

Granting Autonomy to Districts: A Proposal in Brief



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Decentralisation and devolution of power to the lowest administrative units should be the core objective of our reform agenda. While this has become a major part of modern development discourse today, decentralised governance is not some alien concept to the subcontinent. History bears witness that India had a working governance structure since ancient times and one of the key characteristics of that system was its decentralised nature. The tradition continued during the Muslim rule as well but after the British colonization, things changed and a strong and visible state was given birth to – one that intervened in all spheres of life and exercised tight central control. When the subcontinent was decolonised and partitioned into two countries, the ideal change should have been a reversion to the decentralised systems that had existed in the region thousands of years prior to the colonization. This, of course, did not happen and the state with its tight central control, which it had inherited from only two hundred years of colonial rule, persisted. It is only wise and logical to state that most of Pakistan's problems have become intense due to a lack of decentralisation in political and economic spheres. Decentralising and devolving at the micro level, i.e. the districts, could solve major governance issues; particularly in terms of service delivery and service provisions.

AN OVERVIEW OF GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES IN ANCIENT INDIA

In ancient India there were kingdoms, and it wasn't until the Mauryas Dynasty that modern day Baharat was unified under a single kingdom followed by the Gupta Dynasty. Ashoka organised an efficient public administration system wherein policing was a state duty to be performed by state officials. Ashoka's Baharat was a classic example of a 'devolved state structure' although not 'devolved power' as is understood today. The Baharat of Ashoka was divided into provinces and the provinces were composed of small administrative units. These smaller administrative units were known as janpadas. The janpada had a public official looking after its administration.

The main job of the janpada administration was the maintenance of peace and order. This job description came from Ashoka's edicts directly.

The Gupta Dynasty was not the immediate successor of the Maurya Dynasty. However, since the Gupta Dynasty like the Maurya was one of great social, cultural, scientific, economics and political impact it is being discussed here.

The Gupta Dynasty is said to have existed from 320 CE to 550 CE. The Gupta, just like the Maurya, divided the empire into smaller administrative units or provinces. These smaller units were called bhuktis. An administrator was appointed by the state to govern the province and was called the bhuktyuktas. The bhukti is what we would call province in today's world.

However, just like the Maurya before them, the Gupta too, divided the province into much smaller units known as the visayas. These were smaller administrative units within the bhuktis, or provinces, and were governed by vuisyapatis.

The Muslim period was a bit different in the sense that the sultanate of India was governed by Sharia Law but it retained an aspect of decentralisation by creating revenue courts, criminal courts, and appellate courts at the provincial (suba), district (sarkar) and sub district (parganas) levels. The administrator of the sub unit also had considerable autonomy.

Sudipta Kaviraj in his masterpiece, 'The Enchantment of the State,' writes that whether it was Hindu or Muslim, the state it did not intervene in the personal affairs of people. In both these periods, religious beliefs and dogmas played an important role where certain things were taken as given and hence the populace also did not interfere in what they considered as divine decrees. But the point here is that Bharat had experienced a proper governance structure under different regimes and decentralisation was a characteristic of all of them. Kaviraj writes that this changed with the advent of the British.

The British brought with them a very different form of state. The Indians had never experienced such a visible and interventionist state. Institutional economics literature does provide one decent explanation as to the rationale of the highly centralised state under the British raj. As they held the political power, so the resultant insertional and governance structure reflected their preferences.

The colonisers weren't here to stay, their main purpose was to extract resources and economic benefits as pointed out the works of Ayesha Jalal and Sugata Bose, Acemoglu, Robinson and Simon Johnson. They introduced a highly extractive system that led to riches of the British Raj at the expense of India. And they were able to that with the help of a highly centralised bureaucracy and governance structure. If the story had ended there it would have been good but when the colonisers left, the extractive systems continued and have become even more extractive as time has passed.

THE PROPOSED SYSTEM OF DISTRICT AUTONOMY

The 18th amendment is often quoted as a step towards decentralisation and devolution of power. While promising some provincial autonomy, however, it cannot be seen as devolution per se. If we really intend to have decartelised governance structures that will deliver results, we need to look at Indian history. The proposed structure should be democratic and promise freedom to administrative units. In order for the system

to work we first need to decide what sort of administrative divisions should be there.

It is proposed that each district should have a district wise election based on universal franchise. And the district council should be an elected body. The council shall decide on what is needed by the district, manage the revenue and expenses and serve a 5 to 7 year term. The prerequisite for this system to work is the abolishing of the office of Deputy Commissioner of the district, with all its powers transferred to the district council and exercised by the Council Chairman/District Administrator.

The district should have its own policing organisation answerable to the district council. The maintenance of law and order in the district should be the responsibility of the district council. The Chief of Police of the district can also be appointed following an election. This will truly lead to a decentralised and devolved power structure and as would positively impact economic growth as it rolls out on a mass level due to reduced burden on the center.

The district council should also have the freedom to grant incentives for industry and attracting investment from the rest of the country. It should be free to award contracts and have its own revenue generation stream. This would be devolution of power in the true sense. The centre should only worry about foreign affairs, currency and defence.

The reason why this system will provide far better results than the current district administration system wherein the Deputy Commissioner is head of the district and is appointed by the central government. Within this modality, the Deputy Commissioner is not the client of the people but rather the central government. Therefore, he or she has no stakes in the actual happenings of the districts. Mostly it's the completion of tenure and enjoying perks without being answerable to the people. When people cast votes, however, they become the patron and the electable becomes the client. The client has to look after the welfare of the patron due to the repetitive game involved. The proposed system in this piece makes the district council directly answerable to the people, thus making him/her much more likely to ensure good performance due to the prospects (incentive) of returning to power for subsequent terms should results be observed. It's time we cut ties with the colonial set-up and strive towards a more democratic and free society. As I see it, it's the logical way forward.

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