CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

There is unanimity of opinion among political thinkers about the positive contribution of local self-governing institutions to the strength of a free nation. They are seen as necessary prerequisites for the sustenance of the spirit of liberty and popular democracy. Decentralization, as envisioned above, implies the spirit of autonomy in decision-making within at least a limited sphere. However, in the West, the concept of decentralization signifies administrative convenience and, as a result, the local bodies function as ‘limbs and hands of the central government.’ In India, the rural local bodies known as the Panchayats embody the traditions of autonomy and of grass-root level democracy.

The autonomous features of the local self-governing bodies (rural local bodies) in India have evolved from the peculiar geo-physical and socio-political nature of the country as well as out of India’s historical processes. Hence, each village developed into an autonomous unit, a little world of its own, which survived all political convulsions and invasions, and retained its continuity. Under the British rule in India, a different model of local administration evolved, which replaced the traditional pattern of the Panchayats. As a result, the self-sufficient natural economy of the Indian villages was broken up. Lord Ripon’s Resolution of 1882 did result in the routinization of a structural innovation and the introduction of a model of administrative decentralization paving the way for the establishment of a three-tier structure of local bodies. However, the vision of local bodies as agents of the central government, which characterised the
subsequent measures under the British administration, did not augur well for their growth and autonomous functioning.

It was in this background that Mahatma Gandhi's idea of Village Swaraj emerged as a fighting slogan against the Imperial Government. The rural local bodies in India known as the Panchayats, which guided the destinies of autonomous village communities in ancient times, provided Gandhi with a model of democratic decentralization, the spirit of which can be recaptured and modified to suit the requirements of modern times. In the revival of the autonomy of the Village Panchayats, Gandhis' concept of democratic decentralization was a bulwark against authoritarian rule and exploitation and a guarantee of individual freedom and progress of individual citizen. Villages were envisioned by Gandhi as republics, self-sufficient and self-reliant units of perfect and real democracy. Gandhi's concept of Gram Swaraj visualised a non-violent, non-exploitative and equalitarian order (an equalising mechanism) and a model of development which was not confined to material progress alone. Instead, it was an integrated and holistic vision of progress. The entire structure was not to be a power-pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom (top-down development model) but vice versa, i.e., the model of an inverted pyramid. The autonomous units of power at different levels would be organically linked together in an 'Oceanic Circle.' Thus, Gram Swaraj is a concept of village-self-rule in which the legislative, judicial and executive powers are combined into one, to function as units of democracy based on individual freedom. Gandhi did not mean that the ancient Village Panchayats should be revived exactly in the old form. That was neither possible nor desirable.

Gandhi's insistence on decentralization at the village level had little effect on the decision-makers of independent India. The mode of development envisioned for independent India, involving large-scale industrialization and
employment of modern technology, favoured monolithic bureaucratic structure and centralised administration. Gandhi’s advocacy of the empowerment of rural local bodies or Panchayats was, however, countered by projecting villages as ‘sinks of localism, dens of ignorance and narrow-mindedness and the cause of ruination of India’ and as bases least suited to begin the process of development.

Reservations about the grant of autonomy at the grass-root levels stand justified in situations where widespread illiteracy and poverty prevail. But even in regions in the country with total literacy, high level of political consciousness, and relatively high standard of life, efforts have yet to be made for the devolution of power into the ranks of the lower administrative units. It is in this context that a study on the decentralization of power at the Panchayat level in Kerala assumes importance.

Unique socio-political, geo-physical and economic factors have placed Kerala in a pre-eminent position among the states in India. The progress and development achieved by Kerala in many sectors have been lauded by different study groups time and again. The state has taken great strides in the spheres of education, particularly at the primary and secondary levels. The literacy rate in the state has touched cent percent in many parts. In the adoption of social welfare measures, it has set an example to the other states in the country. The impact of these welfare schemes is clearly visible in the rural areas. The availability of basic services such as schools, primary health centres and hospitals, post-offices, transport and communication facilities is near universal. Special mention should be made of the establishment and effective functioning of rural credit societies in the co-operative sector within easy reach of the rural population.

The social scenario of Kerala comprehends certain unique features.
Earnestly implemented land reforms have made the tenants in the state the owners of the land on which they live. This has removed the landlord-tenant rift which could impede the smooth functioning of rural local bodies. The absence of bonded labour, harassment of lower classes and caste and communal dominations are other significant features.

