9 State, Politics and Civil Society: A Note on the Experience of Kerala

R. Ramakumar[1] and K. N. Nair[2]

Abstract

This paper discusses the historical experience with civil society and decentralisation in the State of Kerala, India. The paper tries to address three separate, but related, questions: firstly, what conclusions can we draw from the literature on the conditions for the success of civil society organisations in social transformation? Secondly, what are the lessons that the history of Kerala provides on the potential and role of social movements in the development process? Thirdly, how has the interface between civil society organisations and democratically elected institutions changed with the increased decentralisation of power to local people in Kerala? While we draw liberally from the published literature on Kerala's history for the historical discussion, we also make use of data from a field survey in rural Kerala for the contemporary discussion. We try to delineate certain conditions under which institutions of civil society can play a useful role in a democratised local environment. Our analysis presents interesting evidence on the effects of increased democratisation of society in general on the functioning of civil society institutions. We argue that the deepening of democracy in rural Kerala was brought about primarily through the strengthening of class- and mass-based associational networks. This necessitated a weakening of existing 'undemocratic' associational networks. Further, what was important was not the density of associational networks as such, but the extent to which these associations furthered democratisation and tackled issues of power relations, and the ways in which the networks were structured to politically advance the demands of the weak.

Keywords: Kerala; politics; civil society; decentralisation; public action; social capital.

9.1 Introduction

The editors of this volume asked us to explore the links between decentralisation and social movements. Within this framework, the editors defined social movements in the following way: "social groups which are internally defined by sharing common values and beliefs", with "low degrees of formalisation of decision-making and action-taking", that have "low preference to non-violent forms of action" and that consciously keep a distance from "more formalised representations of society such as political parties, private or public corporations, formalised religious organisations etc.". The idea of *social movements* put forward in this definition corresponds closely to what could be called the idea of civil society, in the sense in which it is defined today in dominant writings. According to one such definition, civil society is

> *the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organisations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organisations, community groups, women's organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups,* social movements, *business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups.* (LSE 2004, emphasis ours)[3]

It follows that a discussion on the relevance of the concept of social movements has to be conducted within the larger debate on the relevance of the concept of civil society. With its contours marked thus, the present paper examines the relationship between civil society, state and politics in the context of both historical and contemporary evidence from Kerala. While we glean the historical evidence from the published literature on Kerala's history, we base the contemporary evidence on information collected during a field survey in rural Kerala. Our analysis leads to interesting conclusions on the effects of increased democratisation of society on the functioning of civil society institutions. Given the dynamics of institutional responses, we delineate certain conditions under which institutions of civil society can

play a useful role in a democratised local environment. An effort is made to answer three specific questions:

– Firstly, given that social movements are components of what are called 'civil society' institutions, what conclusions can we draw from the literature as to the conditions for the success of civil society organisations in social transformation?

– Secondly, what are the lessons that the history of Kerala provides about the potential and role of social movements in the development process?

– Thirdly, how has the interface between civil society organisations and democratically elected institutions changed with the increased devolution of power to local people in Kerala?

9.2 The role of civil society actors in development

The anatomy of civil society is to be sought in political economy.
Karl Marx

Civil society, as the term has come to be used in academic and policy 'discourse' in recent years, has proven to be quite a tricky concept. The definition by the London School of Economics (LSE) quoted by us in the introduction is an attempt at a reasonable definition; civil society, thus, refers to that sphere of voluntary association in society in between the state on one side and family and kinship groups on the other. According to this definition, civil society should include political parties and organisations as well, but more recently, there has been an attempt to delink them; 'civil society' and 'political society' are seen as separate entities.

9.2.1 Understanding civil society: Smith, Hegel, Marx and Gramsci

The term civil society has been in use in social sciences for over two centuries. In the 19th century, the concept could be found in the works of scholars like Adam Smith, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Karl Marx. It is important to note here that the way these scholars understood civil society was very different from the way it is understood today. For Adam Smith, civil society was the economic sphere of the free market; the "market-organised

sphere of necessity which is driven by the self-interested motion of individual proprietors" (Ehrenberg 1998). Indeed, this was how civil society was theorised in the works of most classical liberal writers, who were driven by their great faith in the ability of the market to efficiently allocate resources in the economy.

Hegel and Marx tried to understand civil society in the broader context of its functioning in capitalist society. Thus, in the writings of Hegel and Marx, there was a partial equivalence of the concepts of "civil society" and "bourgeois society". Hegel wrote that "the creation of civil society is the achievement of the modern world" (cited in Smith 1996) and that people's participation in civil society is driven by their need to protect their power and property in the capitalist economy. He identified and expressed the problem in these terms: "How are Ethical Life (*Sittlichkeit*), or Community (*Gemeinde*), to be reconciled with private property, which sets individuals and classes against each other?" (ibid.). Nevertheless, Hegel was optimistic in his belief that interventions of the state can effectively address the contradictions in civil society.

Marx, however, rejected this optimism of Hegel and argued that the state can never function independent of civil society under capitalism (and this is where he mainly differed from Hegel). For Marx, the state in a capitalist society was a "false universal" (Ehrenberg 1998) and it was "a dependent element of a total social process" (Bottomore 1979, p 9). Marx wrote that "civil society embraces the whole material intercourse of individuals within a definite stage of the development of productive forces. It embraces the whole commercial and industrial life of [that] given stage" (Marx 1845). Thus, civil society for Marx was a representation of the fully advanced capitalist society with all its exploitative features, stratifications, inequalities and power structures. He argued that the possibilities of emancipation lay in the "formulation of (...) a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society".[4]

In the 20th century, the concept of civil society appeared predominantly in the writings of Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci's views on civil society were significantly influenced by the sufferings inflicted by Mussolini-led fascism in Italy in the early part of the 20th century. Italian fascism, which attacked the working class movement and weakened all forms of political struggles, was a child of Italy's civil society (see Putzel 1997). In his writings, Gramsci identified

> *two major super-structural 'levels': the one that can be called 'civil society', that is the ensemble of organisms commonly called 'private', and that of 'political society' or 'the State'. These two levels correspond on the one hand to the function of 'hegemony' which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of 'direct domination' or command exercised through the State and 'juridical' government.*[5]

Thus, in Gramsci's view, civil society was the "hegemonic apparatus of the ruling group" in modern capitalist society. It was the arena where the production of consent for the projects of the capitalist state took place, the domain of cultural and ideological practices where the tools of oppression by the dominant classes and the capitalist state were legitimised (Chandhoke 1995). Chandhoke (1995) explains Gramsci's distinction between political and civil societies as the distinction between sites and forms of power. She notes that

> *political society is the location where the coercive apparatus of the state is concentrated – in prisons, the judicial system, the armed forces and the police. Civil society is the location where the state operates to enforce invisible, intangible and subtle forms of power, through educational, cultural and religious systems and other institutions. The political society disciplines the body through its penal codes and prisons, but civil society disciplines the mind and the psyche through these institutions.* (p 149)

Contrary to the more recent understandings of civil society, in Gramsci's view, *it is not the individual who is shielded from the state by civil society under capitalism, but it is the state that is shielded by civil society through the production of consent for its actions.* The individual is neither protected by the state nor by civil society; a radical democratic transformation of both the state and civil society would be required for that empowering function.

Our discussion of the views of an early, classical liberal writer like Smith and those of Hegel, Marx and Gramsci helps us to place the current debates on civil society in a proper perspective. Classical liberal political economists understood civil society as the economic sphere, and they demanded the autonomy of civil society from the state so that a free market economy could be established based on the principles of *laissez faire*. In their analyses of civil society, however, Hegel, Marx and Gramsci developed an alterna-

tive theory of civil society in a capitalist system. They rejected the view that civil society was a homogeneous entity. Instead, they argued that civil society was a *stratified social formation* that reflected the power structures and exploitative features of the society and economy of that period. This is not to say, however, that these authors completely rejected the utility of civil society in social transformation. They considered civil society to possess significant potential, but *only when it was radically transformed and democratised internally.* This transformation required, as a precondition, the *politicisation* of civil society on progressive terms.

9.2.2 Civil society in the contemporary discourse

In recent years, the concept of civil society has made a powerful comeback to the social science discourse. However, what is notable is that this return has been on a totally different note and in a very different context. Under this new discourse, encouraged by international funding agencies and organisations like the World Bank, 'promoting civil society' has become the new buzzword in development policy. One set of scholars have even concluded that civil society (and social capital, in particular) was the "missing link" in development policy (Grootaert 1998). Once social capital was invested in and promoted, an important barrier to growth and development in developing countries could be overcome. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are now seen to be the central agents in governance and development policy.

