

# "DEVOLUTION AND DEVELOPMENT"

**Professor C. Suriyakumaran has served as Deputy Executive Secretary of ECAFE, Director Education Training and Technical Assistance and Regional Director of UNEP Asia and the Pacific. On his retirement he was honoured as Knight Commander of the most noble order of The Crown of Thailand. He is visiting Professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He is also Vice Chairman of a recently convened UN meeting of eminent persons on sustainable development.**

By

**Professor C. Suriyakumaran**  
(Based on the lecture series by  
Prof. Suriyakumaran  
at the BCIS, May 1987 and an  
SLBC Interview)

I would have liked to define straight away what devolution means, but in the present state of a lack of understanding of what devolution is really, I think I must preface this by saying two or three things about the question of understanding. I used the phrase 'crisis of understanding' and I used it advisedly on one occasion, because what we are having precisely, now, is an inability to understand what devolution is. And so long as we don't understand what devolution is, any solution which is based on devolutionary concepts will be unacceptable to one side or to the other. For instance, we have concepts of devolution which are varying and varied as between peoples, within our country and also as a matter of fact, outside. Whereas the practices are different, we want the practices to be different; certain parties have expectations of a type but the realities are different. When it comes to implementing, we have very difficult situations. But right through I think, in order to answer the question of what is devolution, we have to understand that there are imperatives, fundamental imperatives and it is very important to distinguish clearly between the concept of central government and the concept of shared government. In other words, it is imperative to understand that there is a thing

called shared governmental responsibilities, that everything is not concentrated in the Centre and that this is not an erosion of the unitary concept of a country, either in government, or in constitutional terms, or as a society. All over the world, of course, we have this type of thing. Sometimes they are called Federal Governments, sometimes they are called Union States, sometimes just a State with plenty of decentralisation; and so, I have felt that while the politics of devolution has been, in fact, - let us face the fact, has been and can be - divisive, the principles of devolution are integrative. I think this is the first thing that I must emphasise, that the principles of devolution are highly integrative. Having said this I am in a position to answer, I hope satisfactorily, your question as to what is meant by devolution.

Now we can distinguish between devolution, decentralisation and deconcentration. Devolution is the sharing of governmental power on agreed terms, which are not then varied according to the whims and fancies of the parties to an agreement to share power. Central power obviously has certain prerogatives of national policies, and national functions in certain respects. We don't have to go into those details. I think everyone is aware of this. But subject to these overall policies, that is the prerogative that the central government has, it has incumbencies or obligations, to share power at the

periphery. In a sense, this has nothing to do with the multi-ethnic society, or a pluralistic society. It is a valid principle in fact, even in a unitary society in the sense of being unitary in terms of language, religion, culture and so on.

Now, decentralisation is quite different from devolution. I am emphasising this because very often people, when they think of solutions, talk of devolution but really are thinking of decentralisation.

Decentralisation is simply the allocation of certain functions to the periphery, whatever that periphery is, whether it is a region or province or district or whatever, at the discretion of the Centre; and these functions are simply law and order and administrative functions, in experience at least. They need not be, but in actual experience they are, and that is all that we have as far as decentralisation is concerned. So obviously, in a political situation, and a social situation, a cultural situation, where there is a felt need by the periphery and an agreement in the country as a whole, from top down, that something has to be done to meet satisfactions of a multi-ethnic, a pluralistic society, then decentralisation is inadequate. What we need is devolution. That is what is meant by devolution.

And when we talk of deconcentration, this word is not very often used here, but it is very important

to remember, because we are really peddling this in practice. Deconcentration is really the effectuation of administration in the periphery, very effective administration sometimes, but by the use of officials; in other words, the outposting of officials through bureaucracies. It is the decentralisation of bureaucracy, and this is the typical colonial system, or as we know it here, the kachcheri system. And this of course has nothing to do and is not an adequate substitute for what is called devolution.

So that, essentially, is what is devolution and why there has been so much emphasis on this idea of devolution.

#### Extremes

If we think in terms of extremes then we run into problems. At the one extreme, is the unitary state and at the other extreme, is the threat of a periphery which is on the point always of alienating itself from the centre; and alienation is a polite euphemism for anything that could happen in terms of declaration of itself as a separate entity, or in this country as we have it an Eelaam, and so on.

