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EMS ON ECONOMICS AND POLITICS OF DECENTRALISATION

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SECTION 1

POLITICS OF DECENTRALISATION

Democratic decentralisation constituted an important theme that engaged serious attention from Com. EMS over a long period: "It was not a new found fervour for decentralisation", we had written in an obituary note," EMS always had an abiding interest in democratic decentralisation". (EPW vol.33 #13, 1998).

EMS had a very wide conception of decentralisation, which went far beyond the usual conceptions of it either as simple bureaucratic decentralisation, or as a process where the local bodies confined themselves just to civic functions or even development functions. EMS placed the process of decentralisation squarely within the larger political process - a process by which democratic governance would be extended from central and state level to the local level. The rationale for a Marxist - Leninist in defending and extending democracy is a puzzle to many of the critics of the ongoing experiment in democratic decentralisation in the state of Kerala.

As far as in the functioning of the organisations of the government is concerned CPI(M) is committed to democratic decentralisation and has given more than enough evidence of its commitments in West Bengal as well as Kerala. Which other state in India has a better record in Panchayati Raj than West Bengal?

The conspiracy theorists like Prof. M.G.S. Narayanan, who warn that decentralisation could be misused for tyranny by the party ignore the fact that the democratic decentralisation is not devolution of

powers to the local committees of the party but to the elected local bodies. Nearly 40 per cent of the local bodies in Kerala are controlled by the opposition parties. There is perversity in the logic that the CPI(M) is devolving powers to the opposition led local bodies in order to establish party tyranny. Why should CPI(M) and its political allies who hold power at the state level want to share it with the opposition at the local level? Would it not suit the authoritarian reflexes of the party set-up to hold on to its monopoly of authority and power?

There are some on the Left also, who doubt the system of sharing power with the opposition in local bodies. Therefore, it is important to understand why a revolutionary party such as the CPI(M) should be interested in the decentralisation agenda. How does decentralisation help the revolutionary process? Com. EMS has responded to this question in a most lucid manner in his note of dissent to "Ashok Mehta Committee Report on Panchayat Raj Institutions. After explaining how the capitalist path of development is immiserising the mass of working people and how there can be salvation only through their own self conscious organisations and struggle, he states:

"It is from this view point of the organised struggle to end the system of exploitation (pre-capitalist as well as capitalist) that I am looking at the entire problem of defending and extending democracy.

"By democracy here, I mean the system of parliamentary democracy with adult suffrage; periodical elections; the executives' responsibility to the elected legislature; the rule of law, full protection of the citizen's rights and freedoms which are known in our Constitution as the fundamental rights of citizenship, etc. These constitute a set of valuable rights which our working people won after decades of struggle and which can be used by the exploited majority in its struggle against the exploiting minority.

"Our experience of working of this system proves that since the parliamentary democratic system as prevails today provides the exploited majority a powerful weapon with which to fight the exploiting minority, the latter does its utmost to reduce democracy to a mere formality to subvert it whenever and wherever the exploited majority uses it to get anywhere near the seats of power.

Defence of parliamentary democracy at the Central and State level (where it exists but is very often threatened by the authoritarian forces) and its extension to the district and lower levels as envisaged in the four-pillar democracy is, therefore, of extreme importance in the advance of Indian society.

"My faith in democratic decentralisation in other words, arises from the fact that it helps the working people in their day-to-day struggles against their oppressors and exploiters" (Note on Report of the Committee on Panchayat Raj Institutions 1978).

Writing soon after the bitter experience of the struggle against Congress authoritarianism during the period of Emergency, the above argument was readily understandable. Even in states where the revolutionary movement is weak, greater autonomy for the local bodies would facilitate better manouvrerability and mobilisation prospects for the radical forces within their localised pockets of influence.

There was an important conclusion that EMS drew on from the above class exposition of the significance of decentralisation. "I cannot, therefore, think of Panchayati Raj Institutions as anything other than the integral part of country's administration with no difference between what are called the "development" and "regulatory" functions." (Note on Report of the Committee on Panchayat Raj Institutions, 1978). Given this broad vision of local self-government, the issue of decentralisation within a state -- to district and sub-district levels -- cannot be isolated from the issue of Centre-state relations, in which EMS took a very keen interest.

Centre State Relations

It was for the above reason that EMS came out strongly against the aborted attempt of Rajiv Gandhi's sixty fourth and sixty fifth Constitutional Amendments. He considered them as attempts in bureaucratic centralisation rather than in democratic decentralisation because the bills did not envisage any restructuring of Centre-state relations. He was strongly opposed to the tendency to divorce Centre-state relationship from the issue of state-panchayat relations.

"I am opposed to this whole approach. The Constitution itself according to me, failed to envisage an integrated administration in which, apart from the Centre and the states, there will be elected bodies which will control the permanent services at the district and lower levels. Democracy at the Central and states levels, but bureaucracy at all lower levels - this is the essence of Indian polity as spelt out in the Constitution. Added to this is the fact, in the actual work of the Constitution, the Centre made increasing encroachments into the rights and powers of the States. This trend reached its high watermark in the 42nd Amendment of the Constitution.

"It was with such a centralised administration as its core that Panchayats were envisaged in the Constitution and the Balvantrai Mehta Report. It is, therefore, not surprising that neither the bureaucrat nor the politician at the states level is prepared to decentralize whatever power has been conferred to the state under the Constitution. The point is to make a radical change in the very concept of democracy and adopt what is called four-pillar democracy." (Note on the Report of the Committee on Panchayati Raj Institution, 1978).

Restructuring of the Centre-state relations was an important theme of his speeches at the National Development Council, as the Chief Minister of Kerala. In the Kale Memorial Lecture he has gone into the historical roots of ideals of autonomous linguistic states as they emerged in our national movement: they were an ideal with firm footing in the traditions of the national movement. However, the ideal of federalism got mixed up with the problem of communal relations.

"The spokesmen of the two major religious communities became the champions of the unitary and federal structures. It was in the course of an attempted agreement between the two communities (the Lucknow Pact of 1916, the All-Party Conference in the years preceding the 1935 constitution and in the discussions before the 1947 transfer of power) that the leaders of the Indian National Congress accepted the federal idea. They had serious reservations on it, considering their acceptance of the federal idea as nothing more than a compromise. They therefore took advantage of the first available opportunity -- the partition of India which removed the Muslim League from the scene -- to bring back as big a part of the unitary concept as they could. This was how, in framing the Constitution, they subscribed to the federal principle in words, but

made the federal Centre so powerful that the state structure as a whole is hardly distinguishable from a unitary one." (Republican Constitution in the struggle for Socialism, 1968).

