

The *Mandal* System in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh

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The *mandal* system came into existence as an administrative reform, as part of reducing the size of erstwhile taluks and making them more effective and manageable. The decentralisation of taluks into mandals was done with a two-pronged strategy of modernising the revenue administration, record-keeping as well as further decentralising the panchayati raj system. It was hoped that the division of erstwhile large taluks into mandals could make them more manageable, and also that the administration of the state government, especially the revenue administration, will become modernised.

The question of how governments should be organised must be as old as the study of politics
— Triesman (Saito 2011)

Governance, in a way decentred government and within its conceptualisation, lies the notion of dispersal of power in society.
— Mathur (2008)

Of the three dimensions of decentralisation—delegation, deconcentration and devolution—what must be said of decentralisation reforms in the name of the *mandal* system in Andhra Pradesh and what is currently taking place now in Telangana is that these are essentially aimed at the deconcentration of the government rather than the delegation and devolution of powers. Also, it should be noted that these reforms had been carried out earlier, and are being carried out now (at least in the context of Telangana), essentially for two avowed purposes: modernisation of the administration and the decentralisation of polity. It is argued that though the avowed purposes then and now have been modernisation and decentralisation, what this actually entailed then, and entails now, is the deconcentration of administration rather than the devolution of political power.¹

Panchayati Raj Reform

The *mandal* system concerns the middle tier of the panchayati raj system. It was introduced while replacing the earlier panchayat samitis in Andhra Pradesh during the tenure of Telugu Desam Party (TDP) government led by N T Rama Rao (Kistaiah 1990). The attempt had been inspired by the recommendations of the Ashok Mehta Committee. The Ashok Mehta Committee, in fact, had recommended a two-tier system of mandals and zilla parishads in place of the previously existing three-tier structure of village panchayats, panchayat samitis (or taluk panchayats) and zilla panchayats.

However, when the recommendations of the Ashok Mehta Committee were adopted in erstwhile Andhra Pradesh, the three-tier structure was retained, while replacing the middle tier, that is, panchayat samitis with smaller size mandals.

Thus, post the reform, the panchayati raj system in Andhra Pradesh still had three tiers, that is, the village panchayat, the *mandal* panchayat and the zilla panchayat. Thus, the recommendations of the Ashok Mehta Committee were only partially implemented and were not fully adopted. In the first place, the Ashok Mehta Committee had recommended the implementation of smaller intermediate-tier *mandal* panchayats because it was thought that they would be in a closer geographical vicinity of the villages and villagers.

In all, the recommendations of the Ashok Mehta Committee were adopted, either partially or fully, only by four Indian states, that is, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, West Bengal and Jammu and Kashmir (Mathew 1995). Given that the Indian states were spatially large, making the intermediate tier of panchayati raj institutions (PRIs) smaller made a particular sense to the members of the Ashok Mehta Committee as well as policymakers during those days. For example, the erstwhile Andhra Pradesh was one of the largest states of the union, the fifth largest state to be precise; Karnataka, the seventh largest state in India, also implemented the reforms. In such contexts, it was meaningful to make the larger intermediate-tier panchayat samitis into smaller mandals, so as to be easily within the reach of the village inhabitants.

However, in erstwhile Andhra Pradesh, the reforms were far-reaching in that 330 intermediate-tier panchayati samitis were replaced with 1,104 “*mandal praja parishads*,” as the latter came to be called. In fact, almost three to four *mandal praja parishads* were constituted in the place of each panchayat samiti. Each of the reformed *mandal praja parishads* came to consist of 10 to 12 revenue villages, covering a population of approximately 35,000 to 55,000. Thus, the slogan then

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adopted by the government was, “government to the doorstep of the people.” These reforms were introduced by an act of the government called “the Andhra Pradesh Mandal Praja Parishads, Zilla Praja Parishad and Zilla Pranalika Abhivrudhi Mandals Act, 1986.” This was introduced in July 1986, and came to be implemented after the assent of the governor from January 1987. Thus came to existence the new middle tier of the panchayati raj system in erstwhile Andhra Pradesh.

