

Emerging Issues in Panchayati Raj in Kerala

A Study Report

2003



**Centre for Socio-economic
and Environmental Studies**



Centre for Rural Management



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CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT FOR
DECENTRALISATION IN KERALA

Emerging Issues in Panchayati Raj in Kerala

A Study Report

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abbreviations	5
Why this study	6
The Scope	7
The Study Process	8
1. INTRODUCTION	9
Panchayati Raj in Kerala	9
Chronology of Related Events	10
2. PANCHAYATI RAJ- UNDERSTANDING, OWNERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION OF THE PEOPLE	12
Understanding the Concept	12
Monitoring	13
Ownership and Participation	14
3. CHANGING ROLES, POWERS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES	18
Capacity Development Programmes for Elected Representatives	20
4. ISSUES RELATED TO TRANSPARENCY, ACCOUNTABILITY AND QUALITY OF DELIVERY OF PUBLIC SERVICES	23
Accountability	24
Quality of Service	25
Citizen's Charter	26
Financial Transactions	27
Social Audit	28
5. GENDER IN DECENTRALISATION	29
Gender in the Society	29
Women in the Panchayats	29
Women in Gram sabhas	29
Gender Status Studies	30
Elected Representatives	31
Women Component Plan	31
Jagratha Samithies	32

6. ISSUES RELATED TO WEAKER SECTIONS	33
Gram Sabhas and Oorukootams	33
Working Groups on SC/ST	35
Disparities and Differences between Tribal Communities	36
ST Promoters	36
Linguistic Minorities	36
Migrant Labourers from other States	37
7. NON-GOVERNMENTAL SUPPORT SYSTEM	38
Local level General Interest Groups	38
Clubs, Reading rooms and Libraries	39
Mahila Samajams	39
Residents' Associations	39
Local level Special Interest Groups	40
Kudumbashree Units	40
Agricultural Production related Groups	41
Beneficiary Groups	41
Voluntary Agencies	41
Non-Governmental Organisationsm	42
Perceptions of PRIs regarding NGOs	42
Attitude of NGOs and Voluntary Agencies towards PRIs	42
Relationships and Processes	43
Topics / Fields	44
Panchayat Associations	44
Academic and Nodal Institutions	45
Other Actors	45
8. OTHER GENERAL ISSUES OF CONCERN	47

ABBREVIATIONS

BG	Beneficiary Group
BPL	Below Poverty Line
CapDecK	Capacity Development for Decentralisation in Kerala
CDS	Centre for Development Studies
CESS	Centre for Earth Science Studies
CRM	Centre for Rural Management
CSES	Centre for Socio-Economic & Environmental Studies
CWRDM	Centre for Water Resource Development and Management
DDC	District Development Council
DPC	District Planning Committee
DRDA	District Rural Development Agency
FCRA	Foreign Contribution Regulation Act
HRM	Human Resource Management
IKM	Information Kerala Mission
IMG	Institute of Management in Government
KILA	Kerala Institute of Local Administration
KSEB	Kerala State Electricity Board
KSPB	Kerala State Planning Board
LSGIs	Local Self Government Institutions
NHGs	Neighbourhood Groups
PCU	Programme Coordination Unit
PPC	People's Plan Campaign
PRI	Panchayat Raj Institutions
SCP	Special Component Plan
SC	Scheduled Caste
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SHGs	Self-Help Groups
SIRD	State Institute of Rural Development
ST	Scheduled Tribe
TSP	Tribal sub Plan
WCP	Women Component Plan

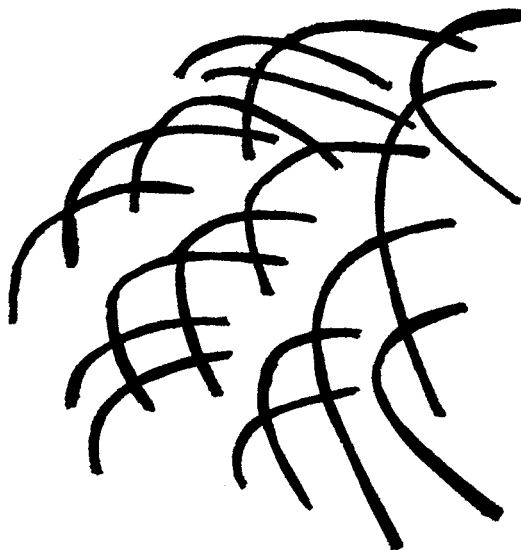
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Why this Study

Eight years have passed since the new State legislation following the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution. These eight years were eventful with a lot of initiatives in building, nurturing and strengthening the process of decentralisation in the State. Four Ministries have overseen this process. While the State has over this period emerged as one of the key prototypes in decentralisation in the country, it can not remain complacent. A lot needs to be still done to fine-tune and strengthen the Panchayati Raj process so as to institutionalise it. This requires in-depth introspection and analysis both from within the Government and from outside. The objectives of this study are to analyse the ongoing processes and trends of Panchayati Raj in Kerala and to suggest intervention strategies to promote people-centred, decentralized democratic governance by empowering citizens and their democratic institutions.

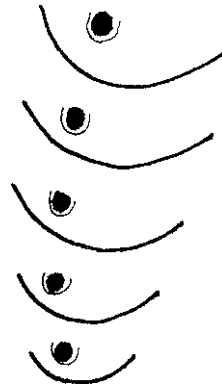


The Scope

The study report is to focus only on the lacunae, limitations and flaws in the Panchayati Raj system in Kerala, so as to enable interventions for rectification. The report is a modest attempt in this direction. In fact, many of such rectifications are already in process under the leadership of the State government as well as the local self-governments. Thus one would find that the report does not enlist any of the enormous achievements of the State¹ in the process of democratic decentralisation.

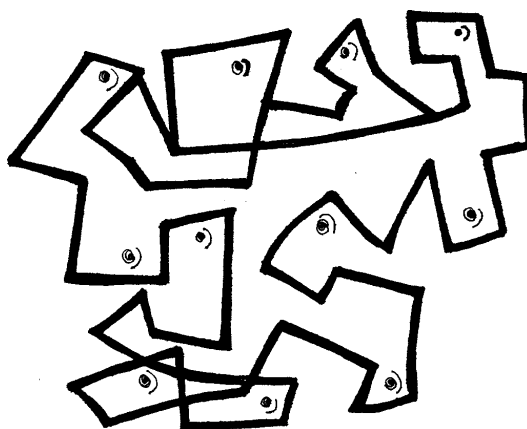
The study had approached the decentralisation process by looking into the different aspects of the understanding and ownership of Panchayati Raj, the changing roles and powers, transparency and accountability, gender in decentralisation, issues related to the weaker sections and the non-governmental support system. The report also includes an additional introductory chapter on the history of decentralisation in the State and a concluding chapter touching on a few general issues of concern.

¹ The details of these are available in the book 'Local Democracy and Development – People's Campaign for Decentralised Planning in Kerala' by T.M. Thomas Isaac with Richard W. Franke published in 2000 by LeftWord Books, New Delhi



The Study Process

Keeping the objectives in the background, a series of workshops were conducted for different stakeholders across the state. The Centre for Socio-economic and Environmental Studies (CSES) organised a two-day workshop at Kochi for researchers and academicians who have done substantial work on Panchayat Raj. Two more workshops with other stakeholders were organised at Kochi and Thiruvananthapuram. The participants were mainly from non-governmental organizations and community based organizations. The Centre for Rural Management (CRM) organised three regional workshops for Panchayat functionaries at Kannur, Palakkad and Kottayam. The Programme Coordination Unit (PCU) of SDC-CapDeck had extensive interactions with various stakeholders which included elected representatives –both former and the present, officials, volunteers and resource persons of the People’s Plan Campaign, experts and academicians. The inputs for the report are mainly drawn from the discussions and deliberations that took place in these workshops and meetings, and from a vast number of published and unpublished documents on the decentralisation process in Kerala.



1

INTRODUCTION

The 73rd amendment to the Indian Constitution was a landmark in the history of local governance in the country as it led to the strengthening of the Panchayats as 'institutions of local self-governments'. The Central Act required all States to amend or make new Acts on Panchayati Raj in an year's time. The Kerala Panchayat Raj Act, modelled after the Central Act, was passed in 1994. Thereafter, two State elections were held in the year of 1995 and 2000.

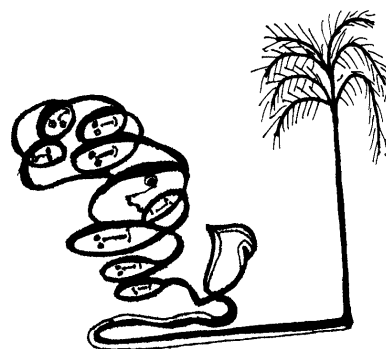
The Kerala Act provides reasonable space for citizen participation in local governance and decentralised planning. As a result, Kerala achieved the distinction of having a participatory planning otherwise known as 'People's Plan Campaign' during the Ninth Five-year Plan. With slight modifications, a planning process known as 'Kerala Development Programme' has been ushered in since the beginning of the Tenth Five- year Plan.

