

DECENTRALISED DEMOCRACY AND MARGINALISED COMMUNITIES IN KERALA

ABSTRACT

The popular dictums of decentralisation, participatory democracy and people's empowerment, particularly among the weaker sections of society and women have gathered impetus over the last decade in India. There is universal demand for taking governance and administration to the grass-roots level to the people and for transparency and the right to information concerning the affairs of the state. In this situation the 73rd Constitutional Amendment making the panchayats a third constitutional tier below the state governments in our federal system has been welcomed as both timely and necessary. Within it reservations have been provided to ensure participation by the weaker and marginalised sections. Some state governments such as Kerala have gone a step further and apart from passing legislation setting up the new panchayats in their states have also adopted the People's Planning Programme (popularly known as *Janakeeyasoothranam*) during 1996-97. Under it the Special Component Plan for Schedule Castes and Tribal Sub Plan for Scheduled Tribes attempts to ensure that the weaker sections are also included in the functioning of an institution in which they have remained marginalised for a long time. Through the People's Planning Programme, the state government for the first time set aside 40% of the Plan outlay for the panchayats so that local level plans can be made by the people keeping in mind their own needs. Within panchayats the Grama Sabha

in Kerala has been given more autonomy to make decisions and implement them with the help of the local bureaucracy.

Against this background an examination of the role played by weaker sections within the new panchayat experiment assumes significance. This study titled 'Decentralised Democracy and Marginalised Communities in Kerala' is an inquiry into the level of participation of the marginalized communities in the New Panchayati Raj system through in the Peoples' Planning Programme in Kerala. It examines how far, factors such as political affiliation, social reform movements, labour movements and caste organisations determine the level of participation of Scheduled Castes, especially in the Grama Sabha and its related committees. The empirical study was conducted in two panchayats in high range region of Idukki district of Kerala. In the district two reserved panchayats were selected, from which 200 respondents were interviewed using a structured questionnaire.

The state of Kerala has contributed to the policy of popular participation in many fields of governance. Even though, the 'Kerala Model of Development' has been subjected to much criticism, it is relevant to discuss to what extent this development paradigm has included the aspirations of the marginalised sections of society, namely the Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes. While it is true that the level of socio- economic and Human Development in Kerala is higher than

that of other states in India. This does not include the section of the population below the poverty line who are backward in social, economic, educational and health sectors. Most of this section consists of the people belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Even after 65 years of independence this section is not getting adequate food and shelter and is living in separate colonies and clusters.

The study is divided into three chapters and an introduction and conclusion. The first chapter explains the theoretical framework and the methodology used in the field study. It discusses the concepts of *decentralisation*, *participation* and *political affiliation*, which are central to the work. Decentralisation in a participatory manner could, it is argued, facilitate greater participation and rural development if it accommodates the lowest strata and can guarantee their active involvement in the decision making process through concrete involvement. The Panchayati Raj Institutions established after independence were meant to achieve these twin goals, but early experiences in different parts of India shows that it could not function properly due to lack of adequate autonomy. For ensuring decentralised development, the 73rd Amendment Act gave a mandate to state governments to establish Panchayati Raj Institutions. In Kerala importance was given in the process of decentralisation to the Grama Sabha which was established in every ward for ensuring maximum participation of the people.

An individual's active involvement in society varies in keeping with different aspects of the social, economic and cultural realm. Participation is one of the means to counter and overcome poverty, thus nurturing the democratic process in an equitable manner and is essential for dynamic social change. Accessibility of resources and assets enhances the level of participation. As a study suggests, political participation varies in relation to four major factors: (1) the extent to which the individual receives political stimuli (2) an individual's personal characteristics (3) the individual's social characteristics and (4) political setting or environment in which the individual finds himself. One of the important concomitants of individual participation in politics is the extent to which the citizen feels involved in the political process. Within this framework, the study investigates the functioning of the new panchayats and the opportunities they offer of participation to SCs and STs, a social category, marginalised and excluded from mainstream political and social life.

Political affiliation means supporting a political party, either through being a member, campaigning or voting. The study argues that political affiliation is a major determinant of political participation in Kerala. This is because of high levels of mobilisation by left parties based on ideology and around issues such as land reform and education beginning in the late colonial period itself, which has resulted in

politicisation of the population. This has forced all other parties also to mobilise in order to maintain their political base. At the panchayat level political parties also provide a platform for collective bargaining. The presence of the CPI(M) leads to higher levels of participation by marginalised in panchayats as they believe that it is a party with sympathy for the lower castes.

