

THE DECENTRALISATION OF EDUCATION IN KERALA STATE, INDIA: RHETORIC AND REALITY

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Abstract – The decentralisation of educational administration has been widely advocated as a strategy to promote local participation in education. However, the fact that this advocacy has a long history raises the question why decentralisation has not been achieved in more educational systems. The answers to this question are many and complex. Among them are difficulties with the implementation of reforms. The present study examines some of these difficulties in Kerala State, India. It determines that although Kerala has a strong reputation for political participation, the rhetoric of decentralisation in the educational sector has not matched the reality there. The lessons to be learned in this context have wide implications for the theory and practice of decentralisation in education.

Zusammenfassung – DIE DEZENTRALISIERUNG DER BILDUNG IN DER PROVINZ KERALA, INDIEN: RHETORIK UND REALITÄT – Die Dezentralisierung der Ausbildungsverwaltung wird seit langem überall als eine Strategie befürwortet, welche die lokale Beteiligung am Bildungswesen fördert. Dies wirft die Frage auf, warum nicht bereits mehr Bildungssysteme eine erfolgreiche Dezentralisierung erfahren haben. Die Antworten auf diese Frage sind zahlreich und komplex. Eine der Antworten ist, dass es mit der Durchführung der Reformen Schwierigkeiten gibt. Die vorliegende Studie untersucht einige dieser Schwierigkeiten in der Provinz Kerala, Indien. Ihr Ergebnis ist, dass die Dezentralisierungsrhetorik im Bildungsbereich keine Entsprechung in der politischen Realität dieser Provinz gefunden hat, obwohl Kerala einen guten Ruf hat, was die politische Beteiligung angeht. Die Lehren, die man daraus ziehen sollte, haben große Bedeutung für Theorie und Praxis der Bildungsdezentralisierung.

Résumé – LA DÉCENTRALISATION DE L'ÉDUCATION DANS L'ÉTAT INDIEN DU KERALA : DISCOURS ET RÉALITÉ – Il a été vivement plaidé en faveur de la décentralisation de la gestion de l'éducation, cette stratégie favorisant la participation locale à l'éducation. Pourtant, le fait que ce plaidoyer ait une longue histoire interroge les raisons pour lesquelles la décentralisation n'a pas été concrétisée dans un plus grand nombre de systèmes éducatifs. Les réponses à cette question sont nombreuses et complexes. Elles comprennent les difficultés soulevées lors de l'application des réformes. L'étude examine certains obstacles rencontrés dans l'État indien du Kerala. Elle constate que, malgré la grande réputation du Kerala en matière de participation politique, le discours sur la décentralisation de l'éducation n'a pu se transposer aux conditions concrètes de la région. Les enseignements à tirer dans ce contexte comportent d'importantes implications pour la théorie et la pratique de la décentralisation de l'éducation.



Resumen – LA DECENTRALIZACIÓN DE LA EDUCACIÓN EN KERALA STATE, INDIA: RETÓRICA Y REALIDAD – La descentralización de la administración educativa ha recibido mucho apoyo con el argumento de que es una estrategia que promueve la participación local en la educación. Sin embargo, la larga historia de este argumento suscita el interrogante de por qué la descentralización no se ha logrado en un mayor número de sistemas educativos. Las respuestas a esta pregunta son muchas y complejas. Entre ellas, tenemos las dificultades que causa la implementación de las reformas. Este trabajo examina algunas de esas dificultades en Kerala State, India, y los autores llegan a la conclusión de que si bien Kerala goza de una gran reputación en cuanto a participación política, la retórica de la descentralización en el sector de la educación aún no concuerda con la realidad reinante en ese lugar. Las lecciones que se deben aprender en ese contexto tienen amplios efectos para la teoría y práctica de la descentralización de la educación.

Резюме – ДЕЦЕНТРАЛИЗАЦИЯ ОБРАЗОВАНИЯ В ШТАТЕ КЕРАЛА, ИНДИЯ: ЗАЯВЛЕНИЯ И ДЕЙСТВИТЕЛЬНОСТЬ – децентрализация органов управления образованием получила большую поддержку как стратегия эффективного вовлечения учреждений местного уровня в процесс образования. Тем не менее, исходя из того, что эта поддержка имеет долгую историю, возникает вопрос, почему большее количество систем образования еще не подверглись децентрализации. Ответов на этот вопрос много, и они неоднозначны. Среди них можно выделить трудности, связанные с осуществлением реформ. В данном исследовании рассматриваются некоторые трудности этих реформ в индийском штате Керала. На основании данного исследования авторы пришли к выводу, что хотя штат Керала и известен своим активным участием в политической жизни, заявления о децентрализации в образовательном секторе все еще не соответствуют действительности. Из этой ситуации следует извлечь полезные уроки, которые имеют большое значение для теории и практики децентрализации в образовании.

