

## **DECENTRALISATION OF ELEMENTARY EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN KERALA\***

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### **Abstract**

*This paper discusses decentralisation of, and community participation in, elementary education of Kerala. Decentralisation is the political process of sharing power on the part of the state with local level structures and community participation refers to assumption of power or responsibility on the part of the people at the local level. In the process of decentralisation in education, all state schools in Kerala are brought under the power of the local self-governments. Involvement of civil society in education in Kerala is a form of both decentralisation and community participation. There has been large scale involvement of civil society in establishing and administering schools in Kerala. School level community participation is the involvement of the immediate stakeholders of the education service in running their schools; the most important school level structure for this in Kerala is the parent teacher association. Implementation of the central act of 2009 on free and compulsory education has its implication for the prospects of community participation in education in Kerala. In order to benefit from the act, Kerala has to judiciously adapt its provisions to suit Kerala's context of the structure and achievement of elementary education.*

## INTRODUCTION

India has made the constitutional commitment to universalisation of elementary education or schooling of all children in the age group of 6-14 years. The initial article under the directive principles of the Constitution on universalisation of elementary education was amended in 2002 to make elementary education a fundamental right.<sup>1</sup> In accordance with the provision under this amendment, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (RTE) has been enacted by the central government in order to make elementary education necessarily and really available to every child in the country (Government of India 2009). With regard to the strategy in implementation, the major programmes for universalisation of elementary education in the country have relied on various forms of community participation.

Success of the efforts in elementary education is often assessed in terms of enrolment of children of the school going age in school. At times retention rate is also used in assessing the achievement of elementary education. But the real success in schooling is to be assessed in terms of the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values and attitudes on the part of the students. Hence, when we speak of achievement in elementary education, we have to consider not merely enrolment and retention, but the actual learning outcome. Thus there are two interrelated tasks in elementary education, viz., enrolment and retention of all eligible children in school (or quantity), and pursuit of learner achievement (or quality). There have been several specific projects aimed at improvement in the quantity and quality of elementary education in the country during the last few decades. The current central government programme of elementary education that is implemented throughout the country is the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA).

In the context of the new central legislation on universalisation of elementary education for improving both quantity and quality, this paper discusses the twin process of decentralisation of educational administration and community participation in elementary education in the state of Kerala. The paper contains six substantive points: (i) a brief contextual account of

elementary education in Kerala; (ii) the meaning of decentralisation (as a political process of sharing power on the part of the state) and community participation (assuming responsibility on the part of the community); (iii) participation of the decentralised local self-government in elementary education; (iv) participation of the civil society in elementary education; (v) community participation at the school level; and (vi) some implications of the RTE for the prospects of universalisation of elementary education of Kerala.

## **1. ELEMENTARY EDUCATION IN KERALA**

Kerala, with an area of 38863 sq. km, is one of the small states in the Indian Union. But it is the state with the highest density of population in India – 819 as against 324 for the whole of India. According to the 2001 census the total population of the state is 318.41 lakh, of whom 154.69 lakh are male and 163.72 female. Kerala has had the lowest growth rate of population (9.43%) between 1991 and 2001 in India. Another special demographic characteristic of Kerala is the female-favourable sex ratio in the population – 1058 females for 1000 males. Yet another interesting demographic feature of Kerala is the high literacy rate – 90.86; the difference in the literacy rates of males (94.24) and females (87.72) is much narrower than in most other states of India.<sup>2</sup> Scheduled castes constitute 9.81 per cent of the population in Kerala, while just 1.14 per cent of the state's population belongs to the scheduled tribes. Kerala has a sizeable population of religious minorities. The main religious minorities are Muslims and Christians. Muslims constitute 24.74 per cent and Christians 19.04 per cent of the state's population (Census of India 2001, PEDSK 2009).

### **Schools in Kerala**

Kerala has had a good record of educational development. Even before the independence the erstwhile princely rulers and the different communities took keen interest in spreading education in Kerala. Community participation in the form of the efforts of different caste and religious communities in promoting education has contributed a lot to the development

of education in Kerala. As a result, majority of the schools in Kerala are in the private sector, run by different agencies of the civil society.

**Table 1**  
**Schools of Kerala in 2009-10 by Level and by Management**

<b>Management</b>	<b>Lower Primary</b>	<b>Upper Primary</b>	<b>High School</b>	<b>Total</b>
State	2542 (37.5)	953 (31.3)	1006 (35.7)	4501 (35.6)
Private Aided	3979 (58.6)	1870 (61.5)	1429 (50.8)	7278 (57.6)
Private Unaided	267 (03.9)	217 (07.2)	379 (13.5)	863 (06.8)
<b>Total</b>	<b>6788 (100)</b>	<b>3040 (100)</b>	<b>2814 (100)</b>	<b>12642 (100)</b>

Figures in parentheses are percentages.

Source: Government of Kerala 2011b

As per the data of 2009-10 (Table 1) there are 12642 schools in Kerala, of which 6788 (53.7%) are lower primary (LP) and 3040 (24.0%) upper primary (UP) schools, and the remaining 2814 (22.3%) high schools (HSs). Schools in the private sector include 57.6 per cent state aided schools and 6.8 per cent state recognised unaided schools. Unaided schools are mostly English medium schools and follow the curriculum of the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) or Indian Certificate of Secondary Education (ICSE). These unaided schools are the pace setters of the increasing trend of exclusion in education in Kerala in so far as they are accessible to only those with adequate financial and social (background) capital (Kumar and George 2009).

### **Funding of School Education**

The state makes the capital investment in the case of the state sector schools (35.6%). Capital expenditure of the remaining schools (64.4%)

is borne by the private sector agencies (Table 1). The running cost on salary of teaching and non-teaching staff of the state and aided schools is met by the state. This means that, in terms of the financial source, the vast majority (93.2%) of the schools in Kerala are run with the funds from the state. Students of the unaided schools meet the cost of their education in the form of fees. Thus schooling in Kerala exhibits a peculiar form of joint venture of the state and civil society.

