III

Dhirendra K. Vajpeyi

LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN THE THIRD WORLD: ISSUES AND TRENDS

It is neither easy nor proper to generalize about the nature of politics and political institutions in the so vast and variegated an area as the Third World. The countries in this area are different from one another in respect of their levels of social evolution, political development, economic achievement and technological change. Common among these countries is their colonial past. They are now all (with some exceptions) formally free, but their political, socio-economic and technological development continue to be influenced by the hangover of colonialism. Local government system is one of the fields of state activities where the hangover of the colonial past is quite obvious. Whatever indigenous institutions of local administration these countries had were made de-functionalized and moribund be the colonial state machinery. The local government system in post-colonial societies is basically the continuation of the colonial idea of treating local government institutions as central government agents for local administration. These local administration agencies fall far short of the standard definition of local gevernment having the following characteristics, viz. (i) separate legal existence, (ii) powers of adopting own budget, (iii) authority to allocate substantial resources, (iv) comprehensive functions dealing with local development, and (v) popular mandate and local choice for local development[1]. Against this backdrop of understanding about the nature of local government in the Third World countries, its changing role and functions are to be analyzed.

Almost in all the Third World countries the colonial rulers created local institutions primarily for public health and sanitation reasons and asked the

---

[1] *Local Government in the Third World: The Experience of Tropical Africa,* ed. P. Mawhood, John Wiley, New York 1983.

local people to contribute to the maintenance of the system[2]. With gradual awakening of political consciousness, people demanded, and were given, partially elected councils. The argument was the traditional one of d e m o c - r a t i c   f u n c t i o n s   that if people are to pay local taxes and rates, they must have their representatives on the local council. After attaining formal independence, the state in the post-colonial societies began undertaking some welfare functions and local government system had to be involved, in varying degrees, in this task. Hence the second important function of local government in Third World countries has been the w e l f a r e   (i. e., s o c i a l   s e r v i c e) f u n c t i o n s. Very closely connected with these two basic functions of local government, there are two other broad and inter-related functions: d e v e l o p - m e n t   f u n c t i o n s   and   n a t i o n - b u i l d i n g   f u n c t i o n s. These are very significant functions which are closely related with, and dependent on, the general process of socio-economic transformation of post-colonial societies. Next in designing and reforming local government, its i n f r a s t r u c t u r e f u n c t i o n s need to be detailed in the total scheme of governmental structural arrangement. This is an important function in so far as it is influenced by load-bearing capacity of local government machinery and leadership. And last, but never the least, important function of local government is its l i n k a g e f u n c t i o n s, that is, how successfully it helps link local political leadership with national political leadership. In assessing the changing functions of local government, each of these functions need to be closely examined.

In the developed countries of the west, local government institutionalizes local freedom. Alex de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill stressed the importance of local freedom in the life of the nation and put up classical defense in favor of local government. In recent times when some of the reform measures in Britain threatened local choice for deciding on the priorities in local government expenditure, Jones and Stewart put forward the argument of democratic functions of local authorities and new modes of service delivery, new forms of decentralization and new relationships with the public[3]. The point relevant for the Third World countries has two dimensions in this respect. First in many Third World countries local democracy is imperfect in so far as the superior government (national or regional) enjoys and, in practice, frequently exercises its power of superseding or suspending elected local councils. Secondly, even when the elected councils are not superse- ded/suspended, normally they are to function under very many administrative controls exercised by the superior government. Thus local government in the

---

[2] H. Tinker, *Local Self-Government in India, Pakistan and Burma,* (Indian Edition), Asia Publishing, Bombay 1967.

[3] J. and G. and J. Stewart, *The Case for Local Government,* George Allen & Unwin, London 1983.