The second chapter provides a historical background to the study by analysing the working of the village panchayats that prevailed in India and Kerala in the colonial and post-colonial period. A brief look at history enables us to understand the reasons for earlier failures and how far the present experiment promises to be different. In the pre-colonial period Panchayats were not democratic in the modern sense as they consisted mainly of elders of upper castes who enforced rules, and codes of conducts. The colonial authorities installed local governing bodies but they were granted little autonomy or financial powers. The Panchayati Raj system in post independent India began with the introduction of the Community Development Programme, which gave special emphasis to rural upliftment. It did not last, nor did it touch all the aspects of local self-government including the absence of elected representatives at the local levels. The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee of 1957 recommended a two-tier system of governance at the district or Zilla level, coordinating and supervising the block and village levels, which would have

democratically elected bodies. The decline of PRIs in the 1960s, led to the appointment of Ashok Mehta Committee in the 1970s that suggested a two-tier structure at district and block levels. It offered unlike earlier, official participation of political parties at all levels of panchayat elections. Seats were reserved for Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes in proportion to their population. The recommendations of the G.V.K. Rao Committee in 1985 and L.M. Singhvi Committee in 1987, helped in the introduction of the 64th Constitution Amendment Bill in 1989. But it failed in the Rajya Sabha.

Finally the 73rd Constitution Amendment was passed in 1993 and it became mandatory to have a three-tier system of governance below the state level with compulsory elections every five years. The Act provided for the Grama Sabha at the village level to ensure the maximum participation of people in the process of development. One-third of the total number of seats was reserved for women and seats were also reserved for Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes. A Finance Commission has to be constituted every five years to review the financial position of the panchayats.

In the specific context of Kerala, the Colonial State established local self-governing institutions. The Madras Local Boards Act 1884, the Madras Village Panchayat Act 1920 and the Madras Local Boards Act 1920 were the most important Acts in the formation of village units in

Kerala. When the state of Kerala was formed on 1st November 1956, there were a total number of 894 panchayats. The District Council Bill of 1959 was introduced in the state assembly, on the recommendation of the Administrative Reforms Committee of the first ministry, but it could not be enacted into law due to the dissolution of the Assembly. Since 1959, a number of Bills were introduced, but could not be ratified. However in 1991, District Council elections were held, but due to lack of proper budgetary allocation, they also ceased to exist. On the basis of the provisions of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1993, the government of Kerala passed the Kerala Panchayati Raj Act of 1994. On the basis of the Act, elections were held in 991 grama panchayats, 152 block panchayats and 14 district panchayats in September 1995.

A unique feature of the Kerala Act was the installation of Grama Sabhas at the ward level. The Grama Sabha set up 12 Subject Committees on different areas of development including the welfare of SC, ST and women. The committees were expected to undertake local level planning. A Task Force consisting of experts and local officials was setup to assist various projects taken up by the committees. Special meetings were held at the panchayat level for the selection of final plans. After integration of various projects, the District Planning Committees prepared a list, which was incorporated in the State Plan. In this manner it was hoped that grass-root level planning would become a people's

movement. The statistics show that at least 30 lakhs of people took part in the first phase during 1996-97. Throughout the state people assembled together, discussed, deliberated, and decided what schemes were good, viable and result oriented. At the same time the process has faced much criticism from different corners, especially regarding implementation of projects.

The third chapter presents a profile and research findings of the two selected panchayats. The study was conducted in two panchayats in the Idukki district of Kerala: Chinnakkanal and Edamalakkudy in Idukki district. This chapter also analyses the data collected on the two selected panchayats. A micro-level field study was conducted to analyse the nature and level of participation among the marginalized communities in the two panchayats. With the help of a structured questionnaire a total of 200 respondents – 100 in each panchayat -were interviewed.

In Kerala, as already explained, political affiliation is an important factor in analysing the participation of the people in various programmes. Other variables used were gender, age, education and income. The participation of the respondents both in the Grama Sabha and the 12 subject committees was examined using the above variables. In terms of age the study showed that respondents between 18 to 29 years are not interested in participating in panchayats as compared to

those between 29 and 40 years. Literacy rate is higher in Kerala than other states although among the marginalised some illiterate respondents did exist. The rate of political participation drops with raise in educational and income levels. This is because the better-off sections are not beneficiaries of the panchayats programmes. This section resides mainly in the colonies where living conditions are dismal and most families are below the poverty line. Most of them own very small plots of land and do not have means to build their own houses.

