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# Planning at the Grassroots: An Experiment with Integrated District Planning

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*This short reflection has emanated from the author's involvement in a project on Integrated District Planning undertaken at the Institute<sup>1</sup> in the context of 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendments to the Constitution; and about a year long experience of field work related to it. The note begins with an introduction, a brief account of the project and processes adopted therein; followed by a section that puts the issues, discussed in some detail later on, in perspective. Then, it goes on to outline the major academic and practical issues as well as challenges that emerged with an attempt to provide a critique of the whole approach towards decentralised planning in particular, and democratic decentralisation in general.*

## **Background and Overview**

It is now, almost unequivocally, held that the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendments to the Constitution, brought into effect in April 1992, envisage a major departure in reform of governance in the country. The Amendments attempt at ushering concrete and very significant changes in attitudes; administrative, planning and financial systems; institutions; and methods of working at the grassroots. The most significant and core aspect of these Amendments is that they accorded a constitutional status to institutions of local self-governance and made it a new, more politically underpinned platform of 'decentralised planning' in the country<sup>2</sup>.

However, it is only in 2004, after more than a decade of Constitutional recognition provided to the Panchayati Raj Institutions through 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendments with definite role towards decentralised planning, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj was set up as

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<sup>1</sup> Institute, here, means OKD Institute of Social Change and Development, to which the author is affiliated.

<sup>2</sup> Decentralised Planning in India, however, has a stretched history. Starting with the First Five Year Plan of the Country, every Five Year Plan has made reference to decentralised planning in some way or other. There have been a number of Committees, Working Groups and Task Forces constituted by Government of India and Planning Commission to look at and operationalise the ideals of 'decentralised planning' in the country. One can refer to the most foundational and widely discussed reports of Balwantray Mehta Committee (1957), Ashok Mehta Committee (1978), G V K Rao Committee (1985) and L M Shingvi Committee (1988) texts of which including a dissenting note on Ashok Mehta Committee Report by E M S Namboodiripad are available at the Planning Commission's website. Besides, Report of the Administrative Reform Commission (1967), Planning Commission's Guidelines (1969), Report of the Working Group headed by Professor M L Dantwala (1978), Report of the Working Group headed by Professor C H Hanumantha Rao (1984) also make useful reading regarding the 'decentralised planning' in the country. It may be mentioned that Hanumantha Rao Committee recommended specifically devolution of functions, power and finances for effective decentralisation of the planning process. The report of the Sarkaria Commission went a step further in recommending formulation of a State Finance Commission akin to the Finance Commission to look into the issues of State level devolution of resources to the districts on an operational and objective basis. 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment mandated State Finance Commission a constitutional requirement through Article 243 I.

an independent Ministry to give an impetus to the strengthening of Panchayati Raj Institutions in the country. Ministry convened meetings of the Chief Ministers of the States; taken up steps to review the status of actual devolution of powers to Panchayati Raj Institutions; and organised seven round tables of State Ministers of Panchayats to discuss the issues and to prepare a time bound road map for effective devolution of functions, functionaries and funds.

Following the recommendation of the Second Round Table<sup>3</sup> of the State Ministers of Panchayats, an Expert Group under the leadership of V Ramachandran was constituted in 2005 for studying and making recommendations on planning at the grassroots level. In order that eleventh Five Year Plan (2007-11) is prepared in tune with the district planning process as envisaged in the Constitutional Amendments, the Expert Group was expected to draw up an action programme so that this could be materialised. The Expert Group submitted its report in 2006 where these issues are put into perspective and discussed in detail.

Accordingly, the Planning Commission issued guidelines of district planning in August 2006 with the main objective of “making district planning a reality in eleventh Five Year Plan”<sup>4</sup>. However, the Commission soon realised that “wherewithal for such a planning exercise was limited”, and felt that “there existed wide variety of confusions regarding district planning at different levels”. The Planning Commission, therefore, constituted a Task Force for preparing a Manual for Integrated District Planning, and the Task Force submitted the Manual in November 2008. The Manual tries to further clarify various issues relating to district planning in particular, and decentralised planning in general.

