

Pranab Kumar Das (ed.), *Decentralisation, Governance and Development: An Indian Perspective*. Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan. 2017. 282 pages. ₹995.

Satyajit Singh, *The Local in Governance: Politics, Decentralization and Environment*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 2016. 261 pages. ₹895.

DOI: 10.1177/2321023017727989

Pranab Kumar Das's volume brings together a number of authors to reflect upon themes of decentralization, public finance, electoral competition and issues of human development in a three-part structure. The studies span macro-policy discourse, micro-level studies, electoral politics and institutional practices by various academics, policymakers and government personnel (p. xix). The volume is significantly focused on fiscal policies and evaluation of implementation based on data analysis. Nine of the twelve essays deal with evidence from West Bengal and the other essays present concerns from the states of Karnataka and Kerala. While these three states have a reputation for having decentralization policies that are widely considered successful, the essays in the volume offer minute and critical reviews. The book approaches the issue of a qualitative evaluation of decentralization in India by foregrounding the importance of 'mass-based movements' (p. xvii) in the states where these policies have enjoyed partial success.

The focus is on qualifying the notion of successful decentralization in Kerala and West Bengal with critical studies of programme implementation and politics. The understanding of institutions of governance is complicated by the evidence of circumvention of the Gram Sabha in the framing of by-laws for restructuring user charges (pp. 119–120). Commenting on the situation of Human Development Planning at the district and Gram Panchayat (GP) level, Manabi Mujumdar demonstrates how in the 1990s 'the district planning process did take off but since then has been stalled' (p. 157). Majumdar's essay is certainly a significant contribution in understanding the stalled project of local-level planning. These readings are presented alongside detailed quantitative evidence indicative of the capture of the lowest level of the GP by 'rural oligarchy' of owner cultivators (p. 241). Essays that delve into the past success of the [West Bengal] Left Front government in Panchayat elections argue that there was a dual strategy of 'selective doling out of political support to prospective voters' (p. 273) and moving away from radical initiatives of 'democratization and "massification" of information' (p. 223). Evidence of the gap between the rural mass and the local institutions in Kerala is also demonstrated through a detailed study of widespread 'non-reporting' of mortality data (p. 205) despite the long history of the civil registration system. Analogously the path to 'administrative decentralization' (p. 10) in Karnataka that had started with the Ramkrishna Hegde regime is found to be limited in its ability to extend and democratize civil society engagement into the discourse of fiscal decentralization. The essays on fiscal devolution bring together comprehensive overviews and astute observations for the macro-policy level but the details of implementation are significantly tilted towards studies located in West Bengal. The critical tonality of the

essays, however, provide much needed dissonance from the general positive evaluations of the state's decentralization policies and open up new spaces of research and debate.

These readings seem couched within a broader discussion of fiscal policy failure in timely transfer of funds, 'local revenue generation' (p. 42) and a lack of personnel for local planning. The essays collectively argue that these problems have been compounded by the treatment of panchayat institutions as 'implementing agencies' (p. 16). These essays are closely related to the political narrative of regime change in West Bengal and debates on 'primitive accumulation', inter-party violence and land politics in West Bengal. The essays on West Bengal therefore needs to be read in relation to the works of scholars like Dwaipayan Bhattacharya and Rajarshi Dasgupta in order to situate them within the broader discussion on rural politics and communist regimes in contemporary West Bengal.

Satyajit Singh's book is the direct opposite when it comes to the question of 'how' to study local governance. While the Das volume draws out questions from the macro-policy discourse and tests them at the micro level, Singh focuses on the specificity of local politics and history as the source of institutional design, considering the politics of decentralization discourse as against discussions on fiscal efficiency that dominates the theoretical structure of the Das volume. Bringing together colonial archival records with contemporary policy discourse and ethnographic insight, Singh argues for the dissolution of binaries that structure discussions on local governance: The book presents a critique of 'both the state and the market as alternative paradigms and instead focuses on an arrangement of institutions that facilitate greater inclusion, democratization and accountability, and greater participation' (p. 20).

