

**From Decentralisation of Planning to People's Planning:
Experiences of the Indian States of West Bengal and Kerala**

Charvak

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**Kerala Research Programme on Local Level Development
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Dr. K. N. Nair, Programme Co-ordinator,

Kerala Research Programme on Local Level Development,

Centre for Development Studies,

Prasanth Nagar, Ulloor,

Thiruvananthapuram 695 011

Tel: 550 465, 550 491

Fax: 550 465

E-mail: krp@giasmd01.vsnl.net.in

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From Decentralisation of Planning to People's Planning: Experiences of the Indian States of West Bengal and Kerala

Charvak*

1. Introduction

The line of argument for decentralisation of planning is based on the premise that information cost is a monotonically increasing function of the distance between the action point at which the information is generated and the point at which the decision is made (Marshach and Marshach: 1959). If the decision-making is pushed down to lower levels, the smaller will be the units, better will be the situation, other things remaining the same (Chakravarthy: 1972; Mathur: 1973). It has also been argued that the total planning problem should be partitioned according to some criteria into sub-system problems (Dutta Choudhury: 1973). Some of these can then be pushed down to lower levels of decision-making. Given that the basic purpose of this partitioning is to have different strategies suited to individual regions, which differ from one another, it is important that the spatial unit of this lower level planning should be homogenous (Boudeville: 1961). In the Indian context, the often-cited argument for decentralisation of planning is that, given the wide regional variations in natural endowments, levels of development and potentials, no single strategy of development for the whole country is appropriate (Gadgil: 1967; Raj: 1971; Biswas: 1973; Mathur: 1973; Aziz: 1983; Jain *et al*: 1985; Ghosh: 1988; Gulati: 1994).

The advantage of decentralised planning lies with the possibility of tapping local resources by ensuring greater participation of the people in the developmental process given the fact that the bureaucratic planning and implementation machinery is alienated from the people. Decentralisation of planning has been seen as a method to overcome this alienation and to ensure a transparent and participatory development process. If the decision-making is done at the lower levels, it is easier to ensure an effective system for people's participation in the process of plan formulation (Raj: 1971). This is particularly true for sectors such as agriculture, animal husbandry, inland fisheries, small and village industries, education, health, drinking water, housing, and rural transport, which would have to be planned according to the specificities of local resources and local needs of the people. Standardised development schemes that are centrally drawn up cannot take into consideration these local variations. An integrated approach is vital for sustainable development and poverty alleviation. The cen-

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* Charvak is Field Publicity Officer, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Jalpaiguri, West Bengal.

trally-sponsored so-called integrated programmes of Indian planning, which were put forward to meet these needs, in fact, degenerated very soon into yet some other departmental programmes. The only viable alternative of integrated development lies in decentralisation of the planning process. It is only through decentralised area planning that the “departmentalism” that characterises plan formulation and implementation in India can be overcome (Aziz: 1993; Webster: 1994).

Decentralisation, as a process, implies the transfer of decision-making powers from the centre of an organisation to its sub-units (Stiglitz: 1994). Decentralisation of planning in different countries or states may be assessed from the perspective of functional, administrative, and financial devolution and the extent of people’s participation (FAO: 1984). Decentralisation therefore has to be viewed as a process with varying degrees of devolution. In this context, a comparison is attempted in this paper between the processes of decentralisation of planning experienced in the two Indian States of West Bengal and Kerala.

Kerala is well known for notable achievements in social sectors as is evidenced in the fields of literacy, basic education, life expectancy, fertility, sex ratio favouring females, wide redistributive measures such as land reforms, minimum wage legislation, social security schemes, and public distribution. These achievements were, however, accompanied by low growth in income and of the materially productive sectors at least till the end of the 1980s. Notwithstanding the recent signs of improvement, this region is still economically backward. Scholars have been studying the reasons and extent of this paradox for long (Tharakan: 1996; Dreze and Amartya Sen: 1995; Isaac and Tharakan: 1995; Frankie, W. Richard and Barbara Chasin: 1989; Jeffrey, Robin: 1992; Kannan *et al*: 1987, CDS/UNDP: 1997). The ongoing research regarding the causal factors that have contributed to such remarkable achievements has sharply brought out the role of *social mobilisation* and *demand from below* in initiating public policies for social provision of the necessary infrastructure and legislative action for redistribution. Development in a typically underdeveloped situation is thus attributed to welfare activity of the state under popular pressure (Frankie: 1993; Ramachandran: 1995). Social movements against caste domination like the one led by Sree Narayana Guru and later people’s initiative for land reforms have contributed much to shape the modern state of Kerala. In addition, there were important contributions made by Christian Missionary activism, Gandhian village construction activity, and voluntary action of various agencies including the people’s science movement led by KSSP (Kerala *Sastra Sahitya Parishat*). The *process of democratisation* and the role of *collective action* in this Indian State is therefore of great research interest.

Despite the long tradition of local initiatives for development and the presence of an educated and vibrant civil society, it is surprising that Kerala has remained one of the most backward States in terms of decentralisation of governance till 1996. Between 1956, when the State was formed, and 1991, only three general elections to local bodies were conducted. The history of *Panchayat Raj* in Kerala till 1996 has been one of aborted attempts, unkept promises, and half-hearted efforts (Raj: 1992; Gulati: 1994; Ramachandran: 1994).

It is only from the late 1980s that substantial efforts began to advance the process. The uniqueness of the decentralisation process of Kerala in the past two decades is that, besides

a feeble top-down decentralisation effort on behalf of the State, the current of bottom-up initiatives for local level planning and development went from strength to strength. A process of development of ideas was in progress regarding decentralisation, among researchers and social and physical scientists, which culminated in initiatives from research centres, and *mass conscientisation* and *mass mobilisation* efforts on development issues which together gave shape to the 'Bottom-up' development initiative. The efforts made under the leadership of KSSP, the people's science movement of Kerala, constituted the final but the most important component of the mass mobilisation in favour of the bottom-up approach.

A confrontation between this KSSP-led campaign for the introduction of a bottom-up decentralised development process and the insistence of the State on the top-bottom approach brought about in Kerala the unique experiment of decentralisation in history. These two countervailing forces converged in making a People's Plan for Kerala. Preparation of the People's Plan was done in a campaign mode, which itself was a unique and innovative idea. The idea of 'campaign' came, as we shall show presently, from the earlier experiences of bottom-up initiatives. The People's Campaign for the Ninth Plan in Kerala has become the basis for the evolution of decentralised planning in India. In fact, it has marked the emergence of a qualitative approach quite different from that of decentralised planning, which has been in existence till now.

Unlike Kerala, which had a mixture of direct and indirect colonial rule, Bengal was in the centre of the colonial exploitative structure. The social history of Bengal also differs from that of Kerala, with popular conscientisation against casteism happening in the former much earlier (if we locate it with Chaitanya Mahaprabhu). The later social reform movements of Bengal, (for example the one initiated by Vidyasagar and others) were also accompanied by popular uprisings against the colonial rule and the feudal relations, and emerged from a more direct influence of European culture and philosophy.

West Bengal is one of the few States where the *Panchayat Raj* system was successfully institutionalised after 1977. Institutionalisation of the *Panchayat Raj* system was rendered possible by the implementation of land reforms, which helped creation of an organic dynamism at the micro-level thus facilitating the emergence of Local Self-governments. The procedure of decentralised planning introduced there in 1985, became an example to the rest of India including Kerala. The constitutional changes of the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution of India were much influenced by the actions of the West Bengal Government. West Bengal had, in fact, gone ahead with further democratisation by making public audit compulsory by law, even before the Amendments, though the government stepped short of implementing it.

In this context, in order to understand the process of decentralisation of planning, and to assess the extent to which it has advanced, it would be interesting to observe in a comparative perspective the process taking place in West Bengal and Kerala.

Panchayat Raj being the institutional set-up for decentralisation of planning, we shall start with the evolution of *Panchayat Raj* Institutions. In the second section, we shall focus primarily on the beginning of this historical process and trace the top-down decentralisation ef-

forts. The latter, started with the introduction of local self-governance in the State of Bengal, followed in time, by Kerala, began in the colonial period. The top-down process as an element of the total process of decentralisation, was stronger during this period, and continued to be manifested in the experiments of decentralised planning as late as the 1980s.

In the third section we shall discuss these latter-day experiments in greater detail and observe how the organisational, functional, and financial devolution have worked in West Bengal and Kerala. This discussion of the top-down process is based on available literature; only very few scholars have discussed the question of decentralisation from the bottom-up point of view.

The fourth section will discuss the evolution of bottom-up initiatives for decentralisation together with that of the top-down process, and examine how the approaches came to some kind of a convergence in Kerala during the past one decade. The new legislative provisions of Kerala which had come as the outcome of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments – provisions to tone up a top-down process - are now being utilised to initiate the ‘People’s Campaign for the Ninth Plan’ - one of the most thorough-going decentralisation procedures ever attempted anywhere in the world. The practical as well as the conceptual roots of the Campaign are with the bottom-up process. Since the Campaign is still on, we shall not undertake any comprehensive evaluation. Limiting the discussion to a brief description of the procedure and the organisation of People’s Campaign for the Ninth Plan, we shall elucidate its most important features.

The salient findings of our comparative exercise are summarised in Section 5. We conclude the discussion by stating that the Kerala experiment has wrought a qualitative advancement in the theory and practice of development planning in India. From mere decentralisation of the planning process, a newer, far more democratic, People’s Planning has emerged.

2. Evolution of local self-government

West Bengal

The history of modern local governments in Bengal may be traced back to the Resolution of Lord Mayo, the British Viceroy in India, dated December 14, 1870. Mayo observed that “... local interest, supervision, and care are necessary to success in the management of funds devoted to Education, Sanitation, Medical Charity, and Local Public Works. ... this ... will afford opportunities for the development of self-government, for strengthening municipal institutions, and for the association of Natives and Europeans to a greater extent than heretofore in the administration of affairs” (Hunter: 1875, Vol. II, pp.57-60). Accordingly, Bengal Village *Chowkidari* Act (1870) was enacted by which a body named *Chowkidari Panchayat* (or *Panchayat* Union) was constituted for maintaining watch and ward in the villages. But despite such noble thoughts regarding decentralisation of local development, all that was done was extension of colonial law and order into the interior of village Bengal, through the *Chowkidari* Act. The District Collector or his subordinate representative was given the power to select not less than five persons as office-bearers of *Chowkidari Panchayats*, who would assess and collect *Chowkidari* tax and maintain the village police (Mukhopadhyay: 1977, p. 21; NIRD: 1980). This was, however, in no way local governance even remotely, but only decentralisation of the local law and order management of the colonial state. Later, in 1882, Viceroy Ripon felt that local institutions were necessary to make use of the “intelligent class of public-spirited men whom it is not only bad policy but sheer waste of power to fail to utilise” (Palit: 1882, Pt II pp. 36-51).

The Bengal Local Self-Government Act, 1885, provided for a three-tier structure for rural areas with District Boards at district level, Local Boards at sub-divisional level and Union Committees for groups of villages. The electorate was extremely restricted by property ownership, education, and gender criteria (Ghosh: 1994). The higher officials who were ex-officio members exercised real authority. The Union Committees and Local Boards were conceived as mere agencies of District Boards, which in turn were run by District Collectors (Mukhopadhyay: 1977). In fact, Union Committees were never formed in most of the areas. The emergence of departmental district bodies such as District Education Board, made even the District Board redundant with respect to the limited powers that were assigned to them by the act (Mukhopadhyay: 1977; Webster: 1992). These boards merely served the purpose of engaging the rural elite in the periphery of colonial state structure and creating an illusion of power-sharing.

Initiation of urban local bodies dates even further back. But as the former were restricted to Calcutta only, the panchayat may be taken as the historical starting point for modern local bodies. In 1726, during the regime of East India Company, Calcutta Corporation was established through a Royal charter. All the 10 executives - a Mayor and nine Aldermen - were nominated members in this first urban local body. The charter went through revisions in 1793, 1817, 1840, 1847, 1852, and 1863 with the avowed objective of introducing increased representation to selected sections of the citizens, but with very little effect in practice. For the smaller towns, Acts of 1842, 1850, 1856, 1864, and 1868 initiated a similar process. By 1873, altogether 184 municipal bodies were in position in the then Bengal. The Act of 1873,

which came as a fallout of Mayo's Resolution, granted tax powers to urban local bodies. For Calcutta Corporation also, this Act instituted a 72-member body with two-thirds of them elected and the rest nominated. Under the Act of 1884 for the first time the post of chairman of urban local bodies was opened to elected councillors (GOB, SFC: 1995). Though the electorate was restricted like in the rural local bodies, urban bodies enjoyed more autonomy in terms of finance. Minute changes in legislation apart, the urban bodies did not go through serious changes for the first three decades of this century on the ground that they had already reached some level of maturity in the context of colonial rule.

For the rural bodies, however, there were further changes. After the turbulent nationalist upsurge of 1905 against the proposal of partitioning Bengal, a Royal Commission for Decentralisation was constituted. The suggestions of this committee formed the basis of Bengal Village Self-Government Act of 1919. It provided for a two-tier structure of Union Boards at the lower level and District Boards at the higher level. The intermediate sub-district tier of Local boards was abolished. This Act also integrated *chowkidari panchayats* with the Union Boards. In a significant departure from the earlier Act, the revenue village consisting of 8 to 10 villages with a total population around 10,000 was designated as the Union Board - the basic unit of local government. Thus the new Act closely integrated the upcoming structure of local bodies with the administrative and land revenue structure of the colonial state (Mukhopadhyay: 1977; Ghosh: 1994).

The Union Boards were vested with several municipal functions such as sanitation, water supply, and maintenance of roads as well as some limited development functions such as establishment and promotion of cottage industries and establishment of primary schools and libraries. They also had certain regulatory functions including limited control over village guards, which they had inherited from the earlier *chowkidari panchayat* system.

The revenue of the Union Boards was limited to what they could raise from the local rates on buildings. With no financial support from above and payment for the salaries and equipment of rural police being the first statutory charge on their income, even municipal functions could hardly be exercised.

The above system survived for nearly four decades and it continued more or less unchanged even during the period since independence. Low resource capability and relative weakness of local governments, emphasis on municipal functions, excessive official control, and above all, control by vested interests, particularly landed gentry, were elements of the main colonial legacy with respect to rural areas (Khanna: 1994; Webster: 1992; p. 14, 23). However, with the Bengal Municipal Act of 1932 delegating wider range of civic responsibilities and increasing the proportion of elected members in urban bodies, the municipal bodies of the urban centres had greater autonomy and financial powers and functions than their rural counterparts.

It was only after a decade following independence that the Act of 1919 was replaced (by the West Bengal Panchayat Act 1957) reflecting the constitutional directive to promote *Panchayat Raj*. The Act provided for a *grama panchayat* in every village. It was conceived of as the executive of the *grama sabha* consisting of all the voters on the electoral role in the village.

The number of voters was in the range of 700-1200. The number of elected members of *grama panchayats* varied from 9 to 15. Also there was a provision for the State Government to nominate eminent persons from the locality to the *grama panchayat*. The *grama panchayat* had two elected executive posts namely *Adhyaksha* (president) and *Upadhyaksha* (vice-president).

Anchal panchayat consisting of members indirectly elected by the *grama panchayats* replaced the Union Boards. The earlier structure of District Boards was allowed to coexist with the emerging two tiers of local self-government without having any organic linkage between them. It is also debatable as to what extent the new system was operational: though 19,662 *grama panchayats* had been formally constituted only 50 per cent of them was actually formed up to 1963 (Dutta: 1993. p.39).

As for the functions of the newly-constituted *grama panchayats*, there was no dearth of responsibilities, though the exact opposite was in the case of funds. The municipal functions of the earlier Union Boards were assigned to *grama panchayats* while the fund raising powers were allotted to the *anchal panchayats*. The *anchal panchayats* were to devolve the surplus revenue to the *grama panchayats* under their jurisdiction.

The Act of 1957 had been prepared before the publication of the Balwantrai Mehta Committee's report that proved to be a major influence in shaping the *Panchayat Raj* legislation elsewhere in the country during this period. As a result, the Community Development Project (CDP) Blocks were not integrated in the *panchayat* system in West Bengal. Since the Blocks of CDP were not coterminous with the *anchal panchayats*, problems arose in the proper implementation of CDP, and meaningful involvement of the *panchayats* in development activities was hindered.

In an endeavour to integrate the *panchayat* institutions in the CDP framework, *Anchalik Parishads* were created by the West Bengal *Zilla Parishad* Act, 1963. *Zilla Parishads* were to be set up in the place of the existing District Boards. Altogether 15 *zilla parishads* and 325 *anchalik parishads* were formed. These two new institutions together with the 19,602 *grama panchayats* and 2926 *anchal panchayats*, formed under the 1957 Act, constituted the basis of a four-tier system of rural local government.

Mid-1960s was a period of severe economic crisis in the State, particularly, in the sphere of food distribution, and consequently, of severe social unrest. It also was a period of general political instability. This period is marked with a split in the ruling Congress Party in 1965, the rising to power of United Front Government in 1967, its dismissal and return to power in 1969 mid-term elections, the President's rule from 1970 to 1972, and the installation of a new Congress government in 1972.

Many of the *grama* and *anchal panchayats* had been formed way back, between 1959 and 1963, and no elections to local bodies were held since then till 1967. With elections to local bodies long overdue, the United Front Government that came to power in 1967 decided to hold fresh elections after reorganising the system. In 1969, the *zilla parishads* were disbanded. Even before the draft bill proposed by the second United Front ministry could be

enacted, the government fell. The elections could not be held. Finally, in 1973, the West Bengal *Panchayat* Act was passed annulling the previous laws. The four-tier structure was replaced by the three-tier structure – *grama panchayat*, *panchayat samiti*, and *zilla parishad* – which was the emerging all-India pattern. The new *grama panchayats* were similar to the *anchal panchayats* of the 1957 Act and Union Boards Act of 1919 and consisted of a group of villages with a population of 10 to 12 thousand. Following the Balwantrai Mehta Committee report, *panchayat samitis* were made coterminous with blocks, and *zilla parishads* became coterminous with districts.

The Act provided for direct election of members of all the three tiers for a five-year term. The *Pradhans* of *grama panchayats* were ex-officio members of *panchayat samitis* and *Sabhapatis* of *panchayat samitis* were similarly ex-officio members of *zilla parishads*. The Act also provided for nominations of officials without voting rights, into the standing committees of *zilla parishad*, and of local MLAs and MPs as ex-officio members of both block and district tiers.

As a framework for decentralised governance, the 1973 Act was a great improvement on the earlier legislations in ensuring organic linkages among various tiers, improving executive efficiency through the system of standing committees, and providing greater clarity regarding the functions. The municipal functions were obligatory for *grama panchayats* while development functions were mostly discretionary in nature, unless otherwise assigned by the government. Some of the traditional functions like control over construction were continued. The functions of higher tiers were related to developmental activities. The long list of functions also included planning.

Though the Congress Government (1972-‘77) can take credit for the Act, it has also to take the blame for not holding the elections to local bodies during its tenure. It was the Left Front Government, which came to power in 1977 that took determined steps to implement the law. In June 1978 elections were held simultaneously for all the tiers of the rural local bodies for the first time. The event heralded a new era for the *Panchayat Raj* system in West Bengal. Since then, elections to the local bodies were held at regular five-year intervals in 1983, 1988, and 1993 as stipulated by law. More importantly, the powers and responsibilities of local bodies so constituted were systematically enhanced over time as the new institutions gained confidence.

In the first phase after 1978, the newly-elected *Panchayat Raj* institutions were increasingly involved with implementation of land reforms. The essence of land reform was to bring land illegally held under government possession, identify the beneficiaries, and distribute vested land. An equally important preoccupation was the establishment of legal rights of the share-cropper, known as *Bargadar* in West Bengal. After 1978, the newly-elected *panchayats* took the initiator’s role at the grassroots-level for the implementation of land reforms. Thus, while West Bengal with 3.5 per cent of agricultural land and only 1.8 per cent of the estimated surplus land of India had by 1985, contributed 19.2 per cent of the land declared as surplus in the country. The outstanding progress achieved during the period after *panchayats* got involved in the process is thus obvious.

Panchayats took initiative in exposing *benami* (disguised) land holdings. They also identified excess lands, declared vested lands, and finally ensured legal rights of recipients of vested lands and of *bargadars*. The earlier block-level Land Reforms Advisory Committee was replaced by the *Bhumi O Bhumi Sanskar Sthayee Samiti* (Land and Land Reforms Standing Committee) of the *panchayat*. Between 1972 and 1976, 1500 to 2000 acres of agricultural land was vested per month on an average. Between August 1977 and December 1980, the average rate of vesting excess land increased to 3000 acres per month (Dasgupta: 1981). Vesting of agricultural land was more than 4000 acres per month between 1979 and 1981. *Panchayats* also initiated the channelising of institutional credit to assignees of vested land and *bargadars*. After the rural development projects were devolved to them for implementation, naturally the beneficiaries of land reform got priority in the distribution of benefits from the different rural development projects.

