

## Rethinking Decentralization for Nurturing Learning Societies

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### WHY DO WE NEED A PARADIGM SHIFT IN THE DISCOURSE ON DECENTRALIZATION?

Along with universalizing factory-schooling, the other mantra floating around the Development circuit (by this I mean, those individuals, NGOs, consulting companies, and bi- and multi-lateral donor agencies who are very busy ‘Developing’ the world) is “governments should decentralize and people should participate in democratic governance.” Sounds like a fairly innocuous, even laudable goal, right? After all, today we see the tremendously negative impact big centralized States have had (and continue to have) on the people of their country – incompetent political elites steam-rolling over the voices and views of millions, corruptly looting resources Left and Right, forcing ‘nationalism’ upon indigenous ethnically/ linguistically/culturally diverse peoples, making unsavory deals with multinational companies and donor aid agencies, unconscionably driving their people into deeper poverty, while cheerfully increasing the bulge in their own pocketbooks.

And the biggest irony of all is that the State has somehow managed to brainwash us into believing that we *need* it: to protect us from the Market (which is its own bedfellow), to regulate the Media (which it also owns and controls), to make India into a world power (which means nothing to over 99% of us), and to save us from our ugly selves (through laws, jails, representatives, etc.). In the face of all of this, political decentralization — where, as the rhetoric goes, ‘the power is in the hands of the people’ — should be a much welcomed, uncontested change, at least from the perspective of the Development circuit.

Like their above-mentioned ‘Good Governance’ cronies, the ‘Education for All’ (EFA) crowd also wholeheartedly embraces decentralization and people’s participation. These terms translate into greater parent/community involvement in promoting school attendance, local school management, or civil society-government “dialogue, decision-making, and innovation around the EFA goals for basic education.”<sup>1</sup> From their perspective, “governments must put in place regular mechanisms for dialogue enabling citizens and civil society organizations to contribute to the planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of basic education.”<sup>2</sup> Again, it all sounds fairly reasonable. After all, without ‘Education for All’, how will we all Progress and Develop? As the argument typically goes, If local people plan and implement their own version of EFA (with government assistance, of course) then soon everyone will have received a basic education, illiteracy will be eradicated, and the world will be a better place.

Unfortunately, what is missing from both discourses is a critical and constructive analysis of what decentralization means in a deeper sense. The truth is, the Development circuit as a whole does not want to ‘rock the boat’ by seriously challenging or changing the underlying power structures, notions of roles, responsibilities, and relationships, or the vision of Development that suffocates our humanity today. They fall into the trap of viewing decentralized political or education structures as, at their best, vehicles for

making the delivery of State/Market goods and services more efficient, and thereby ensuring an expedient achievement of Development. They fail to see ‘decentralized participation’ as little more than a form of insidious manipulation, to ensure that all the world’s people succumb to a uniform vision of human beings, human knowledge, human relationships, and human progress. **Thus, while it is true that learning societies must grow from local communities, this cannot happen within the current framework of decentralization.**

In this article, I will argue that a paradigm shift in the concept of decentralization and peoples’ participation is necessary, if we are serious about nurturing learning societies for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It requires that we move away from artificially-imposed, State-sponsored, ‘structural democracy’ (where good governance is equated with the mere existence of political parties, administration, voting, reservations, and representatives), and move instead towards more organic and dynamic ways of democratic living and being — where good ‘governance’ is intrinsic, growing out of learning processes that enable each of us to realize our full human and collective potential and to transform our roles, responsibilities, and relationships towards greater justice, ecological connectedness, and meaningfulness. Such a paradigm shift must occur on three parallel levels: (1) re-thinking the locus of the ‘problem’ and of potential solutions; (2) re-conceptualizing the ‘decentralized body’; and (3) re-envisioning relationships and identities.

#### **KEY DIMENSIONS OF AND SPACES FOR THE PARADIGM SHIFT**

India offers us an exciting platform from which to engage in this paradigm shift, as it has implemented several laws (the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendments and the Provision of Panchayats Extension to Scheduled V Areas (PESA) Act) that have facilitated ‘decentralization’ to the village level.<sup>3</sup> Both *gram panchayats* (the group of elected representatives at the village level) and *gram sabhas* (literally, “village meetings,” where every voting man and woman can hypothetically come together to engage in collective decision-making processes) are structurally mandated in all the states of India. Yet, for the most part, these local units have been mal- or mis-functioning. Local elites have managed to manipulate the power and resources of the *panchayat* to their advantage, while the *gram sabhas* have served as little more than ‘boxing rings’, where people seek to knock-out one another to get onto the list of potential beneficiaries for the latest government scheme. Ironically, with decentralization, the channels of power and privilege have become further concentrated and contested over. Men and women alike experience abuse and suppress one another along narrow caste, class, and gender lines,<sup>4</sup> the natural environment is destroyed in the name of Development, and the overall conditions of the villages further deteriorate. By nearly all accounts (with the so-called exception of Kerala, which I will come to later), State-sponsored decentralization in India is a farce.