The state gives priority to school education in financial allocation. The total plan and non-plan budget estimate on education in Kerala for the year 2010-11 was Rs.6648.29 crore. As much as 79.4 per cent of it was allocated for primary (39.1%) and secondary (40.3%) education. The allocation to higher and technical education was 14.8 and 4.7 per cent respectively (Government of Kerala 2011b).

### Student Enrolment and Teachers

Kerala has achieved nearly total enrolment and retention in elementary education. The gross enrolment ratio in elementary education in Kerala for the year 2007-08 was reported to be 108 for girls and 110 for boys, and the net enrolment ratio, 99.5 for girls and 100.0 for boys. For the same year dropout rate was stated to be zero for both girls and boys (PEDSK 2009).

**Table 2**  
**School Teachers in Kerala by Sex and by Level of School in 2009**

Level of School	Women	Men	Total
LP School	47732 (75.8)	15235 (24.2)	62967 (100)
UP School	36288 (68.0)	17107 (32.0)	53395 (100)
High School	38737 (64.3)	21470 (35.7)	60207 (100)
<b>Total</b>	<b>122757 (69.5)</b>	<b>53812 (30.5)</b>	<b>176569 (100)</b>

Figures in parentheses are percentages.

Source: PEDSK 2009

The total number of teachers in the schools of the three levels (LP, UP and HS) belonging to the three categories (state, aided and unaided) as per the data of 2009 was 176569 (Table 2). Majority (69.5%) of them were women. Proportion of women at the LP school was as high as 75.8 per cent. There is a marginal decrease in women's percentage at the higher levels – 68 per cent at UP school and 64.3 per cent at HS.

The above brief information on the nature of schools, funding of education, student enrolment and teacher strength shows that Kerala has its special features in elementary education. This fact has to be taken into account while considering new schemes for universalisation of elementary education in Kerala. The focus of the new programmes of elementary education for Kerala should be geared to consolidation of the achievement in enrolment and retention, and improvement in the quality of education. This is what the current centrally sponsored programme of the SSA seems to be doing in Kerala. For instance, as much as 65.62 per cent of the SSA allocation in Kerala for the year 2009-10 was for quality improvement, such as for textbooks and teacher training. Only 20.33 per cent of the budget was allocated for development of infrastructure (SSA-Kerala 2009).

## **2. DECENTRALISATION AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION**

Decentralisation and community participation are interrelated processes from different starting points. While decentralisation flows from the power structure above, community participation starts from below. In decentralisation power of the central authority is dispersed. It is a form of sharing the power vested in the central authority with the lower level structures that often represent the community. In this respect decentralisation is oriented to community participation. Both decentralisation and community participation may be viewed as having the same goal – efficiency in the functioning of a project or programme of action at the grassroots level.

### **Decentralisation**

The principle in decentralisation as a process of sharing or dispersing power is that the closer the power goes down to where a programme of

action actually takes place, the more efficient would be the functioning of the programme. Depending on the extent of power shared and the manner it is done, decentralisation may be of different degrees or types. One useful categorisation of decentralisation found in social science literature is that of de-concentration, delegation and devolution (Wikipedia 2011). De-concentration, the weakest form of decentralisation, consists in distributing power among the personnel of the central authority located in different areas. In delegation, power is transferred from the centre to the lower level that remains accountable to the central authority, which means that power is used on behalf of the central authority. In devolution, power is transferred and located at the lower level that takes independent decisions in the specified spheres.

Decentralisation of education ultimately is expected to locate power within the community where the process of education actually takes place – normally in educational institutions or schools in the case of elementary education. It would mean that the community, which benefits or is expected to benefit from a school, is given some level of power in running the school. How much of the power in running a school is shared with the community which is the primary stakeholder of the school depends on the nature or degree of decentralisation. Decentralisation may be the maximum when the community at the grassroots level or the primary stakeholder of the school assumes the power to take decision in all matters of the functioning of the school. The degree and nature of decentralisation differ also depending upon how much of the power is shared with the middle level structures (or channels) of decentralisation, and how much of the power is retained with the central authority.

In the process of decentralisation of elementary education in Kerala some power to run schools is dispersed to different structures in the state. There are two middle level structures in decentralisation between the state centre and the grassroots level school. One is the structure of the political system of the elected representatives of people or the local self-government. The other is the structure of the civil society of community representatives (of sectional groups and voluntary organisations). These two structures participate in elementary education of Kerala in different degrees.

Participation of the local self-government in elementary education is the result of direct dispersion of power from the state centre to the political structure at the local level. Civil society participation in elementary education can be considered as the result of 'deemed to be decentralisation' in so far as the state recognises and/or supports the efforts of the representatives of the civil society in providing elementary education, the ultimate responsibility for which has been assumed by the state.<sup>3</sup>

### **Community Participation**

Community participation in education may be understood as involvement of the people or local group in undertaking an educational process or running an educational institution which is meant for its benefit. If education is viewed as a community service, community participation in education would mean that the beneficiary community or the prime stakeholder in the education service is enabled to have different degrees of involvement or decision making role in the delivery of this service. The modern state assumes the power to deliver this service to the citizens as its responsibility. In democracies this is supported by their constitutions. In such a political system it is likely that the state expects community participation that probably does not amount to community taking over the power fully to provide education (or the state totally abstaining from the responsibility of providing education).

Experience has shown that community participation is necessary for successful delivery of the education service to the people. However, the state decides on the extent of community participation or how much of its power can be decentralised. This is a paradox in the present mode of community participation in education. The state has assumed responsibility and accountability for the education of the citizens and at the same time needs participation of the people in carrying out this responsibility. The state does not hand over full responsibility to the people, but makes or enables people to share this responsibility to the extent determined by the state.

The school level community participation in elementary education of Kerala is facilitated by the school level structure. Since decentralisation



of education takes place through the political structure of the local self-government and the social structure of the civil society, there are differences in the degree of community participation in education at the level of individual schools. Community participation at the school level is determined by the extent of the use of power (or decisions made) at the state level, and at the decentralised levels of the local self-government and civil society.

