



## People's planning, Kerala's dilemma

K.P.KANNAN

THE 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments in 1993 marked a watershed in India's quest for democratic development within a pluralistic, parliamentary, electoral framework. This, despite the dismal performance of many states in the country in decentralisation of administration and devolution of powers. The constitutional mandate in establishing and institutionalising a third tier of government is a guarantee against walking away from this responsibility, as has been the tendency in the past.

The real test of the effectiveness of the mandate of decentralisation, however, depends on the success of those states which took up this task seriously, viz. Kerala. While the constitutional amendments came as a golden opportunity for serious decentralisation, there were compelling internal dynamics that contributed to the political acceptability and commitment to this task. The 'Kerala way to development' – some call it, inappropriately in my view, a model – is now at a crossroads. Its achievements in a variety of aspects of social development are nothing less than spectacular given its low income and low level of productive capacity. The expectation was that such spectacular achievements in social development would, and should, lead to much higher levels of economic development than has been achieved so far. But that is not around the corner and the wait continues.

Decentralisation was thought of, if not as a panacea for all ills, as a way out of this logjam. It was expected to facilitate local level development by mobilising both people and resources to strengthen the productive base, especially in the primary sector by creating and maintaining public and collective goods such as in land and water management and agricultural extension. It could also add to the already created, widely spread social infrastructure such as schools and health care centres and create appropriate ones for drinking water, sanitation and so on.

In fact, the urge for decentralisation went beyond this. The aim was the establishment and institutionalisation of local self-

government. It was in 1957, after the victory of the then undivided Communist Party in state elections, that an agenda of decentralisation was first formulated in the form of a bill for enactment. With the dismissal of this government in 1959, the bill met an untimely death, not unlike the historic land reform bill. While the land reform agenda went through a series of revisions and compromises before being finally enacted in 1971, the agenda of decentralisation remained stalled because successive governments had better things to do than decentralise their power. Though the agenda came up again in the national context of the Janata Party coming to power at the centre, but unlike Karnataka and West Bengal, Kerala's coalition politics could not accommodate decentralisation seriously, let alone give a lead. A minor exception was the short-lived experiment of the creation of district councils during 1990-91.

**T**he debate on decentralisation, however, continued. An important contribution to this debate and preparatory work at the local level came from the unceasing work of a large, well-spread voluntary organisation, the KSSP (Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad), better known as a people's science movement to the rest of the country. Developmentalism, as represented by the work of KSSP and a number of emerging independent groups and organisations, was in sharp contrast to the dominant paradigm of development politics. The former stressed people's participation, awareness creation, popularisation, sensitising structures of government to people's needs, and the need to debate alternatives to existing models of development. The issues it took up were cross-cutting, broad-based and relevant to the common people. The perennial issue of inefficiency and corruption was a major one. Access to and enhancing the quality of education and health care were two other common concerns, as was the adverse impact of environmental degradation. While women's issues were highlighted, it is 'women's groups' which were, and still are, in the forefront of this agenda. People's participation was sought to be advanced through taking up local level development work.

**T**he latter, on the other hand, stressed 'bargaining' by organising homogenous interest groups such as workers, government employees, farmers, castes and communities in hierarchical organisations. The bargaining model found favour with political parties, irrespective of their hue and colour. The tension between these two paradigms is now manifest in the controversies surrounding the decentralisation process.

When the constitutional amendments took effect in 1993, the way was cleared for passing legislation in the state assembly. The then Congress-led government came up with a bill, but it was more marked by provisions to throttle the spirit of decentralisation. In the ensuing public debate, pro-decentralisation leaders from all

political parties including the Congress, lobbied for introducing amendments for a more genuine legislation on decentralisation. Intellectuals and voluntary organisations took the lead in organising public opinion and finally an amended version of the bill was passed.

