

Democratic Decentralization and Primary Education: A Comparison of Continuity and Change in Two Districts of Kerala (India)

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Adopting policies of decentralization has become more or less a universal fashion among governments. Institutional redesigning as regard to affirmative state is favored by the political left and right in capitalist democracies. However, their arguments revolve around the decision-making powers of ordinary citizens. Some academics argue that the “People’s Campaign for Decentralized Planning” (PCDP) introduced in 1996 in Kerala, the south western state of India, is an extended version of democratic decentralization. They also describe it as Empowered Deliberative Democracy (EDD). Through a comparison of continuity and change aspects in the field of primary education based on programmes carried out in two districts of Kerala (India), this paper analyzes the democratic decentralization policy initiated in the state. The paper concludes with insights related to the need for the redefinition of the process of initiating and sustaining educational changes in a decentralized fashion in Kerala.

Key Words: decentralization, primary education, empowered deliberative democracy

The concept of decentralization as a developmental strategy has sparked off a renewed interest in institutions of governance in diverse economic and political environments. The vast literature on the concept of decentralization offers normative definitions of the term (Adams, 2002; Bray, 1999; Crook & Manor, 1998, p. 4) as well as technical and theoretical perspectives about it (Adams, 2002; Asian Development Bank, 2001; Bray 1999; Bullock & Thomas, 1997; de Vries, 2000; Dillinger, 1994; Eaton, 2001, p. 101; Lauglo & McLean, 1985; Manor 1999; Parker, 1995; Rondinelli, 1981; Smith, 1985). Political or democratic decentralization involves assigning power to make decisions

about developmental aspects to citizens or to their representatives at lower levels of government.

This paper focuses on a state level developmental policy in Kerala, the southwestern state of India, intended for the transformation of the entire state administration. The decentralization policy was introduced in the state within a ‘big bang’ as well as ‘bottom up approach’ with abrupt transfer of powers and resources. Through the implementation of the democratic decentralization process which was popularly known as the “People’s Campaign for Decentralized Planning” (PCDP) in 1996, the then leftist government in Kerala tried to substitute it for democratization at the local level, and a safe way to acquire much needed legitimacy and grassroots support. They even described it as “Empowered Deliberative Democracy”(Fung & Wright, 1999, 2001; Thomas Isaac & Franke, 2000) which according to its tenets, emphasizes the importance for the words of ordinary individuals, which are capable of making real differences in governmental actions. Hence the term “empowered” is used. Solutions for complex problems are sought out through discussions, debates and collaborative exploration. Thus it is

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described as “deliberative”. Local control is considered as the basic idea of EDD. In order to supplement local control, EDD also suggests the basic notion of central control officiated through proper training, technical assistance, sharing innovations and lessons to remedy the impediments in local actions. To facilitate public pressure and support, suggestions are also made to make outcomes and operations transparent.

The paper begins by presenting a brief account of the historical as well as empirical responses in redesigning the democratic institutions in Kerala State, India. The mechanism and philosophy behind the 1996 initiation of the PCDP will be subsequently described. The implementation of educational projects in various Village Panchayats (the lowest tier of Local Self Government Institutions - LSGIs) of Kannur and Kasaragod districts in Kerala will be discussed further. This sets the stage for the comparison of continuity and change aspects observed in primary education sector in a decentralized context with particular reference to the LSGIs. The paper concludes with a general discussion and analysis of these aspects within the perspective of democratic decentralization which is claimed as empowering and deliberative.

Democratic Decentralization: The case of Kerala

The present Local Self Government Institutions (LSGIs) across the states in India are the continuation of the traditional, dormant communitarian panchayats with a less degree of political overtones compared to the former. Under British control, they were converted into institutions of local self-government with new form of statutory structures, but were essentially local executive agencies for implementation of national/provincial policies. According to Mathur (1995, p. 8), the stalwarts of the Indian freedom struggle showed a lukewarm approach and relegated a lower priority for this process of institutional and constitutional evolution of LSGIs for the sake of a national self-government for India. However, since independence in 1947 and the consequent promulgation of the Constitution of India in 1950, a three tier statutory network of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) began to envelope all of rural India (Bhattacharya, 2001; Brillantes Jr. & Cuachon, 2002).