### **The Experiment**

The project referred to here is an attempt to put in practice the Manual for Integrated District Planning prepared by the Planning Commission. It aims at preparing a district plan for Dibrugarh district in Assam in accordance with the guidelines prescribed by the Planning Commission’s district planning manual.

The project merits on several counts. First, this is the first attempt of its kind in Assam, to prepare (integrated) district plan strictly following the Planning Commission’s Manual and Report of the Expert Group on Planning at the Grassroots in particular; and within the overall framework of 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendments to the Constitution. Second, it is the single attempt in the State that makes an effort to complete the all four phases of district planning mandated by the Expert Group viz. district visioning exercise, fifteen year perspective planning, five year perspective planning and annual planning, which will be tried to prepare in PlanPlus<sup>5</sup> and will be readily accessible online. Third, this is a joint, collaborative project of the Institute, State Institute of Rural Development (SIRD), Assam and Zilla Parishad, Dibrugarh. The Article 243 ZD of the Constitution specifically assigns district planning exercise to the District Planning Committee (DPC), constitution of which,

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<sup>3</sup> The meeting was held in Mysore during August 28-29, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> In Fact, the Eleventh Five Year Plan Document (Vol. I) incorporates a section on District Planning (pp. 226-227). However, the Planning Commission issued similar guidelines earlier (1969) also, following which many States have formulated district plans during Fifth Five Year Plan, although, barring a few, most of them did not integrate such plans into State Plans.

<sup>5</sup> PlanPlus is online planning software designed by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India, initially for the districts covered by Backward Region Grant Fund (BRGF) later on extended up to non-BRGF districts as well. Visit website <http://planningonline.gov.in/MainPage.jsp>.

however, is a prerogative of State legislature. As per the Rule 3(C) of the Assam Panchayat Rule 1995, DPC is to be chaired by Chair person of the Zilla Parishad<sup>6</sup>. The District Planning Manual prepared by the Planning Commission, on the other hand, mentions that in general, the responsibility of the capacity building and training for district planning exercise has been conferred upon the State Institute of Rural Development (SIRD)<sup>7</sup>. It also makes a provision for a Technical Support Institution (TSI) to support the planning at the district level, which is to be notified officially by the State government. Till date, there is, however, no such TSI in Assam. Given the absence of the TSI at the State level, SIRD, Assam approached the Institute to engage in a process of “planning through PRI in an action research mode” in any of the districts of the State, which would “serve as a model and could be taken as a guidance in other districts”. In this sense, the project fills up a critical gap in the area of technical support in district planning in the State<sup>8</sup>. Last but not the least; the entire exercise has been tried in a participatory mode as far as practically possible. It started with a district envisioning exercise following “back and forth consultations” as suggested by the Expert Group and the Planning Commission’s Task Force, which included seven block level<sup>9</sup> envisioning dialogue involving over 1200<sup>10</sup> cross-section of people (one each for seven blocks), one for the Urban Local Bodies (ULBs), one with the district department officials followed by several meetings with people and administration. The inputs and issues that surfaced during the consultative dialogue were thoroughly documented, analysed and then corroborated with the secondary data to prepare a Vision Document covering next fifteen years for the District. The Document was then shared in a public meeting organised by the DPC and district administration (on 21 August, 2009); and presented to the people for their comments. It was made available in the public domain for wider circulation and comments<sup>11</sup>. Upon receiving the comments from the people, it will be modified and placed before the DPC for necessary approval and adoption. Then, based on the vision, long term and short term perspective plans and annual plans will be drawn for the district<sup>12</sup>. The project is still ongoing and this note is basically based on experiences derived out of the envisioning exercise that was carried out during the months of January and February, 2009.

### **Decentralised yet Integrated**

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<sup>6</sup> The Dibrugarh DPC was constituted accordingly on 19 August, 2008 vide notification DDO63/2006-08/47.