This was rendered possible because of the assumption of office by a new leadership through the *panchayat* election of 1978, at the helm of the rural micro-level institutions. In the first *panchayat* elections, 60 per cent of the newly-elected *grama panchayat* members were CPI (M) candidates; in *panchayat samitis*, more than 74 per cent were Left Front candidates. More importantly, the occupational composition of the members showed very significant presence of landless and poor peasants. They constituted 43 per cent of the elected members. On the basis of the results of the 1983 elections, Kohli observed as follows: “The new *panchayats* of West Bengal represent a break from the past political patterns in India. The *panchayats* in West Bengal or in most parts of India have seldom been so free of domination by landlords and rich peasants” (Kohli: 1983, p-794). For example, in 1988, 58 per cent of the CPI (M) candidates (who won 77 per cent of the seats of Birbhum district), belonged to the poor peasants and agriculture labour category. This is in sharp contrast with the earlier picture of *panchayats* dominated by the landed gentry and moneylenders – who accounted for 70 per cent or more of the elected members. The new leadership after 1978, on the other hand, emerged from the peasant upsurge and struggle for land reform waged for about three decades. The erstwhile village elite, viz. the landlords and the moneylenders, lost their dominance over the newly-elected local bodies.

While land reform was a natural choice for implementation through the *panchayats*, another important task accomplished by them in those years was the work of distributing relief and reconstructing areas damaged by floods of 1977-‘78. As a result of the efficient performance of these tasks, there was no visible influx of village people under distress to Calcutta, the megalopolis. Outmigration from villages to the city, either due to natural calamity or joblessness in the rural sector, has virtually stopped after the *panchayats* got involved in relief works.

The *panchayats* were also entrusted with the management of several rural programmes - Food for Works Programme (FWP) being the first among them. Each newly-constituted *grama panchayat* was given Rs. 25,000 and 25,000 kg of food grains under the Rural Works Project (RWP). During 1978-1980, Rs. 119.80 crore and 3.95 lakh tons of food grains were provided under this project. This project (1977-1980) was replaced by National Rural Employment Programme (NREP) with effect from 15 December 1980 (Misra: 1994). *Panchayats* were also involved in implementation of Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme.

Later, in 1989, both these programmes were merged in the *Jawahar Rozgar Yojna* (JRY) and the involvement of *panchayats* was made mandatory by the Central Government of India for the implementation of JRY, taking a cue from the West Bengal experience.

In 1980, the West Bengal Government entrusted *panchayats* with the implementation of as many as 27 rural development programmes. Among them, some were of major national importance. The list included Rural Reconstruction Programme, Rural Water Supply Scheme, Rural Housing Scheme, distribution of mini-kits for agriculture, and Programme of Reconstruction of School Buildings. In the implementation of NREP/RLEGP and other programmes, the most significant departure that the *panchayats* made was the termination of contractor system.

As in the rest of India, rural development activities in West Bengal also had been dominated by bureaucratic agencies. These agencies had drawn in officials from various departments but had remained autonomous bodies with little or no public accountability. For example, the Fourth Five-Year Plan (1969-1974) had identified small farmers, sub-marginal farmers, and agricultural labourers as targets for specific programmes.

To administer these programmes, the Small Farmers' Development Agency (S.F.D.A.) and the Marginal Farmers' and Agricultural Labourers' Agency (M.F.A.L.) were established during 1970-'71. They were merged in 1974 and continued to function through the Fifth Five-Year Plan (1974-'79). By 1979, a total of 168 districts in India were covered by projects under these special schemes.

The S.F.D.A. was an important agency for rural development because of its focus on the rural poor. It was merged with the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) in October 1980; but again a separate agency, the District Rural Development Agency (DRDA), was established which continued to function in each district with the District Magistrate as chairperson. Each of these agencies had a governing body, drawn from district officers from the departments involved - generally agriculture, animal husbandry, co-operation, and some times irrigation.

After the new *panchayats* proved to be effective in implementing the Food for Works programme, they began getting the responsibility of implementing the other schemes as well. The *zilla parishad* was given representation on the governing bodies of these institutions. Further, the *Sabhadhipati* was made the chairperson of the DRDA and the District Magistrate the vice-chairperson. The agency was thus firmly tied up with the *panchayat* framework.

NREP funds allocated to the districts were divided into two parts: around 20 per cent for big projects (Big NREP) and the rest for smaller projects (Normal NREP). The first was under the *zilla parishad*, which sometimes shared the funds with *Panchayat Samitis*. The *grama panchayats* implemented the Normal-NREP. NREP funds were distributed among the *panchayats* in equal proportion to avoid arbitrariness and discrimination. Money under this fund had to be spent according to specific guidelines. Most works undertaken by *grama panchayats* are infrastructural in nature and not productivity-oriented. NREP funds were spent primarily for improving village infrastructure - particularly roads and culverts.

The actual receipts on this account were around Rs. 28000-Rs. 42000 per *grama panchayat* during 1983-'84 and 1984-'85. Nearly 40-45 per cent of this expenditure was on wages (calculated from the income-expenditure data of Kanpur *panchayat* of Burdwan district). Another 10 per cent was earmarked for wages for workers of Scheduled Castes and Tribes. About 60-65 per cent of the total NREP expenditure of the *grama panchayat*, Kanpur, was thus on wages. The material cost in total expenditure was around 35 per cent. During 1980-'85, a total of Rs. 110.4 crore was spent under NREP through the *panchayats* in the State as a whole. Another Rs. 9.45 crore was spent on RLEGP alone in 1983-'84. The IRDP fund, which had to be spent on beneficiary-oriented programmes with a mandatory bank loan element, amounted to Rs. 53.93 crore (GOB, SFC: different years, Economic Surveys of West Bengal).

NREP, and later JRY, constituted bulk of the funds spent by *grama panchayats*. Thus out of the total funds available to an average *grama panchayat* in 1983-'84 and 1984-'85, NREP funds constituted as high as 35 per cent and 33.7 per cent respectively. As is evident, bulk of the other grants was for establishment charges.

The tax base of the *panchayats* continued to be extremely narrow, unlike that of the urban local bodies. The share of own resources (tax + non-tax) of the rural local bodies in West Bengal was only three per cent of the total revenue, which was well below the all-India level (10.9 per cent). The dependence of the *panchayats* on higher levels of government for funds was thus more than 95 per cent. In the case of the urban local bodies, the variation from the all-India average was smaller. Thus, on the eve of introduction of decentralised planning, the *panchayats* in West Bengal reflected, on the one hand, maturity including political robustness gained through effective involvement in development activities, particularly, the successful implementation of land reforms; on the other hand, weakness with regard to financial powers continued (Calculated from Datta: 1992).

Kerala

Tracing the early history of the modern local bodies in Kerala is rendered difficult by the fact that before independence the region had been under three different administrative systems. The northern region, roughly up to the present day district of Thrissur constituted the Malabar district of Madras Presidency. The evolution of local bodies in northern Kerala was moulded by legislation in the Madras Presidency, which ran somewhat parallel to that of Bengal. In contrast, the central and the southern Kerala had not been directly under direct British rule but constituted two princely states, the state of Travancore in the south and the state of Cochin in the central region. It was only in 1956 that the modern State of Kerala came into existence; in 1960 a uniform system of local body administration came into being throughout the three regions following the enactment of the Kerala *Panchayat* Act and the Kerala Municipality Act.

As in the rest of British India, in Madras province also, local self-governments were urban in origin. The recommendations of the Royal Army Sanitary Commission to meet the civic requirements were important factors that contributed to the Madras Towns Improvement Act

of 1865 (Santha: 1993). Within two years, under the provisions of this Act, municipalities were established in the major urban centres of Malabar namely Calicut, Kannur, Tellichery, and Palakkad and at Fort Cochin - an enclave which was directly governed by the British in central Kerala. These were nominated councils and, therefore were dominated by the bureaucracy. The Town Improvement Act of 1871 provided for election of some of the councillors by the taxpayers, and for an elected vice-president.

Following the famous Rippon Resolution, the Madras Municipal Act of 1884 was passed which further extended the scope of elected councillors to three-fourths of the total membership. The Chairman of the Council was also to be elected by the members. Further, the Act enlarged the taxation powers and functions of the municipalities. However, the district collector continued to enjoy extensive discretionary powers though, through subsequent amendments in the law in 1920 and 1930, the scope of both the democratic process and the functions of municipalities were enlarged.

The discussion of local self-government in Malabar is usually centred around the Malabar District Board, which had its origin in the Local Fund Circle, with a nominated local board under the president-ship of the collector constituted under the Local Funds Act of Madras 1871. Local boards that managed the local funds were to attend to construction and maintenance of roads and other ways of transport, hospitals and schools, drainage and water supply, and other local works (GOK: 1958). The Madras Local Boards Act of 1884 introduced the three-tier structure and the provision for elected representation. A revenue village or group of villages constituted the lowest unit, called Union. Above the Unions were the *taluk* boards and at the district level was the district board. Their expenses were to be met from taxes on land, houses, carts, and animals.

It was only after the First World War that the rural local bodies took firm roots. In 1920 the Madras Village *Panchayat* Act and the Madras Local Boards Act were passed. Initially, the *taluk* boards were presided over by a revenue officer of the division and the District Board by the collector. From 1930, the Malabar District Board became an elected body with an elected president; the first president came from the local landlords. Soon the district board became a focal point of nationalist activity and was captured by Indian National Congress in 1934. In the next election, the leftists also gained a significant presence, and in 1954 a clear majority.

An important development that may be noted here was the abolition of the Taluk Boards (Menon: 1962a) and the consequent rise in the importance of the District Boards. After independence, the Madras Village *Panchayat* Act of 1950 considerably enhanced the powers of the local bodies. A *panchayat* was constituted in every village with a population of 500 and above and reservations were made for membership of Scheduled Castes and Tribes. The Act provided for direct election for the office of the president. The number of *panchayat* members varied according to the population of the *panchayat*. On the same criterion the *panchayats* were divided into class I and class II (Menon: 1962a). The *panchayats* were supposed to discharge a variety of functions, some of which were listed as obligatory such as construction and maintenance of public roads, public lighting, drainage, sanitation, drinking water, and preventive health measures. The voluntary functions were fairly large and related

to education and health. The *panchayats* also had a certain amount of limited judicial powers. The main sources of revenue were taxes on buildings, professions, vehicles, and entertainment. They were also entitled to grant, albeit limited, from the government.

The last of the elections to the *panchayats* and local boards, which was held in 1954, gave a clear majority to the leftists. The nationalist and leftist presence in the district board was a significant influence in shaping its activities. The Malabar District Board made monumental contribution to the spread of education in Malabar (Santha: 1993).

In the Travancore State, Town Improvement Committees were formed in Trivandrum, Nagercoil, Alleppey, and Kottayam, following the Town Improvement and Conservancy Regulation of 1894. It was only in 1912 that the principle of election, limited to tax payers only, was introduced. Sanitation was the main focus of the activities of the committees. Apart from sanitation, construction and maintenance of public wells, roads, and market places was also undertaken by the Committees (Menon: 1962a, p.626). The Municipal Act of 1920 expanded the scope of urban local bodies to education and health sectors. The capital city of Thiruvananthapuram had an official nominated by the government as its president. But the other councils elected their own presidents. In 1941, Thiruvananthapuram was made a city corporation with an elected Mayor.

In the rural areas, local self-government was introduced only from the 1930s and, even then, it did not become fully operational. The Travancore Village *Panchayat* Act of 1935 empowered the government to declare any revenue village or group of villages to be a *panchayat* with an elected or nominated committee to perform a variety of civic duties. These civic duty functions such as sanitation, maintenance of roads, and provision of drinking water, were considered obligatory duties, while the promotion of primary education, agriculture, cattle rearing, and cottage industries were considered discretionary functions. In 1940, the Travancore Village Union Act was also passed, giving rise to a type of rural local bodies slightly less powerful than the village *panchayats*.

In the state of Cochin also, the urban local bodies emerged during the closing decades of the nineteenth century, essentially to look after sanitary arrangements. In 1910, Municipal and Sanitary Improvement Regulations were passed under which a number of town councils were set up with representation for elected members. The government nominated the presidents. After a decade, the scope of elected representation and powers of the councils were substantially enhanced though franchise was limited to taxpayers. Significantly, gender discrimination was also removed. Women could vote and be elected (Menon: 1962a). The earliest legislation with reference to the rural areas was the Cochin Village *Panchayat* Regulation of 1914. Accordingly, nominated *panchayat* Committees were constituted on an experimental basis in selected villages. In 1922, the principle of election was introduced for the rural local bodies also.

In 1949, at the time of integration of Travancore and Cochin States, there were 197 village unions and 7 *panchayats* in the former and 100 *panchayats* in the latter. The legislations of the pre-Independence period, both in Travancore and Cochin, were superseded by Travancore-

Cochin *Panchayat* Act of 1950, under which elections were held in 1953. At the time of formation of Kerala State, there were 495 reconstructed *panchayats* in Travancore-Cochin area and 399 *panchayats* in the Malabar area. However, it may be noted that for some time even after the formation of Kerala, the local bodies in the two regions continued to function under widely different legislations – two-tier arrangement in Malabar and single-tier arrangement in Travancore-Cochin.

In 1957, the Communist Party won the first elections held to the newly-constituted State assembly of Kerala. A number of basic reforms were initiated in agrarian relations, education, industrial relations, police, and also in development administration. An Administrative Reforms Committee (ARC) headed by E.M.S. Namboodiripad, the first Chief Minister, was set up with wide terms of reference, which included suggesting “measures for decentralisation of powers at various levels (and) ... methods for democratisation of the organs of government at various levels with a view to effective participation of local self-governing institutions... in the administration” (GOK: 1988).

The *Panchayat Raj* system recommended by the ARC was essentially a two-tier system: village *panchayats* at the bottom and district councils at the district level, both directly elected. The Committee strongly urged for constitution of village *panchayat* as the viable and basic grassroots-level unit of administration and development. Another notable feature of the recommendations was the emphasis given to integration of revenue and development functions. Local bodies were not merely agents of development but also self-governing units. Village *panchayats* would be empowered to collect land revenue to be remitted by them to government. The revenue *taluks* and development blocks were to be made coterminous. With an indirectly elected council, the middle tier was envisaged to be only a weak advisory body. The dominant view of ARC, including that of its chairman, the chief minister, was for a district council with such wide executive functions as would merit its characterisation as a district government.

The transformation of the district council into virtually a district government was to be undertaken in a phased manner. In the first phase, district councils would act merely as agents of the governments and would have otherwise only a co-ordinating role. In the second phase, they would assume full control and responsibility over the social sectors. In the third-stage, “they will assume full authority over development work in the district except the very important schemes which may be specifically retained in Government’s direct control and function as full-fledged local self-governing units for their area” (GOK, 1958).

The recommendations of the ARC laid the basis of the Kerala *Panchayat* Bill and Kerala District Council Bill of 1958. The latter accepted the perspective of a strong district level self-governing body that had to be developed in a phased manner, as was recommended by ARC. However, the bills could not be enacted, as the legislative assembly was dissolved consequent upon a violent anti-communist ‘liberation struggle’. This lapse did exert a decisive influence on the future course of development of local bodies in Kerala. The new government that came to power through the mid-term election, largely ignored most of the recommendations of ARC, while passing the Kerala *Panchayat* Act, 1960 and Kerala Municipal Corporation Act, 1961.

Though the above Acts fell short of the vision of ARC, the functions and financial resources of the local bodies were significantly enhanced. The declared objective was to ensure that no government activity would take place in any locality without the *panchayat* being involved either in an advisory capacity or as direct executing agent (GOK: 1988). The village office was to be merged with the *panchayat*. All the government staff working at *panchayat* level in education, public health, agriculture, animal husbandry, and cottage industries were to work under the control and supervision of the *panchayats*. The list of duties and functions enumerated in the Act was long and impressive, starting from revenue functions such as maintenance of survey and village records, and collection of revenue and village statistics to a wide variety of development functions connected with the sectors already referred to.

The actual experience turned out to be very different. The local bodies could discharge only the traditional civic functions defined by the Act as the compulsory functions. As per the Act, the government had to authorise the *panchayats* to exercise any of the numerous optional development duties that were listed; but no government ever exercised these provisions. Another major defect of the 1961 Act was that there was no intermediate tier between the State Government and the grassroots-level local bodies. The absence of an intermediate tier at the district or at the block levels was a major hindrance to integrating development activities with the *Panchayat Raj* system.

An attempt was made by the Congress ministry in 1964 to pass a new legislation on the model recommended by Balwantrai Mehta Committee. *Panchayat* Union Councils with vital planning and development functions at the block level were proposed to be established by election. In contrast, the *Zilla Parishad* was supposed to be an advisory board only, with the collector as the chairperson, and officials and the presidents of *Panchayat* Union Councils as the members. Before the bill could be enacted, this ministry also fell.

Next it was the turn of the Leftist government. The new Left Front Government that came to power in 1967, after more than two years of President's rule, introduced a new Kerala *Panchayat Raj* Bill. The approach was that of the 1957 Bill. A two-tier structure with *panchayats* as the basic unit and *zilla parishad* at the district level was mooted. The *zilla parishad* was now visualised to be an executive agency. The recommendations of the legislative select committee further strengthened the district-tier that was renamed as District Council. The district council was not a mere development agency. It administered the district. The government could delegate to the district council duties such as collection of taxes, registration, inspection of factories, labour welfare, and even police administration. But even this bill lapsed with the fall of the Leftist ministry and dissolution of the Assembly. It was later reintroduced, with certain changes, as the Kerala District Administration Bill, 1971. This Bill also was allowed to lapse.

In 1978, the Kerala District Administration Bill was once again introduced after removing reference to police functions and restricting the district administration to revenue functions and was passed in 1979. The new Left Front Government that came to power in 1980 issued a number of notifications and rules as a prelude to implementation of the Act. But before more could be done this government also fell.

The new Congress government that took charge in 1982 wanted the Act to be modified before implementation. A committee for proposing the necessary revisions was accordingly set up. But matters rested there till 1987 when the political pendulum again swung to the left. The new government appointed a Special Advisor to advise on measures to be undertaken for democratic decentralisation at district and lower levels. The report submitted by him in July 1988, was a comprehensive review of the provisions of the 1979 Act and a set of suggestions for rectifying the anomalies in the Act, complementary legislation and also the administrative changes that were to be undertaken urgently. The recommendations were not fully implemented but formed the basis of the 1991-'92 experiment in District Councils.

The fact that serious defects remained in the District Administration Act 1979, even after such a long record of legislative scrutiny, is indeed a sad commentary on the legislative process in the State. Leaving aside certain obvious errors, correction of which through an appropriate amendment did not pose any serious conceptual problem, there were a few other serious anomalies with regard to the listing of powers and functions of District Councils. The powers and functions came in 152 items under 19 different heads.

Thus, for example, housing being eminently suitable for decentralisation, the only role in housing allotted to District Councils, was identification of 'houseless families'. In education, the powers extended to "opening and establishment of new schools", a right which if not judiciously exercised was fraught with serious consequences in the context of Kerala. Omission of planning from the purview of the district councils was another major anomaly. This was surprising, when we consider the fact that right from the inception of the discussion on *Panchayat Raj* system in Kerala, planning was considered a subject for local level participation on almost every occasion (GOK: 1988). The Acts of statutory bodies such as Kerala Water Authority, Command Area Development Agencies, and Khadi and Village industries were left untouched. Emergence of such boards and authorities on subjects that could eminently be operated at the local level became an important factor against the involvement of the local bodies in the development process in India at large. Kerala is no exception to this. The worst offender in this case was Kerala Water Authority Act, which gave the water authority monopoly in the supply of piped water and compulsorily transferred even water supply systems that were being efficiently run by the municipalities to the newly-constituted body (Ramachandran: 1994).

The list of powers and functions was left untouched (in fact, planning was added to the list). But the scope of these powers was restricted by preserving government's arbitrary right to interfere and lay down conditionalities (Ramachandran: 1994). The populist stance adopted might have been politically expedient but it gave large scope for an unsympathetic administration legal means to arbitrarily throttle the local bodies. On 29 January 1991, the first-ever election to the District Councils was held. The ruling Left Front was swept to power in all but one of the District Councils.

The State Government, which came to power next, had little sympathy for the opposition-led District Councils and it faced little difficulty in interfering and seriously restricting the powers of the district councils in a perfectly legal manner (Gulati: 1993). An amendment was quietly passed in the assembly to empower the government with the right to amend the

list of powers through notifications and delinking the office of district collector from the ex-officio secretary-ship of the council. Most of the district offices and institutions of the agricultural and allied development department were taken back. Starved of resources and without technical staff (the total staff of the district councils were only around a dozen), the district councils were rendered totally ineffective. The final blow came with the new legislation subsequent to the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, when the district councils were formally disbanded.

