

**THE NEW PANCHAYAT RAJ IN KERALA
REFLECTIONS ON ITS INSTITUTIONALIZATION
AND DEVELOPMENTAL RECORD**

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ABSTRACT

The Kerala experience in the institutionalization of the new panchayat raj as well as its novel idea of 'people's planning' as a means for decentralized development is widely appreciated and acknowledged. This study focuses on the factors that have contributed to the institutionalization of the new panchayat raj and some of its 'best practices'. Several factors can be identified in the success of Kerala in establishing and subsequently institutionalizing a system of decentralized governance. Among them the foremost is the presence of a vibrant public sphere for which the foundations were laid during the freedom movement which in the state was radicalized into a proletarian movement for economic and social emancipation. What imparted the Kerala context a distinctive character was the prior existence of strong people's organizations that not only mobilized the people across the state but also developed models and experiments in decentralized development. By the end of the 1930s itself Kerala's public sphere witnessed the emergence of many people's organizations and movements such as the workers' organizations, village library movement, teachers' and writers' organizations not to speak of the overarching political movements. This background enabled the creation of a critical mass of organic individuals that paved the way for new movements such as the people's science, movements of marginalised sections such as fish workers, dalits and adivasis in the subsequent period. Despite enabling political and socio-economic conditions successful experiments in decentralization have been marked by the creative leadership roles of select individuals. The lesson that one is tempted to draw from the best practices is the critical role of leadership and commitment. However, the counter forces, both within Kerala as well as the country at large, to the new structure for governance and development are also at work and the challenges ahead could be stronger if the forces of neo liberalism and its concomitant globalization gain further strength.

Key words: Institutionalization of new panchayat raj, people's planning, public sphere, decentralized development, neoliberal policy

Introduction

Despite the historic nature of the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Indian Constitution in 1993 mandating the creation of a third tier of government with clearly listed functions, the process of embedding this decentralised system in the society and polity continues to be a formidable challenge. With highly inadequate devolution of finance as well as functionaries, the new panchayat raj in a large number of states have not yet been able to emerge as effective institutions as envisaged in the constitutional amendment¹. Despite such an overall picture, a few states such as Maharashtra, Kerala, Karnataka and Tripura have emerged as best performers in a relative sense². Viewed from the perspective of people's participation, political mobilization and the opportunities created for innovative schemes for local development and governance, Kerala seems to be a leading state despite the fact that it has been a latecomer to the introduction of the new panchayat raj.

A reasonably large literature has already emerged that informs one about the Kerala experience in the institutionalization of the new panchayat raj as well as its novel idea of 'people's planning' as a

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- 1 The Expert Committee on Leveraging Panchayats for Efficient Delivery of Public Goods and Services constituted by the Government of India under the chairmanship of Shri Mani Shankar Iyer noted in its report (Towards Holistic Panchayat Raj) dated 24 April 2013 stated: "After hearing the oral evidence and perusing the available literature, the Committee find, after two decades of Panchayat Raj sanctioned by the Constitution, that the implementation of the mandatory provisions of Part IX relating to the constitution of PRIs, holding regular elections under the aegis of State Election Commissioners, receiving five-year recommendations of State Finance Commissions etc. have been successfully accomplished, and the District Planning Committees provided for in Part IXA have also been largely established. The Committee then stated: "However the implementation of the operative core of Part IX relating to devolution of the 3Fs – Functions, Finances, Functionaries – has been far from in accord with the letter and spirit of the Constitution amendments notwithstanding numerous directives from the Prime Minister downwards and the interventions of the Planning Commission"(p.15). In an attempt to identify the main reason, the Committee subsequently noted: "The obvious explanation for the slow and halting pace and pattern of Panchayat Raj is a *lack of political will* [emphasis added] to proceed with the Constitutional schema. Yet, the very fact of compliance with the mandatory provisions of Part IX would appear to indicate that "the flesh is willing but the spirit is weak". For in consequence of compliance with the mandatory provisions, there has been an impressive, indeed overwhelming surge in institutions of democratically elected local self-government institutions all over rural (and urban) India. The number of these grassroots self-government institutions is around 2.5 lakhs, about 2,38,000 of which are PRIs; the number of elected members about 32 lakh (3.2 million); the number of women representatives upward of 12 lakh (1.2 million); and the number of women office holders ranging above 86,000. There are more women representatives in India alone than in the rest of the world put together" (p. 35).
 - 2 In 2013, the Government of India instituted a new award as an incentive to encourage strengthening of panchayat institutions by the states. The award is based on a Panchayat Strengthening Index (PSI). Under the cumulative PSI, the first four states which secured the award were Maharashtra, Karnataka, Kerala and Tripura in that order.

means for decentralised development³. Our idea therefore is not intended to tread the same territory but to focus on the factors that have contributed to the institutionalization of the new panchayat raj and some of its 'best practices'. Our own view based on extensive interactions with elected representatives in the panchayats, its officials, social activists as well as visits to selected areas is that at least one fifth of the total 1,209 (as of 2010 elections) local governments could be deemed to be functioning in an exemplary manner. While this could be reckoned as an impressive number, it is not implied that the remaining 80 per cent of the local governments are in bad shape. On the contrary, the establishment of the new panchayat raj has given all the local government bodies a certain space, legitimacy, and people's approval going by their ability to discharge the mandated services as well as stipulated development interventions. One major hall mark of the panchayats in Kerala is their physical facilities in terms of own buildings and office equipment, official motor vehicle, the availability of staff (ranging from 12 to 20 officials in a village panchayat), a reasonable share of own revenue in total revenue (around 30 per cent) and high participation of women in both the elected members (52 per cent) as well as in the implementation of the services and schemes (through the women's network known as *Kudumbasree*).

Several factors can be identified in the relative success of Kerala in establishing and subsequently institutionalising a system of decentralised governance. First and foremost is the opportunity provided by the constitutional amendment mandating the creation of a three-tier decentralised structure of governance albeit with limited powers largely consisting of local level development functions. Second, by the time the constitutional amendment took effect, Kerala was well prepared, politically speaking, for implementing the constitutional amendment in a substantive sense. Third, Kerala society was already dense with people's organizations and movements that have, on their own, initiated a significant number of experiments in local level development planning and awareness creation. Fourth, the contributions of a select number of institutions of excellence in research and development were available for the state and their continued collaboration contributed significantly to the methodology of local level development and its implementation. Last, but not least, the highly articulate demands emanating from the civil society acted as a source of 'effective social demand' putting considerable pressure on the state governments with alternating ruling political coalitions to respond by strengthening and/or establishing new institutions for strengthening the capabilities of the newly created panchayat raj institutions.

These larger factors perhaps contributed to preparing the social and political terrain in Kerala in paving the way for a high profile launch of the new panchayat raj. At the same time, these factors should be counted as the motivating environment for many panchayats to generate new ideas and introduce innovative practices. Therefore, what is being emphasized is that successes at the local

3. See, for example, Isaac and Harilal (1997), Isaac and Franke (2000), Kannan (2000), John and Chathukulam (2002), Chaudhuri, et. al. (2004), Heller, et.al. (2007).

level cannot entirely be attributed to factors internal to it unless we appreciate the larger environment that enabled such initiatives. This takes us to briefly discuss this larger context that is also a commentary on Kerala's long journey towards decentralized governance and development. However, it is important to spell out the larger theoretical framework of decentralized democracy and development within the context of a society that is struggling to come out of its feudal moorings to a modern democratic and socially inclusive one.

