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Local Governance, Civil Society and Social Mobilisation*

R.K. Varghese

The Kerala Sociological Society which started functioning in 1972 as a professional body of sociologists enters into its 43rd anniversary. It is a proven fact that the Society, through its earnest academic commitment to the noble cause of mobilising socially sensitive people all around the world, has literally succeeded in its aim to an amazing extent till this time. It is also a noteworthy fact that the KSS has been continuing the tradition of publishing its biannual Journal "Kerala Sociologist" from 1985 onwards. With a view to bringing together all those who pursue the discipline of Sociology, the Society has been organising National Conferences every year on a contemporary theme, and brought under it all teaching Departments and Research Institutes, and have won the active involvement of the academicians and professionals in the subject. It has also played a leading role in mobilising social consciousness in the community around us by organising regular social events, seminars, discussion forums and similar activities of social importance at a regional level. I request all those who are involved in the discipline of Sociology directly or indirectly in various calibre, to get actively associated with the Kerala Sociological Society and render their valuable contributions to the people and the society in a more organised manner.

Social Development and transformation in positive lines is one of the serious concerns of any responsible individual and agency in the civilized world. Social Mobilisation has been one of the powerful tools which could be effectively adopted by the system of governance found to prevail

in the arena of decentralisation of power and an effective participatory governance. The central question before us is to the extent and the manner in which the local self - governance agencies have made substantial contributions to bring about social transformation from the grass root level onwards. Social transformation never implies the changes in the existing social structure, but a veritable change of the structure realigning the power relations within the society and transferring the decision making power at the political and social levels from vested interest groups, communal, terrorist and such other vulgar destructive and vested interest agencies and forces. Many historical and contemporary factors, processes and realities are found continually operating in local governance, catering to the mobilisation and gratification of the aspirations and requirements of various fragments of the society in both positive and negative ways. An inquisitive academic attempt of this sort is truly aimed at this year's annual conference by identifying its theme of discourse as "Local Governance, Civil Society and Social Mobilisation". I would like to remind you that we had chosen the topic "Local Self Governance" as the main theme of the Annual Conference of the KSS in 2004 and have made substantial academic observations that time, more than a decade back. Thus, in this Conference, when we present this issue once again before an august academic body, it takes the form more of a follow up investigation, a repeated analysis of the theme and an evaluative approach towards the efficacy of the micro level agencies of governance in the country, in mobilising and serving the civil society at a macro level and rendering productive benefits to it.

Development of Local Self Governance in India

When we trace out the system of indigenous life in traditional India of Vedic days, evidences show that self - governing village bodies called "Sabhas" existed as oraganisational bodies which regulated their life. Later, they came to be Panchayats, a Council of Five persons. Such factors as Mughal Rule, Casteism, and Feudalistic mode of socio economic organisation, adversely affected the system of self-governance in villages. During the British rule, the autonomy of panchayats gradually declined with the establishment of local civil and criminal courts, revenue and police organisations, the increase in communications, the growth of individualism and the operation of the Ryotwari and the Mahalwari or village tenure system.

The first efforts by the British parliament to design institutional structures for the governance of Indian territories of the East India Com-

pany goes to the Regulating Act of 1773, Government of India Act of 1858, 1919 and the later Government of India Act of 1935 and the introduction of municipal administration in the towns of Madras, Bombay and Calcutta under the Charter Act of 1793 and the Municipal Act of 1842 covering non presidency towns of Bengal. Historians have been mentioning about the attempts which were initiated by the British for a gradual indigenisation of the Indian imperial structure but no one is sure whether they have done any of these measures with the genuine intention of decentralisation or democratisation of administration of Indian provinces. However, the imperial administrators had in their mind, the sanction to provide gradual training to Indians in the arts of local self -government. Thus, Lord Mayo's Resolution issued in 1870 proclaimed: "Local interest, Supervision, and care are necessary to success in management of funds, devoted to education, sanitation, medical relief, and local public works. The operation of this resolution in its full meaning and integrity will afford for the development of self - governance. Lord Rippon's Resolution in 1882 was more of liberal to the desire of the English educated Indians about a democratic, decentralised government in India. Later, the Government of India Act, 1919 embodied the twin ideas of "Diarchy" and limited Provincial Autonomy under which several new enactments for the establishment of Village Panchayats in major provinces of British India.

