

Power to the Malayalee People

Richard W Franke
Barbara H Chasin

32 (48): 3061-3068

Kerala's decentralisation programme is probably the largest of its kind in the world at present. While it does not mean complete abrogation of higher-level responsibilities, the ultimate goal is a substantial relaxation of central control and substantial community empowerment.

CHAPPARAPADAVU panchayat rises to only 75 metres above sea level. But the foothills of the Western Ghat Mountains of southern India are rugged, forcing the 27,000 people of the 70 square kilometres community to live on steep slopes and rocky terraces. Despite the difficult terrain, 70 per cent of households farm rice, coconuts, cashew and areca nuts, rubber, and vegetables. Local accounts claim a 1,200-year history for the panchayat, which is said to be the home of some notable medieval scholars and poets.

Chapparapadavu takes its name from the 'chapparam' tree, one of which stood at a place called Therandi, along the river that cuts the panchayat in half, carving 11 kms of steep slopes that give way in only one or two places to a landing where a ferry can be operated. Chapparapadavu means 'the village at the ferry under the chapparam tree' (the one at Therandi).

It was only in 1985 that the Kerala state government finally built a bridge over the river, making possible modern vehicle access to the panchayat. Now some agricultural products are sold in the nearby lowland and coastal towns of Taliparamba and Kannur, but most production remains for local subsistence. At Therandi itself, a frustrating situation developed when the government built a primary school on one side of the river, compelling students to cross the river on the pole-propelled ferry boat that holds only 10 people or to walk three kms to the bridge and three kms back to the school – repeating the trip at the end of classes. The home-made roads along the sides of the river make even jeep travel barely possible. Students who could see their school from their homes had to spend three hours getting there and another three hours getting back.¹

In late September 1996, panchayat president P P Balan met with residents of ward two where he lives. They had been called to meet as part of Kerala's decentralisation campaign in which the state's new Left Democratic Front (LDF) ministry, elected in April 1996, had organised what

it calls the 'Ninth Plan, People's Plan'. As part of India's ninth national Five-Year Plan, to run from 1997 to 2002, the LDF in Kerala increased state development grants to local communities from 5 per cent – the amount in the first to eight plans – to 40 per cent. Communities were asked to hold meetings, air grievances, plan projects, and take development directly into their own hands. We saw elements of the plan in action during our visit to Kerala from December 14, 1996 to January 16, 1997. We interviewed campaign officials, opposition activists, and ordinary people across the political spectrum in four major cities and in seven villages where we also witnessed meetings, debates, accomplishments and frustrations.²

P P Balan told how his grama sabha heard speaker after speaker demand the public works department to construct a bridge at Therandi to make their lives easier. They had asked for many years, but never got a positive response. Balan asked whether the residents, in the spirit of the people's campaign, could build their own bridge. Surprised by a sudden burst of enthusiasm from some farm labourers who said a locally-built bridge was possible, Balan found himself obligated to inform his neighbours that no panchayat funds were available for the project and he could not say how long it would take for the Ninth Plan funds to be released. Having painted himself into a corner, he suddenly announced he would contribute Rs 500 personally to the project if others would come forward to help. Three hundred households put together a fund of Rs 6,000 – about \$ 200 or 76 per cent of one per capita income in the region.³

The first meeting to plan the construction was held in the Kumaran Asan Reading Room – one of Chapparapadavu's eight village libraries, this one named after a poet famous in Kerala for his passionate denunciations of the caste system.⁴ "The ward members said they could build a bridge as wide as a footpath. They could not build a structure to hold vehicles. Even then, the big problem was to drive in the piles", recalls Balan.⁵ Then farm labourer Kolangarakath

Kumaram rose to speak. "I know how to do it," he told the assembly. With his friend Puthiyaveetil Govindan, also a labourer, both with only primary school education, he described how he had often watched the public works machinery drive piles. He thought they could make a home-made pile-driver.⁶

They poled the ferry across the river, dragging a coir rope, marked with a knot at each five metres. At each knot they took the depth of the river in the dry season, finding 2.5 metres to be the greatest depth. Local households donated 32 coconut tree trunks, two for each five-metre stretch of the 85 metre long rope. Working from boats, Kolangarakath hung a 200 kg wood block on a pulley from a 10 metres high tripod of coconut tree trunks. Volunteers held the tree trunks under the block, the block was released, and slowly each pile was pounded into the river bed. Runners, supports, the bridge floor, and railings were added with wood from areca nut, coconut and other trees donated by households and fashioned at a local saw mill. After 25 days of the volunteer labour of 402 people, the Chapparapadavu 'people's bridge' was complete. Immediately, 500 to 1,000 people were crossing daily. Bicycles and motorbikes can be walked across along with pedestrians. The bridge is functional for seven months of the year, but is submerged under the monsoon waters the other five months. When we crossed the bridge on January 7, 1997, accompanied by local musicians and hundreds of flower-bedecked school children, the local press came to Chapparapadavu; we may have been the first western visitors since colonial times. P P Balan and other local residents used every interview to call for a public works permanent bridge. They are still waiting.

NINTH PLAN, PEOPLE'S PLAN

Kerala's decentralisation programme is probably the largest of its kind in the world at present. Three million people, 10 per cent of the state's population, took part in the grama sabhas, that aired complaints and identified the major problems in their villages and urban neighbourhoods in September and October 1996. Imagine 1.8 million New York metropolitan area residents meeting for six hours, arguing, and electing problem-solving working groups to plan strategies for overcoming local problems. Imagine thousands of them continuing to meet for weeks to hammer out local plans for which a massive portion of federal and state funds would be allocated. Imagine technically trained retired people in their communities forming associations of experts to help make

the plans technically sound. Imagine all these people doing all this work for nothing more than bus fare and lunch. According to proponents of Kerala's programme, people "have to be activated for the new democratic project to improve their daily lives". They should "create a new development culture" that is democratic, participatory and that transcends political parties often prone to sabotaging development programmes for short-term election goals.⁷ Government is to become more dynamic and more accountable. State Planning Board member and Ninth Plan activist T M Thomas Isaac says of the campaign, "we're getting the bureaucrats out of their offices, getting them to work with the people".⁸

Kerala's democratisation is but one variety of a larger structural change taking place in India. With that nation's 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments, adopted in 1992,⁹ states were required to delegate 29 general administrative functions to lower level bodies, along with some taxation powers to finance them. The precise nature of the devolution of central powers was left to the states to determine, creating a wide range of plans, some of which may be more state or district bureaucracy-empowering than people-empowering.¹⁰ Kerala's left activists decided the amendments were a perfect device for trying to create genuine local democracy in which ordinary people would see the main empowerment.