The phase which we had in this country, just before the Eelaam request came up, was a request for a federal structure. Now if you will recall, I think, right through the years, in fact some people may not remember, they can only remember the days of the Federal Party which is just about ten years ago, but really from 1926 when S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike addressed I think a Law Student's Union and advocated the establishment of a federal structure, there has been a lot of misunderstanding and this is what I mean by polarisation. And misunderstanding has been influenced by the sense of polarisation in our minds that we have had, that anything other than a unitary state is a separate entity. Now this is the furthest from the truth.

So, when we are talking about the unitary state, we have to ask ourselves, whether we are talking of a leviathan, which is imposing itself on the entire system, from the top right down to the periphery, or whether we are talking of a state system which gives maximum initiatives to its own people. And that's why I want to go back again to the example, not

of a multi-ethnic Society, not a pluralistic society in that sense, or multi-linguistic society, but just to a single state society where there is one religion, and one language and one culture. Now I think it is absolutely essential that there must be the maximum scope for self-expression at the periphery. And if you view it that way, then you come back to the concept of

### COMMENTS ON ADMINISTRATIVE BOUNDARIES

#### An Interview with Prof. C. Suriyakumaran

The question is of administrative boundaries based on natural resource systems - in this particular case the formation of boundaries round river basins and water systems and water sheds or range lands, where there is a homogeneity based on a particular natural resource. This is a very understandable desire because you are reaching out for an optimization in organizational and economic terms. But we have to be very careful because we can allow our enthusiasm to get the better of our judgement.

The question of boundaries has had a long history in many countries in the world and even in our country. Here, it starts with S.W. R. D. Bandaranaike in the early 1940's. I have no hesitation in saying that he more than most people here, understood what administrative boundaries, decentralisation or local government, devolution through federal or non federal systems meant.

There are three ideas or components which we could talk about. Boundaries are not determined simply by water systems alone. This is just one way of doing it. An important one, but nevertheless only one. To begin with, a boundary concept arises from the concept of human homogeneity. A people, a tribe, or a community

linked by various factors feel that they are one homogenous group. And since the administrative boundaries are by human beings, for human beings, the topmost pull is by human beings and not by water or rivers. Human beings decide what their boundaries are and if there is a sharp conflict between the human preference for homogeneity in tribal or communal or whatever terms, then this obviously will be a bigger force than natural resource endowments. I am not saying that one is better than the other but these are facts.

Then again we have to be careful because water is not the only natural resource though it is the breath of life. There are various instances in the world where boundaries are defined in different forms. Sometimes, you can have boundaries which are built round a mineral or other natural resources. Or take the case of Penang. The Federal Government removed the Free Port status of Penang several years ago. The Chief Minister of Penang immediately went round to various centres in the world and finally made some very interesting decisions to set up a whole series of high-tec industries. The result is that Penang from being way down in per capita income now has one of the highest per capita incomes in the whole of Malaysia.

So when we talk of resources for development we have to be careful. It is true that we are an agricultural country, but I think it's time we got over this nonsense of always talking of being agricul-

devolution of functions. So if you view it that way, and if you do not allow yourself to run into extremes of formulation, or fears, then your question can be answered in the positive. That is, a unitary state, the concept of a unitary state is slightly outmoded. But I would not rest at that. I would not answer it still in that way because I think I could run

tural. The whole point is, I think that we must cease to be agricultural, and the way to cease that is not do poor agriculture but do better agriculture on less land; and to industrialise like other countries. Not only Europe and England but others like Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, of course did that.

We call these countries industrial, but their agriculture is technically far superior to our agriculture. So we are just talking nonsense, when we talk of our agriculture, that we will remain agricultural. What does it mean? We are condemning our people to social poverty, economic poverty and social discontent, right into the long run. So this is not the total, or final criterion.

Then there is a historical point. I sympathise with the point of using water resources, but these have been met in different ways. Some of the Western countries had a conflict between certain things that are small geographically, or say power generation. So in some countries, while the decentralised unit is of a certain limited size, there are special Inter-Area Boards for water, for electricity, for land management and so on.

So you see there are ways of doing this. I am not going into anything else at this stage. It's just a pre-ambular comment as I said, I sympathise with this thing, it's a very interesting idea, but we have to put it into context and then do the best for ourselves, as a country not just for an idea.

into the danger of being misunderstood. What I would say is that we need the concept of an umbrella, unitary concept, for the state, co-terminous and simultaneously with the couple of a multifarious devolutionary system right down to the periphery. Now what this system is of course a different question. It can take the form of provincial councils, or regional councils as Mr. Bandaranaike suggested in the nineteen forties, or it can take the form of a federal structure. Again, federal structures as you know are different. There are federal structures in the United States, and Australia and Canada, which are quite different from the federal structure in India. In one sense, the Indian system is not a 'federal' government system but a union government system and I think this is the pattern that is now being talked about more in this country. So that, I would say is the position about the role of the unitary state.