With respect to the financial situation of the local bodies of Kerala, we may say that the extent of financial devolution to the *grama panchayats* has been relatively high, one important reason being the fact that while in most other States resources for the local bodies had to be divided among the three-tiers, in Kerala only one tier existed. However, more than the total quantum of funds (the decentralisation ratio), the major contrast between Kerala and other States lies in the composition of its revenue (financial autonomy ratio) (Charvak: 1997).

While in India only around 11 per cent of the revenues of the rural local bodies is from their own taxes and non-taxes revenues, in the case of Kerala the proportion is as high as 60 per cent. A similar difference exists in the case of urban local bodies also. This is because *panchayats* in Kerala have enjoyed, from the 1960s on, the right to impose taxes on buildings, professions, and entertainment. However, nearly around 45 per cent of the revenue is expended on establishment charges, and bulk of the remaining on mandatory civic duties and maintenance charges. An average *panchayat* in Kerala did not have much surplus left for new development work (State Finance Commission: 1996).

3. The Process of Decentralisation in Planning

In the previous section we have seen how West Bengal and Kerala differed in their experiences of organisational devolution of the state, and where the similarities inherited from the colonial period and continued to the 1980s lay. After independence, the local bodies were revamped in pursuance of the Directive Principles of the Constitution and following the recommendations of Balwantrai Mehta Committee Report (1957). Ashok Mehta Committee Report (1978) characterised this period as the phase of ascendancy of local self-government of India. It was followed by a phase of decline of the local government institutions all over India. The West Bengal *panchayats* from 1978 are often called the second generation *panchayats* (Mathew: 1993). They signalled the re-emergence and revitalisation of this institution in certain parts of India following the review and recommendations of Ashok Mehta Committee. The passage of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendments in 1993 required a total overhauling of local governments all over India. One may characterise the post-73rd and 74th amendments period as the third generation of *panchayats*. Very importantly, these constitutional amendments have made the process of planning a very important function of the local bodies and therefore heralded a new era for decentralised planning. But the top-down decentralisation process in India was not limited to organisational devolution alone. It also has a tradition of attempts of functional devolution that is embodied in the process of planning.

The concept of decentralised planning was accepted in principle even before the beginning of the planning era in India. As far back as in 1942, Vishveswaraya had visualised a four-tier planning structure for his scheme of planned development of Mysore. However, the concept of decentralised planning in the country as a whole has emerged gradually over the five decades since independence, with variations in theory as well as practice across States.

In the Indian Constitution, which is federal in nature, Article 246 has clearly specified the division of powers and functions between the Centre and the States. However, there was no constitutional status for administrative units below the level of State government i.e., the different tiers of *panchayats* in rural areas and municipalities in urban areas. Their promotion was enshrined only in the Directive Principles of the Constitution. With the recent constitutional amendments, local bodies have also received constitutional status as local governments and their powers have been listed in separate schedules.

The First Five-Year Plan did refer to the planning process at different levels - national, State, district, and community. However, these references had little operational significance. The official recognition for integrated area development came only with the introduction of the Community Development Programme (CDP) following the success of the pilot project in Mahela district (Mishra and Sundrum: 1979). In the latter half of the 1950s, Balwantrai Mehta Committee was appointed to review the functioning of local bodies in the context of the introduction of the Community Development Programme. The issue before the Committee was not only the revitalisation of the *Panchayat Raj* system but also identification of its possible linkages with the rural development structures and programmes that was being introduced in the five-year plans. The recommendations of the Committee contributed to the

formation of a three-tier *panchayat* system in most States in India: *grama panchayats* at the village level, *zilla parishads* at the district level, and the *panchayat samitis* at the intermediate level. The intermediate tier, in most cases, was coterminous with the Community Development Block.

The recommendations of the Committee, for the first time, lent official support to popular participation in planning, particularly in the rural development programmes, through the *Panchayat Raj* institutions. The Third Five-Year Plan also emphasised the importance of decentralised planning, but no clear operational strategy was evolved. In fact, from the mid-1960s, a trend towards centralisation was visible. The centralisation tendencies took on strength with the onset of the crisis of the mid-1960s. To mention the most dramatic of the centralised approach, one may point out the Green Revolution strategy, which made a joke of all the integrated community development projects. Numerous Centrally-sponsored agencies, boards, and programmes with no horizontal linkages with the local bodies came up as a consequence. Above all, was the absence of a political will to decentralise. Little power was devolved upon the local bodies, though a lot of lip service was paid. The few powers transferred to them were in the form of delegation with too many strings attached.

The Administrative Reforms Commission appointed to consider the issues of the planning machinery at various tiers, submitted its report in 1967 in which it mooted the idea of a district planning authority. The Fourth Five-Year Plan also spoke of the need for regional, district, and block level plans. In 1969, Planning Commission issued guidelines regarding the preparation of district plans.

In late 1970s, when anti-poverty and employment programmes took the centre stage replacing the earlier CDP, the need was felt for micro-level planning below the district to take care of the problem of identification. The Working Group on Block Level Planning, headed by Prof. Dantwala, which submitted its report in 1978 (GOI: 1978 a), stated clearly that the then existing district level planning machinery was not able to undertake the task and identified the block as the appropriate unit to identify the poor and their needs. Block-level anti-poverty programming and planning was sought to be introduced in selected 3500 blocks throughout the country. Thus the Sixth Five-Year Plan placed considerable emphasis on block-level planning essentially to alleviate poverty.

The Ashok Mehta committee, which was appointed in 1977 to review the problems of *Panchayat Raj* system, recommended that the task of district planning should be that of the *zilla parishad* to be performed with the help of technically qualified people (GOI: 1978 b). In 1982, a letter was issued to the States seeking information about their preparedness for decentralised planning. The response in general was enthusiastic. A fresh look at the whole range of issues concerning decentralised district planning was taken to evolve a new set of guidelines to assist the States in this direction.

The Planning Commission in this context set up the Working Group on District Level Planning, in 1983. The Report of this working group headed by C.H. Hanumantha Rao, which was submitted in 1984, marks a departure from the earlier documents. To quote:

“The experience gained in the country during the last more than 30 years of planning has demonstrated that merely wishing for decentralised planning would not be enough to be successful, it has to be backed up by sound practices”. The Committee emphasised that there should be necessary technical and administrative changes including attitudinal changes among the bureaucrats and politicians. The Committee also admitted that this would take time, but the process should start from clear thinking, determination, and dedication. On the whole, the Report was extremely enthusiastic about decentralisation in general, and district plan in particular. The Committee recommended specifically taking ‘the stages approach’ to development planning. District planning, in their opinion, is a subsystem in the multi-level planning mechanism.

The first volume of the Hanumantha Rao Committee Report (1984) has a separate chapter on the concept and the case for decentralised planning. It says, “... it was true that the planning and decision-making functions remained centralised and vertical around the two political levels, namely the Union and the States whose spheres of responsibility had been defined in our Constitution. Urban Local bodies like municipalities or rural institutions such as the Village *panchayats* are not only a State subject but have also, by and large, functioned as agencies of civic functioning and not as instruments of micro level-planning and development. Thus this design of political and developmental set-up in the country had left a near vacuum so far as planning at the sub-State levels was concerned” (GOI: 1984).

Neither the 1969 Guidelines for district plan nor the 1978 Guidelines for block level planning, following Dantwala Committee Report, had visualised any serious role for *Panchayat Raj* institutions in decentralised planning. The Dantwala Committee Report did consider the involvement of the *Panchayat Raj* institutions in block level planning, but was generally sceptical of the outcome. Even the block level plan was to be implemented by the district planning machinery. The District Collector, and not the elected representatives, was the pivotal figure in its scheme. People’s participation was limited and left to the involvement of voluntary organisations (NGOs). The NGOs, in fact, were given greater role than the elected local bodies. Hanumantha Rao Committee noted in this context, that district level planning was mooted in several States but not through the *Panchayat Raj* System. The report states: “It is unfortunate that the existing constraints do not allow the PRIs to exercise the planning function” (GOI: 1984).

By this time, some States had already included planning as one of the functions of local bodies in the Acts. However, that was only in the formal sense. In actual practice the local bodies did not perform these functions. The observations of the Ashok Mehta Committee report were a pointer to this situation. These observations were endorsed in the Report of the Committee to Review the existing Administrative Arrangements for Rural Development and Poverty Alleviation Programmes jointly set up by the Planning Commission and the Department of Rural Development, under the chairperson-ship of G. V. K. Rao.

The committee said in clear terms: “The District is the proper unit for planning and development. The elected *zilla parishad* should, therefore, become the principal body for management of all development programmes which can be handled at that level” [GOI: 1985(b)].

Discussions regarding the need to amend the Constitution to empower the local bodies began in this period, which ultimately resulted in the 73rd and the 74th Constitutional Amendments Act of 1993. Since then, district and local-level planning by local bodies became a constitutional imperative. These Acts were to become fully effective from 1994. Still, it remains a fact that systematic decentralised planning by local bodies is yet to begin in most of the Indian States.

Process in West Bengal

The Food for Work Programme, NREP, RLEGP, and similar Centrally-sponsored poverty alleviation and rural employment programmes that constituted the mainstay of development activities of the *panchayats* up to the mid-eighties, did involve local level planning to a limited extent for their successful implementation. However, the scope of local level planning was severely limited given the nature of the above schemes being drawn up from above, in the absence of an authority to integrate the mainstream development programmes implemented by the line departments at local level and without own plan resources for the local bodies.

As the *Panchayat Raj* institutions stabilised and matured, their greater involvement in the planning process became imperative, if their capabilities were to be tapped for accelerating rural development. A number of reforms were introduced in the planning process from the mid-eighties to ensure participation of the local bodies in the planning process. In this section we discuss the evolution of the procedures established for decentralised planning; beginning with a brief mention of the institutional structure that was set up for the purpose.

Planning machinery

At the apex of the institutional structure were the State Planning Board (SPB) and the State Planning Department. Though SPB was an advisory body for formulation of the State plan, it played a leading role in guiding and co-ordinating the lower level planning machinery. A three-tier local planning structure was by and large in position by the time decentralised planning was introduced in 1985. At the district level there are two tiers: the District Planning and Co-ordination Committee (DPCC), more of a deliberative body, and the District Planning Committee (DPC) its executive arm. DPC prepares the plan and it needs the approval of the DPCC. Block Planning Committee (BPC) is the planning agency at the block level.

The chairperson of *Zilla Parishad* heads the key institution in the decentralised planning structure, the District Planning Committee (DPC), and the District Collector is its member-secretary. It has membership of non-officials and officials. Non-official members include chairpersons of the Standing Committees of the *zilla parishad* and of *panchayat samitis* and municipalities and a representative each from the key statutory development organisations of the district. District level officers, one each from each of the development departments, are the official members. Sub-divisional officers are permanent invitees to its meetings. District level officers of banks are also invited if needed.

It is the duty of the DPC to integrate the local plans prepared by blocks and municipalities within the overall guidelines regarding priorities and allocation of funds for the district indicated by the State Planning Board. The District Planning Committee is empowered to approve schemes up to Rs. 5 lakh while schemes of higher value would require the approval of the State Planning Board. Similarly inter-district schemes would also have to be submitted by the State Planning Board. The DPC is further empowered to review and monitor the district plan. It is to meet once in every quarter (GOB No.3230/P-1S-6/85 Dtd. 24 May 1985).

DPCCs were formed by reconstituting the district-level Co-ordination Committees with a minister as the chairman. The chairperson of *zilla parishad* is the vice-chairman and district collector is the member-secretary. All the other members of the DPCs are also members of the DPCCs. The key difference in the composition of the two bodies lies in the membership of State legislators (MLAs) and Members of Parliament (MPs) belonging to the district in the latter. Instead of the sub-divisional officers, the commissioner of the division is a permanent invitee to the DPCC. It considers and approves *ex post*, plans put up by DPC. It is also empowered to review the progress of the implementation of the district level plan schemes. The DPCC is to meet at least twice a year.

The chairperson of the *panchayat samiti* heads Block Planning Committee (BPC). Its membership comprises chairpersons of all the Standing Committees of the *samiti* and also of *grama panchayats* as well as block-level officers of the various development departments. Block Development Officer (BDO) is its member-secretary. The Committee prepares block-level plans within the overall guidelines and financial allocations indicated by DPC. It approves the block-level schemes, each with an estimated cost not exceeding Rs. 50,000. Schemes costing more than Rs. 50,000 each are submitted to DPC for approval. The Committee may also formulate schemes relating partly to adjoining blocks as well. These schemes are also to be sent to DPC for approval. There is a small planning committee at the block level, which prepares schemes and sends them to BPC for discussion and appropriate action. It reviews and co-ordinates plan schemes being implemented within the block. The BPC is to meet at least once in two months.

Table 3.1 Structure of planning machinery after 1985

Level	Govt.	Planning Body	Plan
State	State Govt.	State Planning Board	Annual & 5-year State plans
District	<i>Zilla Parishad</i>	Dist. Planning & Co-ordination(DPCC) Dist. Plg. Committee (DPC)	Annual & 5-year District Plans
Block	<i>Panchayat Samiti</i>	Block Planning Committee (BPC)	Block Plans
Village	<i>Grama Panchayats</i>	--	Basic Needs statements

At the level of *grama panchayat*, there is no planning body as such. *Panchayats* are to provide the BPC with a list of the most pressing problems or a 'Basic Needs Statement'.

Decentralised planning: First year

The preparations of the Seventh Five-Year Plan provided an opportune moment to make a new beginning. A formal decision to introduce decentralised planning was made in October 1984. But launching of the programme was held up by general elections and it was already March when the preparations began in earnest. The *sabhapatis* of *zilla parishads* were urged "to formulate, quickly, district level plans for the year 1985-'86, even without the support of technical experts, to be appointed" thereafter and even pending the formal constitution of the DPCs (WB-SPB: 12-3-1985). There were to be three components to local plans:

- (i) the district sector components of the developmental schemes of departments;
- (ii) the Centrally-sponsored anti-poverty and rural employment programmes (IRDP, JRY, etc.); and
- (iii) the projects prepared by the local bodies using the untied plan fund allocations.

The district plan was to be an instrument for the effective co-ordination of the departmental schemes that were being implemented at the district level. For this purpose the departmental plan schemes were divided into two types: State sector schemes and District sector schemes. State sector schemes were defined as those which were "non-divisible and capital-intensive and confer benefit to the people throughout the state or in a number of districts". On the other hand, District sector schemes "are divisible and operationally restricted to a district only, benefiting the people of that district alone" [GOB No. 6299(30) / Dev. Dated 23 August 1985]. The different departments were to convey to the district planners through their district level officers the details of the district sector schemes for the year 1985-'86. Since the departmental schemes by and large were likely to have been finalised by the time district plans were being formulated there would be very little by way of integration, modification or prioritisation by the districts. For the year 1985-'86, the procedure adopted was intended merely to incorporate all the plans and programmes of the different departments insofar as they operated within the district, in the relevant district plan. The district planners were to bear in mind these departmental programmes while drawing up schemes for utilisation of funds under their control.

The major source of plan funds that was expected to be available for local level planning was the Centrally-sponsored schemes such as IRDP and NREP/RLEGP. It was expected to be significantly higher than in the past. The expectation was that the allocation for West Bengal under RLEGP/NREP might be more than Rs. 100 crore. IRDP funds though beneficiary-oriented and therefore of limited use in area planning were expected to provide another additional Rs. 100 crore. The local level plan would facilitate more optimal use of these funds (WB- SPB: 12 March 1985).

An important innovation was the introduction of a new separate budget head with effect from 1985-'86 namely, 'District Plan Schemes' (DPS). DPS Fund was the untied fund, which the district authorities could utilise to meet the critical gaps between their fund re-

quirements (according to the District Plan) and the available funds from diverse sources. For the first year, a sum of Rs. 20 crore was provided under this head for the whole State, which was to be distributed to the different districts according to a formula arrived at the State Planning Board. The sharing was to be based on population, extent of under-development (e.g., inverse of per capita power consumption), incidence of poverty (e.g., proportion of landless labourers and of *patta* holders of vested land), and a few similar criteria.

The State Planning Board also provided broad guidelines about priorities to be borne in mind in the formulation of the local plans. The first priority was to be development of agriculture and allied activities, which would generate large-scale employment and secure rapid rates of growth. The focus of attention had to be on the marginal farmers, on the assignees of vested land. The provision of irrigation through appropriate technology to this group was to be the key link. The importance of scientific agronomy, in the selection of crops etc., to optimise use of the limited land and water resources was also emphasised. The State Planning Board also drew up a scheme to provide all *patta* holders of around 8 lakh hectares of vested land with free mini kits of seeds and fertiliser worth around Rs. 100 per acre. The local plans were to provide complementary irrigation water and ensure measures to upgrade the soil. Construction of rural grain storage facilities, 'small grain *golas*' was also to receive priority. The ancillarisation of agriculture and allied sectors was also underlined. Education and preventive health care was also to be on the agenda of the district plan. It was suggested that they could both be combined in a school noon-meal feeding programme. The local bodies were asked to refer to PWD master-plans to ensure an integrated network of transport. Overall, the suggestion of State Planning Board was that "at least one-third of the funds available for district planning be spent for irrigation programmes, that no more than one-third be spent on road construction, and that the balance approximately one-third of the funds spent on other programmes" (WB- SPB: 12 March 1985).

In order to create a database for local level planning, a block-level questionnaire was devised by State Planning Board, which could be compiled mostly based on secondary data available. This proforma was meant to give a quick idea about:

- (i) "for whom to plan: who are to be immediate beneficiaries of the district plan outlay;"
- (ii) "the priorities in respect of need"; and
- (iii) "the physical resources available, and the state of development, at a micro-level, in each block, on the basis of which to plan the implementation of diverse schemes" (ibid).

District planning authorities were also encouraged to use map formats to understand and compare the situation of different blocks by putting in collected and collated data in maps. The SPB also provided a hydrological map to help district planners in understanding the ground water situation. The idea was that with the maps providing the basic information on the ground situation, "perceptions of the local people were to be combined with the expertise of specialists attached to the planning bodies of each district, so that worthwhile plans could be formulated, consistent with the available resources of men and money, in the inter-

ests of the growth of employment, income, and living standards of the weakest sections of the population". The teething troubles in the first year proved to be too many. The promised posting of experts to district planning bodies was postponed (Ghosh: 1989, p.319-20). The data collection process was prolonged. The departments failed to provide district-wise schemes' break-up even in the month of September. They showed no eagerness to interact with the DPC. Still, plans of all districts were finalised and approved during the course of the year and reportedly, except for one or two districts, the district plans prepared for 1985-'86 were of commendable quality. The districts of Medinipur and Bardhaman were, perhaps, the best specimens of the process of the improvisation and local innovativeness that characterised the planning procedures of the first year. We shall here briefly sum up their experience, as reported in the chapters on methodology in the district plans (DPCM: 1985; DPCB: 1985), supplemented by the description given by Arun Ghosh (Ghosh: 1988, 1989).

- (i) Each *grama panchayat* prepared a statement of their most acutely felt needs and submitted it to the *panchayat samiti* at the block level.
- (ii) Taking into consideration the felt needs of the people and the resources of the block as revealed by data collected and maps prepared with the help of the officers, the *panchayat samiti* prepared schemes to be implemented. The ceiling for schemes was Rs. 1 crore.
- (iii) Since the required information regarding district sector schemes within the block was not available for the year 1985-'86, a statement of the ongoing and the proposed departmental schemes in the block was prepared relying on the actual expenditures of 1984-'85 and discussions with the officials.
- (iv) The list of schemes in various sectors, both departmental as well as those prepared by the *panchayat samiti*, and the source of finance of each (viz. a. departmental outlay, b. Centrally-sponsored sources such as DPAP, NREP, RLEGP, IRDP, etc. c. other sources such as Hill Area Development Authority etc., and d. District Plan Fund for 1985-'86) were drawn up in a matrix form. Needless to add, many squares in the matrix remained empty. These were then forwarded to the planners at the district head quarters.
- (v) Three sub-committees were constituted to process the documents received from the *panchayat samitis*. A technical sub-committee examined the feasibility and estimated costs/benefits of each scheme. An economic sub-committee arranged all schemes in the order of priorities, ensuring compatibility of and co-ordination between different schemes as well as consistency with the need-based statements of the *grama panchayats*. A third sub-committee headed by the *sabhadhipati* finally took the decision on the contours of the district plan, from the block plans. This implied that the block plans had to be pruned and some of the schemes prepared at the block level omitted.
- (vi) The district-level planning machinery integrated the block plans, municipal plans, area / notified area authority plans, and other inter-block and district level schemes into a draft district plan. An outlay matrix showing outlay by each sector and scheme with source of funding was also drawn up.
- (vii) A credit plan was also drawn up in consultation with the bankers seeking to integrate credit programmes of the banks with the sectoral development plans prepared through the process outlined.

