DECENTRALISATION AND LOCAL DEVELOPMENT – A STUDY OF 
GRAMAPANCHAYAT INSTITUTIONS IN MEENACHIL TALUK

INTRODUCTION

Decentralization is an inevitable dimension as far as local development is concerned and for ensuring participatory democracy at the grass root level. Any kind of development excluding the above two important concepts have little significance in a democratic society. Therefore, decentralization assumes great significance as far as local development and governance of the local government organizations are concerned.

In this new era of globalization, decentralization is the abiding principle which lends the development process a vast and comprehensive dimension, touching, nay, controlling all aspects of life from bullock-cart to metro-rail. This is a salutary and welcome change that gives scope to avail of all the benefits of large scale production and world-wide marketing. But unless we can strictly ensure that the growth process is pro-poor, pro-women, pro-nature and pro-jobs, it will do more harm than good. As market integration and technological innovation render the national frontiers more permeable, it is crucial to put in place and strengthen the systems of negotiation, regulation and decentralized governance. These can ensure that the voices and concerns of the poorest of the poor, in keeping with Mahatma Gandhi’s exhortation and example, are centre-stage in policy dialogue at the global, national and regional levels.

The term development is multifarious and it encompasses economic, political, social, educational and cultural aspects. The economic development concerns with production or output and related activities, particularly with the commercial or monetary aspects of
these activities; the social perspective reflects concern for those aspects of development which are not directly or primarily concerned with production, output or material needs for the general well-being of individuals or groups of people; the political perspective is concerned with the distribution of power among different groups or individuals, particularly the power to control or make decisions about the use of resources (Conyers and Hill 1984: 28-30).

The two most common indicators of development are per capita income (national income divided by the size of the population) and the average annual rate of growth in the national income. However, experience shows that the GDP growth does not have a decisive impact on the life of the poor. Therefore, it is essential to understand development from the perspective of human well-being. Seers provide a list of eight important parameters for development: enough food, employment, equality, education, democracy, national independence, equal status for women, and sustainability (Seers 1979: 11-2). He further states that if just one or two of these conditions are found neglected, then it cannot be termed development even if the per capita income increases to a higher level.

Moreover, it has been widely argued that the means of development is not just to increase incomes, but to increase people’s choices which may extend to standard education, good health, true democracy, cultural identity, social security, sustainability, and all other areas of human well-being. Development must involve the entire society, not just the economy, and the people must be put at the centre of the stage (Haq 1997). Some scholars have pin-pointed another crucial ingredient, stressing that the expansion of social opportunity is a key to development (Dreze and Sen 1997). Extension of basic education, better health care, equitable land reforms and easy
access to provisions of social security would enable the marginalized sections of the society to lead a life, free from the shackles of taboos and make a better use of markets.

The governance process should aim at eliminating disparities and promote comprehensive development. It should concern with mankind and should meet the basic needs of human beings, particularly the poor. It has been, therefore, widely argued that decentralized governance is an instrument for this multifaceted development and it can ensure effective and equitable development at the grass-root level (Maro 1990; Turner 2000:115; World Bank 2000:107). The reason is quite simple: locally elected representatives know the need of their small constituency better and are in an advantageous position to provide best services, catering to their electorate’s preferences. In such a set-up it is easier for the electorates to hold the elected bodies accountable for their performance. Effectiveness of governance means maximizing its contribution to development, or to the increase in welfare (Higgins 1992:3). Effectiveness involves minimizing the functional expenditure and getting the maximum amount of output. Equity means not to allow unreasonable inequalities of income, wealth, power, privilege, and social status in society (Higgins 1992:38). Similarly, UNDP observes that all men and women have equal rights to opportunities to improve or maintain their wellbeing (UNDP 1997). Sustainability is a long-term process, which includes the establishment of the basic social and economic institutions necessary for continuing the economic growth. According to UNDP, “The needs of this generation must be met without compromising the right of future generations to be free from poverty and deprivation and to exercise their basic capabilities” (UNDP 1997). We can’t ignore the fact that there has been debate over this definition. It has been branded as a definition of metaphor and so there can be
little use of such a definition; for the sustainability of the institution in
the development process depends on the management of the
institution, people’s participation, performance of scheme/plan
implementation, local capability, capacity of resource mobilization and
focus on the benefit continuation for a long period of time,

In the present study, development refers to the progress achieved in decentralized governance per se and its effective, equitable and sustainable delivery of services to the satisfaction of the people.

Effectiveness is operationalised as an ability of decentralized governance to the degree of satisfaction of the people about the delivery of services.