The State structure which was heavily loaded in favour of the Centre in terms of divisions of functions of powers, control of resources, unilateral power of Centre to intervene in the state in the name of coordination and control of civil services, further worsened during the course of Congress rule at the Centre. The response of the Central Government to the growing economic crisis such as, New Agricultural Strategy, also has been largely in terms of greater centralisation strategies and interventions. Centrally Sponsored Schemes have been a major instrument to make inroads into state subjects and the expenditure on such schemes today exceeds the total plan assistance even by Centre to the states.

In a paper on 64th & 65th Constitutional Amendments presented at a seminar organised by the Kerala Panchayat Association (Panchayati Raj Bill and Decentralisation of Powers, 1989) he regretted that as a member of Ashok Mehta Committee, he had agreed for central legislation to ensure regular elections to PRIs. The Prime Minister while introducing the Bills had declared that it followed the recommendations of Ashok Mehta Committee. The Central Government was using the constitutional amendments to bypass the state governments and establishing direct linkage with the PRIs directly by devolving funds from the Centre, directly auditing their accounts and conducting their elections. The District Collectors were to be the links between the central government and to the local bodies.

Rejecting the Ashok Mehta Committee's recommendations for central legislation on the Panchayati Raj, he came out in support of Cooperative Federalism as advocated by the Sarkaria Commission. Inter-State Council of Chief Ministers were to draw up the draft model Panchayati Raj Bill to be adopted by the State Legislatures. Another option was that Centre and states through a dialogue reach a consensus on the draft bill which the states may consent to be legislated by the Central Parliament with the consent of the states. He was opposed to unilateral legislation to be carried out by the Centre.

Panchayati Raj Legislation in Kerala

EMS' interest in Panchayati Raj went much beyond these broad theoretical formulations on the concept of decentralisation; he was also a guiding force behind the progressive legislations enacted over a period of time on PRIs in Kerala. EMS was the Chairman of the Administrative Reforms Committee (1958) that addressed the issues of administrative reorganisation of the newly formed state. An important corner stone of the vision of future administrative edifice of the state was local self government.

The Report argued for a two tier set up -- Panchayats and municipalities at the grass root level and a district council at the district level. The functions and powers of the panchayats included, besides the normal civic functions and developmental duties significant responsibilities in revenue administration and a number of other regulatory functions. In this respect it went much beyond what was recommended by even Balvantrai Mehta Committee which had by and large looked at the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) as merely popular developmental agencies.

With respect to district councils the Administrative Reforms Committee of 1958 was divided into two opposite views, both of which were presented in the text. One position was that the Council need only have advisory powers and therefore, need to be constituted only through indirect elections and ex-officio membership. The opposite argued for elected district councils "that should function as institutions and take charge of all aspects of development work." EMS belonged to the second view point and, therefore, the District Council's Bill introduced in the Assembly in 1958 visualised a comprehensive district council that would coordinate the functions of both the panchayats and municipalities in the districts and also take over the entire development administration in the districts in a phased manner.

The bills couldn't be passed as the Government was dismissed and the legislative assembly was dissolved. Subsequent legislations passed in 1960 and 1961 were only much watered down versions of the draft bills drawn up by the Communist Ministry and, in terms of implementation, a far cry from the declared legislative intentions. The role of panchayats in Kerala came to be in mostly what are known as the civic duties and the district

councils were put in the cold storage.

The 1967 Ministry led by EMS introduced Kerala panchayati Raj Bills 1967, once again with a two tier system - panchayat at the lower level and Zilla Parishad at the district level. At the Select Committee stage the draft bill underwent significant modifications to which EMS made significant contribution. The Zilla Parishad which was visualised to be a unit of planning and development was renamed as District Council and its functions redefined as "the administration of a district in respect of matters enumerated in the first schedule shall be vested in the district council." It is in the discussion of this draft bill that EMS coined the term "District Government". This bill was allowed to lapse once the EMS Ministry was brought down.

A Kerala District Administration Bill was introduced in 1971, reintroduced once again in 1978 and finally passed in 1979 while Shri A.K. Antony was the Chief Minister. The act was not implemented during the next decade. Finally, it was only during the Left and Democratic Front ministry of 1987-91 measures were taken for implementation. A Commission was set up to study the 1978 Act to make recommendation for rectifying many of its defects. Certain essential changes were made and elections conducted in February 1990. The district councils were constituted in March 1990. A number of notifications were issued transferring a number of district offices and officers in agriculture, soil conservation, animal husbandry and others. It may be noted that comprehensive changes required of the then existing legislation had not been made and there was a fear that the Government was adopting a ad hoc approach to the whole process.

It was in the above context that EMS took the initiative in starting a public debate on measures to be urgently undertaken to make decentralisation effective, in the pages of the party daily Deshabhimani. He himself set forth a number of proposals in an opening article and invited public debate. Some of his proposals were startling. He called for disbandment of the Local Administration Department as the District Councils were by law the co-ordinating agencies of municipalities and grama panchayats. Arrangements were to be made for a State Development Council with representation of all ministers and certain other key officials and presidents of district councils. He sought to abolish unnecessary and avoidable duplication of work between the government

departments in the secretariat and the directorates outside the secretariat through substantial dismantling of departments in the secretariat and combining the directorship and secretaryship in person. Instead of IAS officers, technical and professional persons were to be the heads of the combined department -- directorate set up. A major proportion of the departmental staff were to be re-deployed to the district councils. He argued for greater devolution of powers to the district councils so that they are transformed into genuine district governments. ("For Comprehensive Power and Responsibilities", Deshabhimani, March, 1992). The publication of the above proposals was followed by a discussion in which important leaders of political parties including the opposition parties, administrators and academicians participated. Re-reading these articles today it is very evident that many could not imbibe the spirit of radical reforms that EMS was proposing. The expectations that were aroused by the initiative of EMS came to nothing as in the ensuing elections the Left lost power and a Congress led government was installed in the sympathy wave that followed the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi.

The new Congress government headed by K. Karunakaran set out to undo whatever that had been achieved in the decentralisation front. The very first decision taken by the new government was to amend the District Administration Act as amended in 1991 and restrict the powers of District Councils. The district collector was removed from the ex-officio secretaryship of the Council and a junior official was appointed as secretary to the Council. The amendment also empowered the government to change the powers and functions through notifications without reference to the legislature. Thereafter through a series of notifications the offices and institutions transferred were taken back and most of the powers nullified so that the district councils were left with only few functions and even less resources. They were left with no technical staff and little administrative support. What remained was only a ghost of the grand designs for decentralisation.

EMS undertook a detailed criticism of the provisions of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments. His contention was that they were a step backward when compared to the legislations that had already been enacted in Kerala (District Administration Act).