The reforms initiated by the then TDP government led by Rao were not just panchayati raj reforms. They were, in fact, three-pronged. First, to reform the PRIs; second, to reform revenue administration; and third, to reform cooperative institutions. As mentioned earlier, the reforms concerning the PRIs per se had been prompted by the recommendations of the Ashok Mehta Committee, appointed to look into the possibilities of PRI reforms by the then Janata Party-led government that was formed after the Emergency. The Janata Party government was committed to carrying out PRI reforms and hence the appointment of Ashok Mehta Committee. What is worth noting here is that the state-level governments that embarked upon PRI reforms based on the recommendations of the committee happened to be the non-Congress opposition party-led governments, that is, the TDP in Andhra Pradesh, the Janata Party in Karnataka, Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI[M]) in West Bengal and the National Conference (NC) in Jammu and Kashmir.

Revenue Administration Reforms

The second and more interesting aspect of the introduction of the mandal system pertains to the revenue administration reforms. The mandal system was intended to improve the PRI system, the revenue system besides integrating the two at the mandal level for development purposes. In the previous section, the mandal reform as part of the PRI system is discussed. However, when it comes to looking at the same as part of the revenue system reforms, we have to note that the pre-existing revenue administration system had strong elements of continuity at least since the Mughal period. Thus, the mandal

reform sets out to modernise a near-medieval revenue administration system. According to this medieval system, there was a Patwari at the village level to assess land revenue; there was a *Mali Patel* to assist him in the collection of revenue and there was also a *police patel* to manage the law-and-order situation at the village level. All these were required to report to the tehsildar at the tehsil level, that is, at the taluk panchayat level. What is more important to consider is that all these were hereditary posts at the village level. And, at first, prior to independence, these revenue officers owed their position to the regime of the Nizam. And after independence, they continued to demonstrate their allegiance to the Congress party, which, in turn, continued the same system of hereditary revenue officers and administration. The system of these village revenue officers was called the *vatandari* system.

Being hereditary officers, these village revenue officers, to some extent, developed entrenched interests in the system. They were usually from the upper castes controlling a considerable amount of land. Naturally, they formed the village elites. They also happened to be the intermediaries between the village and the supra-village officialdom. The mandal system, as a revenue administration reform, intended to modernise this age-old revenue administration. As part of that, the village revenue officers came to be replaced by officially appointed non-hereditary village (revenue) assistants almost overnight. And, at the tehsil level, the tehsildar was replaced by the mandal revenue officer (MRO). This change, however, was resisted by the old village revenue officers, and they approached the Supreme Court against the newly-appointed village (revenue) assistants. However, the apex court upheld the new system while rejecting the old. Thus, the first steps towards modernising the land revenue system were laid by the TDP government led by Rao. The reforms took hold since then, and the new system continues till date.

In the Andhra area of the then undivided Andhra Pradesh, however, the land revenue administration system was slightly different in that here at the village level, there was a *Karanam* with

the supervising authority upon him being the *munsif* (Sudarshanam and Rao 1990). The post of *Karanam* too was a hereditary one. Thus, with the introduction of the mandal reforms, these too got reformed with newly appointed non-hereditary village (revenue) assistants taking their place at the village level. And, the taluk-level MRO came to replace the earlier *munsif*.

An interesting argument put forward at the time of these reforms was that the mandal reforms were introduced by the TDP, elected for the first time, while all the previous governments were the Congress party-led governments. The social base of the Congress party at the village level consisted of upper castes (from which sections came most of the influential village elites) and also Dalits, whereas, the social base of TDP at the village level consisted of the middle-ranking peasant castes in the hierarchical Indian caste system. Therefore, in order to break the stronghold of the Congress party at the village level and strengthen its social and political base, TDP carried out the reform.

For example, Haragopal (1990) observes this as follows:

The Telugu Desam Party, right from its inception has been labouring very hard to retain the support base of the backward caste intermediate peasant group. The abolition of village officers, removal of electric meter system, abolition of land revenue, hasty announcement of the reservations for the backward castes and mandal panchayats are all part of this political strategy to consolidate its support base. The size of the mandals, their large number, formal reservation of seats to the backward castes offer enough evidence in support of this formulation.