Much of the literature of development agencies advocates reform of educational administration through decentralisation (World Bank 1999: 28–29; UNESCO 2000: 19; Asian Development Bank 2001: 106–109). In some quarters, decentralisation has almost become a mantra that is recited regardless of the circumstances of specific settings. However, decentralisation may have its limits. This study illustrates that statement by reference to a part of the world which has a strong reputation for political participation and human development. It indicates that even in this setting, the rhetoric of decentralisation may not be translated into reality. The experience in this setting raises questions about similar strategies in other parts of the world.

The geographic focus of the study is Kerala State, which has a population of 31.8 million and is located in the southwestern tip of India. In some respects, patterns in Kerala must be interpreted within the broader framework of national developments. India is constituted as a federal system, but national-level policies are important both in education and in other sectors.

Of particular relevance in the present context is a pair of amendments made to the national constitution in 1992. These amendments required state governments to strengthen the existing Local Self-Government Institutions (LSGIs) and to create new LSGIs where they did not already exist. The LSGIs were then to be given responsibilities in education and other sectors, and to be empowered through legal and fiscal mechanisms.

The present contribution begins with the broad literature on decentralisation and education, noting some of the challenges raised in that literature and the obstacles to reform. It then turns to the specifics of Kerala, commencing with some background information and then explaining patterns of continuity and change in the years which followed the launch of reform initiatives. Particular attention is devoted to a 1996 reform called the People's Campaign for Decentralised Planning (PCDP). In order to permit some detail in analysis, focus is especially given to experiences of Kannur District within Kerala State. Each district of course has its own characteristics, but Kannur has features which could be considered typical of the state as a whole.

Decentralisation and education: Models and experiences

The literature on decentralisation displays a wide range of models (Rondinelli et al. 1989; Hanson 1998; Bray 2003). One difficulty is that the term is commonly used loosely, and can mean different things to different people. The literature is not entirely consistent, but there is general agreement on some major points. Among them is the distinction between 'functional' and 'territorial' decentralisation. Functional decentralisation arises, for example, when a Ministry of Education hives off some of its functions to parallel bodies. Territorial decentralisation, by contrast, refers to a downward distribution of control among the geographic tiers of government, such as nation, states, districts and schools. This is a spatial conception of the term, and is the one with which the present study is most concerned.

The category of territorial decentralisation is commonly said to include three sub-categories: deconcentration, delegation and devolution (McGinn and Welsh 1999; Mok 2003). Deconcentration is the process through which a central authority establishes field units, staffing them with its own officers. Thus, personnel of a Ministry of Education may be sent out from the headquarters to work in provinces and districts. Delegation implies a stronger degree of decision-making power at the local level, but powers in a delegated system still basically rest with the central authority which has chosen to 'lend' them to the local one. Devolution is the most extreme of these three forms of territorial decentralisation. Powers are formally held at lower levels, the officers of which do not need to seek higher-level approval for their actions. The lower-level officers may choose to inform the centre of their decisions, but the role of the centre is chiefly confined to collection and

exchange of information. The present study is mainly concerned with delegation and devolution rather than deconcentration.

Much advocacy of decentralisation lacks historical awareness. Some documents present decentralisation not only as if it is a panacea, but also as if it is a new idea. In reality, decentralisation has been widely advocated in the development literature for several decades (United Nations 1962; Maddick 1963; Rondinelli 1981; Conyers 1982; UNESCO 1982). This fact must sound a note of caution. Logically, decentralisation should be seen as a process – an ‘-isation’ – rather than as a static situation. If decentralisation is seen as a process and is implemented according to the recommendations of the policy advocates, then at some point it would seem necessary to stop: a decentralised system would have been achieved, and continued decentralisation would not be needed. The fact that decentralisation continues to be advocated so widely implies that it has not been strongly implemented in the preceding decades. The question then is: Why not? Part of the answer is that the benefits from decentralisation are less straightforward than is declared by many advocates. Ironically, some of these benefits, such as increased efficiency, are presented in other arenas as reasons for *reducing* decentralisation and shifting towards enhanced central control. Also, while it may be fashionable to advocate decentralisation, many implementers drag their feet because they fear lack of coordination in the system; and even when implementers are committed, they may encounter major obstacles.