"The Panchayati Raj - Nagar Palika legislations which came out of Parliament is thus a complete negation of all the principles upheld by

the ruling and Opposition parties in the state for a quarter century. It forced on the state the three-tier set-up which had been consistently opposed by all the political parties in the state. It brought about a complete separation of rural and urban self-government institutions, making the Collector and other bureaucrats at the district level the lords of all they surveyed. The spirit of the present Central legislation, as opposed to the earlier Kerala legislation is that the district level bureaucratic framework will be the overlords of the panchayati raj and nagar palika institutions, rather than making the bureaucrat subordinate to the elected district council. It is this spirit of the Central legislation that is closely followed by the Karunakaran Government in Kerala."

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments had come into effect from 23rd April 1993 and all state governments were to pass conformity legislations within a year. Certain provisions of the amendments were mandatory (like three-tier structure). On many others (like the actual powers that should be devolved) the state legislature could frame its own provisions. For several months no action was taken by the Congress government in Kerala. And finally, in March 1994 after all around criticism from intellectuals, opposition parties and public in general the Government in a hurry introduced Kerala Panchayati Raj Bill whose provisions were highly restrictive. EMS led a severe attack on the Bill and sought to mobilise public opinion against it.

"The net effect of the provisions referred to above is the multiplication, at all levels, of the bureaucratic steel frame that exists at Delhi and in the various State capitals. The district, the block and village panchayat will each be dominated and controlled by the bureaucrats at the corresponding and higher levels of the administration. This is no measure of giving "power to the people" but giving more power to the bureaucrats at all levels" (Power to the People, Frontline, May 6, 1994)

As a result of public pressure certain changes in some of the draconian provisions were made at the Select Committee stage and it is this legislation that is in force in Kerala today. Many of the anti-democratic provisions still continue and complementary legislative amendments in the related Acts have not yet been made. It is primarily to make recommendations regarding legal and administrative changes that the LDF government set up, as we have already noted, the Committee headed by late S. B. Sen. EMS felt

that even if all the recommendations of the Committee are implemented, still, the overall constitutional constraints in terms of the structure, lack of regulatory functions and compartmentalisation of rural and urban areas, etc. would continue. It was EMS's conviction that yet another round of Constitutional Amendments is required to rectify these and also restructure the Centre-State relations so that the ideal of decentralisation may be fully realised (Struggle to Change Central Law, Mal., Deshabhimani, 12 Oct. 1997).

Barriers to Decentralisation

The conception of PRIs as part of a larger political process also meant, for EMS, that these institutions cannot be imposed from above -- by just legislative processes alone -- but have to be established through popular movements, through mass mobilisation. The Left movement in Kerala has succeeded to a considerable degree in bringing in a number of people's issues -- like land reforms, social sector advances etc. -- on the social agenda through a process of mass mobilisation in favour of these issues; and PRIs could not be an exception to this.

Kerala is widely known inside and outside the country for its social sector achievements in education, health and social security. The role of public action in these achievements is also widely accepted. The scope of widespread grass root level mobilisation of the people was not limited to legislative and protective interventions by the state and social provisioning of basic needs but also extended to self provisioning some of the basic social infrastructures through community efforts. The network of libraries and reading rooms -- there is one for every panchayat ward today -- or even the formal educational institutions represent best examples of this tradition. However, it is a paradox that a region with such a vibrant civil society as exemplified by the above traditions should have remained one of the relatively most backward in the country in terms of development of local self governments.

As we have already seen it was only in 1991 that local self governments were constituted at the district level in the state for the first time. The elections to the grama panchayats have also been irregular and conducted only either while Left governments were in power or under pressure from mass movements from below. As already noted the local bodies were confined to traditional civic

functions. Such was the departmental administrative control that almost every expenditure required prior departmental sanction.

Why did Kerala lag behind states of West Bengal or Karnataka, whose experiments in decentralisation have caught national imagination and even other States also like Maharashtra, Punjab, Gujarat and so on? While this question cannot be settled satisfactorily for the time being, viewing PRIs as part of a larger political process should provide some clues to this: Thus, one of the reasons for this is the relative political instability in Kerala and the lack of commitment of the Congress party to the decentralisation process. Our brief survey of the history of decentralisation in Kerala dramatically revealed how the efforts made by the Left governments in 1957, 1967 and 1987 were frustrated by the Congress government that succeeded them to office. As in the rest of India the lack of commitment of Congress to decentralisation, despite their generous lip service to the ideal, was the single most important factor that prevented effective decentralisation in the state. In Karnataka also the decentralisation programme of the Janata Government was reversed by the subsequent Congress government.

Unlike the Left Front in West Bengal, the Left Democratic Front (LDF) in Kerala has not been in power continuously for a long period. Moreover the strength of CPI(M) within the Left Front has also not been as decisive in terms of assembly seats. CPI(M) has had only around half the number of seats in LDF even though CPI(M)'s own share of voter support would be around 80 per cent. A seat sharing arrangement, which was born out of the peculiar historical context of the post emergency period, has got perpetuated. It would not be an exaggeration to conclude that the stabilisation and expansion of LDF have been at the expense of CPI(M). The formal vote share of CPI(M) in the total votes secured by the LDF has exhibited a clear trend of decline over time, even though by all indicators its mass strength has only improved during the last decades and the mass support of some of the LDF partners has severely declined.

The representation of the political parties at the local level being more proportional to their actual strength, a lopsided power sharing arrangement at the assembly and at the ministerial level has serious implications for decentralisation. In such a situation it is only natural that the smaller partners in the Front would be less than enthusiastic about devolution of powers. Thus, for example, the

attempt of the 1980 LDF Government headed by E.K. Nayanar for implementation of the District Administration Act of 1978 was largely stalled due to opposition from the Congress faction of A. K. Antony, then a constituent of the LDF. Even during 1987-91 when District Councils were finally formed the necessary legislative amendments in the related Acts and redeployment of personnel proved to be tardy. Even today nearly a decade later, it has not been possible to carry out all the necessary legislative amendments or to undertake the necessary administrative reforms for effective decentralisation. The committee headed by late S B Sen that went into the matter submitted an interim report of recommendations to strengthen the local bodies in a record time of two months. It took more than an year for the cabinet sub committee to clear it and nearly one year before the government started to act upon the recommendations.