No new layer of bureaucracy is being created to implement the Ninth Plan. Only one new group has been set up, the 'High Level Guidance Council', an advice-giving and public relations body, headed by E M S Namboodiripad, the venerable 88-year-old leader of the Kerala branch of the Communist Party - Marxist or CPM, and including all living former chief ministers of Kerala from all political parties. Chapparapadavu panchayat president P P Balan is a member of India's Congress Party; his enthusiasm for the Ninth Plan campaign overrides his opposition to the Left Front ministry led by the CPM.

METHALA

Midway from Chapparapadavu to Kerala's southern border, Methala panchayat lies near the Arabian Sea. It lays claim to the Cheraman Juma Masjid, India's oldest mosque said to be built in 629 AD. Much of the original mosque is preserved inside an expanded modern structure. Muslims make up 20 per cent of Kerala's population. Just two kms distant in neighbouring Kodangallur panchayat is the site where St Thomas is said to have landed in India in 52 AD to found Christianity's oldest communities. A cathedral, religious study centre, and ice-cream parlour have been built around a vault in which one can view a relic of

Thomas's left thumb bone. Like Muslims, Christians are also 20 per cent of Kerala's people.

In contrast to Chapparapadavu's Congress Party majority, Methala is a leftist panchayat. Pro-Soviet, Pro-Chinese, and various other Marxists run the local government. Intra-left hostility has always been a problem, especially in Methala's (and Kerala's) activist trade unions. But in 1987, mutually hostile unions from the two major Communist parties, the Congress Party, and the Muslim League found common ground in a volunteer project to build a bus terminal.¹¹

Nandini is a middle-aged, low-caste widow. She and her 12-year-old daughter Abherma were homeless until the Ninth Plan campaign reached Methala. The campaign training manual for the grama sabhas clearly stipulates that people should not use the assemblies to bring up personal problems, but Nandini's desperation combined with her ignorance of the manual forced her to bring on an emotional appeal for a house. Ignoring the training manual, the assembly spontaneously voted to organise a collection which brought in Rs 12,000 and several hours of volunteer labour from unionised construction workers to build the two women a simple, one-room house with a stone floor and a tile roof. Their new house stands across a temple pond from a Maharajah's palace complex which the Ninth Plan organisers hope to turn into a museum.

Nandini is not the only homeless person in Methala. Along the state highway at the edge of the panchayat, 16 squatters' huts crowd together. Without running water or toilet facilities, the huts line up like boxcars, leading to their local name: the 'train colony'. Almost all are from the lowest castes. Methala's development seminar designated new housing for the 251 squatter families of the panchayat as the number one priority of its local development plan. Because the Kerala Ninth Plan campaign transfers 40 per cent of the state plan over to the panchayat, such a decision is possible. The new housing is to be an apartment complex next to the bus station. A coalition of all the trade unions in Methala has volunteered to provide free skilled labour to build the complex. A publicly-owned swamp next to the bus station will be drained and landscaped to house the project. Ninth Plan organisers have appealed to communities to add 25 per cent to government allocations in the form of monetary contributions or volunteer labour. Across Kerala hundreds of thousands of people built clinics, repaired roads, dredged canals, and painted schools on November 1, 1996, the 40th anniversary of Kerala state, declared as 'rehabilitation day' by the LDF government. Methala activists hope to continue the one-shot event to make homelessness and squatter communities a thing of the past. Other local

actions include cleaning several mosquito-infested canals in low-caste fishing communities and developing co-operative vegetable gardens and marketing institutions to counteract the high price of vegetables imported from other parts of India.¹²

LOW-TECH, HIGH-TECH AND COMMUNITY IDEALISM

Methala's version of the campaign illustrates a wide range of approaches to development. Along with the housing programme is a campaign to raise a 'love fund', to finance medical care and other emergency needs of the poorest residents. Another plan is for a quarterly anti-corruption magazine in which all project expenditures will be explained to citizens. Some young computer specialists have formed a worker-owned software company that designed, 'Pharm-assist', a programme in Malayalam, for hospitals to use in monitoring dispensing of medicines. A larger all-Kerala project now underway plans to install a computer and television-capable monitor in every panchayat to make possible both local database management and local satellite reception of education programmes in Science, Maths, and English. Email capabilities would allow village offices to communicate their problems and demands instantly to central state offices—and receive broadcast messages from them. CD-ROMs would help village teachers prepare discussion questions around state-based educational programmes. A several panchayats pilot project is already starting, based in part, Ninth Plan fashion, on volunteers. Kerala may become the first state in India with complete village electronic 'connectivity'.¹³

NINTH PLAN UNFOLDS

Five stages make up Kerala's Ninth Plan.¹⁴

Stage 1: Ward assemblies

The grama sabhas took place in September and October 1996 in all 14,147 wards of the panchayats and urban neighbourhoods in Kerala. As we noted earlier, about three million people attended these assemblies. Processions, and street theatre created a festive atmosphere, but a serious note was added when campaign organisers delivered written invitations to each household in their ward, asking their participation. Some panchayats developed innovative methods of mobilisation, such as a development quiz in the schools, or a coconut oil lamp procession the night before the meetings.¹⁵

From 50 to several hundred persons attended in each ward. After some introductory speeches, people were encouraged to speak up about the problems in their ward. Meetings began at noon and lasted in many panchayats well into the evening. Participants broke down into 12 topic groups, assigned

to 12 areas of local development as required by the state organisers: (1) agriculture and irrigation, (2) fisheries and animal husbandry, (3) education, (4) transport, energy, and markets, (5) industry, (6) housing and social welfare, (7) public health and drinking water, (8) culture, (9) women's welfare, (10) co-operatives, (11) welfare of scheduled castes/scheduled tribes, and (12) resource mobilisation.