Third World countries cannot effectively discharge its democratic functions. The local council which is elected formally is frequently prevented by the higher state machinery from reflecting local preferences in decision-making, especially in planning and development of the local area. People's right to be governed by their elected representatives is seriously compromised by the unfettered executive discretion of the superior government to cut short, or put an end to, the life of elected local councils. Moreover, such exercise of discretion is not justifiable in any court of law[4].

In respect of social service or welfare functions, local government in post-colonial societies again seems to be losing ground. Primary education and elementary health services are two such functions which have been, in recent times, taken over by the higher-level government from the hands of local government. There seem to be compelling reasons for such development. As population in these countries is fast increasing and demands for better services are becoming stronger, the financially weak local authorities are found to be palpably incapable to manage these social service functions to the satisfaction of the people. Local government definitely loses functions in this field but this loss of function is regretted neither by the local authorities nor by the local people. The considerations of better quality of service, technical standardization of uniform service, and big financial investment in rendering non-profit-making service have proved stronger than that of local democratic control over policy-making and implementation of these services. In practice, the functional relation between the higher-level government and local government in this respect has tilted the balance against local government. In some cases like Bangladesh and Nepal the aggressive role of the central government for improving social services has led to loss of local initiative[5].

Development is the crying need and the primary slogan in the postcolonial societies. Most of these countries have chosen the capitalist path of development. The roots of development here can be found in the capitalist mode of production. The degree of variation from one country to another can be explained by the mediating nature of culture, historic compromise and specific on-going struggles in these societies. The Third World countries basically following the capitalist path of development experience a relation between state and social class different from that in developed capitalist societies but nevertheless these countries display similar conflicts over rights on land and

---

[4] A. Mukhopadhyay, *Status of Municipal Government,* „Nagarlok" 1983, Vol. XV (3), July-Sept.

[5] F. E. McCarthy, S. Feldman, *Decentralization and Political Restructuring in Bangladesh;* Horst, Matthaeus 1988; *Nepal's Urban Government in Transition* presented at IPSA Workshop of the RC on Local Government, New Delhi 1988, India.

demands for investment. The management of urban land policy in India is a good illustration of this point[6].

Again, in the matter of managing urban renewal and slum improvement programs, elected local councils in developing countries usually receive a backseat. The entire responsibility of policy-formulation and policy-implementation is given to some non-representative bureaucratic development agencies of the higher-level government. This is also true, so far as the concrete experience is concerned, in regard to major water supply, housing and road-building programs. The core of land-use and development functions is denied to local government and all capital expenditures for development of local area and services are channelled through non-representative, bureaucratic, ad hoc development agencies. Elected local councils are considered anachronistic to the requirements of modern management. The normal practice is to entrust local councils with operation and maintenace of assets created by development agencies which are nothing bur bureaucratic-technocratic extension of the centralized state. This trend can be found in a large number of the Third World countries where the development process is marked by centralized control and decision-making[7].

Being systematically deprived of development functional responsibilities, people as well as leaders of local government in these societies have developed a restricted perception of municipal management functions. The recent research on electoral perception of local government management in an Indian state reveals that nearly 38.5 percent of the voter-respondents consider infrastructural development like roadbuilding and road-maintenance, and 15.3 percent of the voter-respondents perceive public health facilities, as main electoral issues. So far as municipal leadership is concerned, 45 percent of the leader-respondents consider civil amenities and public health as the chief concern of municipal government and only 5 percent of them consider infrastructural investment like housing as an item of municipal management[8].

Closely connected with development fuction is the range of nation-building functions of local government. This aspect of local government function has always been emphasized in the socialist countries but has been only partially taken note of in some Third World countries. In the long debate on nation-building and political development in the Third World there has been a contest between political-administrative stability and local autonomy

---

[6] A. Mukhopadhyay, *Implementation of Urban Land Policy: The Indian Experience,* „Planning and Administration" 1984.

[7] J. L. Taylor, D. G. Williams, *Urban Planning Practice in Developing Countries,* Pergamon Press, Oxford 1984.