This observation could be partially true, given the then existing political situation. However, there was also a strong urge to follow the other South Indian states, such as Tamil Nadu and Karnataka [Karnataka and Tamil Nadu have since abolished the hereditary officer system in 1961 and 1980 respectively (Bhaskara Rao 1990)] with respect to the revenue administration reform, as they had indeed abolished the system of hereditary land revenue officers at the village level much before the reforms were carried out in Andhra Pradesh.

As a result of the revenue administration system reform, tehsils covering a huge geographical area came to be replaced with mandals covering a smaller geographical area. Thus, the basic purpose of the reform, that is, to make the intermediate tier more accessible to the rural people over a manageable geographical area was well served. The reforms also proved their utility in a way that no government later attempted to do away with the same.

As discussed above the introduction of the mandal system was both to reform the PRI system and the revenue administration system besides merging the two. While the reform of the PRI system and the revenue administration system has taken place successfully, the merger of the two does not seem to have been successful as the two, that is, the PRI and revenue systems continued to work as two separate systems at the mandal level.

Expiience of Other States

It is important to note that erstwhile Andhra Pradesh, under the TDP government, was not the only state to have implemented the recommendations of the Ashok Mehta Committee as far as the Constitution of geographically smaller units of mandals was concerned. In Karnataka too, the Janata Party government led by Ramakrishna Hegde had introduced the mandal system (Satish Chandran 1995).

Regarding the mandal panchayats in Karnataka, T R Satish Chandran (1995) observes thus:

A mandal panchayat was constituted for a population of eight to 12,000 (a lower limit of four thousand was imposed in the hilly areas). It consisted of elected members with one member for a population of four hundred, reservation for women, the scs [Scheduled Castes] and the sts [Scheduled Tribes] being provided on the same lines as the district level. Each mandal panchayat had a whole time secretary, appointed and paid for by the zilla parishad. [...] From 1987 nearly 2,500 mandal panchayats had started functioning.

And, he goes on to observe:

Mandal panchayats were also given considerable powers. Besides the usual municipal functions and provision of local amenities, they were expected to take interest in agriculture and animal husbandry programmes and in the welfare of the scs and sts. An

important function assigned to the mandal panchayats was the implementation of anti-poverty programmes, for which they received substantial funds.

However, the reforms were revoked in Karnataka, as the mandal system was changed later, and again, the taluk panchayat system came to be introduced. Thus, the two states—(erstwhile) Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka—both under the non-Congress governments, that is, TDP and Janata Party respectively, implemented the mandal reforms. Another two state governments that passed a legislation to this effect following the Ashok Mehta Committee recommendations, were West Bengal and Jammu and Kashmir with some of the recommendations implemented.

In an explicit comparison of the mandal reforms in Andhra Pradesh with the decentralisation reforms in Karnataka, Sivalinga Prasad (1990) comes to the following conclusion:

These two experiments (in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka) also indicate different trends in the reforms of political institutions. The Karnataka reforms indicate a desire to transfer some power to local institutions. The extent of financial and administrative devolution exhibits the desire on the part of state leadership to create strong representative organisations at the district level.

Andhra Pradesh experiments show the desire of the state leadership to create opportunities for widening its support base by co-opting more number of people from different sections into political executive positions. The importance given to political executive positions without entrusting the body with any real powers further supports this observation. The experiments in Andhra [Pradesh] seem to be more cosmetic in nature.

In Karnataka, the 1993 Act, which was termed as a historic step towards PRIs in India, initially included mandals as units of governance, with a three-tier PRI system being adopted at that time: zilla parishad—taluka panchayat—mandal panchayat. However, the provision for mandals in Karnataka was later dropped. And now, the taluk panchayats exist, as earlier, as the intermediate-tier of PRI system. In West Bengal too, the intermediate-tier continues to be called panchayat samiti while in Jammu and Kashmir the block development council. In Jammu and Kashmir, the three-tier system consists

of *halqa* panchayat, block development council and district planning and development board with the intermediate tier being called the block development council, which has substantial powers in matters related to local development (Sultan 1995). However, the panchayat samiti in West Bengal, according to one study, even as late as 1997, consisted of an average population of 1,65,736 (Ghatak and Ghatak 2007). The latter figure obviously is in contrast to the mandal in Andhra Pradesh, which consisted of only one-third of that population.

