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Of New Popular Politics of Development: The Kerala Experience

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Among the dilemmas faced by India (and many other developing countries besides), there are three on which I want to focus in this essay.

The first is how to cope with the problems generated by the virtually inescapable attempts of such leaders as Jawaharlal Nehru to free the country from the deleterious effects of colonialism by means of central planning and a powerful nation-state structure. How can both more democracy and more popular participation be promoted under present conditions?

The second dilemma is the following: what can be done about the fact that the majority of Indians are being marginalised still further as national economic policy is adjusted to an expansive global capitalism? The demands for structural adjustment are not as severe as in crisis-stricken East Asia, but the tendencies are the same. How, then, will it be possible to sustain and to renew India's classical ideal of combining sustainable economic growth with socio-economic equalisation?

The third problem is how to ensure that ordinary people can influence emerging questions of this sort when the established parties and mass organisations that are comparatively progressive are (a) characterised by the earlier struggle against colonialism and "feudal" landlords, (b) undermined by boss-rule, commercialism and populism, and (c) threatened by leaders exploiting religious and national chauvinism. How, under such circumstances, can new questions and ways of mobilising be placed on the agenda without undermining the real progress which, despite everything, has been achieved?

The most popular answer nowadays to these questions, both in India and elsewhere, is that the solution lies in more civil society, and in less but "better" politics. Achieving this is thought to require, on the one hand, privatisation, deregulation and

decentralisation; and, on the other, a strengthening of the "core" functions of the state, together with greater support for free media and voluntary organisations.¹

The two questions we shall discuss here is whether these prescriptions are appropriate, and whether there is any alternative. Ideally, this would mean studying a so-called critical case – a case where the problems in question are present; where attempts have been made to apply the prescriptions mentioned; where there are signs of said prescriptions not always having worked; and where efforts have even been undertaken to develop alternatives. But such ideal objects of study do not, of course, exist in reality.

However, the densely populated state of Kerala along the south-western coast of India has uncommonly much to offer. With its strong civil society, its land reform, its extensive educational system, and its high level of social welfare, Kerala and its soon-to-be 30 million inhabitants certainly diverge from the rest of India. To be sure, lessons drawn from "the land of coconuts" cannot be directly applied elsewhere in the federation. Yet, many of India's problems are found in Kerala too. Moreover, some of the popular prescriptions have already been tested in that state, and under relatively advantageous conditions. So if such methods lead to problems in Kerala, then, the results are likely to be still worse elsewhere. And by studying the new alternatives that have started to emerge, we may even be able to move from criticism to constructive insight.² So let us look more closely at what it is that makes Kerala so interesting.

To begin with, Kerala is not just uncommonly beautiful; it also has one of the Third World's strongest civil societies. The fragmentation of its civil society of course bears discussing – the fact, for example, that almost watertight boundaries often separate the different arenas and associations. (Indeed, we shall take up this question later on.) Yet public debate is lively, the free media are many, and the majority of citizens are both literate and voluntarily organised in a multitude of organisations. Among the

¹ For an authoritative, current and "global" pronouncement on this question, see World Bank 1997.

² This presentation is based chiefly on my own studies (which began in the early 1980s) of Kerala's development efforts in a comparative perspective. See Törnquist (1989), (1991a), (1991b), (1995) and (1996) and footnote 4! The theoretical and operational framework is found in Törnquist (1998) or (1999). For a broader introduction, I would recommend Ramachandran (1996), Franke and Chasin (1989) and George (1993). See also Isaac, Franke and Parameswaran (1997), Tharmangalam (1998), Franke, Chasin, Parayil et. al. (1998)

latter we find a wide range: socio-religious associations, educational bodies, development organisations, environmental groups, women's organisations. This is nothing new. This strong civil society has its roots in popularly based demands since the latter half of the nineteenth century in the two British-dominated principalities of Travancore and Cochin, in the south of what today is Kerala. The demands in question were for greater equality in religious and social life, for the right of all to seek public employment, for fairer economic legislation, and for state support for the improvement of health care and education. A sort of embryo, in other words, of a bourgeois revolution. A bourgeois revolution which was, however, inhibited by colonialism.

In addition, there are the political parties, the trade unions and the co-operatives (which many scholars would claim, however, are part of the political and economic spheres rather than of the civil sphere). This organisational life is nothing new either; it is the result, rather, of a bifurcated process of politicisation during the first half of the 1900s. On the one hand, the civic organisations were rooted in the socio-religious and often caste-related associations of civil society. On the other hand, the political and economic groups were affected by increasingly important class interests as well – for example, among landowners, tenants and agricultural labourers. While civil society was strongest in the south of what today is Kerala (in the comparatively autonomous and enlightened principalities), the strongest class-based organisations emerged in the more feudal north – in Malabar, which was governed by the British via Madras.

Secondly, Kerala has also – alongside these strong popular organisations – state agencies and organs of considerable prominence. The historical pattern has been that political groups, civic associations and economic interest organisations have demanded state regulations and programs (within the business and health sectors, for example), as well as state support to such institutions as private schools and credit co-operatives. (And after democracy's breakthrough, of course, political parties have competed to represent voters in the parliament and government of the state.) However, a rapid restructuring of the export-led, raw materials-based economy has not been among the results. And now the economy is in crisis. Even so, popular organisations and the state in Kerala have established India's most extensive programs for education, health care, and the distribution of inexpensive basic goods. Even so, radical parties and interest organisations have pushed through India's most consistent land reform. Even so, in short, Kerala has stood out for several decades as

a benign exception which showed, many thought, that it was possible to pursue a humane path to development without needing first to prioritise a rapid and socially brutal economic growth. Apart from the weak economic performance, one could speak of a sort of Scandinavia of the Third World.