Excessive departmentalism and bureaucratic vested interests are the other impediments to decentralisation. Democratic decentralisation requires that officials at every level would be accountable to the elected representative at that level. Such democracy is alien to the departmental hierarchical traditions that the British colonialists handed over to us and which the successive Congress governments tended to reinforce. As EMS himself stated openly in his post 1991 District Council election article in Deshabhimani, "There is no doubt that the enemies of decentralisation ... those who have been enjoying the sweet benefits of centralization in the Government Secretariat would employ every tactic to see that as little as possible is passed down to the Councils." (For Full Powers and Responsibilities, Mal., Deshabhimani, 1 March, 1991)

It is indeed difficult to generate the necessary political will to create preconditions for a successful programme for decentralisation. It is in this context that the importance of mass mobilisation in support of decentralisation reforms becomes important. Only through mobilising the masses for creating a powerful public opinion in favour of decentralisation can the hurdles be overcome. Here also there is an interesting contrast between West Bengal and Kerala.

The introduction and strengthening of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) was organically linked to the rising tide of peasant movement for land reforms in West Bengal. The panchayats played a formal role in Operation Barga. A large proportion of panchayat members were drawn from the ranks of the leadership of

the peasant movement. The role that the panchayats played in the flood relief operations of 1978 and later in the agricultural extension work during the post Operation Barga phase stabilised the relationship. Decentralisation became a part of the agrarian reforms that were being carried out in West Bengal.

In contrast, in the historic context of 1971 when the Land Reforms were finally passed in Kerala, CPI(M) was in opposition and was involved in mobilising the peasant masses for implementation of the land reform law. The state government led by the CPI and the Congress was too enmeshed in repressive and manipulative tactics to stem the tide of mass movements to think of any measures for comprehensive decentralisation, quite apart from the fact that the Congress has always ideologically been lukewarm to decentralisation.

The fears expressed by EMS about the absence of powerful mass mobilisation in support of the 1991 District Councils became a reality when the Congress government wantonly set about dismantling the entire edifice without fear of any serious resistance. The significance for People's Campaign for Ninth Plan, that we shall discuss in the IIIrd Section of the present paper, is that for the first time in Kerala, it mobilised the masses of people in support of PRIs

SECTION II

DEVELOPMENT AND DECENTRALISATION

The linkage between decentralisation and development has been the rationale for advocacy of PRIs in the Five Year Plan and other government documents. It was in pursuance of this advantage that the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee and, later, Ashok Mehta committee were appointed. "Panchayat Raj as a vehicle for development" was their ideal and as we have seen, an ideal which was too restrictive for EMS, and hence provided a point of departure for his note of dissent.

From the point of view of the radical movement the participatory nature of the decentralisation process assumes special significance. Decentralisation facilitates the mass of people and their organisations to directly intervene in the planning and

implementation of development. In a centralised system their participation in planning can be only indirect at central or state level. In an era where 'Peoples Participation' by governmental and international agencies have come to be synonymous with voluntary organisations it is refreshing to read EMS in his dissent note to the Ashok Mehta Committee:

"..... it is unfortunate that the report does not take into consideration the fact that there are voluntary organisations which have sizeable membership and are active in rural areas, such as Kisan Sabha, Agricultural Labour Organisations, Students and Youth and Women's Organisation etc., which are not and would refuse to be non-political. Many of them are very active and enjoy the confidence of the people. Wherever such organisations exist, they should be given an important role in the scheme of human resources development. I am afraid that this aspect is ignored by my colleague because of their prejudice against political parties and organisations oriented towards them" (Note on the Report of the Committee on Panchayati Raj Institutions, 1978).

With respect to the people's participation in the decentralised planning the official guidelines of the Planning Commission or official reports such as that of Prof. Dantwalla (1978), do not go beyond the involvement of the volunteers of the so called 'Non Governmental Organisations' (NGOs). People are a vast reservoir of life experience and local wisdom whose potential must be tapped for the success of the local level planning. But the official documents on the topic, at best, take ordinary people into consideration for identification of the felt needs. Thereafter, their role reappears only at the implementation stage after the 'experts' have drawn up the local plan. EMS, as we shall see, thought that this is an extremely narrow minded elitist approach, a hangover from the tradition of bureaucratic planning.

NEW DEVELOPMENT CULTURE

Why are the people so much alienated from the planned development process in our country? EMS attempted to unravel this problem in his pamphlet 'Politics of Development' (Mal, 1989): The basic factor responsible is the very class framework of development and class bias of the development policies. The path of capitalist development without land reforms and compromising with imperialism

impoverishes the vast majority of the people and condemns them to a life without even bare basic necessities. Any attempt to improve their lot is considered a drag on development -- a drain from the pool of investable funds -- not to tell of struggles that are viewed as disruptive of planned development. There cannot be a more short sighted view.

According to EMS, in the ultimate analysis all investment surplus is created by the people and determined by their willingness to sacrifice themselves in terms of money, material or labour. This being so, the expenditure on welfare of the people is not a leakage from investment funds but a measure to promote people's co-operation and participation in the development process. In contrast to the policies pursued by the Congress, even while operating within the frame work of capitalist path of development, the state governments led by the Left starting from the 1957 Communist ministry, have attempted to formulate alternative development policies that recognized the rights of the people and ensured their due share in the fruits of development. EMS considered that without reorientation of economic policies at the centre and involvement of the people at large in the development process it is not possible to face the challenge before the country to resist the possible onslaught of imperialism. He pointed to the campaign for Bakreshwar project in W.Bengal and the Development Army for voluntary labour that was announced by the DYFI in Kerala as two events that pointed to the untapped potential mass participatory development (Politics of Development, Mal., 1989).

Adoption of such a participatory approach as described above is all the more relevant in a state like Kerala given the severity of the regional developmental problems and strength of the mass organisation in the state:

"Our greatest assets are our mass organisations and the democratic consciousness of our people. The combined strength of all mass organisation in the state is about ten million. Besides, there is a vast network of co-operative organisations and movements, such as the organisations of the library and literacy movements. I am aware that there are some people who consider all these to be the bane of Kerala society. I have devoted my life to mobilising the people for the radical transformation of our society, and I cannot but disagree with such perceptions. I feel that one big question that we face is whether the organised strength and political consciousness of our

people can be used to increase production and productivity. I want to answer in the affirmative. But there is a precondition : the government and the ruling classes must change their attitude to the organisations of the people and their demands. Instead of suppressing people's struggles and adopting negative attitudes, amicable solutions should be found through collective bargaining and discussions. Further, institutions and social mechanism have to be developed to ensure that the toilers get their due share from increased production. I must emphasis the importance of democratic decentralisation in this context." [Presidential Address, International Congress on Kerala Studies, 1994].