Mahatma Gandhi's advent at the leadership of Indian National Congress stimulated the political thought of the leaders and the public, which led them to conceive a local self-government at least in theory. Thus, some token steps were taken by the government in several princely states from the mid - thirties onwards. Independence enabled a new momentum to local governance but not at all satisfactory compared with the pre - independence era. The launching of Five Year Plans with the initiation of the Planning Commission of India in 1950 provided an unprecedented impetus to local governance conducive to the interests of the common masses. But the village Panchayat institutions, remained more or less in the same condition for many more years too till the Balwant Rai Mehta Report in 1957 which recommended a three tier system of administration. With this, we entered into the historic phase of institutionalisation of the idea of Democratic Decentralisation by the devising of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). The Second Five Year Plan stressed the need for creating a well organised democratic structure of administration within the district. Afterwards, in 1977, the Ashok Mehta Report suggested effective measures for reviving these

institutions and emphasised the need for decentralisation of administration and the adoption of a two tier model consisting of Zilla Parishadh and Mandal Panchayat. It recommended such aspects as direct election and committee system to both tiers, participation of political parties in its formation, representation of SC and ST etc. Another significant milestone in the history of democratic decentralisation in India is the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution in 1992 which provided one third reservation of seats for SC/ST and women. After Part VIII of the Constitution, a separate Part IX has been added to the Constitution with the addition in Article 243 A to 243 D and a fresh Schedule called Eleventh Schedule, enumerating the powers and functions of Panchayati Raj institutions, has been incorporated. The Act also provides for constituting a Finance Commission for each state to look after the financial needs of the PRIs, and entrusted the State Election Commission to conduct the elections.

Decentralisation as a reality in Local Governance

Decentralisation as an inexorable socio political reality is globally accepted and adopted today in the context of the new developmental strategies and mass expansion of market oriented economic activities, private initiative etc., which have a control over the power of the state. The volume and efficacy of developmental activities have been at an increase and the influence of the democratic institutions in everyday existence of people has been considerably proliferated. Thus, states are not able to control and monitor the market based forces and its consequences including exploitation, inequalities, profiteering, environmental contamination, and other similar issues. A parallel and grass root mechanism and its effective work are imperative to tackle this situation. Since the basic frame and constitution of societies vary from each other, the meaning and objectives of decentralisation also differs from country to country. The manner and extent to which it is to be offered to its population is often determined by the varying requirements and infrastructural conditions of the civilization and culture of the society concerned. The areas and activities which are to be included are to be determined by experts or by the guidelines of a careful Social Planning process, especially in developed countries of the world.

The last seven decades of developmental strategies in India after Independence clearly evidence that no single attempt for sustainability and positive development would be successful only with a popular support, and only from the point of view of its beneficiaries. Too much complications and

formalities in administration will keep the developmental and welfare projects of the government away from common masses, since a large segment of our population are illiterate and less educated. More transparency and ease of approach to the people could be warranted solely by a proper decentralisation process. This often becomes a preventive measure too to abolish corruption and nepotism in administration by the continued vigil of the local people. In a society like ours, the participatory involvement of people definitely enhances their capacity building and role performance as responsible citizens. Dissemination of power positions and determining opportunities ensure partaking and citizenship training to maximum number of people from the village level onwards. The 11th schedule of the 73rd amendment confers 29 subjects to the rural local bodies. It is left to the state governments to decide which of these subjects are to be given to the Gram Panchayats through legislative decisions. The state government is vested with the power of allocating appropriate duties to each tier of the Panchayats.

The major leverage of decentralization goes to the weaker sections and the marginalised. Article 243 G of the Constitution envisages that Panchayats would undertake planning for social justice and economic development of the villages. The process of decentralisation has to work in a desirable and transparent manner, without much political manoeuvring. Representation from worker's groups, Dalit organisations, women's gatherings, resident's associations, trade unions, and any other eligible micro subdivisions of society may be ensured so that adequate representation from multiple categories become realised. Thus, the poorest among them get benefits of the welfare and service activities undertaken in local governing bodies, either directly or indirectly. The idea of equitable distribution of national and local resources could be effectually materialised in this manner. Accordingly, in the place of Representative Democracy, we could develop a People's Democracy with direct or indirect participation of maximum number of people at varied levels of governance. Local self - governing bodies also take initiative to facilitate such schemes as Integrated Child Development Programme (ICDS) of Government of India and Anganvadi and similar other schemes which promote the welfare of women and children. It is through the Panchayats that the Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Program (RLEGP) and Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee (MGNREG) have been implemented in the villages in the country.