<sup>7</sup> Refer P. 24, Integrated District Planning Manual, Planning Commission

<sup>8</sup> Chapter I of the District Vision Document records detail of the process followed.

<sup>9</sup> Decision of holding block level dialogue was taken because block boundary and Anchalik Panchayat boundary are co-terminus. For all practical purposes, block is the ideal “programme unit” and Anchalik Panchayat is important for “integration” purposes. Importance of these two has been discussed in the last section. In passing, it may be mentioned that the Deputy Commissioner of the district also opined that block ‘should be the level of activities’ as “scope and capacity of the GP is too limited” and “ambit of the ZP is too large” for effective planning.

<sup>10</sup> Please note that this is not to be mistaken as “sample size”, for this was a process of dialogue and large number of participants being elected representative of people reflected not their individual concerns but the concerns of the people whom they represented.

<sup>11</sup> The Vision Document is available at the district website of Dibrugarh i.e. <http://dibrugarh.nic.in>. A copy of the document has already been sent to all GP for their comments. Besides, the document, along with block specific results, is being also presented at the meeting of the Block Level Task Force (BLTF) in the district.

<sup>12</sup> The process of envisioning and perspective building has been financially supported by the SIRD, Assam while the process of preparation of GP level annual plans has been financially supported by the Unicef. It is to be noted that Dibrugarh is a Focus district of Unicef as well for its integrated approach. Unicef’s integrated approach is, however, specific to child and mother’s health and education and it focuses on sixteen monitorable indicators. Since overall district planning accommodates them, the effort has drawn Unicef closer to the Institute. The Unicef is also contemplating on establishing a district support unit in Dibrugarh to strengthen the process of district level planning in the district.

While looking at the trajectory of ‘decentralised planning’ in the country, one would find, *inter alia*, essentially three notable perceptions. First, principles and processes of decentralised planning have long been viewed in complementarities with the process of democratic decentralisation, or to be more precise, the process of ‘democratisation’ in the country. One needs to comprehend the specific context, connotation, intent and content of the term ‘decentralisation’ in order that one is able to recognise the crucial link between these two processes; and also to put them in proper perspective given the kind of fluidity, which the term is subjected to<sup>13</sup>. It is essential to understand that conceptually ‘decentralisation’ is more ‘political’ and goes beyond mere sharing and/or redistribution of administrative and fiscal authority and responsibilities<sup>14</sup>. While devolution of power, function and fund is still a key aspect in the process of decentralisation, yet it needs to be recognised that this entire process of reorganisation and transfer is very much part of the State structure, defined and provided *statutorily*. There is a common confusion and frequently mistaken notion that devolution of *any kind* amounts to a process of decentralisation, which often comes in way of effective decentralisation of the ‘real kind’<sup>15</sup>. Interpretation of decentralisation in this fashion brings in the principle of “users’ sovereignty”, often encountered in the economic literature, which, in plain terms, means that users’ should be provided with the ‘cash’ and let them exercise their ‘sovereignty’ in choosing their ‘goods’ rather than providing them with the ‘goods’ directly. This justifies devolution of funds to the para-statal governments or institutions of local self governance for deciding about the mechanism of their ‘best spending’.

Now, parting with the authority by the upper layers of governments over the ‘fund’ is essential for converting the possible ways of best-spending (of them) arrived at the lower levels in to ‘projects’ from a pure ‘wish-list’. In this sense, providing a *statutory* space in the decision making process and encouraging people to exercise their ‘rights’ over that space is absolutely critical, which otherwise tends to be ignored. This explains the link between the process of ‘democratisation’ and ‘decentralisation of planning’. However, this requires that people at the margin are organised and capacitated enough, failing which such users’ sovereignty only breeds a petty political class, often comprising local elite intimidators, who become the sole beneficiaries out of this whole process pushing people further to the corner<sup>16</sup>.