### **Decentralisation for Community Participation**

Decentralisation can be viewed as a process for community participation in so far as power is dispersed from the top of the political system to the people so that the community can actually utilise or exercise the power that has been brought down to the community. The greater the freedom of the community to exercise the power and larger the scope of the power, the greater will be community participation. Decentralisation of education ultimately should locate power within the community where the process of education actually takes place. It would mean that the community has power in running the school. In other words, decentralisation of education enables greater involvement of the community in education. Under this perspective decentralisation of education (or transferring power to undertake the process of education or to run educational institutions) can be a means of community participation.

If decentralisation is understood as sharing power with the community or community level structures, it can be viewed as part of the process of community participation. But in reality decentralisation need not necessarily result in community participation. Decentralisation can turn out to be mere extension or expansion of the centralised power to lower level structures specifically created for the same. In such a situation decentralised structures may become channels of effecting centralisation or exercising centralised control. It is also possible that in decentralisation power is marginally shared with the community and important aspects of undertaking a community level programme of education may be retained by the central authority. In this situation community participation may be superficial or symbolic.

The degree of community participation in education depends upon the extent of decentralisation, or what aspects of education with what degree of decision making power are transferred to the community. The important aspects of providing education as a community service are formulation of the contents of education (or curriculum), the manner of the teaching-learning process in educational institutions, establishment of educational institutions and creation of other infrastructure facilities, appointment of teachers, enrolment of learners, and supply of financial resources. Strictly speaking the state, by virtue of assuming the responsibility to provide education as a fundamental right or development service to its citizens, has to take care of all these matters. But most states, especially democracies accept and adopt various forms and degrees of decentralisation of their power in these matters. Yet, no state decentralises or probably wants to decentralise power in all these matters in order to elicit community participation. Political systems differ in the extent and manner of decentralisation of power in these matters.

If one analyses the nature and degree of decentralisation of education in Kerala (and India as well), one may find that the sphere of education that is decentralised is much smaller than what is maintained under centralisation. The more legislative stipulations are made for implementation of education at the community level, the greater would be centralisation. It can happen that even details of community participation are designed and implemented as per centralised pattern, irrespective of the particular local situation. Then community becomes the implementing agency of the decisions made at the state centre. That is, community does not take decisions but just *participates* in decision making and the extent of participation is determined by the centralised authority.

If decentralisation of education and community participation are considered as twin process, three types or levels of decentralisation-participation can be identified in the context of elementary education in Kerala. They are of (i) the local self-government, (ii) the civil society agencies and (iii) the community at the school level. They have their specific characteristics in the Kerala situation. All the three types of decentralisation-participation are taking place at the respective levels as per the norms provided in the Kerala Education Act and Rules (KEAR) of the state central authority.

### **3. PARTICIPATION OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT**

Following the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendments to the Constitution of India in 1992, the government of Kerala enacted the Kerala Panchayat Raj Act and the Kerala Municipality Act in 1994, which came into effect on 23 April and 30 May 1994 respectively (Government of Kerala 2000). The panchayat raj and municipal administration together constitute the local self-government system in Kerala. The panchayat raj has a three tier system comprising of grama (or village), block and district panchayats. The municipal administration consists of municipalities and corporations. Some of the responsibilities of the state administration have been transferred to the local self-governments in accordance with the decentralisation of power stipulated in the acts.

The idea of decentralisation of education in Kerala was much older than 1994. Clauses 17 (1) and 24 (1) of the Kerala Education Act of 1958 had required the government to establish local educational authorities for specified local areas and to appoint local education committees (Narendran 1963). However, the actual creation of the local level structure of educational authorities took place after the 1994 legislation in the form of education samitis at the level of the panchayat and municipality/ corporation. The provision for local education committees in course of time got realised in the parent teacher association (PTA) at the school level.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Schools under Local Self-government**

As per decentralisation that became operational after the 1994 acts, all the state run schools in Kerala have been transferred to the power of the local self-governments. The state primary schools (consisting of only classes I-IV or LP) have come under the village panchayat in which they are located. All the other levels of the state schools (including the higher secondary of classes XI-XII) with or without the primary and/or high school sections attached to them are placed under the district panchayat, in whose jurisdiction they fall. All the state schools, irrespective of the level, located in the urban area come under the power of the respective municipal or corporation local self-government. The local self-governments of panchayats

and municipalities/ corporations have their funds for the maintenance and development of the schools under them. They also have their standing committee on education for looking after the development of the schools. This decentralised system has been one of the reasons for the situation of the satisfactory infrastructure of the state sector schools in Kerala. According to the state economic review, nearly all (99.93%) the state schools in Kerala were functioning in *pucca* buildings in 2010. There were only three state schools that had thatched sheds in 2010 (Government of Kerala 2011b).

However, it may be mentioned that there seems to be lack of clarity in the division of functions between the state education department and the local self-government. The KEAR Revision Committee has pointed it out in its report and made suggestions for clear demarcation of functions. The committee's suggestions indicate that the powers decentralised to the local self-government should be limited to the maintenance of the school infrastructure and development programmes. In other matters the role of the local self-government is proposed to be that of recommendatory (Government of Kerala 2008: 36). In fact the extent of power in education presently decentralised to the local self-government does not seem to go beyond what is suggested by the committee. But they probably need clarification.

### **Education Council**

The local self-government has set up the structure of education *samiti* or council<sup>5</sup> at the level of panchayat and municipality/corporation in order to facilitate participation of local self-governments in education. Every village/district panchayat has its panchayat education council (PEC) for the schools under its jurisdiction and every municipality/corporation has the municipal/corporation education council (MEC/CEC). These bodies were set up as part of the programme of school complexes. The education council of the local self-governments consists of representatives of the elected members of the local self-governments, school heads/teachers, PTA and educationists from the community. A single PEC/MEC/CEC has several schools of the complex under its jurisdiction. And all the schools under a

local self-government are represented in the education council in addition to representatives from different sections of the society. Thus the strength of an education council of a school complex at the local self-government is relatively large (SCERT–Kerala 2007). In view of this, sections 25-28 of the report of the KEAR Revision Committee has proposed a smaller PEC/MEC/CEC and identified their functions (Government of Kerala 2008: 124-128).