A Broad Theoretical Framework

A firm theoretical model for discussing decentralized governance and development is “still in its infancy”, as Bardhan has put it (2002:203). Given the structural problems of underdevelopment, the hold of feudal norms and moorings, extensive monitoring and enforcement problems, the arena of decentralization is an evolving one. In our view, elements of a theoretical framework can be gleaned only through an understanding of the specific socio-political context and its historical evolution. The idea of the emergence of a ‘public sphere, a la Habermas (1964)⁴’ perhaps provides a template to understand the larger social setting within which decentralization as a public issue has been discussed and debated in the Kerala society. For Habermas, the public sphere is “a sphere which mediates between society and state, in which the public organizes itself as the bearer of public opinion, accords with the principle of the public sphere – that principle of public information which once had to be fought for against the arcane policies of monarchies and which since that time has made possible the democratic control of state activities.” (1974:50). While the evolution of the public sphere has different connotations, the one that is useful to our discussion is the emergence of a “public sphere in the social welfare state mass democracy” (ibid.).

Although the emergence of a public sphere as an arena for the people to discuss and debate issues of common interest predated the country's independence from colonialism, its expansion and often vigorous presence took place after the constitutional inauguration of a social welfare state with mass democracy. In the Kerala context the foundations were laid during the freedom movement and its radicalization into a proletarian movement for economic and social emancipation. This was greatly facilitated by both early and evolving literacy and popular education. Decentralization was not a separately identifiable agenda but the idea and practice of decentralization were introduced as part of the then ruling system. In Malabar, constituting the northern districts of present-day Kerala, it manifested as the Malabar District Board that became an elected body from 1930. By the end of the 1930s radical political activists gained significant presence and a majority in the District Board elections in 1954. The election of representatives of radical movements – principally the then Communist Party – led to the emergence of the decentralization space for advancing the basic agenda of education and local

4. The reference is here is to the original article in German that appeared in Fischer Lexicon, *Staat und Politik*, Frankfurt am Main, 1964 and translated into English and published in *New German Critique*, No.3 (Autumn 1974) as ‘The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article’.

governance for the masses. In Travancore it manifested as Travancore Panchayat Union that experimented the idea of limited local level governance. By this time, Kerala's public sphere witnessed the emergence of many people's organizations and movements such as the workers' organizations, village library movement, teachers' and writers' movements not to speak of the overarching political movements.

These movements created, in our view, a critical mass of organic intellectuals *a la* Gramsci that paved the way for new movements since the 1960s and 70s such as the people's science, movements of marginalised sections such as fish workers, dalits and adivasis. The class of organic intellectuals in the Kerala context could be identified as school teachers, educated youth often without a regular occupation, lower and middle level bureaucracy with strong roots in their village/local setting, writers and artists rooted in a rural setting, a small but emerging class of persons with professional or scientific knowledge in some specialized areas working in public administration, print media, teaching and a few research institutions. The group also included what Habermas calls 'moral entrepreneurs' especially those who called attention to supposedly neglected issues. Those within a Gandhian tradition often explicitly advocated the idea of 'panchayat raj' for which there was a pan-Indian perspective. Such a background accords with Habermas's five types of actors who are actively present in an established public sphere (Habermas 2006). They are: (a) lobbyists who represent special interest groups; (b) advocates who either represent general interest groups or substitute for lack of representation of marginalized groups that are unable to voice their interests effectively; (c) experts who are credited with professional or scientific knowledge in some specialized area and are invited to give advice; (d) moral entrepreneurs who generate public attention for supposedly neglected issues; and (e) intellectuals who have gained, unlike advocates or moral entrepreneurs, a perceived personal reputation in some field (e.g. as writers or academics) and who engage, unlike experts and lobbyists, spontaneously in public discourse with the declared intention of promoting general interests.

All these segments were relevant to the Kerala context, as we shall see in our subsequent discussion. In some cases, as for example in the people's science movement, the presence of the last segment was particularly important in promoting and pushing the idea and practice of decentralized development, among other things.

Supporters of the idea and practice of decentralization vary across societies as well as within a society. Enlightened administrators, both political and bureaucratic, often subscribe to the principle of subsidiarity and hence avoiding transaction costs as well as other forms of barriers to people to secure their entitlements. Some others such as environmentalists advocate because of its virtue where local people have a voice in influencing and determining the type and pattern of development. Yet some others value decentralization for its own sake because centralization often leads to domination and a lack of respect to local demands and cultures. However, there are also those who oppose decentralization both in governance and development favouring a strong nation-state and a lack of

trust on the ability of the ‘local’ to decide on priorities. If rent-seeking is the dominant characteristic of politics and governance today then the support for decentralization would be quite weak or even antagonistic by those who stand to benefit from such rent-seeking. This indeed is a continuing reality and the onset of economic liberalization in India seems to have enhanced enormously the scope for such centralized rent-seeking.

It is in such a framework that we attempt the progress of decentralized governance and development in Kerala. Given that the attention is to highlight the best practices, the examples cited here should be viewed as a triumph of the public sphere where the people, as stakeholders, have devised ways and means to overcome the inherited as well as created barriers. This does not mean that the larger counter forces, both within Kerala as well as the country at large, have become weaker or come to terms with this new structure for governance and development. In fact, the challenges ahead could be much more forceful if the forces of neo liberalism and its concomitant globalization gain further strength.

The Social Context

A constitutional mandate in a large, populous, federal state with a fair degree of autonomy to sub-national states is, however, not a sufficient condition for its effective implementation. From a constitutional point of view, all the states in India have, within a long period of ten years, formally established the panchayat raj but few are committed to their effective functioning⁵. Part of this is reflected in the limited devolution of funds, or functionaries or both, and the basic infrastructure in terms of office buildings and facilities. But the real hindrance is the absence of a political commitment both at the national and the sub-national i.e. state levels.

In the Kerala context, it was fortuitous that the constitutional amendment came about when Kerala itself was experimenting with its own versions of decentralization. Given the adoption of decentralization as a political agenda by the leftist political forces represented by the Left Democratic Front this long pending federalist objective emerged as a major socio-political agenda. What imparted the Kerala context a distinctive character was the prior existence of strong people’s organizations that not only mobilized the people across the state but also developed models and experiments in decentralised development. The most important organization in this respect in Kerala is the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (popularly known by its acronym KSSP) which is often referred to as one spearheading a people’s science movement.