One recent study which parallels the present one is by Bjork (2003) and focuses on a reform launched in Indonesia in 1994. At the central level, policy rhetoric was strong, but when Bjork investigated the extent of implementation, he was struck by the constancy rather than the changes in the schools (199). What had been billed as a major reconfiguration of the education system had yet to induce any significant changes at the institutional level.

Some of the reasons for the situation in Indonesia were specific to the situation in that country, but others have parallels elsewhere, including Kerala. Bjork identified three main impediments to change. First was the culture of the civil service: The Indonesian teachers affected by the reform were civil servants who saw themselves as answerable to the government rather than to students, parents or local school boards. Throughout their careers, Bjork reported (204), “public school employees have been conditioned to repress any inclinations they might have to approach their work with a sense of independence.” The reforms changed the instructions from the top, but after a long history of being denied opportunities to participate in determining the direction of schooling, schools and teachers could not promptly switch attitudes and habits.

Second, Bjork focused on incentives and rewards. The new responsibilities demanded that educators develop new curricula, design original lesson plans, familiarise themselves with innovative instructional strategies, and meet regularly with members of their communities. All of these duties required investments of time. The primary incentive offered to individuals who agreed to

participate was an increase in authority; but few of the teachers interviewed by Bjork showed any desire to increase their influence. They tended to value the security of their jobs more than opportunities to influence school policy or make a difference to the lives of their students. They would have responded to financial rewards, but few such rewards were on offer. Bjork remarked (206) that this situation revealed the danger of applying Western models of teacher management to other types of school systems and then expecting similar results. Local educators did not feel compelled to support the reform out of a sense of duty to their profession or their communities.

Thirdly, Bjork focused on central-local relations. Many studies have highlighted resistance from the central government as a primary roadblock to policy implementation (McGinn and Street 1986; Fiske 1996). In Indonesia, Bjork found a genuine desire by many central officials to promote decision-making at the locality, but he added that many of these officials failed to back up their words with appropriate assistance. The concept of decentralisation appealed intellectually to many bureaucrats, but in practice they had trouble relinquishing power. Training workshops remained in the top-down mode, and did not greatly change attitudes or empower groups at lower levels of the hierarchy.

These findings from Bjork's study in Indonesia have been cited at length because in some respects they match the situation in Kerala. Each setting is, of course, different in its dynamics, and some contrasts may also be noted. Nevertheless, the analysis of experiences in Indonesia and elsewhere provides a useful set of lenses with which to view the patterns in Kerala.

The Indian context

At first sight, India might seem to have an administrative framework which has long been decentralised. India is governed as a federal system of 28 states and seven Union Territories, and the constitution devised shortly after Independence in 1947 gave state governments far-reaching powers over many matters, including education. Some of these states, however, are very large; some important powers have been decentralised to the state level, but centralised within the state level.

In the 1950 constitution, control of education was primarily vested in the state governments rather than in the federal government. However, a 1976 constitutional amendment placed education on the concurrent list, making it a responsibility of both state and federal governments. In the case of conflict, this provision gave the federal government supremacy in all matters concerning education (Majumdar 1999: 232). At the same time, the constitution allowed a role for Panchayati Raj Institutions at the local level. These bodies, which owe their ancestry to forms of governance in pre-colonial times, have operated in different ways in different parts of the country. The Indian nationalist perspective on decentralisation was evident in the concept

of *Grama Swaraj* (village self-rule), of which Mahatma Gandhi was the most prominent proponent. Although Gandhi used the concept as a tool to challenge imperialism, he also desired the Panchayati Raj Institutions in the 20th century to have their own democratic bases and powers.

Interest in Panchayati Raj Institutions fluctuated during the initial post-Independence decades, but in the 1980s they were the focus of a major resurgence of attention. This led the national government in 1992 to pass two amendments to the Indian constitution and to require all state governments to create a three-tier system of strong, viable and responsive panchayats at the village, intermediate and district levels of rural areas, and in the municipalities of urban areas. State governments were expected to devolve adequate powers, responsibilities and finances on these elected bodies, to enable them to prepare plans and implement schemes for economic development and social justice (Ambasht 1996; Gaiha 1997).

In the domain of education, the requirements of the constitutional amendments were dovetailed with the National Policy on Education and its accompanying Programme of Action, which were first issued in 1986 and then revised 6 years later (India 1986a, b, 1992a, b). These documents emphasised the importance of decentralisation of planning and management at all levels as well as of ensuring greater community participation. This approach, as observed by Dhingra (1991: 1), marked a shift in educational planning.