The education council at the local self-government is not involved in the day-to-day functioning of individual schools. Its function is more in the nature of policy formulation and development planning for the schools of the complex under its jurisdiction. As the education council at the level of the local self-government participates in the educational administration of a number of schools in the complex, its presence at the individual schools is rather weak. There are two functions that can be identified as specific to PEC/MEC/CEC: “Assessing the educational needs of the locality and if there is adequate justification, recommending the opening of new schools or upgradation of existing schools; (and) Preparing a Perspective Plan for educational development in the areas of jurisdiction of the Local Self Government Institution” (Government of Kerala 2008: 128). Other functions of the PEC/MEC/CEC mentioned in the report of the KEAR Revision Committee relate to the working of individual schools and overlap with those at present undertaken by the PTA of individual schools. Hence, in practice the PEC/MEC/CEC leaves these functions to the school level body of the PTA.

The SSA in Kerala has adopted a system of decentralisation similar to that of the state education department. The SSA structure consists of the state project office at the state capital, district project office at the district level and block resource centres (BRCs) under the districts. Programmes of the SSA reach individual schools through the BRCs. The education councils of the local self-governments are involved in the preparation of the annual work plan of the SSA in the schools under them. In fact the education councils got activated through the SSA. Funds under the SSA are disbursed from the state level to the districts as per the approved work plan. The allocation of funds to the BRCs in the district is as per their approved annual

work plan. Funds for the expenditure at the BRC/school level are disbursed from the district project office to the BRCs as advances. They have to be adjusted against actual expenditure with the statement of accounts and utilisation certificate. In another instance of decentralisation in the SSA context, the local self-governments contribute 35 per cent of the approved SSA allocation of the schools under the respective local self-governments directly to the district project officer of the SSA (SSA-Kerala 2006).

#### **4. PARTICIPATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY**

As already mentioned, involvement of the civil society in elementary education of Kerala can be viewed as decentralisation of education (from the part of the state) as well as community participation in education (from the part of the people). Involvement of the civil society (or private agencies) in education has taken different paths in our society. Probably it started with the philanthropic motive of providing education as a service to the society. This was good enough cause for the flourishing of private educational institutions in the interest of the society. A related aspect of the involvement of the civil society in education has been the direct objective of promoting the interests of individual sectional or ethnic groups. It meant providing education to members of a sectional group for improving the status of the group in the larger society. Some of the elements of the civil society have pursued it in a competitive spirit that has been functional to spreading education in the larger society.

In so far as it promoted education in the society, involvement of the civil society in education was encouraged by the state in various ways, especially with financial aid. With the expansion of this involvement, several elements of the civil society entered the field of education with goals beyond the philanthropic motive of service to the society or furthering group interests. Power and money have crept into the efforts of the civil society in the field of education in the form of, what may be called politicisation and commercialisation, which have to a certain extent marred the process of participation of the civil society in education in India. The situation led to the realisation that participation of the civil society in the form of privatisation of

education required checks and balances. This has naturally resulted in state intervention for regulating privatisation of education, which in turn has had its impact on community participation in education.

### **Civil Society Participation in Kerala**

There has been extensive participation of the civil society in education in Kerala. It was initiated in the pre-independence period particularly in the erstwhile princely states of Travancore and Kochi (parts of Kerala after independence). This involvement of the civil society, popularly referred as private education, was encouraged by the princely rulers with financial assistance. The state government after the independence continued this policy of private education with public or state grants. The educational initiative of the civil society from the early days of modernisation is considered to be the main reason for the present situation of high literacy rate and total school enrolment of both girls and boys in Kerala. Large scale community participation in education was reflected in the relatively high level of literacy in the three constituent regions of Kerala (Travancore, Kochi and Malabar district of Madras Presidency under the British) at the time of independence. Literacy rate in 1951 was 46.7 in Travancore, 43.7 in Kochi and 30.9 in Malabar compared to 19.3 in Madras Presidency and 16.6 in all India (George *et al.* 2003: 4).

Today organised caste and religious groups, and independent trusts are engaged in civil society participation in education in Kerala. While participation of the civil society flourished with immense freedom and state financial support during the pre-independence period, that situation changed with the state assuming responsibility for providing education to the citizens and accountability for the financial grants given to the private agencies for the delivery of education service. For political and practical reasons the state continued with the system of state aided private education. However, the state initiated regulatory measures, which have been often felt as political control or political party interference in private managed education in the state. The first major state intervention came with the 1958 Kerala Education Act, opposition to which from the civil society finally resulted in the fall of

the state government. Some of the provisions of this act have been amended by the subsequent government. However, the dialectics between the state and the agencies of the civil society in the matter of education have been continuing without satisfactory resolution even to the present day.

### **Aided and Unaided Schools in Kerala**

Presently participation of the civil society in elementary education of Kerala consists in establishing and managing two main types of schools – (i) with grants-in-aid from the state and (ii) without state financial grants, but recognised by the state. With the regulatory measures of the state, there is some definition of the extent of participation of the civil society in school education. In the case of the state aided private schools, the civil society agency bears the capital cost of providing the school infrastructure. The state meets the running cost in the form of directly paying the salary and pension of both teaching and non-teaching staff. There is a provision for state grants for the maintenance of aided schools. But the amount is so trivial that the private managements consider the cost of getting it through the cumbersome bureaucratic procedure more than the actual amount available. The annual maintenance grant from the state (other than for salary) available to the private aided schools is Rs.3.25 per student for classes I-VII and Rs.5 per student for secondary classes. These amounts were fixed in 1979 (George *et al.* 2003: 28-29). The aided schools do not receive development funds from the state for either infrastructure expansion or improvement.<sup>6</sup>

Both teaching and non-teaching staff of aided schools are appointed by the private management with the condition that the candidates should fulfil the eligibility requirements stipulated by the state. This is a contentious issue in the state. One position in this matter is that since the state pays for the staff, selection of staff for appointment in aided schools should be done by the state agency. The other position from the part of the managers of aided schools is that, since they select the staff and administer the schools as per the norms laid down by the state, they should have the freedom to select and appoint the staff in the schools established and run by them in



order to achieve the objectives of their institutions and maintain certain level of quality in schooling. The question in this matter is what power or role the civil society agencies should be entitled to have in the appointment of teachers and other staff by virtue of their capital investment and the need to provide quality education. The answer is complicated in the case of the minority institutions where the minority community is entitled to have the role of administration of school, although it is effectively limited to appointment of staff and admission of students (Aikara 2004: 91).