This new understanding of civil society and the importance that it has attained in development discussions is, in large measure, a fallout of the neo-liberal economic policies that have followed the Washington Consensus: privatisation, denationalisation, stabilisation and structural adjustment. The increased role of NGOs in the provision of services is seen as an important element in the privatisation of state services. In other words, *civil society is looked upon as the ideal mechanism to fill the vacuum created by the withdrawal of the state from the provision of public services.* The immense popularity of this new exposition is due to the fact that it has served many interests at the same time. The NGOs have welcomed it because it opens up immense opportunities for their activities at a time when the state, which has 'failed' in providing essential services to citizens, is on the retreat. To the mainstream liberal economists, in the new schema that combines market economics and liberal democratic politics, NGOs appear as market-based actors "placed (...) in a central position as components of civil society" (Edwards and Hulme 1995).

It would appear from the celebration of this concept that suddenly a 'consensus' has developed among everybody on what civil society means, constitutes and can contribute to development policy. But this 'consensus' is probably the problem, as Chandhoke (2003, pp 27–28) notes:

> *When concepts become consensual, they become problematic. When a variety of dissimilar groups, such as international funding agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and institutions of the state on the one hand, and left liberals, trade unions and social movements on the other, subscribe equally to the validity of the concept, it is time to worry. For if groups who would otherwise be disagreeing on the concept come to agree to it, it means that the concept has been* flattened *to such an alarming extent that it has lost its credibility. In other words, the concept of civil society has become flaccid through consensus.*

The problems with the new understanding of the concept of civil society are numerous. Firstly, civil society here is understood as a very homogeneous sphere and not as a sphere where strong power structures exist and operate to suit the interests of the dominant classes. Harriss (2001, p 121) notes that the fact "that civil society exists in a field of power (...) hardly seems to cross the minds of those who wish to see the space of civil society expanded, and that of the state (...) reduced". Without an adequate understanding of power relations in society, the objective of 'promoting civil society' can only lead to a reinforcement of the existing power hierarchies and the increased marginalisation and exclusion of the less powerful and property-less classes from the process of development. As Chandhoke (1995) puts it, the space of civil society "cannot become public in conditions where the individual is socially unequal and culturally marginalised, edged out ideologically and deprived politically" (p 199). It should then not be surprising at all that this ignorance of power relations can lead to extremely reactionary policy suggestions; Swaminathan Aiyar, an economic journalist in India, wrote recently that

> *caste loyalty is often the strongest of all community loyalties (...) It seems to me that if social capital lies mainly in caste groups in villages, we must encourage self-help groups based on caste and provide these with financial and technical resources. In effect, we need caste-based development schemes.* (Aiyar 2000)

Let a thousand castes bloom, Aiyar seems to advise!

Promotion of civil society can also give rise to new forms of exclusion of citizens from the development process, as for instance through the market. As mentioned above, the new conception of civil society has gone hand in hand with the emergence of free market policies and the retreat of the state from its welfare obligations. The market is always an important instrument of exclusion; only the 'fittest' survive in the market. Scholars have shown that exclusion may also go hand in hand with the promotion of social capital (as part of promoting civil society). Harriss and de Renzio (1997) point out that if the concept of social capital was accepted uncritically, then one would be justified in saying that "social capital for some implies social exclusion for others" (p 926). In fact, serious questions have been raised on whether social capital could be seen as 'capital' at all. Fine (2001) has strongly criticised this line of argument and has noted that

> *any use of the term social capital is an implicit acceptance of the stance of mainstream economics in which capital is first and foremost a set of asocial endowments possessed by individuals rather than, for example, an exploitative relation between classes and broader social relations that sustain them.* (p 38)

Secondly, there is a neat exclusion of politics from the new discourse. According to Harriss, the new ideas on the promotion of civil society are "deceptively attractive" because they are used to "veil the nature and effects of power, and (...) they hold out the prospects of democracy (...) without the inconveniences of contestational politics and of the conflicts of ideas and interests that are an essential part of democracy" (2001, p 120). It specifically excludes any role for political parties.[6] Chandhoke argues that as a result, "civil society becomes a neutralised space, it neutralises those forms of politics which are outside the stipulated limits, or those which question the composition of the sphere" (1995, p 187). The components of civil society in this new understanding do not include political organisations (political parties and trade unions), but comprise different types of NGOs, reading clubs and sports clubs. Sangeeta Kamat (2002), in a detailed case study of an NGO (Sansad/Sanghatna) working among a tribal community in rural India, has shown how the "depoliticisation" of its activities (by taking the existing political environment as 'given' and not challenging it) affected the outcomes of its efforts. A review of the book notes that

> *[t]he exclusion of politics from development activities meant that the Sansad/Sanghatna could not support the Adivasis in class struggle over central issues such as land redistribution, fair working relations and wages, and struggles over forests and forest products, water and all elements pertaining to the forces of production and reproduction. Instead, the organisation posed the problem as one of class position, which could be transformed through addressing 'needs' and 'absences' without addressing the social forces that shaped them (...) The result was to foster the values of economic rationality, which compete with collective identity, solidarity and collective struggle.* (Faust and Nagar 2004)[7]

Thirdly, the new discourse that places NGOs at the centre of development policy does not consider the question of accountability of NGOs. NGOs are often seen as the 'magic bullets' in development policy. However, scholars who have carefully observed the emergence of NGOs have noted that "there is increasing evidence that NGOs and grassroots organisations do not perform as effectively as (...) assumed in terms of poverty-reach, cost-effectiveness, sustainability, popular participation (including gender), flexibility and innovation" (Edwards and Hulme 1995, p 6).

The question then is how the actions of NGOs, voluntary associations and other local-level initiatives can be incorporated into the democratic apparatus of state supervision and regulation, but without interfering with their autonomy in decision-making. We wish to discuss this issue at two levels – historical and contemporary – using evidence from the State of Kerala. The discussion on the historical evolution of social movements in Kerala (section 9.3) provides valuable insights into the potential and limitations of social movements. The discussion on the contemporary situation (section 9.4) directly addresses one of the questions that the editors of this volume put to us:

> *Can decentralisation contribute to reducing the lack of legitimacy of the state without being able to productively interact with local and regional forms of governance, e.g. as represented by social movements, beyond conventional models of representative democracy at local level (decentralisation)?*

9.3 Social movements in Kerala's history: Potentials and limitations

The development experience of the State of Kerala, India, in advancing the living and working conditions of its population is well documented (see Ramachandran 1996; CDS 1975). Today, the people of Kerala enjoy a much higher standard of living than other regions in the Third World; some of the achievements of Kerala are even comparable to those of the advanced developed economies. The Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) in Kerala in 2001 was 13 per 1000 live births, vis-à-vis 66 for India as a whole. The Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) per 100,000 live births was 198 for Kerala and 407 for India as a whole in 2001. The average life expectancy of a Keralite was 73 years, while that of an Indian was only 61 years. Literacy in Kerala is almost universal with a rate of 91% compared to 65% in India as a whole.

There is consensus among social scientists that the achievements of Kerala were possible due to sustained public action from above and below. Public action in Kerala included a wide range of actors and factors: state policy in the princely states of Travancore and Cochin in the 19th century, missionary activity in the 19th century, caste-based social reform movements in the early part of the 20th century, the emergence of Left-led mass organisations (such as trade unions) and the formation of the Communist Party of India by the 1930s, as well as progressive state policy after 1956/57 when the State of Kerala was formed. What is remarkable in the history of Kerala is that the agents who contributed to enhancing the living conditions of people belong to all the three classifications of social agents that some social scientists have recently identified: the state, political society and civil society.

The foundations of Kerala's development achievements were laid by social reform movements. Social reform movements of the early 20th century in Kerala questioned the traditional values and attitudes that tied different castes to very backward conditions of life. As Chandramohan (1999) wrote of 19th-century Kerala, "the rules and regulations of caste [had] hampered social mobility, fostered social division and sapped individual initiative" (p 470). Social reform movements opposed archaic social practices such as untouchability, denial of access to educational institutions and outdated caste rules regarding inheritance, marriage and other forms of family organisation. These movements also pushed for state intervention in ensuring adequate representation in public institutions like the provincial government. Reform movements emerged from the upper caste groups as well as the so-

called backward caste groups, and this helped to broaden the social base of the impacts of these movements.

In this section, we shall focus on the historical role, potential and limitations of social movements in contributing to the development achievements of Kerala. In doing so, owing to restrictions of space, we have focused on the most important social movement in Kerala: the Ezhava Social Reform Movement (ESRM) of the first half of the 20th century. We shall review, based on authoritative studies of the movement, the role that the ESRM played in the early 20th century, its stated objectives, the extent of success it achieved, its failure to carry forward its demands beyond a point, and the factors leading to its organisational and ideological disintegration by the 1940s (see Chandramohan 1999; Ramachandran 1996; Isaac and Tharakan 1986).

