

# GENDER AND DEMOCRATIC DECENTRALIZATION IN KERALA

Sumi Kailasapathy

**K**erala took its place in the history books when it elected the first Communist government into power in 1957. Ever since then, Kerala has attracted the attention of both social scientists and social activists alike for its amazing record in the field of social development. For example, Kerala's female literacy rate of 86.2 percent (in 1991) is almost equal to that of the male, while the Indian average of 39 percent for females is lower than that of males by a third. Further, the infant mortality rate in Kerala is 13 per 1000 as against India's 80. The above are just two of the indices, which reveal the tremendous achievements that Kerala has attained in the last four decades, despite the fact that it is one of the poorest states in India. Later to be christened as the "Kerala model," this kind of social development, achieved despite very low levels of per capita income, has underscored the importance of redistributive measures in raising the quality of life for the majority. Such development has also caught the interest of eminent social scientists such as Amartya Sen, who has used the Kerala example to expand the debates on Third World development to encompass issues pertaining to human welfare as well.

In the past decade, critiques of this model have been put forward by many Kerala specialists, mainly due to its unsustainability in the long run. Most agree that the redistributive and social welfare policies of the Left governments in Kerala have improved the quality of life of its citizens. The important role played by the labor unions and peasant organizations in bringing to power the Left governments, which in turn established an extensive welfare state and accomplished major land reforms, has also been recognized. But at the same time, the narrow economism of the Trade Unions coupled with low investments in the productive sector, both by the state government and private investors, has had a toll on Kerala's economic growth. For example, Kerala's unemployment rate is three times that of India's. Lagging economic growth in turn has had a negative impact on the viability of the "Kerala model" as there are fewer and fewer resources to be spent on the social welfare system that has been the envy of most developing countries.

In order to find innovative solutions to the problem of low economic growth and productivity, Kerala's Left Democratic Front government (a coalition of Left parties) embarked on a program called "The People's Campaign for Decentralized Planning" in August 1996. This campaign deserves greater scrutiny not only due to its economic implications but also due its political ramifications. I focus on the political implications of this campaign, popularly referred to as "People's Plan Campaign." In particular, I shall analyze the implications of this innovative model on gender relations and the empowerment of women in Kerala.

The key principles of the "People's Plan Campaign" are democratic participation, accountability and transparency. The government has aspired to achieve these ideals by handing over 40 per cent of the state budget to the local-level governing units such as the Panchayats or Local Self-Governance institutions. This, in principle and in practice is commendable, as it takes democracy to a new level by allowing ordinary citizens to determine, plan and execute their budgets according to their local needs and priorities. This also turns the old Communist model of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe on its head, by rejecting centralized planning and adopting local-level, grassroots-level planning instead. In other words, it has taken planning and decision-making from the hands of bureaucrats and has vested it in the hands of ordinary men and women.

In practice, decentralized planning should promote greater congruence between the needs of the people and the ensuing development in a region or locality. In principle, it should promote the deepening of democracy, as the accountability and transparency added to the fiscal process has a greater potential of achieving the people's will in the economic and social spheres. It is therefore important to critically analyze and understand the recent economic and political developments in Kerala as it has the potential of taking social democracy to new heights by devolving economic and political powers to the lowest levels of governing units. At this point it is important to evaluate whether the deepening of democracy in this larger sense has a positive impact on empowering women and improving gender relations within both the household and society. It is essential to undertake this task, as various experimentations in socialism and social democracy have proved that there are no automatic gains made in the realm of gender relations as a result of radical changes in the spheres of politics and/or economics. For example, the old Communist model underscored the fact that a mere incorporation of women into the labor force was neither sufficient to liberate women from the double-burden, nor to break the ideological confines of domesticity.

The great achievements attained in the field of social development such as a high female literacy, coupled with the legacies of a matrilineal system has attracted the attention of feminist scholars and activists in the past decades to study the status of women in Kerala. Many have acknowledged both the role of Left-wing social welfare policies and the historical legacies of economic and social status enjoyed by Nayer women of Kerala due to a system of matriliney, in elevating their social status in comparison to their counterparts in the rest of India. It is noteworthy that Kerala is the only state within India where women outnumber men. In all the other states millions of women have gone "missing" due to sex-selective abortion, female infanticide, neglect of the girl child etc. Nevertheless, some feminists have rightly pointed out the problems

faced by Kerala women, despite such fortunate legacies. For example, it has been noted that the higher social capacity due to better education and reduction in child care burdens due to declining fertility, have not led to an increase in the work participation rate of women or in their social leadership roles (Seema and Mukherjee 2000, p.2). In other words, welfare gains in health and education have not been translated into higher economic or social status. It has also done very little to increase the entrance and meaningful participation of women in the public sphere.

So what has been the impact of the "People's Plan Campaign" in improving gender relations in Kerala? From the point of view of representation, the state has mandated that one third of the Panchayat members and presidents have to be women. Further, 10 per cent of the local budgets have been earmarked for "women's projects." What does all this mean in terms of redefining gender relations and empowering women? In order to understand the impact of the "People's Plan Campaign" on women, one needs to distinguish women's needs from women's empowerment.

Many of the programs that have been implemented under the heading of "women's projects" have included infrastructural projects such as building of crèches, providing sanitation, water etc. At one level this shows a lack of awareness on the part of the planners and implementers in not discerning the difference between women's needs and women's empowerment. At another level it merely reinforces existing gender relations by emphasizing the fact that it is women who are primarily responsible for the care of children and home. In other words, it leaves the ideology of domesticity intact and does nothing to dismantle the existing sexual division of labor within the household.

Another example which highlights the point that local-level decision-making in itself is not capable of empowering marginalized groups, is as follows. Within the "women's projects," productive sector projects such as animal husbandry, dairy and poultry have been given priority. These projects were implemented through asset distribution—that is, providing animals and poultry to the beneficiaries. A sample examination of these projects has revealed that there

has been no conscious effort to ensure that the income and the assets are continued to be controlled by the women beneficiaries themselves (Seema and Mukherjee 2000, p.15). These projects only re-emphasize the fact that economic policies derived without any sort of gender consciousness not only add burdens to the work day of the already over-burdened women, but also fail to empower them in any tangible way, due to lack of changes in the existing patriarchal gender relations—in this case women failing to reap the benefits of their labor in terms of financial autonomy, leisure, etc.

Many of the "women's projects" of the "People's Plan Campaign" seem to have repeated the problems of incorporating women into the development process under the "Women in Development" (WID) paradigm. The experiences of the "People's Plan Campaign" emphasizes the fact that there is no automatic relationship between the deepening of democracy and the empowerment of women. It further underscores the fact that a gender-conscious effort has to be made in order to not only improve the quality of the lives of women but also to increase their visibility and participation in the public sphere. Mere incorporation of women into the productive sector or encouraging self-employment while keeping intact the patriarchal social relations within the household and society, does not lead to the empowerment of women. Therefore, it becomes imperative that gender-conscious planning and implementation is in place to ensure that the ordinary women of Kerala reap the benefits of the deepening of democracy in their society.

## Notes

\* The author is a doctoral candidate at the New School for Social Research (New York) and a visiting lecturer in the Women's Studies Program at the Eastern Michigan University (Michigan).

## References

T. N. Seema and Vanitha Mukherjee, 2000, "Gender Governance and Citizenship in Decentralized Planning," Paper presented at the International Conference on Democratic Decentralization held in Thiruvananthapuram, May 23-27. ■