The district plan of Bardhaman consisted of seven volumes. The first volume, after an introductory statement on methodology and administrative arrangement, provided a profile of the district, broad outlines of the annual plan, and the perspective for the development of the

district. The second volume consisted of a number of maps providing essential spatial dimensions for district level plan regarding geology, hydrology, irrigation, land use, communication, and other facilities. The Block and Municipal Plans of each of the five sub-divisions were presented in separate volumes. Thus the district plan consisted of 33 block plans, 6 Municipal area plans, and five notified area plans. The total outlay of the Bardhaman Plan was Rs. 62 crore, of which Rs. 25 crore was to be departmental outlays and another Rs. 21.8 crore outlays under different central government projects, area development authorities, etc. The DPS fund provision was Rs. 1 crore only. The major source of plan fund at the command of the local bodies was Centrally-sponsored schemes such as NREP (Rs. 3.6 crore), RLEGP (Rs. 2.4 crore), and IRDP (Rs. 4.4 crore). The credit plan estimated the credit requirements of the plan to be Rs. 35 crore (DPCB, 1985).

The district plans prepared by the DPC were examined and modified through mutual discussion before submission to the DPCC for approval. One common feature of the first year plans was their unrealistic outlays. No firm figures regarding any of the sources of the fund available could be provided when the planning process was initiated. Even the actual outlay of Centrally-sponsored schemes came to only half the amount that was initially expected. Nevertheless, the elaborate plan for 1985-'86 provided a perspective and framework for local level development for drawing up and integrating the schemes of different development agencies, if not in the current year, at least in the years ahead. Schemes such as IRDP, NREP, RLGEF, and DPAP, which were traditionally implemented by the *panchayats*, could now be fitted into a well-knit programme, even if modifications to the plan had to be made to accommodate the changes in outlays.

Above all, the educative value of the first year exercise should not be discounted. It laid a basis for the future of decentralised planning in West Bengal. Many modifications were made in the planning procedures in the subsequent years but the basic framework has remained unchanged.

Stabilisation of decentralised planning process

The major handicap in the first year of the decentralised planning process was the failure of the departments in providing information regarding the break-up of their programmes by districts and blocks. Therefore guidelines were issued to the development departments to initiate consultation with the DPCs before departmental plans were drawn up and also to present their plan proposals in two parts - the State plan proposals and the district plan proposals, with break-up of district-wise and block-wise expenditure. This process of consultation was completed by the end of October 1985. The DPCs were to formulate the DPS fund schemes only after the finalisation of location and priorities of departmental schemes, assessing the critical gaps therein and the needs and aspirations as reflected in the plans and proposals from below.

The priorities of the State government were also more clearly spelt out so that the basic approach of the plan becomes known to the DPCs while formulating their DPS fund schemes. The focus was on generation of employment opportunities and of supplementary income for the underemployed. It was to be achieved through provision of essential inputs and market-

ing facilities for agriculture and allied services and cottage and small-scale industries. Health care, nutrition, and sanitation were also accorded priority. Of course, these approaches did not exclude the DPCs from taking steps to fill up certain unavoidable critical gaps in infrastructure or pursuing social welfare measures (GOB No.7593 (30)/P-1 S-43/85 dated 15-8-1985).

The entire process including discussion of draft plan at the State Planning Board was to be completed by December 1985. But even in March 1986, confusions as to what constituted a district sector scheme were holding up demarcation, between State level and district level schemes, at the State level (GOB: No. 2237(12)/DP-2C-2/86, dated 31-3-1986). The inordinate delay of some of the departments in communicating to their district level offices the allocation for district sector schemes of the respective districts was once again jeopardising the local-level planning process. The block-wise break-up for district sector schemes could not be prepared at the district level. Further, in the absence of prior consultation with the DPCs, the local priorities could not be incorporated in the departmental plan proposals. Therefore a time-bound plan of action was initiated at the beginning of the financial year itself for the preparation of the next year's (1987-'88) annual plan. The same schedule was followed for the preparation of annual plan for 1987-'88 also.

An area where significant improvement in the planning process did take place was credit planning. Strict instructions were issued that no credit plan prepared by the lead bank should be put into operation without the approval of the DPCC and to ensure this, a representative of the lead bank of the district was to be invited to the DPCC. The guidelines for the execution for the same including earmarking of credit for specific sectors and schemes, the mode of selection and the criteria of eligibility of the beneficiaries etc., were also to be finalised at the DPCC. Thus the district plan proved to be an instrument for effective linkage between institutional finance and development credit requirement.

The district plan is implemented by several agencies such as government departments, different tiers of local bodies, and statutory authorities. While RLEGP/JRY/IRDP schemes and DPS fund schemes are exclusively implemented by local bodies, there was lack of clarity regarding the implementation agency for district-sector schemes. A major proportion continued to be undertaken by the concerned department itself. For small and non-technical schemes, particularly those under the NREP, RLEGP etc., with an estimate of up to Rs. 5,000, *grama panchayats* were the executing agency.

For schemes up to the estimated value of Rs. 50,000 *panchayat samitis* were the entrusted agencies. For bigger schemes, the Executive Agency was the *zilla parishad*. Besides certain minimum needs programmes like upgradation of primary school, construction / repair of Rural Health sub-centres and the like were entrusted to *zilla parishads*. According to this pattern of distribution of work, commensurate funds were allotted to the *zilla parishads/panchayat samitis/grama panchayats* under intimation to the District Planning Committee. Normally no contractor could be engaged for implementation of the schemes and utilisation of DPS funds.

On the whole, the process of decentralisation of planning has undergone substantial improvement over time. SPB has succeeded in getting the support of the Planning Commission

for the appointment of an economist-cum-credit planner, sub-assistant engineer, and a couple of clerks for each District Planning Committee. The performance of different districts in decentralised planning naturally varied, depending on the ability, commitment, tenacity of the *sabhadhipati* and the District Magistrate, the relationship among them and their networking with officials of the different departments. The technical expertise that could be put to use also played a role in such variations.

One decade of decentralised planning: an assessment

Having discussed the evolution of the institutional structure and the procedures of decentralised planning from 1985-'86, let us attempt to evaluate the performance on the basis of the limited empirical evidence available from an overview of 14 district plans for the year 1991-'92. The overall sectoral outlay shows that social services claim as much as one-fourth of the district plans. Agriculture and allied activities sector comes next in importance, with nearly 20 per cent. Together with related sectors such as rural development, special area programme, and irrigation, the primary sector as a whole accounts for as much as 45 per cent of the district plans (Charvak: 1997).

This outlay figures include, apart from the plan funds of the Central and the State governments and the local bodies, 'bank credits' and funds from 'other sources' including contribution from beneficiaries. The legitimacy of including bank credit extended to the private beneficiaries and the contribution of the beneficiaries in the plan outlays may be questioned. Bank credit contributes nearly one-third of the total district plan outlay. A sizable part of this is supplementary to the IRDP. But IRDP alone, being only 4.33 per cent, cannot account for this big proportion of bank loan. Actually, the district credit plan is accommodated in the district plan. It has been mentioned earlier that the *sabhadhipati* of *zilla parishad* was made the chairperson of district credit planning. The *zilla parishad* could thus exert great influence upon the district credit plan. Our data show that, as a whole for the State, agriculture and small-scale industry together claim as much as 62 per cent of the total bank credit.

The district sector schemes of different departments contributed to 42.29 per cent, the DPS fund 1.53 per cent and JRY and IRDP together around 17.5 per cent of the overall outlay of the district plans. If bank credit and other sources are excluded from the outlay, the share of district sector schemes rises to 69 per cent, JRY and IRDP to 28.5 per cent and DPS fund to 2.5 per cent.

The district sector

A major objective of decentralised planning was to co-ordinate the departmental schemes implemented at block and district levels and to make them more responsive to local level problems. The district sector schemes of the departments constituted the most predominant component of the local plans.

The first question that arises in this context is the size of outlay on such district sector schemes that the departments were willing to place under local scrutiny and co-ordination. Another related issue is the sectoral allocation of the departmental district sector outlays.

Has the pattern been changing over time and can there be a rational explanation for these changes? Finally, perhaps most importantly, is the more substantial question of effectiveness of the local level involvement in the formulation of district sector departmental schemes. Has it been merely an exercise in mechanical aggregation of departmental schemes into one single document? Or has there been substantial local autonomy in terms of prioritisation, selection of sites and beneficiaries, and implementation?

The proportion of district sector schemes in the State Plan has tended to rise over time. During the latter half of the 1980s, the ratio fluctuated between 24 per cent and 41 per cent. Since then there has been a steady rise, reaching an all-time high of 67 per cent in 1993-'94. It must be noted, however, that this trend need not necessarily have been the result of any shift in the State plan formulation towards new local- or district-specific schemes. It might be only that, over time, more and more of the existing schemes have been redefined and identified and then included within the district sector.

The district sector ratio of Rural Development Department, Agriculture and Allied sectors, and Special Area Programmes has been not only high but also rising. However, the share of this sector in the total district plan outlay has been declining from 38 per cent in 1985-'86 to 22 per cent in 1996-'97. The sector of Social Services constitutes the single largest component of the district sector departmental outlays with its share ranging from 20 to 35 per cent.

There is yet another curious feature of the trend in the district sector ratios of various departments, namely, wide fluctuations from year to year. Thus on Irrigation and Flood Control, there was a very sharp increase from 24 per cent in 1985-'86 to 74 per cent 1987-'88. In the very next year the ratio declined to 22 per cent. But in 1990-'91 the ratio shot up to 94 per cent! Similarly, in Industry it rose from 11 per cent to 74 per cent between 1990-'91 and 1991-'92. We had already noted the confusion that existed regarding the concept. The demarcation of the schemes into two sectors gave much scope for subjectivity.

So far we have been discussing the *ex ante* allocation for district sector schemes. An analysis of their actual *ex post* expenditure indicates substantial shortfalls. The ratio of actual release of funds for district sector schemes is lower than the ratio of allocation for most of the years. More importantly, no continuous trend in actual expenditure is visible. During the latter half of the 1980s, the District Sector fluctuated around 25-35 per cent and during the 1990s at around 50 per cent of the State Plan.

The proportion of regionally divisible schemes being much lower in sectors like energy and industry, their share in District Sector Outlay is much lower than their share in overall State plan. In contrast, the share of Agriculture and Allied sectors and Rural Development and Special Area Programme is together around 45 per cent of the District sector outlays, at a level significantly higher than their allocation ratio in the State plan.

An examination of the per capita allocation of inter-district distribution of district sector schemes for selected years reveals significant differences ranging from Rs. 24.43 for Howrah to Rs. 59.14 for South 24 Parganas, to Rs. 55.43 for Nadia and to Rs. 324.72 for Cooch Behar, during the year 1985-'86. It was not possible for us to get the definite formula or

formulae by which inter-district devolution was made.¹ It was unlikely that there was any such formula. Per capita rank order has tended to change over time; the shares of districts like Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, and Darjeeling have tended to rise; the shares of districts like Howrah and Hoogly have tended to decrease. The overall coefficient of variation of per capita outlay on the whole has, however, remained the same (Charvak: 1997).

Though there was no definite formula for inter-district devolution for district sector schemes, the actual allocation has met regional equity norm in the sense that, in general, the more backward districts received higher per capita allocation. The per capita inter-district allocation has tended to be negative and statistically significant at 10 to 20 per cent. The rank correlation coefficient between the two is even more significant at 5 per cent level.

But as we shall note presently, correlation in this case is not as high as for district-wise allocation of DPF. How effective has been local control over these departmental schemes that are supposed to have been devolved to the districts? It is really a difficult question to answer given the fact that for many reasons its effectiveness varied over time and across departments. The district sector of departmental schemes has been more effective in some districts than in others.

Arun Ghosh, reviewing the programme in 1988, wrote: "More significantly, there is little progress in regard to the co-ordination and vetting of departmental plans - insofar as they affect a district - by the district planning and Co-ordination Committee. Power is not shed easily or voluntarily by any individual: and the departmental mandarins at the State headquarters have not in general relinquished their control or authority over departmental outlays".

While narrating the evolution of district planning in West Bengal we have already noted how during the first year of 1985-'86, not only was there any meaningful interaction between the DPC and the departments, but also how departments could not indicate district-wise and block-wise estimates of the schemes even in the latter part of the financial year. There was no significant improvement in 1986-'87. Certainly some improvement was visible in subsequent years, but inter-departmental and inter-district variations in the quality of the programme continued to persist.

An important reason for inter-departmental variations in decentralisation of planning was perhaps political. All but one of the *Zilla Parishads* was controlled by CPI (M) while important portfolios for decentralisation (e.g., Agriculture, Minor Irrigation, Co-operation, Small-scale Industry, and Public Works) were held by the non-CPI (M) parties in the Left coalition. There was lack of enthusiasm among the minor Left Front partners in transferring departmental authority to DPCs headed by CPI (M). The departmental hesitation from above could be overcome in the districts where *Zilla Parishad* presidents carried sufficient authority for effective implementation at district-level departmental administration.

Though prior consultations with the DPCs were insisted on in order to fix location and priority in the case of multiple schemes, the departments continued to have an upper hand in the decision-making process. The DPCs had neither any control over the departmental officers to ensure compliance of their recommendations nor sufficient own funds to influence

decision-making processes in the departments. Departmental allocation was made to the districts in the form of narrow sub-sector-wise or even scheme-wise division leaving very little scope for local autonomy in planning. Most of the schemes continued to be implemented by the departments concerned. There was very little scope for the local bodies to monitor implementation or even less scope for getting involved directly. There was much departmental discretion in deciding what schemes to be given to the local bodies for implementation.

District plan funds

A major drawback of decentralised planning in West Bengal has been the extreme paucity of untied funds, which the local authority could utilise to fill critical gaps to supplement departmental schemes, or independently to pursue perceived priorities. The district plan funds considered being the basis of financial autonomy for the local planning authorities were too meagre to make any significant impact. In the first year (1985-'86), the district plan funds released came to about 3 per cent of the Annual Plan. In the subsequent two years, though plan provision was significantly increased, the actual release came to only half the targeted amounts. Though during the next three years, i.e., between 1988-'89 and 1990-'91, the allocation remained as in the past, around Rs. 20-24 crore, the actual releases were substantially higher. During the three years which followed there was a sharp decline in untied plan funds released to the districts reaching an all-time low of Rs. 7 crore in 1993-'94. In more recent years even formal allocation has been reduced. In 1994-'95 the allocation under this head was only Rs. 8 crore i.e., 0.47 per cent of the annual plan for the year. More than the relatively small size of the untied funds what has been creating problems for the district and block authorities, has been the dichotomy between the allocation made and the actual amounts released and the consequent uncertainties.

We have already noted that the DPFs were distributed based on a composite criterion of population and backwardness. An examination of the weightage allotted by State Planning Board to the different districts and the estimated per capita DPF allocation for the year 1990-'91 reveals that the coefficient of correlation and rank correlation had higher statistically significant, negative relationship with district development index than in the case of distribution of district sector scheme funds. However, it may be noted that our discussion has been with reference to allocation and not with reference to actual release. There could have been significant difference between the two. Thus, for example, the weightage for the combined Dinajpur districts was 6.82 in 1995-'96, but the share of actual release came to 8.61.

Centrally-sponsored schemes

These funds, which had been traditionally within the ambit of the local bodies, in terms of their target group and scope of activities, were ideal for decentralised planning. However, the centrally drawn up rigid norms of these schemes were sometimes inconvenient for local level implementation as part of an integrated plan. However, with increasing experience in the formulation of local plans, local bodies later showed considerable innovativeness in utilising these Centrally-sponsored schemes for local-specific projects as part of the plan. In

the first year RLEGP action plan had been sent for the approval of the Central Government even before the programme of decentralised district and local planning began. Later, the Centrally-sponsored schemes were integrated in the local plans at, or in most cases even below, the district level, depending upon the executing agency. *Zilla Parishads* sometimes have utilised these schemes, partially or totally, for even building bridges, and more often for constructing roads or check-dams.

Given the meagre untied funds provided and the departmental control over District sector schemes funds, the dependence of local bodies on these Centrally-sponsored funds is quite high. From around Rs. 100 crore in 1985-'86, the funds on this account increased to around Rs. 235 crore in 1990-'91, the first year of the Eighth Plan.

JRY allocation is divided between *zilla* and *grama panchayats*, the major share going to the latter. In the Kanpur *panchayats* studied by Webster in the mid-eighties, NREP accounted for 85-90 per cent of the development funds received. Later, we found that in Ruppur *panchayat* of Birbhum district, JRY constituted around 55-65 per cent of the total expenditure of the *grama panchayat*. Such extraordinary dependence is dangerous for the health of *panchayats*. "Salbari GP in Dhupguri PS of Jalpaiguri district, for example, received Rs. 4,26,872 in all for JRY in 1991-'92. ... The money came in seven instalments of varying amounts between 12 April 1991 and 20 March 1992. The *prodhan* never knew how much would come when" (Mukherjee, Bandyopadhyay: 1993, p.12).

The fault may lie with the delayed arrival of Central funds, or negligence on the part of State government to forward the files in time; either way the result is the same for the local bodies, namely uncertainty about funds. Nor do they have adequate funds of their own to pursue the planned projects of Central schemes, and to get the expenditure reimbursed when Central funds arrive. This is specially so because, at the time the funds arrive, there would exist large difference between them and the allocation.

Our discussion of the sources of finance for district level planning has sharply brought out the limitations of the autonomy enjoyed by local planning authorities. The success lies in influencing departmental decisions to conform to their perceived priorities, a daunting task given the reality of coalition politics and the rigidity of the departmental hierarchy. A number of key departments rested with the smaller partners of the coalition, who did not want to part with their power to the CPI (M)-dominated *panchayats*.

The situation was further complicated by the officials at the State-level, who enjoyed undue freedom (Arun Ghosh: 1989). The administrative and technical capabilities of local planning authorities were too limited to stand up to the departments. The planning bodies neither at the district nor at the block level have provision for inclusion of non-official experts who in many districts, play through their voluntary service, an important role in the preparation of plan documents.

Yet another weakness of the institutional structure constituted for planning is the neglect of *grama panchayats*. Mass participation in the planning process is limited to participation of representatives. At the same time, at the district level, DPCC with a minister as chairperson

and with membership of all the MLAs and MPs has been set up above the DPC. Perhaps this was done because the DPCC (District-level Co-ordination Committee) could not be dismantled without providing some alternative for MPs and MLAs at the district level. But at the same time, this has created unfavourable conditions for the participation of the representatives of local bodies in the district planning process.

Experiments in district planning in Kerala

The lineage of district planning exercises in Kerala, in a sense, may be traced to a practice begun in the late 1960s and early 1970s, of bringing out a document giving district-wise break-up of the annual plan. Each department prepared district-wise break-up of schemes divisible among districts according to the site of implementation and the residence of beneficiaries. Such divisible schemes used to be consolidated into a single document at the State Planning Board (SPB). The only purpose served by these documents was, perhaps, to facilitate better monitoring of the State plan at the district level. The procedure adopted provided little scope for district level planning or even integration of the sectoral schemes at the district level.

A departure from this tradition was made possible with the setting up of the District Planning Unit at the SPB in 1976. Later, a separate decentralised planning division was created at the SPB (GOI PC: 1985). District Planning Offices (DPOs) became functional by 1979 in all the districts except the newly-formed district of Wayanad. The DPO in each district, though attached to the district collector for administrative purposes, was responsible to the SPB (GOI PC: 1985).

Kollam, Kottayam, and Kannur

The first task that the DPOs took up was creation of a database for each district through compilation of the available secondary data. A Status Paper, as a benchmark report, was also prepared for each district. In Kollam district where a resource potential survey had been carried out, it was decided to go ahead with the preparation of a district plan in order to evolve a scientific methodology appropriate to the State and also to gain experience before initiating a State-wide programme for decentralised planning.

In the absence of elected local administration at block and district levels and due to dormancy of the grassroots-level *grama panchayats*, a local level planning machinery had to be set up for the experiment of decentralised planning. Local planning machinery, namely the District Development Council (DDC), an advisory body of officials and non-officials including all the MLAs and MPs of the district headed by the Collector, was already in existence in all the districts. DDC used to meet regularly once a month mainly to review the development activities in the district. A District Planning Committee (DPC) was set up with the District Collector as chairperson to formulate the plan on behalf of the DDC. Eleven Technical Committees were also constituted at the district level for each of the major development sectors, including one for employment planning and another for dealing with financial resources. Block Planning Committees (BPCs) were also formed at every block com-

prising the presidents of all the *panchayats* in the block, the chairperson of Block Development Committee, and officials of different development departments of the concerned blocks.

The planning exercise of Kollam was divided into two stages: Stage one was an assessment of resource endowments and the development potential of the district, which included: (i) identification of local natural resources, (ii) survey of infrastructure, and (iii) review of development of the different sectors and ongoing schemes in the district. As a supplement to the district database already prepared by the DPO, a resource potential survey was carried out. Questionnaires were prepared for each sector to collect the required data from each block. Local officials were imparted a brief training in data collection. After the completion of a resource inventory of the district, deliberations for actual plan formulation were begun.