Even if the above pre-condition is met, as during the periodic left led governments, the political fragmentation of the mass movements and their bi-polar compartmentalisation into two opposing fronts would have hindered united actions. Starting with the unprincipled anti-communist front forged by the Congress against the communist ministry in 1957, the politics in the state has revolved around the opposition between the two antagonistic fronts, one led by the Congress and the other by the Communists. Despite more than three decades of constant warfare neither front has been able to achieve a decisive breakthrough in the relative mass support. Their electoral support have remained more or less stable at around 45% each, the electoral fortunes swinging in favour of one front to the other depending upon chance factors like Rajiv Gandhi's assassination in 1991 or realignment of some of the minor parties. This finely balanced political stalemate has created a situation of constant political maneuvering, and intense rivalry. As the compartmentalisation of masses became more and more water tight the sectarian attitudes also got reinforced and assumed the form of a vicious circle. The constant jockeying for power and spread of sectarian strife to every social sphere created a hostile environment to united mass action.

EMS felt that such an environment as above was mutually destructive and argued for a new political culture in the state that would facilitate the cooperation of the constituents of the two fronts in areas of common interest such as development of the state without any compromise to their independent political platforms.

In the 1989, Pamphlet, 'Politics of Development' and his paper presented before the association of Panchayat Presidents, both of which we have occasion to refer to it earlier, EMS was very

outspoken with regards to the above political reality in the state. He even frankly admitted the non-likelihood of any basic change in the co-relation of political forces in the state in the immediate future. Therefore it was of paramount importance that both the ruling and opposition parties cooperate in order to face the development challenges in the state. Such co-operation was all the more important in the case of functioning of local bodies. With the control of the local bodies more evenly distributed between the two fronts the ruling party in one locality would be the opposition party in another locality. In such a situation co-operation between the panchayats under different political parties and between parties within a panchayat for carrying out development programmes became a necessity. Addressing the conference of grama panchayat presidents, he appealed for such a cooperation.

"The office bearers of the thousand and more panchayats are the representatives of the constituents of the two fronts that fought with each other in the 1987 March elections to the Assembly and 1988 January elections to the panchayats. It is almost certain that this struggle between the two fronts would continue into the immediate Lok Sabha elections and the legislative elections that is to take place three years later. But in the meanwhile cannot the panchayats and the panchayat members belonging to the two fronts work in cooperation? I am of the opinion that not only is it possible but also inevitable...despite the contradictory political perspectives they can work together in solving the daily life problems of the people. Let there be a healthy competition between the panchayats and within the panchayat as to which front is ahead in serving the people. I hope that an appeal for adoption of such a new approach will be issued by this Conference" [Panchayati Raj Bill and Decentralisation, Mal., 1989].

He also appealed to the panchayat members to put aside their political differences to resist any attempt of the central or state governments to interfere with their autonomy.

EMS returned to the same themes even more forcibly after the 1991 District Council elections. There was an urgent need for the opposition political parties to self-critically review their positions and start a dialogue on cooperation for a programme for comprehensive development of the state [Political Kerala After the District Council Elections, Mal., Deshabhimani, 17 Feb 1992].

If anybody thought that the new line he advocated was merely a tactical ploy in the context of a left government in power, they were in for a surprise. He reiterated his position in his "Mathai Manjooran Memorial Lecture" (Politics and Kerala's Economic Planning, Mal., 1992). A Congress government headed by K.Karunakaran was in office then, but he offered cooperation of the left to the government in the implementation of the development programmes if the government was willing to reciprocate the gesture by adopting a more positive policy towards the mass movements and the left led district councils.

The Mathai Manjooran Memorial lecture initiated a major debate on Kerala's development problems in which Congress leaders, important trade union functionaries and academics participated. One of the key issues that figured in the debate was the empirical finding by Prof.K.N.Raj and Prof.T.N.Krishnan that the rate of growth of wages was higher than the rate of growth of productivity in the state. This mismatch was resulting in reduction in employment and production, so they argued. The empirical results as well as some of its possible anti-labour implications were hotly contested by the trade union leaders. Summing up the debate EMS accepted that it was true wages and standard of living had improved as a result of mass struggles. He was proud of these achievements. But he refused to comment on the veracity of the wage productivity relationship in the state. It was up to the professionals to settle the issue through refining their methods and calculations. Whatever be the outcome he was resolutely opposed to any attempt to restrict the wages or benefits to the people. The solution lay not in reducing the wages but improving the productivity. He offered the cooperation of the left and its organisations in any planned effort to improve production and productivity.

He also self-critically admitted:

"I do not claim that the approach of the workers and peasant organisations and political parties leading them are above fault. While they struggle for their rights and demands they have to realise the importance of improving production and productivity in agriculture and industry. Mass organisations of workers and peasants and other sections of people and political parties giving leadership to them have to come forward to increase production in the public and

private sectors and help to mobilise capital for social investment. I want to publicly state our commitment to rectify mistakes if any, in this respect from our side (Summing up the debate, Development Problems of Kerala, Mal., Chinta, Thiruvananthapuram, 1991)."

The opportunity was missed because the Congress government spurned aside the hand held in cooperation and instead persisted in its repressive policies and in a most irresponsible manner began to scuttle the duly elected district councils almost all of which were controlled by the left.

MARXIST DIALOGUE

Despite the above setback the development debate within the left continued. Of particular significance was the round table discussion organised by Marxist Samvadam (Development Dialogue), the newly launched theoretical journal of the party with EMS as the editor. Selected leaders of the left political parties and academics participated in the discussion. The basis document for discussion was prepared by Thomas Isaac and E.M.Sreedharan and published in the inaugural issue of the journal. The text of the round table deliberations was published in the next issue. The discussion paper had attempted to sum up some of the key propositions that had emerged from the development dialogue so far:

1. Kerala model of development with its social sectors achievements was the starting point of the paper. The mass pressure from below had succeeded in fashioning a set of re-distributive policies which resulted in social provisioning of education and health, land reforms, public distribution systems and a number of social security measures. As a result it has been possible to provide for the basic needs for majority of the citizens in the state even though Kerala was one of the relatively more backward states. The experience of Kerala shows that the people of India do not have to wait indefinitely for the trickle down effect of the economic growth for fulfilling their basic needs.

2. At the same time the social sector achievements did not have a complementary positive impact on economic growth in the state. Despite land reforms there was no remarkable improvement in agricultural productivity. Despite educational expansion, industrial

modernisation and diversification remained retarded. As a result unemployment was three times the national average. The quality of social infrastructure was also deteriorating. The fiscal crisis of the state was rendering it incapable of intervening in the crisis. It had become evident that in the absence of economic growth it would not be possible to sustain the redistributive policies or welfare gains of the past.

