UNIT 29 DECENTRALISATION AND PARTICIPATION

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29.1 INTRODUCTION

There is a world-wide trend now to involve people in collective problem-solving. Democracy becomes a reality when people are able to take active part in decision-making relating to their own problems, be it conservation of forests or local environmental improvement or any such issue that affect them vitally. Decentralisation and Participation assume crucial importance in this context. Government has to be as near as possible to the people; and there must be ample scope for the people to participate in the governing process. In the present unit of this course, we will concentrate on the meaning of the two concepts of decentralisation and participation, and explain their significance for people-led development, as distinguished from bureaucracy-led or expert-led development.

29.2 CONCEPT OF DECENTRALISATION

29.2.1 The Concept

Generally, decentralisation is understood to involve transfer of power and responsibility from national (or central) government to subsidiary levels that may be regional, municipal or local. A distinction is made, in this context between de-concentration and decentralisation. The former term is used when central government offices are moved to regions, but remain under the control of the central government. In India, district administration is an example of de-concentration, whereby state government creates an office of the district collector as a sub-state unit under the control of examples of decentralisation proper, as a new type of government is set up which is not a unit of
state government, but a fairly autonomous ‘government’ with independent powers derived from law and local political will.

Decentralisation has been looked at a singularly useful mode of administration to deliver the public services from convenient local centres close to the clients’ locality. Bringing administration to the doorstep of the citizen and forging a direct relationship between the client and the administration have been the driving force behind decentralisation in most developing countries.

Brian Smith in his authoritative work on Decentralisation has mentioned that in the Third World “decentralisation has long been regarded as a necessary condition of economic social and political development.” As he describes, democratic decentralisation has been favoured for a variety of reasons:

First, decentralisation has been found to be a more effective way of meeting local needs than central planning.

Second, it has been particularly useful in meeting the needs of the poor and in enabling the large majority of the rural poor to participate in politics.

Third, decentralisation is said to have improved access to administrative agencies and acted as a corrective to people’s apathy and passivity. In this process, it has helped secure people’s commitment to development.

Fourth, support for change through people’s involvement, conflict reduction, and penetration of rural areas have been made possible through decentralisation.

Fifth, decentralisation has eased congestion at the centre, provided more speed and flexibility during implementation.

Sixth, local democracy has been satisfying for local subgroups and thus, it has strengthened national unity.

Seventh, in the old liberal political sense, decentralisation has served the purpose of political education of the masses.

Finally, local community support for government work has been able to harness local resources and self-help efforts for local development.

The urge for decentralisation has come from many sources. Firstly, it has been prompted by the need to deliver the basic public goods like food, housing, and water and so on as quickly as possible from local units of administration. Secondly, most people in the developing countries live in rural areas which are away from the national capital located in distant urban and rural areas. Administration has to “penetrate” the rural areas and link these up with the nation as a whole. Thirdly, in many countries social diversities manifest themselves in ethnic, linguistic and religious differences. Administration needs to be decentralised in response to regional diversities. Fourthly, regional and local resources can be utilised for area development and localities. Decentralisation, therefore, facilitates local planning and development with the help of local resources. Fifthly,
decentralisation has its own value in political and administrative terms. Politically, local participation in development activities, besides being resource intensive, paves the way for meaningful articulation of local demands. Planning, thus, becomes much more realistic and receives ready political support.

From the administrative point of view, local capability to govern local areas increases through sustained participation in local decision-making. Decentralisation is expected to release local energies and enlist local support for development activities. In the process, the local community can steadily attain political and administrative maturity.

29.2.2 Types of Decentralisation

In this context, three types of decentralisation can be identified: (a) Political, (b) administrative, and (c) fiscal. Transfer of power is at the heart of political decentralisation. Political relations and responsibilities between new or existing levels of government are refined in such a way that the power of lower-tier authorities is increased. Administrative decentralisation is characterised by the establishment of central government offices and infrastructure in local communities or regions. This is also known as ‘deconcentration’ as earlier discussed. Fiscal decentralisation takes place when financial resources are transferred to local authorities who are granted power to raise taxes. Successful decentralisation is the result of both political and fiscal decentralisation.