#### Type of Devolution

There is always the danger, in fact there is the danger of disaffection even in a unitary state, by elements of society.

When we provide, constitutionally, for a slightly different pattern of government, then that can be used as a leverage. Now this is where the role of development comes in. Let me explain. Because first of all it depends, everything depends, when we talk of devolution and disaffection, on what type of devolution has been effected. Suppose we have given only lip-service to devolution. I think we are sowing discontent rather than contentment. We are sowing dissatisfaction rather than satisfaction. And the moment we do this, then it is most important rather than have devolution, than have a devolutionary system which is a false system. So, the moment we have a devolutionary system which provides, as I said in my lectures, it provides for three things - I really identified only three things - one, a sense of 'identity', because this is at the root of the

demand in the peripheries, or multi-ethnic societies, a sense of identity for the groups concerned.

This is no great sin, because even in the family, one brother wants to have a different identity from the other brother, a sense of identity. Two, it provides for a sense of 'security', internal security. I am not talking of national security, which is a state function. And there, it provides for a sense of 'opportunity', that is, for cultural, social and economic opportunities. This is where development comes in of course. And these are what I call the 'equalisers'. If a devolutionary system is able to provide for this, then the pull 'away' from the Centre, becomes far less; in fact, it becomes minimal or even zero. I think I would say, in order that it may be zero, and I am convinced about what I am saying, there is one more factor. Don't forget that when we are talking about devolution, in the way that we have been talking about, we are also talking about unitary government in the Centre. Now, an important component of honest devolution has to be an honest provision for 'participation in the Centre by the various components of society'. In other words, if there is a system of government, where there is a President or Prime Minister, or Cabinet of Ministers or whatever, there must be 'sufficient and satisfactory' participation by the minorities in that system of government. Given this, I think all the chances are that there would be much more interest in preserving that system rather than breaking it down.

Now as I said, this bears on development. That's why, I have the thesis - and I don't know how many will share this fully with me, everybody will agree with me in terms of playing lip-service, but, how inherently and in fullness of understanding, they would say this - that there is no devolution that I see as satisfactory unless it is accompanied by development. When I mean development, let us

Contd on page 29

Contd from page 9

take the regional councils or the provincial councils, I am talking of the capacity to be afforded to these councils, not just to waste central government monies, squander them on corruption – as I called it once, the decentralisation of corruption, rather than the decentralisation of government – no, not for this purpose, but really for them to be able to engage in the use, in the study, in the examination and in the development of their local resources for production. That is because, given what we call a gestation period, shall we say five years or six years whatever – sometimes gestation periods are related to the life-time of a tree, a rubber tree takes five years to grow and a cashew tree takes so many years to grow and so on – but given the use of resources in each area and the development of these resources for production, the product of which then becomes the basis also for increasing prosperity to the people, and to the regional councils or provincial councils and to the central government, then you have a buttress for the devolutionary structure which will make it unshakable.

As I said in my lectures that is why development will also benefit. I have not gone into that. Development will also benefit by having devolution, because participatory democracy, economic democracy, is an important concept. But devolution itself will not stand. Let me go as far as saying that will not stand, unless it is backed up by power to the Provincial Councils or to the periphery, to engage in productive developmental activities. This has been borne out also in a recent experiment in Karnataka State. Karnataka State is one of the northern most of the Southern States, I suppose you can put it that way. It is a very interesting experiment, where the Zilla Parishads, which are equivalent – one of these states is as big as or bigger than our country – to the Provincial Council, or

Regional Council, set up a system where their chief executive is the Chief Minister; the chief civil servant is simply his executive; and the local resources of that area are in the hands of the Zilla Parishad for planning and for application of investment for productive purposes. It attracted so much attention that Dr. Farouk Abdullah, then Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir, made a statement that he intended to follow this up also as a device. I am mentioning this, as a footnote, to illustrate the practical importance that has been accepted, by those who have done it, development as a support to the devolutionary process.

There is a need to develop an understanding of concepts before we can really implement a system of devolution. We could have an excellent devolutionary pattern, intellectually worked out, but if the people are not ready for it, then it would collapse.