Thirdly, these achievements have contributed – unaccompanied as they are by economic modernisation – to the emergence of new problems. To begin with, social and economic benefits have seldom been tied to economic growth (in the form, for example, of alliances between trade unions and modernisation-oriented entrepreneurs). The economy still bears a colonial stamp. The production of raw materials for export predominates, but is less profitable than it had been; agriculture of the "usual" kind is stagnating; industry remains small and weak; the only branch that is growing is the commercial and service sector, which of course includes the import of consumer goods. In addition, demands from below for measures from above have helped to produce unwieldy, expensive, centralised and badly co-ordinated state organs. The bosses and employees of said organs, moreover, have developed their own special interests. The different groupings in civil society, finally, have left their stamp on the parties and on political life in general, as have a range of trade unions and co-operatives.

In this way, then, Kerala has developed a system of politically organised special interests. This system has provided subventions to various groups, but it has also undermined common efforts at economic development. In brief, the successful work of distributing the pie to as many persons as possible has been done in such a way, and with such specific interests in the foreground, that it has become difficult to make the pie grow at the same time.

Since the mid-1970s at least, much of production has tended to stagnate, both in industry and in agriculture. Since 1996, moreover, the price of the only product that is really expanding – rubber – has fallen by half. The unemployment statistics, furthermore, have risen catastrophically, and are now usually estimated at a fifth of the labour force. Moreover, the state authorities are receiving too little in the way of taxes to defray the costs of the far-reaching welfare system, which is accordingly in disrepair. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that the state authorities are subordinate to New Delhi in tax questions. In addition, Kerala benefits only to a limited extent from all the monies repatriated by migrant workers who hail from the

state. Finally, the state's ability to protect and reform exposed sectors has diminished on account of the more liberal economic policy pursued by India in recent years.

Were one inclined to put the point harshly, one could say that, while public consumption is being reduced – as is the ability to make strategic productive investments and to improve quality within the public sector – the comparatively high level of private consumption (including the ever larger private sector in health care and education) is being maintained by the labours of young Keralites who toil under miserable conditions in the Gulf states and elsewhere in India, and who send home a portion of what they earn. (Young Keralites, that is, whose parents struggled for decent conditions in Kerala.) These monies are reckoned to account for between ten and thirty percent of Kerala's gross yearly product. But just as former tenants have turned petty bourgeois and seldom work together with others to produce more on the lands they obtained through the land reform, the incomes earned by migrants are individual in nature, and are often spent unproductively. Cynicism, furthermore, is spreading, as evidenced by widespread comments to the effect that "The economy is deteriorating and there's nothing one can do about it. Because the market decides, and politicians serve their own interests. So let him save himself who can."

Fourthly, there have also been very impressive efforts since the late 1980s to come to terms with many of these problems – efforts building on renewed popular initiatives stemming in part from civil society, and in part from political groupings and state agencies on both central and local levels.

It is on these attempts that I shall concentrate in the remainder of this essay. What is the purpose of these campaigns? Does the work on them indicate that activists have found a way to handle the many problems on which we have touched, and with which India in general and Kerala in particular are confronted? What do their experiences tell us about the widely accepted prescriptions to promote more civil society and less but "better" politics?

The analysis which follows takes up two different matters: to begin with, the first generation of campaigns, which took place under the government of the left-centre front between 1987-1991; and subsequently, the impressive attempts beginning around 1994 to undertake renewed efforts. The first period is covered in my research with P.K. Michael Tharakan.³ The study of the second period is not yet concluded. Here I must rely on my (not yet fully analysed) interview materials, on running press

³ See Törnquist (1995).

coverage, on certain key documents, and on my own and other's preliminary observations.⁴

Impressive Campaigns without a Sufficient Social and Political Base

The most important driving force in the work of reform was (and is) the *Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishat* (KSSP), the "People's Science Movement" of Kerala, winner of the 1996 alternative Nobel Prize. The KSSP began as a rather narrow educational organisation aimed at spreading rational thinking and scientific methods to "the people." In the 1970s, however, the association was broadened and changed. Tens of thousands of activists opposed, in the name of environmentalism and alternative development, a large power plant in Silent Valley in northern Kerala. The work was then continued by students, youth, retired administrators and scientific experts. But the KSSP is not just a typical progressive and urban-based middle-class organisation. It also builds on the unusually strong educational ideals of the peasant and labour movements in Kerala. During the struggle for national liberation, for instance, three movements were everywhere formed: the political movement, the trade-union movement – and the library movement. Moreover, Kerala still contains no really large cities in which modern social life is concentrated. In the lowland countryside, as well as a good ways up into the mountains, semi-urbanised areas lie close up against one another, complete with both middle-class groups and organic intellectuals.

Like many other development-oriented volunteer organisations (NGOs) in India and elsewhere, the KSSP worked along two parallel tracks: firstly to scrutinise public development policies and sketch out alternatives – e.g., within health care and education; secondly to carry out pilot projects to show how people themselves could change their situation – e.g., by installing cheap stoves which reduce inside smoke

⁴ See, e.g., Isaac & Tharakan (1995), Isaac and Harilal (1997), Törnquist (1996), Franke and Chasin (1997), Bandyopadhyay (1997), Chekkutty (1997) and Isaac (1998). The press coverage mentioned includes that offered by *Frontline* first and foremost, as well as that provided by the local editions of *the Hindu* and *Indian Express* (I am grateful for Sabu Philip's help here), as well as that furnished by relevant local articles and papers. Further, I am grateful for continual discussions with Thomas Isaac between September 17 and 27, 1998. Finally, in addition to the tentative results from field studies in Kerala in 1996, I have also tried to include some results from a recent field trip, including visits and interviews (on the present people's planning campaign) in some 15 panchayats, in February 1999; (I am particularly grateful for Rajmohan's assistance here).

and require less fuel. Like other radical NGOs, finally, the KSSP took the view that an alternative path of development presupposes far-reaching social and economic change. In contrast to most like-minded groups in India, however, the KSSP did not turn against the previous generation of progressive political and trade-union organisations. Instead, the KSSP reasoned, alternative development work and traditional political commitment both can and should enrich each other.

Many KSSP members were accordingly active in political parties which typically, though not always, formed part of Kerala's left-centre front. This front is dominated by the largest reformist (and in practice social democratic) communist party, the CPI-M. At the same time, however, it is often the case that other parties within the front – including breakaways from the Congress Party – wield an influence out of proportion to their numbers. Their voters, after all, are strategically important in the hard fight to win majority elections in single-member districts.