Elections to the local bodies were conducted by the Congress government under the chief ministership of A.K. Antony who replaced K. Karunakaran. 60% of the local bodies were won by the then opposition Left Democratic Front (LDF) candidates while the remaining 40% went to the United Democratic Front (UDF) candidates. When the LDF came to power in the 1996 elections to the state assembly, thanks to the sustained efforts of the late E.M.S. Namboodiripad, the agenda of decentralisation was the first one taken up.

**I**t was decided that 40% of the plan budget of the state would be earmarked for expenditure by the local bodies at the village, block and district levels, as decided by them. People's needs were to be assessed through meetings of the *gram sabhas* with the village panchayat making it into a plan, coordinated and vetted at the block level and approved at the district level by a district planning committee constituted to assist the panchayats. This was the 'People's Campaign for Ninth Plan', popularly known as 'People's Planning' (*Janakeeya Aasoothranam*). The word 'decentralisation' or 'panchayat raj' was nowhere in circulation.

To start with there was much euphoria and expectation. There seemed to exist, surprisingly for a state marked by intense party political contestation, a degree of political consensus. A high power guidance council was created with E.M.S. Namboodiripad as the chairman, the incumbent and former chief ministers and the leader of the opposition as vice-chairmen, and a few persons of eminence as members. This was ostensibly to give formal expression to the perceived political consensus. The State Planning Board, hitherto an expert advisory body, suddenly acquired a political profile.

The board had by then been reconstituted with party-political nominations that included two state-level party functionaries of the CPM. It also became an implementing agency for activities under 'People's Planning', chalked out a five-phase program of activities, and went into a high-speed mode of functioning unheard of in government organisations. This was possible only because of the political profile and organisational abilities of the political nominees to the board. A special cell was created to cope with the challenges of this new task. Many of the personnel in this cell were drawn from voluntary organisations with a track record of selfless work.

**I**n the first phase, gram sabhas were convened and people at the local level mobilised to assess felt needs. In the second phase, ‘development seminars’ were held in every village panchayat, followed by formation of ‘task forces’ for the preparation of development projects. 12,000 task forces were formed that worked out to around 12 task forces per village panchayat. Close to 120,000 people participated in these task forces. In the third phase, development reports were prepared according to a format suggested by the state planning board, giving details such as the nature of activities envisaged and financial and organisational aspects.

Despite such quantitative achievements, a review by the state planning board showed that ‘the task forces did not function as effectively as was expected. The main weakness was that adequate number of experts could not be attracted to the task forces. The participation of officials was also far from satisfactory. The training given to the task force members was also inadequate. An interim review of the projects prepared revealed numerous weaknesses, particularly with respect to technical details and financial analysis. Accordingly, a number of rectification measures like project clinics, reorientation conferences, etc. were organised. All these created unforeseen delays in the final plan preparation’. (Government of Kerala, *Economic Review*, 1998:201)

**B**y the time the fourth phase started, the financial year 1996-97 was over. This phase, from March to May 1997, was expected to prepare five year plans for the panchayats based on their development projects. This was no easy task since it involved prioritising projects, assessing resources and institutional capacity, weaving the plan into the development strategy of the state, coordinating it with other village panchayats within the block and district level developmental framework and spelling out mechanisms for supervision and monitoring. The mettle of people’s planning was too frail for this task.

The fifth and final phase was meant for the preparation of annual plans for block and district panchayats by integrating the lower level plans and, presumably, to developing their own plans that would be complementary to the village panchayat plans.

Given the delays and inadequacies in the preparation of village panchayat plans, this exercise could not be undertaken. To quote the Planning Board, the lead agency: ‘As a result, there were many instances of duplication of planning activities and also critical gaps between the various tiers’ (*ibid*:201). Even when projects and plans were available, it was realised that most of them had to be examined closely for their ‘technical soundness and viability.’ This led to another phase with the formation of expert committees and project appraisal teams to scrutinise and approve the projects and

plans.

