CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

The following are the summary of the main findings and recommendations:

1. Gram Sabha is a new experience for Kerala. The record of participation given this fact is indeed encouraging. There seems to be a definite trend in favour of greater participation in Gram Sabha. The benefits that came in the wake of the people's plan are responsible for the increase in numbers. Added to this is the impression that failure to attend Gram Sabha would result in loss of benefits. The middle classes and engaged sections of society still shy away from attending the Gram Sabha meetings. It has been found that wider publicity given to the Gram Sabha, the personal efforts made by the Panchayat members, the political competition, which warrants that all forms of protest are employed – all contribute to greater participation in quantitative terms. However, these quantitative figures do not seem to suggest greater qualitative participation. Participation requires certain skills, which are lacking among the participants.
2. No Gram Sabha meeting was started in time. So people were found unenthusiastic and impatient. The same agenda was used in all wards. Thanks to the campaign, most of the Gram Sabhas were conducted in a reasonably systematic fashion. The meeting usually starts with speeches by the dignitaries present followed by group discussions which are more lively, is the scenario that is emerging. Likewise there is also registration of the participants in many Gram Sabhas, an exercise initiated during the first phase of the campaign.

3. The role of Gram Sabha in the planning process has not been very clear cut. At least from the second year onwards people seem to have started talking in terms of their ward rather than the Panchayat as a whole. Fear of being criticised in the Gram Sabha for not lobbying sufficiently hard to protect the interest of the ward, most of the members now insist on equal division of the projects ward-wise. This has led to diseconomies of scale in the construction works undertaken in most wards. This sort of fragmented project implementation has undermined the rationality of planning. The statutory responsiveness to the electorates envisaged and the concept of planning which should go beyond the ward mentality are in tension in Kerala.

4. On the whole, elite and caste domination is less pronounced in the Gram Sabhas under study. The rich and highly educated sections, business classes and so on do not come to the Gram Sabha. The poor
and the backward classes as well as some of the close supporters of
the Panchayat member constitute the majority of the participants.
Relatively well off people have the feeling that Gram Sabha is the
institution of socially and economically backward people. It has
been found that since opponents in elections are persons of some
stature in the village, their non-participation in Gram Sabha meetings
indirectly affects the quality of consensus that local level
development demands.

5. Although transparency, social audit and right to information have
been recognised in the amendments made in the Kerala Panchayat
Act, people have not started accessing these provisions. In many
Gram Sabhas, members tend to provide essential information. Since
1996, most of the Gram Sabhas have been saddled with plan-related
responsibilities. After the introductory session, the plan related
function such as giving approval to the plan, designing the mode of
implementation, selection of beneficiaries etc., take away much of
the time leaving very little space for free discussion. This has also
affected the performance of other statutory functions of the Gram
Sabha. Members have gained greater self-confidence to face the
Gram Sabha over the years.

6. It has been found that the rate of participation, especially those of
women is high in those regions where the density of population and
poverty level is high. However, this does not hold well in the town
Panchayats where the obverse is the common trend. There is no significant difference between wards headed by the Left Democratic Front and the United Democratic Front. The rate is around 0.72 percent high in the case of wards held by the Left Democratic Front.

7. It seems that the ideal age for women to take up political offices is often when they experience relative freedom from familial responsibilities like reproduction and nursing children. It has been found that parents do not allow unmarried women to hold such posts and another reason is that girls would stake their marriage if before the marriage they indulge in public activity. Sixty one percent of the participants in Gram Sabha meetings belong to the 31 - 50 age group category. Majority of the non-participants in Gram Sabha meeting is also unmarried. Majority (81%) of the Panchayat members, including both men and women are married. Widows are participating in Gram Sabha meetings in good number due to special weightages given to them in the selection of project beneficiaries in People's Planning Programme. Conflicts and political disputes among Panchayat members on partisan basis resulted in low rate of participation of women. It has been found that when males were active participants females kept silence. There is greater consistency in male participation in Gram Sabha meetings than female. Male participation in Gram Sabha does not go beyond a certain level. Where the participation of women tends to increase, there is
corresponding increase in overall participation in Gram Sabha meetings. It has also been found that women like to go together in-groups and participate in social activities and this naturally increased the number of female participants in Gram Sabha meetings. It has been found that personal contact and mike announcement are the best methods to bring women and Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes to Gram Sabha as majority of them do not care for notice or other written materials. Most of the women who participated in Gram Sabha meetings were bored during the reading of administrative report of the preceding six months because they did not have the requisite knowledge and familiarity to respond constructively. Even male participants were found impatient as it took much time that the people saw it as not directly concerned with the ward. It has been found that the budget drawn up by the Panchayat was incomprehensible to the women.

8. It has been found that the male Panchayat members have contact with heads of the family while there are many handicaps in the way of women Panchayat members to get in touch with the people intimately. In the initial stages female representatives were not capable of managing the Gram Sabha meetings. But later they showed marked improvement in the performance of responsibilities related to Panchayati Raj activities. Now women Panchayat members are able to organise Gram Sabhas, address crowds, plan
and implement programmes on their own. It has been found that female Panchayat Presidents depend on their male counterparts or the Panchayat Secretaries for day-to-day affairs of the Panchayat. Domestic responsibilities, lack of time and conveyance and apathy towards the development of other wards prevented female Panchayat members from attending Gram Sabha meetings taking place in other wards.

9. Women's participation has increased generally in the later Gram Sabhas, especially in those dealing exclusively with beneficiary selection. The formation of neighbourhood groups and self-help groups in recent years has also provided impetus to Gram Sabha participation, especially among women. It is now accepted that Gram Sabhas are the legitimate mechanism of beneficiary selection. Cases aimed at changing the Gram Sabha list of beneficiaries are not widespread now.