Activists we spoke to in December 1996 recalled the difficulties of the grama sabhas: people were eager to complain about the lack of roads, medical facilities, housing quality, irrigation and the like, but most wanted to join only the groups on industry or on transport, energy, and markets. P P Balan recalls this difficulty in Chapparapadavu: "At first everyone thought development means roads and industry. We had to push people to get them interested in the other groups, but once they started talking together, they found they had many complaints and lots of ideas in all the areas."¹⁶ In what organisers call 'semi-structured' discussions, each topic group listed areas of concern and suggested one immediate project that could be carried out with voluntary labour.

Each topic group elected two representatives for the next stage, the development seminars. But first all the group members engaged in an intermediate activity: to collect data from village and district offices, interview elderly residents about local history, and put together a printed book with all their information and ideas.

Each of Kerala's 991 panchayats and 54 municipalities has produced a development report. The reports run from 35 to 200 pages. Many are illustrated by community artists and some contain detailed histories of their village. Each has a chapter on each of the 12 task force topics listed above. Reports were printed in 500 to 1,000 copies and bound with often colourful covers. Printing costs were subsidised by private donations, local co-operative banks, and private businesses, some of which put ads in the back pages. Some panchayats sold the reports while others gave them free to interested persons. Panchayat development reports have become a great source of pride in many Kerala villages. The local drafting of a local report – even with some tables that don't add to 100 per cent and other errors – has given people a sense of confidence that they really can plan their own projects. At Calicut City Hall on January 9, 1997, we attended a public exhibition, where about 350 of the reports were attracting a great deal of public interest. The development reports were also intended for the next stage of the people's plan.

Stage 2: Development seminars

The 250-300 people elected to the topic groups reconvened in December 1996 to

discuss their development report. Development seminars took place in movie theatres, schools, co-operative society halls, Hindu marriage halls, private or public, donated or rented. Participants received no pay, but got tea, snacks, and the typical Kerala lunch of twice-boiled rice, one or two lentil curries, steamed cassava, banana chips, hot lime or mango pickle, yogurt, fried fish, and fish curry (vegetarians skipped the fish), all served on the traditional Kerala banana leaf that makes an ecologically ideal serving device. After lunch, the working meetings produced a consensus on the lists of problems and project ideas to be carried forward to the 3rd stage. The seminars also organised the elected activists into task forces to carry out the 3rd stage.

Stage 3: The task forces

Each of the 12 subject areas got a task force to distil the various project concepts into specific proposals, giving the appropriate technical, cost-benefit, and time-frame considerations, as well as an assessment of the resources of the local community to carry out each project, emphasising the possibilities for local contributions.

Stage 4: The panchayat plans

In March-April 1997, the existing elected panchayat boards selected the projects to implement. The selection process required developing a consensus about which projects should have priority over which others. As could be expected, the task forces had come up with many more plans than could be funded. "Economic planning is about setting priorities", explained state planning board member and campaign activist T M Thomas Isaac. Out of 1,50,000 project proposals, less than half would become finalised.

Stage 5: Integration of local plans into a wider, district level plan

In April, the panchayat plans were forwarded to block and district level assemblies for further discussion and consolidation into larger plans. India has neighbourhoods grouped into administrative units called 'blocks', in which certain national development activities take place. Organisers of Kerala's Ninth Plan felt these blocks had to be part of the process, although they often cut across panchayat boundaries, creating an administrative maze. At the district level, the blocks and panchayats finally correspond. Kerala's 14 districts have put together plans that consolidate the panchayat and block levels. These 14 plans are to be consolidated into an overall state plan to which certain state-level projects will be added. The final stage for the first year is set to occur in May 1998 in the capital city of Thiruvananthapuram at a statewide congress in which each panchayat will send delegates from its task

forces. Even as the congress takes place, the second year of the Ninth Five-Year Plan will be in preparation in the localities.

KARIMBA-MEENVALLAM

Kerala was once an electricity surplus state, but the failure to construct any new generating sources since 1976 has led to major industrial losses and consumer inconvenience. By 1990, nearly half of all domestic consumers received less than 150 volts of the 220 volts needed to run electrical appliances.¹⁷ Dependence on big-dam hydroelectric power installations has meant dependence on the whims of the Indian monsoon. Not enough water in the reservoirs means not enough voltage to the power lines. When the 1997 major monsoon came a week late on June 9, the state government was forced to cut power to industries resulting in thousands of lay-offs. Even factories producing oxygen for hospitals had to shut down. The freezer-dependent seafood industry was hard hit.¹⁸ Households across the state had to endure half-hour power cuts each night called 'load-shedding'. Although we found it convivial to sit by candlelight for 30 minutes with our Kerala friends, parents of children who needed to study felt otherwise about load-shedding. Even when the power is on, rural consumers sit by light bulbs as dim as birthday cake candles and people who want adequate voltage (when it is on) have to invest much of their income in voltage stabilisers. Electrical power is usually thought of as part of large-scale infrastructure. Can local communities create electricity on a scale worth the investment?

Karimba panchayat is situated in Palakkad district near the Integrated Rural Technology Centre (IRTC) of the Kerala People's Science Movement (KSSP).¹⁹ With 65,000 members, the KSSP is one of the largest voluntary organisations in Kerala. Starting out in 1957 as an organisation of science writers, KSSP developed into a mass organisation that works to popularise scientific thinking. In recent years it has become Kerala's most significant environmental organisation. KSSP built the campus of IRTC entirely with private donations; the centre now functions mainly to create and popularise participatory, small-scale development projects.