Within the CPI-M, the ideas of the KSSP enjoyed the least support among those who called for a revitalised policy of centralised and state-led modernisation; this group included many trade unionists connected with industry and parts of the public sector. Others, however, were more favourably disposed, if for no other reason than that certain party leaders bore a grudge against the "trade-union fraction." This does not mean, however, that those two faction-like sides of the party each took a distinct view of development policy. In and around the party there are many conflict patterns, which coincide with each other only in part.⁵ On the specific question of development, I have distinguished instead between "state-modernisers" and "popular-developmentalists". These tendencies are found in many different groups – both within and outside the CPI-M.

Since the left won the first state elections in Kerala in 1957, it has on and off – sometimes divided, sometimes united – been able to wield governmental power. After many years in opposition, the left-centre front in 1987 again succeeded in winning an election and forming a government. This was mainly a result, most probably, of widespread dissatisfaction with rule by the right-centre front under the leadership of the Congress Party. In fact, after the work of land reform had been completed during the 1970s, the left had been unable to renew itself. The reform-oriented groups within

⁵ Rammohan's (1998) attempt to analyse conflicts within the CPI-M by using my results (among other materials) – but without taking the several different conflict patterns into account – is therefore misleading.

it, moreover, were in a clear minority. Yet, after lengthy discussions, these groups were anyway able to initiate three innovative campaigns. In these they were supported not so much by the dominant party (CPI-M) as by parts of the government, as well as by a series of volunteer organisations (with the KSSP as the leading force).

The first campaign consisted of a massive literacy drive. It may seem strange that the primary efforts of the most literate state in India were focused on eliciting the engagement of the comparatively small proportion of the population (c. 20%) who could not read or write. Firstly, however, human (rather than just economic) development requires that all be able to take part; secondly, it was politically important to try to emancipate many poor groups which had hitherto relied chiefly on religious patronage; and thirdly, a massive literacy drive, coupled with various follow-up activities, was an excellent way to mobilise the efforts of all those who had previously been attracted by the KSSP.

The pilot campaign was carried out in the district of Ernakulam (including the small but internationally better known city of Cochin). Enthusiasm was at a high level. Unlike most Indian NGOs, the KSSP did not focus its efforts (any longer) on a project of its own, but rather on a broad and massive collaboration among a large number of volunteer organisations and interested parts of the central and local administration. In this case, both the literacy commission in New Delhi and the district administration under the leadership of a previous chair of the KSSP was engaged. A great many activists and volunteers were mobilised. At first, 50,000 volunteers carried out an investigation of all 600,000 households in the district, whereupon 18,000 largely volunteer instructors made contact with those persons who could not read or write. The initial results were impressive. Already after a single year's work, Prime Minister V.P. Singh could in February 1990 proclaim Ernakulam to be the one completely literate district in India. The KSSP garnered appreciable international recognition (which by rights ought to have extended in part to the local administration as well). The popular-developmental forces in Kerala got wind in their sails. The campaign in Ernakulam was used as the model for a larger campaign in the state as a whole. It was applauded by the literacy agencies in New Delhi. And it inspired a multitude of groups in India as a whole.

But there were also significant problems. The air soon went out of the campaign. For one thing, the organisations had not prepared – though they knew better – any proper program for following up the campaign. For another, political parties and groups did

not show themselves to be especially interested in engaging a large number of new sympathisers from the very poorest groups. Finally, it proved even harder than anticipated to get cooperation between campaign-oriented volunteers and permanent public administrators to function well.

The second campaign sought to promote cooperation within agriculture – through "group farming." Notwithstanding India's most consistent land reform, production had not notably increased. A particular worry was the production of rice. The large number of small landowners seldom joined in collaborative efforts. Sometimes, in fact, they worked at cross purposes with each other, as seen in the transition from rice cultivation to coconut production, which made the irrigation of the remaining rice fields more difficult. In addition, centrally directed agencies that controlled vital components within agriculture also found it difficult to co-operate at the local level: some, for example, were responsible for irrigation pumps; others for the electricity required to run them. Furthermore, conflicts arose between small landowners and agricultural labourers. And finally, the countryside too was being affected in ever greater measure by the incomes of mobile migrant workers. In many cases, landowners and their families preferred to concentrate less on agriculture than on other activities which were more profitable in the short term, including land speculation on the outskirts of the many towns and urban areas. For a substantial portion of the rural population – including supporters of the left parties – property and speculation seemed to have become more important than work and production.

Earlier attempts at collective solutions had failed miserably. Nor could the left in Kerala follow the example of their comrades in West Bengal. In West Bengal, the formation of separate organisations for agricultural labourers had been prevented; in Kerala, such organisations already existed. In West Bengal, tenants and small farmers had not been furnished with more land, but rather with political protection; in Kerala, by contrast, the land had already been redistributed. In West Bengal, the policy had been tied to the decentralisation of administration and development efforts on the one hand, and continued central political control on the other; in Kerala, the odd combine of Indira Gandhi's Congress Party and the rather small pro-Moscow Communist Party of India (CPI) that were in power when the land reform was implemented never dared to undertake decentralisation. (They would in that case have lost power to that section of the left led by the CPI-M, which was much stronger on the local level.) All of the factions then turned their efforts to conquering and keeping the power which had been concentrated in the central organs of the state government.

Yet something still had to be done in Kerala. The strategy that emerged was to promote volunteer cooperation among cultivators – or "group farming." First, an uncommonly dynamic minister of agriculture saw to it that the operations of his ministry were delegated to its local units, and that most of the support it disbursed went to the co-operating farmers. Second, certain experts sought, together with local interest and volunteer organisations, to mobilise popular support and participation.