In line with these thrusts, in 1993 the central government, with substantial support from external aid agencies, launched a District Primary Education Programme (DPEP). The programme sought to improve the efficiency of educational planning and management structures within selected districts (Varghese 1997: 141; World Bank 1997: 22–24). Within the first six years, the DPEP had been extended to 240 districts in 16 states. In Kerala, the DPEP was introduced in six of the 14 districts. Kannur, the district which is given particular attention in the present contribution, was not among them, and in this respect did not benefit from special treatment and resource inputs. However, even in the districts which did receive DPEP attention and resources, the practical limits of decentralisation rhetoric were evident (Kumar 2003; Mukundan 2003a).

The Kerala political and cultural context

Kerala State is well known not only in India but also internationally for its highly developed civil society which, in Tornquist's words (2000: 118), makes it "a sort of Scandinavia of the Third World". Kerala has achieved universal primary education, near total literacy, and near gender equality in access to education. These characteristics have caused analysts to investigate what they call the Kerala Model (Sen 1997; Kurien 2000). In part, this model reflects a legacy of communist government (Fic 1970; Prakash 1994). Like other

communist states, however, human development indicators have not been translated into economic ones. In 1997, for example, per-capita incomes in Kerala were estimated at US-\$324 compared with US-\$390 for India as a whole (Franke and Chasin 2000: 18). This has perplexed many analysts, and caused Wallich (1995) to describe Kerala as “a mystery inside a riddle inside an enigma”.

For some decades, Kerala’s political scene has been dominated by two parties: the Left Democratic Front (LDF), which is a Marxist group, and the United Democratic Front (UDF), which is a liberal democratic group. The LDF came to power in 1996 with a particularly radical approach and the launch of what it called the People’s Campaign for Decentralised Planning (PCDP). In 2001 the LDF was again replaced by the UDF, which claimed that it maintained commitment to the principles of decentralisation but did so in a modified way. Much of this study is an evaluation of the impact of the PCDP during the 5-year period of office of the LDF.

Kerala’s education system has a 10 + 2 + 3 structure, that is, 10 years of basic education followed by 2 years of upper secondary and 3 years of higher education (Kappor et al. 1994). The cycle of basic education, which is the main focus in the present context, is subdivided into four years of lower primary (Standards I–IV), three years of upper primary (Standards V–VII), and three years of lower secondary education (Classes VIII–X). The schools are classified into three groups: government, aided and private. In 2003, Kerala had 6,726 lower primary schools, of which 37.4% were government, 60% were aided, and 2.5% were private. The state also had 2,968 upper primary schools and 2,580 secondary schools. However, many of the secondary schools also had primary sections.

In line with the central-government requirement, in 1993 the Kerala authorities introduced legislation to form two layers of local self-government in urban areas, and three layers in rural areas. In the urban areas, the municipal corporations were subdivided into municipalities. In the rural areas, districts were divided into blocks, which in turn were divided into villages. Each of these rural sub-divisions was governed by a panchayat. The 1993 legislation led to formation of five municipal corporations and 53 municipalities, and to 14 districts, 152 blocks and 991 villages.

The People’s Campaign for Decentralised Planning

The PCDP covered multiple aspects of development including education, and stressed the importance of community participation within the system of multilevel planning. In the Ninth Five-Year Plan (1997–2002), state development grants to local communities were increased from 5% to nearly 40%. In educational matters, the panchayats at each level were expected to function according to powers delegated by the Kerala Panchayati Raj Act of 1994. Education up to Standard VII was made the primary responsibility of the

village panchayats in a framework which fitted that for India as a whole (Dyer 2000: 28).

The proponents of the PCDP (Thomas Isaac 2000; Vijayanand 2001) argued that Kerala was following an adventurous strategy for decentralisation. Instead of gradual transfer of powers to local governments in accordance with perceived improvement in their capacities to exercise them, the authorities took a 'big-bang' approach. Franke and Chasin (1997) suggested that the decentralisation programme was probably the largest of its kind in the world. The state government delegated 29 general administrative functions to lower-level bodies, along with powers to raise incomes through taxation. The PCDP was grounded in the principles of autonomy, participation and transparency (Thomas Isaac and Harilal 1997). A special Committee on Decentralization of Powers stated (1997: 3) that "power should flow through the elected bodies and their members to the people and should not be blocked at any level, as power ultimately belongs to the people and it is only legitimate that it is handed over to them."