The initial difficulties partially flew from the massive nature of the programme. But before these could be properly assessed and remedial measures initiated, a controversy erupted. The coalition partners of the CPM charged that the programme was being politicised to suit partisan interests. They alleged that political nominations abound right from the Planning Board to the village level task forces and expert committees. Instances of corruption and favouritism were levelled against many panchayats. The complaint was that the coalition partners were not being given their share.

**C**ertain decisions of the government now began to attract political criticism from the opposition led by the Congress party. It was revealed that the panchayats could not spend more than 10% of the earmarked funds at the end of the first year of people's planning, i.e. by March 1997. The government initially extended the expenditure period by three months; when this was found inadequate the period was extended upto 31 March 1999, i.e. an extension of two years, understandable given the massive exercise based on a 'campaigning' mode.

During the second year too, the panchayats could not spend more than 10% of the earmarked funds of around Rs750 crore<sup>1</sup> and the period of expenditure was extended by another three months to the end of June 1998 with the stipulation that unspent balances would be deducted from future allocations. By end June 1998, the panchayats formally reported 95% expenditure, the bulk of the funds were withdrawn during the final month. This was due to an interesting innovation. The panchayats withdrew the amount from the government treasuries and deposited them either in public sector organisations (such as the State Electricity Board), which were supposed to execute works for them, or in their bank accounts. And these were shown as 'expenditure'. For the third year, 1998-99, the funds earmarked were Rs 970 crore but accounts have as yet not been finalised. Meanwhile the allocation for the fourth year, 1999-2000, was enhanced to Rs1020 crore. Project preparations, however, have not yet been finalised well into the eighth month of the financial year.

**O**bviously, the 'campaigning' mode was seriously flawed especially in the context of raising people's expectations to levels beyond the system's capability to respond. Decentralised planning is not like celebrating festivals, although it is the 'festive approach' that characterises the launching of many a government programme in Kerala, with little serious work done before or sustained work after.

In this melee of confusion and division within the LDF, the opposition led by the Congress Party began a political attack on the people's planning variant of the decentralisation process. They declared that political consensus no longer existed and alleged that the programme was being tailored to suit the interests of the leading ruling party. The UDF constituted an enquiry committee and published a report sharply critical of the implementation of the programme, presenting evidence of corruption and mismanagement from a selected number of panchayats.

The real reasons for the ire of opposition parties, especially the Congress, were obviously political in nature. The Congress Party felt that the credit for the decentralisation programme was being appropriated by the CPM in the name of people's planning neglecting their party's, especially Rajiv Gandhi's, contribution to the 1993 constitutional amendments. It also felt that despite its contribution to the passage of the Panchayat Raj Bill in the state assembly and holding elections under its regime, a different story was being scripted to deny them due credit. Hence the emphasis on the breakdown of political consensus.

**T**he concept of 'hegemony' is dear to the political party leading the people's planning. Despite compulsions of electoral democracy, or because of it, every organisation or institution is sought to be hegemonised – be it organisations of white collar employees, workers, cooperatives, students, women or even cultural bodies. But the flip side of hegemony is that the organisation has to pay a price – in the form of succumbing to their sectarian interests. Gradually sectarian interests overshadow common developmental interests, as witnessed in Kerala over a period of time. Since other parties followed the same model, this lead to a fragmented political structure in every realm of public action. The space for political consensus simply did not exist. How can people's planning alone be an exception to this rule, observers ask.

This has exposed the paradigmatic limits of development politics in the state. Hierarchical organisations such as employees associations, trade unions, students organisations and the cooperative bodies have not been enthused to support and strengthen the decentralisation process. Many organisations, especially the associations of government employees, are openly antagonistic, as revealed in their opposition to several attempts to deploy departmental staff to various tiers of panchayat raj.

A committee set up to recommend measures for the implementation and institutionalisation of the decentralisation process, chaired by the former vice chairman of the West Bengal State Planning Board, S.B. Sen, had submitted a four volume report that included detailed recommendations including

deployment of departmental staff. However, resistance from the associations of government employees was such that so far no substantive steps have been taken by the government.<sup>2</sup> While powerful sections in every political party oppose the decentralisation process, because of the enactment of the Panchayat Raj Bill, they are all formally committed. But there is no such compulsion for the bureaucracy, especially its powerful organised tiers at the middle and lower levels. Why should they submit to a process leading to a loss of their power and patronage?