Given its central objective of popularizing science - interpreted as a systematized body of knowledge in all disciplines - and subsequently adopting the slogan ‘science for social revolution’, the KSSP

5. We have already noted the finding of the Expert Committee on Leveraging Panchayats for Efficient Delivery of Public Goods and Services whose Chairperson played a critical role in pushing the idea of constitutional amendment and drafting the constitutional amendment bill during the Prime Ministership of Rajiv Gandhi (1984-89).

played a singularly unique role in conscientizing the people on the importance of decentralization to stimulate people to think of their local developmental priorities and possible solutions. As far back as 1976, the idea of setting up Village Science Forums (*Grama Sastra Samitis* in Malayalam) was mooted by one of its prominent activists, P.T. Bhaskara Panicker, who had by then attained the stature of a crusader for social change with a modernist socialist outlook, sometimes referred to as a member of ‘Gandhian socialists’ because of their simplicity, honesty and integrity in public life. He was in the forefront of literacy and village library movements, an early leader of teachers’ association, a writer in Malayalam popularising science and progressive thought, a champion for governance reforms and so on. Work on this started in bits and pieces as a process of ‘learning by doing’ by enlisting groups of specialists in development economics, water management, ecology, forestry, engineering and other related disciplines that was part of a larger agenda on Kerala’s development that KSSP took upon itself since the mid-seventies⁶. A preliminary attempt at preparing a village development plan was tried in the Vazhayoor Panchayat in Kozhikode district as early as 1978 responding to the unbounded enthusiasm of the local activists⁷. A little magazine called *Grama Sastram* (Village Science) was published although it could not be continued for long. These initial forays into village level development issues prepared the ground for a debate on ‘appropriate technology’ that was intended to help increase productivity without labour-displacement so long as it leads to higher rate of growth in output resulting in a higher rate of labour absorption compared to the rate of labour displacement. KSSP’s attempt to link with similar organisations elsewhere in the country resulted in an increased confidence in the value of decentralized development. An all India convention of people’s science movements held in 1978 was a turning point in joining and engaging in a national debate on people’s developmental issues of a transformative nature (see Kannan 1979 for proceedings of the convention). Subsequent initiatives and experiments by KSSP strengthened not only its resolve but also capability in campaigning for a decentralised development model for Kerala. These included:

- (a) Developing several models and experiments in improving health care at the local level along with a campaign to strengthen Kerala’s famed public health care system. Later the KSSP was instrumental in launching a people’s health movement both in Kerala and at the all India level. The campaign in Kerala was based on a community survey of ten thousand households, the first

6. In 1976, the KSSP published a book titled *Kerala’s Wealth* focusing on people as the central agency for socio-economic change and used it for conducting popular education through classes and discussions (thirty thousand in the first year itself) for the next several years. More than 50 thousand copies of the book were sold. The initiative for organizing a team of authors and preparing the book was taken up by M.P. Parameswaran, a nuclear engineer who gave up his job for popularization of science. Besides himself the other authors of this book consisted of K.N. Shyamasundaran Nair, an agricultural scientist, T.R. Thankappan Achary, an expert on the socio-economic aspects of the fisheries sector (both of them working at the Kerala State Planning Board), P.R.G. Nair, K.N. Nair, C.T.S. Nair and K.P. Kannan (all working at that time at the Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum).

7. This local level initiative was spear headed by a primary school teacher, A.P. Chandran Master, who worked ceaselessly to prepare a blue print for the development of his panchayat involving the participation of panchayat members, youth activists and others. This author, along with M.K. Prasad, a noted environmentalist and an activist of KSSP were closely associated with this exercise.

of its kind in the state, to understand the health condition of the people across different socio-economic segments (see Kannan, et.al. 1990). This was followed by another repeat survey in 1995 (see Kunhikannan and Aravindan 2000). Subsequent updating of health condition formed part of a comprehensive study on the socio-economic conditions of the people of Kerala (see Aravindan and Menon 2010). It bears worth mentioning that all these three studies were published in both Malayalam and English.

- (b) Improving school education by motivating teachers, students and parents and their associations through publication and sale of books in science and in other subjects, creation of science clubs and special efforts in enhancing the learning capability of lagging students. In fact, the area of education, especially school education, has been a major arena of activity of the KSSP with several novel experiments given the fact that a significant number of members of the organization consisted of school teachers. The total literacy campaign that the KSSP launched in 1989, following the setting up of a Literacy Mission at the national level by the Government of India in which a leading activist M.P. Parameswaran was nominated as a Member, unleashed the enthusiasm of a significant number of social activists as well as new youth to take up local level development issues. An off-shoot of this campaign was the further direct contact of the activists with the people at the local level and an awareness of the potential for organizing them for their development. The earlier debate on appropriate technology and its relevance to local level development got a further impetus through such contacts and pushed further the development and dissemination of appropriate technologies which the late A.K.N. Reddy had called “democratization of innovation”⁸.
- (c) The setting up of an Integrated Rural Technology Centre (IRTC) in Palakkad district in 1990 was a turning point in enhancing the KSSP’s collective capability to undertake studies and experiments in decentralized development and then translate some of its propagative ideas into concrete action. The specific activities related to: (a) land and water management at the micro level of a panchayat as well as identified watersheds, (b) efficient use of energy devices and development of renewable sources of energy, and (c) developing new models and approaches for developing agriculture and other primary economic activities. Examples of projects included mapping for micro watersheds and land development, developing a heat efficient and smokeless stove, portable biogas plants of different sizes for processing bio wastes that produces cooking gas as well as bio-fertilizer, and transforming rural craft and cottage industries through skill up gradation. Later IRTC also teamed up with scientists from research institutions in producing resource maps for village panchayats and models for decentralised planning. Through these efforts the KSSP gained not only considerable experience but also a certain degree of credibility among the people and institutions.

8. See Reddy 1979.

- (d) Developing models for ‘group farming’ to reduce not only the farmers’ individual costs but also to push the agricultural sector from a low productivity one to a high productivity activity consistent with ecological sustainability. This resulted in developing what is called Group Approach for Locally Adapted Sustainable Agriculture – known by its acronym GALASA. The model originated in a context in which the LDF government of 1987-91 had already initiated the idea and practice of ‘group farming’ by encouraging farmers to pool their decisions on the calendar of cultivation practices, common application and receipt of subsidies through farmers’ associations in a geographically contiguous area of cultivation called *padasekharam*, and initiate joint activities for agricultural development to reap economies of scale.
- (e) KSSP was also instrumental in slowly but steadily concretizing a model for decentralised planning at the panchayat level. Towards the end of the 1980s, key activists of the KSSP interacted with scientists and academics and experts in some of the research and development institutions – the Centre for Earth Science Studies, the Centre for Development Studies, and the State Land Use Board – and developed a model of Resource Mapping of Panchayats. To begin with such maps were prepared for 25 village panchayats.
- (f) The challenge of going beyond resource mapping to local level planning was later experimented in the Kalliasseri Panchayat (Kannur district) with strong support from the local political leadership led by the CPI (M) and the panchayat functionaries.

The KSSP’s singular contribution in preparing Kerala’s social terrain by way of debating, motivating and training a large number of youth and other dedicated persons on decentralized planning is yet to be fully appreciated, let alone documented, within the larger historical context of Kerala’s continuing socio-economic transformation. In that sense the KSSP entered Kerala’s historically evolved ‘public sphere’ in its own way marked by a holistic development agenda. This in turn created a ‘public sphere’ where the development agenda became a people’s agenda, as opposed to a state-agenda, for public discussion and debate.

While the KSSP was a leading force in generating ideas and experimenting with them for a people-centred development in which decentralized development formed an integral part, there were a number of other organisations and movements that contributed to the preparation of Kerala’s social terrain, nay public sphere, for implementing the new panchayat raj as envisaged in the constitutional amendments of 1993-94. Mention should be made of the Centre of Science and Technology for Rural Development known as COSTFORD whose core activity was in designing, developing and propagating cost-effective building construction using, as far as possible, locally available materials following the philosophy and practice of famed architect and humanist Laurie Baker⁹. In addition, COSTFORD, set

9 The COSTFORD was started in 1985 at the initiative of C. Achutha Menon, a visionary Chief Minister of Kerala (1969-77), after he retired from party political activity. In this venture he was joined by two other outstanding personalities viz., K.N. Raj, a world renowned economist and the founder of Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram and Laurie Baker himself.

up in 1985, also undertook rural development activities such as training and propagation of appropriate technology, women's empowerment, skill development and so on. It played a crucial role in building houses for the poor under the government sponsored programmes at an unimaginably cost-effective way. Such acquiring of institutional capability turned out to be of great value during the 'people's plan campaign' when the organization trained a large number of elected panchayat members, officials and experts associated with it.