Panchayati Raj in Kerala

The development of Panchayati Raj in Kerala, by no means, has been uniform across the State since some parts of the State were under princely rule and the rest under the British province of Madras. The areas under princely rule had not instituted Panchayats akin to the modern Panchayat until India became independent. Even after independence, Kerala has been impervious to developments that took place in the field of Panchayati Raj in other parts of country. This was despite the efforts by the first Ministry under the leadership of late Mr. E.M.S. Nampoothirippad. The then Government had constituted an Administrative Reforms Committee, which was heavily in favour of a decentralised system of governance. Until 1995, Kerala had only a single tier Village Panchayat and lagged behind most other states in the implementation of Panchayati Raj. The only

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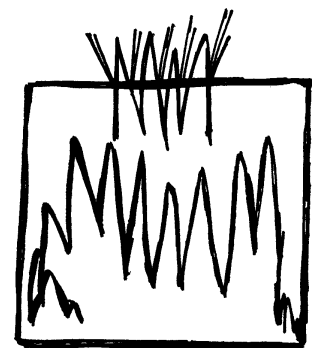
notable phase before the 73rd amendment was the District Council experiment of 1991, prompted by the Kerala District Administration Act. This experiment could not survive the regime change at the state level.

Chronology of Related Events

- 1958** **Kerala Panchayat Bill and the District Councils Bill.** The two bills on decentralization were introduced in the State Legislative Assembly. However, they could not be enacted and implemented as the Government was dismissed and the Legislative Assembly dissolved in 1959.
- 1960** **The Kerala Panchayat Act.** The first Administrative Reforms Committee suggested decentralization of a far-reaching nature as early as in 1958. The Act was passed codifying the Panchayat laws that were in force in Malabar-Travancore-Cochin regions.
- 1964** **Kerala Panchayat Union and Zilla Parishad Bill.** The Government introduced the Bill but the government fell before the Bill could become Act.
- 1967** **Kerala Panchayati Raj Bill.** The government that succeeded introduced the Bill but it could not be passed due to the fall of the government.
- 1971** **Kerala District Administration Bill.** The Government of Kerala introduced the Bill but this too did not become a law.
- 1978&1980** **Kerala District Administration Bill.** Again the government introduced this Bill in the Legislative Assembly in 1978 and it became an Act in 1980.
- 1991** **District Councils.** After one decade, the government implemented the Act and the District Councils came into being. However, they could survive only for a short period.
- 1994** **Kerala Panchayat Raj Act and the Kerala Municipal Act.** The Kerala Assembly passed the new Panchayat Raj Act and the Kerala Municipal Act.
- 1995** **People's Plan Campaign Launched Sen Committee.**
- 1999** **Restructuring of Kerala Panchayati Raj Act and the Kerala Municipality Act.**

In the chequered history of democratic decentralization in Kerala, there was consensus to have a two-tier system of Panchayati Raj - one at the district level and the other at the village level. If at all, there was any reference to a middle tier, this tier was envisaged to be a mere advisory body. All the same, the three-tier system was imposed on Kerala to be in line with the Constitution. Hardliners among politicians and policy makers, however, still harp on the irrelevance of the middle tier for a state like Kerala.

In August 1996, the Kerala State Planning Board was entrusted with the task of spearheading a campaign for decentralised planning, together with the active leadership of the Ministry of Local Administration. The 'campaign' was aimed at making the Ninth Five-Year Plan of the State of Kerala a 'People's Plan'. The 'campaign' hoped that as the plan process moved forward, the institutional, legal and procedural bottlenecks to effective decentralisation of power would be removed as and when they arise. The State Government launched the 'campaign' with an announcement that 35-40% of the total plan (development) funds of the State would be devolved to the local governments to be spent by them on the basis of the priorities drawn by them. Certain broad guidelines about sectoral distribution of the devolved funds were laid down to prevent the Panchayats from allocating disproportionate amounts for non-productive sectors. The plan-related activities included the convening of Gram Sabhas specifically for the purpose of planning, participatory preparation of the Panchayat's socio-economic profile in the form of a printed development report, holding of development seminars, preparation of projects, appraisal and correction of projects by block and district level expert committees of volunteers and the granting of final approval by the District Planning Committee.



2

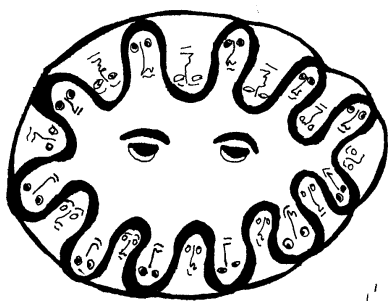
PANCHAYATI RAJ- UNDERSTANDING, OWNERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION OF THE PEOPLE

Kerala entered the new era of local self-governance by decentralisation of power to the three-tier PRIs in 1995. Even though the major concept behind the decentralisation process was the evolution of Panchayats into local self-governments, this is yet to happen in its true sense due to several reasons. One major reason for this is the lack of understanding of the concept itself. This has also contributed largely to the lack of ownership and low participation of the people in the process (despite the large scale efforts undertaken by the Government through the People's Plan Campaign).

Understanding the Concept

The different actors in the decentralisation process do not appear to have adequate clarity either about the concept or the scope of local self-government. The scope has been narrowly conceived as that for development, particularly economic development. The instrument for development too has been perceived exclusively as local level planning. As a result, more importance was given to short term development with more tangible outcomes instead of comprehensive and sustainable long-term development. At present, Panchayats are project oriented than process oriented. The larger scope of local self-governance has not been properly disseminated. The Panchayats are considered largely as another department/agency of the higher levels of government.

There is need to develop a concept paper on the philosophy and scope of local self-governance in Kerala, which requires to be discussed at all levels. In this context, a comparative study of the role of local self-governments in other countries may throw useful suggestions. There is a strong case to



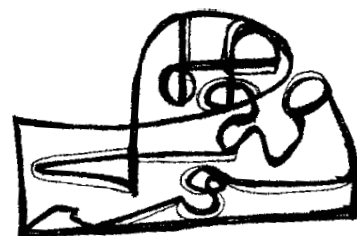
educate the citizens on the philosophy and scope of local self-governance, their roles, rights and duties in Panchayati Raj. This can be done through community-based structures like NHGs and SHGs at the grass root level. The services of the school and college teachers can be made use of. Dissemination can be effectively organised by using various methods like folk arts, discussions in the media and the local news services. Sharing of experiences of the people involved in the decentralisation process may also be thought of. These lead to the need for strengthening existing platforms as also the creation of new platforms at different levels involving all the stakeholders.

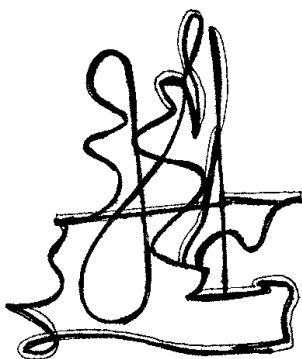
The civic consciousness and the level of awareness of the people about their rights and duties are still low. For changing this situation, attitudinal change is required among the citizens. Apart from the citizen education programmes discussed earlier, modules on local self-governance, rights and duties of citizens and civic consciousness have to be included in the school and college curriculum.

Monitoring

Apart from participating in the plan formulation, people were expected to participate in the implementation and monitoring of planned projects. The beneficiary committees and monitoring committees were conceived as instruments for achieving these objectives. But the general impression is that these committees could not function effectively and benamies of the 'old' contractors reappeared on the scene.

Another major draw back of the present system of people's monitoring of the LSGIs is that they by and large cover only the plan expenditure and the implementation of plan projects. The non-plan expenditure, which covers the upkeep and maintenance of the capital assets created, is largely excluded from the purview of the monitoring and beneficiary committees. It may be noted that non-plan expenditure has important implications for the efficiency and quality of services rendered by LSGIs. A community based monitoring system can be developed which will cover all the activities of the LSGIs. It will also be helpful to make





case studies of some of these committees, the lessons from which can be drawn for further interventions.

Ownership and Participation

The people who should be the owners of the LSGIs have not felt that these institutions are their own. The low participation of the people in the 'Gram Sabha' which is the legally constituted decision-making body in the process, corroborates this observation. It is found that certain sections of people like middle and upper class, younger generation and intelligentsia do not think that participating in the Gram Sabhas is important for them. Since most of the individual benefits are aimed at the BPL families, it is mainly members of these families, who realise that participation in Gram Sabhas has a bearing on their living conditions. The persons who got some benefits earlier are also not participating thinking that they are not going to get any further benefits. In the course of time, participation has increasingly been limited to direct beneficiaries. Now a large majority of participants in the Gram Sabhas are the women from SHGs. Elected members of the Panchayats also consider it as an easier way to ensure the quorum. The low participation of the different sections affects the quality of deliberations in the Gram Sabhas.

Regular opportunities for participation exist in Kerala with the institution of Gram Sabha and emergence of neighbourhood forums at sub Gram Sabha level. The Gram Sabha is expected to meet four times a year. In practice, however, meaningful Gram Sabhas take place twice or thrice only.

The first meeting takes place usually before the finalisation of Panchayat plan and the second one for the selection of beneficiaries. Greater participation is generally witnessed in the second meeting. Considering the fact that Gram Sabha is a post-1995 development in Kerala, the rate of participation up to the year 2000 was quite encouraging, especially participation of the poor and marginalised sections of the society. Since early 2000, the enthusiasm for

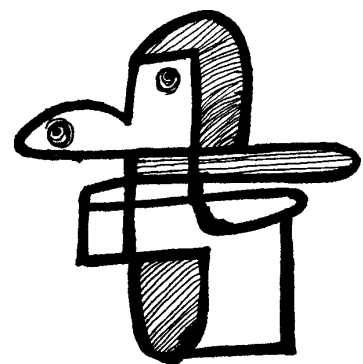
participation in Gram Sabha meetings has come down. A wrong notion that Gram Sabha is a forum only to select beneficiaries for individual oriented programmes has gained ground.