9.3.1 The case of the Ezhava Social Reform Movement (ESRM)

> *The Ezhava Social Reform Movement [was] the most sweeping mass movement that Travancore had known.*
>
> Isaac and Tharakan (1986, p 2)

Till the middle of the 20th century, Kerala was marked by the presence of an extremely oppressive agrarian regime. Slavery and bonded labour, untouchability among caste groups, rack-renting of tenants and other extreme forms of social and economic discrimination characterised this oppressive agrarian regime. A general feature of Kerala society at that time was the close correspondence between the categories of *class* and *caste*, as illustrated in Table 1. Landlords, the big cultivators and the local chieftains belonged to the upper caste groups of Nairs and Brahmins. Marginal farmers, landless agricultural labourers and artisans belonged to the backward caste groups of Ezhavas, Pulayas, Parayas and Cherumars, all of which did not form part of the caste Hindu framework. Thus, the Ezhavas of Kerala were historically outside the caste Hindu framework.

Between the caste groups outside the caste Hindu framework, too, there were clear boundaries. In the caste hierarchy, Ezhavas were placed above the traditional slave castes (such as the Pulayas, Parayas and Cherumars) in terms of ritual status. Nevertheless, Isaac and Tharakan (1986, p 4) note that "Ezhavas held a position closer to the lowest in economic and social hierarchy".

Table 1

Caste and class correlations in Kerala society in the 19th century.

Positions/Occupations	Privileges/Duties	Caste group
(a) Priests, rulers and administrative officials	Had *janmom* (ownership) rights to land	Brahmins and aristocratic Nairs/Nambiars
(b) Militia/Chieftains in charge of law and order, petty officials	Had *kanom* (superior lease) rights to land	Nairs/Nambiars
(c) Petty producers, traders, artisans and dry land labourers	Had *verumpattom* (inferior lease) rights to land	Non-aristocratic Nairs/Nambiars, Ezhavas, Christians and Muslims
(d) Wetland labourers	Agricultural labour	Ezhavas, Pulayas, Parayas and Cherumars

Source: Adapted from Isaac and Tharakan (1986, p 5).

Members of the Ezhava caste, like those below them in the caste hierarchy, had severely restricted access to public places, were prohibited from entering temples, bathing in temple ponds, walking on public roads and enrolling in the mainstream educational institutions. During local festivals, Ezhavas were asked to vacate their houses situated on the side of the roads through which the temple processions with the deity passed; it was argued that they would pollute the procession. Palpu, a leader of the Ezhava community in the 20th century, wrote to Mahatma Gandhi in 1925 that "to walk through the public road is [a right] that even dogs and pigs enjoy everywhere without having to offer any *satyagraha* [agitation] at all" (cited in Chandramohan 1999, p 474).

Primarily, Ezhavas were small peasants, agricultural labourers, processors of coconut and coconut products, and sellers of *toddy* and *arrack*. It was this diverse occupational profile of Ezhavas that provided "a springboard for the economic advancement of some members of the caste" in the late 19th century (Ramachandran 1996, p 306). In the second half of the 19th century, plantation agriculture emerged in the hilly regions, agrarian legislation that favoured backward castes by enabling them to hold government land on superior leases was passed and the old estates held by upper caste Nairs and Brahmins started breaking up due to changes in family organisation (see Ramachandran 1996; Isaac and Tharakan 1986). At the same time, traditional Ezhava occupations, such as coir-making, coconut trade, trade in other coconut products, sales of *toddy* and *arrack* and drawing of toddy, received a boost from the commercialisation and capitalist development of agriculture in Travancore. Tharakan (1999) noted that "when the demand for

coconut oil and *coir* products increased and uses other than the traditional were found, the price of coconut rose relative even to *paddy*; and coconut cultivation became the basis for a variety of processing industries as also for a wide range of trading activity" (p 375).

The expansion in trade and commercialisation brought benefits for some sections of the Ezhava caste that were not in conformity with their low social status in caste-ridden Kerala society. With the expansion of the market for coconut products, one section of Ezhavas became small-scale capitalists and traders (Isaac and Tharakan 1986). Another section of Ezhavas was able to invest the capital earned from the expanding commerce in accumulation of land, aided by the changes in laws on land holding. Yet another section of Ezhavas, comprising artisans, became leaders in the boatmen's trade when water transport increased in importance with commerce (ibid.). All these factors led to a rise in aspirations among the prospering members of the Ezhava community. This desire for social mobility became a driving force in the formal organisation of the community in the early 20th century.

The ESRM emerged as a result of the need among the elite in the Ezhava community to undermine the "undemocratic and feudal values of tradition" (Chandramohan 1999). The emergence of an elite class within Ezhavas and the ways in which this phenomenon drove the growth of the ESRM are discussed in detail in Isaac and Tharakan (1986, pp 1–2):

> *The emergence of a middle class from among the Ezhavas [had] its manifold repercussions on the caste-based social structure of traditional society (...) The development of this new class did not conform to the social reality of Ezhavas in Kerala society. The inferior social status that the emerging middle class was assigned to by the conventional caste hierarchy no more accorded with their new economic power. The traditional social structures and customs within as well as outside their own caste had become* barriers to the further development of this middle class. *It was in this context that the ESRM emerged.* (emphasis ours)

The ESRM was led by a formal organisation called the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP). The activities of the SNDP had two dimensions (Isaac and Tharakan 1986). The first was to campaign for a change in outmoded social customs and rituals such as child marriages, puberty ceremonies and post-burial ritualistic feasts. It was clear to the emerging

elite that these rituals and ceremonies only helped to squander away the economic surpluses, and were "anachronisms in the new age where accumulation was the law of existence" (ibid., p 2). The second was the struggle to weaken the social and political factors that underpinned the low social status of Ezhavas. This objective made it necessary to challenge the domination of the upper castes in formulating the rules of social life, such as access to education, the rights to walk on public roads, to enter temples and to gain government employment.

The SNDP was formed in 1903. The ideological inspiration behind the SNDP was the teachings of Sree Narayana Guru, a saint. The Guru's teachings became a rallying point for the divergent sections of the Ezhava community that longed for social mobility. Sree Narayana was the son of a middle peasant born into a matrilineal Ezhava family (Ramachandran 1996). Sree Narayana was a vedantic of the spiritual tradition propagated by the saint Adi Sankara, but he also adapted it to meet the needs of changing times. It may be useful to quote from Isaac and Tharakan (1986) in introducing the spiritual leanings of Sree Narayana:

> *Personally he would follow Sankara through the path of knowledge (*Jana Marga*) to self-realisation. But as for the lesser mortals, the path of devotion (*Bakthi Marga*) and the path of action (*Karma Marga*) were emphasised (...) The* karma *of the person was not the one laid down by the Brahminical ordering of the phenomenal world. If the ultimate reality is* Brahma*, the one beyond all distinctions, then the distinctions and ethics of the phenomenal world can be changed (...) Logically, if social barriers prevented one from following his true avocation, it was his* karma *to fight them.* (p 8)

Sree Narayana began his spiritual mission in 1888 by consecrating a Shiva temple in Aruvippuram near Trivandrum. This step was a major challenge to the dominant Hindu tradition of the day, which allowed only caste Hindus to enter and worship in temples. According to Isaac and Tharakan, "this event in 1888 was the beginning of a campaign for reforming the rituals, customs and ceremonies of the Ezhava caste to conform to the Brahminical practices" (1986, p 9). Sree Narayana went even further when he declared his personal ideology to be "One Caste, One Religion, One God for Man", which was a radical call for social awakening in a caste-ridden society.

The moral authority of Sree Narayana acted as an enabling force for other Ezhava caste leaders like C. V. Kunjuraman, Sahodaran Aiyyappan and Dr. Palpu, who were already mobilising Ezhavas against outdated social practices. It was Dr. Palpu who took the leadership role in establishing the SNDP in 1903 with Sree Narayana's teachings as the ideological basis. Palpu himself was a victim of caste discrimination in the field of education. He was ranked second in the entrance examinations to the Medical College, but was rejected as he was an Ezhava. Palpu was forced to take up his medical studies in Madras. After graduation, he was again denied a job in Travancore due to his caste status, as a result of which he was forced to work in the State of Mysore. Palpu was the third signatory of a memorandum (known as the 'Malayalee Memorial') submitted to the court of Travancore in 1891; though the Memorial was driven by the desire of Nairs to obtain government jobs hitherto predominantly held by Tamil Brahmins, it also argued for a higher level of Ezhava representation in government jobs.