Stage two comprised actual preparation of the plan, involving people's representatives and local government officials. At a meeting of the DDC, planning bodies referred to were set up. Meetings of BPCs were convened at which two officers from SPB explained the planning procedures. The presidents of *panchayats* were requested to convene meetings of their *panchayat* bodies to discuss their resource endowments, the development problems of their area, and to evolve schemes and projects to be included in their plans. They were at liberty to involve other knowledgeable people of the area in the process.

Schemes suggested by the panchayats could be financed by any one or a combination of the following sources: (i) government; (ii) local contribution including voluntary labour /bank finance; (iii) institutional finance and private finance; and (iv) private finance. Obviously a very broad approach to plan formulation was being attempted, some components of which were more significant as tools for popular education and enhancing people's contribution and participation in planning than in any operational sense. It may be noted that financial resources were not reckoned as a serious constraint during this exercise. The approach was problem-oriented and need-based.

Panchayats were able to complete the above tasks in two to three meetings. Thereupon the BPCs met again, after a month or so, to review the proposals from the *panchayats*. In many cases they were found to be incomplete in coverage and with technical imperfections so that they had to be modified and supplemented before transmission to the respective technical committees at the district level. Meanwhile, the technical committees devoted their attention to make critical appraisal of the ongoing schemes with a view to determining which of them could be continued or extended with or without modifications. After receiving the proposals from the BPCs the technical committees held several rounds of discussion. Officers of the SPB were also present in most of these discussions. The main focus was on the reformulation of the proposals to conform to the patterns of the State-level schemes and programmes and for examination of the benefit-cost relationships and technical feasibility. In cases found essential, new proposals were added. The technical committees also drew up projects and programmes of district-level importance. The responsibility of evolving appropriate strategies of development in the concerned sectors, keeping in view the levels of development and problems and potentialities of the district, also vested with the Technical Committees. The

procedure developed through this experiment was the basis for the guidelines issued for the preparation of district plans by the SPB (GOIPC: 1985). No reference to the guidelines is, however, found in discussions on decentralised planning during the Sixth and Seventh Plan periods.

The Seventh Five-Year Plan visualised decentralisation of planning from the State-level to the level of districts in the first phase, and then further down to the block level, to ensure effective implementation of the anti-poverty programmes and programmes for balanced regional development. In this context, the Planning Commission suggested to the State government to formulate comprehensive district plans in two or three districts as an experiment on the basis of a nine-point guideline (GOIPC, D.O.No.PC (P) 27/1/87-MLP, dated 7-5-1987).

The guidelines of the Planning Commission, — “Sequence of steps in operationalising the concept of district planning”, — had suggested that the exercise of district planning should start with a resource survey and preparation of a resource inventory based on secondary data as well as through primary survey for both natural and human resources. This should be followed by an assessment of the felt needs of the district and formulation of a set of priorities consistent with the State and national priorities. This being done, an assessment of the financial resources covering ‘untied funds’, flow from the State plan, Centrally-sponsored/Central sector schemes to the district, and institutional finance was to be made. It suggested preparation of a perspective plan depicting the long-term development needs and the development potential of the district.

The next step was to draw up five-year and annual plans. Such district plans were then to be integrated with the State Plan. The Planning Commission guideline also suggested not only an effective monitoring mechanism at the district as well as State levels to monitor the implementation of the district plan, in terms of both finance and physical achievement, but also devolution of appropriate administrative and financial powers, and preparation of district budgets. The last item of the nine-point guideline envisaged “involving *Panchayat Raj* Institutions (PRIs), and enlisting the co-operation of the voluntary agencies in the process of decentralised planning”.

Two districts, Kottayam among the developed and Kannur among the backward, were selected for the pilot exercise in district planning and necessary orders were issued entrusting DDCs with the overall responsibility of drawing up district plans. A small executive committee was to be constituted with district collector as the chairperson, with chairperson of DDC as the member-secretary, and selected district officers as members to assist the DDC in drawing up the plan. Blocks were proposed as the primary units for the district planning exercise, and Block Planning Committees (BPCs) were to be constituted with one of the district level officers of the development departments as chairperson and BDO as member-secretary.

The DPO was to help the DDC in preparing the block-wise inventory of resources and infrastructure and report on prospects of development. The BPCs was to assess the felt needs

of the different *panchayats* through discussion and dialogue with representatives of local people. However, as the *panchayat* elections were yet to be held, they were not associated with this project of decentralisation. The procedures to ensure people's participation and details of studies to be conducted were to be finalised by the concerned DDC (GOK, SPB: 7-7-1987).

The Planning Commission later amended the earlier guideline to limit financial assistance for the exercise only if the study was entrusted to private consultancy organisations.² Accordingly, the above structure was abandoned and the Institute of Management in Government (IMG) and Kerala Statistical Institute (KSI) were entrusted with the responsibilities of drawing up district plans, respectively for the districts of Kannur and Kottayam (GOK: GORT. No.181/88/ Plg.: 27/4/1988). The exercise was, however, kept outside the purview of planning in the State or in the districts for the matter of Five-Year Plan and Annual Plan formulation, and was undertaken only as a 'model' experiment of planning (GOK: D.O. No.6039/88/DP/SPB, 22/11/1988).

KSI started working on the district plan of Kottayam from December 1988. The preparation of the resource inventory was limited to secondary data. The focus of the exercise was to be on the preparation of schemes from below in consonance with the felt needs of people in different localities. It is worthwhile remembering that since there were no elected bodies at block and district levels, meetings of the BDCs, which had elected MLAs and *panchayat* presidents as members together with officials and other non-officials and municipal councils were convened for the purpose. They were called upon to put forward proposals taking into consideration the overall development needs and potentials and the felt needs of the people in the region.

By that time, the official preparations for district level plans as part of the Eighth Plan of the State began in earnest in the districts. The Eighth Plan district outlay for Kottayam was indicated as Rs. 90 crore. KSI decided "to utilise the list of schemes which was being prepared for the government" and invite proposals from the *panchayats* based on that list and dovetail the output to fit a financial outlay of Rs. 100 crore - the expected total outlay of the public sector according to the calculation of KSI (KSI: 1990).

It was expected that after the discussions in the BDCs, the *panchayat* presidents would take initiative to hold discussions at the *panchayat* level before making suggestions regarding the schemes. The block level discussions were over by January 1989 in all the 11 blocks of the district. By February, meetings were also over in the municipalities. Altogether nearly 700 persons attended these meetings held throughout the district (KSI: 15-3-1989). By July 1989, around 40 *panchayats* had submitted their proposals in the prescribed formats (Note Appended with D.O.No.6039/88/DP /SPB, 11/7/89). Ultimately proposals came from all the 73 *panchayats*.

In regard to data collection on the main problems and priorities of the *panchayats*, particularly with reference to infrastructure facilities, information was collected from the *panchayat* presidents with the help of a questionnaire. To supplement this input, KSI also undertook a sample household survey to understand the felt needs of the people. Four *panchayats* and

one municipality were chosen for the sample survey out of the 73 *panchayats* and the four municipalities (KSI: 18 May, 1989).

The schemes collected from the *panchayats* and the blocks were supplemented by the data from *Krishi Bhavans*, *panchayat* questionnaire and household survey, and these together formed the basis of the district plan report. The quality of the proposals varied: some were of good quality, based on in-depth analysis of the local situation, whereas some others were the 'usual type' comprising construction of roads and bridges. KSI dovetailed them within the fixed total outlay of Rs. 100 crore and prepared the final district plan. Being a methodological exercise, the plan was not exactly a compendium of finally selected projects, rather it was an account of the understanding of the consultants regarding the felt needs of the people as expressed by different actors involved in the planning process and the former's assessment of the resource endowment of the district.

It is noteworthy that the proposals from below asked for a lower allocation for agriculture while proposing higher outlays for the allied agricultural sectors such as animal husbandry, dairy, and fisheries in contrast with the actual district sector outlays of the State plan. The allocation demanded for rural development, which perhaps covered anti-poverty and employment generation schemes, was also much higher than the actual allocations. What is most surprising is the substantially lower allocation proposed from below on roads. On the other hand, housing figures much more prominently in the KSI plan than it does for the actual allocation for the district. At the same time, the allocation for SC/ST welfare is much smaller, less than half of that actually provided.

Though the KSI plan for Kottayam district had several positive features, the conclusion of the exercise was that in the task of "identification of schemes and projects of local significance and presentation of the same along with adequate details such as importance, costs and benefits, the general public can make very little contribution" (KSI: 1990). The extent of people's participation at the *panchayat* level was limited. The question whether people's participation could extend to the masses was, evidently, not even raised.

The Kannur District Plan was submitted on December 1992, almost two years after the Kottayam Plan. By then the first elected district councils of Kerala had also been constituted. This plan, however, was more a "methodological exercise than an operational (medium/term/annual) plan".

It started with an analysis of situation, which included preparation of district profile, resource inventory through secondary data collection and mapping techniques and also primary survey whenever needed, especially using RRA techniques. The next step involved a sectoral and spatial analysis of the district, which included identification of watershed, geoclimatic typologies, spatial profile of poverty and unemployment, sectoral review of potentials, etc. The third step involved formulation of objectives and strategies based on the situation analysis done as the first step. This encompassed assessment of the felt needs of the *panchayats*, NGOs and formulation of long-term and short-term objectives, as well as sectoral strategies.

It is interesting in this context to examine the preferences or the priorities of the *panchayats*

as revealed by the survey. Creating or improving drinking water facilities was considered one of the five important sectors by 52.8 per cent of the *panchayats*, while 30.3 per cent saw it as the number one priority sector. But the allocation for Kerala Water Authority was 7.7 per cent of total outlay; and actually only 4.9 per cent was spent by it in the Seventh Plan for the district. Irrigation was, in general, ignored at less than 3 per cent (IMG: 1993, p-166), though it was regarded one of the five most important sectors by a total of 31.5 per cent of the *panchayats*. Fisheries sector counted as one of the five important sectors by 21.8 per cent of the *panchayats*, while the expenditure on Fisheries remained only 1.35 per cent of the Seventh Plan outlay in the district. Thus the pattern of preferences revealed in the Kannur Plan significantly varied from the expenditure pattern of the Seventh Five-Year Plan in the district.

The fourth step was the preparation of programmes and projects. It was stated that a quantitative and spatial schematic plan would be drawn up based on a 'development dialogue' with the District Council regarding the financial resource position and their views regarding development priorities. However, this promise never materialised.

Decentralisation of special component plan and tribal sub-plan

Though comprehensive district planning did not go beyond the stage of experiment in plan formulation, Kerala has had relatively a fair degree of success in decentralised planning for certain target-group-oriented special programmes, such as the special component plan (SCP) for Scheduled Castes and the Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP). According to the 1991 census, the Scheduled Castes (SC) constitute 10.02 per cent and Scheduled Tribe (ST) around 1.03 per cent of the population. Though these groups have historically been subjected to the worst forms of caste oppression, during recent decades, SCs are being increasingly drawn into the social mainstream through various social movements and agricultural labour unions. As a result, in terms of education and health indices, the social distance between the SC population and the rest of the society has tended to narrow.

The SC population in Kerala is today in a better position with regard to education, organised sector employment, health and social status than their counterparts in other parts of the country. The same cannot be said of the ST population in Kerala. They continue to be isolated from the mainstream. It cannot be said that the development efforts have had any significant impact on their standard of living (Kunhaman: 1979).

Even today, SCs and to a large extent, STs constitute the poorest of the poor in Kerala with proportionately much higher per cent of the identified poor families in Kerala, according to the IRDP survey, belonging to these communities. They continue to suffer from a double disability - of severe economic exploitation and social discrimination. This being the situation it was only appropriate that these social strata were made the focus of special plan efforts through various welfare programmes.

The strategy for development of areas of tribal concentration culminated in the concept of a sub-plan for those areas of the States and Union Territories where tribal population is below 50 per cent. Accordingly, the States were asked to prepare Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP), combin-

ing resources of all different departments into a single ST development plan for the State. Similarly, the guidelines on the formulation of the Fifth Plan (1978-'83) suggested earmarking schemes and outlays that could be identified to target in every sector the SCs for integrating them in the general development programme. By the end of Fifth Five-Year Plan, however, it became apparent that attempts to quantify financial and physical benefits to SCs had not achieved the desired results. This realisation led to the formalisation of a modified approach through a Special Component Plan. The State Governments were requested to prepare the Special Component Plans for SCs for the first time for the Annual Plan 1979-'80. Schemes benefiting SCs had to be identified by areas and beneficiaries and funds earmarked to the target group through a sub-plan approach. These provisions had to be made under separate minor budget heads to make the allocation non-divertible (D.O. Letter No. B.C14011/2/78-SCT.II dated 3-11-1978).

However, a review of the Annual Plan 1978-'79 revealed that "Most of the Special Component Plans which were submitted were mere segregation of outlays under the various sectors of development; moreover total outlays thus earmarked were far below the proportion of Scheduled Caste population in the State. In fact the main objective to give positive thrust to their development by covering maximum number of Scheduled Caste families has not emerged. Exercises for apportioning funds were not attempted in a number of sectors. It was also noted that most of the States had not taken into account all the schemes, which could benefit necessary linkages with marketing; credit needs were also wanting. There were not linkages also with the state agencies like the various Development Corporations" (GOK: 1978:p-106-7). A number of corrective measures were therefore suggested. Even then, the allocation for the SCP continued to remain below the population share. In 1979-1980 it was only 4.5 per cent; and 6.9 per cent in the next year.

The schemes under SCP used to be drawn up and implemented by different departments, as decided at the State-level and implemented at the district or block level. The schematic outlays were distributed to the districts by the departments themselves. Most of these schemes, as was recognised later, "were routine, stereotyped schemes of the departments which they had been implementing in the previous plan. The only difference was that in the budget the outlays set apart for schemes under SCP were shown separately." The programmes were being formulated and implemented vertically by different departments without being integrated at the local level and they could not produce results to the desired extent.

In 1982, a review of the state of decentralisation of planning decided that instead of aiming at complete decentralisation at one stroke, it should be carried out in a phased manner.³ In the first phase, the preparation and implementation of co-ordinated programmes at the district level in respect of Special Component Plan was recommended (KSPB: 1988 January). The decentralisation process was not carried forward into subsequent phases so as to cover other district sector schemes; it remained limited to the formulation of SCP and TSP at the district level. The effective functional decentralisation of development planning in Kerala began only with the delegation of the power for planning of the Special Component Plan and Tribal Sub-plan to the District Planning offices.

Both SCP and TSP envisaged the "integration of services to the delivery point". But the

machinery at the State level was quiet unequipped to do so and the problem surfaced with identification of beneficiaries. Naturally, it was impossible to locate the lakhs of SC and ST families at the State level without a decentralised system to locate them at the district/sub-district level. This was a matter of concern right from the inception of the programme. It is in this context that the decision for decentralisation of SCP/TSP has to be viewed.

In the new procedure for 'better implementation of SCP', keeping 25 per cent of the SCP fund for the headquarters' schemes for the first year of new procedure, the rest was distributed among the districts according to specific norms (GOK: (MS) 27/83/P. &E.A.: 16-4-1983). After 1983-'84, SCP and TSP outlays in Kerala were budgeted as lump-sum provisions against separate sub-heads of accounts. The District Planning Office then played the key role to co-ordinate the formulation and implementation of schemes under SCP and TSP.

A working group (DWG) chaired by District Collector and co-ordinated by DPO, consisting different departmental officers, was put in charge of SCP and TSP. This Working Group had to ensure that each scheme was properly co-ordinated with the rest of the plan and that the habitat level and the family level co-ordination were properly worked out. The District Planning Officer played the key role to co-ordinate the formulation and implementation of schemes under SCP and TSP. The technical sanction for the schemes was to be given by the district level officer of the concerned department. The Working Group was empowered to sanction schemes costing up to Rs.10 lakh and implement them. The District annual programme had to be placed before the District Advisory Committee on Scheduled Castes for advice before its approval.

The identification of the schemes was envisaged to be essentially guided by local needs and aspirations of the SC population. District Planning offices carried out a Scheduled Caste Habitat Survey in each district to identify habitats with 10 or more SC households clustered in one area. Basic data, such as infrastructural facilities available in the habitat, occupational characteristics of SC workers, and educational qualifications were collected in a prescribed format. Based on them, packages of family-oriented programmes were to be identified through discussions with the beneficiary families, *panchayat* members, knowledgeable persons of the locality, representatives of SC associations, etc. Programmes for the development of the areas or habitats were then drawn up. A medium-term habitat development plan for each district was formulated by the district planning units of different districts by 1984-'85. A second round of survey was initiated in 1987 to identify more SC habitats.

Before decentralised planning for SCP was introduced, shortfalls and lapses had been usual in implementation. After this elaborate process of identification of the beneficiaries and decentralisation of formulation of SCP, there was a significant increase in allocation and expenditure. Finally, the outlay of SCP from the State's share of Annual State Plan stabilised at around 9 per cent of the total allocation. It is also noteworthy that in 1979-1980, against the allocation of Rs. 938 crore, the actual SCP expenditure was only Rs. 752.43 lakh — nearly 20 per cent less than the allocation. In contrast, in 1990-'91, the actual expenditure was 10 per cent higher than the allocation for SCP in the Annual Plan of that year. The share of the district sector was around 85 per cent during the 1980s (Charvak: 1997).

The plan expenditure for tribal population saw a 50 per cent increase in the last year of the Fifth Five-Year Plan, once TSP emerged as an institutional arrangement. TSP expenditure further increased from 0.4 per cent to 0.7 per cent of total Annual State Plan between 1978-'79 and 1980-'81. After 1981, there was a quantum jump in the share of TSP. In the 1990s, TSPs share has been close to 2 per cent, which, compared to the population share of 1.03 per cent, is significantly higher. The share of TSP allocated to districts has come down over the years. Even for the devolved allocation, the District Collectors or the DWG, however, could not alter the sectoral distribution of TSP, once it was passed by the SPB.

Decentralisation of SCP and TSP was undertaken to ensure better formulation and more effective implementation. However, it was limited to functional devolution, without corresponding financial and supporting administrative devolution. Though there were some non-officials including MLAs/MPs as members of the DLWG, no representatives of local institutions were included in that body. People's participation was not envisaged. All that can be said is that planning to the extent of SCP and TSP was decentralised for bureaucratic management in a decentralised way. Instead of finalising these schemes from the capital in Thiruvananthapuram, the district offices of line departments were given the responsibility to do so under the co-ordination of District Planning Officer and District Collector. Still, expenditure for TSP increased from 0.27 per cent in the Fifth Plan to 1.52 per cent in the Sixth Plan and further to 1.86 per cent in Seventh Plan, the credit for which largely goes to the decentralised formulation.

Decentralised planning in Kerala's Eighth Plan and allocation of untied fund

The methodological insights gained, particularly from the Kollam experiment, formed the basis of a major attempt to adopt decentralised approach for the formulation of the Eighth Plan (1990-'95). The Draft Approach Paper for Eighth Plan (1990-'95) laid great emphasis on people's participation for the preparation of plan. "Only their creative insights can ensure unerring guidance; their vigilance and energy in action, implementation. In short, only the whole hearted participation of the people in the planning process can ensure its success" (SPB: 1989). Decentralisation of the planning process, it was recognised, was a precondition for participatory planning. This approach signalled a major break with the past.

There were a number of other factors that created the conditions conducive to the adoption of the decentralised approach to planning. The most important among them was imminence of implementation of the District Council Act (1979). The report of the advisor on decentralisation on the necessary amendments to the acts and rules and administrative changes, had already been submitted. Among his suggestions, one was that district planning for development should be one of the important functions of the District Council, the local self-government institution of the district level; and that it should be appropriately autonomous and empowered to discharge its duties and responsibilities as representative of local people and to undertake management of local affairs and development programmes. To assist the council in this regard, a District Planning and Development Advisory Committee with broad-based membership was suggested. The District Rural Development Agency (DRDA) concerned with special anti-poverty programmes like IRDP was to be merged with the District

Council. Another reason must have been the enthusiasm regarding decentralisation of planning generated in West Bengal. It was hoped that the preparation and subsequent implementation of the State's Eighth Five-Year Plan would elicit similar participation from the people of Kerala.

Till then, departmental heads of the state level used to prepare the plans and give them to the district offices. But in the proposal of decentralised planning in the Eighth Plan, it was envisaged that all divisible schemes would be formulated at the district level and compiled at the State level (G.O. (MS) No.1/86/planning, dated 2-1-1989). In the Annual State Plans of 1981-'82 to 1995-'96, the share of the schemes thus deemed for district planning, accounted for more than 50 per cent of the total outlay. But the trend in the ratio is characterised by wide year-to-year fluctuations (Charvak: 1997).