At Karimba, villagers joined with KSSP and several other organisations to create the Meenvallam (fishing boat) Small-Scale Hydroelectric Project. Utilising the energy of a waterfall in the steep western ghat high ranges near Palakkad, the project is generating local jobs and will connect the small-scale output station to the local grid. Karimba villagers will get some priority in use of the local current, and the experience gained may be transferable to the 50 or so other permanent waterfalls in the ghat ranges. If enough similar plants can be constructed, start up costs will

decline to as parts can be mass-produced. The Karimba-Meenvallam project draws inspiration and direct technical advice from China, which has built nearly 90,000 such stations since 1950, accounting today for 6 per cent of that country's electrical supply.²⁰ The Karimba-Meenvallam project is slated for completion in three years.²¹

TRAINING: KEY TO SUCCESSFUL DEMOCRATIC PLANNING

Drawing ordinary people into development planning requires more than a utopian vision of a better world. Kerala's State Planning Board activists realised that people would need to know how to organise and run a meeting, how to draft a report, how to do at least simple cost-benefit analysis, how to prepare a budget, how to set up safeguards against corruption – all sorts of technical skills. To generate these skills, campaign organisers used two major techniques: training seminars and recruitment of educated retirees as expert resource persons.

Each of the five stages of the campaign was preceded by extensive training at all levels. The training sessions themselves became part of the publicity for the campaign. Before launching the grama sabhas, organisers trained 373 state-level trainers for seven days. These trainees taught 10,497 district level resource persons who conducted one-day workshops for over 1,00,000 local activists. Trainees at all levels received travel costs, snacks, and meals, but no salaries. We witnessed the 3-day training of local volunteers for the 4th stage which took place at Calicut on January 10-12, 1997. The 4,500 volunteers came from panchayats all over northern Kerala. They attended speeches, workshops, and 'project clinics' from 10 am to midnight in the several buildings of a local high school borrowed for the weekend by the campaign. Despite planners' goal of at least a 30 per cent female presence, only 15 per cent of the participants were women. As the campaign progressed, women were dropping out of leadership positions, probably because household and child care chores their spouses were not picking up. Even the 15 per cent participation, however, marks an increase over rates in most unions and other mass organisations. Of the 29 4th stage trainers in Calicut, 9 (31 per cent) were women.

A notable feature of the 4th stage training was the convening of 'project clinics'. A few panchayats with especially interesting or advanced projects presented repeating seminars giving detailed descriptions of their work. In one classroom we heard Chapparapadavu's bridge team explain with charts and drawings to 60 activists at a time how they did it. Nearby were sessions on Thrikkunnappuzha panchayat's 'Total Cleanliness Programme', Thanalur's

'People's Health Programme', Thykkattusseri's 'Tissue Culture' (lab-based orchids and other plants), Kunnouparambu's Water Conservation Society, and Madikkai's creation of an educational complex of primary through high school, along with a 'study festival' to encourage the idea that learning is fun. Pelicode panchayat representatives explained their project to install 100 per cent water-sealed latrines. Peringomvaykkara and Pappinissen Panchayats each described animal husbandry projects that included artificial insemination facilities and rabies inoculation. Many projects involved KSSP activists. Nearly all the projects included data collection surveys and the survey forms were shared among the participants. Trainees were thus exposed to a variety of possible development activities along with concrete tools to carry them out: instead of learning from government officials from higher levels, they were learning from 'experts' otherwise like themselves. At the clinics, women were six of 69 presenters.²²

One- or 5-day training sessions for ordinary people have limits. Planners are aware that certain projects require expert knowledge. India has a mandatory retirement age of 55 for those in public service. Since Kerala's life expectancy is 70, most Kerala communities have a supply of experts with free time to give to local development. A special effort is being made to attract such experts into a 'Voluntary Technical Corps' (VTC). Using the slogan 'Life Begins at 55', the State Planning Board began recruiting retirees to help evaluate and improve the quality of local project documents in March. The initial call brought forth 4,000 volunteers. State-level conventions were organised for retired bank officers and college teachers who were considered valuable resource persons to help with project evaluation and write-ups. Contacts were also made with professional associations of doctors, engineers, and accountants.²³ Willy-nilly, these experts were engaging in further education of the task force members by making suggestions on the project proposals.

PANJAL

Most Kerala panchayats are not like Chapparapadavu, Karimba, or the other exemplary project sites. How has the campaign affected more ordinary places? Panjal panchayat lies in the midlands of central Kerala along the Bharatapuzha.²⁴ The Ninth Plan campaign has unfolded there without any spectacular bridges or other projects. The grama sabhas were held on time, and the participation rate was average. Some activists complain that not enough young people are becoming involved. The development report runs to 100 pages – about medium length. The most unusual aspect of the report is its title, "A New

Adiratram". Panjal was the home of a famous Vedic priest, Iti Ravi Nambudiri, who, until his death a few years ago, was one of the last men in India able to chant the complete 'Sama Veda', one of the four ancient texts of Hinduism. In 1975, Iti Ravi and other Nambudiri priests conducted an 'adiratram', a rare and involved Vedic ritual lasting for several days that was filmed by Frits Staal of the University of California at Berkeley. The university's audio-visual department markets a 30-minute video of the event as "the oldest religious ritual in the world".²⁵

Panjal activists saw people's participation and the Ninth Plan as the new beginning of an old tradition. The symbolism of 'a new adiratram' is ambiguous, however, since much of an adiratram is repetitive and much of the people's participation is in the nature of bystanding. One leftist critic charged that the grama sabhas and development seminar in Panjal involved too many speeches and too much audience listening. "You were doing all the talking and we were only listening. I felt very agitated by this", he told his ward representative during a heated discussion on the verandah next to where part of the 1975 adiratram had taken place.²⁶ Other critics said that key elders had not been approached for their valuable organising experience and that the campaign was in danger of becoming just another government programme – the very thing it should be avoiding.