29.2.3 Recent Thinking

As the countries in the world today get more and more interlinked in terms of trade and financial flows, two contrasting phenomena assume significance: globalisation and localisation. The first represents progressive integration of the world’s economies requiring national governments to reach out to international partners, bilaterally and multilaterally. The second reflects the growing desire of people for a greater voice in their government. It pushes central governments to reach down to regions, cities and localities, generating in the process political pluralism and self-governance around the world.

The World Development Report 1999/2000 points out that “some 95 per cent of democracies now have elected sub-national governments, and countries everywhere—large and small, rich and poor—are developing political, fiscal, and administrative powers to sub-national tiers of government.” The Report observes that successful decentralisation improves the efficiency and responsiveness of the public sector, while accommodating potentially explosive political forces that press for localisation.

29.3 CONCEPT OF PARTICIPATION

The discussion on participation has been going on from two complementary perspectives: the democracy perspective and the development perspective.

29.3.1 Development Perspective

As discussed earlier, development projects were earlier conceived, planned, executed, operated and maintained by “outsiders”. People receive benefits with very little
participation in the actual process of development. Development of people was also mostly understood as improvement in physical facilities such as houses, roads, drinking water facilities, health centres.

It failed to address social issues, and its limitations were as under:

- Unequal distribution of development benefits among different sections of the population;
- Increased dependency of people on external resources;
- Indifference of people towards the facilities created;
- Heavy spending by the government on replacement, operation and maintenance of the facilities created;
- Depletion of natural resources due to over utilisation; and
- Under-utilisation of inputs when unsuitable for use (refer to the example of washing slabs provided under the environmental sanitation project).

A number of field-based research studies, reviews and evaluations of development projects conducted in the beginning of the 1970s identified this approach as “top down” and severe criticisms were levelled against this development model. The findings of these studies also demonstrated that the problems mentioned above originated mainly due to excluding people from the development process and considering them as mere beneficiaries. This finding along with other political developments at that time, such as the women’s movement, environmental movements and greater involvement of NGOs stressed the need for an alternative development approach.

In the late 1980s a new philosophy began to emerge, which gave rise to a gamut of approaches to involve people in the process of development. This approach as a whole came to be known as the “participatory development approach.”

The participatory development approach emerged out of the shortcomings of the top down approach. The new paradigm suggests that all processes should begin with the people who know most about their own life systems. It will have to value the existing knowledge and skills and build on them. The newer approach believes that communities should develop their own means to achieve self-development and any support coming from outside should only facilitate this process.

It was discovered that most development projects implemented from the top could not address the problems sufficiently. Instead, what is needed is people’s own efforts to identify, project, implement and evaluate project for their felt needs.

a) Development has to be holistic rather than fragmented. It is necessary to develop interdisciplinary methods of intervention.

b) Qualitative information from the people is as valid as quantitative data and is often more insightful.

c) Development with and for the people involves a change in relationship between the partners or stakeholders, a demand for dialogue and experimentation with different forms of people’s participation.
d) This also works on the basis of respect for people’s culture, beliefs and ways of coping with life. Also there is an understanding that development practitioners are part of a learning process.

29.3.2 Democracy Perspective

The other perspective from the democratic angle is of generic importance. Conventionally, democracy has been more procedural than real. Regular elections, fundamental rights, freedom of speech and expression and an independent judiciary have been acknowledged as institutional prerequisites of democracy. But, actual operations of government have often been without taking the people in confidence and without associating the people in the decision-making processes. This has affected the legitimacy of government in both developed and developing countries. It is in this context that the role of participation assumes significance to bridge the gap between government and people.

29.3.3 What is meant by Participation?

Now, we can define participation and discuss its salient features. The elements of a definition are as follows:

Voluntary contribution of people towards the project cost, giving information to people about the project and vice versa, getting people to use the project inputs, asserting one’s points of view in project implementation, and active involvement of the people in the process of decision making at all stages.

In fine, participation is “a process by which people, especially the disadvantaged, influence policy formulation and control design alternatives, investment choices management and monitoring of development interventions in their communities.”

