

Decentralization from Below: A Case Study of Nagaland, India

Robert Angkang Shimray

Ph.D Student Department of Anthropology, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya, India.

Abstract- Decentralization and local governance are increasingly recognized as basic components of democratic governance, since they provide an enabling environment in which decision making and service delivery can be brought closer to the people, especially to the rural people. It involves the shifting of fiscal, political and administrative responsibilities from higher to lower levels of government. Throughout the world, countries have been enthusiastically embracing different aspects of decentralization, particularly during the past decades. Decentralized form of governance aims at an economic and political system that responds more closely to people's preferences and requirements at the grassroots level by bridging the gap between suppliers and users of goods and services. Over the past decades the developing world has seen increasing devolution of political and economic power to local governments. And decentralization is considered an important element of participatory democracy and, along with privatization and deregulation, represents a substantial reduction in the authority of national governments over economic policy. Therefore, the present paper examines the institutional and the organizational structures, and execution of various developmental programmes and activities under the decentralized form of local government of the Naga people residing in the Northeastern part of India, where the execution of various administrative and developmental projects are carried out through three institutional and organizational delivery mechanisms which are 'Village Council', 'Village Development Board (VDB)' and through the 'Communitisation' scheme.

Index Terms- Decentralization, Village Council, Village Development Board (VDB), Naga, Communitisation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Mahatma Gandhi on Panchayati Raj (corresponding to the 'Village Council' of Nagaland) said,

"Every village has to become a self-sufficient republic. This does not require brave resolutions. It requires brave, corporate, intelligent work.... I have not pictured a poverty-stricken India containing ignorant millions. I have pictured to myself an India continually progressing along the lines best suited to her genius. I do not, however, picture it as a third-class or even a first-class copy of the dying is fulfilled, and every one of the seven lakhs of villages becomes a well-living republic in which there are no illiterates, in which no one is idle for want of work, in which everyone is usefully occupied and has nourishing food, well-ventilated dwellings, and sufficient Khadi¹ for

covering the body, and in which all the villagers know and observe the laws of hygiene and sanitation. There is nothing inherently impossible in the picture drawn here. To model such a village may be the work of a lifetime. Any lover of true democracy and village life can take up a village, treat it as his world and sole work, and he will find good results (Prabhu & Rao, 1960, pp. 246-247)."

The State of Nagaland is situated in the extreme North-Eastern part of India, sharing an international boundary with the adjacent country of Myanmar. It is pre-dominantly a tribal state, inhabited by 16 major tribes under the umbrella term of the 'Naga', and along with a number of sub-tribes. The Ao, Angami, Chang, Konyak, Lotha, Sumi, Chakhesang, Khiamniungam, Kachari, Phom, Rengma, Sangtam, Yimchungrü, Kuki, Zeliang and Pochury are the major tribes. Each tribe is distinct and unique in character from the others in terms of village administrations, customs, languages and attires. Traditionally, every Naga village had their own form of administrative system which differs from tribe to tribe and from village to village. And there is no uniformity in the pattern of their administrative systems. However, in the past four decades there has been remarkable extension of the administrative reach to the far-flung corners of Nagaland. In many ways, the organization of the districts along with general tribe geographical boundaries has provided continuity to traditional tribal practices and linguistic affiliations.

Each village in Nagaland today has a Village Council and a Village Development Board – corresponding to a regulating and executive body. The traditional institution of the village council was given a legal status in 1968. Subsequently, in 1978, the traditional Village Councils were given powers to deal with development matters. As a result, a Village Development Board (VDB) was created by the Village Council and Area Councils Act of 1978 (Sahay, 1992). Village Councils are an important component of the modern governance system in Nagaland. While the District Planning and Development Boards provide the needed flexibility to ensure a responsive and holistic approach towards development for the district, linkages to the grassroots through the Village Development Boards (VDB) have been established for delivering the rural developmental inputs. These linkages have become vital for decentralizing governance and decision-making in the post-independence and Statehood eras. Quoting UNDP (1997) "Decentralizing government ... enables people to participate more directly in governance processes and can help empower people previously excluded from decision-making. In this way a country can create and sustain equitable opportunities for its entire people. Closer contact between government officials and local communities and organizations also encourages the exchange of information that can be used to

¹ Khadi - An Indian homespun cotton cloth.

formulate development programmes that are tailored to local needs and priorities, and thus are more effective and sustainable." This paper outlines the institutional structure and the execution of various rural developmental projects in the light of mass participation in a decentralized form of local governance.