Decentralization as a political process, claiming its stated intention to alter the political status quo by transferring authority from one level of government and one set of actors to others as stated in the Article 40 of the Constitution of India, was carried out as a reform strategy in Kerala since its establishment as a state in 1957. This has to be viewed as a

positive trend, because there has been even cases of proliferation of parallel bodies which are set up to bypass the elected bodies of LSGIs, or proposing amendments and recommendations which are destructive to these bodies, in some other states like Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu of India (Mathew, 2002). The political leaders of Kerala, both the so called ‘left’ and ‘right’ of the political spectrum, belonging to “two political fronts which historically more or less alternated in power”(Thomas Isaac & Heller, 2001, p. 96) competed to link the vision of overall development of the state for the sake of decentralization.

The democratic decentralization process in Kerala underwent a shift both in its procedural and implementation aspects since 1996. It was a follow-up of the constitutionalization of the PRIs (through the 1992 Constitution 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts) in India, which also “laid the foundation for a significantly different pattern of education governance” (Asian Development Bank, 2001, p. 110) as LSGIs in 1993 and the subsequent enactment and introduction of the Kerala Panchayati Raj Act in 1994, by the then ministry. The 1996 episode was popularly known as the “People’s Campaign for Decentralized Planning ”.

A few academics, identify the launching of the PCDP as a “bold initiative” (Fung & Wright, 2001, p. 14) widely regarded and most ambitious decentralization project of its kind ever undertaken in India (Franke & Chasin, 1998; Thomas Isaac, 2000; Thomas Isaac & Franke, 2000; Thomas Isaac & Heller, 2001). Some academics went to the extent to describe it as “one of the most important recent experiments in generating alternatives to corporate dominated globalization” (Franke, 2002, p. 47). The mechanism and philosophy behind the initiation of the PCDP in the state will be discussed in a nutshell.

The PCDP

The PCDP is conceived as a way of developing support and capacity for institutional decentralized planning. The then Left Democratic Front Government supported and financed this campaign since it was one of their political agendas. As a result, the State Planning Board, which is a semi-autonomous government department was reconstituted with pro-government nominees at key positions having decision making powers. So as to empower the Local Self Government Institutions, the Board asked the Local Panchayat Governing Bodies to draw up five-year development plans within their responsible areas of responsibilities. Various literature which described PCDP claimed that the devolutions of functions and resources

of the state government to the elected representatives at the lower levels were based on principles such as autonomy, subsidiarity, role clarity, complementarity, uniformity, people's participation and transparency (Thomas Isaac, 1998, 2000; Thomas Isaac & Franke, 2000; Thomas Isaac & Harilal, 1997).

The PCDP was carried out in different phases (Thomas Isaac & Heller, 2001, p. 92) starting with the identification of people's needs and gaps in local development at the "Grama Sabha" or village assembly level. 'Development seminars' are then held in which people's representatives, officials and experts discussed a 'Panchayat Development Report', which details development issues and challenges in that particular Panchayat. They also provided basic data, appraisals and sector surveys which in turn helped the different sector-wise 'Task Forces' which were set up to 'projectise' development approaches and finally formulated a Panchayat Plan. The Panchayat level plans were integrated at the Block and District levels later (Nair & George, 2002; Powis, 1999, p. 41).

PCDP in the Education Sector: An Overview of Kannur and Kasaragod Districts

The author conducted a cross-district comparative study focusing on PCDP activities carried out in the primary education sector and aspects related to the primary sector in Kerala, which was based on a multilevel analytical framework. The two sample districts: Kannur and Kasaragod, (the former a non-DPEP district and the latter being a DPEP district since 1994, where educational projects were carried out in a decentralized way as a part of the World Bank assisted, centrally sponsored District Primary Education Programme) as well as sample LSGIs including two District Panchayats, five Block Panchayats, and 29 Village Panchayats were selected through purposive random sampling. In order to collect and to analyze the abundant qualitative data, a 'multiple method' approach along with 'between method triangulation' was employed throughout the investigation.

"Development Reports" in 1996 with a substantial importance given to the education sector had been prepared and published in all the sample panchayats. The chapters discussing education provide a historical background, basic statistics related to different sectors (Pre-primary to Higher Secondary) and different types (Government, Private-aided, Private-unaided) of educational institutions, numbers of students, teachers, the problems in the field of education and suggestions including the possible solutions in this regard.