Second, just like the term ‘decentralisation’, the notion of “decentralised planning” has also remained mostly vague, acquiring different meaning and shapes at different times and contexts, although, there has been surfeit literature on the subject including several reports. This vagueness has been candidly admitted by the Planning Commission itself<sup>17</sup>. Nevertheless, at present we have two ‘official’ documents viz. Report of the Expert Group and Manual for Integrated District Planning, which more or less attempt to clarify and operationalise the notion of decentralised planning in the country. This, indeed, is a great

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<sup>13</sup> For an illuminating and intriguing discussion on it see “A Theoretical Note on Kerala-style Decentralized Planning” by Prabhat Patnaik in *The Marxist*, Vol. 20, 1; January – March, 2004

<sup>14</sup> For more on this aspect see “Democratic decentralization and local Participation: a review of recent research” by Sylvia Bergh in *Development in Practice*, Vol. 14, No. 6, November 2004

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion on this see Prabhat Patnaik (2004), *ibid*, p.9. He argues that creation of such confusion is a part of the deliberate ploy of the imperialism to dilute the whole notion of ‘real’ decentralisation, which is akin to Left lexicon.

<sup>16</sup> This has, precisely, been the argument in Left rank who considers ‘decentralisation’ as an instrument for forging their class-struggle in the society. For a discussion on this see Patnaik (2004).

<sup>17</sup> See Foreword to Manual for Integrated District Planning, Planning Commission, Government of India, 2008.

feat in itself. However, it needs to be pointed out here that District Planning is not only an issue for the districts where Part IX and IX A of the Constitution are applicable. In areas where Sixth and Fifth Schedules are in place, decentralised planning is even more important. Although, there is an Expert Group Report on Planning in Sixth Scheduled Areas, discussion on this is missing in the Manual, and thereby leaving a critical gap in the process of decentralised planning in the country.

Third, evidently, Planning Commission's Manual refers to 'integrated' rather than 'decentralised' planning. While articulating the Committee for District Planning, Article 243 ZD of the Constitution states that "there shall be constituted in every State at the district level a District Planning Committee to *consolidate* the plans prepared by the Panchayats and Municipalities in the district and to prepare a draft district plan for the district as a whole"<sup>18</sup>. Further, it also states that each District Planning Committee shall in preparing the draft development plan have regard to "matters of *common interest* between the Panchayats and Municipalities"<sup>19</sup>.

Clearly therefore, while the ideals of decentralised planning are founded on the principle of users' sovereignty, objective of the DPC is to 'consolidate' or so to say, 'integrate' the projects prepared de-centrally by looking at the "common interests". In tune with the recommendation of the Expert Group, the Planning Commission's Manual posits that consolidation is a task that goes much beyond compilation and connotes a degree of value addition through integration of local plans.

Process of integration, according to both Expert Group and Manual, can be of several kinds. First is the spatial integration, which means integration of schemes and/or projects across space. For instance integration of schemes of roads that runs through one or more planning units definitely add value. Second is the cross sectoral integration like integrating health sector programmes with water and sanitation programmes. This would help ensuring maximum impact upon different interventions<sup>20</sup>. Third kind is the vertical integration. This is based on the precept that the higher level of planning units need to perform the activities, which have the advantages of scale and which can't be done by lower level planning units. This requires consideration of the lower level plans before finalising higher level plans. Fourth type of integration refers to integration of resources. This comprises of two aspects – integration of state schemes with the panchayat plan and integration of centrally sponsored schemes (CSS) with the panchayat plans. Further, the Expert Group also mentions about integration of local resources of panchayats as another important aspect of resource integration. The most important of aspect of integration of sub-district plans is the sectoral integration. This relates to integration of schemes within a sector. This not only helps in identification of lead sector(s) in the district but also provides the basis for integration of rural and urban plans at the district level. Integration and consolidation of rural and urban plans into district plan is of utmost significance in the consolidation process<sup>21</sup>. The Expert Committee views integration of rural-urban plans as particularly important in the light of increasing urbanisation and deems as an area where DPCs can contribute to a great extent.

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<sup>18</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>19</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>20</sup> This is what much talked about subject of so-called 'convergence'. Limits to such convergence and practical problems are dealt with in the last section.