Equity is defined as the ability of decentralized governance to distribute and to deliver services fairly and justly in the society to the satisfaction of disadvantaged groups, particularly the SCs, STs, women, minorities and more especially of people below the poverty line (BPL).

The word decentralisation signifies autonomy to local units in decision making, especially with regard to incentives for investment capital, market access and devolution of powers to the gramapanchayat institutions.

The researcher presumes that gramapanchayat institutions in Meenachil Taluk are not functioning in perfect harmony with the tenets of decentralisation as envisioned in the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Indian Constitution. This prompted him to choose this important topic, decentralisation and local development – A study of Gramapanchayat Institutions in Meenachil Taluk. He believes that the outcome of the research will enable him to ascertain to what extent
Panchayatraj institutions are functioning with decentralized autonomy.

**STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Prior to the introduction of 73rd constitutional amendment Act, participation of the people in rural governance remained skewed in favour of the rural elite, with a few from the marginalized group co-opted into the system. The majority of the rural poor and the other vulnerable sections including the women were kept outside the purview of participation in rural governance. 73rd constitutional amendment by providing reservation to the women and other marginalized, created adequate space for them to participate in rural governance. In the present study, the quest of the researcher was to analyse as to how far true decentralization and participatory democracy have been attained in the Gramapanchayat institutions in Meenachil Taluk and to what extent it has contributed towards local development. The researcher is adamant and stick to the view that the Panchayatiraj as visualized by Mahatma Gandhi is quite possible only if decentralization and participatory democracy have been put to practice with a strong will and commitment.

If real decentralization is not taking place at the grass root level, the researcher contented that the vision and desire of the local people are not adequately met and the developments taking place are contrary to their expectations and desires. The researcher also believes that such woes and worries of the rural poor are still prevailing in the study area.

**RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY**

The researcher feels that a fool-proof decentralization and local development in accordance with the true spirit of the Panchayatiraj
have not materialized in the functioning of the Gramapanchayat institutions in Meenachil Taluk. He also strongly believes that a thorough revamping of the functioning of the Gramapanchayat institutions gearing towards the realization of the fundamental objectives of this ideal is indispensable. Hence, he yearns to make a thorough probe into the actual functioning of decentralized administration in the study area and how far the flaws made in this field impedes development. He wishes to spot-out the flaws and deficiencies of the present functioning of the Panchayatiraj institutions and put forward certain constructive suggestions to ensure that decentralization and local development stream-out of the functioning of the Gramapanchayat institutions. It is also the strong resolve of the researcher to make the probe free from pre-conceived prejudices and extraneous influences so as to make a substantial contribution towards the effective and fruitful of the Panchayatiraj system at the field level.

THEORETICAL FRAME WORK

Mahatma Gandhi and the legacy of democratic decentralization in India

Was Mahatma Gandhi a product of his milieu, and his relevance circumscribed by place and time? Was he an ordinary person who rose to extraordinary heights or a person extraordinary? These and similar questions invoke endless debate and discussion. It can be safely argued, however, that the same milieu of British colonialism, the two World Wars, of racism, of apartheid, produced many great personalities but only one Gandhi that the world recognised as a unique personality.

I would like to submit that the relevance of Gandhi is best assessed not just in terms of his contextual responses to the objective
conditions of his time for bringing about social transformation through non-violent non-cooperation (*Satyagraha*), the spinning wheel technique (*charkha*), self-reliance concept (*swadeshi*), the communitarian Village Republic (*panchayatiraj*), ‘wantlessness’ (*aparigraha*), as the keynote of the active process of the development – built in terms of the conceptual and theoretical abstractions that lie embedded that transgress the limits of time and space in these innovative ideas. If I were to single out some of the most significant abstractions of universal import which most in the world have come to recognize, I would turn to the following contributions:

- The transformatory power of truth and non-violence in thought and deed (the non-violent revolt by Buddhist monks for restoration of democracy in Myanmar; the non-violent ouster of authoritarian regimes as in Iran and the Philippines; and other examples)
- The concept and theory of participatory democracy, embedded in his vision of *Panchayati Raj*. This is a counter to the elitist representative democracy in the western formulation.
- The search for a non-exploitative technology, a cooperative mode of production and trusteeship that would make for an economic order commensurate with distributive and social justice.
- Emancipatory power of women and the rejection of social inequalities.
- Priority of preventive health care over prescriptive medication.
• Humankind as an integral part of Nature, and not apart from Nature. A principle that is now upheld by ecologists and environmentalists the world over.

• The primacy of obligations over rights. Rights as being embedded in one’s obligation to the other.

