

Book Review: We Too Are Governments! Decentralisation, Pandemic and Climate Change Challenges by J. B. Rajan, T. P. Haribabu, 2022, Kerala Institute for Environment and Development (KIED) and Working Group 05 on Famine & Society, International Sociological Association (ISA), p.163, INR 0.00.

The Father of the Nation rightly declared that 'India lives in its villages' and as a measure of assertion, the Constitution of India through its 73rd and 74th amendments has given rise to the decentralisation phase of governance in the form of Panchayats and Municipalities. Even after 30 years of existence, the power of local governments has not been utilised. Through this book, the authors attempt to shed light on the importance of considering Panchayats and Municipalities as third-tier governments in its true sense and the need for imbibing cooperative federalism by giving local governments its deserved true sense of identity. The strong title aims to convey to the readers about the local governments that are still kept in the shadow of the Union and State along with the thirst to be independent and receive the justified lauds. The book has been very lucidly scripted with seven chapters ranging from the evolution of local governments in India to the revised version of decentralisation in the minds of the authors that suits the present-day world.

The local governments (LGs) in India played a predominant role in resettling the migrant labourers who are back to their home States by operating quarantine facilities and community kitchens for them during COVID-19-induced lockdowns. The LGs, which were previously criticised for the monopoly of the head or Sarpanch Raj and Pati Syndrome of women representatives, are now appreciated for their efforts in tackling the pandemic and gained a lot of media attention. The book is able to analyse their impact and the successful effort of the local governments to come out of these allegations during the pandemic. The readers will get comprehensive information on the evolution of local governments in India in the succeeding chapter. For a country like India, direct

administration is far from the dreams and the local governments are best suited to reach every citizen due to their proximity to people and issues. Though every citizen has availed the services of Panchayats and Municipalities, a major chunk of them, even the educated class, is not aware of the concepts of institutional mechanisms that assist the local governments, and average per capita LG elected representative. The book is not failing to consider these aspects and is serving as an authentic source to get to know these in detail.

'Migrant Database' created by Assam, 'Corona warriors' of Karnataka, and the measures of provisioning condoms and contraceptive pills to returned migrant labourers to satisfy the social responsibility of population control by Bihar are some important yet interesting anecdotes of pandemic management by the Local Governments across India. Though it is mandatory for the decentralised governments to comply with the system procedure, it is not a compulsion to just follow them blindly. The real success lies in finding out the present conditions of COVID-19 in the respective States, and areas and adapting to those requirements. Many local governments have proudly performed this and the book sheds light on all these as separate case studies. Kerala's local government system has been applauded worldwide. During the time of COVID-19, they performed even well, which resulted in a special acknowledgement from the part of the United Nations. The synergy between all government departments and the local governments, the 'Community model' approach, Break the Chain campaign, and round-the-clock war rooms are clearly drawn out and the authors made a careful effort to acknowledge Kerala in the publication.

In legal and real terms, there are many examples which prove the non-recognition of local governments as 'governments' in the true sense. The major example cited by the book is with regard to the Disaster Management Act, 2005 (DMA), which considers LGs as another random local body with no separate identity and the Epidemics Act of 1897; the 123-year-long British Act that holds no relevance to the present Indian context. Though

LGs have constitutional backing for planning socio-economic things in the form of Gram Panchayat Development Plan and the preparation of a Disaster Management Plan can be integrated with this, the Disaster Management Act fails to recognise this aspect (pp 63-37).

Climate change is one of the deadliest issues faced by mankind and it's high time the government should step in to tackle this along with people's participation. Local government-mediated actions are the best way for it as smaller steps in smaller areas with citizen's engagement can make a bigger difference. Along with reviewing this, the authors also suggested some ways which can be popularly called 'Decentralisation Version-2.0'. The authors are of the view that its high time local governments should seek space of its own on political, fiscal, administrative and all other fronts. They condemn the improper functioning of institutional mechanisms established to support LGs, inappropriateness in implementing the reservation for women in Panchayats and suggest that there should be five plus five reservation for women to ensure that development aimed at women and children are conceived properly.

Although the book carefully examines the laudable efforts of local governments, the authors fail to consider the fact that LGs often come into the

picture only in case of contingencies and there is lack of continuous efforts for the betterment of citizens. When the book criticises the failure of LG in Kerala to hear the voices of tribals through the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) (p.26), what can be done in this regard is not addressed anywhere. It is true that the local governments should also be given due recognition and power in Acts such as DMA (chapter 5), but the steps needed for ensuring these and the ways to enhance the capabilities of LGs are not discussed at length. There are apprehensions about how five plus five reservation for women can be successfully implemented, and if the authors mentioned comprehensive information, it would have been a more remarkable view. Keeping the shortcomings apart, this is a well-compiled book that widens the perspective of the significance of decentralisation, capacities and way forward. This publication is suited for researchers, policymakers, academicians and students to enhance their understanding of decentralisation wonders in India.

Ardra R. Kumar

Student, Lady Shri Ram College for Women
University of Delhi, India
ardrarkumarrevathy@gmail.com