The campaign won broad support, including within the left-centre front and the government. It also produced results in the form of higher rice production and reduced tensions between landowners and agricultural labourers. Soon, however, a series of new problems came to the fore. The active collaboration of the agriculture ministry was important, but its delegation of tasks to local units of the ministry itself also conserved the old top-down approach, and it did not provide a good way to solve the lack of cooperation between different centrally directed agencies at the local level. The rise in production, moreover, was at least as much due to subsidies and a heavier use of pesticides than to cooperation among farmers. Landowners often seemed more interested in obtaining external support than in co-operating with one another. And just as in the case of the literacy campaign, political parties and groups were not very interested in truly committing themselves to development work and to this way trying to win new sympathisers.

In order to remedy the problems arising in connection with the lack of follow-up in the literacy campaign, as well as in connection with the inadequate grassroots work in support of co-operative cultivation, a third campaign was launched – "resource mapping." Anyone who has visited the central office of a local government in Scandinavia, for instance, knows that all development work carried out there is based on a far-reaching mapping of local resources and the manner in which these are used. This is lacking, wholly or in part, in India and in Kerala. The deficiency in question could quickly be remedied, certainly, with the help of modern methods of measurement, including the use of satellites. But the purpose of the campaign in Kerala was not just to create maps; it was also to ensure that people would be able to use them! The mapping of resources, it was hoped, would promote local consciousness of existing resources, and discussion about how these could be put to better use. Some able and committed geographers, accordingly, sketched out a program whereby they themselves would attend to the advanced aspects of the mapping, while volunteer groups would gather a large portion of the information.

Afterwards, then, the whole lot of them would be able to discuss different development initiatives together with local politicians, experts and interested parties.

The resource-mapping program got under way too late, however, to benefit from the enthusiasm which had been built up during the literacy drive. Aside from the activists of the KSSP, it was for the most part devoted youth who took part. Once again, neither local administrators nor political groups showed any great interest. It now became clear, moreover, that successful local alternative development required that local governments (*panchayats*) already possess some resources, and a measure of decision-making power as well.

The lack of any significant measure of local self-rule proved, in fact, to be a fundamental obstacle to all of the new popular initiatives. The problem, however, was that decentralisation in its turn required that parties and politicians make the "right" political decision. With a few exceptions – like the recently deceased communist patriarch E.M.S. Namboodiripad – there was no great interest in such circles for measures of this kind (any more than there is among bureaucrats in the present centralised administration). It was only the rhetoric that interested them.

Furthermore, activists who had engaged in alternative work outside the formal political system were without direct opportunities of their own for affecting the political process. Nor was it the simplest thing in the world to mobilise broad popular support for radical political and administrative changes. Results could not be expected save over the long run. As mentioned earlier, moreover, decentralisation was not coupled – as it had been in West Bengal – to the implementation of land reform. Without massive development efforts, therefore, broad material interests in favour of decentralisation and alternative projects were lacking. It had been far different in the case of earlier reforms, such as the redistribution of land, when the advantages for the individual were plain for all to see. Accordingly, no far-reaching social movement – one able to live on irrespective of which parties formed the government – emerged. The campaigns stood and fell, rather, with the commitment of devoted activists (associated first and foremost with the KSSP) and certain favourably disposed politicians and administrators. When, consequently, the left-centre government lost the state elections in 1991 (which were held in connection with the national elections, in which many citizens expressed their sympathy for the murdered Rajiv Gandhi by voting for his party), it was not merely the case that the government had to resign. The campaigns in large measure collapsed as well.

New Development Efforts on a Firmer Local and Political Basis

Many committed activists refused, however, to give up. Instead they licked their wounds, assessed their experiences, and sought out partly new paths.

As we have seen, earlier experiences indicated that a true decentralisation of resources and decision-making to district- and local governments was a key to success; they also indicated, however, that established politicians would hardly carry out such measures on their own. Now, therefore, activists themselves had to find a forceful way to exert pressure for their cause.

This time, their efforts were facilitated, paradoxically enough, by the fact that the central government in New Delhi also sought a certain decentralisation, albeit for wholly different reasons (in order, that is, to promote its new liberal economic policies, and to reach out directly to districts and local governments in states where it did not control the state government). In any case, activists in Kerala were thereby able to mobilise broad support (including among some leading moderate academics and other personalities) for criticism of the conservative state government, which had not even carried out the kind of decentralisation championed in New Delhi. And politicians from the centre-left opposition were not, of course, late to join in. On the contrary, activists enticed them into making the one binding promise after the other about how much better they would implement decentralisation if only they were returned to power.

At the same time, of course, the new conservative state government obstructed the literacy, group farming and resource mapping campaigns. It was a tough time, and many sympathisers fell by the wayside. Yet many others struggled on as best they could. This was particularly true where resource mapping was concerned. A series of pilot projects were continued. Important experiences were gained, both in regard to resource-mapping and in regard to the various ways that local development programs could be initiated thereupon.

In 1994 the activists succeeded, moreover, in staging a counteroffensive – by mobilising and demonstrating all the knowledge, competence and drive to be found among the large number of both schooled and organic intellectuals in Kerala who were seeking alternative but undogmatic roads to development. A gigantic "Kerala

Studies Conference” was organised, with a good 1,500 participants and about 500 essays. (The contrast could not have not been greater with the ”Tamil Studies Conference”, a propagandistic spectacle arranged scarcely six months later by the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Ms. Jayalalitha). Indeed, the very skilful manner in which the proceedings in Kerala were carried out – on the basis of local resources and the volunteer efforts of academics, political activists and trade unionists – prompted the small group of international participants to ponder, in mute admiration, their own difficulties in getting even small workshops to function properly.⁶

Of course, the movement was not able to follow up this conference with as many regional seminars as had been planned. And, certainly, concrete local development programs were still conspicuous by their absence when the left-centre front formulated its strategy for the local elections of 1995, and the state elections of 1996. But discontent with conservative rule was massive. The left-centre front made gains at all levels and formed the new state government.