• The paradigmatic alternative to the western concept of the nation and nation-state.

I shall restrict myself to the legacy of democratic decentralisation and the deepening of democracy in India, and presumably in the world, that Gandhi bequeathed for the future. Embedded in his search for an ideal polity, based on panchayati raj lies the formulation of participatory democracy. Like most of his ideas, participatory democracy is a contested terrain of clashing and competing interests and ideologies. I wish to demonstrate that in India, the dialectics of contestation over panchayati raj, has taken an irreversible, albeit a zig-zag direction, consistent with Gandhi’s formulation of participatory democracy. My focus will be on rural India.

INDIGENOUS POLITY AND GRASSROOT DEMOCRACY

At a time when democracy was defined exclusively in terms of the representative democracy of the West (Parliamentary or Republican), Gandhi stood for a democratic polity that would be ‘centred’ on the innumerable self-governing village communities, in which the individual will be the unit and ‘every village will be a republic or a panchayat, having absolute autonomy in every field of human activity. This would not exclude ‘dependence on and willing help from neighbours or the world.’ In such an arrangement ‘there will be ever-widening, never-ascending circles.’ (Harijan 1946: 8-10) His vision was that of a ‘complete republic, independent of its neighbours
for its vital wants and yet interdependent in many others in which
dependence is a necessity... Nonviolence with its technique of
Satyagraha and non-cooperation will be the sanction of the village
community.’ (Harijan 1942: 12) His elaborations, from time to time, on
gram swaraj were so many being enhancements of an ongoing exercise
to portray a holistic picture of the village republic ‘though never
realisable in its completeness.’ (Harijan 1946 (a): 16-17) Embedded in
this romanticisation was the hard structural reality of rural
governance that was native and indigenous to India’s unparalleled
complexity. During the Indian national movement, he spearheaded the
establishment of village panchayats by the Congress Committee, and
was fully aware of the problems these panchayats suffered from.

Consistent with his bottom-up approach, he had proposed an
alternative to the Westminster model:

There are seven hundred thousand villages in India, each of
which would be organised according to the will of the citizens, all of
them voting. Then there would be seven hundred thousand votes.
Each village, in other words, would have one vote. The villagers would
elect the district administration; the district administrations would
elect the provincial administration, and these, in turn, elect the
President who is the head of the executive (Quoted by Mehta 1964:
43).

Gandhi believed that the real development of India was possible
through its indigenous political system in which the centralised state
would wield only such power as was not within the scope of lower tiers
of participatory governance. The state was not the architect but the
facilitator of development. More positively, he was for a multi-layered
autonomous vertical integration of political institutions with its base
as India’s villages and its superstructure at the Centre - manifesting a
descending level of power over the people as one moved from base to superstructure.

In the post Second World War all-pervasive western paradigm of modernity, traditional values and institutions were regarded as obstacles to development and consequently and so it was in opposition to Gandhi’s ideals of gram swaraj and panchayati raj. India witnessed a contestation between forces of ‘modern’ representative democracy, and those who were convinced that the inadequacies of representative democracy could only be met by making democracy more participatory through the introduction of panchayati raj, transforming villages into ‘units of self-government’. The contestation began with the writing of the Constitution for free India.

**OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

(i) To make an in-depth study of the functioning of the Panchayatiraj institutions in the study area, and to ascertain as to whether the Panchayatiraj system is functioning strictly in conformity with the tenets of the Panchayatiraj Act as dreamt of by Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Nation,

(ii) To analyse how far the local people are satisfied with the existing participatory decision making process,

(iii) To make suggestions for improving the present system and make policy recommendations.

**METHODODOLOGY**

The methodology used to carry out the research study is detailed below:-
RESEARCH DESIGN

Considering the nature of the topic and to facilitate accomplishing the objectives of the research, the investigator adopted a survey and descriptive research design for the study. A survey is an attempt to collect data from the members of the population with respect to one or more variables. Descriptive research involves collecting data for analyzing and interpreting with a view to find answers to incidental questions in order to establish the objectives of the study.

POPULATION

All the gramapanchayat institutions in Meenachil Taluk constitute the population for the research.

SAMPLING DESIGN

For conducting the detailed enquiry all the 23 gramapanchayts in Meenachil Taluk were chosen as they are. From these 23 Gramapanchayts, 46 administrative officials and 46 peoples representatives were purposively chosen for gathering the relevant factual details.

