Final Report

Gendering Governance or Governing Women? Politics, Patriarchy, and Democratic Decentralisation in Kerala State, India

The Research Team (in alphabetical order)

Anitha. S

Reshma Bharadwaj

J. Devika (CDS)

Ranjini Krishnan

P.R. Nisha

K.P.Praveena

Reshma Radhakrishnan

S. Irudaya Rajan (CDS)

Rekha Raj

A.K. Rajasree

Santhy. S

Binitha V Thampi (CDS)

Usha Zacharias

Centre for Development Studies

Prasant Nagar Road, Medical College P.O, Thiruvananthapuram 695 0011

KERALA, India.

Website: www.cds.edu

Contents   Pages

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Yoga teachers often advice their students to stretch a bit more everyday; stretching more can be painful, they tell us, but one always grows the stronger for it, and the pain ultimately metamorphoses into pleasure. Each of us in this project, I feel, has gone through something similar, more or less. There were many well-wishers who felt that this project was too ambitious. The fact that we pulled it off together looks like a wonderful dream comes true.

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I don't know if it is done to thank ourselves – maybe we should – it is not often that each of us takes the risk of coming out of the narrow little cells that a rapidly individualizing society assigns us to. But the risk, I feel, was worth it, and I am already feeling nostalgic for our meetings, the talk, talk, talk, the fights (yes!), and above all, the excitement which made me feel quite like a bubbling beer mug. Two years went past, many of us negotiated ill-health, personal losses, and other disappointments, but we did pull together, and pull through. I'm sure all of us share a sense of satiation at this moment, to a greater or lesser extent.

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Executive Summary

The report has three distinctive focal points – women in formal political institutions and local governance, women at the interface of politics and development, and women in oppositional civil social struggles that unfold outside the formal spaces of politics in Kerala. Each of these has been discussed in separate chapters. The introduction provides a birds' eye-view of the history of politics and gender in Kerala from the early 20th century until its last decade. The concluding remarks summarise the arguments and observations of the three chapters and touch upon what we would like to convey to the state, the political parties, and civil society.

One major context of this work is certainly the institutionalisation of political decentralisation in Kerala in the mid-1990s, and of localised planning through the People's Planning Campaign under the aegis of Kerala's leading mainstream communist parties. Not only were women promised 33 per cent reservation of seats in local bodies, later, they were also promised a share in budgetary resources through the institutionalisation of the Women's Component Plan in local bodies. The other relevant context was the formation of a massive State-wide network of below-poverty-line women's self-help groups, the Kudumbashree, under the State Poverty Alleviation Mission, towards the end of the 1990s. The third context was the burgeoning of struggles outside these institutions, for land, human rights, livelihood, water and other resources, in which women began to appear prominently.

Our research is largely qualitative, though we did analyse the State Election Commission's data for the 2005 elections to local bodies, and collect some quantifiable data as well; the single most-used tool used is the in-depth interview. We also relied heavily on focus group discussions, participant observation and memo-writing. Verbatim transcriptions were necessary as we planned to use techniques of textual analysis. Overall, the work is informed by a feminist historical perspective, and an interdisciplinary approach in

general – which constitutes the object of inquiry as multi-faceted and complex and hence requiring tools and perspectives from across the disciplines.

Through the past two years, we got to learn much beyond the usual platitudes heard about gender and decentralisation in Kerala. We learnt of the ongoing bifurcation of politics at the local level – into the hypermoralised, local 'community', and the space of local politics, which continues to be informed by a pre-existing masculinism. The large numbers of women who have entered the former are required to conform to elite feminine norms for success. The utilization of the elite feminine trope of the Generous Giver is also structurally enabled by the general orientation of local bodies towards the minimum entitlement-centred welfare distribution. Underprivileged women, however, find themselves at the margins of such elite femininity and their climb is much steeper. The evocation of the elite feminine does not constitute a critique of the rampant masculinism in the field of politics. It does not guarantee passage to the upper echelons of politics (and so for women wanting to enter politics, 'strategic opportunities' are still crucial); it does not ensure that different developmental priorities gain space. The parties do not show any interest in increasing the numbers of women beyond the quotas; the powerful posts in the panchayat to which reservation norms do not apply are almost completely in the hands of men. Opportunities, however, seem emergent for women that do not require their compliance with dominant gender norms, given the fragmentation of party controls on the ground, and rising 'common' issues in panchayats, in the wake of extractive and neoliberal growth.

