

Five Years of Participatory Planning in Kerala

Rhetoric and Reality

Kerala's uniquely successful experiment in participatory planning has seen the mobilisation of several thousands of people in the implementation of the Ninth Five-Year Plan. The process had its problems that arose essentially from the absence of a clear perspective about decentralisation. The impact of changing policies following a change of government also has its effect on decentralised planning. An objective assessment of the plan campaign is hampered if viewed through the prism of partisan politics. This paper is also an attempt to look at the plan process from the perspective of decentralisation, rather than from the perspective of planning.

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Introduction

Kerala has made the distinction of implementing the recently concluded Ninth Five-Year Plan of the state in a participatory way after mobilising thousands of people throughout the length and breadth of the state through a process starting right from the level of the gram sabha. It has been described as a campaign for people's planning, as in the earlier literacy campaign. The new government that came to power in May 2001 has announced its commitment to continue the participatory planning format with some modifications. A number of studies relating to the plan campaign are now available. Most of them are of an expository nature [eg, Isaac 1997; Isaac and Harilal 1997; Bandopadhyaya 1997; Bijukumar 2000; Chathukulam and Thomas 1997; Franke and Chasin 2000]. There have also been some insider accounts of the campaign with occasional references to a number of lagging aspects [eg, Isaac with Franke 2000]. Although considerable literature on the plan campaign exist detailing out what the government has done, there are few accounts which provide critical reviews of the process [Pal 2001]. The available ones were more of a theoretical nature without much reference to empirical facts. Some of the

early critics like Narayanan (1997) expressed reservations on the ability of the CPI(M) wedded to democratic centralism to take up the cause of decentralisation and predicted replacement of bureaucratic power with party hegemony in the rural areas as the net result. In addition to citing the above danger, Kannan (2000) talked about the amateurish character of the planning process promoted through the campaign. Chathukulam and John (2000a), in a position paper, argued that most of the problems related to decentralised planning arise from the lack of a clear perspective about decentralisation in the first place. Das (2000) provided a critical account of the plan campaign in the context of the panchayat elections held in 2000, in which the CPI(M) registered electoral losses contrary to expectations. Now that five years have passed since the launching of people's planning, it is time that the romanticism accompanying decentralisation is replaced by a more realistic and empirically grounded assessment.¹

That the romanticism still persists in the minds of commentators is evident from the article of Mohanakumar (2002) entitled "From People's Plan to Plan Sans People", which appeared in the April 20, 2002 issue of *Economic and Political Weekly*. He has claimed that there has been a high degree

of participation during the initial phase of the campaign and that the changes in guidelines introduced under the Congress-led UDF rule has considerably reduced the space for people's participation. While agreeing with the author on a number of counts, his reduction of certain trends in the decentralised planning on the basis of Left Democratic Front (LDF) and United Democratic Front (UDF) policy preferences overlooks a number of fundamental issues connected with the plan campaign. A seminar entitled "Democratic Decentralisation – the Experiences of a Decade" held during May 18-19, 2002 at Thiruvananthapuram under the auspices of the AKG Centre for Research and Study also directed its attack on the UDF regime for its alleged anti-decentralisation policies (*The Hindu*, May 19, 2002). Hence the issue is seen primarily through the prism of partisan politics, a development which does not augur well for a dispassionate and independent assessment of the plan campaign. We will argue that the UDF position on people's planning is largely a continuation of the LDF policies in many areas. We would like to look at the whole process differently, from the perspective of decentralisation primarily, rather than from the perspective of planning. In doing so, we will be looking not only at some of the points raised by Mohanakumar, but also

attempt to go beyond it to locate some of its discerning features.

Rationale of People's Planning

Participatory planning was intended to meet a number of goals. It was seen primarily as a means to overcome the stagnation in the productive sectors and the decline in the quality of services and assets in the social sectors built up assiduously through several years of state intervention. It was also envisaged as a strategy towards strengthening local bodies through the process of planning. In other words, instead of strengthening the local bodies first before initiating participatory planning, the reverse approach was accepted, that is, start with planning and remove the legal hurdles as they arise through enabling legislation and orders. The Sen Committee was set up to suggest amendments to the Panchayat Raj Act 1994 in pursuance of this approach. People's planning also sought to create a new civic and development culture transcending partisan considerations. The overall approach to development adopted was a growth-oriented and rapid one, having regard to principles of equity. Modern science and technology was to be used for the attainment of the above goals, and there was no talk of the relevance of indigenous technical knowledge. The decision to launch the campaign was influenced by a number of micro-level experiments in participatory planning carried out in some Left-dominated panchayats, mainly with the support of the Kerala Sasthra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP). The managers of the campaign also assumed that the class and mass organisations affiliated to the CPI(M) would engage in synergistic action to realise the above goals. Participatory planning was carried out in the campaign mode with the State Planning Board assuming the leadership. The campaign was launched with the announcement by the state government that 35 to 40 per cent of the plan funds would be given to the local bodies. Barring the CPI(M), none of the partners belonging to the ruling coalition had shown much enthusiasm in the experiment. Without the support of the State Planning Board, which had a predominance of members owing allegiance to the CPI(M), a relatively weak ministry of local administration would not have ventured into an experiment of this kind and scale. It may also be noted that there was no demand for greater decentralisation on the part of the people or from

their representatives in the local bodies when the plan campaign was launched. The patronage and inspiration extended by E M S Namboodiripad, whose commitment to decentralisation is well known, served as a key motivating force in the campaign effort.