The Panjal development report, however, indicates a lot of serious thinking about local problems. Specific plans are laid for repair of several canals and ponds needed to make the irrigation system work more efficiently. Problems of coconut and rubber cultivation are spelled out. A list of needed repairs and improvements on the village high school reflects input from the teachers and staff. The details of water lines linking up the most needy areas of the village are given. Sixty-five specific road repairs are listed, with exact locations and exact improvements: widening, enlarging the curve, reducing the steepness to prevent accidents. Other proposals call for rerouting electric lines away from the rice fields to make it safer for tractors to enter the fields – which the widened pathways would make possible. A survey revealed that 70 per cent of houses do not have water-sealed toilets. Suggestions for installation of high-efficiency cook stoves and solar-powered street lights (available in India for a few years) indicate a high level of knowledge among panchayat activists and the success of the statewide training programmes.

Because of Panjal's cultural and historical significance, local activists have also proposed the construction of a museum with adiratram and other artefacts to attract tourists.²⁷ Across India, religious pilgrimages

are a major component of the tourist industry – a visit to Panjal with its 500-year-old temple and a museum to the great local singers of the Sama Veda might well be popular.

WHY THIS CAMPAIGN?

Why is democratic decentralisation taking place in Kerala? One reason is the achievements of the progressive movements that have held sway in the state for most of the past 50 years. Several elected Communist Party and Left Front governments have carried out the demands of large-scale popular movements leading to high material quality of life indicators that some development experts refer to collectively as 'The Kerala Model'. With an official per capita income of \$ 180 in 1993 (all-India was \$ 300), Kerala had an adult literacy rate of 91 per cent (versus an all-India rate of 48 per cent), life expectancy of 69 for men and 73 for women (all-India average of 61), an infant mortality of 13 per 1,000 (better than Washington DC; and versus the all-India rate of 80) and a birth rate of 17 (all-India 29).²⁸ Virtually all additional statistical indicators such as vaccination rates, maternal mortality, child labour, nutritional status, access to medical care, and availability of roads, schools, and other public facilities, show Kerala with a substantial lead over the rest of India and all similar-income third world countries. The statistical indicators of the Kerala Model are the outcome of decades of careful organising by left wing activists, enormous sacrifices and dedication by ordinary people, and the rise of an unusually talented and thoughtful group of cadre in the unions, peasant associations, women's groups, and left parties. The state's ecology and general historical background may also have played a role.²⁹ Kerala's people are educated, motivated, and aware of their rights and talents. They have participated in victorious struggles: they are optimistic and thus potentially mobilisable in a popular campaign. But they are also worried.

The positive energy and creativity spreading across Kerala's communities could blind the outside observer to some harsh realities. Despite its many achievements, the Kerala Model is in trouble. Lagging industrial growth has combined with stagnant agricultural output to produce low incomes and high unemployment. Low economic growth has resulted in a series of fiscal crises for the state government forcing it to reduce public spending in some of the most cherished areas of the Kerala model: education, school lunches, subsidised food prices for the poor, access to medical care. And perhaps 15 per cent of the state's people have been left out of the model. On top of all these problems, Kerala faces a major environmental crisis from severe deforestation in the western ghat

mountains, leading to soil erosion there and water logging in lowland areas. Polluted rivers and foreign hi-tech offshore fishing operations are reducing the fish catch. And, like every place on earth at present, Kerala faces the menace of the New World Order with its third world avatar: structural adjustment.

KERALA IN CURRENT NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

The New World Order threatens what Kerala intellectual M A Oommen has called 'euthanasia for the Kerala model'.³⁰ The one-power world remaining in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union has hit India particularly hard. As a state friendly to the Soviet Union, India built its economy partly on Soviet industrial and scientific aid and on public sector investment. In the 1990s, World Bank and IMF structural adjustment policies have come to New Delhi with their typical emphasis on privatisation, lowering of wages and benefits, abolition of protectionist tariffs (that are essential to many Indian industries at least in the short run), and general emphasis on production of wealth without regard to its distribution.³¹ Kerala's left wing activists recognise that inevitably they will have to make some compromises with structural adjustment, but they cannot accept its overall terms – their right wing political opponents do that already. Furthermore, they apparently have no intention of handing over most of the economy to the largest private capitalists whose profit-making desires are inconsistent with the needs of most of the state's people. Even now they are struggling with private bankers who are moving capital out of the state rather than invest in Kerala's future: the bottom line is that profits and local development do not automatically mesh.³²

What about national and state-level planning? Since independence in 1947, India has engaged in vaguely Soviet-style Five-Year Plans and Indian states have followed suit. Even before the collapse of European socialism, however, many Kerala leftists realised that overemphasis on centralised planning entailed inherent weaknesses. As identified in one Ninth Plan document, centralised planning:³³

- Degenerated into un-coordinated, mutually exclusive schemes by various government departments...that did not provide optimal utilisation of resources...
- Was bureaucratic and gave people no say in its formulation or execution...
- Led to overlapping programmes, duplication and waste of resources, and laxness in monitoring.

Kerala's Ninth Plan emphasises co-ordinated village-level plans with individual government departments playing subsidiary roles. Bureaucrats are to become assistants

of the people's plan rather than order-giving officials. Laxness in monitoring is to be replaced by 'transparency', meaning that all the accounts are visible to everyone who wants to see them. Transparency makes it possible to use local community pressure to reduce corruption.

Other reasons for local planning: Kerala's complex geographical and social diversity means that officials in the capital city might not know what is best for particular panchayats. And Kerala's rich history of mass movements and its high level of education mean that local participation could overcome the bane of much international participation-oriented development where democratic structures on paper just become new mechanisms for elite dominance and exploitation of the poor.

