BOOK REVIEW


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Decentralisation of power and decision making have become a global trend. The centralization of decision making at the National or State levels has been unsuitable to the local situations and conditions. The local government is the closest level of government to the communities and common public. Thus, decentralization of power and resources, have the potential of increasing the community’s access to the resources. This system has also been considered as a mechanism of local self-governance and promote sustainable development. It also provides more effective services at the grassroots level. Panchayati Raj Institutions also known as PRIs and Self Help Groups i.e., SHGs have become the new approach to local governance.

*Strengthening Decentralisation through PRIs and SHGs* is written by Sujit Kumar Paul. The book is divided into seven chapters including the “Introduction” and “Conclusion”. This book is mainly concerned with the strengthening and functioning of the decentralised governing system at grassroots level. The book opens with a *Preface* by the author which highlights the global trend of decentralization. It also tells us that decentralization is now a worldwide phenomenon which ensures political stability and efficient delivery of services at the grassroot level.

The first chapter is an “Introduction” to the book where the author discusses about the various roles played by the government in the rural areas. The local self-governments function as the general link between the government and the people at the grassroots level. But even the most successful forms of democratic decentralization have been unable to overcome economic and political disparities. In the first chapter we can find the evolution of the concept of decentralization in India. This chapter also gives us an overview of 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992. The functioning of SHGs and SGSY have also been discussed in detail in this chapter.

Chapter two of this book is the “Conceptual Framework” which discusses the evolution of PRIs in detail. It discusses the history of traditional local governments and also the various political changes in

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the government. It also discusses the village administration of ancient
India in detail. This chapter takes us on a detailed study of Bombay
and Calcutta Municipal Bodies of 1773. The various theories of
decentralization such as the Fiscal Federation, Neo-Classical Economic
Theories, Public Administration and Finance, Political Economy, and
social capital are also elaborately discussed in this section.

“Decentralisation and Self-Help Group Movement in West Bengal”
forms the third chapter of this book. As the title says, this chapter
focuses entirely on the SHG Movement of West Bengal. It explains
the structure and functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions in West Bengal.
The PRI of West Bengal follows the three tier system i.e., Gram
Panchayat at Village level, Panchayat Samiti at the Block Level and
Zila Parishad at the district level. Apart from this we also get the
highlights of Gram Sansad, Upa-Samiti, Gram Unnayan Samiti, etc.
This chapter gives us a detailed description of the addition of Eleventh
Schedule to our constitution, as per Article 243-G.

Chapter four of this book deals with the “Analytical Framework
and Methodology of the Study”. This chapter explains the analytical
framework highlighting the objectives of Self-Help Groups and
Panchayati Raj Institutions. As discussed earlier, decentralization is
an interdisciplinary planning system for ensuring sustainable
development at the grassroot level. Decentralization ensures effective
delivery of resources from PRIs and SHGs in the rural areas and for
the poverty stricken areas.

The fifth chapter sticks to the “Profile of the Study Area”. The
author of the book has mainly focused on the political functions of West
Bengal. As we all know that West Bengal was created after its partition
from Bangladesh and was recognized on 15th August, 1947. This chapter
therefore explains the geographical features of West Bengal such as its
total geographical area, neighbouring states, border countries, its six
agro-climatic zones, etc. this chapter also gives a detailed insight on
the climate of West Bengal, the flora and Fauna found in the state, the
rivers such as Teesta, Brahmaputra, Jaldhaka, Ganga, etc. The diverse
culture of West Bengal is also discussed in this chapter. Apart from
this, we can also study about the socio-economic features of the state
under this section.

The sixth chapter details out the “Results and Discussions” on
the study conducted. The author enlists the methodology of participatory
planning in West Bengal. He enlists around 11 steps of participatory
planning in West Bengal prepared by the Panchayats. This is then
followed by the annual plans of Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad.
Apart from the planning process, the half-yearly and annual meetings
of the local self-governing bodies are also discussed in this chapter.
This chapter is the longest chapter of the whole book where we can also find the various tests conducted for the hypothesis regarding the status of decentralization in West Bengal.

The last chapter i.e., the seventh chapter is basically the “Conclusions and Recommendations” derived from the study. This chapter deals with the pros and cons of the decentralized government system. The governance of West Bengal and the process of decentralization in this particular state is of major importance. The efficiency and successfulness of the SHGs in West Bengal has also been described in detail under this section.

The author has done a great effort in compiling all the studies related to the decentralized governing in West Bengal. The author presents a thorough study of the effectiveness of PRIs and SHGs. It gives a detailed approach towards the evolution of decentralization in India. The best part in the book is the history of democratic decentralization in West Bengal. This is because, the history does not focus on just one commission but the history of decentralization in West Bengal dates back to 1882. Since then, West Bengal has reached great milestones in Indian Decentralisation. However, no book is perfect and therefore, this book too has certain flaws in it. There are many points where we can find the mentioning of MGNREGA and other such programmes. Therefore, there could have been a short description of these programmes for better understanding of the readers. Moreover, this book has enlisted various aspects of PRIs and SHGs but what is found missing or to be more precise, less, is the discussion on the successfulness of the PRIs and SHGs in West Bengal. There could have been a more detailed approach on people’s perspectives and opinions about the functioning of PRIs and SHGs in the State. Since this book is based on a study conducted in West Bengal, we do not get any picture of PRIs and SHGs in other parts of the country. Also, MGNREGA was launched with the aim of 100 days of employment to rural household. But much of data was not found regarding the Act in West Bengal. This includes the number of people benefitted from the Act in terms of employment and income. Moreover, recently NRLM replaced SGSY. But, this was nowhere mentioned in the text. It would have been more effective and informative if the drawbacks of SGSY would have been discussed in detail. Also, the book should have some information regarding NRLM and its function, the amendments made in the previous programmes and also its effectiveness in the present scenario. Even though this book has a lot of drawbacks, it will be of great help to the students, teachers, researchers, planners, policy makers, etc. for understanding the functions of a decentralized Government.