Interpreting People's Planning

Different meanings have been attached to people's planning. It has been used interchangeably with decentralisation by those directly associated with the campaign. Most of the conferences including the International Conference held in May 2000 at Thiruvananthapuram were titled as 'International Conference on Democratic Decentralisation', even though the papers read in the conference were related mainly to different aspects of participatory planning and not to decentralisation per se. In other words, people's planning has become the equivalent of decentralisation in Kerala. There have been conflicting interpretations of the process by the ruling party functionaries themselves. People's planning was seen by the left as a means of offsetting the forces of liberalisation and privatisation by optimal use of the capacity and resources of local government for economic development and maintenance of social services. Critics, particularly those belonging to the radical left, saw this as amounting to succumbing to the very same forces that it seeks to contest by unloading the burden of social services to the local government and to the people themselves with attendant negative effects on the poor. According to E K Nayanar, "decentralisation of power is part of class struggle and conflict of class interests, precisely for that reason a polarisation is taking place between those supporting and opposing it. This polarisation is actually a manifestation of class struggle. Making people's plan campaign a success is thus part of the effort at strengthening class struggle" (*The Hindu*, January 5, 1999). It may be noted that this statement as well as its timing reflected a narrowing of the broad consensus which had characterised the people's planning experiment when it began. In a seminar on Gram Swaraj and Panchayat Raj organised by the Gandhian Study Centre of Kerala University, CPI(M) state committee member E M Sreedharan, who was a member of the then Planning Board, described people's planning as the concretisation of the Gandhian idea of Gram Swaraj (*Madhyamom Daily*, March

20, 2000).² In a recent book chronicling the contributions of EMS to decentralisation, Isaac and Sreedharan (2002) say that it "represents the agitation element of the doctrine of agitation and administration of EMS."³ The vision of people's planning is to mobilise people cutting across party lines for the cause of decentralisation" (p 121). When the 1999 amendments to the Panchayat Raj Act were discussed in the assembly, there was more discussion about the parentage of people's planning than the substance of the bill. While the LDF claimed that it is their brainchild, the UDF said it was a contribution of Rajiv Gandhi. This was the main debated theme outside the assembly also [Das 2000:4301], thereby obscuring the possibility of making an independent assessment of people's planning.

What Kerala tried to do was to graft participatory planning into the already existing framework of five-year plans. This may appear quite problematic since participation in such circumstances is not free flowing and process-intensive as it is bounded by the requirement to meet plan-related annual deadlines. The overall approach to planning emphasised conflict avoidance and harmony rather than conflict engagement. The managers of the plan campaign also gave an impression to the public that this was a novel experiment without any precedent to rely upon. The single largest group that participated in the campaign were activists of the KSSP, most of whom had involved in the literacy campaign earlier. Although one was given to understand that the stages and content of the campaign would evolve through a process of learning and criticism, the manner in which it was formulated and carried out betrayed a relatively high degree of certainty and complacency.

Changes in Plan Procedures under UDF

A number of changes were introduced by the new government that came to power in May 2001, without altering the essential features of the methodology of people's planning. The UDF introduced the Area Development Scheme assigning each member of the legislative assembly (MLA) a sum of 25 lakhs. This has been a demand of the MLAs since the very inception of people's planning.⁴ However, this scheme has not been integrated with the panchayat plans. A decision was also taken to transfer the tribal sub plan funds completely from

the panchayats to the department on grounds of poor implementation record and also in deference to the demand of the Adivasi Dalit Samara Samithi led by C K Janu. Both these decisions were certainly not panchayat-friendly.

According to the orders issued by the LDF government, it was mandated that in each of the Task Forces constituted by the three-tier panchayats for engaging in tasks like project preparation, there should be at least 10 to 12 persons, with one-third representation for women and proportionate representation for the scheduled castes and tribes. But the new order, which renamed these Task Forces as Sectoral Committees, allows greater freedom to the panchayats with the only suggestion that the membership should not be less than five. The UDF guidelines are silent on providing representation to women and scheduled categories, leaving it to the discretion of each panchayat. However, the new order makes it mandatory that there should be separate sectoral committee for women and SC/ST. Experience shows that women seldom participate in such committees other than the one exclusively dealing with the women's component in the panchayat plan. Again, there are very few people (usually four or five) who really come for the Task Force/Sectoral Committee sittings. However, the new order does not effect a closure for greater participation wherever it can be marshalled. It also does not talk about positions like vice-chairman and joint convenor, which were there earlier leaving it to each panchayat to decide whether they require such positions in their sectoral committees. In each sectoral committee, the chairperson will be a member of the panchayat and the convenor, now designated as secretary, will be the concerned official dealing with that subject. That the people's representative should be the chairperson and the concerned official will be the secretary of the sectoral committee was the prevailing norm, which has been retained under the new government also. Instead of district level expert committees, which were to vet the district panchayat projects, the district planning committee was authorised to set up technical advisory committees. In addition, exclusive technical committees for giving technical sanction also were constituted and such sanction was limited to public works. The UDF is also for strengthening the gram sabha, by emphasising increased attendance and theme-based sessions. The planning board

has also been reconstituted to play a more technical than activist role. A limit was imposed on the administrative expenses in plan preparation, and subsidies for families above poverty line were removed. The UDF government has decided to re-deploy the surplus staff especially the engineers to the local governments. It has also decided to fix the plan funds to be given to the local bodies as equivalent to one-third of the total plan size of the state [Government of Kerala 2002]. Summing up the changes, the *Economic Review 2001* brought out by the Kerala State Planning Board says: "Decentralisation process in Kerala has moved from the experimentative phase through a corrective phase and has now entered the critical institutionalisation phase. In the first stage, which was based on trial and error, several mistakes were made and several new areas discovered. At this stage, ad hoc systems were designed to facilitate operational flexibility at the local level. Now from the campaign mode, decentralisation is entering the systems mode. This is the time for weeding out worn out procedures and systems and planning modern systems which are simple, transparent, fair, providing easy upkeep while at the same time ensuring accountability of the highest degree. The people's planning campaign was sustained through a host of activist volunteers. Soon these volunteers would need to move out of direct leadership and play the role of facilitators. Regular support systems appropriate to local government functioning would be in place" [Government of Kerala 2002:200].

