, cannot be sustained indefinitely' (cited by Pritchett 2008).

There are other factors, too, that make for India's character as a 'flailing state'. With regard to measures to reduce poverty, in particular, there is a problem of the proliferation of programmes. New administrations at the centre and in different states are eager to become identified with particular programmes (even if people, in the end, benefit from them through discretionary allocations), and this has contributed to proliferation. As new programmes are introduced old ones, even if they had very similar objectives, are rarely if ever closed down. A visit to clusters of government offices in district capitals, taluk towns and even block headquarters, sometimes reveals a kind of an archive of successive programmes. And there are now very many schemes sponsored by central government, which makes grants for their implementation to the states – but as Devesh Kapur says 'Few states have the administrative capacity to access grants from 200 plus schemes, spend money as per each of its conditions, maintain separate accounts and submit individual reports' (2010: 453). This capacity is most limited where most it is needed – as I observed in the course of a most distressing visit to mainly defunct and decaying health centres in Bihar some years ago, when I learnt that the state had simply not claimed many of the resources available from the central government for primary health care. Large amounts of budgeted central state expenditures actually go unspent – not only in Bihar (Kapur 2010: 453). It is a somewhat ironic fact, too, that over-bureaucratised though it is in so many ways, the Indian state(s) are often chronically under-staffed in key departments.

The factors we have discussed here relate mainly to the supply side of public services. On the demand side, adding to the limitations that follow from the significance of clientelism in India's 'patronage democracy', there is the fact that middle class people, usually those most capable of ensuring the accountability of politicians, have increasingly withdrawn from using public services at all – going to private clinics and hospitals and sending their children to private schools. They have little interest, as a result, in exercising their voice in the cause of improved public services. They may be withdrawing, too, from participation in electoral politics. Javeed Alam maintains that middle class people are increasingly withdrawing from what he refers to as 'the politics of din' – as he puts it 'the core of civil society has turned against democracy' (2004: 122ff) – though the National Election Survey at the time of the 2009 General Election showed comparable levels of participation on the parts of members of middle and lower classes. But as Alam also says his assertion calls for careful interpretation. Many of the most articulate members

of the Indian middle classes are deeply committed to democratic values but find they are corrupted by the way that democratic politics work in their country – and they have turned instead to activism in civil society, as we discuss later in this paper. It is members of the middle classes who have brought about the important innovations in government (through the Right to Information Act) and in social provisioning (notably through NREGA and now through continuing activism over food security) through their campaigning and lobbying, sometimes through the legal instrument of public interest litigation. Such litigation has led the Supreme Court to order the government to act – as, for example, over the use of stocks of cereals in the granaries of the Food Corporation of India. There is a sense, then, in which there is a 'judicialisation of politics' taking place in India, with rather ambiguous implications for the functioning of India's democracy. It may mean that some of the negative implications of patronage democracy are overcome – as we perhaps see in the implementation of the Right to Education and of NREGA – but it can also mean that technocratic measures that are ultimately most favourable to middle and upper class interests are implemented, rather than democratic solutions being sought for public problems. It contributes to what is becoming recognised as a critical problem for the future of the Indian polity – that of the increasing powers of the Supreme Court, and the consequent tensions between the legislature and judiciary. The Court threatens to become an '*imperium in imperio*, the creation of which the drafters of the Constitution specifically wished to avoid' (Rajamani and Sengupta 2010: 93).

These, then, are some of the critical problems affecting governance in India. What is now being done about them? Is government becoming more responsive?

Are Decentralisation and 'Participation' the Answer to the Problems of the Flailing State? Is There a 'Silent Revolution' Taking Place in India Today?

Of the different approaches to the problems in the delivery especially of what Pritchett and Woolcock describe as 'discretion-and-transactions-intensive services' where conventional bureaucratic approaches are particularly problematic, those that have been most prominently experimented with in India are decentralisation and 'participation'. The first of these is expected to make government more responsive, by bringing it closer to the people, improving information

flow both ways (from government to people and people to government), and the second – related to it – to empower ordinary people in relation to the state so as to make it work better for them. Both fit, more or less comfortably, into policy ideas about governance that are associated with economic liberalism, because they represent alternatives to the centralised state (see Harriss 2000).