Generally speaking, projects requiring bulky investments — such as those under power generation programmes, major and medium irrigation schemes, major industrial projects, establishment of engineering / medical colleges, research institutions, etc., — were clubbed together for the State sector. It is to be noted that all Centrally-sponsored schemes were given to the district sector and added on to the district sector, as was the case in West Bengal at that time, to generate the total fund available for the district plan.

In order to fix the share of each district, an analysis of the past 10 years' annual plan outlays was made to arrive at the average percentage share of each district (G.O. (MS) No.1/86/planning: 2-1-1989). The district-wise allocation thus was based on past allocation, not on the basis of any objective criteria like population and backwardness. Nor was financial devolution under the decentralised approach guided by the principle of equitable distribution among the districts (Charvak: 1997).

In the subsequent actual inter-district allocation, a more objective set of criteria was supposed to be adopted (Gulati: 1994, p-30): that is, 50 per cent of the allocations based on inverse of per capita income adjusted to total population; and the balance 50 per cent on the basis of total cropped area excluding plantations. The first criterion ensured a proportionately higher share to districts with low per capita income.⁴ The rationale for the second criterion was that thereby a larger share of the district plan outlays would go for agriculture and allied sectors in which there was greater scope for employment.

Given the district-wise allocation, district level departmental officers were required to draw up an action plan taking into account the relevant schemes/activities proposed in the district plan. The DDCs were to allocate the lump-sum indicated to them among the local bodies according to the following criteria: 50 per cent of the outlay based on population among the village *panchayats*; 15 per cent based on the proportions of agricultural workers among the village *panchayats*; 10 per cent outlay equivalent to percentage of SC/ST population among the village *panchayats*; 10 per cent of the outlay equally among the blocks; 2 per cent of the outlay among the corporations/municipalities; the balance outlay was supposed to be earmarked for district level schemes which cut across blocks. Thus, nearly 65-77 per cent of the outlay for district sector was to be earmarked for schemes to be drawn up by the village *panchayats*.

It is important to note that the lump-sum outlays indicated did not have any sectoral stipulations. The idea was that it would enable the districts to prepare meaningful and integrated development plans based on local resources and in accordance with local priorities. Some guidelines were, however, included in the instructions issued by the government for the purpose.

In the absence of District council, DDC was assigned the duty of designing the district level plans, "assisted" by the District Collector. DDC was also supposed to facilitate planning from below through BPC, and *Panchayat* Level Committees comprising elected people's representatives. According to these guidelines, DDC was to form three sub-committees for Agriculture, Industry, and Social welfare and related areas with a maximum of 10 non-government officials and 10 district officials.

Each sub-committee would submit its sectoral district plan to DDC. DDC would integrate the block and *panchayats* plans with the district sectoral plan proposals into a comprehensive district annual plan, with the help of DPC. The district collector was made responsible for co-ordinating the functioning of the sub-committees and the preparation of the district plan for the approval of DDC before it was submitted to the State Planning Board.

The technical guidance for the planning exercise was to be provided by the officials of the various line departments at the block/*panchayat* level. The departmental officers of the district/block/*panchayat* level were specially instructed to attend the meetings of the blocks and *panchayats* convened for the purpose and extend the necessary technical and other support. It is to be noted that for identifying schemes at the local level, the basic required information was to be provided by the local departmental officers; no separate arrangement was made, not even a separate data collection programme, as was done in West Bengal. It is also noteworthy that, the Kerala experiment of 1989-1990 for the involvement of local bodies in plan decentralisation, was really confined to village *panchayats* only whereas elsewhere, for example in West Bengal, for the first decade of decentralised planning, only the *Zilla Parishad* (district *panchayat*) was the key player (Charvak: 1997).

The *panchayats* did draw up their five-year plans and submit them to the DDCs.⁵ After DDCs submitted the district plans to SPB, attempts were made to dovetail them into the Annual State Plan. For this purpose a three-pronged approach was followed. Firstly in each sector, programmes amenable for local level planning which could accommodate the relevant activities/schemes from the District Plans were identified and indicated as such in the budget. Out of a provision of Rs. 635 crore, Rs. 151 crore (24 per cent) were worked out as district sector schemes. Secondly, programmes for which active involvement of *panchayats* would ensure timely and smooth implementation, were separated and categorised as programmes requiring administrative sanction from the concerned *panchayats* before implementation by the department.

The outlay for these schemes added up to Rs. 36 crore (5.66 per cent). Thirdly an Untied Fund was provided to the *panchayats* (GoK/KSPB: October 1990). As regards sectoral allocation, though roads and bridges were given lower preference in terms of allocation,

many *panchayats*, or their assisting technical officers, ended up with doing “stereo-typed routine exercise” (Gulati: 1994), and “undue prominence” was given to road-works (Vijayanand S. M.: 1993).

Whatever be the effectiveness of incorporating the proposals from below in the Eighth Plan, about which no objective assessment can be made in the absence of documentations regarding the proposals from the districts, around 25 per cent of the Annual State Plan outlay was earmarked for the districts. There is very little documentation as to how the district plan 1990-'91 was implemented in the absence of the elected District Councils; at best it could have been a process of bureaucratic decentralisation. It is more likely that the so-called district sector plan continued to remain a formal aggregation of the district-wise divisible schemes, even in 1991-'92.

In January 1991, new District Councils came into existence with an overwhelming majority for the ruling Left Democratic Front. At the time of Budget presentation the draft Annual Plan 1991-'92 was recast with an increased district plan outlay of Rs. 250 crore, including Rs. 140 crore of Centrally-sponsored schemes. Agriculture and Allied sectors constituted around 15 per cent of this allocation. Around 43 per cent was allocation on Rural Development Schemes. Family welfare also got substantial importance with an allocation of over 13 per cent of total plan fund allotted to the District Councils. A new appendix was instituted with the Budget documents, namely, Appendix IV to earmark the funds allocated to District Councils, both plan and non-plan.

Even before implementation of these proposals, and the spending of the plan as well as the non-plan fund, subjects under district sector/district plan were taken back to the State sector as the United Democratic Front came into power from November 1991 (GOK: L.A. (DALC): 11-11-1991). That was the end of elaborated sectoral allocation for the Eighth Plan as well as 1991-'92 Annual Plan. Against the Rs. 253 crore grant for District Councils under different heads from Plan Fund 1991-'92, in the next year 1992-'93, the amount decreased to a paltry total of Rs. 1.97 crore.

We have already referred that at the time of the 1989-1991 exercise, an untied fund was envisaged for the *panchayats*. This was meant for taking up those programmes from their plans, which could not be accommodated in the district sector of the Annual State Plan. Though the decentralisation of 1989-1991 ultimately could not sustain due to change of government, the untied funds continued to be allocated throughout the Eighth Five-Year Plan, and thus became an important milestone of decentralised planning in Kerala.

Untied funds were distributed among the *panchayats* in a way, which allocated a higher amount for backward *panchayats* or those with the larger population. The actual allocation varied between Rs. 11 lakh and Rs. 3 lakh per *panchayat* depending upon its size, population, and backwardness. The untied funds have endowed the local bodies with a degree of freedom to initiate programmes according to their own priority. As a percentage of total plan, the outlay of Eighth Plan allocation for untied fund was limited to 2.04 per cent and in the annual plans, it stayed at around 2-2.5 per cent of the outlay. Still, this was the first time

that a 'sizable' outlay was provided as untied funds to the *panchayats* from the state plan outlay. "The idea was to increase this discretionary outlay in the coming years, so that it would help improve the planning capabilities at the local level" (Gulati: 1994, p-35-36).

This idea could not materialise, however, for two reasons: (i) the allocation did not increase in real terms, rather it decreased as percentage of the Annual State Plan; (ii) gradually, the *Panchayat* Department started controlling the funds on the pretext that under the prevailing rules, prior approval of the department was required in case the expenditure exceeded Rs. 5000.

This demonstrates how a scheme intended to let village *panchayats* choose projects according to locally felt needs and priorities gets frustrated in the absence of corresponding changes in rules and procedures that would give these bodies greater freedom of action and financial control" (Gulati: 1994).

4. People's Campaign for the Ninth Plan of Kerala: The organisation of Bottom-up initiative

The preparatory phase of the Ninth Five-Year Plan in Kerala presents a major break with the past. Attempts have been made to utilise the new opportunities provided by the 73rd and the 74th Amendments to the Constitution, to introduce a thoroughly new kind of decentralised planning in the State. Moreover, this is being done through a synchronisation of the top-down decentralisation efforts of the State (which we discussed in the second section) with a bottom-up initiative for local level development planning. The history of the bottom-up initiative remains hitherto completely unrecorded, except the small literature coming out of that process itself. An attempt to balance the record is first made with a brief history of this other side, - the bottom-up initiatives for decentralised planning. We shall then discuss the process of synchronisation - the People's Campaign for Ninth Plan. A close scrutiny of the new and innovative implementation procedure and the organisational innovativeness, and an attempt to delineate the key distinctive features of the Campaign compared to past experiences, are made at the end of the discussion.

Four decades ago, Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishat (KSSP)⁶ was born as a small body of science writers. From its initial concern of promoting science writing in Malayalam, - the local language — the KSSP has assumed the role of a people's development movement during the past three decades.⁷ In recognition of its role, KSSP was awarded King Sejong Prize of UNESCO in 1991. The latest feather in the cap of KSSP is the Right Livelihood Award-1996, given in recognition of its major contribution to a model of development rooted in 'social justice and popular participation'. An interesting discourse on appropriate approach and strategy for development goes on, within KSSP as well as between KSSP and other organisations, institutions, concerned development professionals, and the public. The major areas of KSSP's intervention are (chronologically): (i) popularisation of scientific thought; (ii) popularisation of non-conventional energy for total energy planning; (iii) literacy and post-literacy campaigns; (iv) village-level Resource Mapping; and (v) decentralisation of development plan and people's planning.

The unique model of People's Resource Mapping and People's Planning experimented and developed by KSSP has recently influenced the government to restructure the planning process through the People's Campaign for the Ninth Plan. In fact, it has triggered the People's Planning Campaign, which is qualitatively different from decentralised planning. As we have said earlier, combination of this KSSP-led bottom-up initiatives and state intervention together has made the difference for the process of decentralisation of planning in Kerala. We shall therefore briefly examine how a bottom-up initiative for local level planning emerged out of the popular science movement of KSSP.

From science popularisation to local level planning

From its origin as an organisation of science-writers, KSSP quickly emerged as a movement for popularising science and creating scientific temper among the people of Kerala in the early 1960s. Soon they realised that they have to link science with the practical day-to-day

life of the people to achieve this objective. It took another decade-and-a-half for this perspective to crystallise into concrete activities.

One such important activity was KSSP's attempt to establish Village Science Forums (*Grama Sastra Samiti*) in every *panchayat*. A number of ideas were tried out to spread this movement. Often, the existence or initiation of a village library was made complementary to organise a Village Science Forum. A special journal was started to co-ordinate the activities of the Village Science Forums. The concept was that these Science Forums would develop into a nucleus of every village, working for the development of a scientific society, while, in effect they would act as informal village planning committees. A handbook for village study with a model questionnaire was also prepared.

Village Science Forums were formed throughout the State. However, for various reasons, they failed to develop into active autonomous village level expert groups, often reducing themselves to the status of a village library. Yet the attempt, on the whole, helped KSSP to understand the ground realities of organising such a movement for bringing about an ideological change in the society as well as an attitudinal breakthrough among people. We should also refer to the publication *Keralathinte Sampath (Kerala's Wealth, KSSP: 1975)*, a comprehensive statement on the status and utilisation of the resources of Kerala. The book formed the text for tens of thousands of popular classes, and initiated a discussion for increasing consciousness regarding self-reliant development. Thousands of discussions were also organised on many topics, science and society being the central theme, throughout the early and mid-1970s.

By late 1970s, KSSP became conscious of the limitations, and sometimes, the adverse effects of the bureaucratically planned and environmentally insensitive mega projects. Its study on Kuttanad Development Project and Silent Valley Hydro-electric Project in 1978 left a lasting impression on its development perspective. International attention was first drawn towards KSSP at this time, when it started a campaign against the proposed Hydro-electric project in the Silent Valley on environmental grounds. A prolonged debate and opinion mobilisation by the organisation was finally successful in forestalling the proposal.

The debate of technology vs. environment arising from this campaign, and the critique that KSSP built up regarding the development projects also compelled it to seek alternatives. For this purpose KSSP established a research centre named Integrated Rural Technology Centre (IRTC) in 1987, at Mundur - a village in Palakkad district of Kerala. Since then, IRTC had contributed much to the cause of meaningful interaction between 'experts' and 'public'.

Already KSSP had ventured into the formulation of a development plan for Palakkad district, *Palakkad Innale, Ini Nale* (Palakkad - Yesterday and Tomorrow). There were some other similar experiments as well. The most comprehensive of these exercises has been the production of a manual - *Keralathinte Ettam Padhathi - Charchakalkku Oramukham* (Kerala's Eighth Plan - Prelude to a dialogue) in 1988.

The importance of decentralisation for an effective planning process became clear to KSSP through this last study. KSSP launched a campaign on Kerala's development, focusing on

decentralisation, as a follow-up. Within one year, the campaign developed into a true bottom-up pressure, demanding genuine decentralisation and strengthening of village level capabilities for self-reliant growth, based on the slogan - *Adhikaram Janangalkku* (Power to the People). Training camps for *panchayat* members and activists were organised in almost all districts. People's Marches (*padayathras*) were organised across the State covering all the *panchayats*. A by-product of this campaign was the concept of *Grama* Parliament.

As an outcome of this effort, the major barriers to decentralisation of planning became evident. The first among them was the lack of authority for the local bodies to plan or execute any development programme. This lacuna proved a dead end for the training programmes as well. The feasibility and even the need for the integrated planning exercise came under doubt from some quarters. The models at hand had little connection with reality or the problems of mobilisation for development. Partial or sectoral interventions were considered more effective. Natural cynicism increased at the fruitlessness of the endless theoretical exercises. But such small-scale and ad-hoc interventions failed to arouse sufficient mass enthusiasm.

Gradually, through experience, KSSP realised that preparation of an integrated area plan for development of a *panchayat* would require three things: information, expertise, and people's participation. (i) A fairly comprehensive data base of the land, water and human resources and the status of their present utilisation is needed for local planning, as the data base at hand pertained either to the national or the regional level only and were therefore of little use for local level planning. Whatever scanty information was available at the *panchayat* level remained unnoticed in the files of the offices of the various line departments. The traditional knowledge of the villages also goes unutilised; it has to be combined with modern science and technology. (ii) Not only a data base, but *panchayats* also lacked expertise for local level planning, which requires handling of information, interaction with specialists and resource persons, drawing up of plans with people's participation, and giving leadership to their implementation. (iii) Mass participation holds the key to the success of local planning. For mass participation a reawakening of the latent co-operative and creative instincts of the people and also a reorientation of the mass movements are essential (Isaac *et al.* 1995).

A campaign in search of data and emergence of Resource Mapping

The demand for local level data was thus generated not only by the top-down decentralisation process of planning, but also through the bottom-up initiatives for local level planning. In response to this demand, the State (via different agencies) began to collaborate with the bottom-up initiative for local planning, from the late 1980s.

Among the KSSP activists, who had already done a health survey of the State in 1987, there was growing dissatisfaction with the usual questionnaire-based surveys for local level planning. Could there be a more user-friendly method, which could easily capture the imagination of the people? An idea was gradually developed to take up this challenge. KSSP's own experience of preparing resource inventory of Vazhayoor village was recalled, and after a few more experiments, Resource Mapping was developed as an answer.

One of the initial experiments with voluntary activity for data collection with people's participation was in Vazhayoor *panchayat* of Malappuram district. This attempt to prepare a village action plan was a continuation of the long drawn out struggle against Chaliyar River pollution that was going on in this area from the late 1970s. In 1989, the local KSSP unit prepared a water resource map for the village, under the leadership of a KSSP activist - a local primary schoolteacher A. P. Chandran, which aroused much curiosity and drew the attention of KSSP activists. Though the rather amateurish mapping effort lacked scientific rigour, the Vazhayoor experiment contributed towards emergence of the idea of map as an instrument of conscientisation and mobilisation of local people, and generation of local database. The intense dialogue and involved debates that characterised the 'Power to the People' campaign of 1989 formed the background to the conceptualisation of 'Panchayat Level Resource Mapping Programme' (PLRMP).⁹

This was an innovative method, which addressed the three issues referred to earlier in an integrated manner. The programme generated a fairly comprehensive database on land and water resources and the pattern of their utilisation in map format. The cadastral maps, where plot-wise data were entered, are easily understood and handled by villagers, as any person with minimum education and common sense would readily recognise the spatial relations in the map of a known place. Through ensuring active participation of people in data collection and preparation of maps, the programme was also intended to become a campaign for mass conscientisation on local resources and their utilisation. A core group of activists - the local expertise - was also expected to emerge out of the campaign, which would enhance the capability of *panchayats* for local level planning.

Naturally, the campaigners for decentralisation within KSSP turned to Centre for Earth Sciences Studies (CESS), which was well known for the Resource Atlas of Kerala prepared by its scientists, to refine the crude idea of using maps for data collection. An important step was taken when researchers from Centre for Earth Sciences Studies and KSSP activists together developed a method of collecting and collating data with the help of local people in a user-friendly format of cadastral map.

Participatory Resource Mapping involved the following steps:

- (i) Training of volunteers for land use and asset mapping;
- (ii) Mapping of land use and local assets by the trained volunteers;
- (iii) Land and water resource mapping by scientific and technical personnel;
- (iv) Collection of data, finalisation of maps, and interpretation by scientific personnel; and
- (v) Data storage and developing system.

Together with the KSSP volunteers, the scientists from CESS and the Kerala State Land Use Board constituted the team of trained PRM project scientists who were to produce thematic maps in 1:12500 scale on the following:

- (i) Land form
- (ii) Surface material
- (iii) Ground water potential

- (iv) General land use
- (v) Depth to bedrock.

The volunteers from the *panchayat* were to plot the assets and land use of the *panchayat* on cadastral maps of 1:4000 or 1:8000 scale.

Based on information contained in the above maps, the project scientists were to prepare an Environmental Appraisal Map, from which certain broad suggestions regarding the action plan for sustainable development was supposed to emerge.

The method was ready for expanding the experiment to a wider geographical area by early 1991. For KSSP, the PRM Programme provided an ideal post-literacy activity. The idea was to draw the more than one-and-a-half lakh literacy instructors and trainers into a massive development campaign through the PRM programme, and thus organise a unique mass participatory development campaign. A special session and lecture was devoted to this subject in the 28th Annual Conference of KSSP held at Cochin University of Science and Technology in February 1991. The conference called for advancement from 'Alphabet Literacy' to 'Development Literacy'.

Just at this time, the Department of Science and Technology, Government of India came forward to sponsor a project - '*Panchayat Level Resource Mapping for Decentralised Planning with People's Participation*'. At first KSSP was sanctioned a project for carrying out the PRM Programme in 15 *panchayats*, 5 from each of the three geographical regions of Kerala. Later, the project was revised to cover 25 *panchayats* and to be carried out as a formal collaborative project of CESS and KSSP, and finally this was to be jointly undertaken by KSSP, CESS, and Kerala State Land Use Board. This pilot project was mainly intended to concretise the methodology and to create cadastral level data base for the Natural Resources Data Management System (NRDMS) in addition to testing the Geographical Information System / Land Information System in 25 *panchayats* of Kerala. Subsequently, the Government of Kerala came forward to support the project on a wider canvass covering all the *panchayats* in Kerala [GOK G.O. (MS) 48/90/Plg. Dated 15-12-1990]. Thus the State came forward to collaborate with the bottom-up initiative for decentralised planning for the first time.

An Approach Paper titled *Panchayat Level Resource Mapping: A Model for Micro-level Resource Survey with People's Participation* was brought out under this project (CESS *et al.* 1991). The project completion report submitted in September 1994 (CESS and IRTC: 1994) has refined the concept and given a more comprehensive guideline.

The Kalliasseri experiment: From Resource mapping to campaign for planning

The first of the 25 *panchayats* selected for the project for the mapping exercise was Kalliasseri in Kannur district. In March 1991, the PRM programme in Kalliasseri started. The first phase of awareness campaign took around one month. The actual fieldwork for mapping by the volunteers and scientists was completed in about three weeks. By the month of June 1991, the final resource maps - the Environmental Appraisal Maps of the *panchayat* - were ready.

Soon the exercises for drawing up an action programme from the broad suggestions that emerged from the Environmental Appraisal Map were initiated. It was realised that for an integrated plan for the *panchayat*, it would be also necessary to collect socio-economic data systematically regarding the households in the *panchayat*. Thus, in the actual process of implementation of PRM in Kalliasseri, a major component was added to the programme - socio-economic survey of households. A household schedule was prepared. The volunteers were trained. Finally, by January 1992, the census of households in the *panchayat* was completed.

