Innovative Approaches In Governance-
The Kerala Experience

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Introduction

Kerala –the relatively small state in the south-west corner of India ,has received world wide acclaim on account of its remarkable achievement in the sphere of human development which has often been highlighted as the *'Kerala Model of Development'.* It has always stood apart from the rest of India for its education and health achievements becoming India's only fully literate State in the 1980's. Kerala has also achieved remarkable progress in the quality of life of its people comparable with that of many other developed countries.

It is remarkable to note that Kerala has had the sharpest reduction in poverty in the last 30 years in India. Land reforms, basic minimum services and universal public distribution system with reasonable food security, a wide range of social security schemes and remittances from emigrants (of especially Gulf countries) have helped[*] Kerala to achieve high levels of human development. The higher allocation of budgetary resources for social security and the welfare measures have played a significant role in enhancing the basic human development status of the poor.

However the fact still remains that poverty exists in some areas of Kerala (.The poverty rate is 12.72% as against the All India's rate of 26.30%.) The poverty is more in urban areas as compared to rural areas (Kerala's poverty is 9.35% in rural areas and 20.27% in urban areas) and more pervasive among Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes population (Economic Review,2006).

The history of rural development in India, shows a vivid picture of various programmes aimed at reducing poverty in all the five year plan periods. It may be noted that the earlier welfare approaches looked at human beings as beneficiaries and

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not as agents of change in the development process. However, in Kerala a break through could be made with the starting of the much lauded **'Kudumbasree programme'**(*kudumbasree* in local language means prosperity of the family) in 1991. This programme is implemented by the State Poverty Eradication Mission through the Local Governments. It is now seeking to achieve a breakthrough in participatory community based poverty reduction. The Planning Commission and the UNDP have identified this programme as among the 15 best practices in governance in India. The Mission Statement of Kudumbashree is:

> *"To eradicate absolute poverty in ten years through concerted community action under the leadership of Local Self Governments, by facilitating organisation of the poor combining self-help with demand led convergence of available services and resources to tackle the multiple dimensions and manifestations of poverty, holistically."*
> (State Poverty Eradication Mission,1996)

The Kudumbasree programme is unique and the process of identifying the poor is highly transparent and participative and is done using a multi-dimensional index' by empowering groups of poor women**.** At present, Kudumbashree encompass 157951 Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs) federated in to 13915 Area Development Societies (ADSs) and 1050 Community Development Societies (CDSs). This Community Based Organisation's (CBOs) network has a membership of 3202385 women from poor families each represented by one woman. To reach out the family through women and reach out society through family is the working strategy of the Mission.(EconomicReview,2006)

The role of the Kudumbasree Mission is that of a facilitator while the decision making authority rests with poor women in the groups. A critical study conducted by the author in 2002 revealed many pitfalls in the process.(Jaya,2004).Other recent studies also show that many groups are not able to sustain the activity taken up at the beginning due to various loopholes in the system. Critics also feel that more thrust is given to economic development neglecting the 'social aspect'. The handholding

support given in the initial phase is still continuing and the poorest of the poor are still in the dark with little changes in their living conditions.(Human Development Report 2005,Kerala)

Asraya Project

An innovative extension of Kudumbasree programme is the ASRAYA project-the Destitute Rehabilitation Programme-initially launched by the Kerala Government during 2002-03.The idea originated from the realization that even in a state like Kerala,the benefits of social and welfare schemes often do not reach the deserving. It is the first integrated programme for tackling the problems of the poorest of the poor who belong to the very lowest strata of the society – **the really excluded. (Kudumbasree,2003)**

The project envisages to give handholding support to the destitute families till they achieve a minimum standard of life. This project has to a great extent helped in overcoming the criticism that Kudumbasree groups have not helped the poorest of the poor due to the inability of the destitutes to provide weekly savings.

Concept and Implementation

The notion of deprivation has been a common denominator to most perceptions about poverty.(Jacob,2001).He identified six kinds of deprivations namely social, education nutritional, economic, ecological deprivation and gender inequality. The report shows that the destitutes face the worst forms of deprivations and lack of access to the minimum services. Their income is below subsistence and are dependent (Report on Asraya,2005)Considering these ,in the Asraya Project Neighbourhood groups(NHG) of women residing in panchayats who know personally the pathetic situation of the destitute families identified the beneficiaries using the 9 point indices developed by the State Poverty Eradication Mission This task was easier for the well trained Kudumbasree Groups. In urban areas, considering the peculiar urban poverty situation of the State, special parameters to identify destitute families in urban areas have been designed in this project to suit the requirements of the urban areas. They include spending the night-time in public places/ streets/ shops for sleeping, young widows, beggars, no healthy member to win bread for the family below the age of 60,

women subjected to atrocities, families having children below the age of 14 who work to earn money for the family, families having commercial sex workers and families living in slums.