The point being made is that, while following the recommendations of the Ashok Mehta Committee report, the states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, West Bengal and Jammu and Kashmir passed new bills and made changes to the earlier PRI systems, but these changes were not uniform and that the recommendations were accepted and adopted as they suited their existing political, social and other conditions. Thus, only in the state of erstwhile Andhra Pradesh that “mandal” as a smaller geographical and demographic intermediate unit continued its existence, and continues to exist even after the division of the state into two different states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

As is obvious from the above discussion, only four states out of the total Indian states adopted the PRI reforms, following the Ashok Mehta Committee recommendations. Most of the larger states, such as Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Orissa (now Odisha), Maharashtra, and Gujarat, and so on, did not adopt the Ashok Mehta Committee recommendations at all. Therefore, the question of introducing the mandal system in these states did not arise. Among the states that adopted the mandal system, Karnataka reverted back to the taluk panchayat system, as per the requirements of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (73rd CAA henceforth) for a uniform three-tier structure of PRIs. In erstwhile Andhra Pradesh, the intermediate tier of PRIs continued to be as earlier even after the 73rd CAA.

The fact that the recommendations of the Ashok Mehta Committee were not adopted by a majority of the states

indicates that in all these states, the taluk panchayat happened to be a large intermediate tier of the PRI system, though too far from the reach of the villages, and their inhabitants. Therefore, there exists a great scope for adopting smaller size intermediate tier units of PRI system in these states.

Recent Changes in Telangana

The more recent trends, especially post the division of the erstwhile state of Andhra Pradesh into two states, that is, “Telangana” and “Andhra Pradesh” in June 2014, suggest that at least in one of these states, that is, Telangana, there is an attempt to further decentralise the districts into smaller districts and mandals into further smaller mandals (Bhaskar Rao 2017). In the state of Telangana, 10 erstwhile districts have been divided into 31 smaller districts and so have the mandals been multiplied, thus creating a huge demand for infrastructure to be provided for the administration of these smaller districts and mandals, as part of taking government and administration closer to the people. Post the formation of 31 new districts, altogether, there are nine zilla praja parishads, 438 mandal praja parishads, 584 revenue mandals and 12,751 gram panchayats in Telangana. While this may be a welcome development, in the future, this may raise questions regarding the economic viability and sustainability of ever-smaller units of governance, so far as Telangana is concerned.²

Conclusions

While introducing the mandal system as part of PRI reforms inspired by the recommendations of the Ashok Mehta Committee, the impetus for introduction of these reforms in the then Andhra Pradesh was twofold, that is, to modernise the age-old revenue administration system and to decentralise the intermediate tier of the PRIs so as to make it smaller and manageable and closer to the rural people. These two governance drives, namely, further modernisation and decentralisation continue to be the official *raison d'être* for these reforms even in more recent times. The reasons underlying the recent decentralisation

reforms in Telangana are no different from these two drives.

However, for whatever one says about decentralisation (at least in respect of Andhra Pradesh under Rao and Telangana under the present dispensation) the opposite is equally true. Both these regimes have also been centralising powers at the state level. These regimes have been carrying about the changes in administration. These changes have not, at the same time, been carried out in decentralising political power. Political power is still concentrated in the state-level political elites of the regimes.

This process of deconcentration of administration, which is combined with centralisation of political power, helps the regimes broaden their administrative base and also helps in the administration of populist governance. It does well to remember that both the regimes that have introduced these reforms, that is, the TDP government in the past and the Telangana Rashtra Samiti's government in the present, are heavily identitarian and populist.

While the earlier TDP regime combined populist programmes with Telugu identity, now, the TRS regime combines populist programmes with Telangana identity. The kind of administrative deconcentration that is discussed in this article both helps deliver the populist programmes and schemes effectively as well as helps gain legitimacy by providing a statewide administrative basis to the regime. Thus, political centralisation and increasing political power in a few hands and administrative deconcentration go together in state-level politics. The governments then call this deconcentration process as “Government to the Doorstep of the People.” In the process, what actually takes place is the increasing reach of the administration, though not political power. All the same, they have also been championing, the modernisation of land revenue administration and decentralisation drives.³

However, the point to be noted is that the reforms from taluks to mandals do help in improving the efficiency and effectiveness of administration. Thus, the populist welfare programmes of the political regimes are implemented effectively.