II. METHODOLOGY

This paper is primarily based on field data collected from the sample areas/households through survey and interview method. Secondary data available are also used for the study. These are collected from the official records, journals and publications of the development departments etc. One case study was developed by field visits followed by data collection by the author and selected field collaborators. Data and reports from the village/VDB were selected purposively for the study which covers in total 210 households. Besides the selected village the author had also surveyed several other surrounding villages to observe the developmental projects being implemented under Village Developmental Board and Communitisation project. Observation, interview and questionnaire were employed as key methods for collecting data. Interviews were conducted with the help of systematically prepared schedule on the elders and knowledgeable person of the village.

III. DECENTRALIZED LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN NAGALAND

The institutionalization of the traditional modes of local governance in Nagaland had been well before the commencement of the Panchayati Raj Act through the Nagaland Village and Area Council Act 1978. In the present context the Village Councils and their subsidiary Village Development Boards (VDBs) are established modes of decentralized governance all over Nagaland. These institutions have evolved from indigenous practices of the Naga tribes and later regularized through legislation, facilitating their easy assimilation with existing village system. Every recognized village in Nagaland has a Village Council and its development wing the Village Development Board (Chakraborty, J). Nagaland has 1,317 villages in its area of 16,579 sq. km. spread over 11 districts and 52 blocks. There is specific distribution of duties and power between the Village Council and the VDB. The Council has administrative and judicial duties whereas the VDB has financial and development functions.

IV. VILLAGE COUNCIL – POWER AND DUTIES

The Village Council is the principle organ of the Village. The Village Council under the head of the Chairman assisted by the Gaonburas² and the Councilors play the most prominent role in running the administration of the village. The members of the Village Councils are elected democratically for a period of five years. The Village Council is the overall authority for the

administration of justice within the village. Under the Nagaland Village and Area Council Act, 1978, every recognized village in the State shall have a Village Council. The Village Council acts as an auxiliary to the administration and has the full power to deal with internal administration of the village. It also acts as the court of appeal and all the council members pronounce judgment on trial over the prevailing case. It is the duty of the Village Council to frame rules and regulations regarding civil, criminal, and tradition related cases, they also ensure that offenders are duly punished. Most of the disputes are settled within the village by the Village Council based on their framed existing laws and regulations. However some cases may also be appealed to the Court of District Magistrate or to the Dhubashi³ Court. The Village Council also constitutes the Village Development Board (VDB) and ensures that various development projects are implemented efficiently in the Village. The council also has full powers to deal with the internal administration of the village, maintenance of law and order, enforce orders passed by competent authority, etc. This is why Village Councils have been the crux of grassroots administration in Nagaland.

V. VILLAGE DEVELOPMENT BOARD (VDB)

The VDB is a statutory body, functioning under the primary village authority known as Village Council. The institution of the VDBs, which are synonymous with the concept of decentralized grass root level planning in Nagaland, was first set up in 1976 in Ketsapomi village in Phek District on an experimental basis. Nevertheless, on seeing the success of the Ketsapomi VDB, a mass campaign was launched since 1980 to expand the coverage of this unique institution throughout the State. VDBs were thereafter gradually constituted in the remaining parts of the State and the concept institutionalized with the enactment of VDB Model Rules, 1980 (Karmakar K.G. *et.al.*).

The Village Development Board is a mechanism for decentralization of planning and development at the grass root level at its best. It includes all the permanent residents of the village as its members functioning under a management committee with a Secretary who is elected democratically for a period of three years. Besides women are to constitute 25% of the total of the management committee. This is a novel scheme of development as the locals understand their needs better and can effectively articulate and implement developmental activities better.

The Department of Rural Development has been involved in the developmental activities of the rural areas of Nagaland through the implementation of various programmes and schemes with the objective of improving the economic and social living standard of the rural poor through employment generation and infrastructural development programmes. All the activities of the Department are implemented through the grass root level organization "The Village Development Boards (VDBs)" which has been active since its inception in 1980.

² Gaonburas - They are the Ex-officio members in the Council and can exercise franchise in the council election. They are the agent to the Government.

³ Dhubashis are Govt. agent who deals with customary laws and legal advisor to the Deputy Commissioner of the District Headquarter.