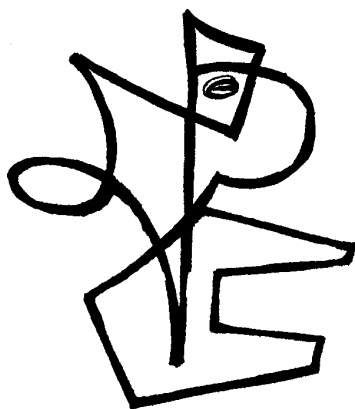
The women from the self-help groups are mobilised and brought to Gram Sabha meetings as a passive audience to ensure the required quorum. As a result, the deliberations in the meetings have almost become rituals. In general Gram Sabhas rarely perform the assigned functions. Though people of Kerala are known for their enthusiasm for political activities, this enthusiasm has not yet percolated down to Gram Sabhas.

It has been argued that genuine participation in the decentralisation process takes place only when people are empowered to analyse their situation, make decisions and get involved in their implementation and monitoring. The regular livelihood issues of the people are most often not addressed by the LSGIs if they do not fall under the Plan. Similarly, issues related to human rights, social justice, environment and quality of service delivery at the local level are also not sufficiently addressed, as these are not even recognised as within the purview of the LSGIs. The potentials of LSGIs for addressing these local issues have to be explored.

Convening of Gram Sabhas is difficult in Kerala because of the large size of the electoral constituencies (wards) of Gram Panchayat and the dispersed settlement pattern, both of which are features specific to Kerala. In a typical ward, there would be 1500-2000 members. The large size also affects the quality of deliberations. In the initial years of People's Plan Campaign, for overcoming this difficulty, NHGs of 40 to 50 families were formed in more than 200 Panchayats, though not required by law. But these NHGs which used to function below the Gram Sabhas have almost disappeared now. NHGs have to be revived and strengthened for ensuring more effective participation of the people in the process of decentralisation. In fact they require to be given legal status.

Many of the representatives of political parties are not active





in the decentralisation process. This is also applicable to the numerous mass organised in the state. One of the major reasons for this is that the leaders of these parties and organisations are not very clear about the concept and its potential and hence have not owned up the process yet. Developing better understanding through discussions and dialogues among the political leadership at different levels on the philosophy, scope and potential benefits of decentralisation is also necessary.

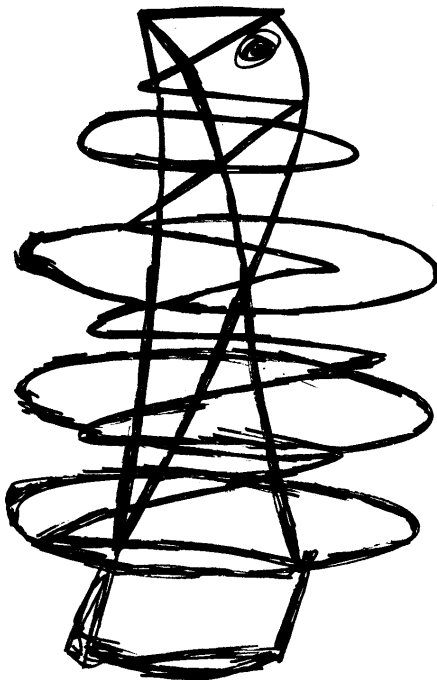
The local level organisations such as Arts and Sports Clubs, libraries, Mahila Samajams, Parent Teacher Associations, Hospital Development Committees, Padasekhara Samithies and other civil society organisations are not very active in the decentralisation process. Participation and ownership by these organisations have not been ensured in the decentralisation process. As a result, they remain either ignorant or indifferent or sceptical. For making LSGIs more effective, mechanisms to bring in more involvement of these organisations, which though not sub systems of local government, have to be developed. Necessary training has to be provided to them.

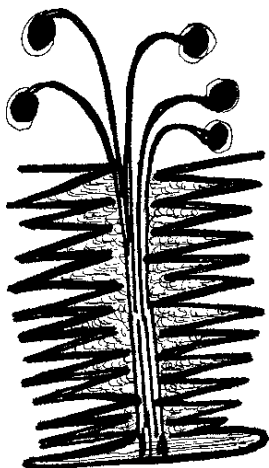
A comprehensive local human resource inventory may have to be prepared and the voluntary help of experts within the region has to be sought at every stage; in identifying problems, planning, implementation and monitoring. Special efforts will be required to secure their involvement in the working of the LSGIs. With the ageing of population coupled with the relatively young age at which employees retire from government services, it is likely that every region in the State, both rural and urban, will have a large pool of 'young-old' experts with diverse expertise and experience and enough time on hand to render voluntary services.

As political parties are officially recognised in the Panchayat elections, it so happens that different parties come to power. There are a number of cases to argue for and against the party system within the Panchayats. The extra constitutional power, authority and control by party functionaries are subjected to severe criticisms from different circles. But, on the other hand, it is argued that

the political parties have not been seriously involving at the local level and if they had done so, the Panchayati Raj system would have been strengthened further and would have been more accountable to the people. In fact, there is a school of thought advocating the 'politicisation of Panchayati Raj'.

In Kerala, the role of media, both print and visual, is very important. Strengthening decentralisation has not been a major concern of a large section of the media. This has affected the process adversely to a large extent. Using media effectively to promote awareness among the people about their roles will be a very useful intervention strategy. The media can also act as a corrective force. They can make people aware of the innovative programmes organised in different parts of the state and share experiences. Some of the best practices adopted by different Panchayats require to be documented and published.





3 CHANGING ROLES, POWERS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES

As the LSGIs became powerful through the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution, automatically the powers and responsibilities of the elected representatives have also increased. This is all the more so in Kerala, where decentralisation was conceived more as democratic decentralisation with emphasis on people's planning rather than mere administrative decentralisation. Elected representatives are expected to gauge people's aspirations, convert them to plans and projects and implement them. As part of the People's Plan Campaign, efforts were made to empower the elected representatives than merely providing training.

In this part we are trying to analyse the issues related to the changing roles, powers and responsibilities of the elected representatives. The concept and the scope of local self-governance and power to the people are yet to be disseminated clearly even among the elected representatives. Their lack of vision of local development and local self-governance is also reflected in the preparation of plans and projects. Even now, some of the elected representatives are not very clear about their roles, rights and duties and the role of PRIs as well.

There are three Standing Committees for every Gram and Block Panchayat and five standing committees for every District Panchayat. All these committees have well defined roles to play and there are subject specifications. In addition to this is the Steering committee, which consists of the president, vice president and chairpersons of all committees. The committee is intended to develop a team spirit and a collective leadership among the members. Though these committees have been constituted in all the Panchayats, majority of them are not performing their

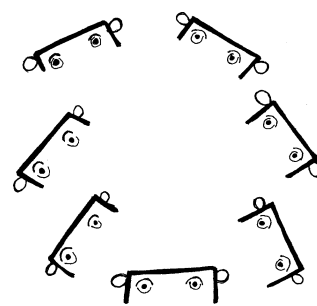
assigned roles. There are cases in which all the decisions of the committees are not placed before the general committee of the Panchayat. It is also noticed that Steering committee meetings are rarely held. The working of the committee system is another grey area, calling for attention.

Many of the elected representatives do not consider the suggestions evolved in the Gram Sabhas and development seminars while formulating the development plans. Instead, they are trying to enforce their decisions on these bodies. There are elected members of the Panchayats, who think that convening of Gram Sabhas itself is not necessary for discussing the issues. To at least a section of the elected representatives, decentralisation of power means 'power up to the elected representatives' only.

Most of the Panchayats in the State are now dividing the allotted funds equally among the wards, contrary to the concept of overall development of the Panchayat. Majority of the Panchayats focus on construction of roads and buildings as they think that development means these types of works. Besides, these works are more visible. The awareness among the elected representatives about the scope of LSGIs in addressing issues related to human rights, social justice, environment, quality of service delivery etc. is also low.

Lack of role clarity leads to conflicts between the elected representatives and officials of the Panchayat and the line departments. The role of elected representatives in the various committees also needs further clarity. The effectiveness of different kinds of committees such as Standing Committees and Steering Committees has not been properly understood yet. Hence, the committee system in the LSGIs has to be analysed and ways for improving it have to be found.

Lack of skills in important areas in the Panchayat governance like budget preparation, project formulation, implementation, monitoring, deciding tax rates, social audit, performance audit, need for transparency, citizen's charter etc. is the other major important issue to be addressed.





All these issues relating to conceptual clarity, role clarity and lack of skills and capacities emphasize the need for capacity development programmes for the elected representatives. As mentioned above, in the People's Plan Campaign, there was emphasis on training and orientation programmes organised by the government at different levels for this purpose. But, many of these initiatives could not be transferred to the new batch of elected representatives who took over in the year 2000.

Capacity Development Programmes for Elected Representatives

Capacity development of around 17000 elected representatives in the State is not an easy task. The training needs of different categories of elected representatives like Panchayat presidents, standing committee chairpersons and other elected members may be different. The experienced members and new representatives may have different training needs. A comprehensive training need assessment is required in the initial stage for the elected representatives holding different positions.

In each term, a large majority of the members are new comers. It may be noted that, even three years after the elections in 2000, there were members who had not attended any kind of orientation programme on decentralisation and local governance. Immediately after the elections, the elected representatives should be given an orientation programme on

- Philosophy and scope of local governance,
- Powers and roles of local government,
- Their own roles and rights and
- Rules and procedures governing Panchayati Raj.