Parties play a central role in the panchayats. Most respondents are supporters of the CPI(M) even in panchayats where the Congress-led UDF is in power. This is because our respondents are Schedule Castes who prefer the CPI(M) as they believe it the party of the weaker sections. The BSP has not made much inroads into the selected panchayats despite being a Scheduled Castes party. The BJP also has few supporters among the lower castes. Both reservation and the adoption of the People's Planning Campaign have increased female participation in the panchayats. Female participation is high in Pallichal where the president of the panchayat is a woman.

However, the study shows that while participation of marginalised is high in the Grama Sabha it is quite low in the subject committees and few are convenors of these committees. The marginalised attend the Grama Sabha meetings held and are both interested and knowledgeable

about the programmes of the panchayat. However, very few are made members of the committees despite their interest. These posts are still filled largely by the upper and middle castes. Thus control over decision-making structures and financial powers, which are in the hands of the committees, remain out of the purview of the marginalised even today.

In conclusion, the study argues that Panchayati Raj has not contributed much to the economic development of Kerala, particularly in the rural areas. Nor has it helped in the upliftment of the marginalised. After independence large amount of money has been invested in rural development through the panchayats, the People's Planning programme and the Special Component Plan and Tribal Sub Plan providing the latest examples. However, the pace of development has been slow and economic inequalities among different social groups in some areas have increased. The marginalised still form one of the poorest and most backward sections and among them the level of participation remains low. An important reason is the unequal power relations in the countryside, which allow the upper castes/classes to control the panchayats. In Kerala undoubtedly the position of marginalised due to many emancipatory changes in society is much better than in many other states of the country. Yet while they do suffer lower levels of discrimination, their economic situation remains very poor. In the selected panchayats in this study, the large majority still lives in colonies

outside the village and has not yet found place in the decision-making structures of local governance. Hence, they are not full participants in the process of grassroots planning inaugurated in Kerala. The study therefore shows that the social context in which panchayats are embedded is important and determines the role that lower castes can play within it. In this situation the introduction of participatory mechanisms at the grassroots levels cannot help the weaker sections. Their ability to make use of these mechanisms is limited without the support of the state. At the same time, under the new economic policy of liberalisation and globalisation the central and state governments are retreating from investment in areas such as education, public health and welfare in general. The funds provided to panchayats have therefore shrunk in comparison to the past despite the adoption of the People's Planning programme. Due to this devolution of powers to panchayats cannot help the poorer sections of society. Thus much needs to be done before marginalised can fully participate as equal citizens in the panchayats and take part in the decision-making structures.

The study concludes that in the long history of Panchayati Raj the marginalised have not benefited as much as was intended by its founders. Since independence much money has been spent on rural development and the upliftment of SCs and STs at the local level. After independence, huge amount of money was pumped into agricultural and other industrial sectors. But this did not, result in the capital formation

was proposed, but only served to increase the rate of economic disparity amongst various social groups in society. As it is hostile to the goals set by the constitution, needless to say, SCs, and STs have become the losers as such. This was hostile to the goals set up by the Constitution and needless to say, SCs and STs have been the net losers as such.

Whatever gains that has been achieved as a result of the various schemes in the past the future plans will also dwindle away on account of the lack of attention on the part of the government. At the same time, the new economic policy as a result of globalisation and liberalization, opened new vistas to the private sector which sidelining government intervention and thus threatening the very existence of the marginalised communities. The society too should have the patience and willingness to devote full and unmitigated focus on the Dalits and share assets and institutions with them, whose history is exploitative and unfair. Our 65 years of Indian 'freedom' tell that power was transferred from the British to India, not to the hands of democratic principles of state, but to the social institutions of caste Hinduism. The Varna system was officially abolished for the sake of upholding democratic principles, but in India, there are not such obvious differences between state mechanism and institutionalised caste principles. Both are handled by caste Hindus and perpetuated for their own benefit.

Indian society is mainly divided into two major blocks; upper varnas in urban society and shudras in agrarian village society. Both the social blocks are competing for political power at the national level.

The mainstream intelligentsia is in league with either of the two blocks and therefore, positive transformation would not happen unless and until an all round transformation of society takes place. It is the duty of the democratic and socialistic minded people to liberate the oppressed from the fold of these two big blocks and launch a joint movement for social democracy, through which an egalitarian society can come into being.

For that, the society itself should be made to respond more democratically so that the aspirations of the marginalised peoples will get proper representation. If the government is not interested in doing so, concerned intelligentsia and like-minded people should unite in a movement towards this desired goal. Otherwise, all the Dalit movements and other programmes for their progress would not make any substantial change towards their emancipation.