Bureaucracy and People's Planning

It has been claimed by Mohanakumar (2002) that the bureaucracy has gained the upper hand under the UDF rule. This is a partial story. Throughout the planning process, the LDF's policy of synergistic action and harmony had avoided conflicts with bureaucracy, one of the key groups interested in undermining the decentralisation process. Since the CPI(M) had considerable influence among the state employees, it did not have any difficulty in enlisting their formal cooperation in the plan campaign through the intermediation of their service organisations. But this could not be accompanied by an effort to reorient the bureaucracy to play a more enabling role for the success of decentralisation. Even as they joined the campaign, they

created spaces for bureaucratic reinforcement. The colonial institution of the district collector retained its high visibility as before. The experiments made in Karnataka to change the bureaucratic power equation at the district level during the early eighties may be noted here.⁵ The collectors could not be made the secretaries of district panchayats. The collector was made chairperson of the district level expert committee (DLEC), a body which consisted mainly of volunteer experts. This position was used by the collectors to control the campaign process. The power dynamics could not be grasped by the KSSP activists, who were otherwise known for their sincere work, which had produced good results in the earlier literacy campaign. This power dynamics was never addressed at any stage of the training process also. For example, the oath taking ceremony of district panchayat president and other panchayat functionaries takes place in front of officials. In other words, all the representatives of the people in the panchayats took oath of office before the bureaucrats. Such symbolic forms of expression of power at the grass root level could not be recognised by the campaign managers. Many KSSP activists functioning as resource persons and coordinators of the campaign were drawn from the lower rungs of the state bureaucracy and their mindset was conditioned by a reverence for bureaucracy at various levels rather than the elected representatives in the panchayats.⁶ While such reverence had no adverse effect in achieving the goals of the literacy campaign, it often worked against the spirit of a campaign for decentralisation, a fact that the KSSP activists failed to grasp.

When the Madhya Pradesh chief minister came to Kerala to understand the nature of decentralisation in the second years of people's planning, he identified the persistence of dual control of bureaucracy at the panchayat level as a major irritant to effective decentralisation. He felt that unless powers and staff are unreservedly transferred to the local bodies, they will not be able to function effectively (*The Hindu*, December 29, 1998). The system of dual control undermined the ability of the panchayat to ensure bureaucratic coherence during the different stages of the plan campaign.⁷ The issue of dual control had not attracted the serious attention of the campaign managers. The Sen Committee, which suggested measures for panchayat reforms and which were later incorporated in the 1999 Act, speaks in

unambiguous terms about the inevitability of dual control. It says that while the panchayats will have administrative control over the officials, professional control over them will be exercised by their immediate department heads [Government of Kerala 1997]. This demarcation does not exist in practice since administrative and professional control continues to be exercised by the higher officials of the line departments [Chathukulam and John 1998]. Even the Sen Committee described the type of powers exercised by the panchayats as representing a kind of delegation and not devolution. It said: "Since panchayats are exercising delegated powers, it is not possible to do away with government directions...Once a policy is enunciated and announced, it is obligatory for all the local-self government institutions to work within the framework of the policy. Thus policy directives are binding on the panchayats" [Government of Kerala 1997].

Role of the KSSP

A key role for organising the campaign for people's planning lay on the shoulders of the pro-Left KSSP, which had been instrumental in the successful organisation of the earlier literacy campaign also. The KSSP was instrumental in undertaking resource mapping in a number of panchayats nearly a decade before the campaign was launched. The KSSP activists constituted the backbone of the Kalliasseri experiment [Isaac et al 1995], which was a major influence on the methodology of people's planning. Majority of the top level KSSP activists are drawn from science backgrounds and each campaign is visualised by them as experiment without being preoccupied with questions of sustainability and need for persistence. When the LDF is in power, the KSSP activists are found to be active in various campaigns, often with patronage from government. Such campaigns are discontinued when the LDF government is replaced. This has happened during the literacy campaign as well as in the more recent people's plan campaign. A recent KSSP document was frank enough to admit that some of the people's campaign activists have discontinued their activities at local level following the defeat of the LDF in the assembly elections and that such withdrawal in a vengeful mood would not be helpful for the cause of decentralisation [KSSP 2002:26].

The KSSP's views on decentralisation, which had also influenced to a certain extent the Sen Committee, were largely concentrated on handing over power to the community. Handing over power to the community by strengthening citizen's assemblies like the gram sabha and sub gram sabha entities like neighbourhood groups, is certainly a form of decentralisation (perhaps reflective of libertarian ideals). But the adoption of this position at a stage when the elected representatives in the panchayats had not gained a foothold over local bureaucracy had only a negative effect on the process of strengthening panchayats. The deflection of attention from the panchayat to the gram sabha and neighbourhood groups by the KSSP also was one of the reasons why they failed to address questions related to power in the decentralisation process. It may be noted that the Diwakar Committee, which was constituted to examine the role of the gram sabha in the panchayat set up, came up with the conclusion that it is premature and would not serve the cause of decentralisation to strengthen the gram sabha at the expense of the gram panchayat. Without being prejudicial to the gram sabha, the committee recommended a graduated enhancement in the powers of the sabha proportionate to the accruing of powers by the panchayat [Government of India 1963].⁸ Reviewing five years of the plan campaign, the KSSP continues to dig further into their position associating the failures of the campaign to the inability of the activists to convince people that power belongs to them and not to their representatives. They attributed this for what they see to be a weakening of the gram sabha and the transformation of the body to a forum of the potential beneficiaries [KSSP 2002:18].

The panchayat did not get the centrality of position in some of the models of local development that the KSSP activists put forward. A tendency to look upon the three-tier panchayats as not policy-making bodies, but bound by the policy framed by the state government was suggested in some of their documents [Reghunandan 2001; Government of Kerala 1997]. In other words, the model of decentralisation that the KSSP promoted tended to advocate a diffusion of authority at the local level by seemingly creating a schism between the elected representatives and the people. Again, because most of the KSSP agenda and activities was focused on the gram panchayat level, they were

found to be ineffective in disseminating the spirit of participatory planning at the block and district levels. The power dynamics at these levels are more intricate than the village level, so also greater resistance by the bureaucracy.

Plan-Related Aspects

If we go through the so-called plans produced by the panchayats, it becomes quite clear that they do not qualify to be called plans. They are nothing but a bundle of schemes reflecting largely the wish lists of the panchayat members, of course keeping in view the sectoral guidelines. These schemes are disjointed projects, which do not link either with the other projects of the same plan year in question or the schemes of the subsequent years to demonstrate some kind of strategic vision.⁹ The plans of the three tiers could not be integrated in any meaningful fashion in spite of five years of participatory planning. Although the plan campaign used the provisions of the 1994 Act, it tried to sever some of the links between the three tiers, particularly with respect to planning.¹⁰ While panchayat was envisaged as the unit of planning, the accountability was to the gram sabha, which represented the electoral unit. This discontinuity between the rationality of planning and political rationality actually led to considerable fragmentation of the plan grants due to notional ward-based apportionment. Again, by the time the plan-related procedures are completed and the first instalment of the funds are released to the panchayats, half of the year would be over. The remaining half of the year would be marked by rush of expenditure, a pattern which could not be set right until now.¹¹

A participatory institution for project implementation that came into being is the beneficiary committee (BC). Such committees were expected to displace the contractors and ensure optimum use of project allocations without any leakage. The beneficiary committees were to be given 25 per cent of the estimated amount subject to a maximum of Rs 50,000 during 1997-98 and Rs 1 lakh as advance since then. The works undertaken by the BCs were given tax exemption. In case of construction materials purchased by them, a secured advance up to 75 per cent could be given. Where the BCs are unwilling to undertake a work, the panchayat can directly do the work or call tenders. In cases

where tenders are invited, the contractor will not be entitled to both the mobilisation advance, and the secured advance for purchasing construction materials as well as tax exemptions. Also, for transparency the details of the estimate were to be displayed at the work site in Malayalam and the BC should be given copies of the same.

