

**SOCIAL CLASSES AND PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL
PLANNING IN KERALA : A MICRO LEVEL STUDY**

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ABSTRACT

The people's participation in the decentralised planning process at the panchayat level is witnessing a steady decline in the State. What is significant is that the participation comes only from the poor and the lower middle class people. The growing tendency of the middle classes and the relatively better off sections of the people to keep away from participation in the grama sabha meetings is obvious. With increasing levels of education and affluence their lack of interest for participation was also found rising. It appears that the educated and the articulate middle class, which is expected to contribute significantly to the planning process, is increasingly giving up its social role. It is the poor and the lower sections of the middle class who appreciate the empowering potential of the grama sabha. They are also found holding a more serious attitude towards political and democratic causes as judged from their involvement in various social activities. The growing environment of neo-liberal policies is a disincentive for the privileged sections of the middle classes who benefit from such policies to join collective social action. This at least partially explains the lower participation levels of the middle classes in social and political activities. However, the declining participation is not exclusively the result of class behaviour. There are inherent problems in the methodology of planning which needs to be addressed to ensure better administrative co-ordination and co-operation in decentralised planning.

Key Words: Participation, people's planning, grama sabha, middle classes, intermediate classes.

Section I

Introduction

The present developmental status of Kerala owes much to its history of active civil society movements spanning over a century at least. The much appreciated ‘Kerala model’ of social development is hailed as the outcome of public action by many developmental experts (Sen, 1996; Frank and Chasin, 2000). While the governmental programmes in the areas of social welfare and community development in Kerala have been essentially the results of people’s struggles, people’s participation in their implementation, played a major role in the success of such state programmes. The contribution of people’s participation in significant achievements of Kerala in women/gender development, high female literacy, high female representation in higher education, low rates of maternal and child mortality and high life expectancy is particularly noted by observers of Kerala society. It was in such a context of active civil society movements that the Kerala Panchayat Raj Act 1994, as a follow up to the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, was introduced for decentralization of power to the local level. The three tier local self government institutions formed accordingly were devolved with responsibilities, resources and man power to carry out projects and programmes for grass root level development. The decentralized process of planning and implementation at the local government level involved the joint participation of different stakeholders and offered every individual an opportunity for direct participation in the development process of the village.

The major strategy of decentralisation in Kerala was to ensure the participation of the grass root level people in the preparation and implementation of developmental plans. Thus evolved the people’s planning (*Janakeeyasuthranam*) campaign in the state. The direct involvement of people in planning and beneficiary selection has been pivotal to people’s planning. The grama sabhas have been identified as the platform for peoples’ participation in the planning process. The legislation of panchayats contemplates that all persons included in the electoral rolls within the area of a panchayat shall be deemed to be constituted as grama sabha of that panchayat which is expected to provide necessary input and support for planning¹.

The functioning of the grama sabhas in Kerala has been noted particularly for its higher participation rates and their contribution to the people’s planning campaign until recent times. The people’s planning

1. The Kerala Panchayat Raj Act, 1994, has in it Grama Sabha (3) that “All persons whose names are included in the electoral rolls relating to a village comprised within the area of a village panchayat shall be deemed to be constituted as Grama Sabha of such village”. The act specifies each constituency of the village panchayat (that is, a ward) as a village.

campaign in Kerala that earned much acclaim both in the country and outside, has over time lost its initial dynamism and the declining participation level has become a subject of concern and criticism from many corners. Some of the recent studies and media reports show that people's participation in grama sabhas is on the decline and the enthusiasm of the participants witnessed earlier is missing now. The growing trend of non-participation in grama sabha meetings is a topic of discussion in a number of studies (Heller *et al.* 2004; Oommen, 2005; International Congress on Kerala Studies, 2005; Sudhakaran, 2006). Indications are that the salaried class and the male population are increasingly withdrawing from attending the grama sabha meetings. (Luciamma Kurian, 2000; George Kutty, 2010). It has also been pointed out that, of late, the elected panchayat members are often forced to adopt various means, including personal offers of benefits, in order to persuade the members to attend the grama sabha meetings as on occasions when even the minimum quorum is absent. There have been even cases of elected ward members losing their positions due to consecutive failure in convening grama sabha meetings in the absence of quorum. The Kerala Government had to bring about an amendment in the Panchayat Raj Act to reinstate status quo in those panchayats.