Decentralisation, legislated for in India through the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution of India that entered into effect in 1993, involving the delegation of some authority to local levels of rural and of urban government respectively, is expected to make critical decision-making better informed about local needs and circumstances, and to make both politicians and bureaucrats more directly answerable to the people. Local governments should be much better able than bureaucrats appointed by central government to monitor and control the delivery of discretion-and-transactions-intensive services. These arguments led senior policy makers in the later 1980s to look to revitalising and strengthening the *panchayati raj* system of local government that had been initiated in the 1950s, partly in response to ideas of Gandhi's about village self-government that were enshrined in a Directive Principle of the Constitution of India. The new legislation mandated (that is, it requires) state governments to establish panchayats at village, intermediate (block) and district levels; to hold direct elections to all the seats in these bodies every five years; to reserve seats for Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe [SC/ST] members according their share in the population (these are social groups entitled by the Constitution of India to benefit from affirmative action); and to reserve one-third of all seats for women. It also mandates state governments to reserve one-third of the positions as chairs at all three levels for women, and for SC/ST in proportion to their shares in the state's population. It thus provides local government bodies with constitutional status. Other provisions in the legislation, however, are 'discretionary' – that is states are called upon, but *not* explicitly required to devolve powers and resources to local bodies (including also the gram panchayats or assemblies that constitute the electorate of a village panchayat) so as to enable them to play a central role in the provision of public services and in the planning as well as in the implementation of development programmes and the securing of social justice. This means that the idea of 'local self-government' may be severely circumscribed in its practice, and that state governments may actually continue to exercise considerable power in regard to the local bodies.

In practice, in most states, district officials, magistrates or collectors, have the authority to interfere in the functioning of local government, and MPs and MLAs exercise a lot of influence in the workings of the second and third tiers (Chaudhuri 2007).

The political scientist James Manor, drawing on his experience of research on democratic decentralisation (which is what *panchayati raj* is expected to establish) in a number of other countries as well as in different Indian states, argues that the three essential conditions for it to work well are: (i) that the elected bodies should have adequate powers; (ii) be provided with adequate resources; and (iii) be provided with adequate accountability mechanisms (so that bureaucrats are accountable to the elected representatives and the representatives to the people). He writes of his regret that most Indian states have failed to satisfy these conditions and that they have consequently lost significant opportunities – given that in so many other ways India is well prepared for decentralised government by comparison with many other countries (Manor 2010).

There is, in fact, a great deal of variation between the states – because of what the legislation leaves to their discretion – in the way in which the 73rd (and, as we shall see, the 74th) Amendments have been implemented. Shubham Chaudhuri's detailed review (2007) showed that more than ten years after the passage of the 73rd Amendment fewer than half of the major states had satisfied the mandate regarding the holding of regular elections, and that some had failed to meet the requirements regarding the representation of women and of members of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The limited evidence then available also showed that very little progress had been made in regard to functional and financial devolution to the local bodies, which continued to be characterised by high levels of dependency for their revenues on the higher levels of government. He writes 'It is hard to see how tax efforts [of local bodies] could get any worse' (2007: 185), and concludes that 'even when functions have been statutorily or even administratively transferred to panchayats, in most states the funds and personnel necessary for meaningfully carrying out the functions remain under the administrative control of the state-level bureaucracy' (2007: 177). Exceptions are Kerala and West Bengal – which according to Chaudhuri's analysis are the only states in which there has been any significant devolution of powers – and, to some extent, Karnataka (the state which, along with West Bengal, had a functioning panchayat system before the passage of the new legislation in 1993), and

Maharashtra. The only other states in which Chaudhuri found that progress with devolution of powers had been other than 'minimal' are Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan.

Indian politicians have long resisted the transfer of resources and authority to local bodies, because of the loss that it would entail of some of their powers of patronage. The political changes of the last two decades, which have seen regional political parties acquiring much greater influence, have increased the powers of the states in relation to the central government and changed the character of Indian federalism (see Mitra and Pehl 2010), but they have certainly not increased the incentives for state politicians to decentralise. Indeed, if anything, the increasing volume of resources coming from the centre to state governments has increased the incentives for state politicians to control local administration (Kapur 2010: 454). Further, as Chaudhuri points out, even apart from problems of political will and of bureaucratic resistance, decentralisation is also extraordinarily complex administratively.

The story thus far, therefore, of democratic decentralisation in India, does not encourage one to think that it can have had very much of an effect on the quality of administration or the delivery of services. There is no authoritative analysis of its impact across the country as a whole – and given the variations in implementation such an analysis is scarcely feasible. We have to rely, therefore, on studies of particular states. Those by Pranab Bardhan and Dilip Mukherjee of the panchayat system in West Bengal show that there it has increased the voice of women and of dalits and adivasis – though they all still participate only at low levels – and increased their share of public resources. Bardhan and Mukerjee also find, however, that the inter-village allocation of resources is subject to high levels of discretion, and report that 'Villages with greater landlessness, land inequality, or low-caste status among the poor received substantially fewer resources as a whole. Anecdotes and case studies indicate that the allocation of benefits followed party lines. Those that do not belong to the party locally in power get severely discriminated against' (2007: 219). Somewhat similarly, Tim Besley and his co-researchers, who studied panchayats drawing on a large sample from across the four southern states, found that having a reserved panchayat chairman does improve targeting towards SC/ST households, but were also concerned about bias in the allocation of resources to benefit chairmen's own villages. They also thought it possible, however, from their findings, that poorer people may participate actively in

