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Making Democratic Decentralization Work in South Asia *Looking Back and Ahead*

Decentralization, understood in the sense of the transfer of power, responsibilities, resources, and decision-making authority from national to sub-national governments, has been one of the essential politico-administrative reforms in recent times around the globe, irrespective of the stage of development or tradition or the constitutional structures or the political system of the country concerned. This 'invisible' decentralized revolution has led to a situation where 60 percent of the world's population now reside in decentralized states, and another third live in polities that are governed by some form of decentralized arrangements. From the 1980s to the mid-2000s, many countries with a history of highly centralized governments took steps towards decentralization (Grindle, 2007). Around 80 percent of developing countries, including the transitional economies of Eastern and Central Europe, are experimenting with one or other forms of decentralization. In recent years, it is estimated that 35 countries (9 federal and 26 unitary) announced new or deepening decentralization reforms (Faguet & Pal, 2023).

Decentralizing governance is critical for democracy and development in developing countries for several reasons, including increased citizen participation and empowerment, improved service delivery, faster local development, local capacity building, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding. It can also act as a check on central government power, preventing the concentration of power and the potential for authoritarianism. It helps create conducive conditions for more responsive, inclusive, and accountable governance.

In the context of developing countries in South Asia, decentralization plays a critical role in enhancing the effectiveness of democratic systems, fostering inclusive and sustainable development, and addressing the unique challenges these nations face. While the decentralization thrust of much of the current policy is rooted in neoliberal thinking on the efficiency of service delivery and the 'rolling back' of the state, South Asian countries have witnessed a new upsurge in decentralization policy since the 1990s.

As elsewhere, the concept of decentralization in South Asia poses several challenges at the implementation level for multiple reasons, such as ethnocentricity, political patronage, regional inequality, the gap between poor and rich, and the rural-urban divide among the people. As a result, repeated waves of decentralization reforms have had little impact on the region's continuing problems with governance, and the decentralization agenda remains incomplete. The pandemic of 2019 added a new dimension, which can be traced to the tension between center-state relations, discrepancies in different tiers of the governance system, poor service delivery, and high public expectations on multiple fronts, from preventive health care to fiscal stimulus. The decentralization design in many South Asian countries tends to limit rather than expand local governments' political, administrative, and budgetary powers. Thus, centralizing powers is still the common feature of governance in the region. This trend of 'masked decentralization' severely limits the scope of citizen participation and the deepening of democracy. Recasting of governance through proper implementation of decentralization reforms in South Asia is needed to address these challenges.

Most academic writings and even public discussions point to three crucial issues. First, there is much evidence asking for fresh thinking on decentralization movements in the region. Second, there is particular concern about the design issue in decentralization policy. Finally, 'masked decentralization,' 'decentralization,' and 'taking power back' have become a new normal in South Asia's governance discourse during the post-pandemic period.

Thus, as the evidence and literature on decentralization suggest that decentralization suffers from some maladies, the proposed book will seek answers to some of the questions that seek to draw the attention of scholars, policymakers, and policy implementers alike. Some tentative questions are as follows: is the key driving factor behind decentralization in South Asian countries different from that in the developed nations? why does the degree of decentralization in South Asian countries vary largely? is the political incentive more important than an economic factor for decentralization in the region? what are the dimensions and challenges of multi-level governance reforms in South Asia, and how has the pandemic affected intergovernmental relationships? does ethnic diversity in South Asia hinder the effectiveness of decentralization? is re-centralization a new trend in the region?

Given this background, the present book will critically explore and analyze the impact of historical and contemporary efforts of decentralized governance in South Asia institutionalized through local governance in both rural and urban areas in strengthening democracy, enhancing regional and rural development, and improving ethnic harmony and the peace (Rajasekhan, 2022) The usefulness of the evolving institutional structures and processes to prop up democratic decentralization needs to be tested in the light of experiences gathered and challenges encountered. It is a widely accepted view that democratic decentralization is essentially a matter of political will combined with administrative support (governmental will). Some scholars argue that mounting bottom-up pressures through civil society activism are essential conditions to pave the road for grassroots democracy because politicians have an avowed tendency to centralize powers and functions.

The chapters of the book may be based on key themes as outlined below. The heart of decentralization is self governance but to make it effective what is required is the genuine devolution of funds, functions and functionaries which constitute the red blood cells of decentralization. We need to shed adequate light on where the shoe pinches and what needs to be done to remove the roadblocks. (Raj and Datta , 2023) Then self-governance becomes meaningful when people participate, which fuels the engine of good governance. Participation ensures and creates conditions for the accountability of the governors to the governed and pushes through the processes of deliberative democracy at the grassroots.

In the era of information technology, all these issues have assumed new dimensions, and new scope has been created to make participation and accountability more meaningful and transparent. In the proposed book, we may have chapter(s) on how information technology is promoting decentralization with the help of illustrative case studies from South Asia.

Some of the tentative and illustrative book chapters are given below.

- Decentralization: Conceptual issues and emerging perspectives
- Decentralized governance through the lens of history: what went wrong and what to learn from
- Devolution and fiscal decentralization for accelerating regional development: problems and prospects
- Deliberative democracy at the grassroots: what is happening on the ground.
- Engendering local governance: constraints, concerns, and way Forward
- Decentralization in an Information age: challenges and beyond

- Democratic decentralization where the shoe pinches (from country-wise studies)
- Sustainable resource management and the extent of local ownership over resources in the localities

The editors will be responsible for writing an introduction highlighting the conceptual issues and the conclusion underlying the general lessons from South Asia.

KEY POINTS

- Abstract submission deadline: 29 February 2024
- Abstract review and decision: 15 April 2024
- Full chapter submission: 15 July 2024
- Referencing style: APA
- Word limit: 7000

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