

A Note on Decentralisation in Administration A Citizen's Point of View

N. H. Atthreya*

AN office attendant of our organisation is living in a not so posh locality of Bombay. He is a little more educated than others in the locality. He is a little more concerned in the neighbourhood than others. He has some inborn qualities of leadership. The result is that the forty or so families, in the locality, go to him for guidance and help.

This attendant has told me more than once: "I do not know what is government and who is administration. When I have a common problem re: water, public hygiene or land, I go and meet people. Practically everyone tells me, 'Not me'. I ask them, 'Who else?' They say, 'May be, this person'. This is what the local corporator, the local MLA, the local MP, the local municipal officer, state secretariat official *and* the local minister says! Someone in this country surely knows who is government and who is administration, as far as a particular matter is concerned. Who is that someone?"

I have taken some of the specific complaints and grievances he and his neighbourhood had and I tried to answer his specific questions to find out 'that someone.' I have tried it a few times. I almost identify the person or persons who are the decision-makers—only almost! I don't find him in fact. Everyone is vague in his answers. The philosophic answer given is that in public administration the authority is diffused. The practical answer observed is that a few persons are able to move things and unless one knows how to do business with them, one has to give up.

As a citizen, I would like to have an updated handbook which will tell me: For such and such matter, at such and such a level, such and such a person is the decision-maker.

THE IMPLEMENTING AGENCY

My attendant friend goes one step further: "Whenever ministers make statements at public meetings, I wish they tell specifically what is the agency

*Governing Director, Modern Management Counsel, Bombay.

that will implement that policy and who is the person. If there is no such agency and there is no such person, they will be saving us endless troubles by not making statements. May be, we are simpletons but we do believe public statements by responsible leaders and we feel cheated when we find they are of a mirage nature.

"We will further prefer that newspapers demand this information. In the absence of this information, newspapers should not publish any of the so-called policy statements. We have been taken for a ride by the political leaders and the Press too long."

The beginning of decentralisation, as far as the citizen is concerned, is the *knowledge of who has what power in what area*. How much power is not that matters but what power who has in what regard he has does. Surely, the powers that go with a position are not in a flux.

The powers of *all* that are in administration may not have been stated. At least those of the officers would have been spelled out. They may not have been updated to meet current conditions. They may be diluted in practice or even withdrawn. What the citizens want to know is: Who has been given what powers to handle—at least on paper?

This is the beginning of decentralisation, for the reason that only with this knowledge the citizen can check with reality and see for himself where and how much re-centralisation—the opposite of decentralisation—has occurred in the past thirty years.

Why the re-centralisation has occurred since independence, the citizen would not like to enquire. One does not need a royal commission to find out why either.

The very knowledge of the gap may (a) make some of the public administrators exercise the powers they are supposed to have and, (b) make the citizen go and knock at the right doors and not 'go to the very top for every legitimate right of his'. The average citizen does not wish to throw his weight around. He does not like the idea of going to the higher-ups or their brokers. He has a legitimate right or grievance and he wants it to be met. He would prefer the appropriate level, not any higher. If the level is low and local, he would prefer it. It is inconvenient and expensive to make a pilgrimage to a state or country capital.

RE-CENTRALISATION?

What is hurting the working of the administration and the economy

is that 'no one' knows who is there to do what, that there is too much of hush hush, and that stated powers are giving way to assumed re-centralisation.

By all means, let us do all the thinking on decentralisation since decentralisation will make for appropriate delegation and appropriate delegation will mean timely decision and actions following therefrom.

In the citizen's eyes, steps for decentralisation can well wait. The urgent and feasible step is to let what we have now work. If the men at the various levels do what they are empowered to do, if the citizen knows who at what level is empowered to do what, the citizen will feel rested and the things will move faster.

The citizen will love to make his contribution to appropriate decentralisation. To do so, he would like a machinery to find out at whose hands what can be settled and to give the information wider and continued publicity. Once he knows it, he will do his best to make it work. He will also do his best to reverse the recent re-centralisation trend.



BLOCK LEVEL PLANNING

The smallness of the size and scale (at block level) will in fact provide an opportunity for a greater meticulousness in planning and implementation and make the former more realistic and the latter more effective More intimate contact with people would sharpen the awareness of the planners regarding problems which need to be solved and the obstacles to their solutions.... The same proximity may, however, become somewhat embarrassing inasmuch as people's expectations would be higher and non-performance would be more exposed.

—*Report of the Working Group on Block Level Planning, 1978.*