Decentralised planning does not mean complete abrogation of higher level responsibilities. We see in the extensive training programmes that state planning board decentralisers have pretty clear ideas about how they want decentralisation to proceed. But the ultimate goal is a substantial relaxation of central control and substantial community empowerment. Ninth Plan theorists T M Thomas Isaac and K N Harilal describe the campaign as leading to

a system of multi-level planning, where the lowest unit is allowed to plan and implement everything that can be performed most effectively at that level and only the residual is left to the higher levels.³⁴

Fine-sounding words, a fine alternative to over-bureaucratic, over-centralised, big-government planning of the past – but grama sabhas, development seminars, over-55 volunteers, mini power stations, and people's bridges – can they really compete with an unchecked, aggressive new world order of capitalist bankers and industrialists whose financial and political powers seem unlimited?

KALLIASSERI

Ravan worked for years in a soap factory in Emakulam. Now retired, he works on, sharing his technical knowledge with the 10 women worker-owners of the Tushara Soap Co-operative. Tushara means 'dew', and plenty of it is on the ground in the early morning when the women start their soap-making on the stage of the outdoor community theatre lent to them by Kalliasseri panchayat free of cost. Some days they make soap; other days they go through the community house-to-house to sell their product. "Our product is not that bad, and neither is the sympathy from our neighbours who often buy it", said one of the women, who looked exhausted when we arrived at their workshop at 3 pm. Stirring chemicals in vats, carrying drums of materials, packaging soap flakes, and selling door-to-

door make up a hard 6-day work week, but at least in Kalliasseri a fair amount of inexpensive day care is available: costs run from nothing to Rs 15 per day. The panchayat, a leftist stronghold for decades, has some of the most extensive social services in Kerala, including a health centre with 12 beds and 2 doctors, 36 reading rooms and libraries, and several child care centres, nurseries, and schools.

Kalliasseri is the inspiration for much of Kerala's decentralised planning effort. Starting in the early 1990s, activists there created a voluntary organisation to promote local development. Much of the energy came from T Gangadharan, a second grade teacher, KSSSP activist, CPM member, and panchayat ward delegate, who helped organise the Kalliasseri Development Society. "TG," as he is now known throughout Kerala, tapped into Kalliasseri's strong tradition of volunteerism, mutual aid, and mass organising to produce several achievements that now inspire part of the Ninth Plan campaign. Kalliasseri development volunteers built an 825 metre long canal in one day, draining a previously waterlogged area of rice fields. They mapped the resources of their village, reorganised their schools, installed high-efficiency cook stoves and solar street lights, set up a shrimp farm in a swamp area, and created dry-season vegetable co-operatives that generated employment and brought down the cost of food.³⁵ They are still fighting the Southern Indian Railways for a road crossing to improve traffic flow near the village centre.

Despite Kalliasseri's many successes, TG thinks they have not made meaningful progress with women's employment. "We [men] have to stand with them at first", to bring them out of the home and into the workplace, he told us.³⁶ Women's work participation rate in Kerala is one of the lowest in India, but 20 per cent of panchayat board members are women, probably a high figure for the country.³⁷ Kalliasseri's panchayat president since 1995 is Janaky Teacher (titles are commonly part of Kerala names), a woman activist and leader whose dynamism and dedication has furthered the experiment begun in 1992. Three other women sit on the 11-member panchayat board. Tushara Soap Co-operative combines male activism with women's energy and skills. Janaky Teacher and the men pushed for a grant from an Indian national programme called "Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA)". DWCRA provides low-interest loans for co-operatives of 10 or more women. Subsidies are available for technical training. Amounts vary by the project. The Tushara Soap Co-operative got enough to start up, but the going is rough and in January, the women were earning a salary of only Rs 15 a day, one-fourth of the wages of an agricultural labourer and just

enough to cover day care above the nursery level. But they get work all year—agricultural labourers get work only 100 days or less—and when their set-up loan and their investments in some machinery are paid off, they will be able to increase what they pay themselves.³⁸

At Samatha printers, a similar story can be told. We watched them printing bus tickets. The 'electric' press must be hand fed one sheet at a time and the wages are only Rs 10 per day, but again it is permanent work, it is their company, and when their loans are repaid they can raise their wages. Six of the original women founders married and left the workshop, but their investment still brings a small return on the shares. A more established nearby printing co-operative provided their training; they say they have no shortage of orders.

At the farthest northern edge of Kalliasseri 10 women bake spicy dipped peanuts, spiral cookies, and sugar dipped wheat flour chips. Their high-efficiency 'oven' was developed by KSSP; more like a wok than an oven pan, they fry as much as they bake. Like Tushara Soap, they go house-to-house with their DWCRA-financed snacks. They average Rs 25 per day from the bakery.

But these 10 women also run a co-operative jasmine, coconut, and pepper farm from which they generate additional income. Theirs is the original women's co-operative, founded in Kalliasseri in 1992. They would like to upgrade the farm, but the land is owned by the state department of industries which could develop or sell the land at any time, destroying their hard-won fields. Rumours have it that the new branch of Kerala University will build dormitories or a library here. Whether the Ninth Plan campaign can protect them remains to be seen.

Several other co-operatives exist in Kalliasseri. Among the most important are handloom centres which export exquisite draperies to Germany; the women fashion them at foot-pumped sewing machines for Rs 30 a day. As their skills increase, wages rise and benefits develop. Because the businesses are worker-owned, only workers reap the benefits.

Worker-owned and managed co-operatives are the most democratic form of production and delivery of goods and services.³⁹ If the Ninth Plan is about democratic development, Kalliasseri's co-operative network suggests a long-term direction. In a recent development, some of Kalliasseri's co-operatives have begun to sell each others' products. They already sell to each other. Can a village-based network of worker-owned co-operatives be built up in Kalliasseri? Could it happen in other Kerala villages? Could economies built on worker-owned businesses and democratic planning of infrastructure and public services become

an alternative to today's exploitative, non-egalitarian, bureaucratic, elite-dominated 'New World Order?' Kerala's planners do not dare think so far ahead, but we who observe their thought-provoking, courageous efforts from afar should watch for what they can teach us.