The engineers and contractors joined together to make matters difficult for the BCs which had neither technical skills nor resources to undertake works. The engineers harassed such committees by preparing estimates lower than the market rates, often in English, and also by failing to turn up to supervise works taken up by the BCs. Often they refused to provide technical advice, or reduced the actual measurement leading to personal financial loss for the convenors of BCs. In other words, the attitudes of the engineers was against such people's committees. Although for 90 per cent of the works, there were BCs, it was mainly the binami or spurious contractors who did the work in the name of the BCs. In this way, the contractors could get not only mobilisation advance and secured advance, but also tax benefits. Because of this double advantage that the contractors got, they were prepared to shelve out 10 to 20 per cent of the estimated amount to the engineers. In other words, the beneficiary committee experiment was a big disaster in terms of participation since the main beneficiaries of the experiment were the contractors and the engineers.¹²

Since all the works were to be carried out in a time-bound manner, the targets could be achieved only by switching the contractors into operation. An enabling environment for the smooth and effective functioning of the BCs was absent in most of the places in Kerala. Skilled labourers are partially or fully attached to the contractors. The equipment including heavy ones are not easily accessible by the BCs, so also the know-how.

Beneficiary contribution in many projects were imaginary rather than real. It means just paper adjustment in some cases, and in others, inflation of the actual costs of the project in such a manner that it would be possible to complete the project without the beneficiary content of it. Some commentators have also questioned [Das 2000] the sudden and substantially increased flow of funds to panchayats without matching ability to spend it prudently.

Some of the institutions like the voluntary Block Level Expert Committee

(BLEC), which was entrusted with the function of vetting the panchayat projects, developed an individualised style of functioning after some time, even though they were expected to work as a group. This often led to instances of panchayat members going to the homes of members of BLECs to get signatures for project documents.

Although the merging of rural development department with that of local administration took place at the state level and orders were issued for the merging of District Rural Development Agency with the district panchayat, this could not be operationalised during the LDF rule, making these two entities exist separately at the ground level [John and Chathukulam 1999b]. The LDF failed to resist the pressure of the officials from the rural development department against the merger. In this instance, protecting the interests of the bureaucracy in the rural development department weighed as a greater consideration than the requirements of decentralisation. With the UDF appointing independent ministers for these two departments, the separate identity is likely to continue with accompanying adverse implications for plan integration and decentralisation.

Some Conceptual and Methodological Issues

Participatory planning should be based on a dialogue among the different sections of society. There is no question of a harmonious approach to needs identification. If we think that such consensus can be reached, it has to be the result of conflict negotiations. People often do not know what their real needs are and it is here that facilitators can help people to interpret and identify their true needs. There was no space in the plan campaign for a politics of needs interpretation. How can a participatory methodology of planning be fitted into a framework of conventional planning since both are based on altogether different perspectives and structures? Yet this is precisely what was done in Kerala. The deadline-driven and uniform approach to participatory planning made it a fully controlled affair. The centralised and command style of organising participatory planning was a contradiction in itself. Power relations are central to development. Participatory approaches to development implemented in the true sense therefore "have the potential to allow conflicts

to emerge rather than stay submerged and fester" [Cousins 1998:68]. Such conflicts are to be resolved either through institutionalised means or through interactive processes. However, the Kerala experience aimed instead at circumventing conflict by emphasising harmony as the point of departure. Further, participatory development cannot be rushed through if empowerment of the participants is what is sought to be achieved. Instead, participation was used instrumentally to serve the goals of planning rather than empowering the participants.

A more significant factor that worked against participatory planning is democratic centralism, the organising principle of the CPI(M). Tracing the attitude of the left to decentralisation in the first two decades of modern Kerala's history, Nossiter (1982:290), says that "the leadership of the CPI(M) and CPI alike remained ambivalent towards the concept of more power to the people". The CPI(M) continues to believe in democratic centralism in spite of the decentralised plan campaign. Arguing that the spirit of decentralisation need not be reflected in the Communist Party, Thomas Isaac says, "the principles of party organisation should be distinguished from principles for organising society in general or government administration. Democratic centralism is the organisational principle of the Communist Party" (2000:34). In other words, the campaign has not led to any organisational change in the party structures based on democratic centralism. Similar reservations have been expressed about West Bengal, where the ruling CPI(M), which was continuously in power since 1978 had initiated substantial decentralisation measures.¹³ In fact, it is the mindset arising from the principle of democratic centralism that acts as the major impediment to the deepening of the decentralisation process in Kerala. With such a mindset, a dialogical participatory culture cannot be cultivated.

Most of the party cadres in both the communist parties in Kerala are confused between decentralisation and democratic centralism (both concept and practice). In a seminar on Decentralisation, Social Security and Sustainable Development held at Mararikulam in Alleppey on the May 11-13, 2002, M A Baby, the central committee member of CPI(M), admitted that "the left suffered from ideological confusions about the democratic decentralisation initiative" with some of the supporters seeing it as a reform movement, while

others failing to recognise the significance of the decentralisation move (*The Hindu*, May 13, 2002).

Two CPI(M) party conferences (1998 and 2002) were held since participatory planning was initiated. But in neither of these conferences decentralisation issues were discussed. Das (2000:4303) says that "Barring E M S Namboodiripad, none of top leaders in the party was committed to the decentralisation programme, much less to the people's plan". The mass and class organisations as well as the party cadres could not be mobilised for the success of the plan campaign right from its beginning, largely because of this lack of enthusiasm and conceptual clarity of the party top brass.

