

# INDIA



## *Carrying on Gandhi's legacy*

### **Political structure**

Federal republic, with 29 states and six union territories. The Head of state is the president, indirectly elected for a five-year term by members of the central and state assemblies. The prime minister presides over a Council of Ministers chosen from elected members of parliament. The national legislature is bicameral. The Rajya Sabha (the upper house) has 245 members—233 elected by weighted votes of the elected members of parliament and the legislative assemblies of states and union territories, and 12 appointed by the president. The Lok Sabha (the lower house) has 545 members—543 elected from single-member constituencies (79 seats are reserved for scheduled castes, and 40 for scheduled tribes) and two representatives of Anglo-Indians appointed by the president. State legislatures are unicameral or bicameral, with elected members; state governors are appointed by the president.

### **Local government system**

There are two types of local government: urban local government and rural local government. Until recently, the urban local government took the form of Municipal Corporations, Municipal Councils, Town Area Committees and Notified Area Committees. However, the Seventy-Fourth Constitution Amendment Act (74<sup>th</sup> CAA) adopted in 1992 proposed to form a uniform structure of Municipal Corporations, Municipal Councils and Nagar Panchayats (City Local Government) in transitional areas. Rural local government would operate through panchayats (local government units) at the district, town and village levels.

Traditionally, local governments served primarily as instruments of political education. In fact, prior to the 74<sup>th</sup> CAA, the Indian Constitution did not confer any independent status or powers to local government bodies.

The 74<sup>th</sup> CAA envisages enabling people to participate in development processes at ward, municipal, district and metropolitan regional levels. However, such reform is in no way self-executory. The individual States need to flesh it out in the form of Municipal Acts.

For instance, the CAA does not grant any powers directly to the municipalities but has left this matter to the discretion of the state governments. Some of these functions are highly technical in nature and are likely to render municipal bodies ineffective. The CAA contains a provision regarding the devolution of powers and responsibilities. However, the devolution of powers commensurate with such responsibilities is left to the discretion of the concerned state government.

In effect, local governments are required to provide for services irrespective of their administrative capacity to do so and have to face unexpected new terms of their own as a consequence of new sets of standards.

The reforms required by urban local bodies are multifaceted, encompassing political, social, administrative, financial and technological dimensions. The CAA provides the structure and mandate of municipal bodies to enable them to function as effective democratic institutions of local self-government. However, their constitutional status alone is not sufficient to make the municipal bodies vibrant and effective institutions of democracy. Expectations are high that the CAA will refurbish the whole system of local self-government by implanting a new structure of municipal authorities with additional devolution of functions, planning responsibilities, new system of fiscal transfers and empowerment of women and weaker sections of the society.



### Local participation

Traditionally it is the responsibility of elected councilors to bring about public participation in the decision-making process. However, direct public participation is difficult to achieve due to various reasons, such as time available to the council and the large number of people living in cities and towns. In general, people contribute



and participate through media such as letters in newspapers, posters and books.

The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendments to the Constitution of India envisage self-governing units at the local level. However, experience has shown state governments to be miserly in devolving powers and resources to local bodies. Thus, democratic decentralization or democratic local governance remains an elusive ideal despite the recent constitutional changes. It was in this context that a unique experiment in extending and strengthening grassroots level democracy and empowering the local bodies was initiated in the State of Kerala.

## Participatory development in Kerala



### Distinctive features of the decentralization experiment in Kerala

1. Kerala decided to earmark 35 to 40% of the 9<sup>th</sup> Plan outlay of the state for projects proposed by local bodies.
2. The state government gave maximum authority to the local bodies in drawing up the development programs. This is unprecedented in India.
3. Each local body prepared a comprehensive area plan before claiming grant-in-aid. The plan outlay was not merely intended to claim grant-in-aid, but was to be integrated with different state and centrally sponsored schemes and projects that were to be implemented using the revenue surplus of local bodies or other resources that could be mobilized, such as volunteer work, donations,

loans from financial institutions, contributions from beneficiaries, etc.