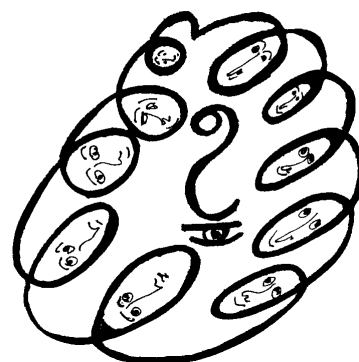
The institutional constraint in providing orientation programmes in a short span of time for all the elected representatives is one of the major issues to be addressed. But such orientation programmes can be done effectively with the help of modern communication technologies. The

modules will have to be prepared by experts with abilities to communicate with the elected representatives with different academic backgrounds. Detailed training programme may be conducted both in centralised and decentralized manners. This kind of programmes may be organised in major centres in the State, where the facilities for organising such type of programmes are to be improved. Identification of adequate number of existing and potential trainers with diverse backgrounds is the first task.

The responsibility of giving training to the trainers and preparation of training modules may be taken up jointly by the three major government institutes in the State, viz. KILA, SIRD and IMG, with KILA becoming the nodal and coordinating agency. But, the lack of coordination among these institutes is a major problem. A lot of duplication has been taking place between these institutes in giving trainings related to decentralisation. Hence there is an immediate need for developing and implementing a new policy, strategy and system for training.

Apart from the general orientation, the elected representatives need to acquire a wide range of skills and capabilities in areas such as management, administration, budget preparation, project formulation, project management, implementation, monitoring, auditing, dealing with officials etc. for successful running of local self-governments. Conflict avoidance and conflict resolution skills are required by the elected representatives in dealing with various political party representatives and also with officials, both of the Panchayats and the line departments.

Sharing of experiences and information among the elected representatives will be an effective capability development tool. This will help the Panchayat members to know more about the innovative initiatives happening in the LSGIs in different parts of the State. Some of these may have the possibilities of implementation in other LSGIs with or without modifications. Networking of elected representatives is one way of sharing experiences. Possibilities of the Panchayat Associations acting as nodal agency for promoting networking and in providing platforms for sharing of



experiences by the elected representatives may be explored. These platforms may be formed at district and state levels. These could also help in facilitating a continuous process of self-learning. Seminars, workshops etc can be organised for the sharing of information. For making networking and other activities more effective, the capability and the facilities of the association at the state and district levels may be enhanced. A newsletter may be thought of for periodic dissemination of information.

Attempts must be made to get the cooperation of the media, which is very powerful in the state, to disseminate the information on Panchayati Raj. A regular mechanism for this should be developed and the elected representatives equipped for such dissemination.

The various actor groups, especially the elected representatives, face many problems while participating in the decentralisation process. Lack of a quick and effective problem solving mechanism affects the planning and implementation activities of the LSGIs. An online support system at the state level for troubleshooting and doubt clearing will be very much helpful for the LSGIs for effective and efficient functioning. A panel of experts in various fields can be formed at the state level for giving quick response to the queries from the LSGIs. Such a system can be made very effective with the help of modern communication technologies like satellite linked video conferencing.



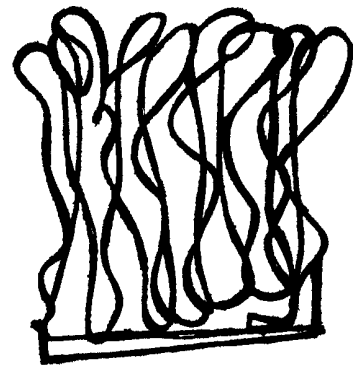
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ISSUES RELATED TO TRANSPARENCY, ACCOUNTABILITY AND QUALITY OF DELIVERY OF PUBLIC SERVICES

Right from the beginning, of the People's Plan Campaign, it was stressed that right to information, transparency, accountability, social auditing and high quality in the delivery of public services were hallmarks of good governance. The guidelines of decentralised planning clearly say that all project documents are public records and every citizen is entitled to get copies of these documents. The Sen Committee recommended the incorporation of these provisions in the Kerala Panchayat Raj Act and the state government gave its nod. For the first time, right to information was recognised and subsequently incorporated in the Kerala Panchayat Raj Act. These developments were not the result of any movement or struggle by the people. Hence most of the people are unaware of these provisions and their importance. The Gram Sabhas are visualized as the forum where people can periodically demand information. However, no mechanism has so far been put in place to make it a reality. So, awakening the people against information blockade is a Herculean task in Kerala.

The Government made it obligatory for Panchayats to install a notice board in each ward of the Panchayat to let people know about the Gram Sabha and various developmental activities. The People's Plan Campaign has ultimately led to the installation of notice boards in the wards of the Gram Panchayats, Municipalities and Corporations. In the initial stages, such notice boards carried handwritten or printed notices or information relating to selection of beneficiaries for various projects, the modalities of selection, the application procedure and so on. They are, however, no longer used for the purpose for which they were originally intended.

Emerging
Issues in
Panchayati Raj
in Kerala
A Study Report





The Government of Kerala had directed each Gram Panchayat to set apart Rs. One lakh from plan funds during 1997 -98 for the purchase of photocopier and to credit the amount to the accounts of the Director of Panchayats. This was to help the Panchayats to provide copies of various documents to the citizens, if they ask for. About 800 out of the 991 Panchayats deposited the amount. However, the government could not supply the photocopiers until now. The non-availability of photocopier has made the scheme a non-starter or difficult in many cases. The Information Kerala Mission, which sought to bring all the Panchayats linked with each other, is yet to take off in full steam.

The decentralised planning programme has contributed significantly to transparency in respect of matters related to selection of beneficiaries and to some extent on Plan formulation. But, the right to information has been recognised only on matters, which come directly under the purview of Panchayats. This constitutes a very limited portion of activities related to government and governance. A number of issues of direct concern to citizens come under the domain of the State government. Activities of the Revenue Department, Village Administrative Office, Public Works Department, State Electricity Board and Water Authority fall outside the jurisdiction of Panchayats. The matters pertaining to these offices continue to be under information-black out. Despite seven years experience in decentralised planning, the right to information movement is yet to pickup in Kerala. The state level legislation granting right to information has not yet seen the light of the day. Here strong lobbying and advocacy are needed.

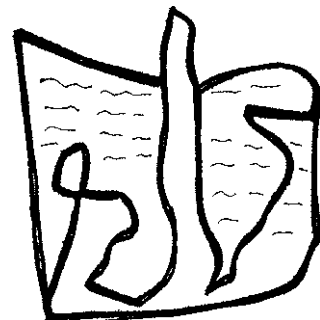
Accountability

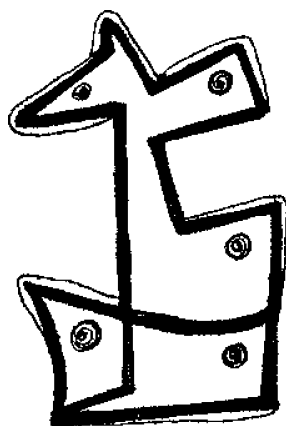
An Ombudsman system was introduced at the state level for redressing the grievances arising from administrative lapses of the Panchayats. It is expected to address grievances in a cost effective and timely manner with a view to deliver the goods and services at the grass root level. It is also visualised as a mechanism to check mal administration, partisanship and corruption in Panchayats.

From day one there was a howl of protests against the Ombudsman system on grounds of its constitution, the size, the credibility and profile of the members, its expenditure and other institutional paraphernalia, its image of traditional judicial system and its bureaucratic cum non-Panchayat friendly attitude. Later, to add to the problems, the seven-member institution of Ombudsman was reduced to a single member system. Though it was envisaged as a non-traditional judicial system, it is generally being perceived as the same as the judicial system. It is handicapped by lack of support mechanism from the government and the public. Another handicap of the institution is its lack of proximity to the marginalised and disadvantaged sections of society. It is also observed that with the emergence of Ombudsman, many Panchayats have become suspicious of persons approaching them for information. It is largely felt that in addition to the existing institution of Ombudsman, it is better to have a decentralised informal system of institutions either at the district level or at the sub district level, which can provide redressal of grievances in a cost effective and timely manner.

Quality of Services

Since 29 subjects listed in the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution have been transferred to the Panchayats, the quality of services provided by the Panchayat cover all the sectors which affect rural life. Moreover, an impression has been created among the public that all the rural institutions, agencies and services fall under the domain of the Panchayats. Therefore, the Panchayats have to take the blame for the poor quality of services available from other departments, which have nothing to do with the Panchayat or very little control by the Panchayats. The quality of public services is not neutral towards all sections of the society. The law-abiding citizens and the marginalised and disadvantaged sections of society have to suffer more for the lack of desired quality of public services. The marginalised and disadvantaged sections of the society are more dependent on the services of the Panchayat than the richer sections. Inadequate and delayed delivery of services from the Panchayat institutions may result in high





transaction cost including opportunity cost. Again the poor and the marginalised have to bear the brunt of inefficiency in the Panchayat institutions.

The lack of awareness of the service seekers about the level of quality of services one can expect from the Panchayat is one of the major reasons for the sorry state of affairs. There are other reasons as well such as attitudinal and behavioural pattern of the respective officials of the Panchayat, lack of capacity and resources and adhoc nature of work allotment without considering skills, experience and training of the officials. Quality of interaction between elected representatives and officials leaves much to be desired in a majority of the cases and it generates certain amount of strains and stress in the administration of the Panchayat. In many cases, the empirical evidence shows that strained relationship among them may lead to poor quality of delivery of services. The situation is more serious in cases of transferred officials who are under dual control. Moreover, the minimum standards to be maintained for the various services of the Panchayat and other transferred institutions have not yet been prescribed. It is also suggested that only by 'doing and acting together', Panchayat functionaries can iron out major irritants in their inter-relationship.