The unaided recognised schools, that provide education through English medium, are in great demand in Kerala. While enrolment in the state run and aided schools has been steadily decreasing, unaided English medium schools have been attracting more and more students. These schools enjoy more freedom in their management. But some of the proposals of the KEAR Revision Committee (Government of Kerala 2008) and the Commission for Right to Education Act, like annual renewal of state recognition (Government of Kerala 2011b), are regulatory measures that can lead to different issues in education including anxiety among parents and students over uncertainty of the school they have joined or intend to join.

## **5. SCHOOL LEVEL PARTICIPATION**

School level community participation in education refers to the involvement of the members of the community, who are the beneficiaries or immediate stakeholders of the school system, in running their school. The main school level structure that is set up at individual schools of Kerala for this purpose is the PTA. It is a statutory body instituted as per the Kerala Education Act and Rules, and exists in all schools.

### **Parent Teacher Association**

The PTA came into existence in the school system in Kerala by the government order (G.O. (P) 138/69/Edn. Dt. 31.3.69 Amended as per G.O. (P) 178/81/G. Edn. Dt. 13-10-81). The main objective of the PTA as visualised in the government order “is creation of an actively interested

community around the school vigilant about and actively participating in all activities of the school. This can help the school in a variety of ways... (and) provide teachers and parents with the opportunity to get together and discuss the needs of the children and to plan and support programmes for meeting those needs” (Hamsa 2005: 892).

The functions of the PTA specified in the government order are: to promote understanding and cooperation between parents and teachers for the welfare of children; to work for overall development of school and homes of children; to organise cultural and related programmes; to organise programmes for making the life of the community richer and happier; to instil good values in children; to help parents take interest in the educational progress of their children; and to help in improving the physical facilities in the schools (Hamsa 2005: 894).

All the parents of the children attending the school and teachers of the school form the general body of the members of the PTA. As per the latest government notification (Government of Kerala 2006), the head-teacher of the school is the convenor-cum-treasurer of the PTA. The members of the general body of the PTA elect from among themselves the president and vice-president of the association. The regular functions of the PTA are carried out by its executive committee. The president, vice-president and convenor of the association will be the chairperson, vice-chairperson and secretary respectively of the executive committee. The other members of the committee are elected from among the members of the association, in such a manner that the number of the representatives of parents in the committee will be at least one more than the number of teacher representatives and the total strength of the executive committee will not exceed 15. The tenure of the committee is one year.

It may be noted that every school has its PTA. The role of the PTA as an important structure of community participation in school education has been recognised by the state. The government document states: “No other body can function more effectively than the Parent Teacher Association in the task of harnessing community efforts and resources for education.

The P.T.A. can form the corner stone of all school improvement programmes. ... A number of activities can be taken up by the parent teacher association which may play a major role in the Nation's endeavour to build up better schools in the country" (Government of Kerala 2006: 112-113).<sup>7</sup>

The SSA in Kerala has recognised and accepted the PTA as the decentralised structure for school level community participation. The PTA is involved in the preparation of the annual work plan of the school to be submitted to the district level through the education council of the local self-government and the BRC. The SSA activities like construction work for improvement of school infrastructure are undertaken by the PTA of the respective schools. Thus the SSA has been using the existing structures for community participation in its activities.

### **School Development/Management Committee**

During the last few years there have been proposals to set up a school level structure for community participation in addition to the PTA. The proposed additional school level structure appeared in two nomenclatures – school development committee (SDC) and school management committee (SMC). According to the government guidelines of 2007 every school is to have the *school vikasana samithi* or the SDC (Government of Kerala 2007). The KEAR Revision Committee has reiterated it. As per its report, the SDC will consist of the following members: ward/division member of the local self-government institution (ex-officio chairperson), head-teacher/principal of the school (ex-officio convenor), PTA president, MTA president, senior most teacher, staff secretary, manager/nominee, and two local non-officials connected with the school (Government of Kerala 2008: 155).

One of the SSA documents of the state government (SSA-Kerala 2006) refers to school management committee (SMC) instead of SDC as a school level structure. Similarly the recent Commission for Right to Education Act (Government of Kerala 2011b), presumably following the central RTE, uses the nomenclature of the SMC. According to this commission parents and guardians of children shall constitute 75 per cent of the members of the

SMC. The remaining members of the committee shall be from among the following persons: the ward/division member of the local self-government; one teacher from the school to be decided by the teachers of the school; one member from amongst local educationists to be decided by the parents; and school manager or his nominee in the case of aided schools. Fifty per cent of the members shall be women (Government of Kerala 2011b: 4-6).

The function of the SDC and SMC, as identified in the respective documents, is more or less the same. It includes ensuring the effective functioning of the school; ensuring maximum enrolment and retention; taking effective steps for avoiding dropouts; ensuring the effective mobilisation and utilisation of school resources; taking effective steps against teacher absenteeism; improving academic performance of every child in the school; and providing facilities for better performance in the co-curricular activities. These are more or less the same as those that the PTA has been expected to perform. However, the SDC/SMC is not meant to replace the PTA. It is the constitution (not the function) of the SDC/SMC that makes it different from the PTA. The SDC/SMC is to have members from the local self-government of the political system and representatives of the community other than parents and teachers. As additional to the PTA, the SDC/SMC is likely to weaken the PTA or remain non-functional. The proposed SDC/SMC is yet to be instituted in the schools in Kerala with either of the nomenclatures. The nomenclature of the SMC, in accordance with the central RTE, can be expected to be accepted in preference to the SDC.