<sup>21</sup> This is subject, which needs to be researched in some detail.

How can one visualise integration out of decentralisation? Herein comes the role of vision. The Planning Commission's Task Force has defined envisioning as a "process of building up, through a consultative back and forth process, a set of priorities" for the district as a whole. Although plans are prepared de-centrally at each level of planning unit, they are guided by the same vision, which binds the plans together. In fact, the vision is shared by all planning units, and exercising their users' sovereignty, they decide to fit in their locally felt needs to it. We will see below that actual integration, however, need not and may not be a simple act of consolidation.

In the subsequent sections, we will try to examine how these thoughts implicate the process of evaluating decentralised planning and help appreciating practical hold-ups to it.

### **Problem of Aggregation**

This section is particularly devoted to the issue of 'integration' of sub-district level plans into a (draft) district plan in a somewhat deeper theoretical perspective. This, in other words, will merit the project on academic interest and generate a genuine appeal for the kind of issues that the project is expected to produce at the end.

The overarching role of the DPC as a consolidator of sub-district level plans, in fact, introduces the classic problem of aggregation<sup>22</sup>. It has been argued, following the Planning Commission's precept, that district vision is the common thread that binds together the decentralised plans; and facilitates the process of integration at the district level. Also, district vision is all about "setting priorities" through "back and forth consultations", held, obviously, at the (possible) sub-district levels, in our case, say, at the level of blocks or Anchalik Panchayats. If the local felt needs (i.e. alternatively speaking, local priorities) are to be reflected in these set of sub-district level plans, the users' sovereignty, supposedly existing, is to be exercised in right earnest.

Now, exercising of users' sovereignty at each level of planning unit will result in n-number of arrays (in fact, n-tuple) of priorities or, say, preferences, from which one set of preferences need to be constructed, which should ideally be Paretian liberal<sup>23</sup>. This is what the theory of social choice is primarily concerned with. The 'rationality' of such a "social choice" has been defined and refined over the time, which taken together, forms the subject of social choice theory<sup>24</sup>.

The Planning Commission's attempt to resolve this problem i.e. obtaining a set of priorities for the district as a whole out of the n-tuple of priorities defined at the sub-district level by means of "common concerns" is, therefore, invites academic debate. Let us try to examine the underlying principle of 'commonality' a bit more carefully. Commonality can be evaluated with regard to two optimums i.e. minimum and/or maximum. In the first case, only those cases, in this context "social states", are *considered*,

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<sup>22</sup> Note that mathematically the integration itself implies summation or aggregation.

<sup>23</sup> Paretian liberalism requires that "unanimous individual preference rankings must be reflected in social decisions" and that "each individual should have a recognised personal sphere in which his preference and his alone would count in determining the social preference". For more on this see "Liberty and Social Choice", Amartya Sen, *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 80, No.1, Jan 1983.

<sup>24</sup> The rationality of social choice has been defined in terms of certain properties that need to be fulfilled. See "Choice, Welfare and Measurement", Amartya Sen, Oxford India Paperback, 1999 for a detail discussion on them.

which are *repeated* by all. In the second interpretation of commonality, the number of times a particular preference is voiced repeatedly is considered, obviously, on the ground that by addressing them, we can perhaps, redress maximum needs.

Note that the second interpretation is nothing but familiar rule of *majority*, which has been popularly criticised as being Paretian illiberal<sup>25</sup>. It has been argued that problem of endemic cyclical preference in case of social preference violates the condition of transitivity and makes the social choice irrational<sup>26</sup>. The problem of cyclical preference, in turn, arises when there are “binary comparisons” and one way to resolve it to do away with the “binary comparisons” of alternatives<sup>27</sup>.

Given this theoretical framework, let us now put the Planning Commission’s suggestion in its perspective. The Planning Commission holds that prioritisation of sectors than anything else should be relied upon for the intention of integration. This makes, however, perfect practical sense since most of the ‘project’s are to be articulated in terms of “sectoral programmes” later on. Now the binary comparison of sectors within the planning unit is not only practically difficult but is also devoid of much sense. To resolve the problem of transitivity loss, *strong* ordering of sectors clubbing them together into distinguishable classes such as high priority sectors, moderate priority sectors and low priority sectors can be adopted. Since the ‘bundles’ will be possibly different for different planning units, comparison across them is not needed, instead, we can look for ‘common’ sectors figuring in priority classes.