[8] A. Mukhopadhyay, *Municipal Management and Electoral Perception,* World Press, Calcutta 1986.

through decentralization as the chief goal. Except Yugoslavia and China in the post-Mao period, the other socialist countries usually have valued stability as the desideratum of political development. Same is the case with a large number of Third World countries who have tried to build up regimented state system with local government as the grassroots outpost of the centralized state. But quite a few developing countries in Asia and Africa have also tried in their own ways to use local government institutions for nation-building purposes by providing for people's participation in developing programs and reconciling local aspirations with national identities. Mao's concept of self-sufficient communes in China and Gandhi's concept of self-sufficient village „swaraj" in India were basically a sort of semi-utopian ideas of nation-building by-passing the conventional local government apparatus. But what these ideas inherently stressed was that any over-developed, centralized state using bureaucratic machineries would be inimical to the nation-building process. Taking the clue from these ideological adventures, local government system in the Third World countries can be reformed and revitalized for meeting the socio-economic as well as ethnic-cultural needs of the people, and for mobilization of manpower and financial resources at the grassroots level. In the evolving societies of the Third World where the process of nation-building and state-building still remains incomplete, local government institutions, especially in rural areas, can achieve something very substantial[9]. But in order to achieve the best result, local autonomy and decentralization need to be accepted as the two essential values. And it is on this point that most of the Third World countries have defaulted in recent times.

One of the proverbial infrastructural weakness of local government in post-colonial societies is the absence of constitutional recognition of local government as a recognized limb of the total governmental structure. This weakness has put local government in the Third World at the mercy of higher-level government. However, in the Nigerian federal system, local government has obtained distinct constitutional recognition under the reforms of 1976, as the third tier of government and has been assigned clearly stated functions and financial resources[10]. But the Nigerian system suffers from structural and functional imbalances[11]. This is a very crucial point to note.

In designing infrastructural functions of local government it is important to determine what function should belong to which level of government.

---

[9] H. M a d d i c k, *Democracy, Decentralization and Development,* (Indian Edition) Asia Publishing, Bombay 1966.

[10] J. O. A k a n d e, *Introduction to the Nigerian Constitution,* Sweet and Maxwell, London 1982.

[11] I. B. B e l l o - I m a m, *Issues and Trends in Nigerian Local Government,* presented at the IPSA Workshop of the RC on Local Government, New Delhi 1988, India.

Allocation of functions between national, regional and local government, and, also between different tiers of local government, must take note of not only manpower, financial and technological but also political and cultural factors concerned. Local government in the Third World is generally condemned as inefficient and corrupt and is regarded as mere „garbage-dustbin" government. The reason for this state of affairs is not too far to seek. Being denied of adequate functions and matching resources to serve the local community, loc.l government in these countries fails to attract competent political leaders and trained career officials. This seems to be a vicious circle which irrevocably condemns local government to an inferior status in the estimation of the people.

The importance of competent local leadership in making local government a success can hardly be overemphasized. One of the avowed objectives of a well-developed local government system is to provide a two way channel of communication between the local community and the higherlevel government. From the viewpoint of political sociological analysis, the power elite in the Third World countries is a „limited" one, but it has started „expanding" in recent times in some of the post-colonial societies[12]. Local politics assumes importance only when its outcome has significance for regional and/or national politics. The kind of issues which are seen to arise in local-level politics (for example, land-using planning, resettlement policy, school educa-tion system, etc.) are clearly linked with higher-level policy and political attitude. Rosenthal's study of Indian city politics has clearly found linkage between local-level politics and state-level politics; similarly Rodney Jones finds that local politics in India is no autonomous political phenomenon and is essentially linked with state-level political process[13]. Most of the Third World countries have, more or less, the same kind of experience of state-local linkages. The change in local government's linkage function can be noted in the growing preference for political management of local government. In very few countries today local government is considered an apolitical delivery machinery of social services under the leadership of local notables fighting for local liberties. Partisan and ideological politics is on the increase at the local level in many Third World countries ranging from Nepal and Pakistan to Nigeria and Brazil. Autonomous local government and politics, performing little linkage function, is today more and exception than the general pattern.