**G**iven such political imponderables, it is no surprise that the decentralisation process, or its Kerala variant in the name of people's planning, is faced with fundamental constraints in institutional capacity building. What has been followed so far was called 'a big bang approach' by deciding devolution of 40% of plan funds and embarking on a 'campaigning' mode to shake up the system. But it was also like putting the cart before the horse, nay the bullock. Panchayats could not cope with the administrative or organisational challenges of spending so much money (nearly one to one-and-a-half crore of rupees per panchayat per annum).

**T**he absence of sound administrative support created a critical vacuum and often led to conflicts between an 'inexperienced' political executive and an 'experienced' administrative executive. Technical support was near absent and hence the involvement of 'key resource persons' and 'expert committees'. The powerful and large rent-seeking departments in government, particularly in public utilities such as irrigation, public works, water supply and electricity distribution, did not give up their considerable powers. That limited the powers of the panchayats, especially at the block and district levels, in creating and maintaining critical infrastructure.

At the same time some small gains, significant in my view, have been made. For the first time, village panchayats have been freed from the clutches of the Public Works Department in matters relating to the design and implementation of construction works. So too in the case of minor, really minor, irrigation and small drinking water projects.<sup>3</sup> Overall, given such dismal failures to restructure and redeploy the bureaucratic system, a demand has arisen for the establishment of a Development Administrative Service along the lines of the Indian Administrative Service. A paradigmatic challenge indeed to the mediocratic hegemony in the state's bureaucratic system!

The peoples' planning variant of decentralisation has also brought into the open the tension between the role of voluntary organisations and the political parties and their affiliate organisations such as trade unions. It is no exaggeration that but

for the whole-hearted cooperation and support of voluntary organisations, principally the KSSP with its all-Kerala network and costford<sup>4</sup> (largely in Thrissur district), people's planning would not have been able to do the considerable amount of preparatory work it has done. As for example, in mobilising people, conducting seminars and camps, working as resource persons, drawing up projects and development reports, organising training programmes and the publication of a large number of books, manuals and guidelines.

**B**ut this has invited the ire of political parties who think that their exclusive terrain – with electoral implications – is now being inundated with what may be called independent (of party politics) organisations (non-party political formations). The dilemma of political parties is now real. It was only the other 'day' that the national leadership of the principal political party leading the decentralisation process in Kerala had labelled all ngos (including voluntary organisations) as 'agents of imperialism' out to 'deflect from the cause of radical socialist transformation.'<sup>5</sup> The same party now finds itself beholden to the commitment and support of voluntary organisations in pushing the agenda of decentralisation. That might perhaps explain why there is no public acknowledgement of the crucial role of these voluntary organisations. Instead, no effort is spared to deny due credit to their work. The tension between democratic centralism and democratic decentralisation is palpable.

**T**here is another factor that, I think, will have equally significant and long term implications for the politics of development in Kerala and indeed in the country as a whole. This is the role of women. Despite the acknowledged and remarkable contribution of women in Kerala in achieving basic developmental capabilities – as in reducing population growth, enhancing literacy, schooling, child care and life expectancy – social opportunities for enhancing women's participation in the public realm remain severely constrained.

The one-third representation in elected panchayats would never have become a reality without constitutional backing. Women in leadership positions in the panchayats have often felt the heat from men and some have been forced to abdicate, even though many women representatives are related by family and kinship to men in politics. More important, their political visibility remains low in this 'socially and politically progressive' state of Kerala. Nevertheless, the educated, unemployed and unrecognised women, especially the younger ones, are waiting for an opportunity.