Decision arrived at following this mechanism acquires Pareto optimality for the district as a whole at least in terms of *outcome evaluation* i.e. “everybody will prefer a ‘state’ where priority sectors are addressed over all other ‘states’” without compromising the individual liberty of the planning units as they can still prepare projects following their set of preference orderings. The integrated district planning will simply ‘place’ those projects under the ‘sector’ along with its priority. This, no doubt, seems to be an appealing exercise but process of integration also involves many critical practical impediments. These, along with a few other practical impediments, are discussed below.

### **Practical Impediments**

In the foregoing three sections, we have discussed also the decentralised planning process, and district planning as a part thereof, within a theoretical perspective, specifically referring to the challenges of ‘integration’ at the level of the DPC. The project under discussion is, in fact, an experiment with these challenges, and this section basically aims to provide a critique of the whole process.

It is, indeed, not hard to see that the Task Force relies more on “sectoral integration” based on the lists of subjects transferred to the rural and urban local bodies through 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendments to the Constitution. The rural-urban integration at District level, however,

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<sup>25</sup> See for instance, “The Impossibility of a Paretian Liberal” by Amartya Sen in *The Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 78; No. 1; Jan-Feb, 1970. pp.152-157 and also “Rights, Welfare and Social Choice” by Prasanta K Patnaik and Kotaro Suzumura in *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 82, No. 2, May 1994, pp.435-439.

<sup>26</sup> See “Preference aggregation, functional pathologies and Democracy: A Social Choice Defence of Participatory Democracy” by Radcliff, B & Wigenbach Ed in *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 62; No. 4, pp. 977-998

<sup>27</sup> For more on this see Part II of the Book “Choice, Welfare and Measurement”; Amartya Sen; Oxford India Paperback, 1999.

has been found to be most challenging on practical reasons. The Task Force itself categorically points out that so far; the practice of rural and urban planning has been focused on “different objectives and tuned to different purposes”. While the panchayat level planning generally follows a socio-economic and sectoral approach, urban “master plans” focus on mostly spatial planning aspects such as land use and zoning, grossly ignoring sectoral and social planning. The Task Force further adds that each of these approach suffers from deficiencies – just as urban plans lack sectoral component, rural plans also lack spatial component. The consolidation process should therefore, “complement each other to add value to each of these plans”.

The current legal framework that mandates planning for urban areas has been, generally restricted to the Town and Country Planning Acts enacted by State governments following the Model Act (1960) prepared by Town and Country Planning Organisation (TCPO). This model was revised by the TCPO in 1985, which largely has been the basis of urban and regional planning in the country. These laws and models, however, pre-date 74<sup>th</sup> amendment to the Constitution and do not provide a formal role for the DPC. It is, therefore, needed that these legislations are modified on the basis of Model Urban and Regional Planning and Development Law (revised) prepared by the Ministry of Urban Development as part of Urban Development Plans Formulation and Implementation Guidelines (UDPFI). The Model Law provides a space for the DPC and formally accommodates the process of rural-urban integration for plans for area development.

In Assam, while the administration of urban areas has been regulated through the Assam Municipal Act of 1956 (except Guwahati, which is governed by Guwahati Municipal Corporation Act, 1969), the urban planning, on the contrary, was largely governed by Assam Town and Country Planning Act of 1959 with subsequent revisions and amendments. These two acts divide and share the roles and responsibilities envisaged through 74<sup>th</sup> amendments to the Constitution. It is only in the year 2007 that Assam Nagar Raj Act has been enacted “to amend the laws relating to the Corporation and Municipalities in the State of Assam to institutionalise citizens’ participation in Corporation’s and Municipal functions”. The Act also makes the provision that the “relevant sections of the Guwahati Municipal Corporation Act of 1969 and Assam Municipal Act of 1956 and rules made thereunder along with up to date amendments thereof inconsistent with the provisions of the Act, shall stand modified or amended, as the case may be, to the extent of such inconsistency” with the effect of enforcement of the Act.

