CHAPTER - 1

INTRODUCTION

Kerala has been recognised for its achievements in certain areas of life as manifested in the human development indicators. Higher life expectancy, lower infant mortality rate, high level of literacy, and universal elementary education are prominent among them (Government of Kerala – CDS, 2005). Kerala ranked first among Indian states in terms of the human development index (HDI) at three points of time 1981, 1991, 2001. Despite this, however, it is particularly significant that Kerala’s per capita income lagged behind the all - India average until the mid 1980s (GOK – CDS, 2005). Kerala’s achievements in human development were attained even with low economic growth (Chakraborthy, 2005). It has been argued that Kerala’s achievements were the result of social mobilization that had its beginnings at the end of the 19th century (Tharakan, 2004; Tharamangalam, 2007). Amartya Sen has suggested the important role of public action in the creation of the state’s higher development in specific areas.

The economic conditions of the state had undergone radical transformation since the mid 1980s. The economic growth rate of the state has increased and Kerala is now recognised as a state with high economic growth rate along with high human development achievements (Kannan, 2007). Though the state’s economy showed signs of growth since the 1980s the stagnation of the productive sector, particularly agriculture and small-scale industry, continued to be an unresolved issue (Isaac & Franke, 2000). In this context, the discussions for the revitalization of the primary production sector in the state through local planning initiatives were an issue that raised considerable debate in Kerala during the 1990s (Kerala State Planning Board, 1999).

With Kerala scoring high on the human development indicators, and with administrative reforms such as land reforms, it was expected that the state would do well in the decentralization of government, and for democratization at the grass roots (Gurukkal, 2001). However, Kerala had a poor history in democratic decentralization before the enactment of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1992. Even though various governments had attempted to introduce decentralized administration in the state, most of them failed, and the lack of continuity in government also
contributed towards this failure in implementing measures to decentralize government.

One of the major terms of references of the first Administrative Reforms Committee in the state formed in 1957 under the chairmanship of E.M. Sankaran (EMS) Namboodiripad was to suggest measures for administrative decentralization in the state. A Panchayat bill that included the spirit of this committee report was presented in the state assembly in 1959. This ended as an abortive attempt because of the dissolution of the state assembly by the centre. After this attempt, the state assembly passed the Kerala Panchayat Act in 1961, which provided some limited powers to the Panchayats, as against the suggestions of the earlier bill. However, the 1961 Act had paved the way for the formation of local bodies all over the state, even though their powers were very limited.

Although the state Panchayat Act came into existence in 1961, there were no successful efforts of the state government to decentralize power from the state government to the lower levels until the establishment of district councils in 1987. EM Sankaran Namboodiripad had attempted to reintroduce the 1957 bill in 1967 when he came back to power, though this bill was also kept in cold storage because of the fall of his government. The experiment of district councils in Kerala that were formed in 1987 was a meaningful effort for administrative decentralization to the district level. These district level bodies also became inactive after the change of state government from the Left Democratic Front (LDF) to United Democratic Front (UDF) following the 1991 state elections. The powers of these elected bodies were taken back by the state government as part of a political decision to centralize power with the state government (Centre for Socio Economic and Environmental Studies, Centre for Rural Management & Capacity Development for Decentralization in Kerala, 2003; Parameswaran, 2001). Kerala’s history of decentralization indicates that there was no consensus among the major political coalitions in the state about the need for democratic decentralization. Though the state initiatives were carried out over a longer period of time there were micro level experiments in grass roots planning in the state led by civil society organizations, particularly by the people’s science movement in Kerala namely Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishath (KSSP). They carried out resource mapping at the local level since the 1970s and initiated a local
panning project called Panchayat Level Development Programme (PLDP) in 1995. In the late 1990s, Kerala’s achievement of total literacy through a mass campaign was outstanding. This campaign was the result of the joint efforts of the state and civil society organizations such as KSSP. The local planning initiatives of KSSP contributed towards developing many institutional systems for local planning, which then became a part of the people’s planning campaign launched in 1996.