Recent literature and media reports are rich in observations on the growing apathy of people belonging to the middle or intermediate classes of society towards participation in people's planning processes and the collective efforts for social development. The trend of declining participation of people, particularly those belonging to the middle classes and the relatively better off sections, needs to be viewed with concern as the State has a history of very active civil society movements in which the participation of intermediate classes was significant. Those classes in fact, had leadership roles in many such movements. Their withdrawal from the public sphere can have other implications also. Those relatively better off sections with their advantageous position in the socio-economic and educational fields can be expected to provide qualitative input to local planning and developmental activities. Hence, their withdrawal implies considerable social cost. The present study is an attempt to look into this emerging trend more closely by taking up the micro-level situation in a panchayat ward with regard to the participatory behaviour of various sections of the people who form the grama sabha of that ward.

Section II

The Study Framework

A broad framework of the study emanates from the widely accepted proposition that in general the middle classes are a significant force in the social and political life of under developed capitalist countries. The middle or intermediate classes in a capitalist society can be viewed as all those classes which are positioned in between the two polar classes, that is, the capitalists and the working class, that constitute the principal classes in such a society. Although the intermediate classes do not constitute the principal classes, they 'occupy a strategic field in the economy and politics' of peripheral capitalist countries (Aijaz Ahmad, 1985). This is the consequence of a number of factors. The very nature of

capitalist development taking place in these countries is the foremost reason. The colonial or imperialist influences on the periphery combined with the pre-capitalist features of the peripheral societies make the capitalist transformation in these countries a complex and contorted process. In such situations, the class polarisation is not taking place in a strict and clearly defined path. These societies have varied forms of property relations, diverse accumulation processes and livelihood patterns, significant measure of petty commodity production and a large mass of peasants of different scales and sizes. As such, the class structure in the peripheral countries is more complex and hazy, compared to mature capitalist societies. A range of classes and strata belonging to different sectors of the economy like small and big peasants, small scale manufacturers, petty traders, self-employed people, and petty bourgeoisie of various hues occupy the middle ground of such societies. They not only form the numerically large segment of the population, but also are in a position to influence other classes and the society at large, owing to the relative weakness of the polar classes in an underdeveloped capitalist society. Hence, most scholars consider the middle class synonymous with the dominant class in a society (Giddens, 1981; Sterns, 1994; Daniel and Paul, 1997; Gilbert, 1998; Savage, 2000; Savage et al. 2013).

It is also argued by many that the middle classes play a dominant role in developed capitalist societies also. They point out that historically civil societies and their institutions have grown with the growth of the middle classes. The historical role of the middle class in social development has gained prominence with the recognition of the role the middle class played in the development of England in the 19th century. The social scientists, who employ class analysis without reference to the mode of production, are found increasingly glorifying the role of middle classes in all countries irrespective of their stage of development or modes of production. The modernisation theory (Lipset, 1959) emphasises the possibilities of middle sections favouring the creation and consolidation of democracy. The middle classes with their higher educational and knowledge achievements are considered better agents of social change by many analysts. Conceptually, citizens with higher human capital may be more effective in sustaining good institutions (Glaser *et. al.* 2004). Their involvement and participation can add value to policies, institutions and governance. More enlightened political participation, stronger voice, larger similarity of preferences and values that help reduce conflicts in policy and institutional reforms could be some other positive dimensions of their involvement. Needless to say, whether the middle classes play a progressive role as described above or not, depends on the socio economic conditions and the balance of class forces prevailing in a society.

It should also be noted that the middle segment of the population is not a homogeneous entity. They are heterogeneous in terms of several features including economic, cultural and social. They are fragmented not only in terms of wealth and income, but also in terms of social position, ideological affiliations etc. As such, it is difficult to have a consensus as to who form the middle class or classes. As mentioned earlier, one way out is to define the middle classes as those who position between the two polar classes. Another approach is a classification based on education, profession and income. It includes all those who are engaged in non-manual occupations that require some level of formal

education and are relatively better off in terms of income. Needless to say that this definition does not carry significant analytical content.

