

## PEOPLE'S INITIATIVE IN WATER - OLAVANNA VILLAGE IN KERALA, INDIA SHOWS THE WAY

*By Joy Elamon*

### **OLAVANNA**

Olavanna is a village situated in the northern part of Kerala state in India. Kerala is considered as a development model with its high rate of literacy, better health indicators and high human development indices. Kerala is also known for its participatory local planning process where local village governments (panchayats) prepare and implement their own development plans with the active participation of the people (People's Plan Campaign). As at July 2003, piped water is provided to 64% of the Kerala population, but there are big differences in coverage between regions.<sup>1</sup>

Hills, marshy areas and paddy fields constitute the geography of Olavanna. A river flows across the village, but the water is salty and cannot be used for drinking. In many places, wells cannot be dug due to the hard rocks underneath.

In the 1990s, Olavanna had a population of 45,000 living in

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<sup>1</sup> Out of the 204 lakh people (64%), 138 lakhs are in the rural area (68 %) and 65.6 lakhs (32%) in the urban area. District wise analysis shows that Ernakulam has the highest coverage of 89.5 % and Kozhikode the lowest with 46.6 %. Similarly, if we look at the rural population the coverage varies from 90.5 % in Ernakulam and Kozhikode with 33 %. With regard to urban population, Kottayam district is highest with 97.6 % and Wayanad at the bottom (50%). According to a survey carried out for the Rajiv Gandhi National Drinking Water Mission, there are 9776 habitats in Kerala. Out of these, by 2003 April, 2091 habitats (21.4%) have been fully covered with piped water and 7444 ie 74 % have been partially covered, and 228 habitats still remain to be covered. In 1788 habitats, drinking water provided is below 10 lpcd whereas in 2091 habitats above 40 lpcd is provided. (Economic Review. 2003. Government of Kerala.)

an area of 21 square kilometres. The sex ratio is 1000:1022 in favour of women. In the early nineties, almost 70% of the households of Olavanna suffered drinking water shortages. Even those lucky ones who had wells were deprived of drinking water as the water was salty and it was a summer of near total drought.

There were a few schemes organised by the state government agencies. Forty-five public taps and 42 house connections were already in place, but of these 42 public taps, 30 were not working. Moreover, the expansion of the nearby city brought more people to the village thus adding to the drinking water scarcity of the village.

Kerala is a politically active state; Olavanna is no exception. Every election has been fought on the issue of drinking water but, although promises were plenty, no solutions were found and, slowly, people in various hamlets began to unite.

### **STRUGGLES BEGIN**

It started with a hamlet (Vettuvendankunnu) near the panchayat office (village government) itself. The hamlet, with a large majority of poor, had only a little drinking water for a long period. It was provided with a well by the panchayat but there was no water in it. People, especially women, had to carry water down from the hill. Under the leadership of the elected representatives of the panchayat, they went to the district authorities but in vain, so women, children and men marched to the district collectorate with empty pots and vessels. Eventually, funds were allotted for a small drinking water project for the hamlet.

### **THE FIRST INITIATIVE**

People joined together to form a beneficiary committee; one of them donated land for the well and another for the water tank.

With people's initiative and monitoring, the scheme was completed within the stipulated time, unheard of in the usual government programmes implemented through contractors. Apart from implementing the project, the beneficiary committee decided to take over the responsibility of managing the water supply. It was in this context that the village panchayat decided to meet part of the monthly running expenses.

It is interesting to note the factor which motivated them. A person had been providing water to the neighbourhood from his household well through a locally-laid pipeline free of cost. Later, people in the neighbourhood willingly shared electricity charges. All these things were not part of any project or scheme, it was the benevolence of a single person which motivated the people to co-operate. This also motivated the people in nearby areas who had watched this for years.

### **A MODEL IN THE MAKING**

The success of the people in Vettuvendankunnu hamlet triggered a series of initiatives. It was at this point that the government of Kerala, under the leadership of the Left Democratic Front, decided to implement the People's Plan Campaign (decentralised planning). It was a bold initiative giving power to the people. The state government decided to devolve 35-40% of the state plan outlay to local self-governments. It also decided to initiate a campaign to mobilise people so that they participate in planning, implementing and monitoring the development projects in their own locality. Thus, the funds devolved to the local self-governments were to be used for local development according to the needs and suggestions of the population.

Olavanna began to be active and people began to get organised. They knew money was required for water projects and they tried to pool all resources available from various govern-

ment and other agencies. They found that the People's Plan Campaign provided the ideal environment. In every hamlet, meetings of the potential beneficiaries were conducted under the leadership of village panchayat and people discussed the problems of drinking water scarcity, the reasons for it and the potential solutions.

In many places, even if they dug wells they would not get good potable drinking water. In such situations, they were to dig wells in ideal locations, tanks were to be constructed and then water pumped to these tanks. From there, the distribution lines were to be laid. Estimates were prepared locally and the total expenses, in addition to the panchayat support, were divided among the total number of households and they paid their share in installments. There were concessions for the poor decided on the basis of their capability. These decisions were taken by the neighbourhoods.

The management of each of these projects is by the beneficiary committees. People paid their share not only in terms of money, but also with physical labour. A person from the locality was posted as the pump operator and the beneficiary committee pays his wages. This committee monitors the drinking water supply, takes the initiatives in its maintenance and sees to it that the repairs are done at the correct time. They also monitor the water usage by the households. Every month, each household spends less than a dollar (varies from rupees equivalent to US\$0,5 to 0,9 according to the area). Every year, the annual general body of the beneficiary committee is convened and the audited accounts are presented. The new office bearers are also elected. It should be noted that the plan, estimate and implementation responsibilities are with local people, who find people skilled to do these activities from among themselves. In fact, one of their reports say that they have not so far sought help from any engineers or technical experts and have

not experienced any problems with their own technology.

