**A Brief Introduction to the Local Self Governance**

**(LSG) System of Kerala, India**

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India has got a universal system of local governance for rural as well as urban areas. The rural local governments are called *panchayats* and urban local governments are called *municipalities*. Given the universal broad structure of local governments, it differs in many ways such as area, population, power structure, financial endowments and so on. Among the 28 Indian states, Kerala has got the strongest local governments in many aspects, viz.,

* Largest area for the grassroots level
* Largest population size
* Strongest power structure and
* Stable financial status

For the rural local governments, i.e.., the panchayats, there are three levels namely Gram Panchayat at the lowest tier, Block panchayat in the middle tier and District panchayat at the highest. Likewise, urban local governments also have three levels namely Municipal councils, Municipal corporations and Metropolitan city councils. Metropolitan City Councils are for larger cities, which Kerala doesn't have presently, but three of the major Municipal Corporations are given status of this tier.

Following list shows the present number of local governments in the state:

Gram Panchayats: 941

Block Panchayats: 152

District Panchayats: 14

Municipal Councils: 87

Municipal Corporations: 6

**Total**. **1200**

A normal Gram Panchayat will have an approximate area of 20-25 Sq.km and a population of 25000. An Agriculture office, Veterinary hospital, Fishery development office, Primary health centre under modern medicine, two health dispensaries of alternative medicine, namely *Ayurveda and Homeopathy*, around 15-20 pre-school childcare centres called *Anganvadis*, about a dozen primary schools, Rural Development extension office etc are under the disposal of Gram Panchayats. Municipalities have more such offices.

Technical support for the LSGs are enhanced by providing Civil Engineers and IT Technicians. Another notable support system is the strong women network called *Kudumbasree (*Means Wealth of families)which helps the LSGs to carry out various activities. In an average, there are 200 Kudumbasree units of 20 women each in a Gram Panchayat.

During 1996, during the rule of the Left Democratic Front, Kerala initiated a path-breaking event for decentralisation of governance, namely, People’s Planning Campaign (PPC) which devised an innovative scheme for preparing local development plan for each local body by itself, through a stipulated participatory process. The whole process starts from the people’s assemblies to discuss about the local requirements and proceeds through half a dozen levels of activities to zero-in to a well drafted annual plan document, which will be scrutinised and approved by expert bodies. PPC created very strong awareness on decentralisation among the people and also it became a good model among other Indian states as well as the ASEAN countries. Five-year plans also are drafted in the same process.

The power structure of Kerala LSGs provides for the control of all primary sector and tertiary sector activities and related institutions with the Gram Panchayats urban LSGs. Thus, a Gram Panchayat in Kerala has control over the local institutions on Agriculture, Animal husbandry, Fisheries, Primary Education, Pre-school education, Primary Health and Social security.

Kerala LSGs are comparatively better placed in financial stability among LSGs of Indian states. They have the power of taxation in specific areas and to collect fees for various services it provides, thereby providing a strong financial footing. Also, the state government provides them a good chunk of the state annual plan allocations, which creates the very basics of decentralised local development plans.

The process of participatory planning initiated by the PPC is still continuing with relevant revisions and upgradations. For example, during the last two years (2018 and 2019) Kerala experienced extraordinary floods which created great loss in many ways. Also, a flood is predicted during the month of August 2020. Thus, disaster mitigation planning has become a major agenda of Kerala LSGs.The LSG annual plan for 2020, naturally includes a component for disaster preparedness. Likewise, the present Covid-19 mitigation also has brought many responsibilities to the LSGs as a primary respondent. No doubt, this part also will reflect in the power as well as the responsibility spectre of them in the coming days.