As is the case in most underdeveloped capitalist countries the middle classes are a significant force in India by virtue of their size and societal position. India being a country of large peasant population, huge number of small scale land owners, petty commodity producers and traders, professionals, a sizeable population of urban petty bourgeoisie and self-employed people naturally has a numerically dominant section of middle or intermediate classes. The middle classes had a significant role in the anti-colonial nationalist movement of the country and a good number of nationalist leaders emerged from these classes during the freedom struggle. Their relative advantage in education and social status enabled them get a major share in the bureaucracy and other state institutions of power. Their numerically dominant position in such state institutions has even led social scientists to argue that India is ruled by the middle classes. For example, K.N. Raj (1973) argued that Michal Kalecki's (1972) thesis on 'intermediate regimes' (that is the regime of the lower middle class and the rich peasantry), articulated in the context of some of the underdeveloped capitalist or post-colonial countries, was relevant to the Indian context. The validity of the argument in the Indian context was, however, subject to criticism and rebuttal (Namboodiripad, 1973; Byres, 1994). The fractious nature itself makes these classes weak although they are numerically the largest group. In the Indian context, while they form a numerically large segment they are by no means the politically dominant class or the ruling class although several fractions of them are the camp followers of the ruling classes. Their collaboration with the ruling classes is mutually advantageous to both the groups as it offers the former various benefits like huge salary hikes, as has been seen particularly in the contemporary period of neo-liberal policies, and in return, the latter get the support of the former in their pursuit of the neo-liberal policies.

The features of Kerala society seem to confirm the above-said general Indian feature of the prominence of the middle classes. They are prominent in education and professional field and have a significant role in the state administration by virtue of their numerical strength in government jobs in Kerala. Historically, they have played a major role in the national movement as in other parts of the country. They considerably contribute to the pool of leadership that helps to put this sector at advantageous position in many walks of life. People of lower socio economic sections often tend to emulate them while setting their goals of achievements and attainments in life. The issue pertinent in the present enquiry, however, is the attitude of the middle classes and the relatively better off sections of the population towards social obligations. It is generally held that they are less sensitive to social issues and indifferent to social and political activities. They are alleged to be politically ambivalent, devoid of any ideological affiliation; they bend to the side advantageous to their individual interests. They often criticize and disapprove the social welfare measures of the state addressing the lower socio-economic strata of the society. Another growing tendency is that the people from these classes show a preference to ally with their own caste and community-based organizations and work as pressure groups to safeguard their interests. This is perhaps the result of the growing culture of

'identity politics' or 'identity grouping' in the country and the feature of a society that is divided into infinite number of castes and clans. This also means that in underdeveloped capitalist countries like India the class divisions are further blurred by caste and community divisions. It needs to be noted in this context that the sense of citizenship of such classes of people can be weak.

The social attitude of the middle class is often evidenced in the consumerist culture embraced by them. It is further aggravated by the satellite revolution that brought to the bedroom of even the lower middle class the images of the consumerist world and its culture. The visual media, the television and the internet, have dragged men and women to a more individualistic and private space, precluding interpersonal communication and interaction even among family members. The individualization gradually invades to wider social arena. Higher income enables people to explore diverse comforts and vistas of individual enjoyments. This may contribute to loss of interest in engagements related to social obligations and development of newer interests related to peer segregation and segmental identity. It has also got the other dimension of influencing the lower classes, which have the tendency to look upon the higher strata as their models. Consequently, the insensitivity and negative attitude of the middle class towards social causes has its cascade effect spreading to other classes, especially the lower strata, that have wider implications and might even undermine the developmental processes and programmes addressing the lower strata of the society.

As discussed earlier, the classes are not homogeneous entities. The bigger the relative size of the middle class the more would be the likelihood of its differentiation and stratification. Therefore, it would be possible to locate a range of strata within it like an upper layer, a middle layer and a lower layer etc. The classification in the mainstream literature, however, is primarily based on economic criteria such as income, occupation and standard of living, although other parameters such as patterns of consumption, cultural engagements, social links etc also appear to have figured on occasions. The fragmentation of the middle class poses many practical issues for empirical studies. With this understanding we propose to proceed with the analysis of the participatory behaviour of the people in governance in a micro region, focussing primarily on grama sabha meetings.