Our explorations of women who have entered the public, and politics, via developmental initiatives have afforded us a view of the critical shifts that are occurring in the political field: the demise of leftist 'political society', apparently imminent, seems to be offset by the formation of a certain liberal welfarist 'civil-political society' through the Kudumbashree self-help group network. The subject of *aanukoolyam* – the new welfare handout – is imagined

to be the 'below-poverty-line' woman. She, however, is not easy to shepherd, as the leaders at the local level are finding out; nor does she always abandon the language of radical citizenship that claims welfare and productive resources as rights. However, not all such underprivileged have equal mobility and the welfare recipient is subject to the vagaries of consumer-dom. The self-help group, the dominant mode of organising women in Kerala now, is based upon a liberal understanding of common interests and hence does not structurally allow for the articulation of collective demands. And as more and more underprivileged women are interpellated into this new subject-position, the possibility of organising around resources, work, and livelihoods in ways that challenge, not re-establish dominant gender inequalities seems to grow dimmer. Many officials at Kudumbashree are committed to transforming underprivileged women into full-fledged economic agents, but the structural positioning and ideological orientation – and these are not readily divisible -- of Kudumbashree -- thwart their efforts. Also, the structure and culture of the development bureaucracy lingers on strongly in the new development initiatives that are directed at women – and without a thorough dismantling of these, such initiatives may bring minimal changes – but not gender justice or democracy.

The last segment was an eye-opener in several ways – it brought to light many aspects of non-elite women's bids to enter the public and politics that are simply invisible from the heights of elite advantage in the other segments. Firstly, we became aware of the extent to which the experience of violence, in different ways and to different degrees, mediates the attempts of women of the underprivileged castes and groups -- dalit, tribal, and coastal communities – not to say of sexual minorities and sex workers -- to assert their citizenship. Secondly, we found the discourse of human rights and radical citizenship alive and relevant in a range of oppositional groups, from widows' associations to dalit women to the sexual minorities and sexworkers, again, in specific ways and to specific ends. Thirdly, we saw for ourselves how the spread of the minimum entitlements regime was eroding the political

resources built by some marginalised communities, while global networks were enabling other marginalised groups to mobilise and press for demands. Fourthly, many of these groups were keenly interested in reaping the fruits of the liberal promise upheld by decentralisation, even as those who have been included seem to be caught in a 'paradox of inclusion'. In other words, the former keep pressing the state to abandon it s duplicity, evident in the way in which it appears to grant recognition to interest groups, but keeps treating them as passive governmental categories. And crucially, we learned about how many women – often individuals – were opening new spaces for resistance and activism – which allows a rethinking the agency of women of the "underdeveloped" world that is lost when the individual is generalized into the mass or the collective.

The situation in formal politics and governance and in developmental programmes that are directed at women may indeed be improved. It is not difficult, for instance, to see the need for a powerful nation-wide organisation of women panchayat members that may effectively counterbalance their absolute dependence on their respective parties, which is autonomous, promised fair representation and voice to women of marginalised groups, and is supported by budgetary allocations from the Central government. Also, the need for state funding of women candidates' election campaigns may also be evident, and full funding should be made available for independent candidates. At present the developmental bureaucracy is too heavily 'manned' – there is the need to bring in a larger number of women at all levels. There is the further need for measures by which the state openly acknowledges the status of Kudumbashree leaders as full time public workers – such as for instance – a 'public worker-wage' as a compensation for the triple burden the leader carries. This is no less than a strategic need. Education in citizenship should be made mandatory to all state-led initiatives to mobilise women, which cannot of course be treated apart from gender justice. A start, too, needs to be made in dismantling heavy top-down hierarchies in development programmes for women's empowerment, by

building forums in which lower level women development workers can make their voices heard and influence policy. The pervasiveness of violence in women's public and domestic lives, which disempowers them hugely, needs to be tackled urgently, by the state, the political parties, and civil society. Most importantly, welfare endowments need to be unshackled from the conjugal family so that the sexual minorities and sex workers may benefit.