Led by the SNDP, the ESRM campaigned vigorously for the rights of Ezhavas to enter temples, walk roads and attend schools, as well as to abolish untouchability. On the occasion of forming the SNDP, Palpu declared:

> *We are the largest Hindu community in Kerala (...) Without education no community has attained permanent civilised prosperity. In our community, there must be no man or woman without primary education.* (cited in Isaac and Tharakan 1986, p 23)

The agitations of the SNDP forced the government to open up public schools to students from backward communities. In many instances, Ezhavas were attacked by the Nairs, who opposed Ezhava enrolment in schools, as in Quilon in 1903. Such violent clashes between Nairs and Ezhavas forced the government to introduce the Mitchell's Educational Code, which allowed enrolment of students from all castes to public schools (Isaac and Tharakan 1986).

Similarly, the SNDP launched a strong civil liberties movement the focus of which was on abolishing untouchability. For instance, Ezhavas in Alleppey organised themselves in a group called 'Sankranti' Pathu, which aimed at physical retaliation against upper caste members who tried to enforce untouchability (ibid.). Ezhavas also forcefully asserted their rights to wear modern clothes, umbrellas and ornaments under the broader banner of the SNDP. In order to assert their right to employment in government jobs, a

Civic Rights League was formed in 1919. The agitations of this League met with partial success when the government decided to open up jobs not related to temple administrations to backward castes.

The Civic Rights League also focused on the rights of Ezhavas to enter temples and walk on public roads. In association with the national movement, a *satyagraha* was organised in Vaikom demanding that Ezhavas be allowed access to the roads adjoining the temple in Vaikom. Widely known as the 'Vaikom Satyagraha', this agitation in 1923–1924 attracted nationwide attention. Volunteers from all parts of India participated in this agitation, which was broken off, having attained partial success, after a personal intervention from Mahatma Gandhi. It took a series of agitations by the SNDP after the Vaikom Satyagraha to achieve total success. A Revolutionary League was formed in Alleppey district (with a membership of 1000 people) to gain entry into a local temple, which was granted after 90 days. In some regions, a movement to boycott temples was initiated, which involved physically preventing caste Hindus from entering temples. These agitations finally forced the Travancore government to issue the 'Temple Entry Proclamation' of 1936, which eliminated in one stroke all caste discriminations pertaining to temple entry.

It is remarkable that the ESRM managed to instil democratic and anti-feudal values in a large community that had a very low standard of living and that was subjected to onerous forms of disadvantages. The ESRM was thus instrumental in putting social reform on a broad base in Kerala in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, while the above-mentioned successes of the ESRM were remarkable indeed, the spread of its benefits within the Ezhava community remained limited even in the 1930s. It is the reasons behind this limitation that inform the conclusions of this section of our article.

The development of capitalism in agriculture and commerce in the early part of the 20th century set in motion a process of social and economic differentiation within the Ezhava community. A major outcome of these changes was that the categories of caste and class ceased to be coterminous. Isaac and Tharakan (1986) write that there was an "erosion of the traditional caste–class identity in Travancore, resulting in the emergence of a bourgeois elite from the Ezhavas (...) and Christians" (p 18). This Ezhava elite was the section that had enjoyed congenial conditions for the exploitation of the opportunities thrown up by economic growth and modernisation; they were mainly small capitalists, new buyers of land, tenants with security of

tenure and traders. This elite also had, by virtue of changes in state policy, gained important posts in government. At the same time, it was also true that most Ezhavas were employed as toiling labourers in agriculture and the traditional industries like coir-making, beedi production and weaving. These traditional industries were also the sectors where the trade union movement emerged for the first time in Kerala.

Over time, the new Ezhava elite, in their role as employers, and the toiling Ezhava masses came into direct conflict with each other on issues such as working conditions and wage fixation. These conflicts posed serious challenges to the credibility of the SNDP leadership. Once the benefits of modernisation had accrued to them, the Ezhava elite began to exert pressure on the SNDP to withdraw support to the nationalist and working class movements (Isaac and Tharakan 1986). Continued confrontation with the state was not beneficial to their own interests of capital accumulation. A concerted campaign was launched within the SNDP for a change in its demands and slogans to suit elite interests. Isaac and Tharakan note that

> *[t]he growth of militant and radical working class movement (...) unnerved the Ezhava elite. There was strong pressure to remove C. Kesavan from the secretaryship of SNDP Yogam, as he was an 'atheist and rationalist'. The conservative sections even threatened non-cooperation if SNDP Yogam continued to participate in agitations against the government 'since most of the grievances of the community had been met'. Their concerted efforts bore fruit in 1939. SNDP Yogam withdrew from all anti-government agitations and withdrew its support to the activities of the State Congress.* (1986, pp 26–27)

Thus, there developed two groups within the SNDP in the 1930s: a conservative group, which consisted of the elite and controlled the organisation, and a radical group, which consisted of the Ezhava working class and was forced to seek "new pastures being opened up by the spreading nationalist and working class movements" (ibid., p 27). The oppressed Ezhava working class increasingly sought refuge in, and was organised into, militant trade unions led by the Communist Party of India. This was the phase of radical politicisation of the Ezhava working class in Travancore.

The Ezhava employers did not want unionisation to succeed and worked against it, thus antagonising the majority of the Ezhava working class. Cher-

iyan (1999) notes about the period that “the grip of caste associations was gradually loosening among the rural masses, especially owing to the increasing class contradictions, within each caste group (...) There was a realisation among them that their economic interests were directly opposed to those of their employers (...) This became very clear to them when the Ezhava employers acted in unison to prevent the spread of trade union movement in rural areas” (p 535). Cheriyan also characterises this period as one of “growing class-consciousness among the workers” (p 535). Robin Jeffrey gives an interesting example of a slogan raised during a workers’ strike in Alleppey in December 1933: “‘Destroy the Nairs!’ the workers shouted, identifying Nairs as the enforcers of the old social system. ‘Destroy Nair rule!’ Then a subtle shift: ‘Destroy Capitalism!’” (Jeffrey 1978, p 84). Similarly, the radical SNDP groups transformed Sree Narayana’s slogan of ‘One Caste, One Religion, One God for Man’ into ‘No Caste, No Religion, No God for Man’.

The flashpoint in the struggle between the radical and conservative groups in the SNDP was the 1938 general strike of coir workers in Alleppey. This strike completed the disintegration of the SNDP as an umbrella organisation of the Ezhavas. Once the strike started, the government tried to reach a compromise with the State Congress and the conservative Ezhavas. The State Congress accepted the compromise proposals of the government, and moderate Ezhava leaders persuaded the workers to withdraw from the strike. Isaac and Tharakan (1986, p 70) note that “though the workers returned to the factories, the moderate leaders were thoroughly discredited before the mass of workers”. The workers declared a break with the moderate sections and identified themselves as an “independent political force in the national struggle” in alliance with the Communist Party of India. Isaac and Tharakan (1986, p 27) sum it up as follows:

> *The divorce between the ESRM and the radical ideological streams emanating from Sree Narayana Guru widened (...) rendering the ESRM, particularly the SNDP Yogam, increasingly a narrow sectarian caste movement of the Ezhavas.*

Thus, increased politicisation and class-consciousness among the Ezhava working class had taken them closer to the Communist Party of India by the end of the 1930s. Isaac (1994) notes that

> *[w]hile supporting and actively participating in the social reform movements in various communities, particularly the anti-*savarna *(upper caste) movements of the oppressed castes, the Communists sought to build class and mass organisations (...) irrespective of caste, and raised caste-reform slogans as part of their anti-feudal democratic struggle. The Communists carried forward the radical legacy of the social reform movements and won over a large part of the masses in these movements, while the elites within these castes began to confine themselves to sectarian demands and withdraw into casteist organisational shells.* (p 28)

The development achievements of Kerala today would not have been possible if the politicisation of the social reform movements and the rise in class-consciousness of the working classes had not taken place in the 1940s. It was only due to this enlightened political agency that land reform was implemented, that there were heavy investments in education and health, and that a minimum social security system was set up for the poor population after 1956/57, when the State of Kerala was formed in independent India. This historic role could not have been played by caste-based social movements, which were ridden with class conflicts in the modern period.

While the SNDP and the ESRM effectively disintegrated in the 1940s, the SNDP as an organisation continues to exist even in 2009. Our conclusions for the 1940s hold for 2009 also. The SNDP of 2009 is led by persons who are the richest within the Ezhava community – people who became rich mainly through the liquor business and government contracts. Its major objective today is to protect and expand the business interests of its leaders. It continues to be what it was in the 1940s: a sectarian and narrow caste-based organisation.