Section III

Participation Behaviour of Different Classes

Our study, limited as a pilot enquiry in to the above issues, is based on a survey of a ward (Deveswaram) in a village panchayat namely Kollayil in Thiruvananthapuram District. We have selected this ward due to the familiarity of investigators about the socio economic background of the households. This ward also has middle class dominance compared to many other wards of the panchayat. Kollayil grama panchayat has an area of 13.73 sq km. According to 2001 Census the panchayat has a total number of 5903 households with a population of 24686 persons (Male -12082 / Female -12604). The Deveswaram ward has 480 households with a total population of 2016 persons (Male- 988 / Female -1028).

We started our investigation by collecting information regarding the number of persons attending grama sabhas of the ward over time. According to the Panchayat records, nearly seventy to eighty percent of the eligible members participated in the grama sabhas in the late nineties, that is, in the initial years of the People's Plan Campaign. Over time, the participation rate has come down. In the recent past (2012-13) it was only 23% of the eligible ward members (Table1). This means a great majority abstained from attending the Grama Sabha meetings in the recent past.

Table 1: Participation Rate in the Grama Sabhas

| Sl. No. | Year | Percentage of eligible members participated |
|---------|---------|---|
| 1 | 1995-96 | 75 |
| 2 | 2011-12 | 25 |
| 3 | 2012-13 | 23 |

Source: Panchayat Records

As indicated in the beginning, the central part of our investigation is an examination of the working of grama sabha and to see the interactive behaviour of different social classes. For this purpose we need a sample representing the cross section of society and see how the segments of social classes within it interact and shape the functioning of grama sabha. We have selected a sample of 100 voters from 100 households in the selected ward. The sample was divided into two segments. Those who regularly participated in the grama sabha belonged to the first segment of 49 respondents. Those who regularly abstained from the grama sabha meetings constituted the second segment of 51 respondents (see Table 2). The high participation rate of women is notable here as observed widely in Kerala. Among those who regularly attended the meetings 82 percent were females.

Table 2: Gender Composition of Respondents

| Sl.No. | Sex | GSP* | | GSN** | | GSP + GSN | |
|--------|--------|------|---------------------|-------|---------------------|-----------|---------------------|
| | | No. | Percentage to total | No. | Percentage to total | No. | Percentage to total |
| 1. | Male | 9 | 18.4 | 26 | 50.9 | 35 | 35.0 |
| 2. | Female | 40 | 81.6 | 25 | 49.1 | 65 | 65.0 |
| | Total | 49 | 100.0 | 51 | 100.1 | 100 | 100.0 |

*Grama Sabha Participants (GSP)

**Grama Sabha Non-participants (GSN)

Class Status of Respondents

How shall we locate the class status of the participants and non-participants? We have developed a criterion based on income in the first stage. The validity of the criterion was then cross checked with

two other indicators namely education and land asset. It is worth noting in this context that international studies on middle classes are based on income and not on consumption. However, the NCAER income based study put the income limit of middle class between \$ 8 and \$ 50 per day (Shukla , 2012). This may indicate the top decile of the middle class and not the entire spectrum. We have adopted an alternative method of dealing with the class dimensions. We feel that such methods should encompass the entire spectrum of middle class and not simply the top decile. Our categorisation is as follows.

Table 3: Class Status Based on Monthly Household Income

| Social Class | | Monthly Income Range (Rs) | |
|--------------------|--------|---------------------------|-----------|
| Lower Class / Poor | | Up to | 5 000 |
| Middle Class | Lower | 5 000 | to 20 000 |
| | Middle | Above 20 000 | to 50 000 |
| | Upper | Above 50 000 | to 75 000 |
| Upper Class / Rich | | Above | 75 000 |

The entire sample respondents have been divided into five categories. The lower class has an income limit of Rs 5000 per month per household. They are the poorest among the groups struggling to escape from absolute poverty. Among the middle class we have three strata. In the base bottom we locate the lower category of middle class as a class above the lower class having an income limit of Rs 20000 per month. Above them is the middle class with an income between Rs 20000 and Rs 50000. The upper middle class has a monthly income between Rs 50000 and Rs 75000 per household. The upper class or the rich segment represents an income group above Rs 75000 per month (Table 3).