---

[12] D. B. Rosenthal, *The Limited Elite: Politics and Government in Two Indian Cities,* Chicago University Press, Chicago 1970, A. Mukhopadhyay, *The Panchavat Administration in West Bengal,* World Press, Calcutta, 1980.

[13] D. B. Rosenthal, *Administrative Politics in Two Indian Cities* „Asian Survey" 1966, April; W. Jones, Rodney, *Urban Politics in India: Area, Power and Policy in a Penetrated System,* Vikas Publishing (Indian Reprint), New Delhi 1974.

With changing functions, the role of local government in Third World countries is also undergoing a change. More and more it is being realized that local government in these countries is an eminently suitable machinery to increase people's participation in policy-formulation and its implementation. Strategies for macro-level development may be determined at higher levels of government and they are also determined, in some cases by international development agencies like the World Bank. But successful implementation of development policies can never be ensured by-passing local government and popular involvement. Herein lies the real significance of the role local government.

Development of local government presupposes democracy and decentralization. The Third World countries have to accept this bigger political challenge. For the avowed purpose of economic development, the national bourgeoisie in these post-colonial societies always tend to concentrate more and more decision-making powers in the centralized state which is committed by two other collaborating agencies, viz., the bureaucracy and the military. This is because of the fact that in most post-colonial societies power-sharing has been confined to these three groups, and they have committed themselves to the capitalist path of development. When power-holders in the Third World countries talk of grassroots democracy, their tactic is populism and misleading the toiling masses about the real center of decision-making power. Local government in these societies is usually given the role of an agent of the centralized state, engaged in preliminary public health functions and implementing localized development schemes in accordance with higher-level policy direction and supervision. Unified and integrated personnel system for local government administration is advocated on grounds of increasing the administrative and technical competence of local government, but the real motive seems to be a deep disinclination to part with controlling powers over local government.

In the Third World countries there is a dangerous polarization between the interests of the ruling elites and those of the poor. Development policies and programmes are mostly out of touch with the aspirations and attitudes of the poor masses. There is also a strong reluctance to entrust local self-governing institutions with planning and development of the new towns established in post-independence period[14]. In the post-colonial societies there is hardly any stable national consensus about the desirable pattern of social development. The ruling elite is eager to imitate the development process of the western countries. The locally accountable political leadership is hardly given any decisive voice in the formulation of local development policies. The remarkable feature of the development process in the Third World is the delinking of local

[14] K. C. Sivaramakrishnan, L. Green, *Metropolitan Management: The Asian Experience*, Oxford University for World Bank, New York 1986.

government from responsibilities of managing local development. Local government in the Third World has not been allowed to play the role of 'local state'[15] reflecting state activity in socio-economic policies in the local area. It simply does not possess meaningful powers and functions for controlling local economy and its productions and distribution system.

In sharp contrast to the recent trends in some western countries, there is no trend towards re-municipalization of the welfare state in the Third World. The ruling elites in the majority of the post-colonial societies have consciously opted for working within the broad parameters of capitalist system. When they talk of decentralization they mean, in practice, „deconcentration" of the centralized state machinery. In the social welfare democratic countries in the west the demand for strong local government rests on the need to reduce both decision over-load and implementation over-load of the central government. It is argued that local government would be able to share the load of decision-making and implementation, and thereby would strengthen the democratic basis of the welfare state by distributing widely the power of decision-making and implementation. The argument is frustrated in the case of Third World countries because of their political economy working for inequitable distribution of national income. Their social structure is inherently lopsided, state-building is imperfect and nation-building is incomplete. The formal democratic institutions and practices adopted in a few Third World countries are constantly under threat from a host of sociological and economic forces like tribalism, communalism, religious fundamentalism, black mony and widespread politico-administrative corruption. The ruling elites comprising the bourgeoisie, bureaucracy and military take full advantage of this state of affairs and push back local government into a position of subordinate implementor of policies decided at the central level. Re-municipalization of welfare functions, particularly of housing, health, education, slum improvement and land-use planning, would go a long way in achieving genuine decentralization. But this programme cannot be implemented with a weak/ineffectual local government system, as is found in the Third World countries, suffering from vulnerable constitutional status, archaic management structure, acute fiscal debility, insignificant functional competence, and lack of inter-sectoral coordination among development agencies.