Activities Implemented through the Village Developmental Board (VDB)

VDBs are the grassroots level Development Institutions in the state and are responsible for implementation of all programmes/schemes of both under State Plan and Centrally Sponsored Schemes under Rural Development Department. The following activities implemented under the VDB in Nagaland:

- Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY)
- Indira Awaas Yojana (IAY)
- Grant in Aid to VDBs (Household Allocation)
- VDB Welfare Fund
- Fixed Deposit (FD) & Matching Cash Grants (MCG)
- Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee
- Schemes (MGNREGS)
- Backward Region Grant Fund (BRGF)
- Micro-Finance (MF).

Duties of the Village Developmental Board (VDB)

VDB being a decentralization concept of achieving "Rural Development through Active Participation of the Village Community" performs a vital role in ensuring the overall economic growth and infrastructural development of a village. The following are the duties of the Village Development Board:

- Identify & Select priority based schemes through General Body Meeting.
- Ensure Ground implementation of Programmes.
- Ensure Community participation.
- Ensure Transparency & Proper Fund Utilization.
- Maintain Account, Muster Rolls & Beneficiary Records.

Through VDB the State Government of Nagaland is implementing several welfare measures for alleviating poverty and to bring about socio-economic change in the lives of the rural poor. And also with a view to ensure grass root level participation of the people in the governance, decentralized institutions have come to play crucial roles. Projects for construction of agri link roads, approach roads, irrigational canals, rain water harvesting etc. has come to be implemented for creating infrastructure facilities of the rural areas to bring about progress and development. The primary responsibility for drawing up developmental projects and to prioritize areas for development based on local knowledge falls on the Village Development Boards therefore that makes them a very important institution of the rural villages. In this aspect the role of Village Development Boards needs special attention.

Communitisation: The Concept

Citizen participation is the essence of democracy. People have the right to participate... a right to be part of decision affecting their lives. They know more about where they live and what they want and what is best for them than do people from outside. Further, equipping people with right information and knowledge that is acceptable and compatible with the community will help them make healthy choices. Therefore, the State Government of Nagaland has adopted openness and encouraged active participation of civil society, harnessing its rich social

capital to revitalize and improve public services through the concept of Communitisation.

The concept of Communitisation was introduced in 2002 under the "Nagaland Communitisation of Public Institution and Services Act of 2002", under the stewardship of the then Chief Secretary of the State Shri. R.S Pandey. And after enactment of Nagaland Communitisation Act on public institutions and services the same year, the government in phases handed over ownership and management of education, health care, water supply, electricity, tourism and bio-diversity conservation to the communities.

Communitisation consist of a unique partnership between the government and the community involving transfer of ownership of public resources and assets, control over service delivery empowerment, decentralization, delegation and building capacities, all with the aim of improving the delivery of public utility systems. Communitisation therefore involves transfer of government assets to the community, empowerment of community through the delegation of governmental power of management and supervision of day to day functioning of employees to village committees to be managed by committees/boards under the aegis of the Village Council as prescribed by the Act.

It also demand ensuring accountability to government employees posted at the service delivery level to local committees and control of government assets by village committees including the responsibilities for maintenance and augmentation of assets. As such Communitisation is based on triple 'T' approach viz:

- Trust the user Committee,
- Train them to discharge their new found responsibilities and,
- Transfer governmental powers and resources in respect of management.

The venture paid off with Nagaland being selected for United Nations Public Service Awards in 2008 for Communitisation programme in recognition of its innovative use of rich social capital. Moreover, the Unicef's current International issue on the State of the World's Children, has also devoted a full page on "Imagine Nagaland". Nagaland is the only State, which has featured this way in the publication. The State Government of Nagaland was also conferred the United Nations Public Service Awards for Communitisation programme in recognition of its innovative use of rich social capital on June 23, 2008 at New York. And Nagaland is the only award winner in Asia Pacific region in the category of fostering participation in policy-making decisions through innovative mechanism and one among the 12 awardees selected globally in different areas of public services.

Salient Features of the Nagaland Communitisation Act 2002:

- Boards or committees constituted under the aegis of Village Councils to own and manage the communitised institutions.
- A representative Committee of the community: Members are from the user community ... the actual stakeholders.

- Assets, powers and management functions of the Government transferred to Committee through MOU.
- Responsibility of the Committee: Disbursal of salary, grant of casual leave, control of employees including power to exercise 'no work no pay', maintenance of buildings and assets, purchase of essentials e.g. textbooks, medicines.
- Responsibility of the Government: Ensure deployment of health workers, provision of funds for salaries and other grants, provision of technical guidance and support.
- Government to be in assistive, monitoring and regulatory role.