## **6. RTE IN KERALA SITUATION**

Legislation on compulsory education is not new to Kerala. The Kerala Education Act 1958 had provisions for both free and compulsory education. Clause 20 of the act reads: “No fee shall be payable by any pupil for any tuition in the primary classes in any Government or aided schools.” Clause 23 of the same act says: “The Government shall provide for free and compulsory education of children throughout the State within a period of ten years from the commencement of this Act” (Narendran 1963: 12). In fact,

by the time of independence lower primary education in Kerala had become almost free. By 1969-70 fees up to class X were abolished and in 1991 the higher secondary of classes of XI and XII (or the plus 2) were made free (George *et al.* 2003: 6).

The recent central legislation (of RTE) has practically little impact on the core issue of free compulsory education of children of 6-14 years in Kerala, because elementary education in Kerala is already free and enrolment of children of 6-14 years is practically 100 per cent. But some of the modalities for implementing the provisions of the RTE, if strictly adhered to, may have unexpected implications especially for community participation in education. Secondly, when the state has already achieved universalisation of elementary education, there is little use in mechanically going ahead with a legislation that is meant largely for increasing enrolment and retention. What Kerala needs at the present juncture are strategies for improving the quality of education, meaningfully responding to the fall in the number of children available for enrolment in the state and aided schools, and keeping under check or reasonable level the dialectics between the state and the civil society in the matter of community participation in education.

### **Decline in Students**

The state and aided schools, that together constitute the vast majority of the schools in Kerala, are facing a peculiar situation of drop in student strength. Both increasing preference for English medium education and decline in birth rate are the reasons for this situation. Despite the steady decline in infant and child mortality rates, the proportion of children under 15 years in the total population of Kerala has been coming down steadily. There has been decline even in the absolute number of children; the number declined from 8.9 million in 1981 to 8.6 million in 1991 and 7.4 million in 2001. It is estimated that the number of children will go down further to 7.2 million by 2011 (S. Irudaya Rajan and Sabu Aliyar, cited in George and Sunaina 2005). Table 3 shows the steady dip in enrolment in school education (except at HS) during the last four years.

**Table 3**  
**Stage-wise School Enrolment in Kerala from 2007-08 to 2010-11**  
**(Students in lakh)**

Year	LP School	UP School	High School	Total
2007-08	17.18	14.69	14.39	46.26
2008-09	16.66	14.53	14.27	45.46
2009-10	15.91	14.24	14.43	44.58
2010-11	15.04	13.93	14.54	43.51

Source: Government of Kerala 2011b

Changes in the choice of medium of schooling and proportion of children in the population have created some problems peculiar to Kerala. The vernacular medium schools are increasingly declared “uneconomic” and face the threat of closure, and teachers are rendered surplus. Under the prevailing norms of education in Kerala, a primary or high school in which the student strength per standard or batch is below 25 is treated as an uneconomic school. There are 3962 uneconomic schools in Kerala as per the figures of 2009-10. Out of these, 1974 are government and 1988 aided schools. LP schools account for as many as 76 per cent of the government and 86 per cent of the aided uneconomic schools.

### **Surplus Teachers**

The other problem created by the decline in student enrolment is that of surplus teachers, some of whom face retrenchment. The teacher-pupil ratio that is operative to determine surplus teachers is 1:40. As a result there is now a mad scramble for getting students among teachers and school managements so that schools are not closed and teachers are not rendered surplus. Some unethical practices have crept into the system to snatch away students from one school to another. Manipulation of the number of students on the day of the headcount in the beginning of the school year is reported. Excess capacity is also developing in physical infrastructure like school buildings and play grounds (George and Sunaina 2005: 14).

However, not all teachers who are rendered surplus are retrenched. Kerala has a special scheme for retaining many of the surplus teachers who are euphemistically called “protected teachers.” Protected teachers are paid salary and deployed in other schools wherever possible. At present there is also a provision to retain one out of ten protected teachers in the parent school without even a clear vacancy. It would mean that some of the protected teachers could be without adequate workload. Teachers who were appointed in the state and aided schools before 15 July 1997 are eligible to benefit from the scheme of protected teachers. There were 2918 protected teachers in Kerala during 2009-10. Out of these, 1189 teachers are deployed in state schools, 899 are retained in parent schools and 359 are deployed in aided schools. The remaining 471 protected teachers are un-deployed (Government of Kerala 2011b).<sup>8</sup>

### **School Enrolment and Structure**

Kerala will have another problem of numbers affecting schools and teachers if the provision of the RTE on age of children for entry in class I (viz. six years) is strictly followed. At present eligibility for enrolment in class I in Kerala is completion of five years. Raising it to six years would mean almost empty class I in the primary section at least in the first year of implementation. Also the state will have to find additional resources for running pre-primary section for the five year old children who do not qualify for enrolment in class I. The state government is reported to be considering the option of adopting the RTE eligibility for entry in primary school in phases – starting with the age of five and half years as eligibility for enrolment in class I.

Another issue that arises from the RTE is the provision to admit children from weaker sections in their neighbourhood unaided schools to the extent of 25 per cent of the student strength in these schools, where the tuition fees (to the extent of the per student cost in state schools) will be reimbursed by the state. The state may find it intriguing to divert children to unaided private schools and aid them to that extent, when the state and aided schools face the threat of closure for lack of students. Unaided English medium schools in Kerala do not have the concept of neighbourhood school;

they believe in busing students. The RTE leaves it to the state government to operationally define neighbourhood school. If neighbourhood school is defined as located within one km. from the residence of a child and if state or aided schools are also available in the neighbourhood, should a child be sent to the unaided school? The answer would depend on the objective of this provision in the legislation, that is, whether the objective is to make schooling available to every child within the neighbourhood or to regulate the trend of exclusion in unaided schools.<sup>9</sup>

Yet another issue in the context of the central RTE is regarding the structure of school education in Kerala. Strict adherence to the provision of the RTE requires the state to restructure school education by transferring class V from UP to LP school and class VIII from HS to UP school. Immediately it would result in delaying the movement of the students of LP school/section to UP school/section by one year. But the question is to what extent it would contribute to the problems of shortage/wastage of infrastructure or surplus teachers at the LP/UP section.