Third World's political systems are threatened by the reproduction process. Most often the process is tied to the needs of international capitalism which dictates the general shape of planning and development policy. The weak role of local government in the Third World is a reflection of this tie-up between this bigger economic force and the indigenous elite interested in exercising power with the help of centralized state apparatus. The ills of local government

---

[15] The phrase is taken from C. Cockburn, *Local State*, Pluto Press, London 1987.

in the Third World are multi-dimensional in character and can be correctly diagnosed only with reference to the nature of the state political economy prevailing there.

The present volume on *Local Government and Politics in the Third World: Issues and Trends* is a collection of thirteen scholarly papers. These essays attempt to raise questions and analyze issues related to changes taking place in local governments in Asia and Africa. The authors realize that there are no easy answers to these crucial issues, however, there is also a concern expressed here that success or failure of local level institutions would have serious implications for nation building, political development, democratic decentralization, elite recruitment, and policy formulation in the Third World. A quest for a common direction or broad vision is desired.

> Would you tell me, please, which way
> I ought to go from here? said Alice. That
> depends on a good deal on where you
> want to get to, said the Cheshire Cat
> – L. C a r r o l l, *Alice in Wonderland*

University of Northern Iowa
Calcutta University India

Dhirendra K. Vajpeyi

ADMINISTRACJA LOKALNA W TRZECIM ŚWIECIE:
PROBLEMY I TRENDY

Kraje Trzeciego Świata różnią się między sobą poziomem rozwoju politycznego i ekonomicznego. Współcześnie kraje te są formalnie niepodległe, ale duży wpływ na ich życie polityczne, społeczno-ekonomiczne i postęp technologiczny ma ich przeszłość kolonialna.

Władze lokalne w społeczeństwach pokolonialnych bazują na zasadzie traktującej władze lokalne jako agendę rządu centralnego. W krajach tych władze kolonialne tworzyły lokalne instytucje zajmujące się służbą zdrowia i opieką społeczną. Z czasem, w miarę rozwoju politycznego zaczęto żądać tworzenia wybieralnych kolegialnych organów samorządowych, co było wyrazem realizacji podstawowych funkcji demokracji.

Obecnie, mimo iż większość z krajów Trzeciego Świata wybrała kapitalistyczny model rozwoju, władze lokalne w tych krajach borykają się z szeregiem trudności związanych z realizacją ich funkcji ze względu na słaby poziom rozwoju ekonomicznego i szybkie tempo wzrostu ludności, co wywołuje szereg napięć społecznych i zmusza władze centralne do objęcia scentralizowaną kontrolą wszystkich spraw związanych z procesami ekonomicznymi.

Kilka krajów Afryki i Azji wybrało własną drogę rozwoju instytucji samorządowych opierając się na aspiracjach narodowych, np. Mao wystąpił z koncepcją samowystarczalnych komun czy Gandhi proponujący samowystarczalne wioski, jednakże koncepcje te zawierały przewagę elementów utopijnych.

Generalnie należy stwierdzić, iż ze względu na słaby rozwój ekonomiczny w krajach Trzeciego Świata władze lokalne są słabo zorganizowane i większość decyzji, w szczególności o charakterze politycznym, podejmowanych jest na szczeblu centralnym.