Table 4: Distribution of Income, Education and Land Asset of the Sample

| Class/Strata | Income (Rs) | Education of the Respondents | Family Asset (land in cents) |
|--------------------|-----------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Lower class | Up to 5000 | Primary (69%) | Up to 5 cents (80%) |
| Lower middle class | 5000-20000 | Secondary (58%) | 5 to 10 cents (79%) |
| Middle class | 20000-50000 | Higher secondary (61%) | 10 to 30 cents (68%) |
| Upper middle class | 50000-75000 | Degree holders (67%) | 30 to 60 cents (91%) |
| Upper class/Rich | 75000 and above | PG and professional (54%) | Above 60cents and up to 4 acres (70%) |

How far does the income criterion correspond to other variables like asset possession and educational status? In order to check this aspect we have compared the income situation with educational achievement and possession of family asset. In the case of family asset we have considered possession of land only. What we see is a close correspondence among the three variables (See Table 4). A majority (69%) of the lower class respondents have only primary education and 80 percent of them hold only up to 5

cents of land per household. The next higher group, the lower middle class, is a shade better in terms of land asset and education. A majority (58%) of them have education up to secondary stage and land holding between 5 and 10 cents of land (79%). Similarly, the third group (middle class), of households in the income range of Rs 20000 to 50000 are in a still higher level in education and land ownership. This trend is maintained as the income level goes up and the top most class (upper class/rich section) in our survey had a significantly higher status in education and land ownership.

Participation of Different Classes

The participation and non participation details of the above-defined classes in the grama sabha are shown in Table 5 below. As the table reveals, the persons from the lower class attending the grama sabha constitute a little more than 61 percent of the total participants in the sample. The second highest participation rate is recorded by the lower middle class, constituting nearly 35 percent of the participating population. From the middle class and above there were only two persons attending the grama sabha meetings. From upper middle class and upper class (rich) sections, there was no representation.

Table 5: Participation of Different Segments in the Grama Sabha

| SL No | Class Segment | GSP* | | GSN** | | GSP + GSN | |
|-------|---|------|---------------|-------|---------------|-----------|---------------|
| | | No. | Frequency (%) | No. | Frequency (%) | No. | Frequency (%) |
| 1 | Lower Class (Up to Rs 5000) | 30 | 61.2 | 10 | 19.6 | 40 | 40.0 |
| 2 | Lower Middle Class (Above Rs 5000 to 20,000) | 17 | 34.7 | 16 | 31.4 | 33 | 33.0 |
| 3 | Middle Class (Above Rs 20,000 to 50,000) | 2 | 4.1 | 15 | 29.4 | 17 | 17.0 |
| 4 | Upper Middle Class (Above Rs 50,000 to 75,000) | 0 | 0 | 6 | 11.8 | 6 | 6.0 |
| 5 | Upper Class (Above Rs 75,000) | 0 | 0 | 4 | 7.8 | 4 | 4.0 |
| | Total | 49 | 100.0 | 51 | 100.0 | 100 | 100.0 |

*GSP- Grama Sabha Participants

**GSN- Grama Sabha Non- participants

What is significant here is that the participation comes only from the lower class and the lower middle class and the rest of the people almost entirely keep away from the gram sabha meetings.

Among the non participants, the representation of lower class has been relatively low. However, a majority of the middle class population abstained from grama sabha meetings along with other higher classes. Given the characteristic description of attendance in grama sabhas in terms of three broad characteristics i.e. asset, income and education, it is pertinent to verify independent roles of each of the characteristics influencing the attendance in grama sabha.