Citizen's Charter

A new section on 'citizen's charter' has been incorporated in the Kerala Panchayat Raj Act. As per the provisions, every Panchayat is expected to prepare a Citizen's Charter and it has to be revised every year. However, it is noticed that these are not yet prepared by many Panchayats, according to the provisions in the Act and even in the Panchayats that prepared them, the services still do not measure up to the standards mentioned in the Citizen's Charter. In other words, the benefits of the Citizen's Charter have not reached the people. No mechanism to ensure the quality of services as mentioned in the Citizen's Charter has been put in place so far.

Financial Transactions

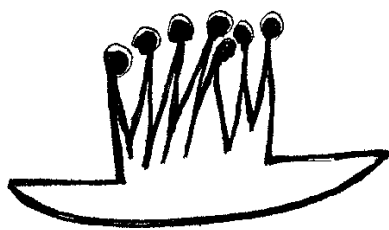
The financial allocation to the Panchayats is also protected from other extra legislative decision making processes in the state. Funds amounting to more than 30% of the total development funds of the state are devolved to the Panchayat on the basis of objective criteria with relevant provisions in every annual budget of the state. This makes the Kerala situation with regard to fiscal decentralisation certainly better than that of other states in India.

An independent Audit commission was recommended for the Panchayats, modelled on the Comptroller and Auditor General of India. The Government has taken a policy decision to establish it. However, legislation has not been passed in this direction. It is expected that the proposed Audit Commission may be an independent machinery which would not be under the control of government. Strong advocacy at the state level is needed in this direction.

The financial transactions of the Panchayat have increased substantially due to the fund flow since 1997. At present, the Panchayat handles various categories of funds and the volume of transactions related to the purchase and storage for office and project related works have also increased. All these would require a different kind of financial transaction and it should have autonomy, responsibility, transparency and accountability. There is no uniform practice of bookkeeping system in the Panchayats and different practices are followed in the Panchayats. It may lead to duplication of work, non- updating of entries and incomplete registering. The poor management of assets and incomplete asset registers bedevil Panchayat administration. In short, one may get an impression that the accounting procedures are cumbersome and unscientific. And in majority of cases it may have a negative impact on the delivery of services from the Panchayat and the time and cost overruns of the project. It may also end up with lack of transparency and accountability.

To overcome the problems related to accountability and transparency in financial transactions, the government has introduced two systems such as performance audit and social audit. A separate State Performance Audit Authority





was established. The assigned role of performance audit is to help the Panchayat in proper utilization of funds with economic prudence. Hence they have to seriously review the financial operations of the Panchayat. In other words, it is a process-oriented audit system that will help the Panchayat in ensuring proper utilisation of funds in a transparent manner. However, experience shows that it nullifies the philosophy and very purpose of performance audit and has degenerated into a faultfinding exercise. As a result, the feedback from the performance audit is not seriously taken by the Panchayats in a many number of cases.

Social Audit

The Gram Sabha is constituted as a strong foundation for the entire grass root democratic structure in general and Panchayati Raj in particular. It is expected to act as a democratic forum for ensuring the participation of people and for seeking information on different development projects. The Gram Sabha has also to ensure transparency in the functioning of the Panchayat and facilitate continuous social audit. People have the right to get information on the estimate and actual expenditure of different developmental projects implemented by the Panchayat. In addition to this, as part of social audit, the reports on the developmental programmes implemented in the previous year, those proposals to be undertaken during the current financial year and the expenditure thereof, the annual status of accounts, performance audit report, local fund audit report and administrative report of the preceding year are mandated to be placed before the Gram Sabha. It is noticed that the above documents are hardly given any space in the agenda of the majority of Gram Sabhas in Kerala. Hence very little measure of social auditing is enforced in the financial management (other than that of the Plan funds) of the Panchayat. As Gram Sabha has become a forum to select beneficiaries for delivering public goods, it has succeeded in facilitating some degree of social auditing in poverty reduction programmes. A massive citizen education programme can take up this issue and model project interventions may be possible in selected Gram Sabhas.

5

GENDER IN DECENTRALISATION

Following the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments which made one-third reservation for women at all levels of local self-government mandatory, the way for women's entry into public sphere has been opened. The decentralisation process provided the opportunity to introduce gender concept and gender dimensions in the development process in the state through various strategies like the introduction of the Women Component Plan.

Gender in the Society

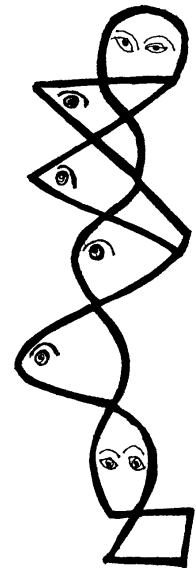
Apart from addressing the practical gender needs, local self-governments could not do much in addressing the strategic gender needs. More over, clarity on gender was lacking across all sections of the participants and across the civil society. People in general and elected representatives in particular are not sensitised on issues of gender equity. Gender dimension is progressively getting reduced to WCP, SHG..etc. and other dimensions like health issues, geriatrics, destitutes, widows, women headed households etc. are often neglected. In this context, focusing on elected representatives alone will not lead to gender empowerment. There is a need for building up awareness on gender, the concepts and practices in the society. To this end, gender status studies could be of much use.

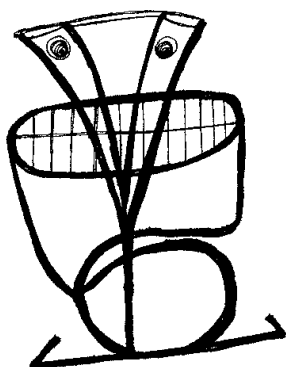
Women in the Panchayats

Today Panchayat is more women-centred, thanks to the SHGs and the 1/3rd reservation. But as an institution, how far it is women friendly has to be looked into even though more space for women in political institutions at the grass root level has been created. The reservation has helped to attain a certain amount of visibility of women in public life in Kerala.

Women in Gram Sabhas

People's Plan Campaign succeeded in making Gram Sabhas





function effectively as instruments of participatory governance. During this process, participation of women in the Gram Sabhas has increased, but it is only in number. Women should be able to raise their voice and participate in the discussions in all topics and not only those related to women and SHG. Women attend the Gram Sabhas more during beneficiary selection. Members of the Kudumbashree units alone attend the Gram Sabha. Other sections of the society including the educated, employed and middle class women rarely participate in the Gram Sabhas.

Agenda for the Gram Sabhas must address many other issues relevant and timely for the strategic gender needs of all women. A few specific interventions could be tried out in selected areas where the role of Gram Sabhas to be taken beyond planning and beneficiary selection. There is need for larger platforms like NHG, Gram Sabha and women's groups at the local level including mahila samajams and SHGs. They have to be given orientation on where and how to intervene in the Gram Sabha.

Gender Status Studies

During the final stages of the People's Plan Campaign, there was an initiative to prepare a gender status report in every Panchayat. They had to be prepared in a participatory manner and presented in the Gram Sabha. Specialised studies had to be conducted on certain specific areas according to the situation in each Panchayat. These Gender Status Studies were to serve as eye openers and also to be the background for further gender mainstreaming in the Panchayats. But, only one third of the Panchayats have conducted the studies. Once the Campaign was over, there was no follow up on this.

It has been suggested that Gender Status Studies need to be followed up in every Panchayat for which broad guidelines have to be evolved. The process itself acts as a form of gender sensitisation in the Panchayat. Technical and academic support for this has to be provided and enhanced. Based on these reports, a Panchayat women development plan could be formulated which will remove

many of the pitfalls in the WCP and the Panchayat Plan in general. The importance of a Panchayat level gender resource centre was also suggested for information dissemination.

Elected Representatives

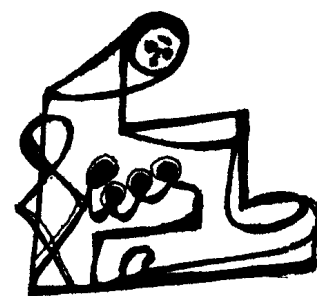
Capacity building of women elected representatives is very important in this process, as most of them are novices to public sphere and administration. They lack political skills and administrative skills. Acceptance of women representatives in the Panchayat offices and Panchayat committees is still wanting. In general, the elected representatives require sensitisation on gender. At present, trainings related to gender issues are exclusively for women only. There is lack of skills in gender budgeting / auditing. Training programmes have not gone beyond welfare approach or at the most Women in Development approach.

Suggested interventions are focused on training of elected representatives, which should ensure participation of both males and females. Issue of gender equity has to be included in the training for all elected representatives. Specific programmes on capacity building of women elected representatives in assertive skills, self-esteem, self-confidence and other human resource management issues also have to be done.

Women Component Plan

The State Government made it mandatory that every project prepared by the local self-government should have a statement on gender consideration, which later paved the way for placing 'gender agenda' at the local level. The WCP was introduced, earmarking 10% of the Plan outlay for those projects, which are directly beneficial to women.

At present, the funds under the WCP in many local bodies are mostly divided among the SHGs. There is no mechanism for ensuring proper implementation of the WCP schemes. Most of the gender related projects are in the form of conventional women development programmes. Technical Advisory Committee/former Expert Committee in majority of the cases lacks gender sensitivity. More over, Panchayat

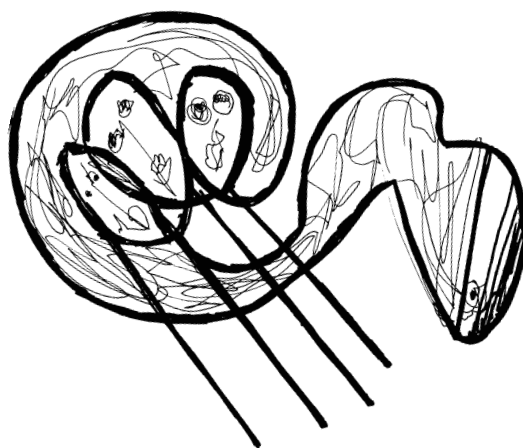


committees were reluctant to give priority for implementing the projects under the WCP. There have been occasions, where, if there is any reduction in plan size or cut in the final instalment, the WCP projects were the ones mainly affected. The WCP is considered to be the concern only of the women elected representatives.