Civil Society and Social Mobilisation

The term Civil Society originally taken from Latin language “societas civilis” which means a community, a collection of human beings, united within a legitimate political order. It also includes a system of private property rights, toleration and freedom of worship, and freedom of speech. The concept was first developed in Ancient Greece and came to be elaborated by Enlightenment. It is often used to be attached with such aspects as civil liberties, human rights, which an authoritarian state usually tends to reject. The concept entered in European discourse in the Fifteenth century which was conceived as synonymous with political society understood as contrivance of free individuals. Civil society as a reality has its historic, Sociological political and economic connotations. Sociologically it is more corresponding to the idea of “Gesellschaft” developed by Ferdinand Tonnies. By its genesis, Civil Society is one of the three evolutionary or transformative stages of progress of human society succeeding the stages of Natural society, Feudalism and Capitalism. The crucial development of the concept came to be associated with later transformations in human society such as commercialisation of the resources of production- the land, labour and capital; the growth of market economy, emerging transitions in the concepts of morality and ethics and the breakdown of past conventions and traditions etc. Many philosophers and social thinkers have developed their conceptions regarding civil society. In his work *The Philosophy of Right* (1821, p.266), Hegel argues that the creation of civil society, by fostering self – subsistent individuality, is one of the great achievement of the modern world.

The modern world which lay a remarkable importance to individualism and personal freedom, is basically founded upon the incessant process of social mobilisation on the principles of civil society. Civil society includes not just individuals who participate, but the institutions through which individuals and groups fulfil their citizenship responsibilities. They have an inseparable involvement and participation in such organised entities known as “civil society organizations” (CSO). It includes both public and private sectors; political or apolitical services and activities accomplished by non - profit organizations such as non - governmental organizations (NGOs). It is due to the utmost importance of Civil Society Organisations that the World Bank maintains effective functional links with thousands of such organisations throughout the world at the global, regional and national levels. These include NGOs, trade unions, faith-based organizations, indigenous people’s movements, foundations and many other. The

partnerships range from forest and nature conservation, AIDS control, rural poverty alleviation, micro-credit, to internet communication. Besides economic infrastructure, a civil society originally develop, sustain and reform the Social Capital as an intangible resource accumulated by civil society that can be expended when a society finds itself in crisis.

It is a fact that many democratic governments in modern world have been earnestly trying to foster civil society and mobilisation of the public in more participatory modes. The three tier system of democratic decentralisation in our country has been devised with this noble intention. The British government has created a variety of regional assemblies and "citizen juries" to bring more people into active participation in political life. Governments in the US also promoted national dialogues on questions of race and "Faith Based Initiative" is designed to support organizations which build social capital. The French government also make sure that sufficient public input is ensured before launching any major new project that might affect the environment is approved. Similarly, the "South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission" received evidence and opinion from their people, even from those who had never been involved in any democratic political process before. It evidenced that most of the responsible governing institutions and development and planning agencies now render their efforts to economically support for the development of civil society. The NGOs who are often in direct contact with the general public, usually functions as a link between the state and the civil society in developing capacity building among women and Dalits, and imparting training to the leaders among them.

The civil society organisations in our country have shown remarkable progress during the past few decades which provide strength to the people for progressive civil society activism. The national policy of empowerment of women, for instance, envisages such objectives as the development of full potential of women by adopting favourable socio economic policies, equal access to decision making, elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, and mainstreaming a gender perspective in developmental projects. A recent area of inclusion in the realm of civil society is Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). It aims at identifying the potential of corporate enterprises to contribute meaningfully to such aspects as alleviation of poverty, promotion of sustainable development, and other developmental strategies. Private companies are considered to be developmental agents in a country, by developing partnership linkages in

social responsibility with the government which envisages a strategic use of power, rights, and interest-based negotiations. Effective corporate assistance will enhance the social power of civil society organisations to acquire technical knowledge, awareness to demand good governance, strategic planning, organisation management etc.

It is undoubtedly evidenced from the observations above that the community of scholars, activists, policy analysts and corporates have been either directly or indirectly involved in the discourses associated with the significance of local governance, civil society and social mobilisation in the context of contemporary socio economic realities. The practical realisations that they arrive at will render useful tips to governments and authorities to identify their prioritisations and frame their strategies. As a developing nation and economy, some of the requirements related with aspects of self - governance and civil society that we should identify as crucial to our emancipation may be dissimilar from those of the developed nations. The models and alternatives suited to our indigenous conditions are to be properly derived by careful thought and investigation. It is for the genuine cause of liberating our nation from many of its vices that curb our development that the popular mind and efforts are to be judiciously applied.

Note

*Presidential address delivered in 42nd All Kerala Sociological Conference (Dec 11th to 13th 2014) on 'Local Governance, Civil Society And Social Mobilisation' at Loyola College of Social Sciences, Trivandrum Kerala.

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