After beneficiary identification, a need assessment of these families is undertaken by the CBOs, officials and elected representatives. The present situation of the family will be analysed and their multiple deprivations identified.. For the rehabilitation of each family a detailed project consisting of different components like food, health, pension, education, housing, drinking water, etc., is prepared.

A separate database is prepared and needs of immediate priority are grouped and reports with the financial assistance required for rehabilitating these families were prepared. The individual family reports are consolidated and the **Asraya** project of that area (Panchayat) is prepared. A set of photographs are taken, digitized and included in the report so that the change/progress in each stage of implementation can be monitored and corrective mechanism taken if required.

The main source of funding for rehabilitation is the plan funds available with the local panchayats. However in order to support panchayats for taking up this challenging task of helping the destitutes, Kudumbasree has set up a Kudumbasree challenge fund. The project also envisages convergence of resources/services from various agencies/Departments.

Progress In Implementation

From 101 Panchayats in the first phase, the project was expanded to 340 and 10urban local bodies in 2005-06.After the second round of identification and need assessment, *a Report published by Kudumbasree(2005) revealed the following facts.*

(1)   The destitute families are less than 2% of the total families in the panchayats - 28430 families identified from 364 Grama panchayats and 4 Municipalities

(1)   The total estimated Project cost of the 364 Grama panchayats and 4 Municipalities to meet the entire needs of the destitute families is Rs.148.95 crores

4

(2)   8% of the total allocation earmarked exclusively for procuring food.

(3)   Majority of the families identified have no land to set up dwelling house.

(4)   42% of the identified families have no house

(5)   Majority of the families identified are suffering from chronic illness such as TB, cancer etc

(6)   There is a high presence of mentally and physically challenged persons. Families headed by unwed mothers / widows/divorcees are common.

In view of this alarming situation and the success of the project ,the Kerala Govt has decided to expand this so as to cover the entire State. A consolidated statement showing the component- wise details of the Project is appended.

Study Objectives

The paper attempts to evaluate the performance of the two projects, Ashraya and Akshaya which are now implemented in the State. Two panchayats was selected for an index study of these two projects. This exploratory study has largely depended on the opinion and perceptions of the stakeholders and also the observations made by the author.

Since the two projects are in the mid-phase of implementation, the findings will provide valuable lessons for action for the implementers and other States which can think of replicating this model.

Field Observations

Interviews and focus group discussions were held with the beneficiaries, panchayat administration, charge officers of the project and the CBOs. Some of the strengths of this project as highlighted by the stakeholders are,

- 46% of the families interviewed were satisfied with this project as it could provide them with physical assets which they never had before. 47% opined that their needs were only partly met and demanded for continuous support if

their conditions are to really improve.However,7% viewed that they were not satisfied with the way in which the project is implemented.

- The presence of a well established network of Kudumbasree groups in all Panchayats in the State with very active women members have made this project a great success. It has ensured the effective utilization of funds earmarked for the destitutes.

- The convergence of resources/ services from different agencies has prevented overlapping and duplication of funds and efforts of identification .

- The community participation has helped in ensuring transparency and containing corruption by effective targeting thereby canalizing the funds to the right hands.

- The role of Government is minimal and there is a great amount of flexibility in the operations as each panchayat has their own project reports based on the baseline survey conducted by them among the poor.

Weaknesses

- The project phase of five years is considered too short a span for rehabilitation of the destitutes. The destitutes need continuous support and guidance especially in the case of the old aged, those undergoing prolonged medical treatment, etc. In view of the multiple deprivations faced by the destitute families, this one time assistance raises doubts regarding the utility utility and sustainability of the project.

- Though the project envisages convergence of resources, this has not materialised in majority of the panchayats. The Project Reports were prepared anticipating funds from different sources including District Panchayat, various Government agencies, MLA/MP funds, contributions from Voluntary agencies etc. The fund of Rs.10 lakhs which is Kudumbasrees challenge fund is the only assistance available for the rehabilitation package. However, in some panchayats where the project is performing well ,they are using their 'own funds'(collected by Panchayats by way of taxes, rent, etc.) for filling the gap in implementing the Ashraya project. There is no active involvement by government departments like Social Welfare, SC/ST Development

Department (even though they have specific budgetary allocation) as they consider Asraya as a Kudumbasree project. The resource constraints have led to partial completion of houses and in meeting only the minimum needs of the beneficiaries.

- A few respondents were of the view that the Kudumbasree challenge fund should be in proportion to the identified number of beneficiaries in the panchayat as there are local bodies which have very few destitutes.

- The success to a great extent depends on the commitment and sincerity of the Panchayat members, charge officers and the Kudumbasree group members who guide, oversee the functioning and monitor the progress. The charge officer is entrusted with the additional responsibility of Ashraya project along with the implementation of the other welfare schemes of the panchayats. This has contributed to flaws in implementation in a few cases.

- The economic component of creation of micro enterprises/ income generating activities in the project has not taken off successfully . The subsidy element included in the budget could not be disbursed to the beneficiaries since banks and other financial institutions are not willing to extend credit to the poor without any security.