From each one of the said gramapanchayts 15 common people were also drawn for gathering the required data. Here judgement sampling technique was employed. This was so done after getting acquainted with the local people in the course of the research. To facilitate this, the researcher frequented to the study area off and on. The sample size of the research is given herein under:
GRAMAPANCHAYAT INSTITUTIONS

(i) Administrative officials : 46

(ii) People’s representatives : 46

(iii) Local people : 345

Total : 437

TOOLS USED FOR DATA COLLECTION

(i) Separate structured questionnaires were designed and administered to the administrative staff and people’s representatives.

(ii) A separate structured interview schedule was prepared and used for gathering data from the local people.

(iii) Participant observation, personal and telephonic interviews were also scrupulously done for gathering the details.

(iv) Focus group discussion.

PILOT STUDY

Permission was obtained from the Panchayat Secretaries of Meenachil, Bharananganam and Karoor, which were selected for the pilot study and these entities were also included in the main study. The purpose of the study was explained in detail and consent was obtained from the study participants. The tools were administered to the Secretaries, one Administrative staff and one peoples representative each from the three Panchayats besides two local people each from the three Panchayats aforementioned.
Focus group discussion guides, questionnaires and interview schedule were pilot tested. The pilot study did not show any major problem in the design of the study and the tools were found to be feasible.

**DATA COLLECTION**

The data were collected over a period of 6 months from April 2012 to September 2012. The investigator personally contacted the Panchayat Secretaries incharge of the 23 Gramapanchayats and took permission to meet the subordinate staff of the respective Panchayats. The details regarding the people’s representatives were also gathered from the Secretaries concerned and they were personally contacted for gathering the relevant details. The researcher also personally acquainted himself with the local people in each one of the study units and established rapport with them for enabling him to gather the pertinent details. During the data collection process, the investigator explained to them the purpose of the study and assured them of the confidentiality of their responses and their consent was obtained.

In order to cover the entire study area, the researcher had to travel a lot and to undergo quite a lot of inconveniences as the panchayat officials could not keep the appointments at times owing to unexpected changes in their work schedules.

Focus group discussions (FGD) were also arranged with the local people and the panchayat representatives separately in randomly selected panchayt centers. Accordingly, four sessions were conducted for local people and two sessions for the people’s representatives. Assurance was made on the confidentiality of the information provided and that it would be used only for the purpose of research. The
people’s representatives whole-heartedly participated in the said discussions.

The researcher conducted an in-depth interview with all the selected Panchayat Secretaries and the Administrative Staff concerned in the chosen for research.

**MAJOR FINDINGS**

(1) It was found that 90 per cent of the elected people’s representatives in the study area were of the opinion that the formation of the Panchayatiraj institutions, invariably helped to plan and execute developmental activities at the grass root level.

(2) It was found that the elected people’s representatives were very much satisfied with the provision for enabling people to actively involve themselves in the planning deciding and implementing of various developmental activities.

(3) It was found that the participation in the periodic Gramasabha meetings in all the Gramapanchayat institutions in the study area is abysmally low. Not more than 10 per cent of the people which is the quorum required for a meeting, usually appeared at the venue. Even this paltry attendance had been achieved after considerable efforts on the part of the Ward member to woo the people. This shows lack of interest on the part of people of the Panchayat in matters connected with their own needs and welfare.

(4) It was found that the most educated people in the Gramapanchayat areas, kept themselves aloof from the deliberations of the Gramasabhas. The well-to-do segments showed little interest in the functioning of the Panchayatiraj.
This tendency greatly impeded the efficient functioning of the Gramapanchayats.

(5) It was found that in most of the Gramapanchayat institutions in the study area, the Presidents, the Vice-Presidents and the Chairpersons of various Standing Committees were forced to relinquish their posts after a brief period of one or two years in favour of the nominees of another of the coalition segments. This adversely affected the continuity of various developmental activities, initiated during the tenure of those predecessors. This often created chaos and discontinuity in the execution of many useful developmental activities, owing to the subjective preferences of the members concerned.

(6) It was found that many of the beneficiaries under the Kudumbasree programmes in the respective panchayat areas were being exploited by middlemen. For availing of the benefits under any such project or programme, the respective Kudumbasree unit is law-bound to prepare a project with full details of the financial assistance, requested for. Since these members do not have the knowledge and expertise in articulating feasible income generating projects, middlemen come to the picture and they charge huge commission from the beneficiaries for getting things done.

(7) It was found that the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), though implemented in all the Gramapanchayat institutions in the study area is yet to play a pivotal role in solving the unemployment problem, by carrying it to the common people at the bottom.
(8) It was found that the implementation of the Right to Information Act (RTI) has greatly helped to improve the overall governance of the Gramapanchayat institutions. This made it imperative for both the paid officials and the elected representatives to be more alert and faithful in the discharge of their duties and responsibilities.