The locally specific educational problems identified in these reports pertain to a wide range of educational issues. They cover academic standards, examination systems, monitoring and evaluation, syllabi, training programmes, text books, co-curricular activities, physical facilities in schools and so on. All these appear to be superficial or sweeping comments and lacking clear definitions of concepts. For example, they all talk about educational quality, but nowhere are the indicators or benchmarks mentioned or defined. So is the case with standards of teaching and learning. As a first instance in the history of documentation of details and statistics of local resources, the importance of these reports can not be under estimated. But as a basis for the materialization of decentralization process, their relevance is questionable.

The State Planning Board (SPB) published a handbook for education sector and proposed a Comprehensive Education Programme (SPB, 1998) and provided training for the members of educational task force. Though these activities were intended to accelerate the process of decentralization, they provided only some understanding about the form and process of planning. The content of the plans were not scrutinized in the desired manner. Based on those guidelines mentioned in the handbook, all the Village Panchayats enlisted above prepared projects. They were prepared in the suggested format outlining the objectives, describing the benefits, explaining the funding and detailing the mode of execution and phasing of the project. Since the CEP suggested a comprehensive programme, the educational projects covered the whole sectors of school education, pre-primary to higher secondary.

Table 1 illustrates the different types of educational projects included in different plans by different Village Panchayats. The researcher classified them according to their features. Many projects were designed to enhance the quality of education in primary schools. However, the designers of the 'Comprehensive Education Programme' as a state level framework merely used the term 'quality' in a superficial way throughout the document. The qualitative educational projects suggested by them and tried out by various Village Panchayats were mainly related to teaching and learning in classrooms.

The following section examines the impact of PCDP in the primary education sector of the two selected districts. The aspects related to continuity and change within the framework of a decentralized context, and in line with the suggested notions of EDD are provided in a comparative perspective. The comparison is made based on the time dimensions and

Table1. *Types and Features of Panchayat-level Educational Projects*

Educational Quality Improvement Projects	Educational Background Improvement Projects	Other Integrated Projects
a) Comprehensive programmes intended to improve the quality of education in standards 1 to X. b) Separate projects to improve the quality of education in standards I to IV, V to VII, and VIII to X c) Short-term courses in remedial teaching. d) Language Skills improvement e) Develop new evaluation techniques f) Research projects of teachers g) Special Education projects h) Programmes for SC/ST students	a) School Building b) Furniture c) Classroom Separation d) Toilet/Latrine construction e) Drinking water supply f) Play grounds, Physical education and equipments	a) noon-feeding programmes b) Guidance and Counselling Centres c) School Agriculture programmes d) School Health programmes

target levels of change (Zaltman & Duncan, 1977, p. 11) and various components identified by Vago (1989, p. 9) as regard to change process.

Comparison of aspects of continuity and change in the primary education sector in the two case districts after the implementation of PCDP in 1996.

This section provides a general comparison of the features of continuity and change observed in the primary education sector in Kannur and Kasaragod districts. The comparison was based on the field data collected using multiple methods like documentary analysis, formal semi structured interviews and questionnaire surveys. These data were analyzed and synthesized based on similarities and differences observed. However, to put the comparative aspects in a comprehensive framework, they were put under different emerging areas of consensus related to functions in education, the control of which are carried out in a decentralized political context and exemplifying the notions of EDD. Table 2 presents the details of comparison of aspects of continuity and change in the two case districts within the framework of emerging areas of consensus pertaining to functions in the sector of primary education.

The general comparative aspects provided in the above table clearly illustrate that the pre context and post context of primary education scenario after the introduction of PCDP did not undergo any substantial change. In a long-term dimension and aimed at a macro-level target, i.e. the entire society, the PCDP as an innovation was not able to contribute any

substantial socio-cultural evolutionary aspects in the field of primary education.