Many organizations opposing the environmentally destructive projects and policies of the government had sprung up in Kerala following the movement to save the Silent Valley beginning from 1978. They all shared a natural affinity with decentralized development with emphasis on land and water development and management, protection and regeneration of natural resources such as forests and agricultural lands, preventing pollution of water and air. They also worked for promoting alternative energy sources and their development, afforestation, waste management, organic farming and a whole range of both protective and promotional measures for sustaining a rich environmental legacy. A combination of motivations ranging from love of nature to a search for a new paradigm of development gave birth to, as in many other parts of India, a number of non-state developmental groups and organizations capable of imparting professional training and assistance.

What we are trying to convey here is the crucial role played by the civil society organisations which, in the Kerala context, consists of people's movements and organisations that came up or became active since the late seventies focusing on developmental issues that have a direct bearing on people's welfare cutting across many, if not all, social and economic divides. It is no exaggeration to say that despite (or because of?) the increasing hegemony of neoliberal economic policies both at the national and state levels, Kerala's public sphere continues to generate a rich repertoire of 'moral entrepreneurs', intellectuals and social activists 'who engage spontaneously in public discourse with the declared intention of promoting general interests'.

Needless to say the contribution of these new developmental organizations with a decidedly pro-people agenda considerably enriched and enlivened Kerala's public sphere. This also led to their being labelled as "anti-developmentalists" by state organs and agencies and rent seeking elements within the political and techno-bureaucratic class.

Role of Academic and Scientific Institutions

If the panchayat raj in Kerala today has acquired some degree of professional capability and has become an arena for a myriad of innovative ideas and initiatives, part of that credit should go to the synergy that was earlier developed between academic and scientific institutions of higher learning on the one side, and social activists, on the other, both imbued with a zeal to use the development agenda as a transformative one in favour of the common people which in turn was positively responded to by a willing state, if not wholly, but significantly.

In terms of decentralized planning and development, the Centre for Development Studies made significant contributions in generating ideas, providing a platform for debates and working in close collaboration with other research institutions and the concerned agencies and departments of the government. Its founder and renowned economist K.N. Raj's vision was perhaps central to the CDS's long-standing engagement with the subject of decentralised development. The first Working Paper published in 1971 and authored by K.N. Raj was on decentralised planning at the district level (see Raj 1971). While chalking out a perspective for Kerala's development Raj and his colleagues at the CDS had also put forward the idea of 'labour banks' which he called 'labour-cum-development banks' as a feasible route for providing gainful employment given the surplus labour and high incidence of unemployment in Kerala¹⁰. If the idea of 'labour banks' is common today in many panchayats in Kerala, it is only appropriate to recollect this little known and a more integrated idea floated in Kerala way back in the early seventies. With the support of the then Chief Minister Achutha Menon, Raj could also witness the implementation of this idea in a panchayat in Ernakulam district although the experiment did not succeed then possibly because, in our opinion, it was ahead of its time (see CDS/UN (1975:110-119). The CDS reactivated the idea of decentralised development in 1980 when the LDF government, under the chief ministership of E.K. Nayanar, was keen to explore this agenda. Given the involvement of some young researchers with the work of KSSP and the Centre's own initiatives a number of opportunities opened up for further work. However, sustained work on decentralised development got started with the struggle to get a bill passed in the Kerala Legislative Assembly following the constitutional amendments. In 1994, the CDS started a special unit for promoting research, both within and outside, on decentralised development under a scheme called the Kerala Research Programme in Local Level Development that was funded by the development cooperation agency of the government of The Netherlands. It was under this programme a pilot project was undertaken by the KSSP to prepare a blueprint for participatory development planning for five panchayats and executed by a team of researchers under the umbrella of the IRTC (see IRTC 2002)¹¹. By this time, I.S. Gulati, a well-known economist of the CDS, was invited, for the second time, to join the government as the Vice Chairman of the State Planning Board. His association

10 The idea of labour-cum-development bank was to create a credit agency for panchayats to take up developmental schemes that will increase output as well as create employment for the unemployed. Panchayats, workers and landowners were to become stakeholders with imaginative savings from additional output to be mobilised for further directly productive as well as social investment. The experiments initiated in the early seventies did not succeed for a variety of reasons but the idea of 'labour bank' as well as 'land bank' seems to have now gained currency under the new panchayat raj.

11 This document makes interesting reading on several counts. First, it makes some attempt, even if rhetorically, to bring in ethical and moral issues relating to participation that often does not gel well with the ground reality. Second, while not spelling out a methodology it makes an attempt to open up issues that are in the realm of sustainable development. Third, it gives its frank views on the ground realities of party politics and bureaucratic approaches that are not always in tandem with its own view of participatory planning. Its value, in my opinion, lies in its non-official approach and organization of the study and the lessons it offers for a more thorough preparation in dealing with participatory development and its planning.

further cemented the collaboration of the CDS both with the State Planning Board as well as with the KSSP and also brought into the fold the other research organisations.

The Centre for Earth Science Studies (CESS), located in Trivandrum a couple of kilometres from the CDS, was another research institution that contributed to the practice of decentralized planning. During 1987-91, scientists from the CESS were invited to undertake pilot studies on resource mapping of panchayats which they demonstrated by taking up the then Ulloor Panchayat. Subsequently this was extended to 25 Village Panchayats and later, in 1996, when the 'People's Plan Campaign' was launched to as many panchayats as possible. For the first time in the whole of India, resource maps were prepared for a large number of Village Panchayats in Kerala within a short span of time (for details see, Chattopadhyay and Frankie 2006)¹². There are also a number of other institutions of research and higher learning who have, in one way or another, contributed to the advancement of the idea and practice of decentralized development. Mention should be made of the Centre for Water Resource Development and Management in Kozhikode, the Kerala Agricultural University (located in Thrissur with colleges in Trivandrum), and the Kerala Forest Research Institute, Thrissur. In addition, institutions directly under the government have also played a crucial role. The most important contribution is that of the Kerala Institute of Local Administration, located in Thrissur, which emerged as an important centre for training a large number of elected representatives and officials of the three tier panchayat raj. Although their faculty strength is quite minimal, the strategy of inviting scholars, experts, experienced officials and social activists as consultants and guests for training and documentation proved to be a highly productive exercise. The State Planning Board (SPB), being the chief agency in matters relating to Plan fund allocation, district level planning and coordination of various local plans, assumed a crucial role. Since 1995, this has propelled the SPB, in my view, to a higher profile in Kerala's development planning and administration. However, during periods of LDF rule, the SPB has been much more proactive than during the UDF rule although there is basic agreement on the agenda of decentralization.

