# crisis states programme
## development research centre (DESTIN)

*Briefing Paper No.9*

## The dynamics of achieving 'Power' and 'Reform'

*Based on Working Paper no.26: 'The Dynamics of Achieving 'Power' and 'Reform' as a Positive-sum Game: a report on the preliminary ethnographic explorations of the politics-governance nexus in Madhya Pradesh, India.'. This is intended to provide a summary of the principal findings, and an indication of the implications these may have for debates over policy.*

This initial report on ethnographic research into politics and governance in Madhya Pradesh (MP) is based upon preliminary interviews with a broad cross-section of the population, from policy makers down to the grassroots activists. It captures the key themes of the discourse on reforms in MP, pushed through by the State's current Chief Minister (CM); suggests an analytical framework that helps to explore how politics, reform and governance dynamically interact; and brings out some crucial concerns that are emerging surrounding reforms. It also raises important questions for furthering the research.

- **Concentration on social sector reform at the expense of infrastructural and financial reform**
Despite social reforms, the biggest concern pervading society at large was the deterioration of infrastructural conditions. Effective intervention in this sector depended on availability of revenue surplus, but inadequate state finances compounded the problem further. People viewed this as a direct outcome of favouring decentralisation and social sector reforms, principally aimed at improving the condition of the rural population, at the cost of ignoring sectors that could promote an overall growth and development of the entire society. As a result, many doubted the credibility of the reform agenda, and perceived it as a pretence to primarily pursue the *politics of power*, rather than reform, through expanding and consolidating votes in the rural areas.

- **Strategies of engagement with traditional political, and bureaucractic institutions for pushing through reform**
An important feature of reform in MP has been the tactical engagement with traditional politics to ensure insulation of spaces for the reforms from their adverse impact. This appears to have been achieved by the CM's highly personalised political and administrative style. Teams of dedicated and reform-minded civil servants were established by the CM himself to function under his direct leadership. However, these styles and strategies also constrained the possibility of building up a larger coalition of the traditional political and bureaucratic actors and institutions in favour of reforms. Additionally, the supplanting of pre-existing bureaucratic institutions, especially at the lower levels of the state, by decentralised institutions and people's participatory structures signalled a strategy of bypassing them premised on deep distrust of their capability and integrity to carry out the reforms.

- **Contradictory signals on issues of accountability and corruption**
While establishment of dedicated teams enables the selection of firm and honest officials, at the same time employing tactical politics implies the utilisation of pliable officers. As a result, confused signals go down the line to the field formations, whether strengthening accountability and curbing corruption are important issues in reform implementation or not.

- **Optimistic official pronouncements often contradicted by grassroots experience**

Another problem in the approach to reform taken in MP is the tension between the need for building up a progressive image of the State and learning from the critical feedback from the ground. The former tends to zealously proclaim the achievements of reform programmes on the basis of grand macro-statistics. But when contradictory ground realities and their analysis are shared by those at the grassroots, such potentially beneficial critical feedback is stifled by invoking the power of statistics and the belief in the axiomatic success of participatory strategies.

- **Defining an enabling politics for pushing reforms in a context of a dysfunctional politics-governance nexus**

A three-pronged political strategy was pursued for pushing through the reform programme:
   a) a political and governance space was defined, insulated from everyday politics, enabling the CM to develop his personal vision of socio-political transformation. This was achieved by employing a strategy of tactical politics to keep vested interests deflected away from the reform arenas, as well as by establishing reform missions managed by chosen teams of capable and committed officials;
   b) winning over of politicians from different factions within the party – an element of tactical politics – was necessary because of the weak initial power base of the CM. This helped to marginalize the rival factions and enhance the authority of the CM over the party and the government to strengthen his reform endeavours;
   c) acquisition of an independent power base that could minimise the insecurity of factional politics. Though probably not intentional, this was achieved through decentralisation and people's participatory programmes that brought numerous new political actors and devolved power and resources to them at the local level. In return, they apparently constituted a functional equivalent of a strong party cadre politically loyal to the CM.

- **Decentralisation of power as  a possible source of personal concentration of power**

While decentralisation and popular empowerment brings political risks, the CM possibly secured the political support of the new actors because it was he who was perceived by them as the main source of their empowerment and patronage.  It also enabled those aligned with him to establish similar patronage relationships beneath them, and with similar effect; and held out the promise of career advancement to individuals who were previously excluded by the established institutions and political organisations. Thus, it appears that the dynamics of decentralisation and people's participatory programmes resulted in the contradictory effect of helping to concentrate power in the person of the CM.

- **Overcoming backlashes and obstacles for further reform**

The way in which reform has been pushed through in MP has inevitably produced a number of backlashes. A few of the strategies employed in resolving them are highlighted below:
   a) resentment amongst established political actors, weakened by the decentralisation process and threatened by competition from the new actors, was partly mollified by making structural adjustments by establishing district governments that, while presented as further decentralisation, had the effect of giving the critics greater influence over decision-making in the local state;
   b) even though intended to empower the marginalized section of the society, the decentralised institutions largely came under control of local feudal power structures.  To counteract this, an experiment has been made in direct (rather than representative) local democracy as a counterbalance to the misuse of institutional power by feudal forces;
   c) giving disproportionate attention to social policy and the decentralisation agenda, while neglecting infrastructure and state finances, has prevented any serious reform of the latter. Though some recent steps have been taken to arrest worsening infrasctructural conditions, they are yet ad hoc and inadequate. Their effective resolution demands stronger focus on governance issues and building state capacity. This, in turn, will also help in sustaining reforms in the social sector.