On the face value of this statement, it can be counter arguable that the implementation of PCDP covered only a six year period which is not enough to expect substantial changes (Gopakumar, 2003). However, this counter argument can not hold its justification because the political and administrative elite belonging to the then government as well as the proponents and organizers of the campaign still claim that they showed the political will power to transform the Village Panchayats to become actual LSGIs through providing enough powers and money to perform independently (Achuthanandan, 2002, p. 12). The administrative structures at the LSGIs level were properly empowered through administrative reforms, taxation reforms and devolving plan funds to the lower levels and PCDP was meant to provide the capacity for the LSGIs in this regard in a transparent and more democratic way (see e.g., Baby, 2002, p. 8; Thomas Isaac, 2002, p. 40). Whether these claims hold any value is another question for that the reality lies some where from these rhetoric. Many of the pro-PCDP literature describing educational projects (see e.g., Ganesh & Ramakrishnan, 2000; Ramakrishnan, 2000; State Planning Board, 1998) were promotional in nature and in most cases justified its intent by exemplifying and reifying isolated examples of developmental projects, which in those authors’ words were exemplary examples for success.

The verification of official documents such as project reports, draft project reports and General Norms (GN) forms for different financial years beginning with 1997-98 to 2002 provided the clue that few of the intended educational projects

Table 2. Comparison of aspects of continuity and change in Primary Education in Kannur and Kasaragod districts between 1996 and 2002

Emerging Areas of consensus related to Functions in Primary Education	Comparison (analysis and synthesis of similarities and differences over time and between districts)
Setting Educational Standards	<p>In both districts no standards pertaining to educational quality, under-performing areas such as learning and teaching, and the basic requirements as regard to infrastructure facilities in primary schools were set up by any tier of the LSGIs. The state government prescribed standards and norms are still followed based on the regulations and instructions provided by the General Education Department and implemented through the field level departmental authorities. This is because, powers in matters of monitoring and prescribing standards were not successfully delegated to the lower level tiers of government. In Kannur district, monitoring of general school functioning by the Panchayat Education Committees were never practiced in most of the Village Panchayats. Out of the 18 Village Panchayats where the researcher conducted his field work, only four of them had reported uneven experiences in this regard. However, they were not conducted in a uniform pattern or they never monitored the entire schools under their jurisdiction. One Village Panchayat had the experience of its PEC dropping the monitoring programme due to resistance from the teaching community. In Kasaragod, monitoring of general functioning and facilities by the monitoring cells under Village Education Committees were randomly conducted as a part of DPEP activities. However, the fixing of standards for learning and teaching in education still remained out of their agenda. Moreover, this monitoring system under the DPEP is carried over in a parallel fashion and has not been integrated with those of the monitoring system envisaged by the LSGIs. Though there are standing committees for education at all tiers of LSGIs, they are devoid of a common structure and properly delegated powers of control.</p>
Curriculum Design and Teaching Methods	<p>Curriculum design and teaching methods are still decided according to the National and State government and departmental level frameworks. The LSGIs have no powers to localize the curriculum. Even for languages belonging to the local minorities, the curriculum is designed at the state level. As regard to teaching methods, though the curriculum is intended for activity based and child-centered approaches, majority teachers still follow the traditional, teacher-dominant, chalk and talk methods in entire schools. The educational projects designed by the LSGIs in both districts did not pay much attention in linking their educational projects with actual and specific class room situations. In Kasaragod district, as a part of the DPEP, more number of chances in trainings were provided to primary school teachers, compared to their counterparts in Kannur district in activity-based teaching. As a result, the trained teachers are trying to practice those innovations in their classes.</p>
Student Evaluation	<p>State level examination systems pertaining to each primary standards (I – VII) in schools are followed in the case districts even after the implementation of decentralized planning. The LSGIs do not have any say in day-to-day evaluation or school-based performance plans. A mixture of grading and marking system is followed in the primary education sector as regard to the promotion of students to the next higher standards. However, as a part of the DPEP, monitoring as well as guidance in evaluation based on grading student activities is provided to primary school teachers of standard I to IV by the concerned BRC trainers in Kasaragod district. In Kannur district, from among the samples, one Village Panchayat conducted common annual-examination covering the relevant syllabuses based on common question papers for Lower Primary and Upper Primary students. This change aspect is a deviation from the common practice among different schools using different question papers set by outside agencies for examination purposes. The same Panchayat also conducted an annual sports meet for primary students. Nevertheless, these are very unique instances initiated at the lowest tier of LSG from among the samples.</p>