- Ineffective targeting and inclusion of those who are not eligible (based on the identification criteria) and exclusion of the 'real' was observed in some panchayats. Critics are of the view that the number of destitutes identified in some panchayats are quite high while the real number may come to only 50-60% of the identified list of beneficiaries.

- The practice of disbursing assistance in cash for education for the children of the destitutes families, and for medical treatment has led to unfair practices. The system in Venganoor panchayat is quite laudable where the medical treatment expenses incurred for these destitutes is reimbursed from the fund to the government hospital. The practice of buying school books, uniforms from the provision for education is also a better model which can prevent misuse.

- It is often criticized that the panchayat members(elected political representatives consider Asraya as yet another welfare scheme and hence a

tendency to divert more funds to their electoral constituency. There is lack of conceptual clarity about this project among these people.

- The efforts taken by all the stakeholders in the first phase of the project was quite commendable and some of the best models could be seen in these cases which have shown positive results. However panchayats selected in the second and third phases were in a haste to implement this project. This has led in the improper identification of destitutes and preparation of unrealistic project reports thereby leading to flaws in the implementation stage.

Akshaya Project – The project for bridging the digital divide

The word Akshaya in local language means '***the gateway to opportunities'***. The project is the first of this kind of IT initiative in the world and is considered as a landmark project that aims at bridging the digital divide and propelling the State into becoming India's foremost knowledge society. The broad objectives are,

- Bringing the benefits of IT to the common man
- Ensuing broad based access to ICT
- Providing e-literacy to one person in every family
- Making available relevant e-content
- Ease educated unemployment in the State
- IT enable services for the poor

To quote Prof. Kenneth Keniston (MIT) '*There are many good projects sponsored by State Governments and NGOs which are admirable; but nowhere has this kind of vision and strategy been as demonstrable as in **Akshaya**. No other State can accomplish these objectives without literacy, without commitment on the part of the people concerned and without a certain level of social justice'*. This e-literacy programme was launched in 2002-03 in Malappuram district and has been extended to almost the entire State now. Akshaya centers are run by trained private entrepreneurs set up within 2-3 kilometers of every household and the caters to information, communication and education needs of the local community. The Government's role here also is that of a facilitator and a seed capital of Rs.1.5lakhs has been given as loan to the entrepreneurs for setting up these Akshaya centers. The

gap in investment is the entrepreneurs contribution..(For an Akshaya Centre, an amount of Rs3 lakhs is to be initially invested) Further an investment to the tune of Rs3.20crores is made by the Government for connectivity of Govt offices and these Centres,(networking) Rs 7crores for e-literacy ,Rs 2 crores for promotional campaigns and Rs 1 crore for content generation. This is an excellent model of Private public partnership.

Strengths

- The project is envisaged as a social and economic catalyst focusing on the various facets of e-learning, information dissemination, e-transactions (like e-payments), e-governance and communication facilities to the common man. which makes this project an excellent model of public private partnership (PPP).

- The project has made the rural community e-literate using private and public funds there by bridging the digital divide.

- Making available facilities for utility bills payments and other financial services.

- Creation of local community maps by mapping all resources and also the general profile including health maps, natural resources maps, etc.

- This project has encouraged the growth of private entrepreneurs in the State there by giving a boost to enterprise creation and employment generation.

- Creation of opportunities for rural students to upgrade their e-skills by learning advanced courses at competitive rates in their local area itself.

Weakness

- There is lag in the implementation phase in a few districts due to the non involvement / co-operation of other service providers and actors.

- Entrepreneurs complained of delay in getting connectivity and hence their inability to provide services as desired. The government contribution to the entrepreneurs for setting up the centres was also unduly delayed in some cases.

- There are criticisms regarding the quality of computers procured in the centres. They have not met the required configuration and hence the desired out put could not be achieved.

- Entrepreneurs are generally hesitant to run advanced courses at lower rates, since it is not viable. More over most of the centers have only limited number of computers, which is not sufficient for all the activities envisaged in the project. The lack of trained manpower to run to these centres have affected its sustainability to a certain extent.

Concluding remarks

The study reveals some flaws in the implementing stage, lack of continuity and continued sustainability, lags due to delay in the release of funds, etc. Inspite of these flaws, the 2 projects are novel and have contributed significantly to the social and human development of the State. In Asraya Project, the results so far are encouraging and the really excluded poor are handpicked and their physical subsistence hass improved. A step-by-step approach over a period of time with a well-designed and well targeted strategy can contribute a big way to the social development. Akshaya Project also has been a revolution making the rural masses e-literate No doubt the 2 approaches are still active and have benefited significantly the community,

The successful implementation of any programme calls for appropriate policies, adequate resources and an effective delivery mechanism with community participation. The programmes should continue with viguor irrespective of changes in Governmentt A social audit will have to be put in place to ensure the effective utilization of funds.

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Note : Kerala has a very powerful decentralized system of governance and the Local Self Government (village) bodies are the panchayats.