Hassan Committee: Missed Opportunity

A committee was appointed by the UDF in February, 1999, with M M Hassan of the Congress(I) as chairman and six other UDF leaders of political standing, to investigate into allegations of corruption and related malpractices.¹⁴ The committee did not do an objective exercise or seek the expertise of neutral bodies or individuals to make a meaningful assessment of the plan campaign. The committee had sittings in several district centres of Kerala. Most of the complaints were related to corruption involving public works, selection of beneficiaries and regional imbalances in the allocation of development projects and funds. There were several complaints related to miss utilisation or diversion of funds set apart for the development of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes under Special Component Plan (SCP) and Tribal Sub Plan (TSP). Almost all the complainants belonged to one or the other constituent parties of the UDF. No independent machinery or expertise was available with the committee to examine the veracity of the complaints. Further, the members on the committee had inadequate familiarity with the nature and process of the plan campaign. The report, therefore, could not serve a crucial corrective function given its amateurish and partisan nature devoid of any degree of professionalism.

Participatory Planning and Growth

The idea that decentralisation and decentralised planning can contribute to growth particularly in the productive sec-

tors has not been borne out by the five-year record of the plan campaign. Barring some growth in the production of milk in some of the northern districts of Kerala, the plan campaign did not have a visible impact in the productive sector.¹⁵ A case study of a gram panchayat made with four years of plan campaign as the reference period showed that no significant achievements in addressing the economic stagnation in the productive sector could be made. The lack of experience of the panchayat members to engage in production-related tasks, which are any way not within the control of the panchayat, the redistributive approach to projects in the productive sector, the inability of the social capital built up through years of leftist imitative politics to be redirected to productive purposes and the highly uncoordinated and disjointed nature of the institutional framework were found to be the reason for this [John and Chathukulam 2001a]. A study conducted in a village panchayat showed that public works carried out under the plan campaign did not result in the creation of any noticeable level of employment opportunities for the locals [John 2000].¹⁶

It has been claimed by Mohanakumar (2002) that the plan campaign has led to the emergence of a new development culture above partisan considerations. This is far from true. It may be noted that even when the discourse on the new development culture was going on, a movement against the conversion of paddy fields by encroaching on farm lands and cutting down the new crops was launched by the CPI(M).¹⁷

Gender Issues

On the whole a gender and development approach was adopted in participatory planning, but the message that went down to the lower levels did not go beyond a women in development approach. Hence, the projects that were carried out under the women's component plan for which 10 per cent of the plan funds were allocated could not address the strategic gender needs of women [John and Chathukulam 2001b]. Although considerable attention was paid to gender issues in the plan campaign, the approach of the CPI(M) to such questions could not be influenced in any way.¹⁸ Gender was recognised mechanically in the general projects by merely adding a statement that the project would either be of direct benefit

to women or that it would not affect women adversely.¹⁹

People's Participation

There is no relationship between the composition of the task force and people's participation, unlike what Mohanakumar (2002) tries to make out. The only institution that plays a participatory role is the gram sabha. In most of the panchayats, the number of people who actually functioned in the name of the task forces does not exceed more than five persons. It is true that during the LDF period, the task force members had greater role. But this very same role was interpreted by some panchayat members as undermining their legitimate powers. There are also a number of factual errors and misinterpretations of orders in the article of Mohanakumar (2002).²⁰

Participation in the gram sabha does not show an encouraging trend. Although the frequency of such meetings has been increased to four times a year, it has not been operationalised. The earlier system of two gram sabha sessions, one dealing with planning and the other with beneficiary selection and implementation, continues to be practised. There has been a decline in the overall participation rate after the special gram sabhas held in 1996. However, the number of participants has been found to be higher in those sabhas where beneficiaries are selected. Also, the share of women's participation in the total has increased. The middle and upper class were not found in the gram sabha, so also the professional classes.²¹

Issues Related to Transparency and Right to Information

An order issued on December 5, 1998 (no 37805 L3/98) had mandated the installation of notice boards in each ward of the panchayats to let people know about the gram sabha and various developmental activities. In a subsequent order issued by the Planning Board (MS no 17/2000/ dated April 3, 2000), it was stated that the plan documents of those panchayats which had failed to install notice boards would not be approved. People's campaign has thus led to the installation of notice boards in all wards of the gram panchayats, municipalities and corporations. In the initial stages, such notice boards carried handwritten or printed notices or information relating to when beneficiaries are selected and what is the procedure, and where forms

for the same can be obtained. Now most of the panchayats in Kerala have durable notice boards available in the wards. They are no longer used for the purpose for which they were originally intended. Notices of the panchayat do not appear on the board. Instead these boards often carry advertisement of private companies, of meetings of political parties and cinema posters in municipal areas. No arrangement has been made by the panchayat to maintain the board or ensure regular display of panchayat notices.

The government had directed each gram panchayat to set apart Rs one lakh from plan funds during 1997-98 period for purchase of photocopier and to credit the amount in the account of the director of panchayat. About 800 out of the 991 panchayats had deposited the amount. However, the government have not been able to ensure the supply of the photocopiers until now. The supply of photocopiers to all panchayats was envisaged as means to enable ordinary people to get copies of panchayat documents, since all documents relating to the plan process and implementation were declared as public documents which can be accessed and copies secured by any citizen on payment of the actual charges.

The elements of civil society which should play a pivotal role in taking the movement for right to information and transparency forward have not looked at the participatory planning process seriously so far. The decentralised planning programme did not in effect lead to transparency except in respect of matters related to selection of beneficiaries.²²

Cumbersome Guidelines

It may be noted that the set of guidelines issued from time to time as well as the procedures laid down for planning were quite elaborate and cumbersome. For example the set of guidelines issued by the LDF has 10 clauses with 82 sub clauses. The UDF guidelines are also no better with seven clauses and 89 sub clauses. Panchayats are expected to obtain special permission from the state government with regard to matters not specifically mentioned in these guidelines. More than 100 government orders have been issued during the Ninth Plan period. Many such orders were against the spirit of decentralisation and participatory planning. Mohanakumar (2002) sees these orders as reflecting the thoroughness of the campaign, but from the perspective of decentralisation as well

as participatory planning, such orders could be seen as circumscribing local initiative and freedom. Majority of these orders were not issued in vernacular language, thereby giving greater leverage to the panchayat secretary and officials in interpreting them.