Table 2. *Continued*

Textbooks/Handbooks Production and Distribution	<p>Textbooks production and distribution are centralized at the state level for the sake of harmonizing them with curriculum design and to increase cost efficiency. Distribution is carried over through textbook depots, which are the district level field-organs of the education department. However, some handbooks prepared for special projects were distributed to participant teachers in both the case districts. In the case of Kasaragod, DPEP provided certain hand books for lower-primary teachers. To cite an experience, one sample Village Panchayat in Kannur district prepared a handbook consisting a collection of folk-songs for the use of primary teachers.</p>
Teacher Recruitment Promotion, and Salary.	<p>Recruitment, promotion as well as conditions of service as regard to regular primary teachers working in government and aided schools are centralized at the state level with norms and regulations prescribed by the Public Service Commission in the state and implemented through the field level offices in the districts. At the district level, the Deputy Director of Education is the decision making authority in this regard. Salaries are usually paid from the recurrent budget of the level to which teachers report administratively. The LSGIs have no control in these matters. However, in the appointment of temporary teachers, in the beginning period of PCDP (1996-97), they were hired and appointed by a committee consisting of the Head master, PTA President and the Village Panchyat Member representing that particular ward in which the school is situated on a daily wage @IRs 125 (fixed rate through out the state) per each working day. They were not eligible for any other allowances. This practice has undergone a change. In 2002, temporary teachers were appointed by a committee consisting of the Head Master, First Senior Assistant and the Standing Committee Chairman for Education, of the Village Panchayat. The incumbent is paid a daily wage @IRs 150 per each working day. In effect, in most cases the selection is done by the concerned Head Master.</p>
Education Financing	<p>The bulk of primary education services including the salary of government and aided school teachers are publicly provided by the state government. In the case of certain projects such as DPEP, and the recently implemented SSA programme, the Central government also do the financing. Some amount from the personal funds of Members of Parliament and Members of Legislative Assembly belonging to the constituencies in the two districts also are diverted for educational activities. Since the implementation of PCDP in 1996, 35 to 40 per cent of the budgetary allocation of state fund is devolved to the LSGIs to plan and implement localized projects. However, in both the case districts, the amount earmarked for the primary education sector projects in majority of the sample LSGIs throughout the financial years 1997-98 to 2001-2002 was less compared to other sectors. The verification of official documents such as project reports, draft project reports and General Norms (GN) forms for different financial years beginning with 1997-98 to 2001-2002 provided the clue that few of the intended educational projects in different panchayats were implemented as planned. Many of those projects were carried out as 'spill over' projects and included in the consecutive plans prepared for the forthcoming financial year. This is mainly because, education sector as a whole (including pre-primary to higher secondary sectors) was included in the service sector. The LSGIs were only allowed to spend 30 percent of the devolved funds in the service sector, which included sub sectors related to drinking water, health and culture along with education.</p>
Construction and Maintenance	<p>Responsibilities for construction and maintenance of educational institutions are laid with the state government and were carried out by the line departmental authorities at the district level. Communities and their representatives such as PTAs conduct routine maintenance through raising funds from the respective locality mainly through charity contributions. They also get assistance from Central Government Schemes or MP/MLA funds. However, majority of the LSGIs in both districts included various projects related to maintenance and construction work related to school buildings, furniture, compound walls, toilets, cooking sheds etc. LSGIs projects were mainly carried over through community participation and free labor services. However, construction works such as building of new schools and BRCs, as well as maintenance works (as part of school modification projects) were carried out in Kasaragod district under the auspicious of DPEP programme.</p>