All said and done, we do think that talking about politics is at least as, or more, important as talking about policy, as far as democracy and gender equality are concerned.

Introduction

a.   Politics and Development in Kerala State, India

Kerala State, in south western India, was formed in 1956, uniting three Malayalam-speaking regions -- British Malabar, and the princely States of Travancore and Cochin. Until the 1970s, it was regarded as one of the most 'backward' and politically turbulent parts of India. However, development research in the 1970s found it to present a 'paradox', challenging established development wisdom about economic growth and social development (CDS/UN 1977). Kerala combined very low levels of economic development with high levels of social development -- extraordinarily high levels of literacy, longevity, low infant and maternal mortality, falling birth rates, a strong public health system (Ramachandran 1997; Heller 1999; Parayil 2000). The extraordinary strength of the communist movement in Kerala -- when the communists were elected to power in the Kerala State in 1957, soon after State formation, it made headlines throughout the world -- made it a favourite site for western political scientists and observers. Since the 1940s, the left enjoyed almost unquestioned hegemony in Kerala's cultural and political domains, till the mid-1980s. The dominant left claimed much of the credit for the achievements summarized in the 'Kerala Model', having successfully made tenants – though not agricultural labourers – landowners through the land reforms in the early 1970s. Since then welfare was expanded hugely through mass housing for the poor, pension schemes and welfare funds for unorganized

sector workers, fixing minimum wages, and state-run supermarkets for the less well-off. The late 1980s-early 1990s saw the first glimmerings of 'state-centric civil society' engaging in developmental work, in the Total Literacy Campaign, which would later reach culmination in the move towards political decentralization and localized planning drawing upon Putnamite 'engaged citizenship', in the People's Planning Campaign of the mid-1990s. Of the leftist parties, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) emerged as the major force since the split in the Communist Party of the India in the 1960s, and at present, the CPM leads the coalition of leftist parties, Left Democratic Front (LDF), which includes the other communist party, the CPI, and the leftist Revolutionary Socialist Party, and is currently in power. Opposing the left in Kerala has been the Congress, and its allies, together in the United Democratic Front (UDF), mainly of parties which draw upon community loyalties, including the Muslim League and the Kerala Congress. The Bharatiya Janata Party, which began to grow only in the mid-1980s, is a minor force, which however is influential in some pockets.

The 1980s was characterized by the formation of social movements around environment issues, feminist groups, and mobilizations by people excluded from the 'Kerala Model'. Such civil social mobilizations deserve to be termed 'oppositional' precisely because they espoused a view of political power radically different from that of formal political parties. These movements did not aim at state power but devised the much more long-term strategy of eroding such power through the continuous transformation of the subject,

aiming at a different social power, not seeking to replace the state but to construct an alternative society. The twin pillars of political society -- large-scale development, and social justice rooted in the rhetoric of class struggle -- came to be questioned. The first came under attack with increasing reflexivity regarding industrial development, a sharper perception of risk. The second was destabilised when, from the early 1980s into the 1990s, the groups that were marginal to Kerala's social development -- women, tribal people, fisherfolk, dalits -- began to emerge into public view. The feminist groups that sprouted in the late 1980s challenged the fundamental understanding of the political that animated entrenched politics. In the 1990s, they brought up issues that demonstrated the extent to which the entrenched notion of politics completely bypassed non-sovereign forms of power, and indeed were quite supportive of them. The 1990s and afterwards also saw the beginnings of gay-lesbian mobilisations in Malayalee society, and of the sex-workers by NGOs, which they revealed the limits of dominant Malayalee progressive politics in stark terms. Besides, these movements crucially widened the scope of politics, expanding it to institutions deemed external to it, and bringing in a host of new issues to be legitimately regarded as 'political'. Indeed, the fact that the dominant left has been forced to face many of the issues raised testifies to the dent these movements have made; precisely because of this, there has been no dearth of confrontations, especially in the new millennium – with tribal movements, widows' associations, dalit mobilisations. The latest chapter is the ongoing dalit land struggle at Chengara which is facing state repression and attack from trade unions affiliated to all major political parties.