This attempt at deconcentration of administration helps improve the administration of the regime effectively. Thereby, it has a likelihood of strengthening both administration as well as the political regime. However, in the meanwhile, some benefit also reaches the people as the offices of government and its bearers come closer to the people and their day-to-day needs. Thus, the move towards smaller mandals from erstwhile large taluks should be a welcomed move, though it has its own politico-administrative dynamics. In these regimes, often, political centralisation is combined with administrative deconcentration.

It is argued in the introduction to this article that these reforms were essentially attempts at “deconcentration” rather than devolution of powers to lower rungs of governance. As Saito observes,

[i]n deconcentration even though decision makers are located in local offices, they are still held accountable to central authorities. In contrast, in devolution, locally-based decision-makers are accountable to the public on a local level. (author's emphasis)

According to this yardstick, both the mandal reforms during the time of Rao-led TDP, and present efforts by Telangana government are more akin to deconcentration rather than devolution. This is also owing to the basic fact that after Rao's mandal reforms, the successive governments led by both TDP and Congress systematically marginalised PRIs in united Andhra Pradesh. The successive governments always tried to centralise political powers at the state level. This was true for both TDP leadership under Chandrababu Naidu and Congress leadership under Y S Rajashekhar Reddy and others. This gave rise to a general, though well-founded, opinion among scholars that PRIs in erstwhile Andhra Pradesh had been largely neglected, if not ignored in governance. Given the past scenario, a general scepticism surrounding decentralisation of powers and devolution in the current states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh stands amply justified (Haragopal et al 2013).⁴ However, what needs to be recognised is that the efforts made in the 1980s towards reforming the erstwhile taluk panchayat system by replacing the same

with mandal system did prove successful in bringing administration closer to the people. This is an irrefutable fact, so far as erstwhile Andhra Pradesh is concerned. In all other Indian states, which are in majority and where no such reforms have ever been carried out,⁵ there is an enormous scope to further reforming the intermediate tier of the Panchayati Raj system and make it within the near geographical reach of ordinary people.

NOTES

- 1 In saying this, Saito's discussion of deconcentration and devolution is followed. Saito, for example, says,

Deconcentration takes place normally within administrative structures, while devolution mainly centers around political bodies. In short, while deconcentration simply relocates authority at different levels of government, devolution removes authority from central to subnational governments. Another crucial difference between deconcentration and devolution is the way accountability works. In deconcentration, even though decision makers are located in local offices, they are still held accountable to central authorities. In contrast, in devolution, locally-based decision-makers are accountable to the public at local level. (Uphoff 1986 qtd in Saito 2011)

- 2 I thank Abdul Aziz for pointing out this problem regarding the ever-smaller units of governance (personal communication).
3 Saito notes this well when he observes regarding the decentralisation debate in general, thus:

Perhaps more importantly, what becomes evident from the (global, theoretical) debate is that the same rationales are used toward

their own ends by both supporters and opponents." Larmour and Qalo (1985 qtd in Manor 2010) stated that "arguments for and against decentralisation are often 'like proverbs' with most principles answer by equally plausible and acceptable contradictory principle ... Decentralisation promotes efficiency and reduces it. Decentralisation enhances national unity and inhibits it" and therefore, Saito (2011: 484–501) goes on to say "Studying decentralisation is therefore, essentially empirical."

- 4 Even after the 73rd Amendment and after the amendment of the State Panchayati Raj Act in 1994, as late as in 2013, Haragopal et al (2013) note the following regarding the panchayati raj in the (till then) united Andhra Pradesh:

The state government continues to treat the local bodies as an extended arm of government to implement its chosen programmes. Any reform mooted at the higher level to give fillip to local bodies is ignored, as officials often believe that decentralisation curtails their powers and a trend toward centralisation (at the state level) is taking place.

- 5 On why decentralisation reforms are only less than even half successful in most other Indian states and regarding what and how they are either made successful or failed in practice, an enormously useful discussion can be found in Manor (2010).

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