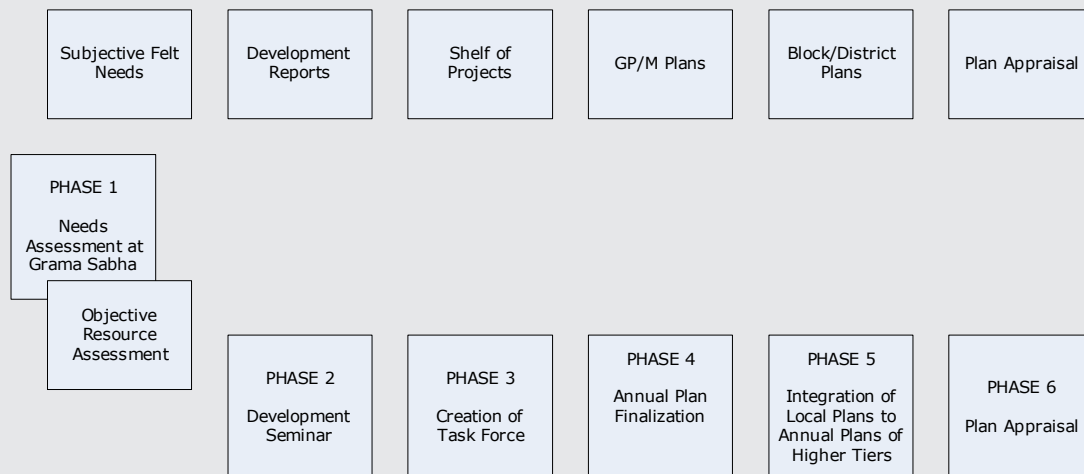
4. The state government has given strong support for administrative recognition and statutory changes in order to institutionalize the local level planning and plan implementation. The recommendations of the committee headed by S. B. Sen regarding necessary changes to existing laws and statutes, re-deployment of employees and related administrative recognition have been accepted by the government.
5. The institutional changes for successful devolution, such as training of personnel and creation of a local data base, etc., will require a few years to become fully operational. Campaigns for decentralized planning were launched to rally elected local bodies, officials, experts, volunteers and the common people, so that the impediments to local level planning could be overcome. The campaign is also expected to generate enough political will to institutionalize these new values generated by the movement. In short, the preconditions for successful decentralization were to be created in the very process of decentralization.

The People's Campaign for Decentralized Planning was formally inaugurated on August 17, 1996. The campaign was organized in a phased manner. The planning process itself consisted of six stages extending over a year followed by the plan implementation which extended to June, 1998. Figure 1 on the next page provides a graphical presentation of the sequence of various events and the objectives at different phases of the campaign.

### Phase 1

#### Needs assessment at the Village Association

The first step in drawing up a local development plan was to identify the felt needs of the people. Local development problems were identified by the people in each locality through the Grama Sabha (translated roughly as "Village Association") in the rural areas and through Ward Associations in urban areas. The Village and Ward Associations comprise all the voters in an electoral precinct.



Discussions in the Village Association were conducted in groups, according to development sector. In addition to such sectoral groupings, groups for SC/ST and women development were also formed. The organization of group discussions made it possible for a maximum number of people to participate in the deliberations.

Some 100,000 resource persons at the local level were trained to act as facilitators for the discussion groups. People were encouraged not to limit themselves to listing developmental problems but to search for their causes and remedies, drawing from their life experiences. Publicity for the discussions was generated through the use of print media or visual media, as well as community media.

Nearly three million people participated in these meetings. One fifth of them were women. At least one representative each from a fourth to a third of all households in Kerala must have participated in the Village Associations. The success of the Village Associations created a general awareness among the people regarding the decentralization program.

## Phase 2

### Conduct of development seminars

After the needs assessment, the next step was to make an objective assessment of the natural and human resources in the locality.

#### 1. Collection of secondary data

No attempt was made to collect primary data because of the

time constraint. Instead, the relevant secondary data available in the various registers and records at the local level offices of different line departments were identified and collected in a common data format drawn up for the whole state.

#### 2. Study of the local geography and natural resources

A rapid appraisal of the natural resources was undertaken using the transect walk technique. Eco zones in each panchayat were identified by first demarcating the area into various zones on the basis of land reforms and then identifying the soil, water and vegetarian characteristics of each zone. An environmental appraisal of each zone was also attempted in many panchayats.

#### 3. Review of ongoing schemes

Each department prepared a sectoral report on the ongoing schemes and made them available to the local bodies.

#### 4. Survey of local history

A short local history was prepared by every local body mostly drawing from oral testimonies and local records. The use of participatory techniques such as history time line was also encouraged.

#### 5. Consolidation of Village Association Reports

Reports of discussions in the Village Associations, including the list of problems identified, were consolidated for each development sector in a local body. The outcome of the above exercise was a 75 to 100-page development report

for each local body. Majority of the reports were of high quality. They also highlighted the importance of popular heritage and tradition in meeting contemporary development challenges at the local level. In each report, a chapter was devoted entirely to analyzing the natural and human resources of the locality. Another 12 chapters covered the various development sectors. The current charter of each sector was discussed and reviewed, including its ongoing schemes, problems, and suggested solutions. The analysis of the agriculture and education sectors proved to be the most comprehensive.