3. The reasons for the above crisis lay in the historic specificities of the capitalist path of development of the region and national and global crisis of capitalism. But given the uneven development of the left movement in the country, in regions such as Kerala where the movement is relatively more advanced, it is important to attempt to find partial solutions to some of the most pressing problems in a democratic and pro-people manner. Possibilities of such autonomous development path are also increasingly foreclosed by the new economic reforms. But given the specific situation in Kerala a conscious intervention for a redirection of the development policy became imperative.

4. Given the class structure of the region characterised by predominantly petty production units, but with high incidence of wage labour the issue of improvement in productivity has become a precondition for ensuring the unity of petty producers and wage labourers. In this manner improvement in productivity assumes special importance in ensuring class unity and for further advance of class struggle. The defence of the public social infrastructure in education, health and other sectors is no more possible without guaranteeing an improvement in the quality of their services. All these necessitate a reorientation of the mass movements towards direct intervention in the development process in order to improve productivity or improve the quality of services.

5. Decentralisation for reasons which have already been explained, is necessary to provide the organisational framework for the participatory development process in the petty production sectors and the social service sectors. It was also important to have an overhaul of the institutional arrangements for land and water management, provision of social services and the cooperatives.

EMS endorsed the basic propositions put forward, but he expressed serious reservation with the concept of the Kerala model of

development, particularly its Western variants that tended to imply that the quality of life of the people could be improved without economic growth not to speak of basic changes in the social system or need for social revolution. It distracted attention from the urgent task of accelerating the growth in the productive sectors:

"Kerala faces today an intense economic crisis in production, agricultural and industrial. In fact, I am inclined to believe that while we have spend much time and attention on "social-sector" issues of welfare and improvement of the living standards of the people, we have not paid enough attention or shown adequate concern for pressing problems of economic growth and material production. I make a request: let not the praise that scholars shower on Kerala for its achievements divert attention from the intense economic crisis that we face. We are behind other states of India in respect of economic growth, and a solution to this crisis brooks no delay. We can ignore our backwardness in respect of employment and production only at our own peril." [Presidential Address, International Congress on Kerala Studies, 1994)

He also steered clear of the two possible deviations namely the right deviation which created an illusion that "every thing can be done" and the left deviation that "nothing can be done." In an environment where decentralisation was being held out as the panacea for all the problems, he always took pains to explain the severe constraints to local level development action imposed by the bourgeois landlord system and lopsided federal set up in India. The contemporary trends towards globalisation and the new economic reforms would only sharpen the crisis. Further, local level planning was not a substitute for national and state level planning. There are many subjects like foreign trade, key infrastructural development and industrialisation that can be handled only at the national and state level. What was required was a system of multi-level planning.

But he categorically rejected the view that nothing can be done... until the national policies are reversed. In this context he referred to the efforts and achievements of people and the left government of West Bengal which he illustrated with the example of acceleration of agricultural growth after the land reforms and strengthening of the Panchayati Raj in that state. Similarly, Kerala has also got to find solutions for its pressing problems:

The above was the rationale behind the International Congress on Kerala Studies organised in August, 1994 by AKG Centre for Research and Studies of which EMS was the director.

INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS ON KERALA STUDIES

The response to the initiative of EMS to bring together scholars in the broad area of Kerala Studies and socio-political activists in an International Congress was overwhelming. Perhaps such an initiative had been long overdue. Around 1600 persons (nearly 700 being academic scholars from more than 2 dozen disciplines) attended the Congress. There were participants from 23 countries other than India and nearly all the major states in India.

The Congress was organised in five broad subject divisions: History, Economy, Science and Technology, Society and Politics and Culture. In each subject group there were 10-12 technical sessions and a symposium on different themes. In 60 technical sessions and 6 symposia over 600 papers were presented and discussed. Altogether 170 hours of discussion took place in 17 parallel venues of the Congress. The abstracts of the papers presented at the Congress were compiled in five volumes and distributed to the participants.

What did the Congress achieve? As EMS himself took pains to explain,

"This is not a seminar that is expected to come to precise conclusions on how the various problems of Kerala are to be solved. That is the task that political parties and social organisations in Kerala shall have to undertake on the basis of their experience, including the experience gained at this Congress...I want to assure you that we will do our level best to continue the dialogue between scholars and activists..." [Ibid].

Even though no formal conclusions were drawn up at the end of the Congress certain broad perspectives did emerge. For each and every one was in agreement that Kerala was in grave crisis. This was not limited to the economic sphere but was all pervasive, in the sense, it encompassed social and political and cultural spheres. Differences persisted with regards to the solutions but there was a definite

gravitation of the dialogue towards the broad development perspective that we have already discussed. Reorientation of the focus of plan towards strengthening of materials production and improvement in the quality of services required a thorough overhaul of the sectoral policies that were being followed. While industrialisation and infrastructural development required determined state level intervention, a decentralised development strategy was more suited for the petty production sectors and basic services. The International Congress on Kerala Studies was an important landmark in the move towards a broad social consensus on the development of the state.

For various reasons, but for a number of thematic state level seminars the programme could not be carried out. But by the end of 1996 every panchayat and municipality was organising their own development seminar as the basis of printed local area development reports. But the occasion was different. These seminars were a part of the Campaign for Decentralised Planning that was launched by the LDF government. In a sense, the vision of the International Congress on Kerala Studies was being realised in a more dramatic manner than was even dreamt by the participants of the Congress.

III

PEOPLE'S CAMPAIGN FOR DECENTRALISED PLANNING

One of the first important decisions of the LDF Government that came to power in 1996 was to earmark 35-40 per cent of the outlay of the state's Ninth Five Year Plan to the local bodies. The so-called 'district schemes', as traditionally defined, formulated in the past by line departments accounted for around 30 per cent of the State Plan. By deciding to devolve 35-40 per cent of the plan funds to the local bodies the state government ensured that almost every development activity that could be planned locally would, if transferred to local bodies, be possible for them to continue according to their own plan priorities.

It was evident that normal preconditions for such a radical financial devolution like redeployment of staff, formulation of procedures and rules, training of personnel and other administrative reforms would take a fairly long period to be satisfied. "Common sense" called for restraint, gradualist approach and postponement of the decentralised planning agenda to the Tenth Five Year Plan. Instead,

the Government of Kerala decided to launch a campaign to rally behind the elected local bodies the officials, experts and masses of people so that the handicaps can be overcome and local plans be prepared from below keeping the schedule for the Ninth Plan.

Apart from the above primary objective, the People's Campaign has also certain wider socio-political objectives. It seeks to bring about certain basic attitudinal changes towards the development process among all the key players involved -- the elected representatives, officials, experts, and the people at large. A radical transformation of the development culture of the state is a necessary pre-requisite for successful participatory decentralisation.