### History

In 1926 we had the first proposal by Bandaranaike for a federal structure. We had the Kandyans, before the Donoughmore Commission in 1931 – in fact they developed this idea before that in 1925 – for a federal structure. And we had the interesting situation where the Tamil community opposed the setting up of a federal structure. Now here, was an early example of a state of confusion as to what they wanted. I am quite sure of course, that each one saw its own sectional interest in different ways. But your point is even more illustrated when we come down, when the 'B - C' Pact was formulated. And it was hardly a federal structure in one sense. It was shot down on the ground, that it was a threat of a federal structure and federalism was then equated, this was the worst part of it I think, with the threat of separation. Now I am not saying these fears and threats should be set aside. What I am not saying is that here is a phenomenon which came up as

a reality. And I think what I would underline is that it is very important in society to meet these fears, however wrong or ill-based they are, as much as to provide for solutions.

It is necessary for society to be advanced enough in ideas to be able to accept a change. I think, fortunately in one sense, but unfortunately through the price that we have paid, through the circumstances and events that have happened in this country, in a sense from 1956 or 1958 onwards, and increasingly after 1983 – these are all very unfortunate – but I think fortunately we now have a situation where, I hope I am not wrong, there is fairly wide understanding and acceptance of the fact, that we need a devolutionary system, and that a devolutionary system is not bad after all. So all I would say is that, if this comes up, we have to assure the people, and I hope this will be done, to assure especially the majority community who now feel also that they are a minority in the larger geo-political context in the Indian Ocean area, that this is not divisive. And the only way to do this nationally, is by injecting the development component into this; by applying a fair mechanism, where in sincerity and honesty, 'identity, security and opportunity' are provided; and by ensuring the participation in the Centre of the minority communities. I think if this is done, then, in concept, the people will begin to accept that this is not a divisive thing and there would be a convergence, as I said, between the politics of devolution and the principle of devolution.

### Switzerland and India

The classic case that people like to quote is Switzerland. In this century we forget that Switzerland had 700 years of war, of fighting, just sheer fighting, before it forged an arrangement, a federal structure, through the cantonal system, which makes it a model country.

## DEVOLUTION / REDEMARCATION

Now if anybody asks whether the Swiss are Swiss, or something else, whether they are Romanche, or Italian, or French or German, I think the Swiss themselves will be the first to laugh at you. They will say 'we are Swiss'. At the same time, they are proud to display their own special characteristics. This is a classic case and I think is a great hope. If they fought for 700 years, we did not fight so long, I hope I can call it 7 years instead of 700. But whatever it is, it is a classic instance.

Now there are other instances where obviously the same story has been enacted but with much less drama. It has happened in Belgium, it has happened, in the United States, in Canada, which it has happened in Australia. It has happened in India. Now in India it is a subtle way, as I would like to put it. India, at independence, was one country. There were states which were set up not on linguistic terms. If they were linguistic in some cases it was just by accident. And I want to put it to you, that as it happened, and the states got redefined in linguistic terms, that if this had

not happened, the divisive forces of the politics of devolution would have come into operation. In other words, that the divisive threat of the Union of India would have been a reality or a force to be reckoned with. The fact that there was a federal system set up on a linguistic basis gave satisfaction to components of the society, of this large country of India, and allowed room for self-expression, which then led to a strengthening.

As far as the Hindu-Muslim situation is concerned I would call it a trans-India phenomenon. I would not attribute it to the weakness of devolution. Because, you will see that the Hindu-Muslim phenomenon - it may manifest in Ayudhya or it may manifest in Maharastra or, it may manifest in Hyderabad or somewhere else - is a phenomenon which is trans-continental, in the sub-continent of India. It is a State-phenomenon. It is a country-wide phenomenon. So I would not say it is something germane to the state-structure.

In the Punjab situation, it illustrates what I am saying, in fact

because there you have the case of a minority which is de facto, concentrated into one physical area, and the fact is, I am not here to sit in judgement on anything or anybody, the fact is I think, the present situation can be largely explained by the fact, that the need, the extent of devolution that was necessary, was not effected in time. In other words, if five years ago, or ten years ago, a type of devolution had been effected in Punjab, then we would not have been in this present situation.

As for the rest, I don't think it is fair for me to go into, because then we are trying to pick holes, find fault with the application of government policy as at present in the Punjab. So I grant you the phenomena, the phenomena exist. But we have to be very careful. The Hindu-Muslim phenomenon is not the result of devolution and the Punjab situation is the result of delayed devolution. Too little, too late, as Marshal Petain said, when Hitler invaded France. It had too few people to defend the motherland. But too little too late is a fearsome consequence. And that may be an example for us also.