By April 1992, the volunteers compiled and tabulated the socio-economic data. In the absence of computer help, 22 tables of cross-tabulated data were manually prepared by the volunteers, and published for the information of the public. The mass campaign for development of this kind and magnitude as envisaged, mobilising people cutting across sectarian barriers, required an understanding of the institutions, history, sociology, and politics of the *panchayat*. Hence, the interested volunteers also documented the history of the village. It was a process of understanding their own traditions and heritage on which the future has to be built; in brief, a search for a development perspective.

Together with the results of Socio-Economic Census, the findings of the Environmental Appraisal Map, which provided a physical appraisal of the development problems, were subjected to discussions at gatherings of the people, officials, and experts at various levels in the *panchayat*. Discussions of these meetings brought forth a social appraisal of the development problems. The resultant document presented a preliminary outline of an action programme as well as issues for further study. Some of the components of the Preliminary Action Plan might be immediately taken up for implementation. These constituted the immediate Action Plan, or a short-term plan, while studies on the unresolved issues would continue with the help of experts to evolve a comprehensive integrated plan or a long-term planning process for the *panchayat*.

The resource mapping was thus the beginning of the planning process. The Kalliasseri experiment made it possible to advance from the stage of data collection and interpretation to the stage of formulation of a comprehensive village plan by putting forward a new model of local level planning with an in-built institutional mechanism for ensuring people's participation. Another important feature of the Kalliasseri experiment was that it showed the potential role of voluntary labour in local level planning. Out of a total of 3119 person days spent for resource mapping, survey, and planning, 96 per cent was voluntary work. Approximately, 6.5 per cent of the adults in the village, i.e., around 1200 persons, was involved in the voluntary activities. At least 150 volunteers including the organisers were involved in the programme right from the initiation of the experiment.

Among the new institutional mechanisms developed through the experiment, there was a new developmental institution formed in Kalliasseri - Kalliasseri Development Society (KDS) in June 1993, which was a registered body under Charitable Societies Act. This was rendered necessary because of the inadequacies of the then existing *Panchayat Raj* institutions in promoting development action. It was conceived as a development agency within the *panchayat*, which could receive aid from government agencies or take loans from financial

institutions as well as co-ordinate the village programme. The idea was also to establish horizontal, inter-departmental linkages by incorporating the heads of various government departments in the new organisation.

More importantly, this new agency was formed to have an institutional mechanism for ensuring mass participation in the programme. The general body of the society (*Jana Sabha*) was to consist of an elected representative for every 25 households in the *panchayat*, *panchayat samiti* members, and important government officials directly connected with development programmes in the *panchayat*. The 200-member general body was headed by a working committee. There were eight sub-committees dealing with the following subjects: agriculture, fisheries, animal husbandry, irrigation, energy, education, health, and communication. The policy matters were supposed to be discussed in the general body while the preparation of the details of programmes and day-to-day functions were the duties of the working committee and the sub-committees.

The *Jana Sabha* members of each ward under the chairmanship of the *panchayat* ward member constituted the ward committee. The *panchayat* president was the ex-officio chairman of KDS (By-laws of Kalliasseri Development Society: 1993).

In 1994, Centre for Development Studies held a seminar on the implications of 73rd/ 74th Constitutional Amendments and their impact on decentralised planning. The contribution of KSSP in these deliberations, especially, in view of their ongoing Kalliasseri experiment, should be specially mentioned. The experience of West Bengal was related by Nirmal Mukherjee and D. Bandyopadhyay, who had finished their report 'New Horizon . . .' by that time. The seminar was also important in view of the participation of the veterans like E. M. S. Namboodiripad and K. N. Raj, who had been keen advocates of decentralised planning for long.¹⁰

The KSSP research centre, IRTC, ventured to propose a bigger experiment at this time. From the lessons of ongoing Kalliasseri experiment, it was decided that the attempt should not be limited to data collection - resource mapping only; rather this initiative should be the starting point for local development planning. The proposal of IRTC to launch a project 'Panchayat Level Development Planning' (PLDP) took off from a seminar in October 1995 held at Centre for Development Studies (CDS).

The lesson from Kalliasseri was that from People's Resource Mapping to People's Planning was a logical step towards democratic development. From 1996, IRTC started the project of PLDP in five *panchayats*. The project was sponsored by Kerala Research Programme on Local Level Development of CDS, the fund for which came from The Dutch Government.

Though formally PLDP was restricted to five villages, KSSP activists from other 15 to 18 villages spread throughout the State made it a point to go along with the project. They shared the software of the project at their own cost and spread the experiment to at least one village per district. This was the stage of the bottom-up initiatives for local level development at the time when the People's Campaign for the Ninth Plan was conceived of.

The occasion and the approach of the People's Campaign for the Ninth Plan

The 1996 Assembly election brought the Leftist parties back to power. The decimation of the district councils by the Congress-led United Democratic Front Government had been an important campaign issue and therefore the new government was committed to striking a new course in decentralisation. The State Planning Board was reconstituted.

A decision was taken in the very first meeting of the State Planning Board in July 1996, to decentralise the planning process in Kerala. It was resolved that 35 to 40 per cent of the plan outlay of the Ninth Five-Year Plan should be earmarked for projects drawn up by the various tiers of local bodies. Since the local bodies were handicapped by inadequacy of staff, institutions, facilities, and expertise to undertake a task of this magnitude, it was also resolved to initiate a People's Campaign to empower the local bodies.

The aim of the Campaign was to make available to the local bodies, official and non-official experts, ensure support of the masses, and facilitate comprehensive area planning. Every local body was to draw up a five-year plan related to the functions that have been devolved on them in a transparent, participatory, and time-bound manner (KSPB: 1996).

The broad plan of action was set out in an Approach Paper titled 'People's Campaign for Ninth Plan'. The Approach Paper called for a five-phased programme. Subsequently, an additional sixth phase was added. High-level Council of Guidance comprising eminent personalities in the State was constituted at the State level to ensure the widest possible consensus for the proposed campaign. Apart from the leaders of political parties, the Council also included Vice-Chancellors of the universities, heads of Centres of Excellence, cultural leaders, and State-level leaders of mass organisations.

E. M. S. Namboodiripad, the first Chief Minister of Kerala, was elected chairperson of the Guidance Council. There was also a panel of Vice-Chairpersons consisting of the former Chief Ministers and opposition leaders and selected eminent academicians of the State, including Prof. K. N. Raj of Centre for Development Studies and Prof. I. S. Gulati, Vice-Chairperson of State Planning Board. E. K. Nayanar (Chief Minister) was made patron and the Local Administration Minister, the convener of the Council (KSPB: 1996).

Different stages of People's Campaign for Planning

The objective of the first phase of the campaign was to identify the felt needs of the people in every locality. This was to be undertaken by the *grama sabhas* in *panchayat* areas and ward *sabhas* in municipalities. Given the large size of the *grama panchayats* in Kerala with 15 to 20 thousand voters in each, each ward / constituency was defined to be a separate *grama sabha*. Thus in a *panchayat* there are as many *grama sabhas* as the number of wards. In the municipal areas, the Municipal Act recognised only ward committees. However, for the purpose of the Campaign, general body meetings of all the voters in each municipal ward were convened.

The People's Campaign for the Ninth Plan was inaugurated in August 1996. Within the first two months, meetings were held in nearly all the *grama sabhas* of the 1000 *grama panchayats* and the ward *sabhas* in the 52 municipal bodies and the 3 corporations. Around 125-250 voters participated in the *grama sabha* meetings. In order to ensure greater active participation as well as greater in-depth analysis of the local problems, each *grama sabha*, after a brief inaugural session, broke into small groups for discussion. There were to be 12 such groups - one each for the major development sectors such as agriculture, animal husbandry, fisheries, industry, education, health, drinking water, culture, co-operation, and resource mobilisation. Trained resource persons acted as facilitators with the help of semi-structured questionnaires. At the end of the discussion, the problems identified were listed and solutions were sought for them. They were also noted and presented at the plenary session. Thus at the conclusions of the *grama sabhas* and ward *sabhas* every *grama panchayat* and municipality had a fairly comprehensive needs list as identified by the people.

The second phase of the Campaign was devoted to making an objective assessment of the natural and human resources of every locality, reviewing the past development experience and identifying the possibilities of development. For this purpose a comprehensive collection campaign of all the available secondary data from the local offices of every department was organised (Isaac & Charvak: 1996). Rapid appraisal techniques such as transect walks were undertaken for geographical and environmental appraisal. The development line departments of the State government were asked to provide review reports of the ongoing schemes.

On the basis of these and other studies a comprehensive Development Report was prepared for every *panchayat* and municipality. Apart from local history and natural resource appraisal, the reports contained separate chapters for each development sector; based on a historical and objective analysis of the development problems, a draft list of recommendations was drawn up. These recommendations represented a list of solutions to the problems raised by the local people. All these reports were printed amounting to about three lakh printed pages of data generated from the local level. Such grassroots-level analysis for planning was unknown earlier.

These Reports formed the basic material for discussions at the development seminars organised in *panchayats* and municipalities. The representatives of *grama sabhas* and ward *sabhas* participated in the seminars. The bureaucrats and the development experts were also invited in the seminars to express their views. At the end of these seminars, a list of recommendations of possible development projects emerged for each of the sectors. All the seminars concluded after selecting 10 to 12 task forces, one for each of the major development sectors. The development seminars started in October 1996 and completed by December, that year.

The third phase of the campaign started with the formation of task forces at the development seminars. The task forces were to draw up projects with quantifiable objectives, technical and financial details, organisational and monitoring specifications, and even a descriptive social cost-benefit analysis. The local plan was not to be a list of proposals but a shelf of projects with all the details finalised. Each task force consisted of officials of the related

departments, non-official experts, and volunteers. An elected representative was the chairperson. The work of the task forces proved to be the most difficult, as it dragged on into the month of March, the last month of the financial year. By then every local body had a shelf of projects corresponding to the problems identified at the *grama sabhas*. Obviously, the quality of projects varied with respect to technical and financial details. Many of them required correction before they could be implemented.

The fourth phase started in March when the plan allocation for each local body was announced in the budget. Once the grant-in-aid to the local body was known, the *panchayats* and the municipal councils could meet and select projects within their resource limits. They were not to confine themselves to the grant-in-aid provided by the State Government but could seek other sources of finance for their plan, such as non-plan surplus from their budgets, or Central and State-sponsored schemes, donations and voluntary labour, institutional finance, and beneficiary contribution.

Though the local bodies were free to choose any project based on their own priorities, certain broad sectoral allocation guidelines were issued by the Planning Board: 40 to 50 per cent of the grant-in-aid was to be used for productive sectors and 30 to 40 per cent for service sectors. A ceiling of 30 per cent was placed on the amount that could be spent from the grant-in-aid for road construction.

The local bodies had to prepare a formal plan document stating their resources, development strategy, rationale for the choice of projects, inter-project linkages, gender and Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe concerns, and the monetary mechanism. The first instalment of the grant-in-aid was to be released after DPC gave the formal approval to this document. Since DPC did not have an official machinery or expertise to make an appraisal of large numbers of local plans with diversified projects in them and since it was apparent that modification to the technical and financial details of many of the projects would be necessary, it was decided to include an additional sixth phase - a phase for Project Appraisal - to the Campaign.

VTC was formed at the block level. It consisted mostly of retired officials and non-official experts. Certain categories of experts of line departments were also made members on a mandatory basis. These bodies would help local bodies to finalise their plans. District Planning Committee would approve local plans based on the recommendation given by VTC. The plans of the Block *Panchayats* were to be prepared by integrating the plans of the local *panchayats*.

Guidelines regarding the integration methodology were provided to block *panchayats*. Similarly, the *zilla panchayats* were to prepare their plans integrating the plans of the block *panchayats*. The preparation of the *zilla panchayat* plans constitutes the fifth phase of the Campaign. Finally the DPC was to consolidate the plans of the different tiers of the *panchayat* and municipalities into a district plan.

People's participation in the campaign

To ensure maximum participation of people, the State Planning Board published pamphlets

and posters and launched a State-wide awareness programme. Around 27 to 30 lakh of people joined the process of plan formulation in the first phase itself. Usually, meetings were attended by one member from each family. Hence, it may be said that approximately 25 to 35 per cent of the families of Kerala had one of their members participating in the *grama* and ward *sabhas*.

On an average, 180 voters participated in each *grama sabha*. Each of the 990 *panchayats* have 10 to 15 *grama sabhas*, while 52 municipal bodies are having 25 to 30 ward *sabhas* each, and the three Corporations around 50 ward *sabhas* each. Among the participants of the *grama sabhas*, 24.82 per cent was women, and 2.75 per cent was Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Government officials constituted 5.47 per cent.

We have already outlined the broad phases of a year-long process of decentralised planning that has been going on in Kerala. During this period, apart from panchayat members, more than one lakh-and-a-half resource persons - 600 at the State-level, 60000 at the district level, and 1 lakh at the local level - have been given five rounds of training. Besides, there are the 6000-10000 persons who participated in the VTC.

As stated at the outset, we do not attempt to make any evaluation of the outcome. But a reference to the impressions from field visits of K. N. Raj, an expert economist, in 1997 would be appropriate here: "One common and very unmistakable feature of all the four *panchayats* Pallichal, Tholikkode, Vithura, and Vellanad and urban Municipal office at Neyyattinkara, has been the pride and self confidence they all display, in their ability to initiate development schemes in their localities and to implement them with the co-operation of ordinary people around them and with such official personnel as have been made available to them". According to Raj, "the popular response to *panchayat* level planning is clearly so positive and broad-based that it appears to be significantly superior to anything seen in this sphere since India attained political independence in 1947 and Kerala became a unified State in 1957".

There is no doubt that the Campaign has succeeded in decentralising the planning process in Kerala and giving shape to an organisation to formulate a Five-Year Plan for Kerala, based on genuine multi-level planning.

Financial aspects of People's Plan

The total outlay of the Ninth Five-Year Plan of Kerala was tentatively fixed at Rs. 16100 crore (SPB: 1998) out of which 35 to 40 per cent, that is Rs. 5635 to 6440 crore is supposed to be the amount of financial devolution to local level institutions.

An amount of Rs. 1025 crore, i.e., around 36 per cent of the annual plan of 1997-'98, was earmarked for the local bodies. Nearly a-third of it was set apart for the State and Centrally-sponsored schemes to be implemented through the local bodies. The rest, amounting to nearly Rs. 750 crore, was to be given as grant-in-aid to the local bodies.

The grant-in-aid had three components: TSP, SCP, and general sector. Out of the general

sector fund, 15 per cent was set apart for urban bodies and the rest went to rural bodies. From the allocation for the rural local bodies 70 per cent was for *grama panchayat* and 15 per cent each for the higher tiers. Within each tier the distribution was determined by population criterion alone. For SCP and TSP components greater weightages were given for higher tiers. For distribution within the tiers, the proportions of SC and ST population were the criteria.

Table 4.1 Allocation for decentralised planning in Kerala

Year	State Plan (Rs. Crore)	Untied Fund (Rs. Crore)
1990-'91	663	18
1991-'92	720	19
1992-'93	825	20
1993-'94	1091	21
1994-'95	1416	29
1995-'96	1764	30
1996-'97	2200@	212
1997-'98	2855#	749*
1998-'99		950*

@ Approximate Estimate. # Budget Estimate. * Grant-in-aid of Ninth Plan.
Source: Different Documents of SPB, GOK.

The Annual Plan of 1997-'98, the first year of People's Plan, allotted a total of Rs. 749 crore for the local bodies. Around 50 per cent to 75 per cent of this fund was received by the district and sub-district tiers by early February of 1998. The time limit to spend the plan fund was extended from the end of March to the end of June 1998. In the Second Annual Plan of the Ninth Five-Year Plan (1998-'99), Rs. 950 crore has been earmarked for decentralised planning.

Thus a total of Rs. 1699 crore is already earmarked for decentralised planning within the first two years which comes to about 32 per cent of the proposed total devolution for the first two years of the Ninth Five-Year Plan. As there is a 20 per cent increase in the second year of the devolution over the allotment of the first year, and the share of decentralised planning is already 32 per cent of the total 35 per cent devolution envisaged in the Ninth Five-Year Plan proposal, the target of 35 per cent devolution is likely to be achieved over the five years.

The High-level Guidance Committee made an appeal to the local bodies to ensure that at least 25 per cent additional resource mobilisation through voluntary labour and contribution, should be made in the case of schemes implemented with the help of enhanced untied funds given to the local bodies during 1996-'97. Most *grama sabhas* are known to have adopted strategies to mobilise resources, which have till now remained untapped.

Every local body was asked to take up some developmental schemes commemorating the 50th anniversary of Indian Independence. Reports from 740 *panchayats* (out of a total of

around 990), indicated that a total of 1129 schemes were implemented with around 50 per cent of the funds allotted by the State in the form of grant-in-aid. The rest they vowed to collect from other sources, including voluntary donations. The number of voluntary mandays to be generated through the implementation of these schemes came to 2.48 lakh, i.e., worth around Rs. 24.8 million by the Kerala average wage. For another example, we may refer to the plan of Kadakkavoor *grama panchayat*, which put more than a rupee for each rupee of State grant-in-aid.

Implementation at the district and sub-district level

A fundamental contribution of People's Campaign to the theory and practice of decentralised planning is the innovative methods applied to organising the decentralisation campaign and formulation of the People's Plan. For the first time a top-down decentralisation approach of the government has come to be synchronised with the bottom-up approach for local level development.

While discussing the different stages of People's Campaign, we have already mentioned about the Key Resource Persons (KRP), *grama sabha*, *panchayat* development seminars, district development seminars, and Voluntary Technical Corps (VTC). These constitute the institutional mechanisms that evolved through People's Campaign to ensure people's participation, which was otherwise impossible to achieve through the bureaucratic system of planning and the structure of local governance in existence. Some of these elements have come from the top-down decentralisation process. Some others are contributions of the bottom-up initiatives. The rest have been created by the dynamics of matching the top-down decentralisation process with the 'bottom-up' initiatives.

The concept of *grama sabha* has its roots in the 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendments. This was supplemented and the idea of democratisation was extended by *panchayat* development seminars and district development seminars. These attempts have enabled the structure of local governance to meet the challenge of containing the most elaborate process of People's Planning. Finally, the conceptual and methodological advancement, such as through People's Resource Mapping and People's Planning, has provided the strength and the vision to undertake the People's Plan.

The VTC was another innovative mechanism to tide over difficulties arising out of an unwilling bureaucracy, which even has been hostile to this new initiative time and again. The schemes, which evolved through discussions at *grama sabha* and development seminars, were too precious to be allowed to be jeopardised by the bureaucracy. At the same time, a large number of those schemes had to be worked on to them reformulate into technically feasible and financially viable propositions. The VTC was conceived of for undertaking this task.

A critical issue faced by the People's Planning process now is that of co-ordinating and consolidating these institutional mechanisms into a permanent workable system. An expert committee was appointed under the chairmanship of S. B. Sen to advise the government on administrative reforms for decentralisation. The final report submitted after Sen's death has

not yet been accepted *in toto*. For the time being numerous government orders have enabled the Planning Board to get whatever human or other resources it requires. In fact, within the Planning Board a special decentralisation cell has been created to co-ordinate the People's Planning Campaign with personnel from different organisations, a sizeable portion of them being KSSP activists. The Decentralisation Cell of the State Planning Board has readily drawn upon the experiences of KSSP (IRTC experiments). Some of the KSSP activists worked in the Planning Board while others shifted their attention from formulation and implementation of isolated pilot projects to participation in the general campaign for People's Planning. The PLDP running at 22 *panchayats* became the provider of software to face a number of unavoidable obstacles.

The implementation mechanism of the People's Plan at the district and sub-district levels has not yet stabilised. But based on the general indications from the history of the past two years, it is possible to make some suggestions about a system, which would be required to carry on the process of decentralised planning in Kerala.

Like the State Planning Board at the State level, at the district level, district planning committees should be formed, which in effect would be guided by the district government and the district council. Similarly at the block level, there should be block planning committees and at the village level, village development committees. The final authority shall rest with the biannual *grama sabhas*, which would control the village development seminar directly and the village development committee indirectly through seminars and own resolutions. In addition to the elected *panchayat* members, common people also would take important part directly in the village development seminars and committees. This in turn would send messages upwards; the block planning committee and the block development seminars would raise the people's mandate at regular intervals before the block level local government and similarly before the district level local governments. As long as local bureaucracy does not co-operate or is found to be incapable of acting as the executionary arm, retired experts, organised as VTC, would fill up this role. For a permanent solution innovations are on. For example, graduates and diploma holders in civil engineering and engineering students in the final year of their studies would spend a year as apprentice to help *grama panchayats* in the implementation of projects. Thus all the *grama panchayats* are going to get an apprentice engineer each at their disposal. This would enable them to get the required technical input - as an estimated 30-45 per cent at the works of the Ninth Plan may be related to public works (G.O. (No. 268/97/LAD, 10-12-1997).