The Assam Nagar Raj Act mentions about Area Sabha and Ward Committee with local planning responsibility. The Section 9 (a) of the Act says that Area Sabha will “generate proposal”, “determine priority of schemes and development programmes” and “forward the same” to the Ward Committee, or in its absence, to the Corporation or Municipality, for “inclusion in the development plans” of the Ward Committee or Corporation/Municipality. The Section 16 (2) mandates Ward Committee that it shall “prepare the annual ward plan and forward the same to the Corporation or Municipality for its integration with the annual plan”. The Section 15 (a) on the contrary, assumes District Plan and Municipal Plans as *ex-ante* and says that duty of the Ward Committee is to “produce the Ward Plans in a manner consistent with the District Plans or Municipal Plans” within a specified time.

It may be noted that Area Sabha as articulated in Assam Nagar Raj Act, 2007 is similar to Gram Sabha in principle whereas Ward Committee is a body comprising of the elected representative of the ward and not more than ten persons representing the civil society from the ward nominated by Corporation or Municipality. Ward Committee is to be constituted within six months of the constitution of the Corporation or Municipality.

The Act, however, does not provide any clear relation between Area Sabha, Ward Committee and Corporation/Municipality with the DPC as regard to the district planning. The Act, unlike the Assam Panchayat Act of 1994, is yet to be followed by an “activity mapping” delineating the devolution of power, functions and finance to the urban local bodies. In the face of such indistinctiveness and lack of required legislations and enactments, rural-urban integration becomes extremely contentious.

The present practice of planning at the level of rural and urban local bodies has largely been driven by various schemes and programmes. This is evidently generating an enormous bewilderment at different levels, particularly at the lower level of Panchayats regarding the whole process of planning. The Expert Group has specifically recommended involving the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in implementation and planning of the Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSS), and the operational guidelines of the CSS also provide a *space* for the PRIs. However, in most of the cases involvement of PRI is more customary than genuine<sup>28</sup>. As such, there are lot of duplications and schemes lack ‘convergence’, hence, remain mostly disjointed. Adding to the complexity, multiple agencies are engaged in the planning and implementation of these schemes leaving the PRIs in an absolute state of perplex. It needs to be mentioned that, in doing so, agencies like District Rural Development Agencies (DRDA) and Municipal Development Authority (MDA) are intruding into the domain of rural and urban local bodies often resulting in conflicts of interest and authority<sup>29</sup>. The consequence of such parallel planning has been pervasive. Instead of planning of these schemes being part of the overall district plan, district plan is now tending to become a composite of these sets of plans<sup>30</sup>.

More importantly, the Information asymmetry and resultant inefficiency<sup>31</sup> in decentralised planning has further been accentuated by limited financial devolution to the PRIs and vagueness relating to it. Funds are flowing to ‘districts’ from scores of sources through diverse channels<sup>32</sup>. Interestingly, funds are not flowing to the ‘PRIs’ directly. Arguably, effective district planning exercise necessitates a complete resource mapping so that the plan does not remain at the level of a “wish list”. Although, government of Assam has

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<sup>28</sup> For example, examine the operational guidelines of Sarva Sikhsa Aviyan (SSA), Total Sanitation Campaign (TSC). Village level committees constituted have more so-called monitoring responsibilities than planning responsibilities.

<sup>29</sup> Ideally, one would expect, after the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendments, DRDA and MDA should cease to exist or become sub-ordinate agencies of Zilla Parishad. However, these agencies are continuing to exist as it was before these Amendments.

<sup>30</sup> This has created lots of practical problems. For example, if a GP decides to have an ICDS centre in a village then ideally it should plan various components of it say the building, water and sanitation, education and nutritional supplement etc. for it and should identify various schemes thereafter from which these components can be supported. In reality, various components are being planned specific to schemes result being that most of these centers are now defunct for they lack one or more components. This is how public money remain underutilized.