Conceptual and practical clarity on the WCP, its scope and potentials have to be improved. Model interventions in the WCP and gendered local planning could be the initial intervention strategy which takes into consideration both practical and strategic gender needs in local plans.

Jagratha Samithies

The Jagratha Samithies on the lines of the State Women's Commission are mandatory at the Gram Panchayat level, but they have never been formed or are not functioning in any of the Panchayats. More clarity is to be developed on the concept, scope and potentials of Jagratha Samithies. In a few Panchayats, model interventions need to be tried out, following which up scaling may be done.



6

ISSUES RELATED TO WEAKER SECTIONS

The goal of equality cannot be achieved without specialised planning and programmes for those of weaker sections that have been traditionally deprived on various grounds. Unless such efforts are made to achieve equality in social and economic spheres, the imbalances in the society are likely to widen. The decentralisation process offered greater and larger space for the empowerment and stronger participation of the weaker sections in the public/political spheres by reserving seats for the deprived sections such as the SC, ST and giving thrust to BPL and other vulnerable groups like the aged, destitutes, widows, disabled etc. This can be seen as one of the major virtues of the governmental initiative towards affirmative action. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments envisaged larger and more effective participation of weaker sections of society in LSGIs. There has been some improvement in the delivery of benefits to the weaker sections particularly the SCs and STs. There have also been efforts to ensure the participation of the weaker sections in the planning and decision making process. Schemes targeting specifically the weaker sections were designed and implemented.

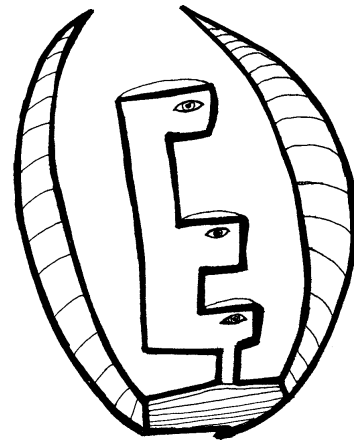
When decentralised democracy was extended to the fifth scheduled areas of different Indian States through the provisions of the Panchayat (Extension of the Scheduled Areas) Act of 1996, it has not been extended over the tribal areas of Kerala. At present, there is a demand from the various sections of the tribal community to implement the Act in the tribal areas of the State.

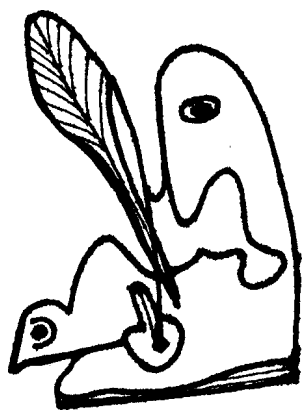
Gram Sabhas and Oorukootams

It is felt that though the participation of the weaker sections in the Gram Sabhas and Oorukootams is not below that of the general population, the process has failed to ensure

Emerging
Issues in
Panchayati Raj
in Kerala

A Study Report





active and effective participation of the former. As a result, their aspirations and priorities are often not reflected in the preparation and implementation of the plan and projects of the Panchayats. It also came out from the discussions that people belonging to weaker sections often thought it inappropriate to raise many of their livelihood and social issues in the Gram Sabhas and Oorukootams. In fact, this lack of understanding about the extent and scope of these new platforms has also contributed to the low level of interest in the whole process.

There is also the problem of inadequate clarity among other stakeholders in addressing issues of weaker sections. For instance, in the tribal areas, all decisions are to be taken by the Oorukootams, but often the decisions of the Panchayat Committee are forced upon the Oorukootams. It is important that the space created to deal with village issues under the decentralisation process such as the Gram Sabhas and Oorukootams should be made more effective to address issues of empowerment of weaker sections. It should also ensure that the weaker sections act jointly with other sections of the society in common platforms and socio-political issues. Through such an approach, the weaker sections could own the decentralisation process, which, in turn, would help in improving their participation.

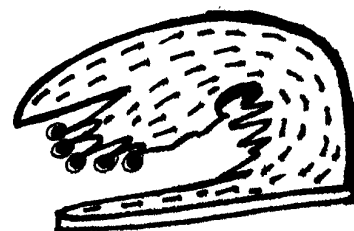
The decentralisation process has not been able to adopt a sustainable livelihood and rural habitat approach in preparing the plans. Most of the plans and projects are in the nature of distribution of short-term individual benefits. It appears that the schemes under SCP and TSP helped to improve the basic facilities like housing, sanitation, drinking water, roads etc. However, the SCP and TSP seem to have failed in improving the occupational mobility of the SC and ST people and in addressing their livelihood issues. Many of the Panchayats find it difficult to fully utilise the SCP/TSP funds due to lack of innovative projects. There is also lack of clear understanding on how livelihood issues of these sections can be addressed by Panchayats. Therefore, it is felt that studies to understand the livelihood issues may be carried out to get a clearer perspective about addressing these issues.

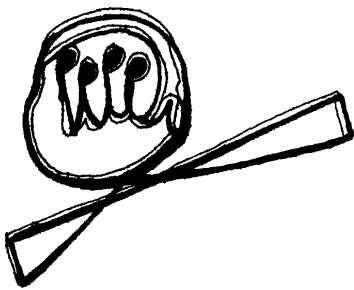
The Panchayats have been successful in addressing the poverty related issues, though to a limited extent, of those living below the poverty line. But they failed in addressing social security issues. For instance, the delays in paying the social security pensions have affected the destitute adversely. In fact, the Panchayats have been acting just as conduits for dispersing the benefits under social security schemes of the State government. The Panchayats at present are **not intended** to spend any money for these purposes from their own funds or from government grants. There is a strong case for providing more freedom to the Panchayats in addressing the social security issues.

The deterioration of the public education system has also affected the poor people, limiting their future chances for higher earnings and social mobility. Added to this are the problems due to the deterioration in the quality of public health care system. This has resulted in increasing cost of health care thereby making the poor more vulnerable. It requires to be examined in what further ways the Panchayats can address these core issues. Based on these enquiries, the strategies for effective intervention among the poor can be formulated.

Working Groups on SC/ST

The working groups on SC/ST development in the Panchayats who are in charge of making plan and projects are the weakest among the working groups. The role of SC/ST elected representatives in decision-making is also relatively low. Many of the SC/ST elected representatives fail to assume their role as representatives of weaker sections outside the ward they represent. They act more as representatives of their particular constituencies or their political parties. Hence special training programmes for SC/ST elected representatives are needed in this regard. Apart from this, other elected representatives should also be trained in preparing and implementing of SCP/TSP projects and special innovative projects for the other marginalised communities.





Disparities and Differences between Tribal Communities

One special issue is that often, the disparities and differences within the tribal communities are not taken into consideration while implementing the schemes meant for them. Their needs vary. This is adversely affecting 'the really' poor tribal communities like Paniyas, Kattunaikkans etc. So, effective guidelines have to be prepared based on status reports on different tribal communities and their varying needs. It was also felt that the present tribal literacy programmes could not fully address the socio-cultural and linguistic difference among the tribal communities. This calls for a re-orientation in the approach of the tribal literacy programmes.

ST Promoters

The ST promoters can assume a larger role under the decentralisation process because they are the people who have the opportunities to know the ground level realities of tribal communities. They are expected to constantly interact with the people belonging to ST communities. Similar is the case with SC promoters. It is felt that the SC and ST promoters are not equipped enough to address the complex issues of the SC and ST communities. They also lack the required motivation. Hence programmes for building up the capacity of the ST as well as SC promoters need to be initiated.

Linguistic Minorities

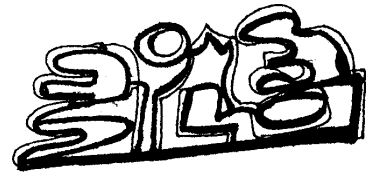
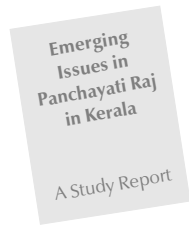
It appears that the message of decentralisation has largely bypassed the linguistic minorities such as the Kannada speaking population in Kasargode District and the Tamil speaking population in Palakkad, Idukki and Thiruvananthapuram districts. Most of the handbooks and guidelines made for preparing plan and projects at the time of People's Plan Campaign and the recent Kerala Development Programme are mainly in Malayalam only. Records and documents of the Panchayats are also in Malayalam thereby making it difficult for the people

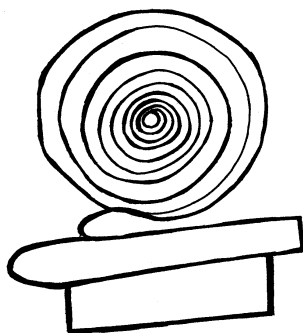
belonging to linguistic minorities to have effective interaction with the Panchayats. Unless specific programmes to reach these communities are made, it is unlikely that their participation will improve from the present nominal level.

Migrant Labourers from other States

Another section of the people, that has not been covered under the decentralisation process is that of the labourers coming from other states. Most of them are living in pathetic conditions and are facing acute problems of shelter, sanitation facilities, drinking water etc. One important aspect to be considered is that these problems not only affect them but also the local environment and community. So, the issues of the immigrant labourers have to be addressed in detail and suitable intervention strategies have to be thought of.