29.3.4 Nature and Types of Participation

One can raise at this point a question about the nature of “participation”. Two concepts have been in use in this field which are not synonymous: popular participation and community participation. The former is related to appropriate mechanisms (election, panchayati raj etc.) through which people are involved in political, economic and social life of a nation. By contrast, the latter connotes direct involvement of the people, especially the poorer and more disadvantaged sections of the population, in local development affairs. Hence, the latter concept has been used in the sense of participatory development.

Different kinds of participation have been conceptualised in this context on the basis of different criteria. For instance, “authentic participation” has been distinguished from pseudo-participation, as the latter kind of participation limits community involvement to mere implementation or notification of decisions already taken by external agencies. By contrast, authentic participation involves the community as a whole in all the processes of local development decisions. Further, this kind of participation requires widespread social structural changes and a massive redistribution of power. Paulo Friere gave vent to this feeling of authenticity as he wrote: “Policies carried out by a rigid bureaucracy
in the name of the masses to whom they are transmitted as order are one thing with their critically conscious participation in the reconstruction of society, in which the necessary never become slogan.”

Another way of classifying participation is to look at it from the point of view of motive force of participation. Thus, there can be “coercive participation” where people are forced to participate inspite of opposition or lack of willingness.

A second category of “induced participation” will be with the help of certain allurement and inducements like money or payment in kind.

A third category has been called “spontaneous participation” characterised by people’s voluntary and autonomous action unaided by government or any other external agencies. This last category is more of an ideal kind, as social workers have generally noticed that deprived communities rarely function autonomously, and their capacity for collective action needs, at least initially, the leadership push from an external agent—be it a social worker or a political leader. As Robert Chambers has put it bluntly: “However much the rhetoric changes to ‘participation’, ‘participatory research’, community involvement, and the like, at the end of the day there is still an outsider seeking to change things”.

As already pointed out, contemporary ideas about community participation in the sense of mobilisation of the poor and the disadvantaged for active involvement in local decision-making to accelerate local socio-economic development and to ensure equitable distribution of the benefits of development, are of comparatively recent origin. During the last three or four decades, development theorising has shifted from emphasising macro “economic growth” as the motor of development to benefits to targeted groups via basic needs approach, defined by external experts working as change agents. It is only recently that social participation has entered into the definition of poverty-related development agenda. As the development paradigm shifted, especially after the Earth summit of 1992, to integrate local communities as key actors of defining development priorities, models based on participation, knowledge-sharing and two-way communication began to emerge steadily.

29.4 BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION

The reorientation of development thought towards the people-centric participatory mode has led to the acknowledgement of the value of “participation” as a facilitative development “process”. The major benefits flowing from participation have been identified as follows:

a) In the planning and programming stages and throughout the implementation of development projects, the participatory process provides important information, ensuring thereby congruence between objectives of development and community values and preferences.

b) By rationalising manpower resources utilisation, the process is likely to reduce project cost.
c) Any change brought about through development will be ‘politically’ acceptable to the community if the local people are involved in setting the stage for change, and mistakes are more tolerable if these are made by people who have to live with them.

d) Monitoring is better, and sustainability of the project is more likely even after withdrawal of the external agent, be it government or NGO agency. Field experience tells us that when people have a direct stake in the provision of their services, they fix things or call attention to them when there is any malfunctioning.

e) The community learns from its own involvement, and from this point of view, participation is a two-way learning process in which both the administrator and the people become co-learners.

f) Active community participation helps rebuild community cohesion and installs a sense of dignity into the community. People gain in confidence and steadily emerge as real actors in the development drama. To participate is to act, and to become a “subject”, as against just a passive ‘beneficiary’ dependent on “gifts” from outsiders.

According to Paulo Freire, being human is to be a “subject”, with capacity to think and act, “objects” are thought about and acted upon. Development is something which cannot be done to or for a person, but must be done with them.

**Three Attributes of Participation**

In this context, Oakley has identified three manifestations of participation. These are:

i) Contributions by target groups to pre-determined projects, which can be local labour, money, land or other resources.

ii) Organisations, structured and supported either by development workers or by the people themselves, and

iii) Improvement through, for example, acquisition of new management, negotiation or decision-making skills that enhance people’s capability and tend to alter local power structure.