At the popular level the State of Kerala displays a high degree of political consciousness. The people perform their electoral duties actively and with a sense of responsibility. Elections, whether to the Central Legislature, the State Legislative Assembly or the Rural Local Bodies, all generate wide enthusiasm and are characterised by the active participation of every section of society. Elections are generally free from violence and do not leave behind trails of hatred and hostility. This may be attributed to superior civic sense, social consciousness, cultural traits and the spirit of communal harmony which characterise social life in Kerala.

The Panchayats in Kerala have been associated with developmental activities for a reasonably long time, and more actively after the passing of the Kerala Panchayat Act of 1960. The local bodies have taken initiatives in implementing various schemes formulated by the State Government and thereby helped developmental activities relating to agriculture, public works, public health, minor irrigation, sanitation, education, rural electrification and housing. Panchayats have been involved in 'Applied Nutrition Programme,' 'Ela Development Programme,' 'Family Planning,' 'Vanamahotsva,' sanitary works and similar activities. There has been active participation in schemes like the 'Seven Point Programme' and the 'Eleven Point Programme'.

Reference may be made in this context to the relatively long traditions of rural local bodies in Kerala. Cochin, an erstwhile territorial segment of the
Kerala State and a Princely State under the British rule was the earliest to enact a *Panchayat* Act in 1914. Travancore, another erstwhile unit also followed suit in 1925. In Malabar, innovations in rural local administration go back to 1884.

Kerala, thus, presents a potential area of experimenting with democratic decentralization in the true sense of the term as envisaged by Mahatma Gandhi. As already stated, the Gandhian vision of *Gram Swaraj* has been an ideological shoot behind every effort leading to the acceptance of *Gram Swaraj* in the State of Kerala.

With the congenial environment already existing in the State, steps for the grant of greater authority and autonomy to the *Panchayats* should have been initiated long ago and pursued earnestly. But in reality the very concept of strengthening the *Panchayats* with a view to ensuring direct popular participation in the process of development and administration, and of transforming the *Panchayats* into nurseries of democracy and centres of liberty, is yet to emerge as a desirable goal in academic as well as political circles.

Reasons for the slow pace in the devolution of power in Kerala State are not difficult to identify. The absence of clarity regarding the role of *Panchayats* in independent India, which has retarded the progress of local self-government at the national level, is shared by the leaders in Kerala as well. The colonial perception of the *Panchayats* as agents of the government continues to blur the vision of local bodies as centres of popular democracy. The confusion which prevailed in political circles in Kerala found echoes in the deliberations on decentralization in the 1950’s and 1960’s.

Discussions relating to the *Panchayat* Act of 1960 were conspicuous by the unanimity of views supporting the implementation of the Gandhian vision of *Gram Swaraj* and the strong advocacy of the transfer of authority and popular
participation in administration. Replying to the deliberations on Panchayats, the then Minister for Local Government said that the Panchayat and Gram Swaraj envisaged in the legislation affirmed the right of the people to govern themselves and heralded great changes in the political life of the State, because the ‘Panchayats will ultimately decide how a citizen should live and take care of himself from the cradle to the grave.’ Concluding the long discussions, the then Chief Minister of Kerala reiterated that it was only by reposing trust in the Panchayats and by giving wide powers and opportunities to them that the goal of self-sufficient, self-government could be achieved. Expectations of the better functioning of local bodies including the Panchayats raised by the initial enthusiasm gradually faded, with the result that the account of decentralization efforts at the lower levels between 1958 and 1988 remains one of ups and downs, of fluctuation dictated by political changes.

The main impediment to the progress of decentralization is the lack of commitment on the part of any political party to the ideal. Successive governments being formed by coalitions of political parties, apprehensions regarding the loss of power appear to have weaned away political leaders from efforts at decentralization. On the other hand, the creation of numerous Boards and Corporations in the Public Sector has been found to offer opportunities for the sharing of patronages. The absence of single party rule, submission to pressures of the constituent political parties in the government, the prospect of the division of spoils and the lack of political will have all combined to retard progress towards a greater decentralization of power in Kerala.

Of greater relevance is the absence of organised public opinion in favour of meaningful decentralization. Academic studies and discussions on the subject remain a necessary requisite to bring about the required attitudinal change and to build the force of opinion that can accelerate changes towards devolution of
authority and power. With an environment congenial to the realization of the ideal held aloft by the Father of the Nation, the role of providing leadership falls on the academic community in Kerala. A sense of urgency in this direction is added by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment initiated by the central government which envisions a third layer of government below the central and state levels.

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