These conclusions take us to a larger discussion on the role, potential and limitations of social movements across the world. In his important work, Bottomore (1979) argues that the histories of different countries offer two general conditions for the long-term success of social movements. Firstly, he insists that

> *such movements formulate a doctrine which is capable of arousing the enthusiasm and commitment to sustained political activity. The doctrine (...) has to include or be founded upon a social theory which can elucidate the principal issues, clarify the objectives and the ways of attaining them, and outline alternative forms of society.* (ibid., p 47)

Secondly, Bottomore argues that

> *[a]t some point in its development, [social movements] must create more organised political groups, or convert or capture existing political organisations, which are able to engage directly in a struggle for power and have the capacity to use power when they have gained it in order to reconstruct society.* (ibid., p 48)

Thus, Bottomore takes a clear position against anarchist forms of social movements, which are bereft of organisation, imagine that they on their own are capable of 'turning things upside down', and shy away from providing concrete alternatives.

Social movements and political organisations play different roles in the development process, as our Kerala case shows. Historically, these roles have been "complementary or sequential" (Karat 2004, p 1). Karat argues, based on the history of social movements, that "while the actual change and delivery of social benefits were accomplished by a political agency through political changes, the raising of the problem, the highlighting of the issue and even mobilisation of public opinion were often initiated through social movements and organisations" (ibid., p 1). In Kerala, the ESRM played a major role in highlighting the plight of Ezhavas and winning the first battles. But by the 1930s, an inevitable process of class-based social and economic differentiation necessitated the politicisation of the Ezhava community for any further gains. Such politicisation could only be achieved by a vanguard political organisation. Our conclusions from the case of the ESRM in Kerala emphasise the *primacy of politics, class relations and power* in determining the success of any social movement.

9.4 Decentralisation in Kerala and the actors of civil society: Some brief observations

> *People's planning is the most radical development that has taken place in Kerala since the attainment of independence, formation of the state of Kerala and land reforms.*
>
> E. M. S. Namboodiripad

> *The Kerala story [of decentralisation] constitutes a powerful statement (...) against the currently fashionable ideas about 'social capital' and 'civil society'.*
>
> John Harriss (2001, p 125)

Decentralisation of government (implemented in Kerala through the People's Plan Campaign [PPC]) was a major political and administrative initiative of the Left government of Kerala that began in 1996. In many ways, the PPC represented a new stage in the theory and practice of decentralisation in the developing world. Firstly, the PPC involved the historic step of devolving 35 to 40% of Kerala's plan funds to the local governments. More than three quarters of these funds was in the form of untied grants. Secondly, the local governments were to draw up plans and projects for the development of their territories using the plan funds devolved. Thirdly, a mass campaign was initiated to sustain the programme: to empower local governments to prepare plans and utilise resources, to encourage transparency and accountability in the planning process, and to institutionalise the new rules and practices of governance. The participation of all sections of the population in the *grama sabhas* (village assemblies) and other forums of the planning process transformed this process from a mere administrative exercise into a mass movement for decentralisation.

9.4.1 Kerala's PPC and the World Bank model of decentralisation

Decentralisation as implemented in Kerala is different from other mainstream initiatives on decentralisation in many ways. In particular, the PPC in Kerala stands in direct contrast with the notion of decentralisation promoted by the World Bank and other neo-liberal actors. The World Bank's position on decentralisation has indeed evolved over time; initially offering a more explicit characterisation of decentralisation as a flourishing of market-based

actors and institutions at the local level, the Bank's position has been modified into supporting decentralisation within a larger framework of improving 'governance'. It may be useful to trace this evolution here: in the *World Development Report* 1983, the World Bank argued that decentralisation "should be seen as part of a broader market-surrogate strategy" (World Bank 1983, p 123), and that the aim was "replacing the burden of central administration by decentralised market forces" (ibid., p 87). The Bank argued that "where governments are simply divesting themselves of activities that they cannot manage, the transfer of ownership [i.e. privatisation] itself confers the autonomy that is needed to make decentralisation work" (p 88). The Bank also noted that

> *[d]ecentralising is not solely a matter of involving a wider range of people in discharging the responsibilities of the public sector. Governments (...) can also make greater use of markets and prices, since they avoid the heavy administrative requirements of centralised planning controls. While greater reliance on markets may appear to carry risks, many governments have learned that their own interventions can easily misfire (...) The practical advantage of relying more on markets is that the public sector can then concentrate on improvements in those activities for which market solutions are inappropriate.* (World Bank 1983, p 5)

Thus, the World Bank integrated decentralisation into the policy framework of *laissez faire* economics. The Bank noted that "the participation of local businesses can also play a crucial role in decentralisation, shaping incentives at the local level" (ibid., p 123). Thus, the concept of firm-level decentralisation was given more importance than that of government-level decentralisation (see Patnaik 2000). At the level of the firm (or any production unit), decentralisation was premised up on the neo-classical assumption that when every firm in an economy maximises its returns (or functions efficiently), the economy as a whole also reaches an efficient equilibrium. The World Bank view of decentralisation involved firm-level decentralisation (to be attained through privatisation, deregulation and denationalisation) complementing government-level decentralisation so that every firm in the economy could attain efficiency. Actors in civil society that are primarily market-based, especially NGOs, figured prominently among 'firms' encouraged by the PPC at the local level.

The idea of firm-level decentralisation is theoretically misplaced. Prabhat Patnaik has argued that firm-level and government-level decentralisation contradict each other as firm-level decentralisation actually "emasculates decentralised planning and makes government-level decentralisation vacuous" (Patnaik 2000, p 10). According to him, "decentralised decision-making, even when informed by individual 'rationality', is fundamentally 'irrational' because the units are in reality not separable from one another" (ibid., p 2). Every economic decision taken by a firm affects other firms as well. Due to this inter-related nature of firm-level actions and outcomes, the final outcome would be irrational for all the firms although each firm would have acted rationally. This fallacy of firm-level decentralisation could be corrected (in other words, a more rational outcome could be ensured for all firms together) if every firm colluded with every other firm or if the state intervened through economic planning. The former being a remote possibility, the latter emerges as the only possible solution.

In the 1990s, the World Bank's position on civil society came to be subsumed under the more encompassing slogan of 'improving governance'. It is notable that this new position does not differ in substance from the Bank's earlier position. Rob Jenkins (2001) notes that the operationalisation of the idea of good governance has included a whole package: "Restructuring state bureaucracies, reforming legal systems, supporting democratic decentralisation and creating accountability-enhancing civil societies" (p 23). In practice, nevertheless, "governance has come to be associated with institutions designed to support market-led development" (ibid.). Jenkins (2006, pp 250–251) notes that the World Bank's encouragement of civil society in Africa is "nothing less than a backdoor attempt to transform African societies *from the ground up* [to] perform the roles assigned to them in liberal political theory and neo-liberal economic policy".[8] This new concept of civil society has been put to use for different purposes in the developing world by the World Bank, aid organisations like the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and Western governments: to speed up neo-liberal reforms, topple democratically elected governments and weaken governments with an avowed anti-imperialist agenda. Indeed, it was no coincidence that the fresh wave of popularity for the idea of 'civil society' in the 1990s began with the promotion of the Solidarity movement in Poland.

The PPC in Kerala, primarily representing government-level decentralisation, was far from corresponding to the model of decentralisation promoted by the World Bank or USAID. In fact, the PPC was an effort at strengthening

the state to improve its capability to provide basic services to its citizens. Thomas Isaac, one of the architects of the PPC, has noted:

> *There are four points on which the People's Plan Campaign differed from the World Bank design. One, for the World Bank, decentralisation is a part of downsizing the state. For People's Planning it is a question of deepening and widening the state. We had taken the state, which used to be confined at the local level in a village office, to the* grama sabha, *the neighbourhood groups and the households.* Secondly, *for the World Bank decentralisation is a first step in a series – they call it deconcentration, devolution and, ultimately, privatisation – wherein, they claim, power will reach each individual (...) On the other hand, for the People's Plan Campaign, the central fulcrum around which the whole programme revolves is local-level planning (...) There is a social regulation by the community of the market forces to the extent possible.* Thirdly, *to the World Bank decentralisation is an instrument to pass the burden of government responsibilities to the community. Through the People's Plan Campaign, along with the transfer of responsibility, proportionate transfer of the funds of the government also takes place (...)* Finally, *when the World Bank speaks about participatory development, it means the participation of NGOs (...) For them civil society is to be moulded by the NGOs. For the People's Plan, more than the NGOs or even individual citizens, the focus was upon the participation of mass and class organisations.* (Isaac 2003)

9.4.2 The PPC and the response of civil society actors

In this sub-section, we are concerned with the last point of Thomas Isaac's as noted above. We shall briefly discuss the ways in which the increased democratisation of rural life heralded by Kerala's PPC transformed the social setting in which civil society actors functioned in our study area. As we shall see, this democratisation forced a change in the developmental stance of many NGOs and led them to increasingly integrate their activities with elected people's bodies and other mass organisations at the local level.