Unlike other forms of decentralization or privatization, Communitisation develops partnership between Government and the people through delegation of powers and responsibilities to the community for the management of public institutions, so that the performances of the public utilities improve. As for instance, the Communitisation of health/education sector means the community takes over ownership and management of health/education institutions and services. It also means active participation of community in preventive and promotive measures, contributing their share to make health a reality in their own community (Govt. of Nagaland, 2009).

VI. CASE STUDY

In 2011, the author visited a village namely Sodzulhou, situated to the North Western side of Medziphema Administrative Block of Dimapur District, Nagaland, and detail discussions with the members of the Village Council, VDB and Communitisation committees were held. Besides this village, several other surrounding villages were also visited and discussions were made with the selected individuals of those villages. Like any other Naga villages of Nagaland, the administration of the Sodzulhou is carried out by the local governing body i.e., the **Village Council**. It is headed by the Village Council Chairman who is elected unanimously from among the Council members for the period of 5 years. The Chairman is assisted by the Council members and the Gaonburas. Along with the Chairman, the number of councilors consists of 10 members which includes; 6 elected members and 4 Ex-officio members i.e., the Gaonburas. The Village Council is the overall authority for the administration of justice within the village. It is the final Authority on all matters relating to the welfare and security of the village.

The Chairman and his Councilors are the legislators in the Village Assembly. They make various necessary rules and regulations, and the same amendments were done from time to time to suit with the prevailing situation and most importantly to meet the welfare of the people. The legislative function of the Village Council is to execute the various existing laws framed by them, government laws, and ensured that these laws are abided by the people of the village effectively. Any breach of laws and taboos by any individuals were punished duly by the Village Council.

The Village Council from time to time decides disputes – public dispute, private dispute and inter village dispute. Private dispute - involving two or more persons, public dispute are those in which the whole village is involved, and inter village dispute – where two or more villages are involved. It is the responsibilities of the Village Council to settle all the disputes within the village jurisdiction and an effective execution of its laws and decisions. In case a person or a party fails to abide by the rules and decisions of the Council, they take up necessary actions against him or them, and see to it that all its laws and regulations are obeyed effectively. The Council does not tolerate any defiance of its authority. Thus, to punish the wrong doer and to ensure the strict observance of laws in the village is one of the primary functions of the Village Council.

Judicial function is another one of the most important functions of the Village Council. The Council members constitutes what is known as the 'Village Court', it is the highest court of justice organ in the village, it deals with all kinds of crimes, disputes and breach of laws by the people within their jurisdiction. The Village Chairman and his Councilors act as the judges and dispense the judgment on the basis of existing laws.

The **Village Development Board** of this village headed by the VDB Secretary, who is assisted by four more members are elected democratically by the people of the village for the period of three years. The VDB works under the aegis of the Village Council and is involved in all phases of developmental activities as a part of their responsibilities. They make sure that developmental projects are carried out efficiently with the good results.

VDB, along with MNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) which was introduced by the GOI in 2008 in all the rural areas of India have been very fruitful and successful in delivering development and employment to the villagers of this Village. The introduction of NREGA scheme has greatly boosted to the growth and development of the Village by constructing infrastructure and guaranteeing employment for hundred days a year to all the eligible individuals. It is basically a grass-root development process. Some of the developmental works that are successfully implemented and accomplished under the agencies of VDB and MNREGA since its induction in the village are footpath, village Gate, drainage, community latrines and bathrooms, approach road to highway and to the village, approach road to primary School, public well/water reservoir, community granary, etc. They have also formulated some few projects to be carried out in the near future, and these are; Irrigational canal for agriculture purpose, Retaining Wall, etc.

Nagaland Communitisation of Public Institution and Services Act of 2002, is establish partnership between Government and community with the aim of improving delivery of public utility systems. Under this approach, the village has three Committees viz: Village Education Committee (VEC), Village Health Committee (VHC), Water and Sanitation Committee (WATSON) and Managing Board Committee (MBC). These three committees carried out their respective duties delivering the overall socioeconomic growth and higher living standard to the people of the village.

The **Village Education Committee (VEC)** takes over the management of the government Primary and Middle school of the village; take care of the basic elementary education of

children in the village; they make sure that all the children of the village are admitted to the Village Government Primary School; the Committee also disburses the salary of the teachers; they also ensure the discipline and regularity of teachers, with power to enforce 'no work, no pay' principle; they enforced deduction of one day wages for the absentee's teacher in the working days; the VEC members also regularly visited the school and cross-checked the students and faculties activities; they make sure that no proxy teachers are entertained in the village school; purchase of textbooks, furniture, construction and repair of school buildings etc. are also taken care by the VEC along with the school authority; the Committee members also took part in the social activities and other co-curricular activities of the school; lastly, they are also empowered with the selection, appointment and transfers of any teacher who is found of misconduct in discharging his/her duties.

