Democratic Decentralisation
Some Political Consequences

W. H. Morris Jones

Good things can be done for poor reasons. Panchayat Raj may fail to produce the wondrous results the framers had in mind; it may, nevertheless, lead to less easily observable consequences of a beneficial kind which no one intended. Such at any rate is the hunch around which this article is written. It is a hunch concerned entirely with the consequences for India’s political system. It can be expressed in the form of three hypotheses.

In the first place, the new institutions will constitute a new political outlet for the increasing competitiveness of Indian rural life.

Secondly the most likely consequence of democratic decentralisation for the fortunes of political parties is a strengthening of the (Congress party in rural areas.

Finally, there may surely be some consequences of interest on the internal life of the Congress party.

If evidence comes to support the above hypotheses, panchayat raj will have been worthwhile not merely in spite of the hopes of the founders but in part at least, precisely to the extent that those particular hopes for communitarian togetherness are dashed.

It is now nearly three years since democratic decentralisation was launched with fanfares in Rajasthan and Andhra. That these reforms could be regarded as a continuation of the tortuous story of local government in India begun in 1882 seemed much less important than that they were to be the solution to most of the difficulties encountered in the programme of community development. It is therefore not surprising that such examination as has been undertaken of the working of the new local bodies should concentrate on whether or not they are having the desired effects in rousing effort enthusiasm and initiative in the people.

This is the point of view from which the two most useful reports issued by the Association of Voluntary Agencies for Rural Development (AVARD) approach the matter. In fact AVARD measures the achievements of panchayat raj by the highest and most exacting standards, as indeed is only fitting for an organisation presided over by J. P. Narayan. The task to which local democracy is to make its contribution is described in one place as rousing the people to enthusiastic and purposeful activity, and the instrument for the job is “a body of selfless individuals dedicated to the cause of national service”. The communists are to be beaten at their own game of sacrifice for the cause: “We must search for and find a democratic counter-part to this great urge which makes people shun the pleasures and comforts of a routine life and makes them plunge headlong into a life of sustained and creative effort.” (AVARD, “Report of a Study Team on Democratic Decentralisation in Rajasthan”, 1961, p. 28).

Misplaced Vision

My own interest in the development of panchayat raj is different. I have not yet been convinced that inspired activisation of India’s rural people is either necessary for economic development or useful for community-building or desirable in itself. Economic development in the Indian situation may call for an effort to increase agricultural productivity, but there are surely many simpler sticks and carrots than the conquest of the peasants mind by the doctrines of communitarianism. Actual community-building, on the other hand, is probably (the caution comes from uncertainty about what the term really means) one of those things which—as J. S. Mill said of happiness—comes less surely from frontal attack than “by the way” while in pursuit of something else. As for activisation, this can be both good and bad; it will depend at least on the kind and spirit of activity induced. Headlong: plunges and dedication to causes, for instance, are activities in respect of which in this totalitarian century we would do well to be wary and of which we have perhaps seen enough. Hardships may be unavoidable but there is something to be said in favour of calling them hardships. The sugar of sacrifice on the pill of suffering is more an affront than a help to the impoverished peasant. Activisation may, at the other end of the scale, entail building up great hopes. This is just as hard to approve. If, as seems probable, rural poverty is not by any means to be quickly alleviated, it appears humbly cruel as well as politically idiotic to stimulate hopes that cannot be realised. For reasons like these, I have not shared the enthusiasm with which the high vision of panchayat raj was introduced into the real world of Andhra villages and I shall not have to share the disappointment that comes when the shortfall is measured.

But this is not to imply that we should turn our backs on the facts of panchayat raj. These institutions are now in being and they are too big; to be ignored as insignificant, they are bound to have

* If it he said that incentive schemes would cost a great deal, it must he answered that the Community Development Ministry and its programme is presumably far from cheap. The salary payments to all the members of this “parallel bureaucracy” must amount to a substantial sum. It could be, of course, that that Ministry’s biggest and most distinctive contribution to the alleviation of India’s economic problems is made through its reducing the numbers of educated unemployed by increasing its own payroll!
AS EVER BEFORE
for
any model any make

CANARA SPRINGS
Ideal for Indian Roads

THE CANARA WORKSHOPS LIMITED
Factories at: Mangalore and Nagpur
effects and these need to be examined. Nor should we prejudge their influence. Good things can be done for poor reasons—Panchayat raj may fail to produce the wondrous results the framers had in mind; it may nevertheless lead to less easily observable consequences of a beneficial kind which no one intended. Such at any rate is the hunch around which this article is written. It is a hunch concerned entirely with the consequences for India's political system. It can be expressed in the form of three hypotheses.

### Outlet for Competitiveness

In the first place, the new institutions will constitute a new political outlet for the increasing competitiveness of Indian rural life......a competitiveness partly between social (i.e., usually, but not always, caste) groups, partly between rivals for leadership within these groups (especially between young and old), partly between individuals seeking external avenues for personal advancement. Such a consequence has already been noted by some observers and has been almost invariably deplored: it is held to increase divisiveness and it is in this connection that the blessed doctrine of consensus is appealed to; uncontested, sense-of-the-meeting choices of members are applauded. The opposite view is here proposed: the divisions in rural society are the inevitable accompaniments of change and provision of open political outlets is helpful. The consequences of pressing the no-contest idea will be practically to exclude any challenge to the existing established leaders. This might have been politically manageable if community development and panchayat raj had come in quietly, without fanfares and without philosophy. As things are, however, such a barrier to free political competition is bound to increase the frustration of the have-nots.