It is important to note that the in the late 1980s- early 1990s, dominant left politics in Kerala was facing a crisis precipitated by the conjunction of a number of elements. First, the remarkable levels of social development, the fruit of Malayalee political society's highly energetic interventions, seemed to be under severe strain here, not to mention the sluggishness of economic growth. Kerala's redistributive and competitive politics was accused of causing the latter (Tornquist 2000). The impact of globalisation ('globalisation' in a broader sense, as Malayalees had begun to slowly turn away from the nation state and towards the international job market, for employment and livelihood since the 1970s) were also becoming apparent by the early 1990s, with very complex social repercussions. More and more educated Malayalees seemed to have lesser and lesser stake in reshaping socio-economic life in Kerala (Tornquist 2000); money flowing from abroad had a definite impact on lifestyle, promoting appallingly wasteful forms of consumption. These were essentially problems that the earlier sorts of 'democratic' mobilisations could not solve, and indeed, seemed to undermine such mobilisations themselves.

The 'People's Campaign for Decentralized Planning' (PPC) in Kerala initiated by the Left Democratic Front government was presented as a solution to this crisis. It has been hailed as an unprecedented political experiment in inviting broad-based community involvement in the political and planning processes in India (Isaac and Franke 2000; Oommen 2005). The 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Indian Constitution, which allowed for

thirty-three per cent representation for women in all three levels of the local self-governing bodies including the leadership, were brought into force in the local bodies' elections in Kerala in 1995. The Left Democratic Front government in 1996 allocated 35-40 per cent of the Ninth Five-Year Plan outlay to the local bodies, which were expected to identify their needs and priorities and draw up projects accordingly. The three stages -- policy-making, plan drafting and implementation -- were carried out in distinct phases with the effort to involve people en masse, irrespective of their party affiliations. The PPC was shaped and supported by elements of the left that had been critical of state-centric visions of development – notably the 'People's Science Movement', the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (Zachariah and Sooryamoorthy 1994) supported it. It was presented as an effort to locate the 'people' as the major historical agent of social transformation and economic growth, in a much broader sense than ever before. Indeed, this has brought much credit to the dominant left in Kerala, and has been used as evidence by the detractors of the claim that the solutions of the ills unleashed by the rolling back of the state with liberalisation and the forces of globalisation lie in civil society (Harris 2001).

In a strong sense, the PPC was the fullest development of the dominant left's social democratic mass agenda, now assuming liberal proportions (indeed, it could well be called the 'Third Way' in Kerala's social democracy). The shift towards liberal social democracy, however, had run side by side, from the 1970s onwards, with the promise that the 'class agenda' would be

completed – through the redistribution of surplus lands to landless labourers. The PPC represented the 'liberal turn', which downplayed the redistribution of productive assets to those excluded from the land reforms of the 1970s, and instead played up the distribution of 'minimum entitlements' through local self government institutions (LSGIs). The 'liberal promise' was also made in the wake of the perceived economic crisis in Kerala, and the apparent inability of the state to continue with the agenda of socialist welfare -- which included citizens' right to land as a productive assets (which is distinct from the provision of housing, a basic consumption resource) along with basic health care, education, and a minimum social security, which produced remarkable gains in health and education. The decentralization experiment was projected as an attempt to avoid privatization; the LSGIs were also perceived as institutions which would integrate citizens into the market on terms advantageous to them. This was to be achieved through government support: by endowing underprivileged citizens with adequate skill, initial capital, technical support, and other requirements, for the big initial 'push' so that they would enter the market as successful producers and not as workers receiving depressed wages (Sharma 2003). Women – especially the informal sector woman-worker/housewife – or the 'below-poverty-line' woman' – was identified as a key target and 'responsible' agent of this new liberal welfarist regime.