Secondly, **Village Health Committee (VHC)** ensured the proper management of the Village Primary Health Centre; they acted as a vigilante on the working system of the Health Centre, staffs and their effective delivery of services to the people; the committee along with the staffs gave more emphasis to the health condition of pregnant woman, new born babies and children through their supply of free of cost medicines and care; they make sure that pregnancy are registered before the VHC; the committee also examines the health condition of the villagers; ensure all children are immunized (Polio drops); the Health Committees along with the staff members carried out preventive measures to any outbreak of epidemic and disease in the surrounding areas and it is their task to announce the people about the outbreak of the disease and if necessary report it to the nearest District Health Department; the Committee is also empowered with the power to transfer any staff found guilty of misconduct in discharging their duties, and the same with the recommendation of the new replacement staff; the village with the initiative from the Committee and the staff members observed 'Nutrition Day' once every month and medicines are distributed free of cost to the pregnant women, lactating women and children on this day.

Thirdly, **Water and Sanitation Committee (WATSON)** looks after the proper management and supervisions of water supply from the source to the common main distributing reservoir; assets and equipment of water supply are also under the maintenance and custody of the Committee; they appoint and control over the person connected with the management and maintenance of the common water; they implement schemes/projects connected with development and improvement of water shed for the sources of water supply and protection of water supply sources; they also make sure that every household receives enough drinking water.

VII. CONCLUSION

Decentralization and local governance are increasingly recognized as basic components of democratic governance, since they provide an enabling environment in which decision making and service delivery can be brought closer to the people, especially to the poor. Decentralization facilitates greater popular participation in governance. It brings government closer to people, making it more accessible and knowledgeable about local

conditions and more responsive to peoples' demands. This facilitates the forging of a strong relationship between the governors and the governed and identification of the people with their government, which helps to reduce alienation from the political process. Decentralization of power from center to states, states to districts and areas within districts and villages can be one of best ways of radically restructuring an over centralized system of governance, which may be somewhat removable from people, and have limited direct accountability to them. It also results in empowering people, promoting public participation and increasing efficiency as it is evident in the State of Nagaland.

Successfully implementation of development programmes requires adequate funds, appropriate policy framework and effective delivery machinery. However, without good governance and programmed implementation, much of the vast quantum of resources being spent for development is wasted. Therefore, it should be so designed as to bring about improve transparency, better accountability and streamlining of the structure of government.

Decentralization provides opportunities to marginalized sectors of the community, like women in some countries, minorities etc., to participate at the local level, enabling a more sensitive approach to policy formulation and implementation. It makes development projects more sustainable and cost effective because local people are more likely to be involved in their design, execution, and monitoring. Decentralization also represents the most effective means of curbing excessive concentration of power by the central government, which is a distinctive feature of the existing governance model, and which is inimical to several basic tenets of good governance, e.g. openness, transparency, fairness and probity.

Decentralization, manifested in a participatory style of local governance, fosters greater social cohesion and stability, and encourages reconciliation between local interest groups and a convergence around common interests. This process of participation helps to create the conditions for collaboration and working together. It broadens the potential for societal capacity building. Weak capacity is one of the main constraints to national development and good governance. The existing authoritarian, over-centralized model of governance is a major inhibitor to capacity development, because it narrows the amount of people who are allowed any meaningful role in the process. A decentralized, participatory model of governance dramatically increases the opportunity for involvement, and provides space for persons to contribute at several different levels.

To conclude, because of a greater degree of accountability, responsiveness and participation, effective decentralization can make a big difference by making the provision of local (social and economic) services more efficient, equitable, sustainable and cost-effective. Through community participation in decision making, planning, implementation and monitoring and backed by appropriate institutions and resources, it can go a long way in improving the quality of life, particularly of the poorer and marginalized sectors of the population, thereby alleviating poverty. Thus, decentralization from above must converge with decentralization from below.

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AUTHORS

First Author – Robert Angkang Shimray, Ph.D Student
Department of Anthropology, North Eastern Hill University,
Shillong, Meghalaya, India., E-mail –
robert.angkang@gmail.com