Women and Panchayat Raj: The Role of Kudumbasree

Kudumbasree, now a common vocabulary in public discourse in Kerala, is a network of women's groups beginning with the local level¹³. At the primary level, Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs) each

12 While this has provided a 'base line of maps' it is important to repeat the exercise with a reasonable frequency say, five to ten years, for subsequent rounds of planning as well as for local level governance purposes. That such exercises have not been carried out by a large number of panchayats goes to show that the initial enthusiasm has not been sufficiently absorbed at the local level

13 The Kudumbasree network arose out of an urban poverty alleviation scheme experimented in the Alappuzha Municipality in the early 1990s by the state government with technical support from the regional office of the UNICEF (United Nations Children's Educational Fund) located in Chennai. It developed a system of identifying the poor households by using a deprivation index and then targeting the women in those households for organising and come out of their situation of manifold deprivation through 'self help' that in practice meant the constitution of 'mutual help societies' in the spirit of collective oprganizations that later got federated into a strong network.

consisting of not more than twenty women are formed; these NHGs in a given Panchayat Ward are then organised into an Area Development Society (ADS) and these societies come under a Community Development Society (CDS) in each Village Panchayat/Municipality¹⁴. A major policy decision in 1998 that should be marked as a watershed gave an entirely new profile to the *Kudumbasree* in the poverty alleviation programme in the state. The decision was to implement all its anti-poverty and poverty alleviation schemes only through the *Kudumbasree* network. This led to the setting up of a State Poverty Alleviation Mission in 1998 as a government support system to the *Kudumbasree* units across the state. It is, in our view, an innovative ‘hand-holding’ agency for the organisational and economic empowerment of women from poorer households. The decision to devolve a number of functions that has to do with poverty alleviation as well as child care, old age care and health care to the panchayats created an important collaborative link between the panchayats and *Kudumbasree* groups. As such the *Kudumbasree* groups are now involved in supplying a part of the supplementary food (called ‘nutrameal’ of multigrain powder) to the child-care centres called *anganawadis* under the four-decade old centrally sponsored scheme called the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), work as Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) under the National Rural Health Mission and the care of the aged and destitute under a scheme called *Ashraya* of the state government.

Having established their mark, the *Kudumbasree* network got a shot in the arm when the state government decided to designate it, in 2005, as the sole agency for implementing the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme later known as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MG-NREGS). Since women are the major beneficiaries of this scheme, it was a case of beneficiary being designated as agency (for a case study of the functioning of *Kudumbasree* at the panchayat level see, Kannan and Jagajeevan 2013).

Today, the CDS has an office in every village panchayat provided by the Panchayat Council. Occasional difficulties such as delays in payment or inadequate support notwithstanding, the *Kudumbasree* women have come to show a remarkable degree of leadership, management capability and articulation of issues concerning their work. The emergence of such a relationship between the new panchayat and an association of women’s network is perhaps an exceptional feature of the new panchayat raj in Kerala. A somewhat different associational body of women from poorer households came into being in Andhra Pradesh, (now the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana) in recent times but without the advantage of any formal collaborative role with the village panchayats. This model, along with the Andhra model, seems to have also influenced thinking on policy at the national level that has now resulted in the setting up of a National Rural Livelihood Mission in 2010 by the Government of India. It is altogether a different matter whether such replication without regard to the socio-political and economic conditions would ensure the desired result.

14 A municipality may register more than one CDS, if found necessary.

No new idea gets easily accepted especially when it is intimately related to the politics of governance and that too in a complex social terrain as Kerala where every public issue gets contested keenly and often fiercely. It is therefore important to keep in mind the larger socio-political background and the processes that took place over a period of at least two decades prior to the historic constitutional amendments. It is this preparatory work that had a society-wide appeal and not just limited to ‘micro level interventions’ (*a la* Isaac and Frankie 2000:Ch.4) that enabled the new panchayat raj to acquire a certain degree of social acceptance and credibility. The ‘People’s Plan Campaign’ (PPC) launched as a governmental agenda by the LDF government that came to power in 1996 stood on the shoulders of this two-decade long, if not more, work by social activists. Despite opposition from within and outside the LDF, the PPC was a reasonable success in energising the new panchayats. This was to a large extent due to the active participation of the earlier social activists later joined by a crop of new enthusiasts. It is in such a context that these institutions now feel empowered to exercise their constitutional rights as well as acquire a minimum level of capability in a number of areas.

The Functioning of Panchayat Raj and Some Best Practices

The new panchayat raj in Kerala has by now acquired a certain degree of capacity for local governance and planning for local level development. This was demonstrated through a ‘social reality show’ called Green Kerala Express that was broadcast in the Door Darshan Malayalam Channel from 1 March to 31 July in 2010. Out of the 978 Village Panchayats and 65 municipal bodies (as of 2010), 167 volunteered to participate in this what may be called public interrogation of the functioning of panchayat raj institutions. Of course there was an element of competition because the show selected 15 best performing panchayats in which the first three were awarded a cash prize of Rs.10 million, Rs.5 million and Rs.2.5 million respectively.

My direct involvement in this what is called ‘social reality show’ opened up a window for a very close interaction with a large number of panchayat functionaries.¹⁵ My own assessment based on this extensive interaction as well as in the field is that the agenda of local level development through the instrumentality of the new panchayat raj has come to stay. The challenge is to strengthen and expand them in the light of the emerging challenges of a fast transforming Kerala economy and society¹⁶. On the basis of the Green Kerala Express show one can get a reasonably good idea of the nature of developmental activities, welfare initiatives and fulfilling civic responsibilities.

In terms of developmental activities, the priority given to agriculture and related activities has been a notable one. The implementation of the National Rural Employment Act has given it a further boost. Many panchayats are now reviving the fast declining rice cultivation because of its comparatively

15 The author functioned as the head of the Jury that interacted and often interrogated the participating panchayat functionaries in the TV show.

16 For account of the transformation that has taken place in the Kerala economy (see Kannan 2012).

low profit and the consequent shift to other crops or the conversion of such lands into real estate in a booming construction sector. In most Village and Block panchayats watershed plans have been prepared and on that basis works have been undertaken to restore disused tanks and ponds, deepening canals and strengthening river sides and related activities that come under the rubric of land and water resource development and management. With the active participation of Krishi Bhavans (Agricultural Offices) which were established in every village panchayat even before the new panchayat raj, farmers are being given seeds and fertilizers and, in several cases, modern machinery and equipment. To counter the declining availability of agricultural labourers, 'labour banks' have been formed in several places with training in modern agricultural practices as well as in the handling of modern machinery and equipment. In several other places, groups of women under the *Kudumbasree* have come forward to undertake rice cultivation and horticulture by leasing land from farmers who have withdrawn from agriculture. These groups are known as Joint Liability Groups (JLGs) that have enabled labouring agricultural households to engage in cultivation profitably. My interactions with an ongoing social reality show for showcasing the achievement and experiences of *Kudumbasree* groups in the state has brought to the attention of the public that in every village panchayat in Kerala there are group farming undertaken by the women's groups as JLGs that are being assisted both by the *Kudumbasree* Mission as well as Panchayats through the Krishi Bhavans. In that sense, this should be seen as an emerging response to the declining profitability in agriculture and consequent weakening of this sector. What is also quite significant to note is that most of these JLGs are conducting their farming by using organic fertilizer and organic pesticides that are a first step towards organic farming. It is only a matter of further technical and financial assistance from the state (centre, state as well as local governments) before these practices are transformed into high productivity organic farming that the people in general are eagerly looking forward to.