10. Although the attendance of officials in the Gram Sabha meeting was insisted upon by the government, very few of them participate in Gram Sabha meetings. It is also found that the relationship between officials and people's representatives, which was not very smooth earlier, had improved considerably following the People's Plan Campaign.
11. Even though some Panchayat members were in favour of strengthening Gram Sabha, they want absolute freedom in deciding the priorities within a functional domain and preparing schemes and projects to carry them out.

12. The Sen Committee (Committee on Decentralisation of Powers 1997) recommended four Gram Sabha meetings a year. But the Panchayat members are in favour of two Gram Sabha meetings due to lack of time and a large number of responsibilities. It has been found that the majority of the Panchayat members are in favour of a quorum of fifty voters as they find it difficult to organise and manage the meeting with a quorum of 10 percent. Most of the Panchayat members want optimum strength of 750-1000 voters in a ward.

13. Most of the Gram Sabha meetings last for maximum four hours. People were more likely to participate in Gram Sabhas, which were conducted on holidays. The average amount of time spent by the Panchayat members is eight hours per day and majority of the Panchayat members found evening as the best time for convening Gram Sabha meetings.

14. It has been found that those who have the inclination to participate in social and political activities have the tendency to participate in Gram Sabha meetings. If material benefits are denied, people feel that the Gram Sabha would serve no purpose. It has been found that
material benefits are the incentives that motivate people to participate in Gram Sabha meetings.

15. Gram Sabhas meet regularly since Gram Sabha resolutions are used as the mandatory basis of the planning exercise. The concept of sectoral group discussions immediately after the general session is also becoming a common feature. In this way some degree of functional specialisation is emerging in the Sabhas.

16. The role of Gram Sabha in the planning process has largely been confined to need identification and beneficiary selection. The role of the Gram Sabha in other aspects of planning such as implementation, monitoring and evaluation is either non-existent or unclear.

17. There is also wide variation in the participation of the Gram Sabha between wards within a Panchayat, between Panchayats and between different Gram Sabhas in different wards and Panchayats. This prevents generalisation difficult. In some Panchayats, some wards have registered good participation levels. However, this also does not show consistency.

18. Panchayats have not shown any tendency to convene Gram Sabhas all on their own. All the Gram Sabhas in the sample Panchayats were convened on directions form the state government. It was also found that in some Panchayats dominated by single parties, the Gram
Sabha merely served as rubber stamps without much space for civic engagement. Where the Panchayat has been characterised by frequent power changes, no-confidence motions and defections, the rate of participation has been quite low. The popularity of the Panchayat member and the mode of inviting people are also factors influencing participation.

19. The disorganised sections of people cannot play an effective role unless they organise. It is here that the Non-Governmental organisations have a major role to play. The skills of the people to ask questions and question authority and seek information needs to be consciously cultivated. While the initiatives taken by the Left Democratic Front government to make the Gram Sabha more compact and increase the frequency of its meetings as well as the formation of neighbourhood forums will go a long way in strengthening and streamlining the Sabha, these institutional means are not enough.

20. There was no demand in the Gram Sabha that the employment generated by means of the public works should be provided to the local people.

21. As the powers and functions of the Gram Sabha have been left to the discretion of the State Legislatures, there is bound to be wide divergence in the powers of these bodies in different states.
22. Holding of Gram Sabha on ward basis as in Kerala may have to be thought of. This also provides certain additional responsibilities to the members of the Panchayats, whose participation in Panchayat activities is at a low rate.

23. An effective Gram Sabha is possible only with the willing cooperation of the representatives of the people, after the Panchayat has been invested with sufficient powers.

24. Since the role of middle class is very crucial in social, measures should be taken to ensure their participation in Gram Sabhas. For this, needs of middle class should also be considered especially in the field of agriculture, industry, employment opportunities etc.

25. Since Panchayats face problems such as party control, defection, conflicts, no-confidence motions which lead to frequent change of leadership, a code of conduct may be evolved among the two major political fronts not to disturb the stability of Panchayats during the five year period except for genuine other reasons justifiable by democratic principles.

26. Members of Gram Sabha should be aware of the functions and powers of the institution of Gram Sabha. Selective training especially through the mediation of non-government and peoples organisations should be imparted to the weaker sections to help them to identify needs and involve in participatory processes more
effectively. Minimum level of knowledge for enabling the people to seek information from the Panchayat (a right that has already been granted but not exercised) also should be provided.

27. To ensure higher participation in Gram Sabha meetings the venue should be in the middle of the ward. A recreation programme especially the children of the ward should be organised immediately after the meeting of the Gram Sabha.

28. There shall be a question-hour in Gram Sabha meetings, when a member would be free to raise questions and seek redress regarding any of the matters related to Gram Sabha.

29. All the concerned officials should be made to attend Gram Sabha meetings so that all doubts of the members of Gram Sabha relating to implementation of local development programmes can be clarified.

30. The structure and functions of Gram Sabha may be made a part of school curriculum and teachers may be encouraged to bring children to the meetings of Gram Sabha in order to give them some kind of apprenticeship in participatory democracy. It is also necessary to include Panchayati Raj Act in the syllabus of the school, so that it may impart civic sense, patriotism and awareness of one's own rights and duties.
Gandhian groups can sparkle a new hope with their commitment to the philosophy which lays stress on purity in politics and concern for the poor and the downtrodden. The Gandhian groups like Sarva Seva Sangh, Gandhi Smarak Nidhi, Gandhi Peace Foundation and Gandhian Studies Departments of various universities should be requested to take up this task and spearhead a massive education programme to make the Gram Sabha reflect the wishes of the poor and discarded.