

Co-ordinator's Report on National Seminar on Restructuring Decentralised Planning in Kerala

Department of Economics, Maharaja's College Ernakulam has hosted National Seminar on Restructuring Decentralised Planning in Kerala under the sponsorship of Institute of Parliamentary Affairs, Thiruvananthapuram. The seminar was organized with an objective of analysing the long 25 years of decentralised experience in the state and the event intended to sets a platform for a discourse on the need for restructuring the decentralised planning in accordance with the emerging needs and challenges of the state.

The inaugurant of the Seminar, Dr.Raju Narayana Swami, Principal Secretary, Institute of Parliamentary Affairs asserted the importance of the title of the discussion by saying it as the most relevant one as each and every person of an economy is part of the state and concerns of every person must be addressed in the planning process and each should be called upon to make contribution to the planning process. The lacuna in the process can be seen only as an ax to the fundamentals of the democratic planning process and violation of the fundamental rights.

The inaugural session was followed by a vibrant group discussion for one hour where the major discussants were faculty members form the departments of Economics and Political Science, and expert representatives from various fields such as law, health, education and students. The session was an attempt to see the decentralization experience of common men.

Shri.K.J.Sohan, Former Mayor, Cochin Muncipal Corporation engaged a session on "Is decentralisation Still a Non-Starter". The session was unique in the way that the resource person was on a stand that there is no need of discussing the restructuring of decentralised planning as such a planning has not yet taken off. He has strongly alleged that he could not function on decentralised lines as there was no discretionary power flowing down to local levels of government in real. Many crucial issues of the Corporation still remain untackled due to the lack of operational freedom. He sighed that eventhough responsibilities and rules are well laid, there is no proper mechanism to materialise it in terms of power, funds, personnel and operational freedom.

The afternoon session of the seminar was very challenging and powerful with a panel discussion on 'Decentralization Experience at Grassroot Levels' where elected representatives form local self governments from different parts of Kochi came as the panellists along with Dr.Soumini Jain, Former Mayor, Cochin Corporation delivered a lead talk on the theme. Dr.S.Muraleedharan, Associate Professor(Rtd.), Maharaja's College, Ernakulam and Visiting Faculty, M.G.University K.N.Raj Centre acted as the moderator of the discussion.

All the panelists were of the opinion that decentralised palnning is on eventhough most of them were sceptical about the achievement of the targets to the full. One major of area of discussion was the effect of decentralisation on women empowerment and all were of the opinion that women population have largely benefitted from the decentralisation. It enabled women folk to become entrepreneurs and savers from mere household wives and consumers. Fund utilisation was another area of dissatisfaction on which the panelists had serious arguments. Discretionary power to utilise the funds according to the needs of the area and hour are almost absent and it limits the effectiveness of the planning and implementation process. The co-operation of the general public is another area

touched upon in the discussion. Lack of awareness and co-operation from general public is yet another major challenge that comes in the way of the success of the decentralised planning. Both positives and negatives of decentralisation have been discussed in the session. Many have quoted that centralisation mentality has to be changed though we talk much about decentralisation. Sector specific emphasis is needed to be given in planning. Lack of strong participation in gramasabhas is an issue. The lack of diligence in fund raising by local governments is yet another issue that came under discussion. The need to move away from traditional lines of fund raising to more potential fund raising avenues is recommended in the session. Therefore, as a whole, the conclusion was that there are a lot of aspects to be taken care of with respect to the decentralised planning for achieving the set goals and targets of the same.

Prof.B.Alwin Prakash, Chairman, Fifth State Finance Commission spoke on 'Fiscal Decentralisation in Kerala'. Fiscal strength is the fundamental base of every economy. The hard realities in fiscal management by the governments coming after and after, and the negligence and ignoring mentality towards the suggestions of state finance commissions has been pointed out by the resource person. He has cited that even though there are attempts to improve the structure of Local Self governments, the lagging behind in terms of economic changes, administrative changes etc is contributing to the factors that hinders the achievement of the goals of decentralisation.

Smt.Renjini S, District Co-ordinator, Navakeralam Karmapadhathi, Thiruvananthapuram spoke on 'Decentralisation of Environmental Management: The Experience of Kerala' wherein she discussed about the environment conservation programs through decentralisation of powers to grassroot levels. Sending the signals of development process to the grassroot levels and making grassroot level participation in the process is one of the most difficult stage in the development process and easing of these difficulties through decentralisation is being given in the initiative of Navakeralam Padhathi. The needs and proposals coming up from the local people in gramasabhas are collected and co-ordinated to design the policy initiatives have helped a lot to improve the local level development and it is made possible to a great extent through decentralisation according to the speaker.

The panel discussion followed on 'Decoding Decentralisation: Delegation and Devolution' was a great experience to the academic community in the program. Hon'ble Mayor of Cochin Corporation, Member of Parliament, Ernakulam, Counsellor, Cochin Municipal Corporation were the panelists and Chairman, Centre for Public Policy Research, Dr.D.Dhanuraj moderated the discussion. Each have discussed decentralisation experience at their own levels of activity. The session was followed by a concluding session with the Rapporteur's report.

To conclude, the National Seminar really presented a platform for analysing the twenty five years experience of decentralisation. The idea generated from the academic exercise is that Kerala cannot boast much about decentralisation. Decentralisation still remains as a non-starter to many even after its inception years back. Decentralisation definitely has a great role in Kerala's economic development but a more rigorous and effective planning is needed for the great step to achieve its conceived goal of taking fruits of development to the grassroot levels.

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