The PCDP began with the identification of gaps in local development at the *Grama Sabha* (village-assembly) level. Development seminars were organised in each village for elected representatives, officials and others. Panchayat development reports were drafted, and task forces were set up to address specific sectors and provide training. The village panchayat plans were expected to aggregate into the block and then district plans (Powis 1999; Thomas Isaac and Heller 2001). A six-phase process was devised for implementation in 1997 and 1998 (Table 1).

Specifically in the domain of education, responsibility for schools was transferred from the state government to the different layers of local government (Table 2). This study looks most closely at the primary schools, for which responsibility was transferred to the districts (for upper primary and secondary schools, many of which had primary sections) and to villages (for lower primary schools). Block panchayats did not have a specific role in this distribution of responsibilities, though, as will become clear, they did also have some influence on developments.

In the domain of education, the State Planning Board introduced a Comprehensive Education Programme (CEP) to guide the panchayats. The CEP visualised education as a single process from pre-primary to continuing education, and gave importance to the learning process inside and outside the schools. The CEP also stressed the importance of participation by teachers, parents and society as a whole (Ganesh and Ramakrishnan 2000).

Experiences in Kannur district

In order to examine experiences in some detail, this section focuses on patterns in primary education in one of the 14 districts, Kannur. According to official sources (Thomas Isaac 1998), this district performed well in the

Table 1. Phases of the PCDP, 1997–98

Phase	Period	Objectives	Activities	Mass Participation
1. Development seminar	August–October 1997	Identify the felt needs of the people	Grama Sabha in rural areas and ward conventions in urban areas	2.5 million persons attending <i>Grama Sabhas</i>
2. Development seminar	October–December 1997	Objective assessment of the resources and problems, and formulation of local development perspectives	Participatory studies: preparation of development reports and seminars	300,000 delegates attending seminars
3. Task force	November 1997–March 1998	Preparation of projects	Meetings of task forces	100,000 volunteers in task forces
4. Plans of grass-root tiers	March–June 1998	Formulation of plans of grass-root tiers	Plan formulation; meetings of elected representatives	25,000 volunteers in formulation of plan documents
5. Plans of higher tiers (blocks and districts)	April–July 1998	Formulation of plans of higher tiers	Plan formulation; meetings of elected representatives	5,000 volunteers in formulation of plan documents
Volunteer technical corps	May–October 1998	Appraisal and approval of plans	Meetings of expert committee	5,000 volunteer technical experts working in the appraisal committees

Table 2. Numbers of schools for which responsibility was transferred to LSGIs, Kerala State, 1996–1999

	Lower Primary	Upper Primary	Secondary	Total
Corporations	289	144	218	651
Municipalities	459	207	263	929
District Panchayats	–	2,615	2,104	4,719
Block Panchayats	–	–	–	–
Village Panchayats	6,007	–	–	6,007

implementation processes; yet even this district showed significant gaps between rhetoric and reality.

Kannur is in the northern part of Kerala State. It has a population of 2.4 million, and a long history of education. The data which follow derive from field surveys undertaken during 2002 in 18 of Kannur's 81 village panchayats (Mukundan 2003b). The sample was chosen in a purposive way to cover a range of situations in the district. Although no powers related to primary education were delegated or devolved to the block panchayats, some block panchayats did initiate educational programmes. Three of the nine block panchayats in the district were therefore also selected for study; and at the apex of the system, the district panchayat was also studied. Data were collected through documentary analysis, interviews and supplementary questionnaires.

At the beginning of the PCDP, each village panchayat covered by the research published a development report (in Malayalam, the official local language in Kerala), and each report contained a chapter on education that outlined historical development and contemporary features. The reports were ratified in development seminars during 1997 according to the schedule presented above (Table 1). The issues identified in the reports pertained to a wide range of educational aspects, including academic standards, examinations, evaluation, syllabuses, training programmes, textbooks, co-curricular activities, and physical facilities. However, concerning the quality of education and standard of learning, the reports were superficial. The educational projects included in different plans by different village panchayats were mainly based on the state-level framework, that is, the CEP introduced by the State Planning Board.

According to their general features, the projects could be classified as ones designed to enhance the quality of primary education; improvement of infrastructure; and integrated projects (Table 3). Almost 90% of the projects were related to school noon-feeding programmes, scholarships and uniform distribution, teaching/learning aids production and distribution, awareness camps for teachers and parents, construction of toilets and cooking sheds, repairs, and drinking water. Most panchayat projects replicated and overlapped with parallel projects implemented by the General Education Department, the State Council for Educational Research and Training, and the District Institute of Education and Training. The noon-feeding programmes in primary schools in Kerala have a history of decades, having been introduced during the 1960s as a foreign aid project to attract and retain students and subsequently replicated by successive governments.

