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Rani D. Mullen. Decentralization, Local Governance, and Social Wellbeing in India. Do local governments matter? New York: Routledge. 2012.

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Rani D. Mullen. *Decentralization, Local Governance, and Social Wellbeing in India. Do local governments matter?* New York: Routledge. 2012.

Assessing decentralization “as the means for shifting power away from . . . inefficient, corrupt, and rent-seeking central states towards more accountable local governments and for encouraging the deepening of democracy and the building of village communities” (p. 1) is the central theme of Rani D. Mullen’s *Decentralization, Local Governance, and Social Wellbeing in India*. The author examines two villages in each of three Indian states: Karnataka, West Bengal, and Uttar Pradesh in order to establish a link between the degree of decentralization in these villages and the social wellbeing of the residents there as well as of the populations of the respective states, in general. Mullen begins the first chapter (*The Promise of Decentralization*) with a much needed discourse on decentralization in general and decentralization theories and literature in particular to understand the impact of decentralization on the reduction of poverty and the process of democratization overall. She, expectedly, declares early on that “this research’s findings show that a state’s history of decentralization, political competition, and social mobilization are key ingredients in determining the ability of village governments to deepen democracy and have an impact [on] their citizens’ wellbeing” (p. 2). Mullen’s *Decentralization, Local Governance, and Social Wellbeing* also draws attention to the fact that existing studies on other countries often neglect local conditions and, hence, draw incomplete pictures of the impact of decentralization on local governments. Here, the author succeeds in filling existing gaps in the fields of decentralization and democracy building. The three case studies presented within the overall context of Indian society enable Mullen to draw a fuller picture of decentralization and its impact on individual villagers and of the process of democratization. Mullen successfully “demonstrate[s] that contextual differences, particularly the distribution of power among local elites, political competition, and the nature of civil society activism, seriously affect the ability of decentralized local governments not only to function democratically, but also to pursue their mandate of alleviating poverty and improving the health and education of their citizens” (p. 3).

The research involved in this books relies on a wide variety of qualitative and quantitative national and local data, which are explained in detail in chapter one as well as in Appendix B. In chapter one, Mullen explains the case study selection methods (though the description found here somehow differs from the methods described in the appendix). Later in the chapter, however, it appears the villages were chosen because of the availability of existing village studies in those locations. Nevertheless, the choice of the states of Karnataka, West Bengal, and Uttar Pradesh is excellent given these states’ differing experiences with decentralization, and the different constitution of their local governments, and their varying democratic processes. The research outcomes, however, are rather predictable given the social history and the political culture of these states. Still, Mullen incorporates interviews and surveys in order to capture local opinions (p. 16), which adds the ingredient missing in other publications on decentralization and highlights that the Indian “project” of decentralization differs from that of other countries due to its specific social and political context.

Chapter two discusses decentralization in India, specifically, where the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1993 institutionalized decentralization from state governments to village level governments. The section in this chapter on the historical background of decentralization in India is indispensable to this volume as well as to broader studies in the field

since “constitutional amendments ... [have] made India one of the most politically decentralized countries in the world” (p. 31), though this claim is partially contradicted by the case studies she later presents of the villages in West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, and Karnataka. India’s political landscape, including party politics, is unique as compared to other countries and therefore, studies of decentralization conducted in India provide a particularly important contribution to the studies and theories of decentralization and the study of the impact of decentralization on social wellbeing. Mullen describes decentralization processes and the democratic functioning of the local governments in detail and provides a figure intended to clarify for the reader the three-tiered panchayat system¹ that is mandated by the Indian government for large states. An additional figure for the two-tiered panchayat system prescribed for smaller states would have been beneficial. A striking feature of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, Mullen emphasizes, is its “attempt at social engineering by mandating quotas or „reserved seats“ for formerly disenfranchised groups” (p. 33), which, based on the case studies presented here, successfully drew marginalized sections of society (women, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes) into the political processes of local government in all three states. A figure provided by the author on the fundamental provisions of the 73rd Amendment serves as a useful summary of the discourse provided in the text. The chapter further distinguishes between financial, administrative, and political decentralization and underlines the weaknesses and potential loopholes of the mandates of the 73rd Amendment. Although this chapter contains several repetitions of the main findings and the argument already discussed in the previous chapter, it provides a closer look at the local context of local governments and a comparison of key indicators of social wellbeing in West Bengal, Karnataka, and Uttar Pradesh, which are the essence of this book. Mullen claims, and proves in the three subsequent chapters, that “building up effective local government systems, which empower disenfranchised groups and increase their control over resources designated to improve their welfare, is essential to improving social welfare in India” (p. 51).

Chapters three, four, and five constitute the chapters in which the author presents the case studies of Karnataka, West Bengal, and Uttar Pradesh. These chapters closely compare the histories of local governments and the decentralization (or the lack thereof) in six villages, all of which are similar in key indicators within their respective states. Each chapter also examines the historical, social, and political contexts of local governments in the three states. The states chosen for this study could not be more different: Karnataka, with its brief attempt at decentralization in the 1980s (prior to the 1993 constitutional amendment requiring it), West Bengal, with the longest history of local government in India, and Uttar Pradesh, with the least successful and most corrupted form of power shifting from the “top to the bottom.” Predictably, Karnataka emerges as a state that pioneered decentralization policies that greatly enhanced the functioning of local governments and the social wellbeing of the villagers before it was required to do so, whereas Uttar Pradesh’s efforts toward decentralization appear to be stuck in their infancy, with little hope for improvement based on the state’s caste-based and corruption-ridden social structure. West Bengal, despite its long history of local governance, represents the prime example of decentralization in India but is unfortunately suffocated by its CPI (M)-controlled political and social atmosphere, leading to party members’ ultimately controlling local government structures and the financial distribution system, which clearly favors members of the

¹ The *panchayat raj* is a political system in which an assembly (*ayat*) of five (*panch*) elders is selected by the local community. The five elected *gram panchayats* are the basic units of administration, and the system itself has three levels: that of the village level (*gram*), the block level, (*Janpad*), and the district level (*zilla*). This elected group of assembly members carries out several administrative functions of the Indian government at the local level.

political party. Each chapter is supported by village-level data and primary accounts provided by villagers, which enhances Mullen's work and the general decentralization discourse tremendously. However, the two villages studied in each state could be separated a bit more in their analysis, since the results appear rather lumped together. Nonetheless, Mullen successfully takes a close look at the quality of governance, the workings of the panchayat system, and the social and political elites and assesses the impact of these elements on the social wellbeing of the villagers.

In the concluding chapter, Mullen claims that "the extension of democratic politics and electoral participation to village governments in 1993 broadened the scope and depth of Indian democracy" (p. 172) despite the rather varied results of her own cases studies conducted in three very different states. The author states that despite their differences, local governments are the decisive forces behind the cultivation of social wellbeing. She provides a figure with "factors that enable local governments to contribute to improved social wellbeing" (p. 174). These factors include a "politically competitive local environment, [a] mobilized civil society, [and] local elites who are constrained by cleavage-bridging political competition and an active civil society to „buy into“ the local government system" (p. 174). Only Karnataka has successfully tackled all three indicators (compared to both West Bengal, which, despite its long history of decentralization, fulfills only one condition for a successful local government and the improvement of social wellbeing: a mobilized civil society and Uttar Pradesh, which has only scratched the surface of one condition for local governments to progress social wellbeing: having a politically competitive environment, though in chapter five, Mullen hints that Uttar Pradesh may also be in the early stages of having a mobilized civil society as well. Towards the end of her conclusion, the author provides some relevant suggestions on how to improve the functioning of decentralization and democracy in order to further improve the social wellbeing of villagers. Mullen concludes, "Understanding the remaining local barriers to effective decentralization should be the first step towards [the] fine-tuning of public policies in order to increase the efficacy of local governments and their delivery of social services in India" (p. 191).

Decentralization, Local Governance, and Social Wellbeing in India targets scholars of decentralization and democracy, policy makers, and development aid specialists because, as Mullen argues, more attention needs to be directed towards the local setting in which government-imposed decentralization takes place (p. 5). The book benefits from already existing studies on the six villages chosen, along with the primary research conducted by Mullen in 2000 and 2008; however, it suffers from repetitiveness throughout. Nonetheless, it is an important contribution to the field of decentralization and democracy studies, just as the author suggests, considering the general lack of studies on local governments in India.

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