One of the striking success stories of revival of agriculture is the initiative by the Wadakkanchery Block Panchayat in Thrissur district. The block covers nine Village Panchayats. By forming a Green Army of labourers with training, uniform dress code, equipment, and social security, the experiment has extended rice cultivation from 3,160 hectares in 2008 to 4,750 hectares in 2012. The yield has been increased from 3.5 tonnes per hectare to 5 tonnes and above. Horticulture was started during the summer season. New activities such as training in coconut climbing with the aid of a mechanical climber has been imparted not only to men but to women as well who were hitherto did not participate in that occupation. Land development activities were undertaken through a synergy created between various schemes such as MG-NREG, Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana, Agricultural Training and Management Agency, State Agricultural Department schemes through the Krishi Bhavan, Minor Irrigation Department and so on. The local cooperative bank played a remarkable role in extending credit to various agricultural activities and thereby becoming an integral part of the local developmental initiatives. The Wadakkanchery Model did attract attention not only within Kerala but at the national level as well. Recognizing its capacity, the Government of India has entrusted a major training

programme for rural women in various agricultural and related activities under the *Mahila Kisan Samakya* Programme covering the three nearby districts of Palakkad, Malappuram and Thrissur.

Livestock development is another agriculturally-related activity that has received considerable attention. While in most village panchayats the schemes are confined to distribution of milch animals, usually cows, quite a few panchayats have organised the collection and distribution of milk and some, as in the case of Elappully Village Panchayat, encouraging value added products through processing of milk. In fact, Elappully has emerged as a model village panchayat in ushering in a sort of milk revolution by increasing its daily milk production four-fold from around 4000 litres per day to 16000 litres per day. Behind such a magnificent result is a sustained effort that saw the collaboration of many agencies and the critical role played by the Veterinary Officer and his office. The model underlines the coordinating role of the village panchayat under its youthful leadership within what may be called solidaristic framework of the local community. Similar efforts in milk and other dairy production can be seen in many panchayats with varying degrees of success. As in agriculture, *Kudumbasree* women's groups have come to play a leading role in these developmental initiatives both as beneficiaries and as agency.

The fact that the national employment guarantee scheme of the central government that came into force since 2005 has been a turning point in the revival of agriculture is something that has not yet been noted, let alone appreciation, in Kerala. It gave an opportunity to panchayats to undertake land development and management works based on the watershed plans that have already been prepared in some and commissioned later in other panchayats. However, Kerala set an example in the implementation of the National Employment Guarantee Scheme by entrusting it to the Kudumbasree members' panchayat level organisation known as Community Development Society (CDS) thereby transforming the beneficiaries as agency. It should be noted that 80-90 percent of workers seeking work under the scheme in Kerala are women. By undertaking the works, the Kudumbasree has also assumed responsibility for identifying suitable projects, assessing its potential and design its field-level operationalisation (including record keeping). This has imparted a certain degree of skill in management and execution of small projects.

At the same time, the devolution of such functions as the supervision of schools and primary health centres also gave opportunities to strengthen their infrastructural facilities. Much of these relate to the construction of toilets, playgrounds and drinking water facilities in schools and construction of additional buildings and acquisition of equipment in primary health care centres. Many panchayats initiated innovative schemes for enhancing the quality of school education by providing special facilities for students who were found to be lagging behind. Akathethara Panchayat in Palakkad district, Aryanad Village panchayat in Thiruvananthapuram, and the *Thelicham* - meaning 'brightness' - initiative in Kodyathur Village Panchayat in Kozhikode district are some of the shining examples of the initiatives in the realm of school education.

Similarly, improving public health care facilities have also received the attention of many village panchayats. Many of them provided for additional facilities, supply of additional quantity of medicines and conduct of health surveys. Two notable initiatives however warrant special mention. The first one is the establishment of Buds Schools for differently-abled children who were hitherto under the sole care of their families. The initiative started in a few village panchayats caught the imagination of many others thereby giving rise to these special schools. What started as an initiative of the village panchayats have now started receiving the assistance and attention of the state government. There is a dearth of well trained and qualified teachers and given adequate governmental support that can easily be made up going by the readiness many young women and men to take up such a role. The other initiative is the establishment of Palliative Care Units in the primary health centres and a system of palliative care for those who are bedridden in their homes. The volunteers for these two initiatives are usually drawn from the Kudumbasree women's groups.

Since 2006, payments of social security pensions to destitute persons as well as other categories such as widows have been entrusted with the village panchayats. The main problem so far has been the absence of monthly payments on a regular basis. This situation is being changed. With the help of the Information Mission Kerala, every village panchayat in Kerala has been provided with a website. In addition an independent web link now provides the details of social security pension from the state government on a panchayat-wise basis with their full address, the category and amount of pension as well as the date of last payment. Such a transparent system of social security pension might perhaps be the first of its kind in the country.

There is yet another service that the village panchayats in Kerala have been providing to the neediest in the society – the destitute. A scheme called Ashraya was started in 2001 by taking advantage of the central scheme of *anna antyodaya* and topping it with state's own resources. Under the scheme destitute persons are identified at the village panchayat level in the state and are brought under the scheme that includes not only the provision of food grains and other essential commodities but also periodic visit of health workers for providing care and medicine, provision of housing and other basic facilities to those who do not have them and any other care such persons require. The village panchayats have been able to implement them with the active collaboration of Kudumbasree women who deliver the commodities and services and facilitate the visit of health workers. No remuneration is either asked for or provided by the government or the panchayat for the service of these Kudumbasree women who have taken upon themselves this as their social responsibility. This indeed is a case of the relatively poor helping the most poor as a collective activity. Such initiatives and collaborations are no doubt made possible by the establishment of the new panchayat raj.

There are many other initiatives that have cropped up as a result of the local dynamics of the new panchayat raj especially in places where local leadership have emerged to take up such challenges. New institutional models have been spawned which combine the initiatives of elected local government

functionaries, officials, voluntary agencies, stakeholder associations (such as the PTAs and farmers associations), and activists from social movements. Many new challenges remain to be addressed such as a well-designed and well-functioning waste management system. While village panchayats seem to have come up with promising models, municipal local governments especially those in the municipal corporations have so far failed in meeting this challenge. In an increasingly urbanizing scenario, this challenge is bound to intensify necessitating more concerted initiatives as well as support from the state level government.

In sum, a reality check of the functioning of the new panchayat raj show a slow but steady embedding of this new tier of government at the local level. Although they are called 'local self-government' there is a long road to traverse before they acquire the status of 'self governments'. The new panchayats do not have any such civil responsibilities as law and order and revenue responsibilities as land registration and related functions. The problem lies at the higher level of the political class that is yet to devolve such powers. The new panchayats however continue to enjoy some basic civic responsibilities (such as birth/death/marriage registration, waste management, local roads and street light management) with the additional but important developmental and welfare responsibilities.

Reflections and Lessons

Favourable Initial Conditions

Following the constitutional amendments in 1993, almost two decades have passed since the new panchayat raj has come into existence in Kerala. It is no exaggeration to say that the new system has come to stay and taken some roots. There are continuing as well as new challenges including the prospect of 'bureaucratic capture' unless the political system pays particular attention to sustain the panchayats as local self-governments with a high degree of people's involvement. There is no doubt that the political priority given to this agenda in 1996 should be marked as a watershed because, more than the decision to devolve a modest share of plan funds to the panchayats, it gave an opportunity to a sizeable section of the intelligentsia oriented towards social activism to involve in the planning and implementation of local level development. The decision to empower the panchayat-constituted expert groups to vet and approve projects was an important step towards de-bureaucratising local development initiatives. In this respect, Kerala's hitherto record of social development ensured the availability of such people even in remote areas. They mostly consisted of school and college teachers, retired officials from the government such as doctors, engineers, land and water management experts, agricultural officers, and a host of others with some expertise in one area or another. Many of them were activists in such voluntary organizations as the KSSP, developmental NGOs, socio-cultural organisations, women's organisations and some in organizations of peasants and agricultural workers. In sum, the prior existence of a group of 'organic intellectuals' helped a great deal in translating the 'people's planning' idea into operational projects. In the first few years close to 65 thousand projects came up for scrutiny and subsequent implementation.