Dimensions of continuity and change are summarised in Table 4. In some cases the changes (e.g., in curriculum) were not related to the powers decentralised to the LSGIs, but were part of centralised state-level decisions. Other changes could have been effected within the PCDP, but did not in fact eventuate to a significant extent. Thus, there was very little change in the administrative system and functioning of schools at the district and local levels,

Table 3. Types of panchayat-level educational projects, Kannur District

Quality Improvement projects	Infrastructure projects	Integrated projects
Comprehensive programmes for the quality of education in Standards I to X	School buildings Furniture	Noon-feeding programmes Guidance and counselling centres
Short-term courses in remedial teaching	Classroom separation	
Language skills improvement	Toilet/latrine construction	School agriculture programmes
New evaluation techniques	Supply of drinking water	School health programmes
Research projects for teachers	Playgrounds and equipment for physical education	
Special education projects Programmes for students of scheduled castes/scheduled tribes		

though school authorities and teachers were to a certain extent required to implement instructions given by the administrative bodies of the LSGIs in implementing or participating in educational projects. The responsibility for the management of human and physical resources at the school level remained largely vested with the departmental bureaucrats and controlled by them based on the Kerala Education Rules and Kerala Service Rules. These responsibilities included distribution of responsibilities of headteachers and teachers; admission of pupils; appointments, staffing, salaries and other service benefits; sanctioning of leave; suspension and dismissal of teaching and non-teaching staff; curriculum and assessment; inspections and auditing; and the role of statutory bodies including Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) and the Mother PTAs designed for mothers in particular (as opposed to both parents). Further, even when village panchayats did develop projects, only a minority, most of them related to construction of buildings and toilets, were implemented as planned.

Stakeholder participation demanded considerable involvement from teachers. In this respect, examples may be provided from the focus-group interviews and questionnaires in Chapparapadava Panchayat. Though this panchayat was described by local and state politicians as outstanding in its implementation of innovative projects, the education sector activities, particularly in regard to the quality of education, were very modest. Of the 56 teachers who responded to the questionnaires, 38 mentioned that they were active in union activities but only 18 participated in the *Grama Sabhas*. Among the 18, three were headteachers, one was a village panchayat

Table 4. Continuity and change in primary education in Kannur, 1996–2001

<i>Departmental and political aspects related to primary education</i>	<i>Continuity and the reasons</i>	<i>Change and the reasons</i>
Departmental bureaucratic administration at the field level	Continuing as a part of the deconcentration and delegation of powers to line department, and controls over all aspects of education in the district; all service benefits to these personnel sanctioned by the state government and General Education Department	Controlling officers at the field levels were transferred based on general norms prescribed in the state government rules and subsequent orders
Headteachers and teachers in government primary schools	Appointments, promotions, transfers and service benefits determined by controlling officers based on general norms. Salaries paid by the state government	Some of them transferred based on general norms by the department authorities
Headteachers in aided primary schools	Promoted, appointed and transferred by concerned management with the ratification of officers in the department and paid by the state government	Some of them transferred by management bodies based on general norms with the ratification of controlling officers in the department
Provisional teachers in government schools who are recommended through employment exchanges	Appointed subject to government prescribed norms by the controlling officers; salary as per government norms and paid by the government	
Temporary teachers in vacant posts in government schools and aided schools		Hired and paid by Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs)
Admission, transfer and promotion of students	Government norms, procedures and rules unchanged	
Curriculum, teaching and learning materials, time allotted for each subject	Subjects included in the curriculum and the time allotted for them unchanged	New curricula and materials introduced by the state government; activity-based classrooms and integrated teaching and learning strategies introduced
Classroom evaluation and student promotion	Marking system continues to a certain extent in tests and examinations	Grading system introduced by the state government

Pre-service and in-service teacher training	Activity-based classroom strategies introduced in pre-service teacher training; more in-service training in new strategies for teachers
PTAs and Mother PTAs	PTAs and their functions continue as before Mother PTAs more active after the implementation of the new curriculum. Class PTAs introduced in some schools
School Development Committees	Suggested by the State Planning Board as a part of decentralised planning, but not widely implemented
Village Education Committees for overall monitoring of education at village panchayat level	Political decision at the state level as a part of decentralisation; not functioning in most villages.
Panchayat-level education task force to prepare education projects	Constituted in all village panchayats as part of decentralised planning since 1996; but dissolved by the state government in 2001
Various projects intended for qualitative improvement, infrastructure development and integrated projects related to primary-education sector at village panchayat level	Projects formulated and implemented in villages as a part of state-level decentralised planning campaign; some of them carried out when funds available
District, block and village panchayat level monitoring and academic committees, resource centres	All envisaged in the state government's Comprehensive Education Programme (1998), but most existed only on paper.
special projects covering the whole district	Kannur District Panchayat initiated a special noon-feeding supply of milk to primary-school children with the cooperation of all block and village panchayats.