Unfortunately, when discussions around these experiences occur, the first (and often only) solution that comes to mind is to increase the number of procedural regulations upon the *gram sabha* and *gram panchayat* (or village education committees, as the case may be). If the discussants are feeling unusually creative, sometimes they suggest

checking such ‘transgressions’ with legal action, police involvement, or public hearings. Underlying all these solutions remains the mindset that people cannot manage their own affairs, that the State knows what’s best for us all, and that it has a *right* to intervene on *our* behalf. Perhaps, it is Ambedkar’s ghost whispering softly into our ears, “The village is a cesspool, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness, and communalism,” that leads us to believe that the only way to Develop these villages is to fully force the State-Market’s agenda of Development upon them.<sup>5</sup> Random stories of dowry deaths, caste prejudices, landlord and *bania* exploitation, and child marriages serve to further silence any challenge to the Development frenzy. Of course, as India *is* a democracy after all, we need not use military force to achieve this goal (though perhaps they did not tell the people in Nagaland, Jammu & Kashmir, and the Andaman Islands that). We have parliaments, schools, courts, media, industries, etc. to more subtly reinforce the idea that ‘common people’ in the village can do nothing, will achieve nothing, are nothing, and therefore, *they need Our Help*.

Thus, in rethinking decentralization, the first paradigm shift revolves around how we see the locus of the problem. We must come out of the mindset that the rural poor are responsible for all of India’s problems and instead draw attention to this attitude of the so-called ‘educated’. In calling for this shift, I am not romanticizing the village; I do not claim that problems do not exist within *panchayats* or *gram sabhas*, or that class, caste and gender abuses do not still occur in villages. However, I am arguing that the way the ‘educated’ have considered solving these problems is fundamentally flawed. We look to Big Brother, the State, or the System as whole, to take care of them, to ‘eradicate poverty’, to ‘fix’ those ‘illiterate, backward’ people, to Educate and Develop them (once and for all). We rarely think that perhaps it is this very System that is causing the problems, that perhaps if the parasitic mainstream changed its attitudes and behaviors, the marginalized would find the spaces and opportunities they need to redress these grievances on their own.

In fact, the mainstream must abandon its ‘I am superior - you are inferior’ mentality and begin to revalue and respect the diversity of culture and context that exists in the world. Indeed, such diversity may be our only hope for survival. We must realize that the kinds of knowledges, values, wisdoms, intelligences, and meaning-making systems required to get us out of this Development mess (to which the messes of factory-schooling, modernization, globalization, privatization, liberalization, neo-colonization, mechanization, techno-imperialism may be added) may actually only grow out of the so-called ‘ignorant’ villages. To paraphrase Albert Einstein, we must understand that we cannot hope to solve problems using the same thinking that produced them in the first place. In other words, using State-sponsored decentralization to ‘tinker with’ and ‘make more efficient’ a catastrophe-laden System will not reconcile the crises before us. We can draw lessons from those before us, like *Ujaama* in Tanzania, the Castro-led revolution in Cuba, or the last 50 years of Development in India and around the world, to see how such prescriptive social engineering fails. Instead, for serious transformation, we must ask critical questions about the System itself, while simultaneously seeking out and building from diverse contextualized realities.

Secondly, for nurturing learning societies for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we must also re-conceptualize the ‘decentralized body’: What are the visions of these collective local/community-based decision-making bodies? Today, the *gram sabha* is an institutionalized, State-sponsored body that, at its best, audits and regulates the panchayat’s or State officials’ actions, or engages in ‘planning’ efforts. If I were to put on my skeptical hat, I would call it a microcosm of dirty state or central government politics, where voting and political parties are used to fight over narrow interests within the dominant vision of Development. Others have termed the *gram sabha* simply a survival space, where ‘enemies’ determine the agenda and villages/tribals struggle to carve out their own space for survival against parasitic city/Nation-State interests.<sup>6</sup> Such ‘visions’ of the *gram sabha* are reminiscent of Gandhiji’s (1938) own dislike for parliaments, which he saw as prostituting themselves to power plays and incapable of producing anything of substance or meaning from their existence.