Table 6: Characteristic-wise Odd Ratios of Participation in Grama Sabha

| Income | Odd ratio | Education | Odd ratio | Land holding | Odd ratio |
|--------------|-----------|------------------|-----------|---------------|-----------|
| Lower class | 3 | Primary | 8.42 | Up to 5 cents | 3.3 |
| Lower middle | 1.1 | Secondary | 1.27 | 5-10 cents | 0.75 |
| Middle | 0.14 | Higher Secondary | 1.7s | 10-50 cents | 0.78 |
| Upper middle | 0 | Degree | 0.1 | 50-100 cents | 0 |
| Upper | 0 | PGs | 0 | >100 cents | 0.21 |

The Table 6 given above presents the bi-variate odd ratios of participation in grama sabha by income, education and land holding characteristics. While on the whole there is 49 per cent participation, the characteristic pattern of this outcome is revealing of the bearing of characteristic attribute on such participation. As regards income the poorest of the poor are three times more likely to participate in grama sabha which systematically shrinks with increasing income level. In fact, there is no participation at all beyond the middle income level. Similarly in relation to education, the illiterate and primary level educated are 8.42 times more likely to participate, as against the degree holders, who are 0.1 times less likely to participate in the grama sabhas. Further, with regard to land-holding as well a confirmatory pattern emerges with the landless and the nominal landholders being 3.3 times more likely to participate in grama sabhas compared with those with higher amount of land. In fact, better asset holding seem to be working adversely to participation in grama sabhas.

On the whole, there is a distinct pattern of participation in grama sabhas in keeping with economic and educational status. Such an exposition somehow defaults the interaction of these three attributes, hence there is a need for verification of this association with a multivariate exercise. An attempt in this direction offers the following results.

The variable income has been considered in its log form. Four categories of Education are taken. Primary education is considered as base.

Outcome: Participation =1 & Non-Participation=0

| | Coefficient | Standard Error |
|----------------------|-------------|----------------|
| Log of Income | -1.1593*** | 0.33681 |
| Asset | 0.00341 | 0.00739 |
| Secondary | -1.9123* | 1.10588 |
| Higher Secondary | -0.9158 | 1.27119 |
| Graduation and Above | -3.4583** | 1.54654 |
| Constant | 12.223*** | 2.99253 |

| | Odds Ratio | Standard Error |
|----------------------|-------------|----------------|
| Log of Income | .3137172*** | .1056644 |
| Asset | 1.003415 | .0074144 |
| Secondary | .147738* | .1633802 |
| Higher Secondary | .4002031 | .5087338 |
| Graduation and Above | .0314819** | .048688 |

Marginal effects after logit

$y = \text{Pr}(\text{Participation})$ (predict)

= .47629972

| | dy/dx | Standard Error |
|-----------------------|--------------|----------------|
| Log of Income | -.2891647*** | .08365 |
| Asset | .0008503 | .00184 |
| Secondary* | -.4445781** | .22277 |
| Higher Secondary* | -.2160516 | .27719 |
| Graduation and Above* | -.5652181*** | .13247 |

(*) dy/dx is for discrete change of dummy variable from 0 to 1

These multivariate analysis results obtained through logistic regression analysis reiterates the fact that the increasing levels of education and affluence indicated by assets and income act as deterrents to the participation in grama sabhas. The Odd ratios and the coefficients which are less than unity reconfirm the observation made in terms of univariate odds computed earlier. Further, considering the marginal effects of these attributes, there is clear observation that such deterrent or lack of interest for participation in grama sabhas intensifies with betterment in these attributes.

Reasons for Non-participation

To the question on the reasons for not attending the gram sabha, a great majority (57%) of the non-participants reported that they lacked time for it (Table 7). This obviously means that a majority of this better off section has employment or various other income generating activities and hence they are not too keen to find or allocate time for such social activities. Another group (12%) said they were simply not interested to go. Yet another group (12%) was of the opinion that the grama sabhas served no purpose. We sought the opinion of non-attendees from the Scheduled Caste people. According to them, their presence in the grama sabha would not make much difference because what all schemes are envisaged in the plan especially for the welfare of the SC population will go to them without any problem. Also, attending the grama sabha will be costly for them as they will lose a day's work and wages. There was, however, a widely held view among the lower classes that the middle class people, whether they attend the grama sabha or not, manage to get a higher share in the benefits of the panchayat schemes as the majority of the panchayat officials belong to the middle classes.