member, and one was a block panchayat member. Among the respondents, 40 teachers stated that they had never been contacted by any tier of LSGI authorities, and that they had never participated in any kind of educational planning and implementation at the panchayat level. Of the 56 teachers, 45 indicated that the Panchayat Education Committees were inactive. Thirty teachers felt that the objectives of the PCDP could be useful for overall development, but 22 teachers asserted that the PCDP had not brought any change in the primary-education sector.

An alternative set of examples may be taken from Alakode Panchayat, where different projects pertaining to education were submitted for the approval of the District Planning Council during 1996/97–2000/01. In 1996/97 the only project to be approved by the District Planning Council was the noon-feeding programme, and in subsequent years no educational project as a part of decentralised planning was implemented. Similarly, in Udayagiri Panchayat in 1997/98 no educational projects were implemented as part of decentralised planning, since there were no recommendations from the Task Force for Education. In this panchayat, programmes such as cluster meetings of teachers, comprehensive education projects for students and youth, supply of medical and first-aid kits, erection of news boards etc. had not been implemented by 2000/01.

One exception to this pattern, at least in the eyes of the local, district and state authorities, was Panniannur. This village panchayat prepared an education calendar which spelled out curricular and co-curricular activities to be carried out during the academic year, and did proceed with implementation. Projects in this panchayat included quiz competitions, knowledge festivals, handbooks for primary teachers, field trips for pupils, and arts and sports festivals. The panchayat set up a committee to monitor activities in schools, distributed reference books, organised seminars and exhibitions, provided coaching for state-level examinations, and organised awareness camps for mothers. A major factor was that most local politicians in Panniannur had come from the teaching field. This included the President and Vice President of the village panchayat along with the Chairman of the Education Standing Committee. Also, teachers and managers were forced to be innovative by competition from private English-medium schools; the activity in this panchayat partly reflected a project which had been carried over to the PCDP era.

Explaining the rhetoric/reality gap

Perhaps the most important factor explaining the gap between rhetoric and reality lay in the nature of the PCDP. The strong panchayats such as Panniannur and Kerala's long traditions of political participation were in some respects problematic because they were misleading: State-level planners over-estimated the capacity of administrators and community members at the local

level. In this respect, the pattern in Kerala matched that described by Bjork (2003) in Indonesia. Policy-makers mistakenly assumed that the participants in the *Grama Sabhas* could, with assistance, rise to the challenge fairly easily. In practice, when the *Grama Sabhas* did identify needs, they tended to focus on capital works and on familiar schemes such as noon-day feeding. The 'softer', qualitative sides of education proved much more difficult to address.

Another problem, which again echoed the Indonesian situation, concerned the nature of the models advocated by the centre. The project guidelines prepared by the State Planning Board took inadequate account of the diversity of local realities and possibilities. The guidelines were also highly academic, with extensive technical jargon. For example, a section of the planning handbook (State Planning Board 1998: 33) included the following statement:

The education sector in Kerala is facing some challenges, and the deterioration of educational standards is prominent among them. Literacy and numeracy are not the only criteria to be considered for educational standards. Other matters to be considered should include how far the learner has achieved in: acquiring knowledge; applying knowledge; achieving the skills for living; showing progress in scientific awareness, civic awareness and value awareness; involvement in aesthetic activities such as appreciation and art performance; development of creativity; creative approach to the nature; and achieving propriety of values such as patriotism, humanitarianism, equality and rationalism.

This sort of jargon was evident in much of the promotional literature and created major difficulties for ordinary people in rural villages.

A third difficulty arose from the time frame. As noted, the PCDP was deliberately launched with a 'big bang'. Such an approach can have merits, as observed elsewhere (Bray 1985; Heyneman 1997; Gershberg 1999). The strategy can concentrate attention and by mobilising forces can overcome inertia. However, inevitably such initiatives encounter problems of capacity. In Kerala, moreover, the needs of the education sector were overshadowed by the demands of health and culture, which gained even stronger priority.