gram sabhas, and that this may have a positive influence on targeting towards the poor (Besley et al. 2007). Two other scholars, Crook and Sverrisson, having studied analyses of decentralised government in several countries, and in West Bengal, concluded that decentralisation has been most successful in regard to poverty alleviation in the Indian state largely because in this case state-level politicians have intervened at local levels in support of poorer people against local power-holders (Crook and Sverrisson 2003). Clearly – as was often the case in India's earlier experiments with local government through panchayats – democratic decentralisation may easily go to enhance the opportunities of those who are already locally powerful, and work against the interests of the poor and the excluded. There is indeed a 'paradox of decentralisation' – which is that effective decentralised government may actually require those in power at the centre to intervene *more* than before at local levels, against the manipulations of those who are locally powerful. This argument emerges very clearly from Judith Tendler's studies of 'Good Government in the Tropics' (the title of her book, 1997), in the state of Ceara in North-Eastern Brazil.

The same point has been made in regard to decentralisation in Madhya Pradesh in the time of the government of the Congress Chief Minister Digvijay Singh (between 1993 and 2003) by Patrick Heller, drawing in part on research by James Manor (2010). In this state decentralisation has had most effect in the sphere of primary education, through the Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS) established under Digvijay Singh's government. The EGS empowered any panchayat that did not have a school within one kilometre to demand one from the state government and mandated the latter to respond within 90 days. In turn the panchayat had to identify a teacher from within the community and to establish a parent-teacher association to monitor the performance of the school. The goal of the EGS was 'to provide community-centred, rights-based primary education to all children in a quick and time-bound manner' (Anderson, quoted by Heller 2010, forthcoming). By 2001 the primary education system in the state was entirely decentralised, with the panchayats charged with recruiting and monitoring teachers – and, it appears, with very positive outcomes, for a nation-wide study found teacher absenteeism in MP to be well below the national average, while the 2001 census showed that literacy levels had been remarkably improved. The Singh administration worked quite like the progressive administrations of Ceara in Brazil, described by Tendler, devolving resources in such a way as to

by-pass the patronage channels of local bosses; and Singh relied significantly for the implementation of this, and other programmes, on a cadre of talented bureaucrats whom he kept in post and insulated from the pressures of patronage politics through the setting up of special delivery mechanisms called 'Rajiv Gandhi Missions'. In order to build and maintain political support Digvijay Singh sought to break with his party's reliance on upper castes and local bosses, reaching out to the historically marginalised dalits [Scheduled Castes] and adivasis [Scheduled Tribes]. As Heller notes, however, the limits of this top-down process of reform have to be recognised, and 'critics, including Singh, have complained that Panchayats in Madhya Pradesh have been dominated by sarpanches [chairmen]' and that the panchayats have been ineffective in holding bureaucrats and local elites to account. The dangers of elite capture remain acute – and in Madhya Pradesh, indeed, Digvijay Singh finally lost power, in spite of the successes of his administration in regard to the delivery of some public services, substantially because of losing the support of local elites and of information from them (Manor 2010: 69-70).

Still, the story of the relative success of the Education Guarantee Scheme in Madhya Pradesh, and even more so, that of the People's Campaign for Decentralised Planning in Kerala, encourages Patrick Heller to argue that *panchayati raj* is bringing about a 'silent revolution' in India. As we have seen, Kerala is one of just two states (the other being West Bengal) in which, according to Chaudhuri's analysis, there has been significant devolution of authority, though the state was a relatively late entrant into the renewed experiment with democratic decentralisation in India. The People's Campaign was supported only by a reformist fraction within the CPI(M) in Kerala, that has for long alternated in office in the state with Congress-led coalitions. This fraction, inspired by arguments put forward by the legendary former leader of the Kerala party, the late E.M.S. Namboodirapad, and under the leadership of Thomas Isaac, originally an academic economist and development studies scholar, launched the People's Campaign when the party regained office in 1996. Heller describes it, rightly, as 'the most ambitious decentralisation initiative' yet to have been attempted in India. It involves a much greater level of fiscal decentralisation – about 30 per cent of all state plan expenditures – than in any other state in India (while according to the World Bank in regard to fiscal decentralisation Kerala is second in the world only to Colombia); and full devolution of functions in the context of 'the creation of a comprehensive, nested, participatory structure of integrated planning and budgeting' (Heller