However, the PPC also was presented as a way in which other kinds of politics, not rooted in the problematic of class, could also be addressed. In

other words, the assumption was that the new liberal welfare regime of 'minimum entitlements' would resolve issues of gender or caste inequality raised by activists in oppositional civil social movements. Or, that essentially political issues could be treated as developmental ones. That this was a mistaken assumption is evident today. First, the demand that the 'class agenda' of the left be completed has not gone away; indeed dalit political formations in Kerala have been pointing out, since the 1970s, that the question of land ownership by dalits is one of caste equality and not simply a class question. Since the new millennium we have seen intense struggles by landless dalit and tribal peoples for productive land which have revealed that the emergence of new forces of capital renders the completion of the left's class agenda difficult. Feminists have protested over sexual violence almost continuously through the period (Devika and Kodoth 2001); so have sexual minority women, over denial of citizenship; environmental activists have pointed out that the new regime cannot resolve the rapid ecological destruction engendered by extractive growth. The present political scene in Kerala is punctuated by the tension between the left's adamant stand over the efficacy of the minimum entitlements regime, and the civil social movements' critique of the same.

b. Women, Politics, and Development in Kerala: A Historical Overview

It has been observed in the literature on the Kerala Model that the political field remained inaccessible to Malayalee women despite their impressive social developmental achievements in the twentieth century (for instance, Jeffrey 2003). More than a decade after that observation was made, and after many years of effort to mainstream gender concerns into local government, there is little *effective* change in sight. There is no doubt that more women have entered local bodies now. However, whether this will lead to a rise in the numbers of active women politicians, and to a greater articulation of women's interests via the broader politicization of women as a group is still to be seen. Ironically enough, since mid-90s, feminists have been demanding gender justice from the state and battling the major political parties over a series of well-publicized cases of rape, traffic and sexual harassment, in which leading members of major parties, both on the left and non-left seemed implicated (Erwer 2003). Very little support to this cause came from women who were inducted into the political process through political decentralization. So the 'gender equality lobby' in the state, represented mainly by the feminist network, the Kerala *Stree Vedi*, had been engaged in almost a continuous combat with the state and political parties -- who of course are the major actors in political decentralization. Indeed, a certain rapprochement of the feminists with the left -- that seems to be falling apart in the present -- came when one of the most powerful and senior leaders of

the CPM, the present Chief Minister of Kerala, V.S. Achutanandan, began to seriously take up the issue of sexual violence as Opposition Leader under the previous UDF government , in 2005. This has important implications – that the large numbers of women in local governance have not yet become part of the 'gender equality lobby', and that senior male leaders still control the decision whether or not to support it.

This curious phenomenon -- the simultaneous 'presence' and 'absence' of gender concern in political decentralization in Kerala in the 1990s -- makes sense when viewed in a historical perspective. Playing on the title of Robin Jeffrey's well-known book on the Kerala Model, a widely shared conception of the roots of the Kerala Model may be expressed in formulaic terms as 'Politics + Women = Social Development/Wellbeing'. The conjunction of a particular sort of politics with a particular sort of female subjectivity is seen to have produced the well being Kerala is so famous for. 'Politics' as mentioned earlier, has been a male zone; as for the 'enlightened ' female subjectivity, it, as well as the community reform movements that projected it as a desirable attainment, has been incisively criticized in recent feminist research (Kodoth 2001; 2002; Velayudhan 1999; Awaya 1996). It has been pointed out that women were accorded a new role and social space shaped by and serving modern patriarchy that limited female agency to the sphere of modern domesticity, and ultimately tied to the welfare of the larger collective -- be it the community, the locality or the nation. There were efforts to expand women's social space in the 1930s -- this however largely made a powerful