Panchayats (local governments) are, of course, part of the state itself. Strengthening the *panchayat* system is equivalent to strengthening the state as an institution. Thus, decentralisation in Kerala after 1996 was an effort at strengthening the state as an institution. Like any other development effort

in Kerala's history, the PPC was an outcome, and also an instrument, of public action. Public action in Kerala historically involved actions from above and below. Public action from above consisted of legislative and enabling actions of the state. Public action from below consisted of a diverse set of actions: social reform movements for reforming archaic practices within castes, peasant struggles against oppressive landlordism and for land reform, struggles of labourers for better wages and working conditions, struggles for literacy, schooling and health care, and struggles for social security. These movements were *political* in the nature of their demands, and their success lay in challenging the hierarchies of power in their contemporary societies. An important feature of public action after the formation of the State of Kerala in 1956/57 was that it aimed to force the state to act in favour of the poor. Public action in Kerala was thus characterised by efforts to strengthen, and raise the legitimacy of, the state.

The aim of the PPC with respect to the NGOs was the streamlining of their activities and their linkage to the larger process of local-level planning. This was considered necessary in order to avoid duplication in the allocation of resources in the social sector as well as to ensure integration of local-level activities. For instance, the existence of two parallel schemes for the distribution of plant seedlings by a *panchayat* as well as an NGO undermines the objectives of both schemes and results in wastage of funds. *This is where coordination among different agencies and the integration of plans becomes necessary.* The planning process of the decentralised local bodies aimed to achieve such coordination. A request was made to all the leading NGOs in Kerala to reduce independent and parallel initiatives and try to link them as much as possible with the *panchayat* planning process.

Until the initiation of the PPC, state activities (such as the implementation of poverty alleviation schemes) were mainly of a top-down nature. Such top-down and bureaucratic planning and implementation had rendered these schemes ineffective in terms of their reach and targeting. In this setting, activities of different types of NGOs in the social sector flourished. In particular, NGOs led by different social groupings – religious as well as caste organisations – were formed in large numbers. These religious and caste organisations had a few characteristics in common: firstly, their work was largely devoid of politics and they were opposed to all forms of organised political practice; secondly, these organisations were led by the elite and the powerful in the respective religion or caste; and thirdly, in spite of being led by the elite, the survival of these organisations was based on the strength of

the associational networks that existed between members of the same religion or caste. To restate the last point using the terminology of some of the studies we reviewed, these organisations survived on the basis of religion-based or caste-based *social capital.*

In our study area of Upputhara, the major NGOs were affiliated to either religious groups or caste organisations.[9] Among religious groups, the Catholic Church played a major role in forming a number of NGOs in the sphere of social work. Among caste organisations, the SNDP and the Nair Service Society (NSS) were active in Upputhara. Of course, in the Catholic Church, SNDP and NSS, membership was limited to people of the corresponding religion or caste. The success of their activities was mainly due to the associational ties that existed between members of these religions and castes.

The introduction of the PPC in 1996/97 'disturbed' the social environment in which religious and caste organisations functioned. Given the large amount of untied grants to the *panchayats*, and the flourish in social sector schemes that were conceived, planned and implemented at the local level, the nature of the relationship between the people and the state changed significantly.[10] The benefits of deepened democracy at the local level, achieved through the strengthening of the state, upset the sphere of free play that the religious and caste organisations had enjoyed previously. As Thomas Isaac noted:

> *In People's Planning, one objective was to transform the* panchayats *from mere low-level government structures into a structure where people could directly participate and to that extent develop an organic link with civil society. The campaign consciously attempted to create new civic organisations such as the neighbourhood groups, monitoring committees, beneficiary committees and so on, so that the Chinese Wall between civil society and the state is broken. Many NGOs felt their space was being encroached upon.* (Isaac 2003)

The religious and caste organisations feared that the associational networks that they had been able to exploit until then would be weakened through the deepening of local democracy. Processes of deepening democracy, while forging new forms of associational networks, always weaken existing associational networks. An important conclusion to be drawn from studies that have critically looked at the concept of social capital is that "associations do not appear to promote democratic processes so much as to be their conse-

quence, and these same democratic processes tend to erode existing forms of collective action" (Mosse 2006, p 714). Drawing from his fieldwork in south India, Mosse also noted that "indeed, [earlier] associations may use non-democratic means and seek to manipulate an existing personalised order of hierarchy and patronage" (ibid., p 717). Mosse's conclusion was that it is not the density of networks that matters, but the "power and reach" of these networks. In Upputhara, the earlier networks of caste and religion were at threat given the mass success of the PPC.

We shall, at this point, offer two illustrations from our study area of Upputhara that support the arguments we made above. The first illustration refers to the implementation of a watershed-based development scheme and the second refers to the policy on micro-credit provision during the PPC.

(a) Western Ghat Development Scheme and NGOs

The Western Ghat Development Scheme (WGDS) is a scheme launched in 1974 and sponsored by the Ministry of Rural Areas and Employment of the Government of India.[11] The WGDS aims at an integrated development of the Western Ghat region, to which Upputhara belongs.[12] The Western Ghat region has sensitive environmental and ecological features owing to its topographical specificities and the large areas of tropical forest that it includes. The WGDS was initiated to address the major environmental problems the region faced: deforestation, landslides, soil erosion and water erosion.

While different sub-schemes under the WGDS were implemented in Upputhara *panchayat* from 1974, it was only from 2000/01 that major investments were made under the scheme. In 2000/01, the government decided to undertake development activities under the WGDS based on watershed-based development plans. In Upputhara, five micro-watersheds were identified under the scheme. The Mattuthaavalam ward of the *panchayat* that we surveyed belongs almost completely to the catchment area of one of these micro-watersheds.

The activities undertaken within the scope of the watershed-based projects of the WGDS aimed at reducing the intensity of soil and water erosion and at developing agriculture. Farmers were given subsidies to build structures of soil and water conservation (such as stone bunds, earthen bunds, trenches and rainwater harvesters), organise the stabilisation of stream banks and renovate springs. These schemes for soil and water conservation were combined with schemes for improvement of agriculture, such as assistance for

livestock rearing and purchase, distribution of seedlings and manure, and installation of vermi-compost units.

In 2000/01 and 2001/02, the government designated the Peermade Development Society (PDS), an NGO, as the implementing agency of the WGDS. The PDS was the social service unit of the Kanjirapally Diocese of the Roman Catholic Church. In 2002/03, Upputhara *panchayat* and the *Krishi Bhavan* (the agricultural office of the state in the *panchayat*) were designated as the new implementing agencies, with only technical assistance sought from the PDS as and when required. We observed that there were major changes in the implementation of the WGDS when the responsibility shifted from the PDS to the *panchayat* and the *Krishi Bhavan*.

Firstly, there was more transparency in the execution of the scheme. Before the *panchayat* took over the implementation, a Watershed Committee of five members ran the scheme. One member was a representative of the PDS and the other four members were nominated from four regions in the catchment area of the watershed. After the *panchayat* became the implementing agency, the Watershed Committee was expanded to include 24 members. This new committee included five representatives of self-help groups (SHGs), nine farmer representatives selected from different land-size classes, all the elected ward representatives under the watershed, the *panchayat* President (Chairman), the local Agricultural Officer (Convenor) and three representatives from NGOs.

Secondly, the selection of the beneficiaries of the scheme became a more democratic process after the *panchayat* had taken over. The beneficiaries had earlier been decided by the PDS after the Watershed Committee had collected applications from the people. There were complaints from farmers that there had been no proper announcements regarding the invitation of applications. The announcements had allegedly been made selectively in SHGs working under the PDS and during functions of the Catholic Church (as the PDS was controlled by the Church). These farmers also told us that in the first two years, this scheme was actually thought to have been a programme of the PDS, and not of the government. However, once the *panchayat* had taken over, beneficiaries were selected in *grama sabhas*, in which all households in the catchment area of the watershed participated; announcements for these meetings were made in every SHG meeting as well as through posters in the *panchayat*, the *Krishi Bhavan* and the offices of farmers' organisations. It was widely felt that it was only after the *panchayat* had taken over that the selection of beneficiaries was no longer cause for complaint.