The decentralisation of governance provides an opportunity to transform Panchayats so that they address issues relating to weaker sections. Unless the weaker sections are motivated to participate in the decentralisation process including participation in decision-making, it is hardly possible to say that 'real' participation has been achieved. It is important that the space created such as the Gram Sabhas should be made more effective in addressing issues of empowerment of weaker sections, to make them participate jointly with other sections of the society in common platforms and socio-political spheres. Specific programmes for empowering the weaker sections have, therefore, to be organised through community based structures such as NHGs, SHGs, Oorukootams etc. to ensure their participation in the process. The Panchayats also need to re-orient themselves as 'poor friendly' institutions to a larger measure.





7

NON-GOVERNMENTAL SUPPORT SYSTEM

A major highlight of the People's Plan Campaign for the Ninth Plan in Kerala was the space it provided for people's participation in democratic processes. The roles of the Gram Sabha in planning and beneficiary selection and that of the beneficiary committees in implementation etc. have been a few such examples. During this period, neighbourhood groups and self-help groups also became active in various Panchayats. In a few places, these were under the leadership of the Gram Panchayats, where as in a few others, on their own.

The large size of the Gram Sabha with its average population of 1500, the heterogeneity of the population in a ward, which is geographically widespread, have all contributed to the lack of 'feeling' or ownership of one's Gram Sabha. It is here that the need for more micro level organisational forms arises. Fortunately, every village in Kerala has many such organisations in their area, which have contributed a lot to its development and history. An attempt is made here to classify these organisations which are potentially of relevance to the decentralisation process in Kerala.

Local level **General Interest Groups**

Every village in Kerala has different kinds of organisations like Arts and Sports Clubs, reading rooms, libraries and Mahila Samajams. Historically, on many occasions they have played key roles in many interventions and developments in their villages. It is surprising to note that in the decentralisation process, however, this has not happened. It may be due to the inherent decline of such movements in the state or due to the characteristics of the decentralisation process itself.

Clubs, Reading rooms and Libraries

These organisations, which are large in number in the villages, have strong local roots. Though generally of a positive disposition towards PRIs, they lack awareness of their role and potential in strengthening the decentralisation process. Some have supported the conduct of Gram Sabhas or have organised seminars and thus built awareness on Panchayati Raj. Some are also involved in planning and implementation of a few projects in the Panchayat Plans. But, in general, their importance and scope in making the democratic decentralisation process a sustainable one and in making the Gram Sabhas the real people's assemblies, have not yet been utilised.

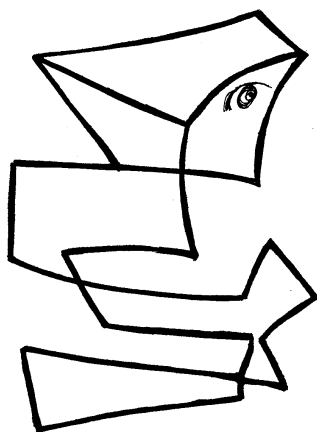
Mahila Samajams

Many Mahila Samajams existed in the villages of Kerala. Some of them were created as part of government programmes, some as part of the library movement, a few under the religious groups and others locally. Over the last ten years, they have been on the decline and at present they are being replaced by SHGs. As organisations, their role in the decentralisation process so far has been limited, though the potentials are high. Since the new SHGs are also turning out to be only of women below poverty line, the space for those outside BPL in such local organisations is also getting negligible.

Residents' Associations

Residents' associations are largely confined to urban areas and actually are quite strong lobbies for the interests of their members, who are mostly the middle and the upper middle class. Though they have more access to the local governments than any other organisations, usually they do not follow the formal democratic channels (Gram Sabhas, ward assemblies, etc.) but have access through informal channels to secure favourable decisions. This definitely weakens the democratic decentralisation process and the strengths of people's forums like Gram Sabhas. Indirectly, this affects the marginalised sections of society as they are not the key players in the residents' association movement.





Local level Special Interest Groups

Local level special interest groups are those types of organisations formed for specific purposes at the local level, like the Kudumbashree SHGs, padasekhara samithies, coconut farmers groups etc.

Kudumbashree Units

Every Panchayat now has Kudumbashree SHGs of women below poverty line, with their federation at the Panchayat level known as Community Development Societies. The cooperation with PRIs is normally assessed as being good. In fact, Kudumbashree unit members are the main participants in Gram Sabhas and virtually keep the Gram Sabha and thus also the democratic part of the Panchayati Raj alive. This strong role the units play has also led to visible signs of empowerment of the participating women. Still, the real decision-making eludes the women as most of the final decisions are taken by the few but powerful men, present or absent (Panchayat members, politicians, but also social volunteers). Kudumbashree units are usually perceived by Panchayats as a convenient system to 'mobilise' women to fulfil Gram Sabha quorum and to take care of the utilization of the WCP. These units, on the other hand, perceive Panchayats as a ready source of substantial funds through the WCP.

As mentioned, conflicts exist at the local level between Kudumbashree units and PRIs as well as with SHGs of NGOs and even with the Kudumbashree mission. The conflicts are centred on questions of control of these units. The units have now become comparatively powerful as they can mobilize people and have access to funds. With NGOs the conflicts rather are competition for the same space, i.e. for the people to whom NGOs have developed a feeling of ownership through their SHGs but also for the money involved.

An important point, finally, is the question of the medium and long-term sustainability of the Kudumbashree movement in strengthening Panchayati Raj. At present the Kudumbashree units are first for economic activities

and empowerment objectives are only secondary. If, in future, the fund flow from the Government decreases or even dries up, or if the units fail to diversify outside the presently dominating thrift and credit activities, their survival will be at stake and they certainly will not be able to play a role in improving the democratic functioning of the PRIs, for which they have a large potential.

Agricultural Production related Groups

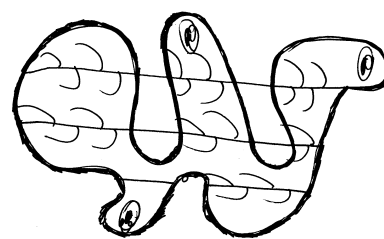
Some of these groups have joined the Panchayats in project formulation and implementation of production oriented activities, like organic farming, labour banks, watershed management, etc. However, though agriculture as a subject has been transferred to the Panchayats, in the majority of cases, there still is no vision on the future of agriculture in the area and the available local expertise has not yet been fully utilised.

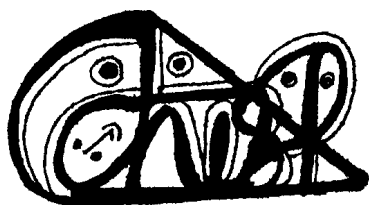
Beneficiary Groups

Different kinds of beneficiary groups have emerged as part of various government initiated programmes like Jalanidhi. Once the programmes are over, there is no plan to utilise the experiences gained and the potentials of these groups. As these programmes have been implemented jointly with the Panchayats, the BGs have the experience of working with the PRIs.

Voluntary Agencies

Most of the voluntary agencies are membership based and work for a common cause. They have to be differentiated from the conventional NGOs. In the case of members of voluntary agencies, they generally are not salaried. These organisations include advocacy initiatives and activist groups. While some of them have been critics of the Panchayati Raj system and the processes involved, there have been others who have been actively involved in different ways in the People's Plan Campaign. This involvement varies from providing experts and resource persons as implementing agencies of various projects of





the Panchayats to help in the beneficiary selection process, planning, monitoring, mobilisation of people for Gram Sabhas and beneficiary committees and providing ideas to elected representatives for project planning. But, it is surprising to note that in general there have been only very few interventions on right to information and transparency. Some of the issues regarding PRI-Voluntary agency collaboration are applicable in the case of NGOs and are accordingly dealt with in the next section on NGOs.

Non-Governmental Organisations

NGOs in general are not membership based and their animators receive salary. They have an office, may or may not have FCRA and are donor assisted (either foreign, local or government). During the People's Plan Campaign for the Ninth Plan, there have been a few attempts to bring in the NGOs for supporting the PRIs. But, due to the background of the NGO movement and the mutual perceptions of PRIs and NGOs, NGO-PRI collaboration existed only in a few Panchayats.

Perceptions of PRIs regarding NGOs

In general NGOs are perceived as group with access to finances. Among the elected representatives there is very little knowledge about the capabilities/potentials of NGOs, which sometimes turns out to be over-expectations as well. There is also notion that there are 'fake' i.e. not genuine NGOs that just go for money making. In many a case, Panchayats consider NGOs as a threat (competition) and vice versa, which lead to ego-clashes. There is also the view 'why are NGOs needed in the first place (can't we not do it alone)?'