2010, forthcoming – the planning and budgeting system is fully described and analysed by its architect, Thomas Isaac, with Richard Franke 2000). The system starts with meetings of *gram sabhas* – village assemblies – in which research by Heller and his co-researchers shows that women and SCs/STs participate somewhat disproportionately. Their research also shows that decentralised planning, through the panchayats, has had positive outcomes especially in regard to the provision of roads, housing and child services; and as one scholar from Kerala whom they quote – K.P. Kannan – who had been distinctly sceptical about the People's Campaign, has himself written, it has in the end been successful in establishing 'a public platform for a vigilant civil society' (Heller, Harilal and Chaudhuri 2007).

So for Heller *panchayati raj* appears to be effecting a 'silent revolution' in India, in spite of the severe limits thus far on its implementation, with little having happened at all in so many states. But the histories of Kerala and Madhya Pradesh, and perhaps those of West Bengal and of Karnataka, have both shown up the existence of groups of progressive state reformers in different parts of the country and – more significantly – that 'Ordinary citizens have been afforded opportunities to engage with public authority in ways that simply did not exist before' (2010, forthcoming). As Stuart Corbridge, Glyn Williams, Manoj Srivastava and Rene Veron have also argued in their work on 'Seeing the State' in India (2005), based on research in part on the much less propitious terrain of Bihar, the very language of participation 'resonates with popular aspirations and can readily be turned against a non-performing state' (Heller 2010, forthcoming). Support for this positive view of the potentials that have been opened up both for the deepening of democracy in India, and for making the state more accountable to the people, comes from the mounting evidence – to some of which we have referred – about the changing social character of political participation in the country, as members of lower castes and classes, and women too, have begun to take part more actively at all levels of politics.

Other scholars, including this writer, are less sanguine about the prospects of this 'silent revolution'. Abhijit Banerjee and his co-researchers, for example, reach quite pessimistic conclusions from their study of participatory initiatives in regard to primary education in Uttar Pradesh. In this state, as in others, Village Education Committees (VEC) have been set up – or are supposed to have been set up. These bodies, in UP formed by head teachers together the

heads of local government (usually panchayat chairmen) together with three parents, are expected to improve the functioning of schools through the involvement (or 'participation') of 'beneficiaries' (here children and their parents). The researchers' baseline surveys, however, showed both that parents were unaware of the existence of the Committees and that VEC members were unaware of their powers. They then experimented with three different innovations designed to enhance participation in this case, but found – sadly – that none of them had a positive impact on community involvement in schools, or on teacher effort, or on learning outcomes. The one innovation that did have an impact was that of the setting up of reading camps, which both showed that parents are interested in their children's education and had some success in teaching reading. The researchers concluded that 'citizens face substantial constraints in participating to improve the public education system, even when they care about education and are willing to do something to improve it' (Banerjee et al. 2008). The research in part brings out brings out the familiar problems of collective action (on which see Olson 1965): in this case parents' involvement in their children's schooling certainly can have positive outcomes, but how and why – or under what conditions – should people get involved? The fact that there can be benefits from participation in bodies like VECs doesn't automatically mean that people will get involved in them – because participation also entails costs, not least in terms of time.

Studies of democratic decentralisation in India's cities, following from the 74th Amendment, or Nagarpalika Act, (which, we know, was added almost as an afterthought by the architects of *panchayati raj*), and of other participatory initiatives in the cities, have shown that while the state encourages these endeavours rhetorically and to an extent in practice, in others of its measures it has made it possible increasingly for powerful people to by-pass democratic processes over the vital matter of control of urban space. Solomon Benjamin, an urban planner who has both studied and been politically active in regard to urban space in Delhi and in Bangalore/Bangalaru, argues that India's great cities are divided between what he refers to as the 'local economies', in which the mass of the people dwell, very often in circumstances of insecure tenure, and in which they try to secure their livelihoods, mostly through insecure, informal employment – and on the other hand, the 'corporate economies' (Benjamin 2000). These are the city spaces that are controlled by industrial, bureaucratic and IT sector elites, which increasingly are demarcated physically from the geographical areas of the local economies. These elites

operate through their political connections with politicians at levels beyond the immediate locality, and through mega-projects and the 'Master Planning' of Urban Development Authorities, and through these means have managed to achieve 'hegemony in the shaping of urban form that is quite unprecedented' (Nair 2005: 340, writing about Bangalore). Urban development authorities are empowered to exercise control over urban real estate in a way that by-passes elected local bodies, so that the urban poor, enormous in their numbers though they are, have little influence over the allocation even of the most minimal living space (see Roy 2006, writing on Ahmedabad, and Ghosh 2005, about the activities of the Bangalore Agenda Task Force). The facts that the provisions of the 74th Amendment have been implemented to a lesser extent even than those of the 73rd, or that the Jawaharlal Nehru Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) set up by the United Progressive Alliance government in 2005, for all its reference to the needs of the urban poor, should focus mainly on infrastructure and provisioning of the IT and service sectors, are hardly surprising in this context (see Mukhopadhyay 2006, and Gooptu 2010 on the JNNURM; and Harriss 2010 on the argument in general).