Thirdly, the type of schemes implemented by the *panchayat* reflected the needs of the beneficiaries more than before. When the PDS was the implementing agency, the schemes were just reported to the Watershed Committee; the Committee had no power to change the type of schemes to suit local requirements better. With the *panchayat* as the implementing agency, the Watershed Committee was more powerful in deciding the type of schemes to be implemented.

Thus, the transfer of the responsibility of implementation from an NGO to the elected *panchayat* had a major democratising influence on the running of the WGDS. With the transfer of the scheme to the *panchayat*, the PDS lost the control it had over the implementation of the WGDS, which included the supply of significant material benefits to farmers. Before 2001, the appropriation of the scheme by the Catholic Church, given its exclusive membership structure, had rendered the implementation of the scheme largely undemocratic. The Catholic Church had used its religion-based social networks in the region to implement the scheme, and had also used the scheme to build on and strengthen these networks. The entry of the *panchayat* as the implementing agency implied a loss of opportunity for the Catholic Church to continue this process of network-building through the supply of development benefits. In other words, the entry of the *panchayat* represented a rupture – albeit limited – in the existing dynamics of exclusive social networking in Upputhara.

(b) The provision of micro-credit

A similar phenomenon could be noted in the case of our second illustration, the provision of micro-credit through self-help groups (SHGs). In Kerala, the model of micro-credit provision is significantly different from that in other Indian states; a far larger role is envisaged for public institutions in the activities of SHGs under the decentralisation programme. This is because the activities of SHGs are linked with the planning process of *panchayats*.

The growth of SHGs across Kerala in the 1990s, especially among women, was in part a response to the micro-credit movement that was spreading across the developing world. The emergence of SHGs was also due to the focus given to gender justice in the PPC. There were special efforts to increase the participation of women in *grama sabhas*, and to promote women SHGs. It was mandated that every project should have a gender impact statement. Besides, 10% of the plan funds of each *panchayat* were to be earmarked for projects which would have women as the direct beneficiaries and which

would be managed by women. This constituted the Women Component Plan (WCP) of the *panchayats*.

Thus, while the formation of SHGs was encouraged as part of the PPC, there were also independent SHGs already active in Upputhara *panchayat* when the PPC was initiated. These SHGs had been formed, in the main, by the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church, through its front organisations like the PDS, had begun to form SHGs from the early 1990s. Once the PPC was initiated, other religion- and caste-based organisations (like the SNDP) also entered the sphere and began to form SHGs for members of each religion/ caste.

Under the PPC, the efforts were aimed at (a) transforming SHGs into non-exclusivist groups in which people from all religions and castes participate together; and (b) bringing all SHGs under the decentralised planning framework. All SHGs were encouraged to register with the *panchayat* under a government scheme called *Kudumbasree*. For many WCP projects, SHGs were seen as the appropriate organisational structure for implementation. *Panchayat*- and ward-level committees were set up to oversee the functioning of the registered SHGs. Unlike NGOs, these SHGs were to have no federating structures above the local *panchayat*. The transition from providing micro-credit to fostering micro-enterprises was to be integrated and supported by local plans of *panchayats*. Special promotional funds were also made available from *panchayats* to eligible SHGs apart from loans from public banks.

At the time of our fieldwork in 2004, there were 50 SHGs operating in Ward 8 of Upputhara *panchayat*. The total membership in these SHGs was 664, with an average of 13 members in each group (Table 2). In other words, 35% of the population of Ward 8 were members of at least one SHG. Out of the 50 SHGs, 37 were exclusively made up of women.

The presence of a social grouping with a membership of 35% of the local population in any organisation is a significant phenomenon in itself. This mass of people and their resources should be pooled together in the most efficient manner possible. Democratic decentralisation and planning in Kerala offered such a possibility. About 70% of all SHGs were registered with the *Kudumbasree* scheme of the *panchayat*, thus integrating themselves with the planning process of the local bodies.

Table 2

Number of SHGs in Ward 8, Upputhara *panchayat*, and details of membership (2005).

Registration type	Number of SHGs	Share of number of SHGs (%)	Number of members	Share of number of members (%)
Kudumbasree and VIKAS	20	40.0	265	39.9
Kudumbasree	13	26.0	173	26.1
SNDP Yogam	5	10.0	66	9.9
PDS	8	16.0	103	15.5
Kudumbasree and TSSS	2	4.0	28	4.2
TSSS	2	4.0	29	4.4
Total	50	100.0	664	100.0

Source: Census survey of SHGs, 2005.

Note: PDS – Peermade Development Society; SNDP Yogam – Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam; TSSS – Thiruvalla Social Service Society.

As the data in Table 2 indicate, more than a quarter of the SHGs and their members were not registered with Upputhara *panchayat* and chose to remain isolated from the democratic planning exercise. All of these SHGs were controlled by large NGOs. SHGs working under NGOs are free to join the *Kudumbasree* network and function autonomously. However, many NGOs chose to dissociate themselves from the *Kudumbasree* network. Predominant among these NGOs were the PDS and the SNDP.

The case of SHGs controlled by NGOs and *panchayats* presents a similar analytical issue as in our above example of the watershed scheme. It is clear that the regulation of SHGs by *panchayats* was a necessary step towards their democratisation as well as efficient integration into the larger development framework. For this purpose, all SHGs had to be brought under one broad umbrella. However, this policy would then have limited the control of religious and caste organisations over SHGs. For the Catholic Church, the issue was whether to give up control over an instrument of exclusive social networking that it had had access to for many years. For other organisations like the SNDP, which began SHG formation after the introduction of the PPC, the issue was slightly different:given the popularity that the SHG movement enjoyed, how can the SNDP enter into, and participate in, this arena and create its own spheres of influence and control outside the realm of state regulation?

Our illustrations from Upputhara take us to two broad conclusions. Firstly, the deepening of democracy in Upputhara was aimed at strengthening class- and mass-based associational networks. This necessitated a weakening of existing 'undemocratic' associational networks. What was important about these networks, and for appraising them, was not their density as such, but the extent to which they furthered democratisation and tackled issues of power relations, and the ways in which they were structured to politically advance the demands of the weak.

Secondly, for increased democratisation in the functioning of *panchayats* and for increased participation in *panchayat* assemblies, the activities of all actors (including civil society actors) in the local arena have to be integrated. While it is true that the usefulness of civil society-based actions may have been underestimated earlier, the problem with this fashionable idea of recent years is that it is much in line with the ideas of economic globalisation and liberalisation. We believe that *the state needs to remain accountable with respect to satisfying the basic needs of the people.* Development prospects in less-developed countries are critically linked not only to the continuing role of the state in undertaking investment, regulation of the economy and preservation of institutions of public welfare, but also to the facilitation of increased democratisation in decision-making. Democratic planning and governance in large societies marked by social and cultural diversity is too complex and big a task to be left only to social movements or non-governmental groups. In fact, increased democratisation demands a constructive role from civil society actors in bringing people closer to democratically elected bodies like *panchayats*.

Endnotes

Full citation for this article:
Ramakumar R, Nair KN. 2009. State, politics and civil society: A note on the experience of Kerala. *In:* Geiser U, Rist S, editors. *Decentralisation Meets Local Complexity: Local Struggles, State Decentralisation and Access to Natural Resources in South Asia and Latin America.* Perspectives of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South, University of Bern, Vol. 4. Bern: Geographica Bernensia, pp 275–310.

Acknowledgements:
The research for this paper was supported by the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South: Research Partnerships for Mitigating Syndromes of Global Change, co-funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

[1] R. Ramakumar is an Economist, with specific interests in issues related to agrarian relations and rural development in India. He did his PhD in Economics at the Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata. Earlier he was a faculty member at the Centre for Development Studies in Trivandrum. Presently, he is Assistant Professor with the School of Social Sciences at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai.
E-mail: rr@tiss.edu

[2] K. N. Nair is Professor and Director of the Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram. His research interests include Agriculture and Rural Development, Decentralisation and Local Level Development, Science and Society, Economic Policy and Planning, and Institutional Economic Analysis.

[3] This definition is provided by The Centre for Civil Society, London School of Economics (LSE). See LSE (2004).

[4] To give the complete quote from Marx:

> *Where, then, is the positive possibility of a German emancipation?*
> *Answer: In the formulation of a class with* radical chains, *a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, an estate which is the dissolution of all estates, a sphere which has a universal character by its universal suffering and claims no* particular right *because no* particular wrong, *but* wrong generally, *is perpetuated against it; which can invoke no* historical, *but only* human, *title; which does not stand in any one-sided antithesis to the consequences but in all-round antithesis to the premises of German statehood; a sphere, finally, which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all other spheres of society and thereby emancipating all other spheres of society, which, in a word, is the* complete loss *of man and hence can win itself only through the* complete re-winning of man.
> (Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right; Marx 1843)

[5] We are not entering into the debate on whether Gramsci and Marx differed on the conceptualisation of civil society as part of the base or the superstructure (see Kaviraj 2006). That debate is a bit redundant here, for the reason that we only attempt to highlight certain features of the conceptualisation of civil society in Hegel, Marx and Gramsci in opposition to the more fashionable approaches today (see below for a discussion).