Development seminars were thereafter organized in each local body to discuss the above report. An estimated 300,000 people consisting of representatives from the Village Associations, elected representatives, local leaders of political parties, line department officials, local experts, volunteers, youth, trade union members, students, etc., participated in the development seminar. Discussions in the development seminars were also organized in small subject wise groups. The development seminar proved to be the high mark of the Campaign.

### **Phase 3**

#### **Creation of task forces**

Around 12 task forces corresponding to the different development sectors were constituted in each local body. As many as 12,000 task forces, composed of at least 120,000 persons all in all, were trained at the village level alone.

Each task force prepared as many as a hundred thousand projects for the consideration of local bodies. The task of project preparation demanded the participation of officials and a large number of technically qualified people. The chairperson of a task force was an elected representative. An officer from the concerned line department was made its convener. A simple and transparent format was proposed for the projects to be prepared by the task forces. For uniformity, it was suggested that the project reports should have the following components:

1. Introduction;
2. Objective;

3. Beneficiaries;
4. Activities;
5. Organization;
6. Financial Analysis;
7. Achievements;
8. Monitoring.

### **Phase 4**

#### **Annual plan finalization**

By the end of March 1997, the beginning of the financial year in the annual state budget plan, each local body received their allocation. The plan fund allocation is divided into a tribal sub-plan, a special component plan for Scheduled Castes and one for the general sector. Plan funds for each of these groups were divided between urban and rural local bodies on the basis of population. The plan allocation for each of the local bodies was separately indicated in the state budget with broad guidelines regarding sectoral allocations to be made by the local bodies.

By the time the grant-in-aid for local bodies was announced, most of them had prepared a shelf of projects corresponding to the development problems identified by the people. This set the stage for the fourth phase, where the projects prepared by the task forces were prioritized and incorporated in the plan document of the panchayat and the municipalities. The plan document comprised eight chapters, as follows:

1. Introduction;
2. Development strategy;
3. Resource mobilization;
4. Sectoral programmes;
5. Integrated development;
6. Welfare of scheduled caste and scheduled tribes;
7. Women development programs;
8. Plan monitoring.

### **Phase 5**

#### **Integration of local plans to annual plans of higher tiers**

Block and District Governments are supposed to start preparing their annual plans only after the Village Governments had drafted theirs. This sequential planning process is supposed to ensure that the plans of the various tiers were integrated

and that the plans of the higher tiers did not duplicate, but complement those of the lower tiers. A simple method of integrating the analysis and programs of the Village Government at the block and district levels was also proposed.

Every Block Government has to prepare a printed development report incorporating the problems identified in the development reports of the Village Governments within the block area. Each District Government would also prepare a development report integrating the analysis and programs of lower tiers. The Block and District Governments were to take up projects to fill the gaps in or to complement the activities of the lower tier.

Emphasis was laid on integrating the different centrally sponsored alleviation programs being implemented through the community development blocks with the Block Government plans. There was strong resistance to this move from both the bureaucracy and elected representatives. This resistance was due to genuine problems arising from existing separate guidelines for centrally sponsored programs. As a result, there were many instances of planned activities conflicting with centrally sponsored programs as well as critical gaps between the various tiers.

## **Phase 6**

### **Plan appraisal**

A sample review of the projects prepared by the local bodies revealed that a significant proportion had to be modified to ensure their technical soundness and viability before they were approved for implementation. Realizing that District Planning Committees (the constitutional body for approving the plans of local self governments) did not have the technical manpower or infrastructure to undertake a proper scrutiny of the projects, a major revision in the original program of the campaign was done. A new (sixth) phase was added for the technical and financial appraisal of the projects and plans.

This appraisal was intended not to select or reject projects, but to rectify the technical and financial weaknesses of the project proposals, e.g., preparation of technical specifications and designs. The entire work had to be undertaken within

three to four months. Retired technical experts and professionals were encouraged to work as volunteers to appraise the projects and plans of local bodies. Hence, a Voluntary Technical Corps (VTC) emerged. Members of the VTC were qualified and experienced hands. Such volunteers committed to spend at least one day a week giving technical assistance to the panchayat. Special orientation courses were organized for these volunteers. More than 40,000 technical experts were enrolled in the VTC.