Apart from that, however, the provision of challenge and competition may have great value. What is to be hoped for is neither the protection of the established leadership nor its wholesale overthrow and replacement, but rather a sifting of its ranks and the political education of members who prove, by their ability to survive, to be the fittest for the new political world. From one point of view, then, it is a question of fitting a valve on to the bottle of rural politics — refusing, that is, either to cork it up completely or to spill out its contents by turning it upside down. But from another, it is more than a negative holding operation. Institutions are patterns of behaviour and fresh institutions mean new ways of behaviour. That part of the rural leadership which can cope with the new roles, new procedures, new techniques will be changed in the process of doing so. To say that panchayat raj will be captured by the rural establishment is bound to be too simple: for (a) some of them at least will be defeated by newcomers, and (b) those who win will have acquired a new style. These bodies may therefore be a new instrument for selective political recruitment and training.

### Congress Likely to be Strengthened

Secondly, the most likely consequence for the fortunes of political parties is a strengthening of Congress in rural areas (This, of course, supposes that parties behave as parties, that they do not refrain from entering the arena, that they ignore preachers who praise the nobility of non-partisan politics.) For one thing Congress is more amply present than other parties. There is also the consideration that at this level of politics tangible material benefits are an even larger part of the purpose of political activity than at higher, ideologically more susceptible levels. Since the source of assistance is the Government, the identification of the three elements — Congress Party, local bodies and Government — will become more and more perfect. This does not necessarily mean that Congress candidates will be successful but rather that successful candidates will become Congress representatives; for not to do so will seem to leave the exercise uncompleted. This identification of Congress and Raj is, of course, nothing new: opposition parties have protested against it for years; to be associated with Congress meant that one had some access to the ears of the local administration. But now the perfected identification means that to be associated with Congress is to be part and parcel of the local administration. As the bureaucrats come down a step or two, the party moves up. Who will decline a lift?

The picture must not be overdrawn, however. Panchayat raj puts good new cards into Congress hands but this is not to say that the player must win every game. It would be surprising and dismaying if other parties wrote off this area as hopeless territory. The Communists, and even the P S P, should be able here and there to exploit the resentments and aspirations of the landless, and they could achieve successes wherever established local leaders prove too unresponsive, too conservative, too incompetent in the new techniques, too obviously concerned to protect the position of a few. At the other end, a party like Swatantra may in some areas (the general elections suggest Gujarat, Rajasthan, Bihar and even Andhra as possibilities) be able to exploit sentiments of fear near the opposite pole of rural society. Their chances will be best where men of (relative) substance feel apprehensive about a "stream of leftward tendency" being pushed downwards too strongly from the Congress top or where they feel the need for a tougher line of resistance to local radical pressures from below.

### Opportunity for Local Party men

Finally, and not least in importance, there may surely be some consequences of interest on the internal life of the Congress Party. Here in the new local bodies there is at last provided a real job of work for local party men. The party's constructive work side was always there, it is true; but that was for devoted social workers, not politicians. Politicians can want to do good, but they want the doing of good to do good for them — which, by any appropriate standard, is fair enough. Panchayat raj offers positions of influence and clear local prestige, at once far superior to party committee work and far more accessible than the heights of Pradesh or State politics. This 'filling out' of the Congress base may thus have several interesting by-products. One Will be the simultaneous drawing in to these new levels of quite different kinds of men. There will be those who have tried and not quite succeeded in obtaining satis-
factory positions at State level; they may well reckon that the new bodies offer adequate scope in themselves as well as providing firmer stepping stones for a second assault at the State level. There will also be successful Pradhans of the Samitis, and even Sarpanches of Panchayats, who didn’t realise how good they were at leadership; they will be drawn in and upwards.

Again, this set of institutions seems capable of easing the Congress headache of the tussle between Government and organisational wings. For that tussle has been partly the result of inadequate outlets for political energy: Mandal and District were important mainly as leading to State; and at State the competition became at times intolerable. Now there will be something for the unsatisfied party customers to do; they need not spend their time plotting in the PCC how best to throw out the Ministry. To put the matter at the very lowest, they will be able to see that a good way to their end is to get to work through the local bodies. With luck, some of them will become satisfied on the way and forget what their goal had been. Of course, it is possible that new tussles will develop — for instance, between District Congress Committees and Congressmen on Zila Parishads. But this may also be no bad thing: it is not conflict and competition as such which have to be avoided but only their over-concentration.

If evidence comes to support the above hypotheses, panchayat raj will have been worthwhile not merely in spite of the hopes of the founders but, in part at least, precisely to the extent that those particular hopes for communitarian togetherness are dashed. And then we shall be able to copy F M Forster and say “Two cheers for democratic decentralisation”.

No Objection to "Good Politic" in Panchayats!

While politics could not be completely kept away from Panchayats, there should be a concerted effort to safeguard village democracy from the pressures of power politics, according to Shri S K Dey, Union Minister for Community Development, Panchayati Raj and Cooperation. He was addressing a two-day study camp for Members of Parliament organised in New Delhi recently.

Shri Dev admitted that it was going to be very difficult to isolate Panchayat work from the activities of political parties. “What we want to avoid is power politics,” Shri Dey said, and added that there could be no objection to “good politics”!