[6] As Emir Sader (2002) argued, the exclusion of political parties is a problematic idea

> *not only because it means rejecting a potential weapon in a radically unequal contest but also, and more importantly, because the movement thus distances itself from the themes of power, the state, public sphere, political leadership and even, in a sense, from ideological struggle (...) The result of this exclusion of parties and state, if pushed through, would severely limit the formulation of any alternatives to neoliberalism, confining such aspirations to a local or sectoral context – the non governmental organisations (NGOs') mantra, 'Think global, act local'; proposals for fair trade; 'ecologically sustainable development' – while giving up any attempt to build an alternative hegemony.* (p 92)

[7] Available at http://bnarchives.yorku.ca/105/01/040101_Tzfadia_Review_of_GPEofISR.pdf.

[8] Singh (2005) notes that in the 1990s, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funded 60 'local governance' initiatives while the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) funded more than 250 'decentralisation' projects. According to him, "in the name of decentralisation and local self-governance, essential developmental tasks and social responsibilities of the state are being handed over to cash-starved, non-transparent, unaccountable NGOs and local bodies without examining their performance and capacity to deliver (...) [T]he welfare functions of the nation-state are (...) being weakened from below in the guise of decentralisation" (p 121).

[9] Upputhara *panchayat* is situated in the southern part of Idukki district. In 2001, 7002 households resided in the *panchayat* with a total population of 28,953. Members of scheduled caste households formed about 15% of the population in 2001. A large section of the population in the *panchayat* was Christian. Given the large population of the panchayat, we decided to select one ward within the *panchayat* for our study. There are 15 wards in the *panchayat*. The ward selected for study was Mattuthaavalam, which was officially 'Ward 8' of Upputhara *panchayat*. A sample equivalent to 20% of the population was surveyed.

[10] The changed situation represented the fruition of a vision that E. M. S. Namboodiripad had outlined in 1958: That the people should contact the state and the state should contact the people through *panchayats*.

[11] While the Government of India contributes 80% of the financial requirements of the Western Ghat Development Scheme (WGDS), 10% is contributed by the *panchayat* and 10% is mobilised from the beneficiaries.

[12] The Western Ghat region is a long mountainous stretch in the western and southern parts of India that extends to about 1600 km in length and 80 to 100 km in width. It includes regions in the states of Maharashtra, Karnataka, Goa, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. In 1991, a population of about 49 million resided in this stretch.

References

Aiyar SA. 2000. Harness the caste system. *The Times of India*, 4 June 2000.

Bottomore T. 1979. *Political Sociology*. New York: Harper and Row.

Centre for Development Studies. 1975. *Poverty, Unemployment and Development Policy: A Case Study of Selected Issues with Reference to Kerala.* Chennai: Orient Longman.

Chandhoke N. 1995. *State and Civil Society.* New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Chandhoke N. 2003. A critique of the notion of civil society as the 'third sphere'. *In:* Tandon R, Mohanty R, editors. *Does Civil Society Matter? Governance in Contemporary India.* New Delhi: Sage Publications, pp 27–58.

Chandramohan P. 1999. Growth of social reform movements. *In:* Cherian PJ, editor. *Perspectives on Kerala History: The Second Millennium.* Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala State Gazetteers, pp 456–487.

Cheriyan PJ. 1999. Radical movements in 20th century: Tiruvitamkur and Kochi. *In:* Cherian PJ, editor. *Perspectives on Kerala History: The Second Millennium.* Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala State Gazetteers, pp 511–546.

Edwards M, Hulme D, editors. 1995. *Beyond the Magic Bullet: NGO Performance and Accountability.* Sterling: Kumarian Press.

Ehrenberg J. 1998. Beyond civil society. *New Politics* 6(4). Also available at: http://www.wpunj.edu/newpol/issue24/ehrenb24.htm; accessed on 17 March 2009.

Faust DR, Nagar R. 2004. Review of Sangeeta Kamat's "Development Hegemony: NGOs and the State in India" (New Delhi: Oxford, 2002). *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography* 36(1):166–169.

Fine B. 2001. *Social Capital vs. Social Theory: Political Economy and Social Science at the Turn of the Millennium.* London: Routledge.

Grootaert C. 1998. Social capital: The missing link. *In:* World Bank, editor. *Expanding the Measure of Wealth: Indicators of Economically Sustainable Development.* Washington, D.C.: World Bank, pp 77–93.

Harriss J. 2001. *Depoliticising Development: The World Bank and Social Capital.* New Delhi: LeftWord Books.

Harriss J, de Renzio P. 1997. An introductory bibliographic essay. Special section on 'missing link' or analytically missing? The concept of social capital. *Journal of International Development* 9(7):919–937.

Isaac TMT. 1994. The left movement in Kerala: Lessons of the past and challenges of the present. *In:* A. K. G. Centre for Research and Studies, editors. *International Congress on Kerala Studies, Abstracts.* Volume 1. Thiruvananthapuram: AKG Centre for Research and Studies.

Isaac TMT. 2003. "People's Plan is different from World Bank programme." Interview with R. Krishnakumar. *Frontline* 20(16), 2–15 August.

Isaac TMT, Tharakan PKM. 1986. *Sree Narayana Movement in Travancore, 1880–1939: A Study of Social Basis and Ideological Reproduction.* Working Paper 214. Trivandrum: Centre for Development Studies.

Jeffrey R. 1978. Travancore: Status, class and the growth of radical politics, 1860–1940. The temple-entry movement. *In:* Jeffrey R, editor. *People, Princes and Paramount Power: Society and Politics in the Indian Princely States.* Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp 136–169.

Jenkins R. 2001. The emergence of the governance agenda: Sovereignty, neo-Liberal bias and the politics of international development. *In:* Desai V, Potter R, editors. *The Companion to Development Studies.* New York: Oxford University Press, pp 485–488.

Jenkins R. 2006. Mistaking 'governance' for 'politics': Foreign aid, democracy and the construction of civil society. *In:* Kaviraj S, Khilnani S, editors. *Civil Society: History and Possibilities.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp 250–268.

Kamat S. 2002. *Development Hegemony: NGO's and the State in India.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Karat P. 2004. *Meeting Imperialist, Communal Challenge.* Speech at the World Social Forum panel on Political Parties and Social Movements, 18 January.

Kaviraj S. 2006. In search of civil society. *In:* Kaviraj S, Khilnani S, editors. *Civil Society: History and Possibilities.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp 287–323.

LSE [London School of Economics]. 2004. *What Is Civil Society?* Available at: http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what_is_civil_society.htm; accessed on 29 January 2009.

Marx K. 1843. Introduction. *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right.* Available at: http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm; accessed on 29 January 2009.

Marx K. 1845. *The German Ideology.* Also available at: http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/index.htm; accessed on 21 May 2006.

Mosse D. 2006. Collective action, common property and social capital in South India: An anthropological commentary. *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 54(3):695–724.

Patnaik P. 2000. *Alternative Paradigms of Economic Decentralisation.* Paper presented at the International Conference on Democratic Decentralisation, Thiruvananthapuram, (State Planning Board), May 23–27. Available from R. Ramakumar.

Putzel J. 1997. Accounting for the dark side of social capital: Reading Robert Putnam on democracy. Special section on 'missing link' or analytically missing? The concept of social capital. *Journal of International Development* 9(7):939–949.

Ramachandran VK. 1996. On Kerala's development achievements. *In:* Dreze J, Sen A, editors. *Indian Development: Selected Regional Perspectives.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp 205–356.

Sader E. 2002. Beyond civil society. *New Left Review* 17:87–99.

Singh K. 2005. *Questioning Globalisation.* London, New York, New Delhi: Zed Books and Madhyam Books.

Smith C. 1996. Hegel, economics, and Marx's capital. *In:* Brotherstone T, Pilling G, editors. *History, Economic History and the Future of Marxism: Essays in Memory of Tom Kemp.* London: Porcupine Books.

Tharakan PKM. 1999. Development of colonial economy. *In:* Cherian PJ, editor. *Perspectives on Kerala History: The Second Millennium.* Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala State Gazetteers, pp 360–401.

World Bank. 1983. *World Development Report 1983.* Washington, D.C.: World Bank.