But a paradigm shift requires that we think of ‘decision-making bodies’ differently. For example, could the *gram sabha* be an organic body, the entirety of the village, in their various roles, relationships, and responsibilities, coming together in one space to take decisions, be they of a political, economic, or social nature? Or, even more creatively, could the ‘*gram sabha*’ be understood as a multiplicity of self-organizing processes, attitudes, relationships, and spaces that catalyze and nurture communities of learning and unlearning? Not only would such a vision enable village people to challenge the crippling crises before them — economic exploitation, mind-numbing mass media, violence, cynicism, loss of language, land degradation — but it would also pave the way for greater justice, ecological balance, self-respect, self-reliance, and meaningful living and being. Most importantly, these varied and interrelated learning opportunities could offer people the chance to conceptually engage with the serious questions, “What is Education? Education for What? What is Development? Development for What?”, instead of being forced to blindly submit to the ready-made answers/agendas of NGOs, the State-Market, or International Agencies.

The third aspect of the paradigm shift therefore emerges from the first two. If we agree that the locus of the problem is the mainstream and not the marginalized, and that the ‘decentralized body’ must be comprised of organic, dynamic learning processes, then it follows that we must re-envision our roles, relationships, and responsibilities as individual human beings and parts of the larger human collective. Not only must we each unlock our vast human potential, but we must also redefine what we mean to each other. Village/marginalized people must ‘unlearn’ the dependency syndrome that afflicts them, the deep conditioning that has forced a loss of Self and Community, as well as an ‘acceptance’ of oppression and domination. City/mainstream people must ‘unlearn’ the arrogance, greed, and materialism that allow them to thoughtlessly live out a parasitic, ruthless existence. Rabindranath Tagore (1998) articulated the need for such a transformation of relationship, to end the “fatness of cities and the physical and mental anaemia of the villages” and re-establish a “spirit of cooperation, mutual benefit, unity, and self-sacrifice” between the two. With vast scope to reflect, challenge, critique, resist, dream, reclaim, revalue, create, connect, dialogue, experiment, grow, and regenerate,

human relations would transform from ‘survival of the fittest’, ‘might is right’, or ‘local governance’ to more liberating, constructive, and soulful senses of living and being: *Swaraj*.

### **RESPONDING TO THE CRITICS**

Ah, well and good, the cynics say, such unfettered idealism always provides a good laugh. To such unabashed pessimism, I have three responses. First, I recognize the great challenges to such a paradigm shift. Though physically few in number, the vested interests in this System are powerful, and they are not going to freely hold open the door to peoples’ real learning and transformative participation. The System will spend much time creating illusions to make us believe that we are free, primarily relying on its traditional mechanisms of manufacturing hegemony/consent (slick advertising/social marketing campaigns, divisive identity-based politics, legislation, and factory-schools).

Many of us will likely swallow these illusions — peoples’ planning in Kerala or PRA, being two noteworthy examples — and claim that we have achieved our goal of giving ‘power to the people’. We will fail to see that Kerala’s planning and PRA are simple subterfuges: Neither offer real spaces to deeply question our underlying assumptions about the purpose of education or the meanings of progress, success, and development. Nor do people’s planning in Kerala and PRA provide scope for resisting or rejecting the dominant Model, much less creating or experimenting with one’s own ways of living, being, growing, and learning. Rather, they use outside ‘experts’ to convince people that this is The Development they *need*, that there are no other alternatives, regardless of their diverse values, meaning-making systems, etc., and that this Conclusion (to build a school, or a road, or a dam) must be valid because ‘networking’ and ‘collaboration’ exist in the methods they are employing. But in fact, they trick us once again. By allowing the System to think for us, such illusions make us even more dependent on it. We *plan* together; we *replicate* together; but, we don’t learn (and unlearn and relearn) together.

Even more of a threat will be the System’s attempt to co-opt peoples’ learning movements, as it has done in the past and continues to do today. The System will back movements into a corner, forcing them to play by its rules, or to be wiped out of existence. In this process of ‘engagement’, the System counts on the fact that, by throwing a few crumbs, some individuals will be ‘perverted’, will re-engage in a politics of the Other, will forgo self-reflection, and will defect from the movement. Such defectors will help to re-establish a dependency on the System, restore its hegemonic control, and reaffirm the oppressor-oppressed power dynamic. Today’s panchayats — given the problems they experience from accepting State funding and the State’s agenda — could be considered living examples of this phenomenon. Therefore, let the cynics not mistake such a vision for naivete. I, like others committed to such transformation, am well aware of the challenges. However, unlike the cynics, we are willing to confront them head-on and not be placated by thinly-disguised ‘reform’.

Second, I respond to the cynics’ Ambedkar-like rationale. They imply that because injustices of gender, caste, class, etc. exist in villages today, how can one rely on something as immaterial and spiritual (god forbid) as faith in human beings, as the root of

change? Actually, the answer to this criticism boils down to what one believes about human beings and human collectives. When given a choice, will they tend towards 'goodness'? More importantly, can they learn, unlearn, and relearn? Do human beings have the capacities for self-discipline, for changing themselves, and for caring of one another and the world around them? As I said above, I do not wish to romanticize the village. But, I do believe the answers to the above are all a resounding yes.