Table 7: Reasons for not Attending Grama Sabha

| Sl.No. | Reason | Number | Percentage |
|--------|----------------------------------|--------|------------|
| 1. | Not aware | 6 | 11.8 |
| 2. | Aware, not interested | 6 | 11.8 |
| 3. | No purpose served by attending | 6 | 11.8 |
| 4. | Grama Sabhas are politicized | 2 | 3.9 |
| 5. | No time to participate | 29 | 56.9 |
| 6. | Don't want to lose wage/leave | 3 | 5.9 |
| 7. | No intimation got from Panchayat | 0 | 0 |
| 8. | Ill health | 2 | 3.9 |

As found earlier, among the attendees in the grama sabha, the women were a majority. A major reason for their participation seems to be the fact that they were all active members of Kudumbashree (women self-help group) operating in the ward of the panchayat. The Kudumbashree members have a stake in participation as they are involved in various income generating activities with the support of the panchayat. They are in fact direct personal beneficiaries of several schemes that the panchayat supports. In addition, the poorer sections have a stake in participation as there are various schemes like grants for housing, construction of sanitation facilities, cattle rearing etc., meant for them, and the grama sabha provides them an opportunity to present their case for such benefits.

We have received varying responses from persons of the middle classes when asked about the beneficiaries and the benefits of the panchayat schemes and projects. Dissatisfaction was the dominant feeling expressed by them on such questions. They were of the view that political favouritism and communal bias played a major role in the selection of beneficiaries, a typical middle class response. They being relatively better off sections, are not eligible for various schemes specifically earmarked for the poorer sections. This gives them a feeling that they are excluded from many support schemes of the panchayat. They are actually looking for direct personal benefits that are more visible and tangible. The common developmental activities (like road development or other infrastructural development) are often not perceived as beneficial to them. This of course is a reflection of a limited social concern, a characteristic feature of the middle classes. This also reflects a reality that several segments of the so-called middle classes are aggrieved on various forms of inequality and unsatisfactory material conditions of living. It was also pointed out that in many cases the priority scales were not followed and the decisions of the grama sabha were flouted by panchayat authorities to the detriment of the interests of several deserving people. A major complaint of the non-participants was that the people with political clout enjoyed the benefits disproportionately. While there is an element of truth in this, the non-participants are not choosing the path of participation to resist such undemocratic tendencies in the panchayat. This could be the result of a growing apolitical attitude of the middle class and several other segments of the society in Kerala, and India as well.

Participation in Other Social Activities

An enquiry about the respondents' social activities other than that related to the panchayat elicited the results shown in the Table 8 below. As can be expected, a great majority (61%) of the GSN category (that is, the non-participants of the gram sabha) did not have any social activities. This perhaps implies a negative attitude of a majority of the middle class towards social and collective actions. In the case of the gram sabha participants, a majority (53%) are involved in several other social activities, in addition to the gram sabha activities. This might mean that the lower and the lower middle class people who are socially active in a variety of ways indicating that they play a more serious role as citizens. However, the major social activities of both the groups (GSP and GSN) include caste and community based activities (23%) and faith based activities (10%). Only 4% of the respondents are involved in political activities. Although this is the status about political activism, the information on participation in voting in elections shows that all the persons (100 percent) in the GSP category go for voting, while a little above 80 percent of the GSN category, that is mainly the middle class segment, take part in voting. This indicates that, by and large, it is the middle class that is showing some disinterest in voting, although their non-participation rate is not very large.

Table 8: Major Social Activities of the Respondents

| Sl.No. | Social activities | GSP | | GSN | | GSP + GSN | |
|--------|--|-----|------|-----|------|-----------|------|
| | | No. | (%) | No. | (%) | No. | (%) |
| 1. | Literacy and awareness programmes | 3 | 6.1 | 1 | 2.0 | 4 | 4.0 |
| 2. | Faith based activities | 4 | 8.2 | 6 | 11.8 | 10 | 10.0 |
| 3. | Community based activities | 14 | 28.6 | 9 | 17.6 | 23 | 23.0 |
| 4. | Political activities | 3 | 6.1 | 1 | 2.0 | 4 | 4.0 |
| 5. | Other social activities (blood donation/pensioner's welfare etc) | 2 | 4.1 | 2 | 3.9 | 4 | 4.0 |
| 6. | No activities | 23 | 46.9 | 31 | 60.8 | 54 | 54.0 |