### **School Level Participatory Body**

Another provision of the RTE, on which the aided schools in Kerala may have reservation, is that of the SMC for school level community participation, that may replace or weaken the existing PTA.<sup>10</sup> The Commission for Right to Education Act has pre-empted it by recommending the manager or nominee of the manager as the ex-officio chairperson of the SMC in aided schools. In the other schools the chairperson is elected by the members from among themselves. This must be a deliberate deviation from the composition of the SDC recommended by the KEAR Revision Committee. The elected ward/division member of the local self-government is ex-officio chairperson of the SDC. Even prior to the RTE, the aided schools had already been against the proposed SDC, on account of the inclusion of the elected representative of the local political structure as its members. In view of the fact that most of the elected representatives of the local self-government belong to political parties, the aided school managements have considered the SDC as a mechanism for political interference and control of school. Even the teachers are reported to have reservation in having the



ward member as the chairperson of the school level committee in so far as the ward member may not be an educationist or person holding position comparable to that of teachers. Moreover, the ward officer may or may not be one of the stakeholders of the school whose SDC/SMC he/she is expected to lead.

The RTE does not have the provision for the PTA. It has only the SMC (comparable to the SDC) as the school level participatory body. The Commission for Right to Education Act recognises the role of the PTA and recommends the SMC as additional to the PTA at the school level. The commission suggests representation of the PTA on the SMC as the link between the two bodies. In the Kerala context, where the local self-government has its educational body for the schools under it, it needs to be seriously considered if the PTA that has been functioning as a statutory body at the school level for decades should be replaced or weakened with another similar body having similar function. Alternatively it may be considered if the PTA, which has been functioning in the school system in Kerala, can be designated to function as the SMC under the RTE. Too many participatory structures with similar function are likely to weaken community participation.

It may not be out of place to say that the RTE was formulated with reference to the general situation of universalisation of elementary education in the country which is different from that of Kerala. As a result some of the provisions of the act are irrelevant to Kerala and some others create certain issues in their application. Kerala already has had the legislation for free and compulsory elementary education and it has achieved commendable success in implementing it. There has been some level of decentralisation of education and community participation in education in Kerala, although one cannot deny the scope for improving it. The RTE is a means and not an end in itself. Uniform structure need not necessarily be uniformly functional, and this is one of the principles implied in adopting decentralisation against centralisation. The state legislation in the context of the RTE will have to see how best its centralised provisions can be decentralised (or find meaningful application) in the peculiar context of Kerala. We need uniformity in goal

and not in the means to achieve it. Results in the pursuit of the uniform goal will depend on the means appropriate to individual socio-cultural situations.

## CONCLUSION

Decentralisation of education and community participation in education may be viewed as processes with the same objective – involvement of the people at the lower levels in providing the education service. The idea of decentralisation is to disperse power to the lower level so as to enable the community to take decisions or participate in activities that are for their benefit. It should not be seen as a way of setting up state structures at the lower level so that the community level programmes and activities can be regulated or controlled. Such a step at best may be a form of de-concentration. An ideal form of decentralisation of education should result in the community assuming power to decide certain matters of the educational delivery system that are within their capability or for which they have been made capable. Much has been done and said about decentralisation of education in Kerala. But there is less enthusiasm in speaking about the results of this lauded initiative of the state government. This is reflected in the title of the research based article, “Decentralisation of Education in Kerala State, India: Rhetoric and Reality,” by Mukundan and Bray (2004). They point out that decentralisation of education did not result in greater participation of the stakeholders like teachers and parents in schooling and, in particular, very little happened in improving the quality of school education.

Decentralisation of education and community participation in education take place in specific socio-political and educational contexts. Kerala presents a peculiar situation in this respect. The major aspects of school education are with the centralised state department of education. The local self-government of the political system and civil society elements of the social system function as parallel structures for certain aspects of elementary education that are decentralised from the state central authority. The main function decentralised to them is the provision and maintenance of the infrastructure of the schools under their respective responsibility. While the PTA has been institutionalised as the school level structure for community

participation, the proposed SDC/SMC has received mixed responses from the structures of local self-government and civil society. The Kerala context may require continuation of the partnership between the state and civil society with the spirit under which it has been developed and fostered. To be beneficial to the community, decentralisation should lead to greater community participation or, what Pandey (2010) terms as, 'communitisation,' wherein convergence of state support and social capital of the civil society takes place.<sup>11</sup>

When there is a decentralised state system and state-civil society partnership, one may ask the question who represents best the community as far as education is considered – the elected representatives who are part of the political system (as in the case of the local self-government in Kerala) or members of the civil society who make their presence in the form of sectional groups or voluntary associations. In a socio-political scenario where ethnic identities and partisan politics are intertwined, there are differential demands on education in the name of social accountability and community participation. One can debate, on legal and structural grounds, on the degree of the right and accountability of the elected local self-government and the different elements of the civil society to the community it serves with education. The question can be reversed when it comes to community participation at the grassroots level of the school. Whom is the school accountable to - the state (or the local self-government) or civil society agencies or the community?

Another socio-legal issue of community participation in education is that of the freedom of children (or parents on behalf of children) to the type of education, particularly English medium education in the context where the state provides only vernacular medium education. Today this freedom is in vogue with the cost of education being recovered from students in most cases. How to reconcile it with free elementary education is a paradox in the present socio-political context. It seems that the state determines the nature and quality of the education under the RTE dispensation and the citizen has little choice in it. In the Kerala situation of growing demand for English medium schooling, which is one of the reasons for the dip in enrolment

in state and aided schools, expanding English medium education in state and aided schools as a reform needs to be seriously considered. Some of the schools have already started it with the objective of controlling the fall in student enrolment.