However, the crux of the innovations of institutional mechanisms to implement the People's Campaign for the Ninth Plan lies in the concept and application of Key Resource Persons (KRPs). It was clear that the existing machinery, the bureaucracy in the development departments, and even the people's elected representatives together couldn't make a team for undertaking implementation of a Plan. The first is inadequate and incapable, the second is unwilling if not hostile and the third is a heterogeneous set without adequate experience and direction (this was the first time when Kerala had a three-tier *Panchayat Raj*). Key Resource Persons constituted the organisation envisaged to counter the weaknesses of the other three groups.

Doubts and fears were expressed that the campaign would be usurped for political purposes by parties in power, by involvement of such a large number of KRPs. This was proved wrong as except for a small proportion of KRPs, all resource persons were recruited only after approval or endorsement by the elected *Panchayat Raj* institutions concerned. Further, all the elected representatives were involved in training at one level or the other. Finally, resource persons were not a stock concept. The composition of the pool of resource persons itself has undergone substantive changes throughout the campaign.

While the first round of training consisted mainly of volunteers and elected representatives, in the second round the emphasis was on experts and officials. The third round of training was focussed on officials who were directed to work with the local level task forces and to prepare development schemes; the fourth round was exclusively for elected representatives, who take final decisions on prioritisation or formulation of plan proposals. The resource persons at every level are supposed to work under the local government as an arm for organising the campaign for People's Plan.

Salient features of People's Campaign for Planning

The decentralisation experiment in Kerala is a genuine attempt at planning from below. Models of decentralised planning in India, of which the West Bengal model is one of the best, were patterned after the top-down process of planning. The district plan in West Bengal is constrained by sectoral and sub-sectoral allocations for district schemes made by the government at the State level. District plan, at best, only integrates the schemes and the allocations. At the district level the freedom of choice is limited to choosing the location or the beneficiaries or to modifying the guidelines prepared at the State level. Though opinions of the felt needs are sought from below, the local bodies are severely constrained in reordering priorities to meet the demands from below. Genuine local planning is limited to utilisation of the meagre untied funds (District Plan Fund). In contrast, in Kerala, a substantial grant-in-aid to the tune of 25 per cent of the annual plan is provided to local bodies for prioritisation, project selection, and implementation (Charvak: 1997).

Secondly, the basic unit of decentralised planning all over India, including West Bengal is the district. In contrast, in the new decentralisation experiment in Kerala, the *grama panchayats* and the municipalities are the basic units of planning. For the first time, *grama panchayats* in India are drawing up their own five-year plan.

Thirdly, what is being attempted in Kerala is the preparation of an integrated and comprehensive local plan. As we noted earlier, decentralisation of planning in Kerala used to be limited to certain sectoral programmes. Every aspect of the local economy is now brought under the purview of the local plan. There is a conscious move to emphasise productive sectors in the integrated area plans.

Fourthly, local bodies have become the fulcrums of the planning process. In West Bengal also local bodies are closely linked with the decentralised planning process. However, in the official guidelines of the Planning Commission for district level planning issued in 1969, or for block level planning issued in 1978, the emphasis is on the official government machin-

ery, the reasons alluded being the weakness of *Panchayat Raj* system in India. The Kerala exercise attempts to make maximum advantage of spirit of the constitutional provisions and their amendments regarding the right of the local bodies in the planning process.

Finally, there exists no parallel to the Kerala experiment with regard to the scale of mass participation, participation of three million people in *grama sabhas* to identify their needs and priorities. Further, there were three lakh persons in development seminars and one lakh persons in task forces. This being the order of magnitude of popular participation, it is expected to have implications for the plan implementation process also. But a major impact of the popular mobilisation that has become evident during the planning process itself is on resource mobilisation. It is expected that every local body would raise resources to the tune of 25 per cent to 30 per cent of the grant-in-aid provided by the State government through voluntary labour and donations. The emphasis on local resource mobilisation is thus another major hallmark of People's Planning in Kerala.

In July 1996, at the beginning of the campaign, it was envisaged that a Development Congress should be organised in May 1997 to sum up the experience of the Campaign. As the time schedule could not be maintained, it is now clear that only by the second year, the cycle of the decentralised planning shall be completed and the Five-Year plan of the local bodies, finalised. It was decided therefore to reschedule the Development Congress to end of 1998.

5. Conclusion

The *Panchayat Raj* system provided a basic framework for decentralised planning in West Bengal. The key turning point for West Bengal in decentralised planning came in 1978, with elections to the local bodies and implementation of the Act of 1973. The colonial framework of local administration had survived through the first decade of independence without much change. Even after the Act of 1964 was passed, the colonial legacy in terms of low resource capability of local governments, relative weakness of lower level local governments, emphasis on municipal functions, excessive official control and above all control by vested interests, particularly, landed gentry, continued to haunt the *panchayats*. As in the rest of India, not even regular elections to these bodies were being held. The reason of continuation of the colonial legacy may be traced to the particular state of affairs of rural Bengal.

Despite the strong tradition of social mobilisation and the rising demand from below which had succeeded in influencing public policies considerably, Kerala remained one of the most backward States in terms of decentralisation till the first half of the 1990s. Our discussion of the evolution of *Panchayat Raj* institutions in Kerala has provided insights into the causes for such a situation. It is a case of lack of political will, which may be related to the absence of any mass mobilisation in support of decentralisation.

In Kerala, coalition politics has been a highly unstable phenomenon. The bureaucracy, embodied in the specific instance of the District Collector of Malabar – in the northern part of present-day Kerala, assumed authority over the local bodies during the colonial period; it continued to be the pivotal instrument of the state at the sub-state level even after independence. One does not see an organic link between peasant mobilisation for land reforms and decentralisation; however, the political conditions in Kerala resulted in the disruption of such a linkage during the immediate post-land reform period during the 1970s (Charvak: 1997). On the whole, the history of *Panchayat Raj* in Kerala has been one of aborted attempts, unkept promises, and half-hearted efforts, and was even more unfortunate than that of West Bengal.

The local bodies' legislation even in the princely state regions (Travancore and Cochin) of Kerala had followed the pattern set by colonial guidelines modified from time to time. Two points may, however, be noted: (i) the local administration structures were relatively weak in the princely states of Travancore and Cochin when compared to those of the British provincial districts; (ii) the local boards of Malabar became a battleground for nationalists; and the nationalist radicalisation of these bodies to a great extent had undermined the hold of vested interests.

The first generation *panchayats* of Kerala that emerged after independence and submission of Balwantrai Mehta Committee Report were weak. Virtually there was no second generation of *panchayats* worth mentioning (except the experiments of 1991, which was too short). The emergence of the third generation *panchayats* in Kerala followed the 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendments.

The commitment to decentralisation of Left Front Government of West Bengal that came to

power in 1977 provided the political will to overcome the vested interests that had thwarted the attempts till then. The successful linkage established between the rising tide of the peasant movement and the reforms in local administration contributed to a total transformation of the *Panchayat Raj* system. The social composition of the membership in the local bodies shifted sharply in favour of the rural poor. It enabled the *panchayats* to play a key role in the implementation of the land reforms and subsequently, to provide the necessary inputs and the assistance to the peasants who benefited from land reforms. Thus, over a period of time, the *panchayats* were transformed into truly participatory agencies for development. It was at this juncture, in 1985, that the process of decentralised planning was introduced in West Bengal. Greater involvement of the local bodies in the planning process became an imperative necessity if their capabilities were to be tapped for accelerating rural development.

The composition of planning committees at the block and the district levels was certainly such that it brought together the elected representatives and the officials. However, certain structural weaknesses remained in terms of (i) insufficient involvement of *grama panchayats* in the planning process; (ii) lack of provision for including non-official experts in these bodies; and (iii) the avoidable cumbersome two-tier structure at the district level. The DPCC has an inherent tendency towards unnecessary duplication of work and intervention from above. We also saw that local bodies have very limited financial autonomy. Their dependence on Centrally-sponsored schemes is great. The DPS funds were not significant enough to make any major impact. Though the incentive scheme had given them some leverage, it has not solved their financial problem.

The main focus of the decentralised planning introduced in West Bengal has been on integration or co-ordination of district locale-specific schemes of the departments at the district and the block levels. The major initiative in the scheme of things came from above. The 'departments' would always have an upper hand in drawing up sectoral and sub-sectoral schemes whatever may be the priority of the local bodies till the local bodies gain the expertise for planning, planning bodies at the block level get the powers in terms of sanctioning authority, and the local bodies gain authority over the local officials. The autonomy of the local planning authorities is thus limited to choosing the location within the district, selection of beneficiaries, or choosing between various schemes sponsored by the departments. However, with the process continuing, the local bodies can also insist and sometimes ensure that schemes are drawn up according to their need as indicated earlier.

However, it is apparent that district planning could exert some influence to help their district level departments in clinching their due share of schemes from the State headquarters in West Bengal. It has been reflected in the district plans, specially in the less developed districts of North Bengal - Medinipur, Bankura - in the form of a statement showing the related indicator and the allocation together, to solicit for more departmental allocation, or to protest against low allotments in previous years (DPCM: 1990-'91; DPCJ: 1989; DPC Cooch: 1988; etc.). The strong negative and slightly increasing correlation of district sector expenditure in the period of district planning of West Bengal and district development index, confirms the success of co-ordination of the departmental schemes to the extent of ensuring due share to districts rather than arbitrary bureaucratic allocations.

During the initial phase of the new *panchayats*, they were mere agencies of the State government in the implementation of land reforms and certain other essential development programmes. With district planning introduced, the local bodies have been gradually acquiring experience in co-ordinating schemes of different departments with their own initiatives. No doubt, this process has given them increasing confidence to think in terms of planning, rather than implementation of scheme-specific projects. Earlier the local bodies had to seek help from the local officials who wielded the power of meeting the supplications of local bodies or rejecting them.

Now the local bodies have come to be at least equal in power to, if not more powerful than, officials. At least the chairpersons of local bodies do preside over the meeting of DPC and BPC, where all the officials of that level should be present and submit their departmental proposal for district sector schemes. Further, the DPF, however, meagre it may be, has yielded some result in the sense that a district officer, to get sanction for schemes from that fund, has no other way than to co-operate with the local bodies. On the whole, certainly, the process of decentralised planning begun from 1985 was a major step forward towards the ideal of self-governance. But the goal still remains elusive because of the slow pace.

In Kerala, as well as in Bengal, the mechanism for creation of district-level institutions has been the same as in the Central government till very recently. District planning units were set up in Kerala in the latter half of the 1970s. The same was the case with regard to the formation of the various committees and agencies at the district level. District *Panchayats* did not replace DRDAs despite the recommendations to this effect by its own advisor on decentralisation. This being the background of the decentralisation of planning in Kerala, the efforts for decentralisation, which had primarily come from above, in a top-down process, were not at all substantial. This was the case for both the district plan experiments and the decentralisation of SCP/TSP. The pilot experiments revealed that priorities of the people did not match with the allocation of the centralised plan, a fact, which again underlined the importance of decentralisation. But for the better part of the 1980s, decentralisation of planning as well as its implementation, remained restricted to the limited delegation of SCP/TSP. Even with such limited delegation, the performance of SCP and TSP did, in fact, improve.

This process of evolution of decentralised planning in Kerala, which was dominantly a case of top-down decentralisation may be categorised under two phases. While in the first phase attempts were marked primarily by experiments of plan formulation, in the second phase there was actual implementation of decentralised planning, albeit in a limited way.

The process may also be divided into two broad periods from another angle, the first one corresponding to the decentralisation of the planning machinery without any involvement of local governments (in the beginning they were not in place, later they were not involved) and secondly when the attempts at decentralised planning started through the local bodies. The first phase, or the period, also corresponds with a lower level of bottom-up initiatives while the second phase or period, corresponds with increasing initiative from below. The recent trend is the synchronisation of the two in the process of People's Campaign for Planning.

While the West Bengal *panchayats* were the best examples of the second generation *panchayats* that emerged in the latter half of 1970s, with functions going beyond the traditional civic function of rural bodies to include regulatory functions with respect to land reforms, relief works, implementation of poverty alleviation programmes and also, to a limited extent, development activities in agriculture and allied sectors, in Kerala it was not so. With respect to planning in Kerala, decentralised planning was limited to SCP and TSP, which together constituted 10-12 per cent of the total State plan. Moreover, there was a small component set apart in the State plan for allocation as untied fund to rural local bodies. It is only this portion that gave local bodies a certain amount of freedom to plan though within the rules and procedures for sanctioning of works and expenditure. In a sense it was a limited sectoral exercise of what was being attempted at a more comprehensive level in West Bengal at that time.

Kerala has moved to the third stage of full decentralisation in a rather dramatic manner, for the formal legislative provisions of functional devolution rendered it necessary by its decision to allocate 35 to 40 per cent of the State plan to local bodies virtually in the form of untied funds, with freedom to match sector-wise allocation, and formulate and implement schemes in accordance with their local development priorities. Kerala has gone further through People's Campaign both to build up local capability in planning and to ensure the participation of people through the instrumentality of *grama sabhas* and ward committees. Without any ties to the State level schemes, the local bodies can draw their own sectoral priorities and projects within the areas of their functional jurisdiction. The proportion of plan expenditure on district level schemes (including village and block schemes) in Kerala is now most probably the highest among the States in India though within the framework of this study, we were not able to generate definite empirical base for clinching the issue.

With respect to financial autonomy, the own resources of Kerala *panchayats* were much higher than those of other States though the plan funds they received were limited to untied funds. Recently, the resources of the Centrally-sponsored schemes covering poverty-alleviation and employment-generation were also made available to local bodies. These schemes were within the firm grip of the Rural Development Department of Kerala. However, in regard to financial devolution, the positions have been reversed in the context of the Ninth Plan, with more than 35 per cent of the annual plan outlay of Kerala being given as grant-in-aid to local bodies. The local bodies of Kerala have thus financially become much more autonomous than the local bodies in the rest of India.

Though 35-40 per cent during the Ninth Plan is now being devolved, commensurate redeployment of authority or powers to the democratically elected local bodies has not taken place. Such a situation could result in a major crisis at the time of implementation, unless the problem is resolved soon.

As regards popular participation in decentralised planning, the efforts in Kerala have been extremely poor until very recently. This could not have been otherwise in the absence of popularly elected local bodies at the district and at the block levels. The decentralisation of SCP and TSP was a bureaucratic exercise. And the exercises in district level planning were mostly of academic in nature.

By making the *grama panchayats* the basic building blocks of the planning process, and involving the *grama sabhas* and ward conventions in identification of plan priorities and monitoring, decentralised efforts in Kerala for preparation of the Ninth Plan have ensured participation of people on an unprecedentedly large scale in the planning process during the first two years of the campaign.

The Kerala experiment of decentralised planning for preparation of the Ninth Plan is more in accordance with the Constitutional vision on the role of local bodies being self-governing units; in fact, it goes even beyond. Functional and financial devolution is being attempted to the greatest extent possible with the expectation that the necessary administrative devolution would follow soon. Popular participation and voluntary help from experts would possibly enable local bodies to overcome the immediate handicaps of limited administrative devolution. But unless the required administrative devolution is also introduced soon, the decentralisation of the planning process may not go far. If, however, the necessary administrative devolution is not unduly delayed, decentralised planning should soon start showing its positive results.

Such a hopeful scenario, we feel, is made possible by the specific features of the Kerala State. It has a relatively well-educated population and a vast pool of retired technical personnel. Land reforms and the presence of strong people's organisations also have created a conducive atmosphere for comprehensive local level planning. Therefore to take this alternative path, other States have to work more than Kerala, as they have to start from campaigns for total literacy and people's science movement for general conscientisation.

In general, the idea of empowerment of the people through bottom-up initiative has relevance for the other States as well, though one should not talk in terms of replicability because of the specificities and non-replicability of the public action of Kerala. If any State could look forward to a similar kind of empowerment of the people, it is West Bengal, which also has rich experience of grassroots-level mobilisation and public action.

The less developed States of India, especially the BIMARU States (Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh), have to undertake a still longer journey. It should be mentioned here that Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti (BGVS), an organisation of science movement, has been trying to learn from the Kerala experiences and initiate a bottom-up development process in the different States of India from the early 1990s. Their attempts started with literacy programmes undertaken in the targeted areas/States. Though mostly the government has funded these efforts, they are shaped to a large extent by the experience and the human resources of the people's science movements of different States. 'Development Literacy' and 'Health Literacy' have been taken up as follow-up activities or post-literacy programmes. Also there is a conscious effort to incorporate the experience of local-level resource mapping and planning within the curriculum of the literacy programme.

An umbrella organisation of science movements of different States has also been formed to further the cause. This umbrella organisation, namely, All India People's Science Network also makes attempts along such lines. However, the paradox is that these efforts are, by and large, dependent on government funding. A second problem is that these efforts are con-

strained by inadequacy of manpower resources. The organisers of these initiatives are often tied up more with the overall agenda of their respective States, than with the all-India campaign. The organisational strength of KSSP has no parallel at the all-India level till now, even in the all-India process initiated by its own leaders!

These reasons are not, however, enough to underrate the possibility of bringing about radical and sustainable changes in the other States along the Kerala line. Rather, it should be the priority of the developmental project of India, to augment the process of bottom-up initiative in the other States. The agenda and the method have no doubt to be innovative while learning from the experiences of Kerala. Above all, the immense possibility that has emerged after the Constitutional amendments has to be exploited to the fullest possible extent. Democratisation of the State in the full sense of the term would no doubt create conditions favourable for the bottom-up initiatives to blossom and mature to yield long-term propitious results.

End Notes

¹ The formula of inter-district allocation we mentioned earlier was for the District Plan Fund only, exercised by the State Planning Board and Development Planning Department. No such formula could be found in the case of other departments' district sector allocation.

² The name of Kerala *Sastra Sahitya Parishat* was also considered for this. However, they required three months time, i.e., up to December 1987, to begin work. So, the Kerala State Planning Board went ahead with other organisations. Finally the work could start only in December 1988 (Note of KSPB: dated 8-10-1987, p-3).

³ The different phases of decentralisation as envisaged at that time were:

Phase I (1985-'86): *Beneficiary-oriented economic development schemes of all departments to be sanctioned and implemented in the district as in Special Component Plan. *In 'infrastructure schemes', priority to be fixed and works undertaken at the district level. *In establishment of institutions, locations to be recommended at the district level in accordance with guidelines.

Phase II (1986-'87) *Beneficiary-oriented and infrastructure district and local schemes to be prepared, sanctioned, and implemented at the district level in accordance with the guidelines [GOK: No. (MS) 70/84/Plg: 4-9-1984].

⁴ This was probably, found necessary as the earlier pattern of district-wise distribution of plan outlays was seen to be weighted in favour of districts with higher per capita income, as is confirmed in our correlation test also.

⁵ In the Annual Plan Proposals, 1990-'91, published in January, 1990, it was reported that, "The District Development Councils have already drawn up District Plans for an estimated outlay of Rs. 1300 crore covering the period 1990-'95. . . . Attempts are now being made to dovetail the proposals from the District Plans for an outlay of Rs. 136 crore in the State's Annual Plan 1990-'91 under the different sectors. This will account for over 20 % of the State Plan outlay".

⁶ For further reading, see: KSSP 1984; Isaac and Ekbal 1988; Zachariah and Sooryamoorthy 1994; Tharakan 1996(b).

⁷ In 1980s, KSSP took the initiative for the drive for total literacy in Kerala. One cannot of course claim that KSSP solely should get the credit for the achievement of Kerala in the field of literacy. There are historical reasons behind that, including the popular policies of the princely state, the role of the missionaries, and the local government dominated by the nationalists and the leftists (especially in Malabar) besides strong movements for reform within as well as against the caste system. But KSSP contributed much to create popular enthusiasm and people's action to push for total literacy and to connect the literacy movement with post-literacy activities related to other areas of development.

⁸ Much of the information, which is given in this sub-section, is based on my discussions

with the scientist-educationist and KSSP leader Dr. M. P. Parameswaran, and KSSP activist T. Gangadharan over the past three years.

⁹ This was also called People's Resource Mapping Programme (PRM Programme) though the more appropriate name would have been People's Participatory Resource Mapping Programme, at least at that stage. PRM Programme could really become People's Resource Mapping Programme only in the later Kalliassery experiment.

¹⁰ As the first Chief Minister of Kerala, E. M. S. Namboodiripad, we may recall, instituted the ARC (referred to as "The perspective of 1957' in Section 2). He received little support for an immediate radical change, even from his own ministry especially from his own party, at that time. About the contribution of EMS and for further details, see Gulati and Isaac, 1998. Prof. Raj argued for decentralised planning as back as 1971 (K. N. Raj: 1971) when the idea was still in its nascent form, and contributed much in the discourse on decentralised planning for next two-and-a-half decades.

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