The idea of ‘people’s planning’, it seems to us, was largely meant to impart the new panchayat raj a people’s character thereby preventing it from becoming a bureaucratic system as in the higher tiers of government viz., the state level and the national level. This therefore warranted a society-wide mobilization through a process of campaigning as well as demonstration of successful implementation of the new initiatives. This larger process should be seen as a key to the embedding the idea of new panchayats as people’s organisations. This is in sharp contrast to micro level interventions of often isolated agencies – development NGOs, individual-centred philanthropic initiatives and so on – working for local level development that often do not add up to any significant transformatory change in the economy or society of a given region (state) or even a smaller area such as a district.

Having said this, one must also appreciate the fact that the social terrain in Kerala had already been well prepared for the kind of local level development initiatives that we referred to in the beginning. To this must be added the specific state-wide institutional support systems that got strengthened or created during the first decade of the new panchayat raj. The role of the Kerala Institute of Local Administration in conducting a large number of training programmes (running into a few thousands by now) and the efforts in preparing a large amount of printed materials in the form of guidelines, information packages and so on also needs to be underlined. The setting up of Information Kerala Mission (IKM) as an IT-support system to facilitate computerisation of the new panchayat bodies as well as developing several specially designed software packages has been responsible for the computerisation of the office work of the panchayats. In addition, the last three years has also witnessed the introduction of online services for purposes of securing certificates for birth, marriage and death. Social security payments from the government (pensions for the aged poor, widows, unmarried destitute, physically and mentally challenged poor and agricultural labourers) have been made transparent by providing the details of the beneficiaries as well as the date of last payment for public scrutiny in a website. The computer-based functioning is an evolving process that could cut down on time and many inconveniences to the people dependent on the services of the panchayats. It could also be more convenient for the panchayat officials.

Among all the collaborative partner organisations of people, we would place the role of Kudumbasree as the most important one. And this goes to show the crucial role of women in strengthening the new panchayat raj in Kerala. This mutually beneficial relationship assumed a critical stage in 2005 when the National Employment Guarantee Scheme was introduced in the country. By then Kudumbasree units had come up and organised under a Community Development Society (CDS) in every panchayat including the municipal bodies. The challenge in Kerala was not the absence of unemployment but the mismatch between the educated unemployed and their job expectation leading to a shortage of labour for manual work. The wage rate for the manual work, especially of the men, was almost double the wage rate announced for NREGS in 2005; currently it is almost three times. Women were willing to work under the NREGS because they perceived it as a ‘job under a government scheme’ compared to what was perceived as a low status work as casual manual labour working for

households or farms. In a historic step, the Government of Kerala designated the Kudumbasree as the sole agency to implement the NREG schemes taken up by the panchayats. Since the Kudumbasree members were the work seekers, the beneficiary became an agency thereby investing it with a greater degree of responsibility to manage and supervise the works taken up.

Against the Tide of Neoliberalism Initiatives in Developing the Primary Economy

While allocating plan funds, the state government had also stipulated the sectoral shares as between the three main sectors of the economy viz., primary, secondary and tertiary. Recognizing the importance of developing the primary sector that has shrunk in economic importance due to a variety of reasons but resulting in a greater degree of inter-sectoral inequality, the state government has justifiably stipulated a greater share of its funds for this sector. Of course, the panchayats have also their own revenue which could also be utilized for the development of this sector, if they so wished. One of the hotly debated issues in agricultural development in Kerala is the sharp decline in area under rice cultivation that has also come to be recognized as environmentally important. It is in this light the Wadakkanchery Block Panchayat's initiative assumes an importance that goes beyond its locale. By careful planning with the help of experts and institutions, bringing about synergy among various schemes, linking up local financial institutions with the farming community and above all mobilizing labour that has given them a new found dignity and identity, the model is rooted in the concept of cooperation among the stakeholders. Another version of this model can be discerned in the Kanjikuzhy Village Panchayat's (Alappuzha district) initiatives in horticulture that later spread to the processing and manufacturing activities under a common brand and organization. Elappully Panchayat's (Palakkad district) initiative in dairy development has created a web of both backward and forward linkages encompassing agriculture, dairying, diversifying dairy products as well as creation of specialised institutions in animal care. Here the social dimension is in mobilizing women in households who are in a position to access gainful employment without going outside for work. A similar initiative has also been successfully tried in Kannadi Village Panchayat in Palakkad District. Palamel Village Panchayat in Alappuzha District had to wage a struggle to bring back the fallow land for rice cultivation that would have otherwise got converted into a real estate business opportunity. Aryanad Village Panchayat (in Thiruvananthapuram district) seems to have taken up the idea of 'labour banks' further by creating, a land bank as well as a seed bank.

Underlying these initiatives is a strong environmental dimension that the local people and their panchayats are keenly aware of. The emphasis is on moving towards organic farming, as in Adat and several others. Although current initiatives are in replacing chemical fertilizers/pesticides with bio fertilizers/pesticides, there is a long way to go before fully adhering to a protocol that can then be truly called 'organic farming'. Akathethara Village Panchayat (in Palakkad district) initiatives in tree planting on a massive scale and the efforts in protecting its river banks and modernising agriculture based on a watershed plan is a commendable effort for a village level local government body.

While one cannot but admire these remarkable initiatives in which the panchayats performed the crucial role of an organizer, coordinator and part-funder, one cannot also miss the larger picture emerging in Kerala as elsewhere in India. Given the neoliberal policies for accelerating aggregate economic growth, natural resources have now been converted into commodities to be exploited despite the official rhetoric of environmental sustainability and regeneration. Kerala is littered with thousands of granite quarries in its Western Ghats as well as mutilated rivers arising out of indiscriminate sand-mining. The spread of rubber, an industrial raw material with a high profitability, has reduced the culture of mixed cropping and led to a shrinkage of land available for food crops. A new model of environmentally rich and sustainable mixed cropping that can compete with rubber has to emerge if the situation has to be turned around. These larger trends and challenges are likely to dwarf the local level successes unless the neoliberal policy regime gives way to a people-centred and environmentally sustainable as well as regenerative development policy both at the state and central levels.

Interventions in Social Development Education, Health and Related Arenas

As in the primary sector of the economy, the social sector has also been subjected to the neoliberal policy logic of commoditization of education and health services. In the case of Kerala, the public as well as fully public-funded school education continues to be dominant form of school education with 90 per cent of children studying there. Yet there is a trend of increasing enrolment in fee-paying private schools. Many panchayats have therefore taken up this task with schemes to improve the infrastructure and quality of teaching in the public school system. The best example of Kodyathur Panchayat is only one among the many. Apart from the best practices here such as Akathethara, Palamel, Aryanad, and Nilambur Village Panchayat (the latter has recently graduated to a municipal council) there are quite a few such experiments. This would not have been possible but for the active role of the PTAs and a dedicated band of teachers. In fact, the role of school teachers in Kerala's social transformation is legendary whether it is in the realm of literacy, village library movement, radical politics, people's science movement and now in spreading environmental consciousness among students.