This time, moreover, the reformers had a much better starting point. The politicians had pledged to institute decentralisation, and the activists themselves had amassed a great deal of theoretical and practical knowledge about how alternative development could be furthered from below. Accordingly, before the forces of hesitancy were able to put obstacles in the way, leading reformists within the left-centre front were able to present complete and comprehensive plans – which they did rapidly and with great tactical skill – for what could and should be done under the aegis of the Kerala State Planning Board. The road was now open for renewed efforts at alternative development on the local level (aside from where industrial and fiscal questions on the state level were concerned).

What were the major ideas behind the new efforts? To begin, the reformists emphasised, the district- and especially the local governments themselves (*panchayats*) were only able to decide over details, and were without any resources of their own to speak of. Indeed, this had been the case ever since the founding of the

⁶ The abstracts of all the papers are gathered in four volumes published by the organisers. For a fruitful attempt at a summary, see Isaac & Tharakan (1995). (Where Ms. Jayalalitha’s propaganda spectacle is concerned, I base my description on Ingrid Widlund’s forthcoming doctoral thesis, to be submitted at Uppsala University, on political discourse in Tamil Nadu.)

state. Changing the distribution of the running activities and expenditures of the state would take time; still, a start could be made with the investment budget. And following the victory of the left-centre front in 1996, in fact, the reformists succeeded in pushing through a decision that the district- and the local governments themselves would through the State Planning Board receive as much as between 35% and 40% of the investment budget (as compared to the previous negligible amounts).

Furthermore, the reformists claimed, almost all planning to that point had been done from above. Alongside the "district collectors," different departments and agencies had each been responsible for their own little sub-units, even on the lowest levels. Activities had neither been co-ordinated nor formulated on the basis of local needs and opportunities. Now, the reformists said, it was time to turn this arrangement upside down. Goals and operations must be formulated and co-ordinated locally. A certain degree of central and regional co-ordination was necessary, they granted, but this should be accomplished through the State Planning Board, and in broadest possible cooperation with all interested parties. Thus, it was hoped, the new effort would be less party-dominated and party-politicised than the previously most successful decentralisation program in India had been – that undertaken in West Bengal.

A critical argument among reformists, moreover, was that most of the popular movements – the political and trade-union movements especially – had hitherto mainly demanded state and local measures, and furthermore had done their utmost to ensure that such measures would favour their own members and sympathisers. This, the reformists claimed, had helped create such conflicts between different special interests, and such expectations that the state would take care of everything, that the participation of citizens themselves had been set aside, and development efforts to the benefit of all had been neglected. The goal now was rather to promote cooperation and complementary volunteer efforts on the basis of the broadest possible discussion within each district and locality of what needed to be done. Broad committees of cooperation and voluntary action were formed on a range of levels.

This was not a question, of course, of some kind of apolitical developmentalism. On the contrary, this was a conscious political project on the part of reformist left-centre forces to ensure that all local governments and citizens would enjoy equal opportunities to participate in the new efforts to be undertaken. It was a matter of

competing to implement the best possible policies for and with the popular majority, rather than for and with the members and clients of each distinct group.

The reformists worked with public agencies, established popular organisations, and new volunteer associations (of the KSSP type). Experiences from the earlier campaigns showed the necessity of working via institutionalised and legitimate organs (like the local governments) if all volunteer forces were to be capable of working together and co-operating on projects that would be tenable over the long run. Voluntary commitment presupposed political initiative and legitimacy. At the same time, the wish was to continue to attract fresh blood (outside of the established organisations), in the form of committed experts and youth. At the lowest level, activists sought to create neighbourhood fora capable of unifying the splintered fragments of civil society. All documents and decisions, furthermore, were to be public. In the end, of course, activists hoped that these grand efforts to introduce and practice deepened democracy would result not merely in improved economic and social development, but also in the renewal of the established trade-union and political movements, and of the state and local governments as well. The parties, for example, would no longer just compete over who could help "their own," but also over who could develop entire localities and districts.

Finally, the new efforts were in the first instance social and extra-parliamentary. The most important thing, the argument went, was not growth at any price, but rather engaging ordinary people, so that they would be able to influence development themselves. And, according to the activists, it was almost as important that it not be experts and politicians who discuss how laws and directives for decentralisation ought to be carried out (for in that case those opposed would be able to put spokes in the wheels), but rather that citizens themselves get going with local projects of their own, discover what they can accomplish, and develop the ability to demand true decentralisation.

How was all this to be accomplished? A six-step plan had already been formulated in its main outlines before the new left-centre government took power in the middle of 1996.

First, the necessary information materials would be collected, and a large number of persons trained (about 600 at the central level) whose task it would be to train roughly 15,000 others at the regional level; these latter would then be charged with training some 100,000 persons at the very local level. The idea was that a similar educational process would then be undertaken at each subsequent step in the campaign.

Already between mid-August and October, all of the roughly 1,000 local governments in Kerala wishing to take control over their portion of the investment budget conducted – with the help of the above-mentioned trainees – general meetings in basic localities. All citizens were entitled to take part in these meetings, and to have their say about which problems were the most serious, and which development projects the most urgent. Some ten percent of the entire population or about three million people, among whom a fifth were women, are estimated to have taken part. Reports and follow-up were then introduced at subsequent meetings.

Between October and the end of 1996, the general goals of each local government were then complemented with a comprehensive analysis of its history and resources. These reports were carried out by working groups which had been appointed at the general meetings. The reports were then approved at development seminars – in which local elected politicians and local administrators took part – and then were sent via the districts to the State Planning Board. This was one of the high points of the campaign. The quality of the reports was equal, in several cases, to that of a master's thesis.

From the New Year to March of 1997 – when the economic circumstances became clearer – a good 10,000 working groups formulated concrete projects on a range of levels. From March to June, the groups reviewed what specific resources could be mobilised, and drew up local plans. During the rest of the fiscal year, finally, these local government plans were integrated on block (sub-district) and district levels. During the first year, over 2.7 milliard rupees⁷ were distributed in the form of projects which had been drawn up by the central state authorities but which would be implemented by local authorities, and as much as approximately 7.5 milliard rupees in the form of grants to local projects. The mobilisation of supplementary local funds and voluntary labour was also encouraged. The general directives included an instruction that at most thirty percent be invested in roads and the like, that a

⁷ One US dollar corresponds roughly to 40 rupees – although locally, of course, the rupee's purchasing power is greater.

somewhat higher proportion be invested in the social sector, and that priority otherwise be given to measures that promote production. All this was to be done, furthermore, completely transparently and without expanding the public sector.