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendments created a momentum in Kerala too. The Kerala legislative assembly passed the Kerala Panchayati Raj Act 1994 following the national level Constitutional Amendments. Two years after the Kerala Panchayati Raj Act was enacted, the Left Democratic Front (LDF) government led by the Communist Party of India Marxist (CPI (M)) came to power in the state. It was also the time when the 9th Five Year Plan was taking shape. The government decided to launch a mass campaign named People’s Planning Campaign (PPC) for democratic decentralization and inaugurated it on 17th August 1996 (KSPB, 1999). The micro level experiments in local planning by the KSSP contributed in developing institutional systems and methodology for local planning adopted by the PPC. The major objectives of the campaign were (1) to develop and sustain a participatory methodology for local level planning with mass participation and (2) to institutionalise local self-government in the state. (3) It aimed to empower the hitherto marginalized sections of society including women, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. (4) It intended to overcome the stagnation in the production sector through mass mobilization and (5) to develop a transparent and accountable system of governance through mass participation (KSPB, 1999; Isaac & Franke, 2000). (6) The PPC envisaged generating a new civic culture that favoured grass roots democracy. (7) It also aimed at bringing attitudinal changes among all actors such as elected representatives, officials, non-official experts and people at large towards development and grassroots democracy. The proponents of PPC argued that the network of Kerala’s political and civil society organizations would act as tools to mobilize the masses towards local planning activities. The joint action of political and civil society organizations was expected to translate this principle into reality (Isaac & Franke, 2000).
Various institutional systems and different practices were developed to attain these objectives. They included macro level institutions such as ombudsman, district and block level expert committees for plan appraisal and approval, and micro level institutions such as task forces for plan formulation, beneficiary committees for plan implementation, and measures to ensure transparency and accountability of governance such as the Citizen’s Charter, social audit etc. Neighbourhood groups and self-help groups were also promoted as part of the People’s Planning Campaign. The constitutional institution of gram sabha was innovatively employed as a tool for mass mobilization in the democratic process during the PPC period in Kerala (Isaac & Franke, 2000). This institution was expected to play a key role in the process of mobilization of different strata of people towards participatory plan formulation and implementation. The PPC continued until 2001.

Following the 2001 elections, the United Democratic Front (UDF), led by the Indian National Congress (INC), replaced the LDF government (which had led the PPC). The PPC had already lost the initial effervescence and enthusiasm and had given way to a certain amount of routinisation. The new government, which was not apathetic towards the decentralization process, wanted to institutionalize the panchayat system rather than continue the campaign model. The element of volunteerism which had energised the campaign was considerably reduced (Government of Kerala, 2002, 2004). The UDF government renamed the programme as Kerala Development Programme. However, the basic structure of the PPC remained unaltered. The financial assistance to local self-governments continued without significant change. However, the financial crisis and curtailment of the State plan also reduced the planning process of LSGs (Government of Kerala, 2004). Notwithstanding this, the institutions created by the PPC continued in one form or the other in the KDP phase as well.

The most important change that occurred in the context of the shift from PPC to KDP was in its mode of implementation. The PPC had followed the campaign mode, which had a higher element of volunteerism, along with persistent attempts to rejuvenate the system. The focus of KDP on the other hand was to institutionalize the grass roots level planning process through bureaucratic efforts rather than in propagating the element of volunteerism. Through this measure, they reduced the
number of members in the task forces, and decided to dispense with beneficiary committees in plan implementation (GOK, 2002, 2004). The full time coordinators of the block level experts committee and district level expert committee (most of them had come voluntarily and through their interest in the functioning of the panchayats) were sent back to their parent departments within the early part of the KDP (Planning Commission, 2006). The grass roots democratic structure of NHGs did not get any more recognition after the PPC phase (Isaac, 2005).

Decentralization in Kerala has completed seventeen years since the beginning of the PPC in 1996. The institutions created by the PPC continued even after the campaign phase. Institutions are intended to orient the actions of people towards a particular goal and to bring changes in their behavioral pattern (Eisenstadt, 1968; Desouza, 2003). Likewise, the PPC also had ideal objectives to be attained through various institutional structures. Democratic institutions are considered as tools for inculcating democratic values among the people (Giddens, 1972). They are expected to strengthen the processes of democratic participation of the people. The PPC also had such an ideal objective. Instead of taking the civic culture as historically determined and given (Putnam, 1993), the PPC actively sought to nurture a civic culture that would promote a grass roots democratic system (Isaac, 2001).

 Participatory institutions created during the PPC had a key role in mobilizing people for the local planning process. Conceptually, institutions consist of cognitive, normative and regulative structures and activities that provide stability, coherence and meaning to social behaviour. Institutions are transported by various carriers, culture, structures and routines (Scott in Appendini & Nuijten, 2002). Institutions provide a means of orientation to a large number of actors. They enable the actors to coordinate their activities by means of orientation to a common sign post (Lachman, 1970). Even though institutions have been designed with ambitious objectives, the actual practice of the people determines to what extent these institutions will be able to achieve their objectives. It is argued that the practices of people will be different in different contexts and time (Eisenstadt, 1968).