While the initiatives in health, especially in the development and maintenance of Primary Health Centres (which come under the supervision of the Village Panchayat) are commendable where the usual practice is to add new buildings, buy equipment and medicine and often create facilities for in-patient care. But the special initiatives of Kannadi and Nilambur need particular mention in the form of setting up a Palliative Care Unit in the PHC or the school-based health care for children or the supply of free food to the patients and bystanders in government hospital on a regular basis. A large number of Village Panchayats have now taken up schemes for palliative care; in fact Kerala can boast of a palliative care movement that has attracted the care services of around one hundred thousand volunteers who have been trained for such service. But, and unlike the school education system, the health sector in Kerala is just not dominated but overwhelmed by the presence of private health care

institutions including in rural areas. This has not only increased the share of household expenditure in health care but there are often unethical practices of too much medication, diagnosis especially of an expensive kind in many such institutions, if not all. Yet the demand for health care in public health care centres is quite heavy given the fact that it is the poor and vulnerable who are the major users of this system. That is perhaps one reason for the demand for setting up in-patient care in Primary Health Centres which are basically designed to take care of public health issues and out-patient care.

Role of Leadership

When one reflects on the ‘best practices’ discussed here as well as many others, what is striking is the role played by individual leadership or a small group leadership in translating ideas into operational schemes and projects. The crucial role here is that of the panchayat president often backed by one or two other elected members but also by a panchayat official or a locally popular social activist. It is important to carry the whole Panchayat Council lest there be political contestations on the merits or demerits of a given initiative. The quality of leadership shown by a panchayat president or a few elected members often determines the outcome of several initiatives. Wherever such a leadership has been in evidence, they have left their mark. For the quality of leadership in Wadakkanchery Block Panchayat has been an exceptional one embodied in a young person in his late thirties who functioned as the President of the local cooperative society as well as the Vice President of the Block Panchayat. There is no doubt what he represented was the result of a collective initiative, backed by his political party, but more importantly a cross section of the people in the area covering nine village panchayats. Similar is the case of the Panchayat President in the Cheriyanaad Village Panchayat who led the initiative to make the panchayat a ‘litigation free’ zone with some remarkable degree of success. At the same time, the panchayat has performed exceptionally well in its functioning especially in implementing development schemes and mobilizing resources outside the panchayat budget. Adat Panchayat is another example where the young Panchayat President in his thirties has left an indelible mark after serving for two terms covering a decade. In the case of Elappully Panchayat, the young President in his early thirties was ably assisted by a remarkable Veterinary Officer as well as another prominent personality who happened to be a member of the Malabar Regional Milk Marketing Board. It might be a coincidence that he was also the brother of the Panchayat President. But the combination of these three persons and prioritization of the dairy sector as a focus area for developmental intervention produced remarkable results judging by the limited resources and human capability of a village panchayat. Elappully Village Panchayat, of course, is known for its long tradition of agrarian radicalism and pro-poor politics and has been a bastion of the communist movement in Kerala. While some other similarly placed panchayats have been in the forefront of decentralized development (e.g. Kanjikkuzy and Palamel), there is no one-to-one correspondence. That is to say, despite enabling political and socio-economic conditions successful experiments in decentralization have been marked by the creative leadership roles of select individuals. In fact all the 15 village panchayats that we examined in the

detailed study¹⁷ present in unmistakable terms the outstanding leadership qualities of a few individuals. In some, as in Kodyathur, the individual was not in the scene but someone who had developed an innovative approach to teaching that attracted the leadership at the village panchayat. The result has been a remarkable transformation of the quality of teaching and student-teacher participation that has enhanced the prestige of public schools as opposed to the fee-paying private schools that has made a significant, if not substantial, inroad into the school education system in Kerala.

It goes without saying that individual leadership does not emanate in a social vacuum. It is more often a product of the social and cultural context and movements. While Kerala has thrown a large number of activists arising out of its radical political movements and its socio-cultural outgrowths, the emergence of a group of social activists in ‘developmental politics’ is relatively recent say, from the mid-seventies. Some have come from the by now four-decade old developmental activism of the KSSP or the three-decade old environmental movement, some others have come of lesser known but significant local level struggles and interventions for pro-people development. In a way this has sensitised, to some extent, government functionaries at different levels. A large group of school teachers, with a fairly long history of socio-cultural activism, has also got involved the developmental politics in the local arena.

The lesson that one is tempted to draw from the best practices is the critical role of leadership and commitment. How to sustain such leadership for long in a given panchayat is indeed an important, though difficult, question. There have been occasions when a change in leadership resulted in a decline in performance or descending to a lower level equilibrium. An effective counter to such tendencies lies, in our opinion, on an ambience of constant vigil and active participation by people – in effect the local citizens constituting themselves as a countervailing force. That calls for people’s organizations and movements willing to function as such rather than be co-opted by the system in one way or another.

Larger and Stronger Counter Currents Against Decentralised Development

There is an increasing tension in India today between the demands for accelerating aggregate economic growth under a neoliberal policy regime and the welfarist and people-centred – basically to enhance livelihood security – development. The demands of an electoral democracy often compels the elected governments, both at the centre as well as at the state level, to introduce various welfare schemes and even legislations bowing to the demands for ‘entitlements’ in a democratic society. Such welfarist initiatives are carefully designed to make them as minimalist as politically acceptable under the pretext of limited resources. An impression is also created by the neoliberal lobby especially through the corporate-backed media that they are ‘doles’ as compared to ‘incentives’ that should help

17. This paper is an abridged version of a larger study with the same title prepared for the Research Unit on Local Self Government Institutions at the Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram.

increase corporate investment for growth. The organic link between human/social development and growth is deliberately downplayed. The people's demand for a dignified life also comes up with the demand for participation and transparency. While the creation of the panchayat raj is one of the ways for meeting the demand for participation, its developmental potentialities and possibilities are not given adequate opportunity unless there is a strong pressure from below.

Such a scenario poses difficult questions. To what extent the panchayat raj can contribute to a participatory, people-centred and locally rooted developmental journey given the strong counter current, especially at the national level, for accelerating aggregate economic growth under a neoliberal policy regime? Meaningful local level initiatives not only get dwarfed but even smothered when they come into direct conflict with the power of corporate capital. The spectacles of villages being evicted, lands appropriated, mountains demolished, and forests wiped out are but some examples of this tension between local demands for people-centred developments and the larger forces for exploitation of nature and people under the pretext of growth and its presumed trickle down effects.

Such tensions between local people's aspirations and the larger counter currents are also evident in Kerala. Its earlier model privileging human/social development is increasingly giving way to a commoditized economy privileging private capital, corporate and other. The increasing inequality in wealth and income, largely induced by remittances that at any point in time benefits less than twenty per cent of households, is seeking avenues for its surplus. Given the scope for quick-profit ventures and rent-seeking, such surpluses get concentrated in sectors such as tourism (hotels, resorts and restaurants), real estate and construction, education and health, trading and money-lending. That the kind of participatory development initiatives that we have discussed here as well as many others perhaps reflect the continuing resilience of an active public sphere. The challenge here is whether these initiatives can be disseminated and replicated to a much larger area and arena and then raise to a more coherent state level development policy framework.

Of course, much would depend on the unfolding national scenario not to speak of the international one. For India, it is imperative to move towards an effective participatory and decentralised development model given its size and complexity. If the highlighting of the modest success of the new panchayat raj in Kerala can contribute to such a possibility, then there is indeed some justification for hope.

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