Thereafter, it was hoped, it would be possible to go ahead realising the plans. But the working groups had not functioned sufficiently well. An additional phrase – of expert examination and correction – was therefore required. The work was delayed, and in October 1997, in fact, it seemed that an impasse had been reached. Several politicians were hesitant. Many publicly employed administrators and experts on the central state level were not deployed to the local bodies and were dragging their feet. It was first after political intervention (from among others the communist patriarch E.M.S. Namboodiripad), and after the mobilisation of tens of thousands of volunteer experts, that the projects could begin to be implemented.

New Lessons

It is still somewhat early to start evaluating the second campaign as a whole. Without doubt it is unique and bold, and it has drawn widespread attention, including internationally. Judging from the reports of colleagues, the local press, and my local contacts (including both the prime mover of the campaign and his critics), it appears to have gone rather well. Compared with the expectations of the sceptics, it has even gone very well. Among the thousand local governments, the campaign leadership is highly satisfied with the results in about 15 percent, dissatisfied with the results in a fifth, and moderately impressed with the results in the rest. The goal now is to make it possible to classify a majority of the local governments as highly successful. It is true, of course, that there are several problems and that criticism is building up among political groups as well as ordinary people on the *panchayat* level. But the fact that many politicians begin to worry, partly signals that the campaign and the decentralisation that they did not use to take seriously are now becoming real and part of mainstream politics. And the criticism from below is mainly a sign of people getting engaged, being able to look into previously non-transparent practices, and being capable of standing up against abuse of resources and corruption that used to be hidden and taking place higher up in the system where commoners could not fight it. So let us rather begin, with these relative achievements in mind, the work of drawing lessons from the difficulties encountered and the experiences gained.

To begin with, of course, the campaign does not tackle all problems. Kerala's lack of industrial development, its negative balance of trade, and the difficulties faced by its many migrant workers are just some of the questions which must be addressed mainly by other means. On the other hand, activists have never claimed that alternative local development is the cure to all ills. And the fact remains that "only" somewhat over thirty-five percent of the investment budget is available for these purposes. It is more significant, rather, that (with a few exceptions) clear connections are still not being made between, on the one hand, the various local projects, and on the other, larger-scale central economic investments, or the situation of migrant workers, or the best possible use of these workers' savings. This is nothing, however, of which the campaign's leaders are unaware, so the question is sooner what obstacles they face. One possibility is to build further on the co-operative sector, which may seem especially appropriate in view of the fact that the public sector cannot be expanded. In that case, however, the co-operatives must be reformed and liberated from political and economic special interests. Activists hope, in fact, that legislative revisions will lay the basis for this.

Similarly, those critics are naturally right who aver that the campaign does not put the class struggle foremost, and that it scarcely amounts to a death blow to capitalism. But that, of course, is not the point of the thing. As under colonialism, a good portion of the problems facing Kerala today derive from the fact that dynamic economic development of virtually any sort – the capitalist kind included – is inhibited. Earlier, the left sought to solve this dilemma through such methods as land reform – methods which would make it possible for the beneficiaries themselves to increase production. The reformers of today wish "only" to reconnect to this development-furthering strain within the progressive movement, and to find new ways by which the mass of the people themselves – as opposed to just the well-to-do – can be stimulated to invest and to increase production.

The most serious problem in this respect is instead the fact that it remains unclear what exactly the new obstacles to development are that have to be combated this time – now that the large landowners and tenancy system of old have been disarmed. One problem is that this question is difficult to answer, inasmuch as contemporary exploitation, subordination and capital accumulation are very complex, and many of the clear old class lines have disappeared. Another problem is that activists themselves tiptoe around this question like a cat around hot milk. For the fact is that many supporters of the left-centre front too are involved in everything from patron-

client relations within trade unions and parties to speculation in land and the unproductive use of (for example) cultivable soil and migrant workers' incomes.

Alongside this overarching and rather abstract criticism, however, it can also be instructive to focus on three of the very concrete problems encountered by activists – and to ask ourselves what these indicate.

First, certain critics charge the campaign with partiality to the left-centre front in general, and the CPI-M in particular. The argument is that the leaders and key activists of the campaign come from the front (especially the CPI-M), and that state resources are used to benefit the front's (especially the CPI-M's) supporters. Most indications are, however, that this is just a political half-truth. Indeed, the campaign is obviously political; it is not, however, (at least not until the time of writing) narrowly party-political, nor does it restrict benefits to certain groups. It is political inasmuch as its activists co-operate with political and trade-union organisations, and inasmuch as they use volunteer organisations and state resources on behalf of local development policies which are not exclusive in nature, but which instead are generally beneficial. Undeniably, most of the leaders and key activists of the campaign sympathise with the left-centre in general and the CPI-M in particular, but this, in view of their expertise and experience and the fact that this party has the far largest amount of grassroots members and sympathisers, is as inescapable as the fact that campaigns for the benefit of business would be dominated by businessmen and their experts. Nor, clearly, do the campaign's leaders and activists have anything against strengthening their own parties. Yet the primary logic of the campaign is that this will only be the result to the degree that the parties try to be best at promoting local development for people in general, and not just their own supporters. Of course there are cases where local politicians, administrators and related contractors take advantage of devoluted funds and distribute benefits to their own clients. But this is against the rules stipulated within the campaign and the instructions on how funds shall be used. New checks and balances are getting institutionalised. There are regulations about full transparency. And local groups, associations, beneficiaries and the public attending regular general meetings at the ward level begin being able to keep track of it and fight it. Moreover, extra care has been taken to ensure that all of the interested parties in political life are present within the co-ordinating organs at different levels. And there are few signs, as far as I know (including from discussions with actors critical of

the campaign), that local governments with a left-centre majority have been granted favoritistic treatment – this notwithstanding the fact that some voices within the left-centre front are still critical of "handing over money and power to *panchayats* where the left does not predominate." On the contrary, the fact is that local governments in which the Congress Party predominates (c. 40% of the total), and in which its members truly exert themselves, enjoy especially good opportunities for obtaining substantial resources. The campaign leadership is extra anxious to demonstrate its impartiality.