Essentially, participation represents action, or being part of action like the decision-making process. Under conditions of scarcity and competition for finite resources, participation introduces the possibility of equity into resource distribution. The other important feature of participation is its consciousness raising force. Critical consciousness and awareness, as Freire said, are basic to sustaining participation. Otherwise one-time project-based participation has the tendency to exhaust participation after the completion of the project.

## 29.5 PARTICIPATIVE DEVELOPMENT: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

Advocates of community participation are many and varied. At one end of the spectrum are the idealists with profound faith in community cohesion and collective grassroots wisdom; and their argument in favour of participation almost verges on the construction
of a sovereign local community outside the ambit of the state. At the other end are the more pragmatic social workers who strongly believe that community help. In the process, costs are minimised for construction as well as maintenance. Participation thus serves the dual purpose of local and national development.

Critics have pointed out that in this kind of formulation, moral sentiments tend to overtake conceptual rigour, and therefore, participation “has popularity without clarity and is subject to growing faddishness and a lot of lip service.” Serious analysis of local community life reveals differentiation in terms of status, income and power. Conflicts and rivalries are not uncommon even among the poor and the underprivileged. One of the reasons why Ambedkar was critical of Panchayati raj was precisely this: village societies had traditionally been divided along caste, class and communal lines. The romantic vision of frictionless, harmonious community life did not tally with the ground reality in rural India.

Autonomous local community participation for grassroots development has been conceived as an antidote to top-down, benevolent and paternalistic development. Reality, however, is very different. External intervention by social workers or political activists has been found necessary almost everywhere to organise the local community and mobilise the local people against the oppressor or for articulation of local demands.

It has also been observed that there is an imaginary notion of continuous activism by the local people behind all discussions on community participation. The poor work hard to eke out a living and are not so easily available for permanent activism. Total and continuous commitment to activism is more a revolutionary’s dream than the poor people’s actual behaviour.

There are critics who doubt the efficacy of community participation in bringing about radical change in the life of the poor and the underprivileged through autonomous local action only. Small changes are not ruled out, but community participation to be really effective needs profound social structural change at both domestic and international levels. Community mobilisation cannot, on its own, correct the basic social imbalances that have their roots in deeper socio-economic layers of the society. The Marxist argument, for instance, has been that participatory development within the framework of capitalist mode of production is unworkable; the purpose of participation is to diffuse revolutionary movements and create an illusion of solution. The state, under conditions, of capitalism, seeks to subvert popular movements through manipulative cooption of the poor (via participative structures). ‘Participation’, in this view, is a conscious attempt on the part of the state to co-opt the poor and at least to outwit their leaders. It is anti-revolutionary and pro-establishmentarian.

The Role of the State Community participation viewed in functionalist developmental term misses the fundamental role of the state in helping or hindering participation. In other words, a proper understanding of participation begs a theory of the state. As James Midgley has observed, “there are a variety of social sciences theories of the contemporary state which evoke different images of state-society relationships. While Marxian and elite theories are pessimistic about the possibility of community participation, liberal-democratic and pluralist theories are much more helpful.”
Community participation, from the state’s point of view would depend on the definition and purpose of such participation, state’s perception about its role, and the political will to decentralise power and resources to local political institutions.

29.6 SUMMARY

Decentralisation and participation assume critical importance in terms of making democracy a reality. Decentralisation means transfer of power from a Central government to regional, municipal or local levels. Successful decentralisation should be political, administrative and financial. Participation means active involvement and voluntary contribution of people in the process of decision-making. There are two perspectives on participation. One is the development perspective which was earlier understood as improvement in physical facilities such as houses, roads and drinking water facilities etc. Now it involves people’s own efforts to identify, implement and evaluate projects. The second perspective is the democracy perspective which seeks to fill the gap between the government and the people with the process of elections, freedom of speech and an independent judiciary.

Critics of participative development say that it is popular without having any clarity and that there are a lot of conflicts and rivalries even at the local levels. Autonomous local community participation is seen as an anti-dote to a top down paternalistic development. Thus participation is seen as an attempt by the state to co-opt the poor, and in the process subvert popular anti-establishment movements.

29.7 EXERCISES

1) How do the concepts of decentralisation and participation help make democracy a reality?

2) Write a short note on the types of decentralisation.

3) In what respect does the democratic perspective of participation differ from development perspective?

4) Write a short note on the benefits of participation.