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On a close analysis of various official documents along with informal discussions and formal interviews with various individuals and personnel who were part of the programme revealed the fact that the so called policy makers and implementers were not aware of the locally specific realities and possibilities. This is because the decentralized planning campaign itself was introduced in rather a 'project' mode with time and procedural bound formalities. The participants of the Gramasabhas (Village Assemblies) were mostly locally active politicians and their allies who were eventually put into different committees or forums related to different development sectors. For instance, in the education sector, a stakeholder based representation (excluding student community) was not found in any of the panchayats. Almost 90 percent of the educational projects were related to School noon-feeding programmes, scholarships and uniform distribution, teaching learning aids production and distribution, awareness camps for teachers and parents and projects related to construction of toilets or cooking sheds, repair works, providing drinking water facilities. (The actual number of proposed educational projects in a Village Panchayat can not be provided here because, most of them put the general title 'comprehensive education programme' which can intend any one or a number of projects as identified by the SPB and put in their handbook.) They were replicating in nature and overlapped with parallel education projects implemented by the General Education Department (e.g., The Quality Improvement Programme), State council for Educational Research and Training and District Institute of Education and Training (e.g., various training programmes for teachers at the Lower Primary level). Many other projects were complementary to those which were projects implemented or funded by the District Panchayat and Block Panchayats (e.g., especially noon-feeding programmes).

An Analysis from the Perspectives of EDD

The notions and concepts of EDD as mentioned earlier in this paper, gather momentum from the fundamental assumptions that representative democracy and techno-bureaucratic administration lack the required potential in addressing the challenges of just and equitable development. If these assumptions are taken for granted there is no meaning in further discussion of the decentralization experiments carried

out in a place like Kerala, where representative democracy as well as techno-bureaucratic administration prevails even at the LSGIs level.

It would be nice to initiate arguments on the premise of the recognition that democracy is a universally relevant system. Worthy of noting in the case of Kerala (as elsewhere) is that democracy is not a mechanical condition, but rather a demanding system. Political and social participation as well as public discussion regardless of the volatile political situation with constellations of political forces with contradictory political perspectives are high in this top literate state compared to other states in India.

Even with these favorable circumstances, the educational projects carried out in Kannur and Kasaragod districts, as elsewhere in other parts of the state, as a part of PCDP proved to be inconsistent with the tenets of EDD. The notion of 'empowerment' highlights the importance of ordinary people's voices which are directly related with the problems and decision making. It also claims corresponding governmental actions in this regard. But many of the educational projects remained unapproved by the District level Planning Committees. One of the reasons for this can be disinterest shown by the local level authorities in pressing them. Another reason is that the decentralization process in practice was degraded as a process of fund utilization (35 to 40 percent of the budget allocation devolved to the PRIs) and the amount earmarked for the education sector, which was included in the service sector along with health, culture etc become meager when comparing with other sectors such as the productive sector which includes agriculture, animal husbandry, fisheries etc. Interestingly, noteworthy of the common attitude of the organizers (who were literally politicians) as well as the ordinary people (who are considered as the beneficiaries of the projects) were that building roads, bridges and some school buildings are the hall marks of development in a society.

In some Panchayats, the task force assigned to formulate educational projects did not even suggest a single project for the education sector. For example, in Udayagiri Panchayat of Kannur, during the year 1997-98 no proposals were submitted. This happened because the task force did not submit any proposals as such for education sector (Information provided during formal interview by Mr. V.S. Sunny who was a member of the Education Task Force of the Panchayat). Whereas in Alakode Panchayat, though they submitted certain educational projects during the financial years 1997-1998, 1998-1999, 1999-2000, and 2000-01, none of them were ratified by the higher authorities and were not implemented at all (Information provided during formal interview by Mr. A.R.

Prasad, a Key Resource person who was also a member of the Education Task Force in the Panchayat). Still the question of effort and energy put in the preparation of projects at least by a voluntary group is challenged within the system. This instance also points towards the credibility of the rationale of the whole decentralization programme through people's participation.

Empowered Deliberations: Does representation work well?

What actually happened during the first phase of the campaign, Grama Sabhas (Village Councils) in the assemblies of citizens? "Which have served as little more than 'boxing rings' where people seek to knock-out one another to get on to the list of potential beneficiaries for the latest government scheme" (Jain, 2001, p.2). According to the Kerala legislation, the Village Councils are limited to the voters in a ward. A typical Village Panchayat has 10 to 12 wards and the assembly of voters consists of 1,500 to 2,000 members. These voters are ordinary people, many of whom were not used to speaking in large meetings. They were even ignorant about the functions and powers of the Gramasabhas.