It is fair to say, however, that those parties in the left-centre front whose members are not substantially involved in broad development work have tended to wield less influence than they would otherwise have done – if, that is, they had been able in the usual fashion to exploit their swing vote in elections, and on this basis to demand privileged representation in the full range of boards and committees. The same applies to certain ministers, whose top-down departments have been weakened, and to members of the state parliament, who no longer have access to funds of their own for the benefit of their home districts. On the other hand, those groupings and leaders within the dominant party (the CPI-M) who have supported the campaign would appear to have strengthened their positions. Actually, attempts have been made, within both the State Planning Board and the party leadership, to ensure that the campaign stands above the various internal disputes. The party as a whole has now committed itself to such an extent that it seems to have reached the point of no return. Quite recently, however, in late February and early March 1999, the campaign suffered a serious setback as the minor left-front parties, spearheaded by the CPI (Communist Party of India), managed to reduce the influence of committed expert-volunteers at all levels in favour of politicians and administrators, even though many of the latter have not yet been transferred to the local levels and have not been too enthusiastic of decentralisation and planning from below in the first place.

What is more, it is clear from the course of the campaign than results are not automatically best either in localities governed by the left-centre, or in areas wherein civil society and the market have long been strong.⁸ Popular and democratic

⁸ Those are the criteria of the State Planning Board to measure success in the People's Campaign:

1. Participation a) Number of male/female in Grama Saba. b) Number of delegates to seminars. (male/female) 2. Additional resource mobilization a) Voluntarily labour and contribution b) Institutional finance c) Beneficiary contributions d) Other official funds 3. Transparency a) Beneficial selection done as per rules b) Publication of accounts c) Public exhibition of summary

development work is not something that can be called forth by political command; nor is it something which emerges of its own accord just because private activities are widespread and associational life is strong. Indeed, all of the private and tentative reports and observations of which I am aware, as well as my recent interviews in several *panchayats*⁹ indicate that the campaign has hitherto encountered its greatest problems in southern Kerala, where civil society and the market have long been strongest. Nor can the successes in the central and northern parts of Kerala be ascribed solely to the fact that the left has long had its greatest strength in those regions. For another important difference between the north and the south is the fact that social life in general is much more commercialised and privatised in the south. Besides which, there are important exceptions in the south where the campaign is doing extremely well, and it does not always succeed in the centre and north. The key question seems rather to be the presence, on the one hand, of enthusiastic local politicians, and, on the other, of genuine popular organisations which are focused on political development work, which are not narrowly party-political, and which do not just demand state and local government measures but also facilitate citizens own actions. KSSP activists often play an important role here.

A second critical concrete problem is that the campaign has been accused of trying to replace representative democracy, in the form of elections to posts on various levels, with red organs of popular power. To be sure, many activists have long been so frustrated with the established political system – wherein parties favour just their own supporters – that they prefer direct democracy, consensus decisions, and popular participation to constitutionally regulated forms of decision-making. At the same time, however, it is important to note that the KSSP has changed over the years from a typical NGO – a private and apolitical association – into an organisation engaged in politically oriented development work in cooperation with state agencies, local governments, and elected politicians. Indeed, one fundamental difference between the KSSP's work during the first campaigns up to 1991 and its work thereafter is the fact that, nowadays, its commitment to decentralisation and to long-term collaboration with the local governments is altogether fundamental. In addition, activists have

details of the public works (Source: Performance Audits Report) 4. Inevitable programs a) In technology b) In organization c) In integration 5. Number of genuine beneficiaries 6. Efficiency of tax collection

⁹ See footnote 4.

become increasingly anxious to ensure that elected politicians (and state and local government employees as well) are represented in all new development organs.

Obviously, however, there are conflicts here. An important objective of both previous and present campaigns, after all, has been to engage larger numbers of people, young and old, in local development work, with an eye to revitalising the political system. It clearly bears discussing, moreover, whether or not a prioritised part of the campaign ought to have been the training of elected local government politicians – including the many inexperienced (but politically less constrained) women who have come into their positions thanks to the new national quotas (which require that one-third of elected politicians be women). Now, however, this stands high on the agenda of the campaign leadership. And it is a mystery to me that such donors as Scandinavian aid organs and joint associations of local governments have not literally flung themselves upon this opportunity to truly do some good.¹⁰

A third concrete problem lies in the difficulties the campaign has encountered when working with established administrators and technical experts. The fact is, as earlier indicated, that the entire campaign risked being deadlocked (after somewhat more than a year's time) when the projects that had been worked out could not be implemented, due to difficulties encountered by activists working with the experts whose go-ahead was needed. This is at least as great a problem as that presented by the earlier-mentioned state politicians who are unhappy about losing influence as a result of decentralisation.

As a matter of fact, the conflicts with administrators and experts are just the tip of the iceberg. For while the development campaign is moving on at a breakneck pace, it is taking a much longer time to develop a full legal basis for political and administrative decentralisation to the local and district governments. The same applies to the training and relocation of all important administrators. The so-called Sen-committee, which was charged with drawing up guidelines, rapidly saw the need for some relatively radical principles. After that, however, much of its more detailed work came to a standstill. Several politicians (including some from the left-centre front) and many administrators themselves did their part to complicate and obstruct the process. The work – which was characterised by concession and compromise – is moving forward slowly. In late February 1999, finally, amendments were made of the *Panchayat Raj* Act. But it remains to be seen when and how the actual regulations will be worked

¹⁰ At the time of writing, it appears that only the Swiss have opened their eyes to this opportunity.

out and carried out – together with the deployment of sufficient administrative personnel.