The bureaucratic departmental approach has to give way to an integrated, democratic vision. As we have discussed, democratic decentralisation requires that officials at every level work under the elected people's representatives. Similarly, the approach of the academic and professional community also has to be transformed. Although one of the important social developments during the post-Independence period has been the emergence of a specialised academic and technical community related to the universities, research institutes, laboratories and firms in the state, unlike the organic intelligentsia of the national movement period or immediate post-Independence period, this intelligentsia has increasingly divorced itself from the social environment. But if local bodies are to be provided with expert support, particularly in the transitional phase when the bureaucracy is in the process of readjusting itself to the changed situation, the ivory tower attitude and deeply ingrained cynicism prevalent among the technical elite will have to be transformed.

The bureaucratic development process today is totally alienated from the people. The ordinary citizen is scarcely interested in the government programmes except from the point of narrow self-interest. What can one get for oneself from the programmes? People view themselves as mere beneficiary objects of the development process rather than participants in social process of community improvement. The strong traditions of popular grassroots level development action have eroded over time. We have discussed in detail how the people's movements themselves have got to reorient their agenda to include popular development action.

Above all, there has to be a transformation of the elected representatives themselves. The barriers to decentralisation are not merely at the Centre but at every level below. The demand for decentralisation is only for up to that level. Even a gram panchayat member develops cold feet when it comes to making the gram sabha effective. On the other hand, the ultimate aim of decentralisation has to be to give opportunity for as much direct participation of people in daily governance as possible. The people's representatives at national or state level cannot be the role models for local bodies. The development administration at the grassroots level demands day-to-day involvement of the elected representatives. At the same time, the officials, experts and voluntary activists at the local level also have their own roles. The elected representative, as the coordinator of the local development activities, should recognise the legitimate role of others, particularly the officials, and develop a partnership based on mutual respect. In short, the objective of the People's Campaign for Decentralised Planning was not somehow to draw up a plan from below.

There is, however, a crucial question: How does one ensure that the new values and spirit generated do not die away with the tide of the movement, but are sustained? In the long run, the sustainability of the new development culture depends upon the success in institutionalising it in the legal system, new developmental institutions and traditions. Changes in laws and statutes or legalisation of new institutions would not occur automatically. There has to be sustained pressure from below, i.e., of the masses mobilised in the movement for decentralisation, to secure the necessary structural changes.

To sum up, the campaign had three objectives. The first was to draw up the state's Ninth Five Year Plan from below. Along side, the objective also was a) to bring about attitudinal changes among the key actors in the planning process and b) to institutionalise these changes by amending the existing laws and creating new institutions and traditions.

THE DECENTRALISED PLANNING PROCESS

From the preceding discussion, it is clear that the process of planning is as important as the final product -- the local plans. We shall outline in brief the broad phases of the planning exercise

spread over the past one year. Our discussion is more a conceptual analysis than an empirical review of the exercise. The first step in drawing up a local development plan is to identify the felt needs of the people. But a plan cannot be drawn up based on the subjective needs alone. It is particularly so in the case of a comprehensive area plan as was envisaged under the People's Campaign. It was necessary for this purpose to make an objective assessment of the resources-not merely financial resources but more importantly the local natural and human resources too. Then only could a perspective of local development that would make optimal use of the resources in tune with the aspirations of the people be developed. Thus, the People's Campaign attempted a judicious blend of need based and resource based planning methodologies.

The local development problems were identified by the people of every locality in their gram sabhas and ward sabhas. Gram sabha, it may be noted, is the assembly of all the voters in an electoral ward. Every effort was made through various means of appeal and publicity to ensure maximum participation in these meetings. It is estimated that nearly three million persons participated in these meetings to discuss local developmental problems. At least one representative from around 1/4th to 1/3rd of the households in Kerala must have participated in these meetings. People were encouraged not to limit themselves to listing of the problems but search for the causes and remedies drawing from their life experience. The convening of the gram sabhas (August-October 1996) constituted the first phase of the campaign.

The task of the second phase (October-December 1996) was to make an objective assessment of the resource potential and development problems in each sector. For this purpose, secondary data were collected from government offices, geographical studies undertaken through transect walks, local history written, ongoing schemes reviewed and gram sabha reports consolidated. Findings of these studies and discussions were summed up in a comprehensive Area Development Report which was printed and circulated. Each of these reports averaged 75-100 pages and formed the basic document for the discussion at the Development Seminars that were organised in every panchayat and municipality.

It is estimated that more than 3 lakh delegates -- elected members of local bodies, representative of grama sabhas, departmental officials and local experts -- attended these seminars. The seminars drew up

a list of recommendations and constituted a task force for each of the development sector to prepare projects. Nearly a lakh persons served in these task forces.

Preparation of projects by the task forces constituted the third phase (December-March 1997). A simple and transparent format was suggested to be uniformly followed in preparation of the projects.

At the end of the third phase, every grama panchayat and municipality had a shelf of projects corresponding to the development problems identified by the people. By then the grant-in-aid for each local body from the state government was also made known. This set the stage for the fourth phase of the campaign (March-June 1997). Each local body was to make an assessment of the financial resources available for its annual plan -- not only from the state and central government but also what it could raise from its own resources, voluntary labour or donations from the people, financial institutions and from beneficiaries themselves. They were then to prioritise and select projects to be included in the plan. A detailed document describing the logic of final selection of the projects along with its statistical and other annexes constitute the Plan Document of the local body. The Special Component Plan for Scheduled Castes and Tribal Sub Plan had to be separately shown in the Plan document. It was also recommended that 10 per cent of the outlay be earmarked for special, women targeted programmes. In order to ensure that the local plans are sensitive to the state level priorities, certain broad guidelines on sectoral allocations of plan funds were also indicated.

The next phase in the campaign was to integrate the grama panchayats plans at block and district levels and prepare the plans of block and district panchayats.

Elaborate preparation had to be made to ensure that the task of each phase was successfully completed. The most important among them was the three-tier training programme that preceded every phase. Around 600 Key Resource Persons were trained at these state level programmes who in turn trained about 15,000 District Resource Persons. At the local level nearly one lakh Resource Persons were trained. The training materials came to around 3000 printed pages. Video programmes of nearly 15 hours' duration were prepared. Despite these efforts, as we have already noted in connection with

sixth phase, there were many lapses and weaknesses. But what is important is that despite these weaknesses, a plan did emerge from below.

It was only inevitable that numerous problems cropped up during the implementation stage. They were inevitable given the fact that devolution of resources and powers had taken place before the preconditions for successful devolution were met. The expectation was that the mass of people mobilised in the Planning Campaign would generate pressures from below and create a political will to clear the obstacles.