I also think that the cynics engage in such stigmatization of the village in order to keep our eyes off of the injustices committed by the 'urban' and the 'educated,' which proportionally have wreaked far greater havoc on humanity. After all, it is much easier to blame an upper-caste male for his abuse of women and dalits, than to question the abuses committed by the Tatas or Monsanto or the Government of India or the CIA. Unfortunately, even many of those who recognize and are trying to fight against the exploitation produced by faceless, faraway Globalization/State-ization fall into the trap of equating it with local level abuses, thus missing the nuanced understanding that is required to mitigate and transform both kinds of dehumanization.

Finally, the cynics say that such a change will be difficult and will take a long time. But when did anything worth having come quick and easy? If we agree that a System of oppression, exploitation, thought-control, and dehumanization has stubbornly taken root the world over, and it is having catastrophic effects on the vast majority of its population, is it not our responsibility to attempt to dismantle it and regenerate/create something(s) better?

A paradigm shift in the concept of decentralization will take time, no doubt. It also requires that we find spaces for these constructive learning and unlearning processes to occur at all levels, in continuous, organic, and dynamic ways, which eventually (gasp!) will weaken/eliminate the strong, interventionist State, as well as the Global Market Economy, Factory-Schooling, Massive Media, etc. In fact, the mechanisms, tools, and processes used to nurture and facilitate learning in peoples' collectives will have to very consciously work on dismantling the System from within and without, guarding against co-optation, indoctrination, and status-quo entropy, by constantly carving out spaces for learning and unlearning. So yes, of course, time, space, and processes are the keys to transformation. But to imagine that a quick-fix solution could resolve the complex crises before us would only be more naïve.

At the heart of any discussions on decentralization and participation, whether in the EFA discourse or in Good Governance circles, must be emancipatory, vibrant visions of human relationships, roles, and responsibilities. These visions not only envelop our Political and Economic Selves and Communities to contextually re-define what 'Good Governance' means, they are also crucial to understanding and evolving our Social, Spiritual, Cultural and Learning Selves and Communities. Through such processes of deep learning at all levels, with spaces for resisting, rejecting, reclaiming, and regenerating, people can take decentralization and participation to their full ends: the creation of just, meaningful, and sustainable learning societies for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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Shilpa Jain <shilpa@swaraj.org> is a learning activist for Shikshantar in Udaipur, India. Through her work at Shikshantar and previous experiences with international development organizations in Washington, DC, such as Creative Associates and the Academy for Educational Development, she has conducted research on several areas of education and development: democratic living, conflict transformation, creativity, Gram Sabhas and Panchayati Raj Institutions, the role of NGOs in civic participation, systemic reform, community participation, and equity education. Shilpa also loves learning from/with children and youth and has had extensive experience doing so around issues of self-esteem, creativity, collaboration, identity, and conflict resolution. She hopes to continue researching and activating the link between learning and social-political-economic transformation, and the role of children and youth in these learning processes. Shilpa has a B.A. magna cum laude in Political Science and Women’s Studies from Harvard University.

1 “The Dakar Framework Draft. Education for All: Meeting Our Collective Commitments.”

2 Ibid.

3 I put decentralization in quotes, because in many respects, the laws are fundamentally flawed. I have analyzed the 73rd amendment elsewhere (in “Redefining the Politics of Presence: The Case of Indian Women in Panchayat Raj Institutions”, Shilpa Jain, Harvard University, 1998) to demonstrate in detail the problems with the law, as implemented in Rajasthan and Kerala. Others have done the same with the PESA act (see papers produced by the *Project on Panchayati Raj and Empowering Gram Sabhas*). Nonetheless, such laws are worth mentioning, not only because they are a rare occurrence in the world, but also because they can potentially constitute a step in the direction of rethinking governance and development.

4 See Dipankar Sinha’s “Indian Democracy: Exclusion and Communication” in Economic and Political Weekly, August 7, 1999, where he argues that the current political and economic structure actually forces the emergence of identity-based politics, as it “fails to establish a communication network wide enough to take into account and to involve people from all segments of society.”

5 Reference to B.R. Ambedkar, one of the architects of the Indian Constitution, and his oft-quoted feelings about the total worthlessness of the village (as he advocated for a strong, centralized Indian State). Quoted in George Mathew and Ramesh C. Nayak, Panchayats at Work: What it Means for the Oppressed? New Delhi: Institute of Social Sciences, 1996, p.1.

6 Pradip Prabhu, of Kashtakari Sanghatna, recently shared this example of a *gram sabha*, when discussing issues around peoples’ movements and strategies of struggle, conscientization, and empowerment, at the

“Building Community Capacities and Resources for Self-Governance” conference, in Delhi, February 26-28, 2000.