Kerala has achieved free and compulsory education in so far as free elementary education is available to all and practically all children of the school going age are in school. This has been the result of considerable community participation in education and some level of decentralisation of education. Kerala is unlikely to benefit from a blind adoption of the present central RTE. It can create uneasiness in the present situation. Kerala has to judiciously adapt the provisions of the RTE to suit its context so that the achievement of Kerala in universalisation of elementary education can be sustained and the quality of schooling further improved. For that the provisions of the central RTE should be directive and facilitative rather than prescriptive and dogmatic. In addition to the comprehensive report of the KEAR Revision Committee prior to the RTE, there have been three committees on the RTE (including the Commission for Right to Education Act) in Kerala. They have not provided readily acceptable solutions to the issues in the context of the RTE. In the true spirit of decentralisation, the state government has to adapt the provisions of the centralised RTE to suit the needs of the Kerala situation, instead of trying to adopt them in the name of uniformity.

## NOTES

- \* This is the revised version of the paper presented at the “National Seminar on Decentralisation of Elementary Education: Policy Reforms and Practices” held at the National University of Educational Planning and Administration, New Delhi on 24-25 March 2011.
- 1 Article 45 of the Constitution of India (prior to the 86<sup>th</sup> Amendment Act in 2002) read as follows: “The state shall endeavour to provide, within a period of ten years from the commencement of this Constitution, for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years.” The Constitution 86<sup>th</sup> Amendment Act, enacted on 12 December 2002, made three changes in the Constitution of India. First, a new article, 21A is inserted in the

part on the fundamental rights. Article 21A of the Constitution reads as: “The state shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of six to fourteen years in such a manner as the state may, by law, determine”. Second, the existing article 45 of the Constitution in the part on the directive principles of state policy is substituted with a new article. After the 86<sup>th</sup> Amendment Act, article 45 of the Constitution reads as: “The state shall endeavour to provide early childhood care and education for all children until they complete the age of six years”. Third, article 51A of the Constitution in the section on the fundamental duties of a citizen is amended with the insertion of a new clause, (k). With this insertion article 51A of the Constitution reads as: “It shall be duty of every citizen of India - ... (k) who is a parent or guardian to provide opportunities for education to his child or, as the case may be, ward between the age of six and fourteen years” (Government of India 2002).

- 2 According to the provisional data of the 2011 census, Kerala has a total population of 333.88 lakh, sex ratio of 1084 females for 1000 males, population growth of 4.86 per cent between 2001 and 2011, population density of 859, and literacy rate of 93.91 – 91.98 for females and 96.02 for males (Census of India 2011).
- 3 In a broad sense (i.e. if both the local self-government and the civil society agencies are considered as representative of community) involvement of the local self-government and civil society agencies in elementary education can be considered as community participation. However, it is easier to view civil society as representing community than local self-government, especially when the latter is treated (and often functions) as an extension of the political system.
- 4 The PTA at the individual school level is comparable to the village education committee (VEC) existing in most states in India. Madhya Pradesh is reported to be another state in India, where the PTA exists at the school level.
- 5 The word ‘samiti’ can be translated as council or committee. Following the report of the KEAR Revision Committee the term council is preferred here. Thus panchayat education council (PEC) and municipal/ corporation education

council (MEC/CEC) are used to refer to the educational body at the local self-government.

- 6 The same policy is followed by the SSA in the state. The SSA funds are not available to aided schools for development of school infrastructure. Programmes for teachers and students in aided schools are covered by the SSA (SSA-Kerala 2006).
- 7 As forms of expansion of the PTA, there are Mother Teacher Association (MTA) and Class PTA in most schools. The MTA consists of the mothers of students and women teachers. Its specific role is in matters concerning girl students in the school. Class PTA is the body of the class teacher and parents of the students of a particular class. It meets regularly and is concerned with the teaching-learning process in the class. Where it is functional, class PTA is an important mechanism to monitor the learning process of students.
- 8 The existing prescribed norm of teacher-pupil ratio is 1: 45. In view of the steady decrease in enrolment, the government has permitted a lower ratio of 1:40. The report of the KEAR Revision Committee has recommended the teacher-pupil ratio of 1:30 for primary school and 1:40 for classes above primary level. The reason given by the committee for the recommendation is the demographic change in the child population (Government of Kerala 2008: 77, 82). The Commission for Right to Education Act (Government of Kerala 2011a) has recommended the teacher-pupil ratio of 1:30 and 1:35 for classes I-V and classes VI-VIII respectively. It is reported that the state government would accept the teacher-pupil ratio of 1:30 for classes I-V and 1:35 for classes VI-VIII when the new RTE would be implemented (Manorama 2011a: 20). The obvious reason for this move is to reduce the number of teachers who will be rendered surplus, rather than pedagogic considerations.
- 9 Judgement of the Supreme Court on the petition filed by the unaided private schools against this provision of the RTE is awaited.
- 10 The nomenclature of the SMC can give rise to misgivings, particularly in the context of the aided schools. Legally the management body of an aided school

is a trust or society. In such a school the nomenclature of the SMC (which in fact has little advantage over that of the SDC) may appear to be a misnomer. This point seems to have been recognised by the central government. It has been reported that the Union Cabinet has approved the proposal to amend the RTE so as to make the SMC an advisory body in the case of the aided schools of minority status (Manorama 2011b: 16). Similarly, the Kerala state government is reported to have decided to implement the RTE provision of the SMC only in the state schools (Manorama 2011c: 18). The move of the central and state governments seems to give the impression that there has been no agency to manage state schools!

- 11 Communitisation is the process that involves extensive decentralisation of the power of the state and high level of participation of the community. Nagaland started this process of decentralisation with elementary education and primary health service, and has had great success in eliciting community participation and improving the functioning of elementary education. The critical factor here was, what Pandey termed, the social capital of the community which was well exploited in the process of decentralisation for augmenting community participation (Pandey 2010).

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