The growing importance of community-based(or caste- and religion-based) activities including faith-based activities (together 33%) is an indication of a new pattern of social development taking place in Kerala in which more and more people align with caste and religious groups and form pressure groups to gain sectarian rights and benefits. It may be added in this context that the caste based organisations such as Nair Service Society (NSS), Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana (SNDP) Yogam , and various Muslim and Christian sectarian organizations have increased their membership in recent years. More than that, the activities of such organisations have become more exhibitivite, visible and strident and the number of participants in such activities must be growing in recent times. It is also observed from the table that there is very little representation in socially more useful activities of more inclusive and secular nature such as literacy programmes, blood donation camps etc. This must also be a reflection of people losing faith in secular and progressive political ideologies and instead getting lured by such agencies thriving on narrow sectarian divides.

It appears that the shift in social and political orientation visible in recent times is in the background of the growing disenchantment of the people, particularly the middle classes, with electoral or parliamentary politics. The campaigns of the apparently non-political formations, in particular the NGOs, against the prevailing atmosphere of political corruptions have been able to reinforce their resentment towards political parties. As is well known, this new development has under-emphasised class struggles and mass mobilisation. Instead, new words like empowerment, advocacy etc. are being circulated to camouflage the social reality and encourage the philosophy of the middle classes. In the present context, a growing pull towards communalism and various forms of identity politics is visible in Kerala society. Various fractions of the middle class are certainly influenced by such developments in the society. However, in the specific context of Kerala, there are reasons to believe that a sizeable segment of the middle classes still remain with the secular and progressive political forces.

Section IV

Conclusion

The study has been able to capture some important dimensions of the grama sabha participation. The decentralised planning process at the panchayat level presently cannot claim to be an exercise enjoying the support of all sections of society. The growing tendency of the middle classes and the relatively better off sections of the people to keep away from participation in the grama sabha is obvious. Those who have been active in the initial period of the people's planning campaign are no more enthusiastic in their participation. The field level information suggests that the people, particularly the educated and the articulate middle class, who are expected to contribute significantly to the planning process and its implementation, are increasingly giving up their social role. The reasons for the growing indifference of the upper middle class and the better-off sections can be many. Among them a major reason could be that they are powerful enough to achieve their objectives even without their participation in the grama sabha meetings. Their accessibility to power and the higher ups in the government is the determining factor. As pointed out by Jaffrelot, they have their channels through which they get their things done (Jaffrelot, 2008). So there is no need to go and spend time in the grama sabha.

We also see that the lower categories of middle class and poor sections very much appreciate the empowering potential of grama sabha. As observed earlier, the poorer sections of the population appear to be more visible beneficiaries of the development activities at the panchayat level. At the same time, the political culture of these classes also play a role in their participation behaviour. It was seen that they have a higher rate of participation in voting and political activities even while they take part in the activities of the caste and community related activities. In this sense, the lower classes including the lower middle class sections hold a more serious attitude towards politics and democratic practices.

As we have mentioned earlier, middle classes are internally fractionised. These fractions pursue their own agenda separately which results in divisive tendencies. That can go against the concerns at the panchayat level where the developmental agenda, which is more inclusive although limited in range, demands more collective approach. It has been noted by scholars that as the composition of middle class changes the middle class politics will also take a progressive or regressive turn depending on the nature of such changes. The growing environment of neo-liberal policies is certainly a barrier for the privileged sections of the middle classes who benefit from such policies to align with progressive forces. This explains the lower participation levels of the middle classes in social and political activities.

It may also be noted in this context that the declining participation is not exclusively the result of class behaviour. There are inherent problems in the methodology of planning which failed to ensure better administrative co-ordination and cooperation in decentralised planning (Harilal, 2013).

As things stand today, the possibilities of cooperation among different social classes do not appear very bright. This is mainly because the decentralised planning efforts are not uniformly attractive to different classes of people. Satisfying conflicting class interests is a challenge that the grama sabha faces in its efforts to ensure participation of different sections of the population. Also, our study gives the feeling that a progressive role expected from the middle class is not forthcoming in the context of decentralised planning in Kerala.

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