Notes

- 1 Statistical and historical data on Chapparapadavu come from the Chapparapadavu Panchayat Development Report, 1996, especially pages 10, 12, 15-16, and 61-62. Thanks to G K Thampy of Thiruvananthapuram for the English translation of the report.
- 2 Our research itinerary included the capital city of Thiruvananthapuram and the cities of Thrissur, Kozhikode and Kannur. We conducted observation and interview research in the village panchayats of Pallichal, Balaramapuram, Methala, Kodungallur, Panjal, Chapparapadavu, and Kalliasseri. Our research trip to New Delhi on December 9-13, 1996 and Kerala from December 14, 1996 to January 17, 1997 was 80 per cent financed by the Montclair State University Global Education Centre.
- 3 One Indian rupee was worth about \$30 in 1996. The Kannur district per capita income in 1995-96—the latest year for which a figure is available—was Rs 7,940 at current prices. The figure is from GOK 1997:15.
- 4 George (1972). See Franke (1996:83-84) for quotes from Asan on the evils of the caste system and from his teacher, Sri Narayana Guru, another of Kerala's famous caste reformers.
- 5 Interview with panchayat president PP Balan, December 9, 1996, New Delhi.
- 6 Kumaram and Govindan's system and the description of the construction are taken from an account of the Chapparapadavu bridge prepared for the fourth stage training—Calicut, etc, as translated by G K Thampy and interview notes from our visit to Chapparapadavu on January 7, 1997.
- 7 Kerala State Planning Board 1997a:3
- 8 Interview with T M Thomas Isaac, December 9, 1996, New Delhi.
- 9 George (1997:83).
- 10 Oommen (1995).
- 11 Shaji (1996:4).
- 12 Observations and interview notes from our visit to Methala, January 4 and 5, 1997.
- 13 "C-DIT [Centre for the Development of Imaging Technology] urged to set up resource information systems", and "Informatics system to strengthen people's planning", *The Indian Express*, July 23, 1997. Kerala benefits in this endeavour by having a substantial amount of fibre optic cable already in place and modern telephone hook-ups in every village. One-third of Indian villages generally have at least one direct-dial phone.
- 14 For overviews of the plan in its five stages, see Krishnakumar (1996), 'The Campaign Schedule', *Frontline*, August 23, 1996, p 104, and Thomas Isaac and Harilal, (1997).
- 15 Thomas Isaac and Harilal (1997:55).
- 16 Interview with P P Balan, president of Chapparapadavu panchayat, December 9, 1996 in New Delhi.
- 17 Parameswaran, M P (1990), 'Kerala's Power Predicament: Issues and Solutions', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25(37):2089 and 2090.
- 18 Krishnakumar (1997:41).

- 19 For an overview of the history of the KSSP, see Thomas Isaac, T M, Richard W Franke, and M P Parameswaran (1997).
- 20 Krishnakumar (1997:42).
- 21 Specifics on the Karimba-Meenvallam project from Kerala State Planning Board 1997.
- 22 Observations at the session and interview with Srikumar Chattopadhyay, January 10, 1997. Kerala State Planning Board (1997b:67).
- 23 Panjal is the site of our major research into Kerala's earlier radical reforms and their impact on the level of village inequality. See Franke (1996).
- 24 The video is titled 'Altar of Fire', 1977. A 1975 performance of an ancient Hindu Vedic ritual. Robert Gardner and Frits Staal, University of California Extension Media Centre, Berkeley, 45 minutes.
- 25 Interviews in Panjal, December 29 and 30, 1996.
- 26 Panjal Development Report and interviews with panchayat activists on December 29 and 30, 1996.
- 27 For a summary of the details and qualifications concerning these statistics, see Franke and Chasin 1994:ii-vii and 11-14; and Franke and Chasin 1996:3. Washington DC's infant mortality rate for 1993 was 17.4, and the national US rate for African Americans that year was 20.6. See US Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1996, Table 127, p 93.
- 28 A brief history of Kerala's achievements and the possible reasons for them appears in Franke and Chasin 1994. Jeffrey (1993) gives a more detailed account with a different explanation.
- 29 Oommen (1994:13).
- 30 World Bank pronouncements often differ from the effective policies the Bank promotes. In its most recent India report, for example, a Bank spokesperson calls for more investment in health and education, ironically praising Kerala for its progress - exactly the opposite as the effects of structural adjustment programmes in Africa and Latin America. See *The Hindu*, August 26, 1997 for coverage of the World Bank report on India and Franke and Chasin (1996) for examples of structural adjustment's consequences in other countries.
- 31 See *The Indian Express*, July 24, 1997, for example, for a story on bankers' resistance to government attempts to get them to provide more credit to Kerala development projects. An ongoing dispute centres around the apparent use by banks of Kerala savings deposits to fund loans in other parts of India where the returns are higher for the banks.
- 32 Kerala State Planning Board (1997b:6).
- 33 Thomas Isaac and Harilal (1997:53).
- 34 For more details on Kalliasseri's innovative programmes, see Franke and Chasin (1994:xvii-xviii), Thomas Isaac et al (1995), and Thomas Isaac, Franke, and Parameswaran (1997).
- 35 Interview with T Gangadharan, December 17, 1996, Thiruvananthapuram.
- 36 Computed by us from Bhaskar (1997:WS-14), Bhaskar (1997:WS-16) found that 54 per cent of female panchayat representatives came from the left parties.
- 37 Kalliasseri vignettes from interview with T Gangadharan, Thiruvananthapuram, December 17, 1996 and our visit to Kalliasseri, January 8, 1997. We also visited Kalliasseri in January and October 1993.
- 38 For an advanced and large-scale Kerala example, see Thomas Isaac, Franke, and Raghavan (1998).