Expert committees were formed at other levels of local bodies, drawing from VTC members and certain categories of mandatory officers. Each expert committee had a non-official as its chairperson and an official as convenor. The expert committee functioned through subject committees with membership confined to those who have expertise in the particular field. The expert committee was also given the power of approval of technical sanctions within certain limits. They were also given a role in plan implementation, such as approval of revised estimates, settling disputes in measurement, inspection of all works and verification and approval of performance/completion, etc.

District Level Expert Committees (DLECs) consisted of senior officials and non-official experts, with a collector as chairperson. It is an advisory body to the District Planning Committee (DPC) in appraising the projects and plan documents of Block and District Governments. It also enjoys a wide range of powers in the approval of technical sanction, tenders excesses, revised estimates, disputes in measurements, etc.

### **Training empowerment program**

The experience of the People's Campaign has underlined the vital importance of detailed preparation and training in ensuring the success of local level planning. Seven rounds of training at the state level, four rounds at the district and block level and two rounds at the municipal level had to be organized. The training/empowerment program of the people's campaign is unprecedented in terms of the scale of participation as well as in the diversity of topics covered within a short period.

The number and composition of participants varied from one round to the next. The participants in the training programme can be divided into four groups:

- (1) Elected members;
- (2) Officials;
- (3) Resource Persons;
- (4) Non official experts.

Every round of training started with a discussion of the philosophy of decentralization in general and participatory planning in particular, in the context of the development crisis in Kerala. Rules and statutes were discussed in the first and subsequent rounds. Sectoral development perspectives were given special attention in the second and third rounds. Problems of SC/ST development and gender concerns were a constant theme in every round.

In general, the training program focused on self study by participants. A basic handbook was prepared at every round with the help of experts and officials. Besides, as part of the second and third rounds, 12 simple monographs on sectoral development perspectives were also prepared. A comprehensive list of all the ongoing development programs in the state that may be relevant to decentralized planning was also printed and distributed. Besides these, video presentations, lectures, clarifications, discussion sections, group discussions, presentations on rules and statutes, study presentations, experience sharing, etc., were organized as part of the training empowerment program.

### **Brief review of people's planning**

The most remarkable feature of the people's planning was the conscious attempt to mobilize additional resources. The total grant-in-aid to the local bodies was increased. It integrated state and centrally sponsored schemes with local plans. The mass participation of the local people and their experience were reflected in the projects of the local bodies. People got the opportunity to identify their own problems and those problems were solved step-by-step.

### **Implementation of the plan**

The utilization of plan funds and other resources in the people's planning campaign has reversed the normal sequence

for devolution. The campaign envisaged devolving the resources and powers first and then clearing the obstacles to implementation as they arose. It was expected that the mass of people mobilized in the planning campaign would generate pressure from below and thus clear the obstacles. This being the logic of the campaign, it was only inevitable that numerous problems cropped up during implementation.

The financial procedures for the flow of funds to the local bodies and their utilization were designed so that the flow of grant-in-aid funds in general and their utilization by project could be systematically monitored and thereby minimize if not eliminate the chances of funds diversion and misuse. They were also meant to ensure that the plan fund would not get accumulated in suspense accounts indefinitely. The transfer of officers to the Grama Panchayat was intended to integrate such officers into the panchayat system so that they could be made accountable to the panchayat.

A series of steps was taken to create a new environment in which a genuine beneficiary committee could effectively function. The old procedure was that technical sanctions were issued by the department officials on the basis of their delegated powers. Under the new procedures adopted for the plans of the local bodies, the technical sanctioning process was made a function of the block level and district level expert committees. After getting these technical sanctions, the public works were done by the beneficiary committees. Next, steps were taken to do away with the irregularities and unhealthy practices of the beneficiary committees.

Effective monitoring systems were implemented. Effective monitoring helped to control corruption and financial irregularities in some of the local bodies.

### **Democracy, Local Level Participatory Planning and the Development Process**

Kerala has approached decentralization as a process of extending and deepening the system of political democracy. The extension of parliamentary democracy from central and state levels to the district and lower levels would open up possibilities for more direct participation by the masses in day-to-day governance. Such grassroots level democracy is favorable to mobilizing and defending the interests of the ex-

exploited and weaker sections of society.

The people's planning program in Kerala has been very successful. The systematic evaluation and monitoring of the processes have helped to institutionalize the campaign. Practical, not theoretical, solutions have been proposed for the issues raised. Kerala's 10-year experiment with decentralization is a landmark in the annals of Kerala's history as well as in India's history of participatory planning and good governance.

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