Each panchayat is expected to attach a number of certificates proving that they have fulfilled all the steps in the participatory planning process for final plan approval. Panchayat members are brought up in an environment in which public relations and activities aimed at gaining political mileage and political visibility dominate in their day to day time allocation. It is inconceivable to make them adhere to these guidelines in the strict sense. The net result is the evolution of a system in most of the panchayats by which all the guidelines are met on records although in practice many of them have been watered down to suit the style of functioning of the panchayat members.²³ In each panchayat, there are a handful of people who assist the panchayat members in meeting all these requirements. In some panchayats, they have also identified people who can be taken into confidence and who can assist them on an individual basis in the planning process, with or without any payment.

The contention that the plan guidelines were prepared after consulting the panchayat functionaries [Mohanakumar 2002] is also imaginary. The fact that the participatory planning process was placed within an annual financial year mould as in conventional planning closed the space for the evolution of the process dimensions of people's planning, which enables conflicts to surface.²⁴ In other words, no conflict of any serious proportion took place following the plan campaign, suggesting that something was wrong with the campaign.

Sustainability Question

The claim of Mohanakumar (2002) while talking about sustainability that the labour bank idea is spreading very fast is also not borne out by facts. The concept of a labour bank as instituted in Kunnathukal is actually confined to only one or two panchayats by the admission of KSSP itself [KSSP 2002]. Same is the case of many other panchayats like Kalliasseri, Vallikkunnu, Chapparapadavu, Kumarakom, Mayyil, Onchium, Madakkathara and Mezhuveli to name a few, which were projected during the campaign as model panchayats. Even in Kunnathukal, the initial enthusiasm witnessed in the labour

bank experiment is waning. Most of the panchayats where people's resource mapping programme was carried out could not show results markedly different from the other panchayats where such intervention on the part of the KSSP did not take place.²⁵

The campaign also did not contribute much to the enhancement of local government capacity except in planning. There has been no improvement in areas like budget preparation, office management including records maintenance, control over staff, procedures relating to meetings of panchayat committees including sub-committees and so on. Institutions like the district planning committee, could not be strengthened largely because of the centralised organisation of the plan campaign centred around the state planning board.

Achievements of the Plan Campaign

The people's planning exercise has led to a number of positive developments. The first relates to the planning exercise, which was demystified and freed from its technical and bureaucratic moorings and made within the reach of the ordinary people in a language that is understandable to them. The second relates to the evolution of a methodology of participatory planning, whatever may be its limitations. The elements of the methodology include need identification in the gram sabha, preparation of one time development reports comparable to an approach paper or situation analysis, strategy setting for the ensuing year through development seminars, projectisation of needs by the task forces constituted for the purpose, plan finalisation by the panchayat, plan vetting by the experts, plan approval by the DPC, project implementation and monitoring by the people through beneficiary committees and so on. It also evolved an elaborate system of training from the state level to the village and the production of training materials in the vernacular language. It is perhaps the first case in which planning has been used as a means of social mobilisation.

Thirdly, Kerala allocates the highest amount of plan funds to the local bodies in the country, and of this, around 90 per cent is given as untied funds with broad sectoral guidelines to prevent excessive spending in any one sector. As far as Kerala is concerned, the lack of finance will no longer be a major hurdle for the local bodies. Also the entire plan grant can be

invested and no leakages are possible for non-plan purposes from this unlike the state plan funds. Fourthly, right from 1997-98, the allocations of all the local bodies are budgeted separately and individually in an annexure. Since it is passed by the legislature, diversion of these allocations is out of question. Further, funds devolved are based on well-defined and transparent criteria with very little space for partisanship, discretion and patronage. Since the local bodies know about their budgetary allocations when the state budget is presented in the assembly, they have a clear idea of the funds available for the next year's plan [Bandopadhyaya 1998]. A system of flow of funds also has come into being mandating a 75 per cent level of spending to claim the full entitlement for the ensuing year.

Fifthly, a 10 per cent earmarking of funds has been done for projects exclusively meant for women. This is known as the Women's Component Plan (WCP). The arrival of the WCP has been followed by the formation of a large number of self-help groups for women throughout Kerala, thereby filling, to a certain extent, the huge gender gap in the structure of Kerala's social capital. In other words, there has been some sort of feminisation of social capital and along with it an increase in the participation of women in the gram sabha, both in absolute terms, and also as a share of the total participants [John and Chathukulam 2002]. Most of the beneficiaries of the plan campaign are drawn from the lower social strata.

Sixthly, the authentication of beneficiary lists by the gram sabha has reduced the possibility of ineligible persons getting benefits. There has been a strong pro-poor tilt in the campaign effort if we take the socio-economic character of the beneficiaries into consideration. Seventhly, some improvement in the quality of public works also has taken place with faster payments mediated through the beneficiary committees, compared to other PWD works.

Eighthly, the possibility of people's participation has been legally provided in all stages of the planning cycle. Some models in development such as water supply, etc, have also emerged although such models do not have a spread-effect. A core group of people who assist the panchayat in plan-related activities (akin to a kind of panchayat level planning cell) now exists in each panchayat.

Ninthly, the gram panchayat has become a site of welfare. It is increasingly becoming

a site for expression of grievances, which was not there earlier. Also, the visibility of the panchayat as well as the members has increased considerably following participatory planning, so also the work of an average panchayat member.

Finally, a large number of people with some degree of knowledge relating to planning has been created as a result of the campaign. Significant achievements have been registered in areas like housing, sanitation, drinking water, public health and also rural infrastructure.