<sup>31</sup> Inefficiency, here, should be interpreted as “wastages”.

<sup>32</sup> Funds are coming in the form of CSS, State Schemes, MPLAD and MLALAD, BRGF, additional schemes, special assistance, loans, grants etc.

completed activity mapping<sup>33</sup> requiring a Panchayat Window in the State budget in case of 'subjects' transferred to Panchayats, there is no clear district level figures for resource mapping to perform<sup>34</sup>. Lack of proper financial devolution has been pointed out as one of the major limiting factors<sup>35</sup>.

This calls for a thorough discussion on the issue of fiscal federalism and its functioning in the country. The present framework of fiscal federalism talks of two tier federalisms i.e. sharing of resources between Centre and State through Finance Commission; and sharing resources between State and Institutions of Local Governance through State Finance Commission. The important issue relating to the framework of this federalism here is that just as the State remains dependent upon the Centre in the first case, the PRIs also remain dependent upon the State in the second case. The reversal of this framework in order to buttress the PRIs, therefore, is an issue, which needs to be discussed in detail.

In this context, political will has been widely argued as most critical factor in strengthening the PRIs and decentralised planning. Lack of political will has been commonly explained in terms of conflicting domains of interests within the State structure<sup>36</sup>. This has led to political manipulations that go to weaken the PRIs. Some would even go to argue that prevailing approach to development is responsible for the decline in the thrust towards decentralisation<sup>37</sup>. One would be forced to view these attempts as the part of the neo-liberal policy of development where there is a deliberate dichotomy between the words and work<sup>38</sup>, as has already been discussed.

To conclude, it appears as if the notion of decentralised planning had the implicit assumption that the people at the grassroots are, indeed, organised and capable of planning for their improvement. However, it has already been pointed out that the absence of such capacity at the grassroots level only helps to produce a petty political class depriving people of their benefits and rights. Massive corruption at the level of PRIs often reported can only be linked to deviation. Nonetheless, in principle, democratic decentralisation is to be preferred, no matter how unsatisfactory its immediate results, precisely on the grounds of greater accountability and subjectivity of people<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> See Notification No. PDA 336/2001/Pt-III/32 published in *The Assam Gazette* (Extraordinary), 25 June, 2007, No 214

<sup>34</sup> The Budget Document, 2008-09 of Government of Assam of the Department of Finance includes a "Statement of Transfer of Resources from the Consolidated Fund the State to Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies", where allocation, both plan and non-plan, are earmarked. However, the district level disaggregated figures could not be ascertained even after much deliberation with the Department till the time of writing this note.

<sup>35</sup> See State of the Panchayati Raj (SoPR) Reports and other studies

<sup>36</sup> In Assam, *Raijor Padulit Raijor Sarkar* (RAPRAJ) format can be viewed as a deliberate political ploy to hijack the notion of Gram Sabha. The RAPRAJ is convened by the district authority to discuss a specific issue starting usually with a message from the Chief Minister. This has been mistaken by the common people as Gram Sabha. See "Rejuvenating Panchayati Raj: Ideology, Indian State and Lessons from Periphery" by Bhupen Sarmah, OKDISCD and Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, 2006.

<sup>37</sup> See for instance "Political Decentralisation and Development Models" by V K Natraj, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 35, No. 26, June 24, 2000 p. 2215. Also see 87<sup>th</sup> Amendment Bill and responses to it published in *Economic and Political Weekly* Editorial Vol. 35, No. 18, 2000.

<sup>38</sup> In passing note that Planning Commission is non-statutory but the DPC is statutory entity. Overwhelming influence of the Planning Commission in carrying forward the development agenda in the country is well known. For an interesting debate see "Democracy, Development and Countryside: Urban Rural Struggles in India" by Ashutosh Varshney, Cambridge University Press, 1995

<sup>39</sup> See Patnaik (2004).

## Note

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