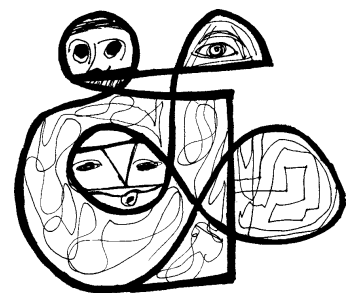
Attitude of NGOs and Voluntary Agencies towards PRIs

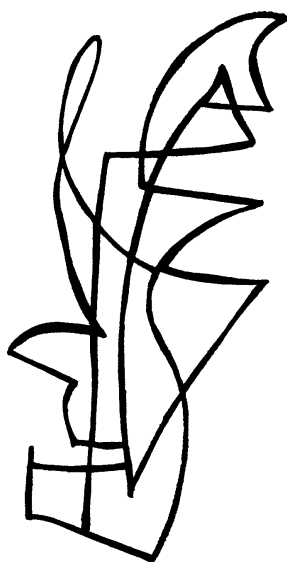
It is not realistic to generalise the attitude of NGOs. There have been positive and negative responses. Majority of the NGOs never had Panchayati Raj on their agenda nor could they absorb its spirit. They, therefore, lost the

opportunities to become involved in the process and utilise this new space. There has been a fear of threat also for a few of them as the PRIs were to involve in many of the areas where NGOs were involved. NGOs have not always understood the PRI system, its concept, scope and relevance. Some of the NGOs initially expected to directly benefit from decentralisation. Many among them consider Panchayati Raj as just another politically motivated government departmental programme and are not supportive as a consequence. Initial problems consisted of role clashes, 'we only know' attitude, even wounded feelings and generally a lack of vision and energy. However, those NGOs that did cooperate with the PRIs saw this as an opportunity to reorient themselves through this process. Some changed from traditional development activities to new roles (introduction of innovations and new techniques, planning support). Some NGOs have even been chosen by PRIs to enter into partnership for developmental activities. Exclusion or inclusion of NGOs in the decentralisation process can happen both deliberately or otherwise. In such situations, only those NGOs that proactively search for or even forcefully enter the Panchayat space can play a role.

Relationships and Processes

Role clarity is very crucial in PRI-NGO collaborations. Conflicts arise if NGO activities affect the political sphere. PRIs generally appreciate help for sorting out concrete problems, but criticism is resisted. For the NGOs, the question is whether it is a partnership or a hierarchical relationship. Crucial question is also who gets the credit for successful projects. An important factor that prevents closer PRI – NGO collaboration is the persistent conflicts between the main actors in the local arena like the SHGs, NGOs and PRIs. In addition, certain NGOs show clear reluctance to accept the supremacy of the democratically elected representatives. Mutual 'get-to-know each other' process usually takes time and once relationship is established with the key actors and results are visible, acceptance is good. Transparency is crucial to avoid conflicts. Evidently,





complete transparency of NGO activities is also a must in PRI-NGO collaboration.

Topics / Fields

In general, support is appreciated for tasks that cannot be done by Panchayats themselves. NGOs are welcome if they give financial support, or if they efficiently execute the tasks. NGOs are generally perceived as scientific and professional (i.e. qualified for specific problems) and are expected to be used as specialised knowledge resource. This, however, does not always turn out to be true. NGOs can be useful for grass root activities and strengthening of the social relationships only if Panchayats feel that they need this kind of support. Insufficient number of local NGOs with required capacity is a problem and some NGOs cannot provide valid advice on concrete problems and their performance may be sub-standard. NGO capacity and credibility in the support to advocacy issues is limited unlike that of the voluntary agencies. But, they can provide capacity building support, help in village based studies, assist in the conduct and strengthening of Gram Sabhas, assist in beneficiary selection, project planning, implementation and monitoring. They can also support PRIs in the roles of service providers, facilitators, experts, resource persons, etc. Integration of NGO activities at the local level with PRI activities and transfer of technical skills will benefit the Panchayati Raj system and village development. Major NGOs and voluntary agencies could also work towards mobilising, reorienting and empowering local level organisational forms discussed above for strengthening Panchayati Raj.

Panchayat Associations

There are the Gram, Block and District Panchayat Associations. While the Municipalities have the Chamber of Municipal Chairpersons, Corporations have the Mayors' Council. Gram and Block Panchayat Associations have their state and district level organisational committees. The state level Panchayat associations presently function as lobby for implementation related practical problems faced

by the Panchayats. District level Panchayat associations in general are dormant, with a few exceptions, which have attempted the organisation of orientation programmes and seminars.

There exists clearly untapped potential for the state Panchayat associations to play a more proactive role in conceptual and strategic questions of decentralisation, beyond purely operational issues. They can perform a coordinating role, bringing together all possible support for strengthening Panchayati Raj.

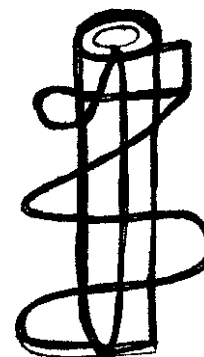
Academic and Nodal Institutions

Various universities including the Agricultural University and other technical institutions, colleges, schools, CDS, KILA, SIRD, IMG, CESS, CWRDM etc. have large potential in strengthening the Panchayati Raj system, considering the vast number of subjects transferred to PRIs. There is an undisputed need for technical advice at the local level, which could be provided by these specialised academic institutions. To a limited extent, such collaborations have happened in the past. In fact, the University of Calicut even has a Compulsory Social Service programme through which students are participating in the Panchayati Raj processes. But, operational strategy needs to be clearly spelt out and potentials need to be tapped.

There is also, however, an overall lack of information and awareness on both sides. Academic institutions are not aware of the field level problems faced by the Panchayats, while Panchayats do not know what the institutions could offer by way of advice. It is here that the institutions and Panchayat Associations can come together and work towards strengthening Panchayati Raj.

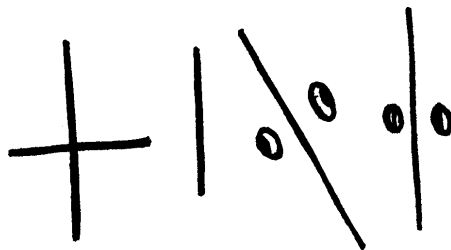
Other Actors

There are other groups also which have roles to play like the media, political parties, religious groups and the professional organisations. As of now their involvement in the decentralisation process is nominal, sometimes only critical or negative and many a time silent.



The potentials of political parties, nongovernmental organisations, community based organizations and other civil society organisations have also not been tapped for strengthening the decentralisation process and the Panchayats. Thanks to their mass base and wider membership network, civil society organisations can play a major role in citizen participation and in creating support structures for the Panchayats. The potentials of the academia have also not been explored. Intervention strategies are necessary for creating a support base for the Panchayats among the political parties, NGOs, civil society organizations, mass media and academia.

An important group that has contributed a lot to the decentralisation process in Kerala has been the highly motivated and committed voluntary workers who served the People's Plan Campaign as Key Resource Persons, District Resource Persons and Coordinators. The Coordinators were from the Government departments, but had been very supportive to the Panchayats and functioned with the same level of motivation and commitment as that of the KRPs. All of them follow the legacy of the Literacy Movement of Kerala. Panchayats consider their non-involvement at present as a major loss.



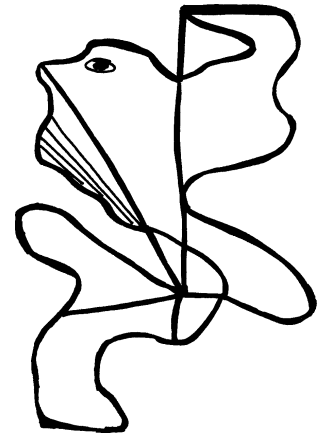
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OTHER GENERAL ISSUES OF CONCERN

Kerala had an experiment of District Councils for a short period. The District Councils covered the entire geographical area without making any artificial demarcation between rural and urban divisions. It encountered very little problem with regard to spatial integrated planning, district level administration, monitoring and evaluation by the officials. Under the present arrangement, urban areas are excluded from the District Panchayat and it has raised a new set of problems related to planning and administration. The District Planning Committee, which is supposed to address the above problems, is not a fool proof mechanism and has not yet started performing in the role assigned to it. To overcome the in-built structural problems of the District Panchayat, there is a demand to create enabling provisions in the Constitution for bridging spatial divide. Since setting up of District Councils and bridging spatial divide needs further Constitutional amendment, it has been suggested that working out a package of strategies to strengthen the District Planning Committee may be tried. However, no serious attempt has been made so far in this direction.

The general observation is that the parallel bodies undermine the purpose for which the Constitution was amended. There is a proliferation of bodies or institutions of different varieties at the grass root level. It is important to note that without losing their identity and legitimacy, they can all be brought under the overall control of the Panchayats, thanks to the overall capacity gained by the Panchayat with the decentralised planning. However, poor coordination of the departments and Panchayati Raj institutions at district and sub district levels has nullified its impact.

The DRDA, in practice, has not been merged with the District Panchayat. In certain cases the District Development Council (DDC) is working as parallel structure to the District Panchayat and DPC. There are other areas also where





poor coordination is observed like in the case of centrally sponsored schemes, MLA and MP funds. Moreover, the district administration and the District Panchayat are two parallel structures at the district level. When the word 'district administration' is referred to either in media or in development communication or anywhere, the District Collector continues to be the main power centre in the district and the District Panchayat is totally ignored. The District Collector, the highest-ranking bureaucrat in the district, heads the district administration. He/she is not the secretary of the District Panchayat, as one would expect in a representative system.

As per the recommendations of the Sen Committee, the State Development Council has been constituted. It is meant for formulating policies related to decentralization and Panchayats and for reviewing the working of Panchayati Raj institutions. It is headed by the Chief Minister and consists of the ministers, Leader of the Opposition, Vice Chairman of the State Planning Board, Chief Secretary and all the District Panchayat Presidents and a few representatives of Block and Gram Panchayats. The working of the State Development Council is not properly regularised and operationalised. So far it is not involved in any major policy formulation or in resolving any major operational issues.

All said and done, the bottom line is how the existing Panchayati Raj Institutions can be transformed into organs of good governance at grass root level, so as to ensure social justice, to fight poverty and move towards local economic development. Making a dialectical interface between citizens, civil society organizations, rural polity, economy, society and Panchayat could be the tool to ensure these. A 'New Panchayati Raj' with conceptual clarity, vision for future action and the required capacity needs to be groomed in Kerala which would show the path for all the states in India.