Conclusion

Kerala's decentralised planning amounted to a command style implementation of participatory planning. The failure to internalise criticism and to include a broad cross section of society in the movement for decentralisation as well as the subtle strategies of surveillance and exclusion exercised by the plan managers to make the whole process a controlled one, was at odds with the message of participation and inclusion that was conveyed during the early phase of the campaign. It certainly stands to the credit of the CPI(M) for organising a campaign of such an extensive scale. It is not surprising given the mobilisational and epistemic resources the party can muster. The commitment of the Congress to decentralisation has hitherto been confined to rhetoric, banking exclusively on the initiatives that Rajiv Gandhi had taken for decentralisation during his tenure, and more remotely on the Gandhian ideal of Gram Swaraj. The CPI(M) was instrumental in organising a programme, which was at odds with the party's organising principle of democratic centralism, a principle that saps the very essence of decentralisation. The new development culture and the spirit and appropriate attitudes of decentralisation could not be ushered in, not even among the members and followers of CPI(M). Kerala's decentralised planning lacked a proper political perspective and a poor understanding of power dynamics. The way the whole process was organised, the content of training and the procedures initiated, reflected a concern primarily with the goals of planning than genuine decentralisation. In a programme like this, the nature and organisation of the process has implications for the end result. Also, by highlighting the role of participatory institutions at the expense of the elected representatives, the right sequencing of decentralisation

was upset in strategic terms. It is too simplistic to think that decentralisation can be implemented through self-less work of the KSSP activists as in the literacy programme since both are governed by altogether different set of social and political dynamics. In other words, participatory planning was implemented not with corresponding advances in the direction of decentralisation. Conflicts would be natural and also may be desirable in a decentralisation movement, but the entire programme was built on the principle of conflict avoidance. No social change of any substance can be brought by mystifying or suppressing conflicts. Further, participatory planning should not be clubbed with deadline-driven, financial year-based five year plans, which we are familiar with at the national and state levels; otherwise participation will become largely a mechanical exercise serving as an instrument of planning rather than serving as a means of people's empowerment. Instead a flexible set of time frame with emphasis more on the process rather than quick results may be appropriate.

Kerala's experience shows that participatory planning in itself need not lead to a strengthening of the panchayats, unless conscious efforts are made towards that end. This also suggests the need for undertaking decentralisation initiatives first before embarking on participatory planning. The issues in the movement for decentralisation cannot be reduced to the requirements of partisan politics – as one between the UDF and the LDF. Instead, forces working against decentralisation as well as in favour, are found in all the political parties. What is needed is a concerted move on the part of the pro-decentralisation groups in each political party to engage in a politics of decentralisation focusing on strengthening the panchayat. [47]

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Notes

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1 Scholars who came to the state on brief visits when the plan campaign was launched presented an idealistic picture of the campaign

- effort. Such impressionistic accounts are often the result of guided visits to selected sites or based on isolated phenomena. Consider for example Reghulam (2000). She says: "The democratic decentralisation campaign in Kerala will be significant in the history of India for it establishes a politics of social change which restructures the systems of power, of production and relations, especially between, government, the state and the people who image the alternatives and build them" (p 2107).
- Madhu Dandavate, the then deputy chairman of the Planning Commission, government of India who visited Kerala immediately after the introduction of people's planning described the movement as representing "a Gandhian approach to development" (*The Hindu*, January 26, 2000).
 - For details relating to the agitation and administration principle of EMS, see Nossiter (1982).
 - It may be noted that it was the then speaker of the assembly during the tenure of the LDF (1996-2001), who came out strongly in favour of such a fund. This could not come through largely because of the stand taken by E M S Namboodiripad.
 - In Karnataka, in the early eighties, the resistance of the district level bureaucracy was overcome by appointing officers senior to the district collectors as chief secretaries of district panchayats.
 - It was found in the district of Kottayam that most of the resource persons involved in the campaign were wary of standing up to respect the district panchayat president whereas they were quick in paying their respect to the district collector.
 - The panchayat projects are implemented through officials of the line departments who have been transferred to the panchayats. Once funds are handed over to them, there is no regular means of ensuring accountability of these officials to the panchayats since they see their accountability to be confined to their superiors in the line departments. In effect, this cannot even be described as dual control as the panchayats effectively lack the resources and skills to control them.
 - Iqbal Narain, one of the early commentators of Panchayat Raj was of the opinion that the very composition of the gram sabha does not allow it function as a sober body. Any effort to strengthen the sabha before strengthening the panchayat amounted to "putting the cart before the horse, according to him [Narain 1962]. For a brief summary of this position, see John and Chathukulam (1999a).
 - We have benefited from discussion with P P Pillai, an expert in planning and the former vice-chairman of the District Planning Committee (1996-2001), Trissur, on this point.
 - As per the 1994 Act, the gram panchayat should prepare its plan in a prescribed format and submit the same to the block panchayat, which considers the gram panchayat plans also while finalising its own plans. The block panchayat plans are then submitted to the district panchayat, which in turn prepares its own plan after reckoning the various block panchayat plans. Then, the district panchayat plan is submitted to the district planning committee for approval. In other words, the district panchayat plan will include not only the plans of the gram panchayats and block panchayats within the district, but also the district panchayat plan as well. Provision for direct

linkage between the grama panchayat/block panchayat and the DPC was there in the 1994 Act. The campaign managers ignored this and created new relations between each tier and the DPC. This is one of the reasons why in spite of five years of planning Kerala has not been able to come up with a District Plan in the strict sense and why duplication in the projects of the three tiers took place. Each tier now prepares its plan and submits it to the DPC for approval as per the 1999 Act. The grama panchayat is now required only to send a copy of the plan document to the block panchayat and district panchayat. Similarly, block panchayat is required to send a copy to the district panchayat. In other words, the inter-tier linkage in planning is severed in the new arrangement.

- For example, the dates of plan funds received by Thalappulam gram panchayat in Kottayam district in each of the five years of participatory planning is illustrative. All the other panchayats in Kerala also got the plan funds with a variation of one or two weeks in each case. See the table.

Table: Dates of Plan Fund Received by Thalappulam Panchayat

Number of Plan Instalments*	1997-98	1998-99	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-02
First	19/8/97	28/10/98	1/7/99	19/7/00	22/9/01
Second	10/2/98	9/2/99	22/11/99	17/11/00	20/3/02
Third	26/3/98	23/3/99	14/2/00	21/3/01	31/3/02
Fourth	31/3/98	31/3/99	22/3/00	Nil	Nil

Note: * The Plan Funds were given to the panchayats in four equal instalments.

Source: Thalappulam Grama Panchayat Office.