Thomas Isaac, as member-in-charge of Decentralization in the State Planning Board, one of the main protagonists and intellectual brains of the campaign at the State level, in his combined work with Franke, stated that, "The first statutory gramasabha convened during December 1995 and March 1996 seemed to confirm the general apprehension. In most places the gramasabhas were convened to fulfill the legal formality with barely the quorum of 50 members present. The general opinion has been that the preparations, publicity, organization and the discussions in the first round of gramasabhas were of poor quality." (Thomas Isaac & Franke, 2000, p. 81). Various other reports were also eloquent about the re-drafting of projects in various Panchayats (see e.g., Pereira, 1997), the lack of expertise in the bodies at higher levels such as Blocks and Districts which were constituted to examine the technical viability of the projects prepared by Village Panchayats (see e.g., Nazeer, 1997a, 1997b), the low-level participation of ordinary citizens and ritualistic nature of Gramasabhas (*Mathrubhumi* daily news paper, October 14, 2002).

Given such experiences, the possibility of very few 'ordinary citizens' representing and raising the problems of a considerable group (consisting a large variety of characteristics as regard to their livelihood, profession, communal status etc) belonging to a locality and its consequent effect is imaginable. It apparently makes the claims made in favor of 'participatory

planning and deliberation of ordinary people' by the proponents of the campaign as well as an important tenet of EDD, a paradox.

It was also alleged generally that most of the participants were either the LDF activists or party sympathizers. This situation was the result of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM) led LDF being elected to power in 1996. The CPM is a mass party having a strong cadre system functioning smoothly with a highly centralized leadership. Along with this they had strong support of trade unions as well as NGOs, most notably the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP)-the People's Science Movement. For example, according to Raina, (2002, p.115),"Under the PDP process in Kerala, initiated by the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP) and later adopted by the government for statewide implementation, each *panchayat* has made its own ninth five year plan". The KSSP which is allegedly a pro-leftist movement, played an active role within the SPB and at the grassroots level in implementing the campaign (Thomas Isaac & Heller, 2001). Though this argument can be criticized, panchayats like Kalliasseri in Kannur and Cheemeni in Kasaragod district and many others in the State have proven to be unique in their strong tradition of volunteerism and their near monopoly of power by the CPI(M) in local level decision making.

The participation and deliberation of ordinary people as claimed by the designers and campaigners thus proved to be the carrying out of political agendas as designed by the political leaders who controlled the government. Apart from the low rate of participation, the participants of the gramasabhas were asked to divide into small groups, (here, the author is not favouring large groups as a norm, but wanted to highlight the impracticability of minimum representation of the varied stake holders in education) each dealing with a particular development sector, and discussing the problems of that sector. This further limited the scope of participation and deliberation.

Local Control through disguised Centralization

The concept of local control as enunciated by the proponents of EDD is also not given proper consideration in PCDP and especially in educational projects. Instead of giving authority to the actors in the field of education, mainly to teachers and parents, the problems in the field of education are identified by the political representatives or political activists with vested interests who lack the conceptual and technical know-how regarding educational factors such as quality of education, evaluation techniques and so forth.

The second basic notion suggested in EDD, central control in order to remedy the impediments in local actions also is misconceived and practiced in an undesirable way in the PCDP. Instead of acting as facilitators to the lowest tier of LSGIs at panchayat level, the District Panchayat and the District Planning Committee impose great powers over them for the sake of formal approval of local level plans. Here again, political and partisan considerations and the bargaining capacity of local level administrators count a lot (almost the entire teaching community who responded to the questionnaire survey opined in line with this argument). The proposed monitoring of school level activities by popular committees at the local level could not function because of the protest raised by teachers who challenged the professional expertise of the local monitoring bodies.

More or less the activities of the different tiers of LSGIs at the district level are concentrated in an exercise of utilizing the allotted funds (35 to 40 percent of all developmental expenditures directly allocated to them) within the stipulated time. All these activities are carried out in the same old manner of techno-bureaucratic procedures by the line departments. In reality, the process of decentralized planning was alternated by introducing certain innovations evoking certain peripheral effects, but the decentralized situation in the districts made no substantial change in developmental activities and their planning and implementation carried out by the governments. The statement made by the State Revenue Minister Mr. K. M. Mani in the Kerala Assembly illustrates this idea clearly. His statement reads as: "The rural Panchayats have got the power to select projects. But the power to allocate funds for them still exists with the State Government (*Mathrubhumi* daily news paper, November 29, 2001).