EMS: THE GUIDING SPIRIT

If there is any single person who can claim credit on the ongoing Campaign for Decentralised Planning in Kerala, one of the most thorough going and boldest experiments in decentralisation in our country, it is EMS. It was he who mooted the idea that decentralisation should be placed highest in the order of priority in the agenda of the new LDF state government. Details of the proposal were worked out at the State Planning Board but it was the political authority that EMS commanded that facilitated the smooth launching of the Campaign. There were serious doubts regarding the practical wisdom of plan devolution of 35-40 per cent of the outlay to the local bodies. It may be noted that during the Eighth Five Year Plan the share of panchayats in the annual plan varied between Rs.20 to 30 crores only. In its place during in the first year of the Ninth Plan itself nearly Rs.750 crores was to be given as grant-in-aid apart from around 200 crores of schemes and additional resources from Centrally Sponsored Schemes. It was EMS's intervention that put to rest the numerous reservations that were expressed. Once the decision of earmarking 35-40 per cent of the plan outlay was declared by the state government there was no going back.

It was EMS himself who explained the significance of the government decision and the role of party and class and mass organisation in making the Campaign a success in the party state committee. Despite his illhealth he personally presented the reports in the party regional conventions convened to explain the Campaign to the senior functionaries. He attempted to situate the Campaign in the broader political context and draw attention to its significance in finding partial solutions to the pressing problems of the people and

also in breaking down the political compartmentalisation of the masses.

The first two months of the Campaign witnessed an exhibition of the traditional bipolar front reflex reaction from the opposition parties. Without even waiting for the details of the programme Congress started a virulent slander campaign. It was alleged that the Campaign for Decentralised Planning was an attempt to replace elected bodies by 'people's committees' and siphon off public funds by CPI(M) cadres. References to West Bengal where allegedly CPI(M) captured the rural areas through Panchayati Raj was a constant refrain in the plethora of statements issued by Congress leaders. EMS, Chairman of the High Level Guidance Council took initiative to clarify some of the genuine doubts expressed even by the left front partners and expose the hollowness of the criticisms of Congress leaders. (People's Planning Myth and Reality, Mal., Deshabhimani, 12 May 1997,).

A new component was added to the conceptual structure of decentralisation of EMS with the Campaign for Decentralised Planning, viz the Grama Sabhas. The grama sabhas were introduced in Kerala for the first time in the conformity legislations that followed 73rd and 74th amendments. With no tradition of grama sabhas, its unwieldy size of around 2000 numbers on an average and the dispersed settlement pattern of the state the general belief was that grama sabhas as an institution of direct democracy were impractical in the state. EMS was keen to personally understand how they performed in the Campaign. He spent a whole day in a panchayat in Trivandrum where grama sabhas in all the wards were simultaneously being convened. He even attended some of the group discussions. He was enthused by the potential of the grama sabha. He saw in them yet another forum for not only people at large but also the different mass organisations for example, peasants associations and agriculture workers unions to collectively sort out the conflicts such as paddy land reclamation for garden crops (The Vital Role of the Grama Sabhas, Mal., Deshabhimani, 8 October, 1997). He expressed his conviction that the future system of governance and development would have to take the grama sabhas as their basic unit.

During the 2nd phase of the Campaign criticisms were voiced that the printed reports and the seminars were a financial waste. EMS pointed out the details of the procedures that were being adopted for

the preparation of the reports and how the whole exercise was a non formal mass education on a vast scale. He even reviewed a sample of the development reports that he had received and his assessment was that 'the material collected and the conclusions drawn are such that one would wonder whether the work was done by postgraduates or research scholars' (People's Plan, Frontline, 13 December, 1996).

The presentation of the budget for 1997-98 with more than 36 per cent of the plan outlay earmarked for the local bodies had an unexpected fall out. The village roads, minor irrigation works, small drinking water schemes and so on which were normally an important component of the budget document were conspicuous by their absence. All this were to be decided later on the basis of priorities drawn up by the local bodies. This meant abolishing of a major source of political patronage for the MLAs. Their disappointment soon erupted into virulent attack on decentralisation and demand for an MLA area development fund on the pattern of area development funds for Members of Parliament. EMS openly came out in severest terms to nip the above demand in its bud itself. He characterised the demand for a special development fund for MLA as negation of the decentralisation process and an affront to plan development. MLAs should not be allowed to arbitrarily meddle with subject areas that have been devolved to the local bodies. It was his firm position that facilitated the People's Campaign to weather, perhaps the most serious political challenge that it faced (On People's Planning, Mal., Deshabhimani, 21st April 1997).

When the plans were being finalised by the local bodies, and criticisms were raised that the plans to the local bodies were nothing but modified departmental schemes and subsidy distribution programmes and so on EMS made a much publicised visit to one of the grama panchayats in Trivandrum district. He personally quizzed the panchayat office bearers in a public meeting regarding the details of the plan. He expressed his satisfaction at the serious attempt made for additional local resource mobilisation and the participatory nature of plan implementation that was being envisaged. Not satisfied with the grama sabhas the panchayat had taken initiative to organise neighbourhood groups. The entire dialogue was televised and contributed to settling the disquiet that was being spread by the critics.

Perhaps the most decisive intervention by EMS after the Campaign was launched came during the implementation stage. As we have

already noted the progress of complementary administrative reforms or amendments to statutes or laws were proving to be very slow and was creating difficulties for smooth implementation. In his presidential address at the 3rd meeting of the High Level Guidance Council, EMS openly criticised the hesitation of the government and demanded immediate adoption of Interim Report of the Sen Committee and better coordination of rural development and panchayat departments. His criticism had immediate impact. He followed it up with a series of articles where he attempted to set an agenda for the Administrative Reforms Committee that had been appointed by the government. According to him the recommendations of Sen Committee on decentralisation, if implemented, would require a thorough restructuring of the entire administrative edifice of the state government. Decentralisation and grama sabhas were central to any attempt to democratisise the administrative set up (Sen Committee Report and Administrative Reforms, Mal., Deshabhimani, 7 to 11 October 1997).

EMS passed away before the issues could be clinched and the agenda for decentralisation fully carried out. But there is no doubt whatsoever that the People's Campaign for Ninth Plan is decisively transforming the administrative landscape of Kerala. More importantly it has initiated a political process of dialogue and united action cutting across narrow sectarian divisions that would contribute significantly in breaking down the two front compartmentalisation of state politics and, along with other factors, also contribute to the further strengthening of the democratic forces in the state. One is aware, that a lot needs to be done to institutionalise this whole process of democratic decentralisation in the state. And that would be a fitting tribute to the man who was instrumental in setting the progressive socio-economic agenda in the state for the last three generations.