Firstly, of course, this result is due to the special interests mentioned earlier, as well as to the fact that activists cannot easily fight such interests, deeply rooted as the latter are even among both members and supporters of the left-centre front. Secondly, however, disputes over principle enter the picture also, as in the debate over the influence that elected representatives ought to wield in comparison with rule-bound administrators. On the one side are those who say that all administrators on the local level (including the "district collectors") should be subordinate to elected representatives on that level. On the other side are those who say that the "delicate balance" between politicians and administrators must not be upset, especially since the latter are required to follow various rules, and moreover, in their own view, are the only ones who are capable of holding the country on a steady course in the face of all the doings of "corrupt and power-hungry politicians." Thirdly, then, is the currently more serious dispute on what influence volunteers should have in the triangular relation between politicians and administrators, to begin with as long as enough administrative personnel is not deployed, but also, of course, in the long run in terms of popular participation.

The answer furnished by campaign leaders themselves is that they have consciously refrained from getting closely involved in these political, administrative and legal conflicts, and have instead concentrated on getting real development efforts under way. It had been clear already during the struggle for land reform, the leaders continue, that it was futile to await legislation and new rules before starting to implement changes. Besides which, it was hard to organise mass movements over formal questions. The only thing that produced results was when activists mobilised people to start implementing the land reform before the formalities were altogether ready. It was then that things started to happen. In the same way, campaign leaders explain, the need of the hour is to heighten expectations and to get concrete projects going which really will help people, so that demands for decentralisation and for new rules and principles will have a broad and powerful movement behind them.

There is a great deal to this argument. If it is taken too far, however, unproductive tensions will arise between the popular power championed by activists and the constitutionalism defended by administrators and some politicians; tensions which in turn will complicate the institutionalisation of local popular self-rule. Just as it is not

enough for people who expect to benefit from the policies pursued by the elite to place demands on it but must also participate in governing the society themselves, development work and expectations from below can only make possible but not create and implement the necessary pro- decentralisation rules. It remains to be seen if efficient regulations regarding decentralisation and deployment of personnel will be implemented, as well as if the forms of popular participation that have been practised can be institutionalised, so that when the campaign is now weakened (through less involvement of expert-volunteers) the field is not opened up for local bossism, including (though far from primarily) among some leftist politicians.

Conclusion

The new development efforts in Kerala represent, without a doubt, an intellectually impressive, democratic, and socially dynamic attempt at remedying many of the central problems found in India and the Third World generally: the need for greater democracy and popular participation; the need to combine economic growth and socio-economic equalisation (without harming the environment); and the need to counter fossilised boss-rule and to place new questions and ways of mobilising on the agenda (without undermining earlier achievements).

To be sure, the state of Kerala is so special – in its well-educated citizenry, its uncommonly lively civil society, and its strong political and trade-union organisations – that its campaigns and policies can scarcely be replicated in other contexts without significant modification. At the same time, however, Kerala really is a "critical case." As pointed out in the introduction, after all, some of today's popular prescriptions have already been tested in that state, and under relatively advantageous conditions. So if such methods lead to problems in Kerala, the results are likely to be still worse elsewhere. And by studying the new alternatives that Keralites have started developing, we can take the step from criticism to constructive insight.

According to the fashionable prescriptions of the day, as we know, the problems of the Third World can be cured with more civil society and less but "better" politics. This state of affairs, in turn, is to be achieved through privatisation, deregulation and decentralisation; through a strengthening of the "core" functions of the state; and through greater support for free media and voluntary organisations.

Experiences in Kerala indicate that much of this is misleading. The lack of local self-rule was certainly a fundamental obstacle encountered in the first development campaigns. Above and beyond calling for privatisation and deregulation, however, the prescriptions in vogue have little to say about how to cope with powerful interests such as those associated with the existing order in Kerala. For many years and in many cases, not even politicians of the left-centre went against the stream. Furthermore, activists who had committed themselves to development efforts through civil society lacked the means on their own (outside the established political system) to clip the wings of powerful groups. And after the land reform, in any case, the very privatisation, deregulation and commercialisation recommended by today's fashionable theoreticians sooner counteracted than promoted interest in joint productive efforts, and sooner promoted than counteracted fragmentation in civil society and special interests in politics.

The key to renewed development efforts in the mid-1990s lay rather in political pressures for devolution of resources and self government, and in the victory of the left-centre front in the 1996 elections. In order, moreover, to co-ordinate efforts on the part of both the state and local citizens' groups, activists integrated their development projects with local government operations. Actually, they also initiated and co-ordinated the projects from above, via the State Planning Board.

Alongside the impressive results hereby achieved, new problems also point to the importance of popular and political – but not narrowly party-political – mobilisation. On the one hand, development work goes least well where privatisation and commercialisation – and the fragmentation of civil society issuing therefrom – are strongest. On the other hand, traditional leftist rule is not enough either – in a situation where organisations are antiquated and voters no longer so production-oriented.

It would seem difficult, furthermore, to revitalise the political system without also investing in the training of local politicians and administrators. More co-ordination is also needed on the state and political level between local development projects and development projects of a more overarching kind. Finally, the legal basis for political and administrative decentralisation is trailing behind. The results are not happy when far-reaching expectations are raised, and local development projects undertaken, while the devising of political and administrative rules is left to the old elite. And now that politicians and administrators realise that decentralisation and popular

participation is really taking place, they are of course doing their utmost to avoid losing out. The bottomline, then, is the importance of institutionalising the popular participation that has been practised, to thus set a pace for fruitful checks and balances as well as co-operation between politicians, administrators and volunteers. Hence, the fate of a new KSSP campaign to be launched in mid-99 to engage all volunteers (including the now disempowered technical experts) in upholding the spirit of the campaign and helping people on the grassroots level to keep a watching eye on politicians and administrators may well be crucial.

In sum, cooperation between citizens furnishes no guarantee of progress in a civil society which is strong but fragmented by commercialism and privatisation. In many respects (though of course not all), it is more politics that is needed, not less. It is needed in order to facilitate the democratic co-ordination of various development efforts – state, local government and "civic."

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