The approach taken by Singh is predicated upon 'understanding the transition towards decentralization' (p. 3) where complex and mixed forms of 'deconcentration, decentralization and devolution' (p. 131) can create locally mediated designs of local governance. The study argues that institutions can qualify as political actors that represent and stabilize 'operating procedures' (p. 6) while articulating interests and contesting objectives. Local governance in this study is staged in a setting where 'critical control over rents' (p. 7) is at stake for politicians and bureaucrats. The author optimistically argues that the problem of elite capture is losing significance and 'would resolve itself in time' (p. 11). This seems to be an outcome of the specificity of the author's primary field work since he argues 'the more egalitarian social reality of Uttarakhand' defies elite capture (p. 50). This limits, to an extent, the direct generalizability of the ethnographic insights. Singh argues that there was a general air of mistrust for local governance institutions in the 1960s and 1970s and then he attempts to demonstrate how that mistrust and especially the fear of elite capture was not correct in the case of Kumaon. He ends up commenting that the assumption of elite capture does not work in the 'more egalitarian' societal structure of Kumaon. While his prescriptive and theoretical gestures are general, his substantiations are dependent upon a rather rare quality of 'egalitarianism' found in caste homogenous mountain villages. Even while distancing from the romantic notion of community, the author seems to retain its functions reminiscent of a 'moral economy' framework. The book minutely demonstrates periodic shifts in objectives and instruments of decentralization by narrating periodic decentralization and recentralization in the history of *vanpanchayats* in Uttarakhand. The 1976 act that transferred powers from *van panchayat* to deputy commissioner (p. 50) and the 1995 draft legislation that diluted the power of local communities 'without good reason as only state-level officials have the prerogative to take policy decisions and change legislation' (p. 57) are presented as examples. The author deftly weaves in ethnographic narratives with policy details to argue that 'social relations within the communities are also changing due to the influences characterized by the increase in social opportunities' (p. 96) dissolving watertight distinctions between state-, market- and community-driven local governance models.

The informality and plurality of property claims and strategic 'projection of autonomy' in negotiation with state institutions complicates the notion of local politics (p. 109). The author's problematization of

forms of claim making politics, specifically by informal women's organizations like Mangal Dal is minute and significant. These organizations have been instrumental in foregrounding women's struggle for fodder and fuel and, they have been celebrated by other scholars in the field. The author strongly argues that an unqualified celebration of such formations 'bind the women to particular roles that are in no way emancipatory' (p. 124). These arguments substantiate a prescription of 'flexibility of institutional design' (p. 128) for local structures of governance.

While comparing Joint Forest Management (JFM) with the older system of *van panchayats*, the author clarifies the importance of local and inter-departmental contestations while substantially demonstrating that in the JFM model 'the entire participatory exercise is top heavy' (p. 146). The reshaping of NGOs 'as line agencies of the forest department' and the erasure of 'all their political content' (p. 163) informs the critique of anti-historical methods of developing policy initiatives. These arguments need to be read as part of the existing literature on anti-politics in India by scholars like Vasudha Chhotray who have substantially clarified the qualitative distinctions in the processes of depoliticizing the discourse on development.

In the two penultimate chapters, the tone and site of the study changes significantly. The author argues for an archetypical transition within the public sector organizations. He demonstrates that institutions and beneficiaries of rural water supply suffer due to 'a structure of accountability that is responsive to the central government' (p. 181). The empirical evidence comes from Uttar Pradesh and Kerala and a macro policy reading of resource governance in India. In this section of discussions on the water sector, the author describes pathways to decentralization in three different states: 'substantively participatory' institutions outside 'local government structure' in Uttarakhand (p. 205); redefining deconcentration through 'notional participation' in Tamil Nadu (p. 207); and democratic devolution in Kerala through institutionalization of Village User Committees (p. 209).

The book concludes by highlighting two issues of capacity-building mechanisms of mediation between tiers of government and 'Inter-local organizational synergies at the community level' (p. 228). These two issues mark a prescription for future policy design coming out of the ethnographic consideration of policy failures at the grass root level while simultaneously situating the study within the contemporary literature on capacity and justice in state policy design.

Himadri Chatterjee  
Centre for Political Studies  
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India  
E-mail: himadri.atw@gmail.com