Bibliography

- Aryad Panchayat (1996): *Development Report*. Baramapuram Panchayat (1996): *Development Report*. (Malayalam only).
- Bhaskar, Manu (1997): 'Women Panchayat Members in Kerala: A Profile', *Economic and Political Weekly* 32(17):WS13-WS20, April 26.
- Chapparapadavu Panchayat (1996): *Development Report*.
- Franke, Richard W (1996): *Life Is a Little Better: Redistribution as a Development Strategy in Nadur Village, Kerala*, Promilla and Company, New Delhi.
- Franke, Richard W, and Barbara H Chasin (1994) [orig 1989]: *Kerala: Radical Reform as Development in an Indian State*, Oakland, California. Food First, and New Delhi. Promilla and Company, second edition, 1996. Is the Kerala model sustainable? Lessons from the past: prospects for the future. Paper presented at the International Conference on Kerala's Development Experience: National and Global Dimensions. New Delhi, December 9, 1996. Sponsored by the Institute of Social Sciences. Text available at <http://www.chss.montclair.edu/anthro/deconf.html>
- George, Jose (1997): 'Panchayats and Participatory Planning in Kerala', *Indian Journal of Public Administration*, 43(1):79-92, January-March.
- George, K M (1972): *Kumaran Asan*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi.
- Government of Kerala (1997): *Economic Review 1996*, State Planning Board, Thiruvananthapuram.
- Jeffrey, Robin (1993): *Politics, Women and Well Being: How Kerala Became 'A Model'*, Oxford University Press, Delhi.
- Kalliasseri Panchayat (1996): *Development Report*, (Malayalam only).
- Kerala State Planning Board (1996): 'People's Campaign for Ninth Plan: An Approach Paper', Kerala State Planning Board People's Plan Campaign Cell, Thiruvananthapuram.
- (1996a): 'Power to the People: People's Plan - Ninth Plan: A Note', training programme for resource persons, Kerala State Planning Board People's Plan Campaign Cell, Thiruvananthapuram.
- (1997): 'Sample Panchayat Development Projects with People's Participation', *Ninth Plan, People's Plan: Fourth Round Training Manual*, Kerala State Planning Board People's Plan Campaign Cell, Thiruvananthapuram.
- (1997a): 'We Can Create a Better Tomorrow: People's Campaign for the Ninth Five-Year Plan', voluntary technical corps, Kerala State Planning Board People's Plan Campaign Cell, Thiruvananthapuram.
- (1997b): *Ninth Plan, People's Plan: A Review of the First Year's Activities*, Kerala State Planning Board People's Plan Campaign Cell, Thiruvananthapuram.
- Krishnakumar, R (1996): 'A Kerala Initiative: The People's Campaign for the Ninth Plan', *Frontline*, 13(16):102-04, August 23.
- (1996a): 'The Campaign Schedule', *Frontline*, 13(16):104, August 23.
- (1997): 'Current Crisis: Kerala Looks to Small Hydro Power Projects', *Frontline*, 14(13):41-42, July 11.
- Krishnaswami, Sridhar (1997): 'World Bank Recipe for Fighting Poverty', *The Hindu*, August 27, p 14.
- Methala Panchayat (1996): *Not from the Old Virtues but from the New Vices: Possibilities for Regional Development*, Methala Panchayat Development Report (Malayalam only; English translation in preparation.)
- Mukarji, Nirmal (1996): 'Panchayat Raj: Kerala's Initiatives', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 31(38):2577.
- Namboodiripad, E M S (1996): 'A Kerala Experiment: Planning from Below - and Above', *Frontline*, October 18, pp 91-92.
- Nayanar, E K (1997): 'A Note on the Approach to the Ninth Plan', Paper presented at the National Development Council Meeting, New Delhi, January 16, chief minister of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram.
- Neenmani Panchayat (1996): *Development Report*.
- Oommen, M A (1994): 'Kerala and the New World Order: Some Tentative Hypotheses', Paper presented at the First International Congress on Kerala Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, August 27-29.
- (1995): *Devolution of Resources from the State to the Panchayati Raj Institutions: Search for a Normative Approach*, Institute of Social Sciences, Occasional Paper Series, No 18, New Delhi.
- (1996): 'Working Towards a Sustainable Kerala/India', presidential address at the International Conference on Kerala's Development Experience: National and Global Dimensions, December 8, New Delhi, p 10, sponsored by the Institute of Social Sciences.
- Pallichal Panchayat (1996): *Development Report*, (Malayalam only).
- Panjal Panchayat (1996): *A New Adiratrnam: Development Report*, (English translation by M Subramanian Nambudiri).
- Parameswaran, M P (1990): 'Kerala's Power Predicament: Issues and Solutions', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25(37):2089-90.
- Shaji, H (1996): 'Methala Panchayat: Setto Create History', *The Indian Express*, December 21, *Expressweek*, p 4.
- Thomas Isaac, T M and K N Harilal (1996): *Planning for Empowerment: The People's Campaign for Decentralised Planning in Kerala*, paper presented at the International Conference on Kerala's Development Experience: National and Global Dimensions, December 8-11, New Delhi, sponsored by the Institute of Social Sciences.
- (1997): 'Planning for Empowerment: People's Campaign for Decentralised Planning in Kerala', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 32(1-2):53-58, January 4-11.
- Thomas Isaac, T M, Richard W Franke, and M P Parameswaran (1997): 'From Antifeudalism to Sustainable Development: The Kerala People's Science Movement', *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 29(3):34-44, July-September.
- Thomas Isaac, T M, Richard W Franke, and Pyralal Raghavan (1998): *Kerala Dinesh Beedi: The Dynamics of Work and Democracy in an Indian Industrial Co-operative*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, (forthcoming).
- Thomas Isaac, T M, P V Unnikrishnan, T Gangadharan, Sreekumar Chattopadhyay, Lalitha Bhai Sathyan, and Ajay Kumar Varma (1995): *Kalliasseri Experiment in Local Level Planning*, Munder, Palakkad, Integrated Rural Technology Centre, prepared for the Seminar on Local Level Planning - Learning from Kalliasseri, October 2-3, Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram.