Democracy presupposes that collective decisions are made by the people who are most affected by them. Decentralisation is a prime mechanism, through which democracy becomes truly representative and responsive, further democracy is a way of life and also a political process. Among the established democracies in the world India has the largest and also the most vibrant democracy in the world. At the same time, India also figures among those who have failed to address the basic issues of their people. It is evident from the fact that in India there is co-existence of mass democracy and mass poverty.

Development administration is today’s trump card. It intends a holistic approach with broad-based vision. Its effectiveness is dependent upon two inter-related factors. They are the capacity of the administrative system to bring about, sustain, and strengthen goal-oriented changes in the Socio-economic institutions; and the level and quality of people’s participation, in the formulation and implementation of development policies and programmes. According to R.K. Arora (2001): The strength of participation in turn, depends on the ability of the people to participate, the willingness to improve themselves in the change process and the opportunities provided to them to participate in the process of self-governance.

Development is a hydra-headed concept. It is perceived differently by different people subscribing to various professions, prophecy and persuasions. It was the industrial revolution who taught us that the nature is a commodity and the society is constituted of human beings only. This confusion determined the policies for development. Since the pace of development is based on production, it has affected climate, environment, soil, forests and the whole of the human habitation. The disastrous gifts of development are – pollution, depletion of land and forest, rivers with industrial effluents, poverty and hunger. It is to here noted be that Government of all kinds have failed to solve – Threat of war, Poverty and Hunger.

The unbridled development have many consequences – (a) there is material abundance but not for survival requirement, (b) developed is further developing and also redefining development and (c) it has led to competition which has caused heavy ecological cost, social disruption and psychological damage.

Decentralisation is one of the most popular and popularised terms in the contemporary development discourse. As a concept it is very broad and it covers many aspects. As per an analyst, during early 1960s, the concept of decentralisation was advocated
for supplementing the theory and practice of development administration. Further, this was also in tune with the western ideology of containing the spread of Communism.

‘Democratic Decentralisation’ refers to (a) transfer of authority to plan, make decisions and manage public functions from the national to sub-national level, (b) decentralisation is a structure of government where bodies are created at the local level separated by law from national to local, (c) a political issue which moves around the distribution of power, (d) it is transfer, planning, decision-making authority from central to field, local etc.

The intellectual discourse on decentralisation reveals two broad theories – NORMATIVE and DESCRIPTIVE. The classical liberal democratic theorists, like de Tocqueville, J.S. Mill, H.J. Laski and Woodrow Wilson were the first to make a strong case for decentralisation considering the possible benefit to be percolated to the lower levels.

Theoretically, decentralisation assumes that all those who are governed ought to take part in government process.

Structurally, decentralisation brings the governing structures, institutions and process nearer to the governed.

Functionally, it makes the process of decision making and implementation functional in the sense that the people who knows their problems better are entrusted with the task of solving those problems.

Operationally, when people that they govern themselves instead of being governed; and initiative, motivation and participation become spontaneous and effective’. Decentralisation is a twin process of ‘deconcentration’ and ‘Devolution’. Deconcentration involves ‘Delegation of power’ for smooth functioning. But it is far away from the concept of transfer of authority. ‘Devolution’ believes in disbursement of authority. It is a process wherein power is transferred from one organ to another by means of legislation.

It was observed that for quite some years unnecessary importance was accorded to both deconcentration and delegation. Because of this rural development instead of occupying the centre-stage turned into a periphery matter. B.R. Mehta (1956), the then chairperson of Estimates Committee of the Indian Parliament was appointed as Chairman of a Committee to examine the working of the community development wherein he found Community Development Programmes could not sensitise people because of over bureaucratisation. The three-tier grass root organisation below the State recommended by Mehta could not yield result due to lack of Statutory protection. Thus for two decades from the dawn of independence people living at the village level could not get scope either to participate in decision making or the benefit of democratic governance and its development initiatives.

The B.R. Mehta Committee Report intended to shift the division-making centre from a distance to a point closer to people. It wished a three-tier body below the State from district to village with genuine transfer of power and also adequate resources. All development Schemes at the rural level, were suggested, to be channelized through these grassroot bodies.

Thus the significance of Panchayati Raj needs to be appreciated from the positive contribution that such institutions make in – (a) developing healthy democratic traditions in the country, (b) inculcating leadership qualities among the rural people,(c) making planning for
development more realistic, (d) encouraging participation of people in planning and programming for goal-oriented change, (e) reviving among the rural people a spirit of responsible citizenship and self-confidence, (f) ensuring a more effective implementation of development plans, (g) relieving the administrative burden of the upper layers of government, and (h) increasing the legitimacy of the system of governance. As has been mentioned earlier it was a sad story that such a beautiful and workable scheme could not be implemented in both letter and spirit.

In 1977 the then Janata Government with the hope to revive and to strengthen the PR bodies appointed a Committee under Ashok Mehta to suggest the way out. The Ashok Mehta Committee recommended- (a) creation of two-tier body (Zilla Parishad and Mandal Panchayat) the lower tier will have a population between 15000 to 20000 (b) Nyaya Panchayat under the Chairperson of a qualified Judge to be kept as a separate body, (c) open participation of political parties in PRIs through elections conducted on party basis, (d) PRI elections to be conducted by Chief Electoral Officer (e) Zilla Parishad to be made responsible for planning at the district level, (f) reducing the dependence of PRIs on state funds and, instead, endowing them with powers of taxation, (g) development functions to be transferred to Zilla Parishads, (h) State governments not to suspend the PRIs on partisan grounds, and (i) appointing in the State Council of ministers, a minister for Panchayatiraj to look after the affairs of the PRIs. The collapse of the Janata Government in July 1979 stood as a road block to the progress in institutionalising process to have a visible as well as durable rural development for which the Janata Government had decided to ensure 50% of the development funds to the rural sector.

In 1985 another Committee known as Administrative Arrangements for Rural Development under the Chairmanship of GVK Rao was appointed by Rajiv’s Government. The Rao Committee recommended that – (a) PRIs at the district and lower levels be given greater power in relation to planning, implementation and monitoring of rural development plans., (b) elections to PRIs be held regularly, (c) a post of District Development Commissioner who should act as in charge of all development departments at the district level and be the Chief Executive Officer of the Zilla Parishad be created and (d) the post of BDO should be revamped.

The Rao Committee Report was found to be different from the report of the working group on District Planning set up under the Chairmanship of CH Hanumantha Rao in 1984. This Committee had recommended for the setting up of a separate district planning body under a Minister/Collector with a major role for the latter in the decentralised planning through PR bodies.

In 1986 a Committee under the Chairmanship of eminent Jurist L.M. Shingvi was constituted by the Department of Rural Development which recommended constitutional status for PR bodies. The Committee emphasised the importance of Gram Sabha with a reorganisation of villages and suggested the creation of Nyaya Panchayats. To give credence to the above recommendations and observations a Parliamentary Committee headed by P.K. Thungon was put on the job to provide basis for the grass root organisation by making them statutory bodies. Once this was done the 64th Constitution Amendment Bill was moved and in the Rajya Sabha it was killed by one vote. What happened after that is now part of history.

Rajiv’s Government was unseated by vote in 1989 and a hung parliament could become
active when Janata Dal was supported by BJP and Left from outside and V.P. Singh was the Prime Minister. In July, 1990 Singh’s Government moved the new amendment bill and before it was considered Singh’s government was defeated on the floor.

In 1991 a Congress Government came to power and P.V. Narasimha Rao became the Prime Minister. He developed an all party consensus and the 72nd Constitution Amendment Bill was adopted in December, 1992. It received Presidential assent on 24th April, 1993 and was named as 73rd Constitution Amendment Act. This Act was a visible improvement. It made PRIs Statutory. The six features were- tenure, qualification Power Responsibility Authority (PRA), Finance Commission, Election Commission and Audit provision as definite improvement over previous laws.

It is to be remembered that though Panchayats or any form of village administration in India had ancient roots and even the observation of Charles Metcalfe in 1832 is self-explanatory – ‘India is a Republic of Village Republics.’ Yet village India suffered most during the colonial era. The plight of the villagers could be internalised by Gandhi and he through his communication system advocated for ‘Gram Swaraj’. He meant by that both participatory democracy and decentralised development. If villages develop then India can develop and not the other way round. There is no doubt that by administrative decentralisation we may get efficient system. But democratic decentralisation is something more than that. It advocates participation. No amount of efficiency is acceptable, if there is no participation of the people. Only a participatory democracy can identify, prioritise and initiate development because it involves and indoctrinates the local population who can own the development design, process and end result.

Rural development in India is a much debated affair as everyone had contributed his installment for the evolution and growth of the concept of development. PRIs were taken as vehicle for promoting development through popular participation. From the inception the idea of development came to be identified with the PRIs. The CDP was the precursor of PRI whose thrust was on securing socio-economic transformation of villages through people’s own democratic cooperative organisation with the government providing technical services, supply and credit. National Extension Service (1953) was an amplified version of CDP. It aimed at transferring scientific and technical knowledge to agriculture, animal husbandry and rural craft sectors. It was entrusted with the sole objective of developing villages with the active participation and involvement of local people. However, it failed to achieve its objectives. Instead of ensuring peoples visible participation it caused the creation of a bureaucratic super-structure. Despite good intention of the Government it failed to ensure people’s participation. This was identified by B.R. Mehta (1956) and the three-tier PRI System was introduced without providing proper statutory recognition. The deficiencies of the past legislations and administrative actions were made good through the 73rd Amendment Act. This generated a newly created statutorily sanctified PRIs to revamp the institutional arrangement at the grassroot level so that the old objective of seeing developed India through developed villages can be achieved.

Prof. Surya Narayan Misra, Emeritus Professor, KIIT Law School, Bhubaneswar.