 Pierre Bourdieu has explained how the actual practices of the individuals are evolved against the institutional objectives. He has given a detailed description about the way in which the practices of the people evolved. Bourdieu’s concept of practice
explains that the *habitus* of people in which they are situated and the fields they represent in the society have a prominent role in designing their practice (Bourdieu in Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The success of the institutions largely depends on how people internalise their values and bring them into their practice. The field consists of a set of objective historical relations between positions anchored in certain forms of power or capital. Bourdieu viewed society as a combination of various fields such as political, religious, cultural etc., each of them with its own logic and volume of capital. The nature and volume of capital that each field possesses has a decisive role in the creation of practices of the individual or groups affiliated to them. The habitus comprises a set of historical relations between positions deposited within individual bodies, in the form of mental and corporeal schemata or perception, appreciation and action (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992:16). The macro level field enters into an individual through the micro system of habitus. The habitus is structured by the field through a historical process, and it acts as a system of structuring of individuals, and as a system of conditioning. Here the concept of field is related to macro level sub structures of society while habitus explains the micro level phenomena, how the field enters into the individual and structures his/her social behaviour. In this study we use the concepts of field and habitus to understand the responses of various social fields towards micro level participatory institutions and the practices of various individuals and groups affiliated to them. These concepts are used to understand and analyse various practices of Kerala’s social fields in grass roots democratic institutions.

There are several general studies and some case studies about the overall performance of the People’s Planning Campaign in Kerala. None of these studies has, however, focused exclusively on the actual institutions and practices of people that were vital elements in the local planning process in Kerala. The studies that have taken institutions as part of a holistic societal cultural system, and analysed the practices of actors related to the institutions, are lacking. The studies that have examined the dynamics of institutions during the KDP phase are small in number. The studies that compared the dynamics of institutions during the PPCand KDP phases and the differences in the practices of different actors during these two periods are also rare. The present study attempts to understand different social, cultural, and political factors that contribute towards the emergence of these practices. This research also analyses the dynamics of institutions and practices in different political
contexts during the PPC and KDP phases, which were implemented under the political leadership of the Left coalition and the Congress led coalition respectively.

The study will examine the dynamics of participatory institutions such as gram sabhas, Neighbourhood groups, self-help groups, and Task Forces, in the planning process. The study will also focus on the factors influencing the practices of people towards these participatory institutions. This study will adopt the theoretical framework of Bourdieu, which views society as a totality of various fields such as political field, religious field, cultural field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In our study, we will focus on the political field, religious field and the field of voluntary action in Kerala, as fields that can influence the functioning of participatory institutions. The changes in the functioning of these social fields after their interaction with participatory institutions would also be examined. The ways in which these fields have internalized participatory democracy and planning, and reproduced them through their practices will be another point of inquiry. The study will also attempt to understand the ways in which the various social fields influence the behaviour of individuals towards participatory institutions through their habitus, that is, the way in which a field enters into individuals. This study has utilized relative methodology, which connects both the subjective and objective understanding of reality to reach a comprehensive picture about the real situation on the ground.

1.1 Thesis organization

The thesis is divided into nine chapters. The first chapter elaborates the relevance of the study in the specific context of Kerala. The second chapter reviews literature related to the background and context in which this study has been located. This chapter also describes the basic concepts used in this study such as institutions, practices, field and habitus. The third chapter describes the methodology and methods adopted in this study. This chapter also includes the research questions and objectives of the study. The details of the selected field sites and the logic of this selection are also described in this chapter. The empirical chapters based on field inquiry in the selected three gram panchayats from different parts of Kerala start with the fourth chapter, and extend to the eighth chapter. The fourth chapter of the thesis explains the dynamics of participatory institutions with special emphasis on grass roots democracy. In this chapter we have discussed the functioning of gram sabhas,
neighbourhood groups and other participatory institutions such as ward and panchayat level development committees, which were intended to strengthen grassroots democracy. The fifth chapter focuses on the participatory planning process at the local level. These discussions emphasized the functioning of Task Forces in various development sectors. This chapter also discusses the efficiency and outcomes of local planning in the selected panchayats.

The sixth chapter focuses on the empowerment of marginalized groups through participatory institutions and the local planning process. Scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, fisher folk, and women are the marginalized groups discussed in this chapter. Their attendance and participation in the participatory institutions and the impact of local planning on their empowerment are the major points of discussion in this chapter. The seventh chapter concentrated on the influence of political parties and the political field in the participatory institutions. The major political parties and their mass organizations in the panchayats are included in this analysis. This chapter discusses the changes in the approaches of political parties towards participatory institutions after their interaction with institutions of local self-government. The eighth chapter discusses two aspects. The first part of this chapter focuses on the dynamics of civil society organizations in the selected panchayats, and their interactions with participatory institutions. Libraries, youth clubs, nongovernmental organizations and other people’s organizations such as people’s science movements are included in the category of civil society organizations. The second part of this chapter discusses the dynamics of caste and religious organizations in the state and their interface with local participatory institutions. The last chapter concludes with the overall findings of the study. This chapter highlights the theoretical implications of the study based on the empirical findings.