In the case of PCDP, the proponents and protagonists succeeded to create an illusionary current of peripheral waves of innovations which forced at least a majority of the population (mainly LDF followers) to blindly submit to the ready made agendas of their political bosses (see e.g., Radhakrishnan, 1997). This was possible to the political elites because they were able to (mis)use the governmental machineries with the help of a group of committed and ideologically driven human resources (both at political and administrative levels), with a dedicated group of cadres at the field level, governmental financial support and propaganda. The lack of a creative and critical opposition and the passive interest shown towards such "political gimmicks" by the majority of the public were other supportive factors to the "radical reformists". These innovations were much more isolated attempts at changing or improving some particular

component of the education system without affecting its entirety or either the entire development sectors.

Instead of empowered deliberative democracy, what exists in Kerala is a State-sponsored, 'structural democracy' where good governance is equated with the mere existence of political parties (oligarchical, conservative, communal, and radical or programmatic ones which are polarized for the sake of ideologies and political agendas, but competent enough to manipulate insidiously the ordinary citizens), administration (line-departments with techno-bureaucratic nature), voting (universal adult franchise), reservations (for women, minorities, and Scheduled Castes / Scheduled Tribes) and representatives (political). It appears to be a paradox that 'development' can be carried out through decentralized political or administrative structures. Decentralized participation is equated to the political bargains made by political representatives in forums such as Grama Sabhas at the LSGIs and State Legislature at the State level in Kerala. The problems related to micro level project management in that attempts at reforming the political and administrative institutions to make it more participatory were not properly addressed by the designers of PCDP. This appears to be the political elites' ignorance of the fact as observed by White (1996, p. 6) that "sharing through participation does not necessarily mean sharing power".

Conclusion

The tenets of Empowered Deliberative Democracy, as the PCDP proponents claim, revolve around the themes of ordinary citizens exercising their voice over important decisions affecting them and legitimate central control. In the wake of educational experiments carried out in Kannur and Kasaragod districts in Kerala state, the findings were supportive to substantiate the assumption that it was not the active voice of ordinary people that is heard or rather not the actual voice of actual stakeholders heard in the field of education as against the claims made by the decentralization campaign proponents and organizers. The decentralization programme can not bring any fundamental changes in the existing system but rather it was carried out as an alternative institutional arrangement for implementing governmental programmes.

However, the active voice of ordinary people was not exercised over important decisions affecting them in Kerala. Nevertheless, they were driven by the illusions created by the system and its external 'experts'. Instead of the system thinking for the people, and the external experts convincing them with ready made agendas and developmental programmes,

each individual should be offered a real space to think, question and act for common purposes. (However, in real situations this idea can be argued as utopian or impracticable because the degree of interest shown by individuals may vary and some of them may not show any interest at all. In such circumstances, it can be made applicable to the major frontline stakeholders who are supposed to function based on certain enforced norms in regard to their stake and showing a collaborative willingness in achieving the desired objectives) In such circumstances, only ideals intended with attractive sounding objectives become alive, let alone the ideal of decentralized control. Nevertheless, ideals are always ideals. Pseudo changes or reforms grab them for the sake of rationalization. The fundamental question before us is whether we have to believe the mask as the real face or the real face behind the mask itself?

This study with the reviews of ongoing decentralized practice in the field of primary education in Kerala provides insights related to the need for the redefinition of the process of initiating and sustaining educational changes. If new changes are to be iterative and have to involve participatory processes, they still require an in depth understanding and interpretation of internal and external environments or the context of each Village Panchayat. Additionally, at the political level, the policy makers and implementers need to link the existing and potential of this context to define the opportunities and limitations of that particular locality in relation with the general objectives of primary education as envisaged by the state and central governments. This in the long term also helps to integrate local level educational changes into the behavior of the larger systems such as the state and national systems. The policy designers at the local level, have to think further about altering the local environment to enable the different categories of stakeholders including teachers, administrators, students and community members to achieve the general objectives of primary education. The harmonization between different stakeholders should be maintained through constant constructive criticism, evaluation, analysis and feedback from each locality.

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