- We have come to this observation on the basis of discussions with a large number panchayat functionaries, convenors of BCs, engineers and contractors while engaged in the people's plan campaign.
- Based on the Bengal experience, Acharya (2002:794) says, "It should be noted that a political party based on the principle of so-called democratic centralism cannot allow a truly decentralised administration, in any area of social activity".
- When the coalition partners also became critical of the plan campaign, the LDF also appointed a sub-committee to look into allegations, however nothing came of that committee.
- Kerala continues to rely on other states for vegetables, meat and eggs in spite of the emphasis laid in the campaign to address stagnation in the productive sectors. The import of rice from the other states has also not shown any decline.
- A KSSP review of five years of experience of the plan campaign was frank enough to admit that "there has been no change in the productive sector including agriculture. Neither the farmers nor the farm workers felt the benefits of people's planning. It also failed to create opportunities for employment and thus reduce the intensity of unemployment in Kerala [KSSP 2002:22].
- The Swaraj trophy, which is given to the best panchayats, illustrates how partisan considerations weighed more in the award of such trophies. There was no objective criteria for the award leading to a case being filed against it. During the first four-year period of the LDF rule, of the 135 panchayats, which were awarded Swaraj Trophies, only two belonged to the opposition [Das 2000].

- As far as the CPI(M) is concerned, women's issues are to be subsumed under class and are therefore inseparable. Even in the most recently constituted state secretariat of the CPI(M), not even one out of the 15 members is a woman. Devika and Kodoth (2001:3175) says "women, it seems, must keep themselves within the paternal care of the mainstream left, content with and grateful for such paternalism".
- Even when all the talk about gender mainstreaming was going on a woman employee of Calicut University was fighting for justice with a leftist service organisation of the university. The manner in which the sexual harassment case of a senior IAS officer in the state, against a minister in the LDF cabinet was handled also had led to protests from women activists [Devika and Kodoth 2001]. Women panchayat members belonging to the CPI(M), who tried to engage in panchayat activities without being partisan in their approach often had to face difficulties in dealing with their male local party functionaries [Chathukulam and John 2000b]. Also, women did not find any representation in the key bodies/committees constituted during the plan campaign such as the State Planning Board, Sen Committee, Administrative Reforms Committee, Expert Members of District Planning Committees and the seven-member ombudsman..
- The contention that division of the SHGs into APL and BPL and thereby refuse assistance to the SHGs is also contrary to the facts. But the fact is that when the LDF was in power, in an order issued on April 3, 2000 (GO, 17/2000/Pig), it is said that "group programmes for industrial and economic development should be restricted to those below the poverty line, and these groups should be given subsidy at the rate of the centrally sponsored programmes – Suvarna Jayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY) and in the urban areas according to Swathanthrya Suvarna Jubilee Swarozgar Yojana (SJSRY). This provision has been endorsed by the UDF government also without any change in the order (Order GO no 17/2001 Planning dated June 18, 2001). Mohanakumar has said that the convenor of a task force, who is an official, who presents the draft proposals both in the gram sabha and the development seminar, which is not true. Only in the development seminar, this is the practice. In gram sabha it can be done by any member of the sectoral committee. The role of the convenor (official) in the development seminar was brought in to correct the lack of cooperation of these segments during the early stages of the people's plan campaign. Because the task forces were initially seen as a threat to their power by the panchayat members, they tried to ignore them. Many of them dropped out leaving only handful left behind. It is already found that in 33.8 per cent of the panchayats only a handful of people prepared the projects, that in 27.17 per cent of the panchayats the task forces were only partially active and 27.1 per cent of the panchayats only some of the task forces were active were the findings of the 1998 Key Resource Persons (KRP) survey by State Planning Board, Government of Kerala. Hence, the existence of the task force does not have any bearing on the extent of participation that can be achieved or on the quality of the campaign effort. Excepting some of the showpiece panchayats, in most of them, very few task force members were active.

It is incorrect to say that the LDF government withheld the last instalment during 2000-01 as said by Mohanakumar (2002). The fact is the LDF government could not release the fourth instalment for which no specific explanation was given. This coupled with a flurry of cheques which were honoured created some degree of confusion. The election process in the state began in April 2001 itself and the new government took over only in May by which time the financial year was over. Hence, the question of disbursing the fourth instalment was out of question since the new government was concerned only about the next years plan. The UDF government also cut 25 per cent of the total plan size and the reason for this, the cut in the state plan size, was provided to the panchayats. It is also quite illogical to say that all the gains from the planning process washed away when the fourth instalment could not be paid to the local bodies making the people turn against the government and nullifying four years of hard work. The response of the people to the panchayat elections in 2000, when the plan campaign was at its highest crescendo, did not show any signs of hope for the LDF. More than the plan campaign, it is the performance of the LDF in other sectors that made the people turn against the LDF in the assembly elections.

- 21 We are grateful to V V Kunhambu for giving us access to data relating to gram sabha participation of three village panchayats in Kannur district, namely, Ramanthaly, Kankol-Alappadamba and Peringome-Vayakkara. This trend is also visible in the study made by Luciamma Kurian (2001).
- 22 A survey conducted by the Centre for Rural Management, Kottayam, Kerala, on the right to information and anti-corruption initiatives following the participatory plan campaign for Institute for Development Studies, Sussex, as part of a countrywide study had to conclude with five reports instead of the commissioned eight reports on grounds of absence of any significant movement for right to information and anti-corruption.
- 23 This system is not a contribution of the plan campaign. Even when the centrally sponsored programmes like RLEGP, NREP and Jawahar Rozgar Yojana were introduced, this system of making impeccable records had come in existence. It is interesting that Kerala always fulfilled all the guidelines including the man-material ratio in muster rolls each year, perhaps more meticulously than any other state in India [Chathukulam and Kurien 1995]. It may be noted that when people's plan guidelines were introduced the panchayat functionaries did not protest against them or demand relaxation of the rules, which suggests that the members were confident of surmounting such guidelines based on past experience. For example, the composition of various committees, frequency of meetings, minutes of meetings, presence of quorum, ensuring of quotas in committees, holding of meetings and so on are all fulfilled on records.
- 24 It may be noted that in the early 1980s when drastic panchayat reforms were introduced in Karnataka, a large number of conflicts surfaced, which was anticipated by the then ruling group and provisions for resolving them also were put in place [Crook and Manor 1998:43-49].
- 25 This information was communicated to one of the authors by Srikumar Chattopadhyay, who was associated with the programme right from its beginning and who made a study of such

panchayats after the launching of the plan campaign. See also [Chattopadhyay 2001].

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