(9) It was found that the Panchayatiraj institutions have only a nominal control over the officers, deputed from the various key Government Departments such as Agriculture, Health, Education, etc. Hence their best services and their faithfulness to their responsibilities cannot be utilized to the fullest possible extent.

(10) It was found that there is only a single Engineer to look after the Public Works and other important developmental activities in a group of Panchayats and as such he experiences great strain in spotting out and meeting the needs of two or three Panchayats, particularly in the fields of construction of bunts and digging of wells. This causes inordinate delay in completing important Public Works in time.

SUGGESTIONS

(1) As per the present Panchayatiraj system, there is uncertainty regarding the continuity of an elected incumbent for a second term as for the subsequent term the said ward might be declared a reserved ward for women. Therefore, it is suggested that a representative must be given at least two consecutive terms to serve in our
ward so as to enable him to fruitfully pursue the completion of developmental activities he or she has initiated. To this effect necessary amendment in the existing Panchayatiraj Act may be done.

(2) It is suggested that effective control / measures should be introduced to check the existing anomalies in the administration of the various individual benefit schemes in the Panchayatiraj institutions and steps should be taken to ensure that the benefits of a certain scheme did not go to the same beneficiaries time and again.

(3) It is suggested that stringent regulations must be introduced to ensure that the minutes of the Gramasabha meetings are recorded at the end of the meetings themselves and the recording is not postponed for a later time.

(4) It is suggested that provision must be made to recruit and appoint a Civil Engineer each in each of the Grama-Panchayatiraj institutions for the effective supervising of the public works and other important developmental activities.

CONCLUSION

Decentralization is the corner-stone of the Panchayatiraj institutions. Decentralization facilitates the wholehearted co-operation of the local people for ensuring participatory democracy at the grass-root level. The real needs of the local
people can be properly addressed if only decentralized governance becomes a reality. This lofty idea remained only as a myth for a protracted period in the governance of the Gramapanchayat institutions in the country ever since we got independence. The introduction of the Panchayatiraj is a great tribute to the Father of the Nation as it was one of his long cherished desires and as such when it became a reality after the introduction of the Panchayatiraj Act in the country, we were paying a tribute to the Mahatma. Now it is the solemn responsibility of each and every one of us to make an objective evaluation as to what extent the true participatory democracy and local development dreamt by the Father of the Nation has become a reality.

In the present research study the researcher has made an earnest attempt to trace out objectively how far the implementation of decentralization at the grass-root level has become a reality in conformity with the objectives of the Panchayatiraj Act. It is a matter of satisfaction for the researcher that he could bring to light many of the inadequacies and flaws in the implementation of the Panchayatiraj system in the study area. He feels justly proud that his research enabled him to make a thorough study of the principles and practice of the Panchayatiraj system and it has enabled him to put-forth constructive suggestions for facilitating the realization of
decentralization enshrined in the Panchayatiraj Act. The researcher gained sufficient insight as to how the current functioning of the Panchayatiraj institutions in the study area can be spruced up to the expected level.

Of course, the implementation of the Panchayatiraj Act has certainly upset the applecart of several unscrupulous politicians and it made the common people more enlightened about the vital needs for decentralized administration and grass-root level participatory democracy.

During the course of the research work, the researcher was able to identify several lacunae in the efficient implementation of the provisions of the Panchayatiraj institutions. The researcher believes that there was need for further research in this area and more committed men and women should take up the responsibility to bring to light many a hidden mystery, which will ultimately lead to a state that the country has truly benefited by the implementation of the Panchayatiraj Act and the revolutionary changes it brought about in the socio-economic scenario in Kerala.

The researcher genuinely hopes that the outcome of his research study will be an eye opener for the authorities concerned to chalk out effective safeguards for ensuring the implementation of the Panchayatiraj Act in accordance with its true spirit.
From the research the researcher is now convinced of the fact that the implementation of the Panchayatiraj Act has yet to go a long way before participatory democracy at the grass-root level became a reality. In this connection I would like to point out that several complicated provisions currently prevailing in the administrative governance of the Panchayatiraj should be eliminated. Such hindering constraints should be spotted out and through a revamping of the various procedures in the governance of the Panchayatiraj institutions should be made so as to make them simple and transparent. Then we can be rightly be proud that our country is one of the pioneers in the field of democracy in both letter and spirit.

Another important piece of knowledge the researcher has gained is that Panchayatiraj is a real boost to the local people as Gramasabhas have been made mandatory for the grass root level populace to identify projects and programmes for addressing their real needs and enhancing their welfare.