

# Chapter 10

## DECENTRALIZATION OF EDUCATIONAL GOVERNANCE IN INDIA: TRENDS AND ISSUES

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, decentralization has become a global trend and it is on the political agenda in many countries. Education is being decentralized in numerous countries as part of a larger move to reform public management systems (Govinda, 2003a). The policies largely aim to reduce government size, reorganize delivery, expand private initiatives, and create new partnerships. Decentralization is having a significant impact on policy, planning, and management of elementary education. With the increasing impact of globalization, the challenges faced by the nations of the world are substantial; hence, the importance of localization through decentralization has intensified. At the same time, decentralization is seen as a means of improving the efficiency of education systems and the quality of educational services. In India, education is the joint responsibility of state and union governments. Ever since decentralization has been promoted in the field of education, different states in India have undergone various decentralization processes with distinct outcomes. The actual manifestation of the process of decentralization, in terms of the rationale put forth as well as operational features adopted, varies widely across the states. The socio-political context and the degree of popular participation in the decision-making process directly influence the outcomes of decentralization measures.

Generally speaking, in India decentralization is treated as a means of politically restructuring the system. Capacity building is also held up as one of the benefits of effective implementation. However, the decision to decentralize often translates into intense social activity at the local level. Many researchers suggest that educational decentralization essentially becomes a political decision that requires strong political will, both at the central and state levels. It also becomes imperative to carefully plan the process of decentralization to ensure effective implementation. The challenge of balancing several different aims can be enormous: first, making education more relevant to local needs; second, democratically promoting people's participation by empowering local authorities; and third, improving performance accountability (Govinda, 2003a). In general, it appears that, decentralization seems to mean different things to different people, depending on the political and administrative context in which the term is used. The concept has remained vague and highly ambiguous, when used by policy makers as well as intellectuals. Public discussion of decentralization is often confusing, characterized by sweeping, cross-disciplinary claims about the positive effects of decentralization measures on the quality and efficiency of both government and social interaction (Faguet, 2001). It is within this ambiguously defined

framework of decentralization that one has to carefully study the actions initiated in the education sector to transfer power and authority to local level actors. Needless to say, over the 50 years of post-independent period, contours of decentralization in education have also undergone significant transformations.

This chapter examines how decentralization is being integrated into the system of educational governance in India. The focus is on primary education, where decentralized management is perceived as the only means for achieving efficient management. The chapter begins with a description of policy initiatives that have been introduced for democratic as well as administrative decentralization in India, and describes how they have affected primary education. We also consider whether India is favoring a market oriented efficiency model or is emphasizing political and ideological reform. Finally, the chapter addresses some of the issues that inform contemporary debates and discourses on the subject in India, and across the world as well.

## 2. DECENTRALIZATION OF EDUCATIONAL GOVERNANCE: CHANGING FACETS

### 2.1. *The Early Years After Independence*

Decentralization of educational governance has been a prominent element of educational discourse in recent years. In India, however, debates and policy initiatives related to decentralization emerged immediately after the country was liberated from British colonial control. At that time, a federal arrangement was relied on to bring together the various politico-administrative units with diverse culture, language, and ethnic affiliations. However, the notion that federating units should enjoy some freedom and autonomy was also ingrained in the concept of the nation. Accordingly, primary responsibility for several areas of policy and action, including governance of education, was delegated to the state governments.

It is in this context that the concepts of *panchayati raj* and a community development framework were adopted in the early years after independence. The political system consisted of three tiers: district, block (sub-district), and village levels. While political decentralization followed this framework, it was deemed appropriate to designate the block level as the main unit for development administration. Thus came the establishment of the Block Development Offices, with each block consisting of 100–150 villages. The districts created during the British period remained more or less intact. Interestingly, education governance remained generally delinked from the development administration framework adopted for all other sectors. The district education offices remained the main organ for school governance. Nearly 25 years after this arrangement was established, separate offices of education were created at the block level in many states. This was partially due to the enormous expansion of the primary education system that took place during the preceding two decades. In fact, the block education offices currently oversee primary education in many states, while the district education office directly governs secondary education.

After an initial flurry of interest in “democratic decentralization,” attention to the process waned. Most of the states showed little interest in involving local citizens in the management of public institutions. At the village level, the relative inexperience of the people, lack of knowledge, dearth of resources, and tightening of bureaucratic