A good deal is expected, too, of the role of civil society organisations in India's metropolitan cities. Urban authorities in both Delhi and Mumbai have to sought to establish partnerships with civil society groups– to bring about 'collaborative change, in the words of the Delhi government website, 'for the development of the city', through its *Bhagidari* Scheme; or in Mumbai through 'Advanced Locality Management Units' that were instituted first in 1997. The *Bhagidari* Scheme involves 'partnerships' between the Delhi government and local Residents' Welfare Associations (RWAs), and the Mumbai set-up, too, involves partnerships between residents/citizens and the municipal administration (Zerah 2007). In both cities it is clear that the 'residents' who are involved are generally those from middle-class areas in which people have security of tenure for their homes. *Bhagidari* has been extended very little into the massive areas of (officially) 'unauthorised' development in Delhi, or to the *jhuggi jhopris* (the slums). In other Indian cities as well RWAs are very largely confined to middle class areas, and there are many cases of political and legal action being sought by these groups to exclude poor people physically from their neighbourhoods (see Bhan 2008) – sometimes using the instrument of public interest litigation (which, as we have pointed out, has been used in other cases – as in that of food security – to advance socially progressive objectives). The whole sphere of formal association in

'civil society' indeed, involving a wide range of local associations, advocacy groups and service-delivery NGOs, is mainly the preserve of the middle classes. As I have argued, from empirical research in Chennai and Bangalore, 'Civil society activism has opened up new opportunities for representation, no doubt … but such opportunities hardly extend to the informal working class … the paradox that increasing opportunities for participation may actually go to increase political inequality stands against the claims of protagonists of "new politics" [supposedly grounded in associational activism]' (Harriss 2007: 2721). Evidence of this kind adds to the doubts about the practical possibilities of 'participation' that are expressed by Banerjee and his co-researchers, suggesting that there are ways in which the language and practice of participation and even of democratic decentralisation can serve specifically middle and upper class interests, and in a way that complements the agenda of neo-liberal economic policy.

This is not to say that members of the massive informal working class of India's cities do not organise themselves – and there are significant organisations of slum dwellers, some of them led by women, as well as of groups of informal workers. These, like the women's rights movement, slum-dwellers' rights movement, and the Unorganised Workers Federation that Harriss describes from Chennai, may have been launched by left-wing middle class activists, but they are movements *of* the working poor, rather than having been set up – like so many service delivery NGOs – to deliver 'benefits' *to* them. But it is still the case that the mass of urban poor people depend substantially on the intermediation of their local leaders – those referred to in Delhi as *pradhans* – with both bureaucrats and politicians, when they try to tackle problems of access to public services (those that, according to Chandhoke's research, they mostly do expect the state to supply; and see also Harriss 2006). Saumitra Jha, Vijayendra Rao and Michael Woolcock have observed the significance of the role of the *pradhans* as intermediaries in their studies of the politics of Delhi slums (2007), and they argue that through these local leaders poor people enjoy good access to politicians and to the state. They suggest, therefore, that 'urbanisation … (is) ... providing the poor with greater voice in democratic discourse' (2007: 244). We might question this conclusion: how so, when the 'participation' of poor people in the city is mediated by dependence upon particular gatekeepers?

My conclusion, then, is that while decentralisation and other ways of organising 'participation' can, in principle, serve both the cause of democratic deepening and that of improving the responsiveness of government in India so that public services are delivered more efficiently and more equitably, their practical achievements thus far are quite limited, certainly outside two or three states. Beyond this factual conclusion I recognise that there is continuing debate between those scholars like Patrick Heller and others who believe that there is reason for thinking that a 'silent revolution' is taking place, as the language and practice of democratic decentralisation increase the capacities of poor people to express themselves and their grievances, and on the other hand sceptics who find in the actual practices of participation vehicles for the interests of the dominant and middle classes of India that leave largely undisturbed the dependence of the labouring classes upon locally powerful intermediaries, so allowing the reproduction of 'patronage democracy'.

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