A related problem arose from the fact that most members of the *Grama Sabhas* lacked technical expertise. Many panchayats were highly politicised and, in the words of Jain (2001: 2) "served as little more than 'boxing rings', where people seek to knock out one another to get on to the list of potential beneficiaries for the latest government scheme". None of the panchayats investigated for this research included stakeholder representation *per se* from the education sector; and, as in Indonesia, teachers lacked incentives to change, tending to see themselves as accountable to the bureaucratic hierarchy rather than to local communities. Thomas Isaac, who was the member in charge of decentralisation in the State Planning Board and one of the main protagonists and designers of the Campaign at the state level, himself recognised this (Thomas Isaac and Franke 2000: 81):

The first statutory gramasabha convened during December 1995 and March 1996 seemed to confirm the general apprehension. In most places the gramasabhas were

convened to fulfill the legal formality with barely the quorum of 50 members present. The general opinion has been that the preparations, publicity, organization and the discussions in the first round of gramasabhas were of poor quality.

He added that active workers who understood the nature of the tasks were in short supply, and that the state-level personnel were not able to work with local-level bodies on delegated powers and projects. Another important factor was the lack of capacity of parents and people's representatives to deviate from traditional patterns. Few parents welcomed new programmes, especially those related to the implementation of new curricula that aspired to broaden the approach education. They tended to view with suspicion the new teaching techniques and evaluation methods supposedly used to update and improve educational processes. Few parents attended the awareness camps, and most even hesitated to attend the school PTA meetings in schools which focused on the curricular changes and their intended roles of parents. Similarly, few people's representatives, most of whom were politicians rather than professionals, could handle with equal dexterity issues in education, health, roads, community-building and infrastructure. Moreover, even when they did have some competence in education, they inevitably had divided attention in the pressures of the multifaceted approach.

Another challenge lay in the lack of an effective monitoring system. This problem basically reflected the lack of experience of the Panchayat Education Committees. The designers of the PCDP had recommended three types of monitoring: state-government monitoring; monitoring based on consensus and co-operation among neighbouring schools; and monitoring by bodies consisting of parents and people's representatives. The designers of the PCDP also envisaged that neighbourhood and ward committees would play an important role. However, in practice, the monitoring by these committees was vehemently criticised even by the so-called 'radical' associations of teachers. These bodies challenged the right as well as the qualifications of such committees to assess classroom practices and other curricular activities. This sort of resistance by the teachers undermined the spirit of such monitoring in various panchayats.

Conclusions

Gershberg (1999: 63) commenced his study of decentralisation processes in Mexico and Nicaragua with the observation that "we still know too little about how to implement such reforms successfully given the intricate political contexts in which they must occur." A similar remark was made by Gaynor (1998: 4): "While the decentralization of education continues to attract considerable interest and support, there is an increasing demand to extract lessons from experience and to critically challenge assumptions about

decentralization.” Bjork’s (2003: 186) study of Indonesia commenced by noting the need for case-specific analyses to provide “a much needed balance to more theoretical treatments of decentralization and reports produced by funding organizations”. The present contribution has been written in the spirit advocated by these authors, providing data from one state, and particularly one district within that state, in India.

The strongest message of this study is that even in a society with high levels of education and strong traditions of participation, decentralisation is difficult to achieve. In Kerala, this was attempted with a multifaceted ‘big-bang’ approach which had limitations but also strengths. Among the obstacles were technical competence at the local level and the attitudes of actors unconvinced that decentralisation was desirable in the first place.

In his parallel study of Indonesia, Bjork (2003: 215) raised the obvious question whether time would make a difference. He asked himself whether he was too hasty in drawing conclusions about the fate of the reform only 4 years since it had been enacted, and whether 10 or 20 years would be needed before the benefits of the reform could begin to surface. A similar question of course needs to be asked in Kerala. Bjork’s answer was to leave open that possibility in Indonesia; but he indicated that he was not convinced that it was likely to occur. He added that:

The difficulties that Indonesian educators have experienced as they respond to [reform] directives stem from friction between the ideological foundation of educational decentralization and the culture of teaching and government that shapes the behavior of teachers as public employees. The ... teachers have been socialized to accept a set of values and to display behaviors that clash with the philosophical underpinnings of decentralization.

Comparable forces were at play in Kerala; and since in any case the Left Democratic Front which came to power in 1996 was replaced in 2001 by its rival United Democratic Front, much of the momentum of the PCDP was dissipated. Of course, it can be argued that development must take the form of a series of pushes: two steps forward, one step backward. But the Kerala case seems to raise questions about the fundamental goals as well as about the practicalities of implementation.

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