Olavanna village now has a total of 60 new drinking water schemes, of which 34 were with the support of the village panchayat and agencies related to that; 26 have been completely people's initiatives. All these together provide water to half the population of the village.

### **STOCK TAKING**

Taking stock of the situation, we find that a people's initiative, together with the involvement of the local panchayat and the support of the state government, could address the issue of scarce drinking water in Olavanna to a large extent. Moreover, all classes of people, irrespective of religion, caste, economic status or political affiliation, participated in such a venture and there were instances where the poor were subsidised by the affluent among the community. People's unity was strengthened to a great extent and, in addition, the need for people's participation in such development interventions was demonstrated. More than all this, the Olavanna initiative lessened one of the major burdens women have had to face all their lives for many years.

A few key points can be learned from the Olavanna model. It focuses on the need for more decentralisation of the implementation of development activities. Olavanna proved beyond doubt that instead of major mega projects, micro level projects with micro water sources are the ideal. Such schemes can be designed with local skills and capacities. If transferred to the local people along with the resources for implementing them, the people have the capacity to do things themselves. If it is a centralised agency, the cost increases and the experience in many situations is that projects fail to provide the expected results. Sustainability is also an issue in such situations.

An analysis of the Olavanna model shows that the management cost is much less compared to state-run mega projects. If given powers, the local community is ready to supplement with local resources including capital and recurring expenses. The ownership of the projects gives them satisfaction, which in turn leads to proper monitoring and maintenance of the water schemes. This leads to the sustainability of the project.

Olavanna clearly shows that the local population can handle most of the technical issues in such projects. This ownership also prevents the misuse of water and adds to water literacy. As people understand that water is theirs, they are empowered, which in turn makes them fight the lobby of water exploiters.

So far urban centers have not done similar things. But, even in larger centres, management of drinking water is possible through people's initiatives. In the case of sanitation, similar initiatives are being launched in many municipalities, which clearly indicates the viability of such initiatives in drinking water. The government programmes on drinking water slowly took lessons from Olavanna and to a major extent it helped to shape the drinking water initiatives of the government.

Olavanna and similar models do suggest that the failing state-run models and privatisation can be replaced with people-owned models. The difference to be noted is that here the state is not actually shying away from providing drinking water, but it helps people own their drinking water projects and supports them through support to the village governments.

## **BARRIERS AND THREATS**

Once such people's initiatives are successful, we find that the various agencies engulf those ideas and re-orient them to their advantage. This is especially true of the international funding agencies like the World Bank, which have started funding the

drinking water projects in the state. While the Olavanna initiative was a movement by the people, owned by the people with the support of the local and state government, such funded initiatives are controlled by other agencies. Though the Olavanna initiative was able to influence the design of such projects to a major extent, the loan dumped on to the people of the state is a potential burden to the population.

Such projects are more expensive with lots of costs for technical expertise, management structures and the like. On the other hand, the Olavanna model shows how the local people can design such projects with local expertise, with less cost and with better chances of sustainability. International funding agencies influence governments so that the state withdraws from key sectors like drinking water in the name of facilitating instead of providing. In the case of Olavanna, the state, through its devolution of funds to the local self-governments, actually brings the government closer to the people. Along with funds, it also provides scope for people to decide themselves, thus it becomes an empowerment process where the state also plays a major role.

Of course, local players in the drinking water sector also play a major role in creating barriers for such people's initiatives. The engineer-contractor nexus has caused problems for many beneficiary committees in several other panchayats. By questioning the expertise of the local people, by delaying the funds, by not approving the projects in time and by initiating parallel projects and schemes with the approval of the centralised agencies in the government, they discourage the local beneficiary committees. In such situations the state also fails to play a proactive role. This is especially crucial in the context of globalisation and privatisation where the states are asked to withdraw from such social sectors and then they are opened for markets.

Another major issue cropping up is that of multi-national companies and transnationals trying to exploit water resources. There are a few major struggles going on the state against these multi-national giants. In the name of soft drinks, cola and mineral water, these companies take hold of the water resources in the villages, thus exploiting it to the maximum. Worldwide solidarity is required to combat such forces and exploitation.

With the state being in a fiscal crisis, the lending agencies are trying to influence the policies of the government. This has worsened especially in the context of globalisation. Much of the support from the national government is being linked to such “reforms”, which in effect is government “withdrawing from service sectors”. Thus the state has no option but to follow such directives which, in essence, is privatisation. This is a retrograde step for Kerala considering its history in the service sector where the state always provided services in areas such as health, education, drinking water and the like. Whatever the state has achieved is through these interventions.

Olavanna was a major weapon against total privatisation of the drinking water sector. When the World Bank supported drinking water initiatives being designed, the Olavanna model became convenient for the people and the government, then ruled by left-wing parties, to show that people’s initiatives are possible. The mass mobilisation through the People’s Planning Campaign gave the additional support needed to correct the original proposal from the World Bank-directed project planners. Thus the World Bank model was remodelled after learning a few important lessons from Olavanna. Though there has been dilution, the Olavanna model was adapted to a large extent, so much so that even in a World Bank-aided project, drinking water is owned by the people.

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