**A** meeting convened by a voluntary organisation in Thrissur to discuss 'women's issues' witnessed participation of over 1000

women from the district. More than 5000 women turned up, giving a jolt to the organisers! Political parties are sore that women are being mobilised by organisations independent of party politics. The subtle opposition is increasingly becoming open. On this issue at least political consensus is not found wanting. Here again one can discern a paradigmatic challenge to the male monopoly in public action for development.

Given such challenges in the context of the development dilemmas facing Kerala, what are the prospects for the decentralisation process? A major achievement of the current programme, it must be recognised, is that the agenda of decentralisation has been forced into the public discourse on development. This alone should ensure that future governments are not tempted to walk away from this challenge.

Over 100 village panchayats are in the forefront of implementing the current decentralisation programme with imaginative projects backed by effective participation from elected representatives, officials, voluntary organisations and contributions from local people in a variety of ways. But this accounts for only around 10% of the total number of 990 village panchayats. Going by independent reports, another 30-40% may have some record of effective implementation in one area or another. The remaining may not have much to show except spending money – distributing umbrellas, *chappals*, dictionaries, utensils, goats and chickens. They pose the most formidable challenge to the institutionalisation of democratic decentralisation.

The single-most important factor that will determine the success or otherwise of the constitutionally mandated panchayat raj system in Kerala – and I am sure in the rest of the country too – is the ability of our political society to forge a modicum of political consensus in its implementation. It certainly calls for a paradigmatic shift away from intense political contestation, from narrowly defined party-political interests on every issue at the local level to suit the short-term interests of those in power. Such a political consensus can also, in my opinion, enable the much needed restructuring and reorientation of the bureaucracy to meet the new challenges of development administration.

**P**olitical society will have to not only recognise but help the development of a civil society where the contributions of independent and collective initiatives are valued and countervailing institutions respected. Ordinary people should be seen as citizens, not clients. Such a shift will, in my opinion, help evolve panchayat raj as an institution of local self-government. People expect not only development functions but also civic functions to be brought under panchayat raj.<sup>6</sup> The social terrain in Kerala with a vigilant public, vigorous press, vibrant voluntary

organisations and the unutilised and underutilised energies of younger men and women, willing and waiting, is more than ready. A new paradigm of development politics has to emerge and respond to this social reality.

**Footnotes:**

1. The amounts given here represent only the funds made available by the state government. The other sources of funds are the centrally-sponsored projects, internal revenue, loans from cooperative banks, voluntary contributions and beneficiary contributions.
2. This is despite the political hold of the leading parties in the LDF over the associations of government employees. A recent controversy pertains to the attempt of the government to enforce timely attendance of employees in offices. A suggestion for introduction of a 'punching system', as in factories, is being vehemently opposed by a section of the employees. In such a context, the agenda of redeployment of staff seems a tall order indeed.
3. Even then panchayats have not been forthcoming in the creation of such infrastructure. Of the total plan, they have earmarked only 20% under the head 'infrastructure' which almost wholly consists of 'roads and bridges'. There is a distinct preference for 'individual beneficiary-oriented programmes' such as distribution of seeds, livestock, housing grant, books, uniforms, and so on with ample scope for political patronage.
4. COSTFORD stands for Centre of Science and Technology for Rural Development, a voluntary organisation, started under the leadership of the late C. Achuta Menon after he relinquished chief ministership. While in power he tried in vain to get the low-cost, but ecologically appropriate, building construction technology developed by Laurie Baker, approved by the government system. But its diffusion accelerated principally due to the work of COSTFORD which is also engaged in a number of rural development programmes. However, it was largely due to the insistence of Achuta Menon that the government system took cognizance of the need to examine 'alternatives' in construction works. It took exactly three decades for this alternative to be accepted by the government system, albeit limited to local level works.
5. Prakash Karat, 'Action Groups/Voluntary Agencies: A Factor in Imperialist Strategy', *The Marxist*, April-June 1984.
6. In this way the country may pay a small tribute to the original author of the panchayat raj whom we honour as the father of the nation. It is ironic that the Kerala variant of panchayat raj is conspicuous by its silence on any reference to this man.