case for women's presence in the public by emphasizing that certain 'Womanly' qualities -- capacities supposedly given to women by virtue of their 'natural' sexual endowment, like compassion, patience, gentleness and so on -- were necessary for the smooth running of modern public life (Devika 2007). This claim was never really effective in the field of politics and political society in mid 20th century Kerala continued to implicitly or explicitly endorse the public/domestic divide and the relegation of modern female agency to the domestic. This continued to be so during the decades of left hegemony in the Malayalee public sphere that lasted roughly up to mid -1980s. The gains of mid 20th century dominant leftist politics were certainly gendered and historians have begun to notice this now. As Anna Lindberg has recently shown for the cashew workers of Kerala, women workers were directed towards the home through a range of strategies by state officials, employers and their own trade union representatives (Lindberg 2001). Thus while maternity benefits were fought for, the family wage remained in place. In the state-sponsored development programmes of the 1950s and 60s, women were organised at the local level, the focus being on the intersection points of social development and rationalizing and modernizing family life (Eapen 2000).

The civil social associations of women which began to appear since early 20th century were also less concerned with resolving the 'women question' in favour of women's autonomy and equal participation in community life and citizenship than with shaping ideal home managers. Though the issue of patriarchy was raised in the major civil social mobilizations of the 1980s (such

as the People's Science Movement and the Fishworker's Movement) (Nayak and Dietrich 2002), those who sought to articulate it within these movements found it a steep climb. At the end of the 1980s, however, feminist groups had indeed made their entry, they found not much support in civil or political societies – rather, they were greeted with hostility and suspicion at worst and palpable caution at best (Erwer 2003). In the 1990s, gender equity came to be discussed much more in the hugely expanded mass media (the coming of satellite television) with the sites of enunciation for 'Women' increasing. In the same decade, public debates over gender inequity and injustice have been bitter and long-drawn out – and still continue to be so-- while in contrast, there seems to be all-round support for women's associational efforts that define empowerment as strengthening women's economic contribution within patriarchal frameworks, which, it is assumed, will lead to an expansion of their life-choices automatically. Indeed, there is reason to think that the drive towards mainstreaming gender in local level governance was inspired at least as much by strategic considerations as it may have been by commitment towards gender equity. For, the PPC was also an effort to overcome the crisis of redistributionist politics (Tornquist 2000). The remedy, it seemed, was to expand the inclusiveness of 'People' as the historical agent of change and so the interest in integrating women into people's planning was to be expected. Women in Kerala had already proved their mettle as agents of change within their families, and in local communities, more recently – as instructors in the Total Literacy Campaign of the early 1990s.

It is important to note that the PPC was launched and implemented in an atmosphere in which the feminist network in Kerala was confronting the major political parties over their adamant and blatant sexism (Radhakrishnan 2005). This meant that an element crucial in ensuring the attainment of declared goals of mainstreaming gender in political decentralization was missing right at the beginning. It must be remembered that this was the first time in post-independence Kerala that 'Women' were treated as a political group with representatives (pre-independence legislatures had nominated members to represent 'Women'). However, for the large number of women who were newly inducted into the political process, this was certainly a new and unfamiliar idea. Similarly for women in general too, the idea of having representatives of their own was a new one. The gender equity lobby which could be reasonably expected to mediate between these two groups and establish the lines of communication between them, however, was grievously debilitated precisely because of the massive confrontation between feminists and political society in general. Indeed, political society, both the left and the non-left, have been doing their utmost to strip off the feminists their claim to represent the interests of women as a distinct group. In such a situation, the impact of women's large-scale induction into local-level political structures was bound to be limited seriously. The latter rapprochement arrived with the CPM in 2006 was under the hope that the new LDF government under V S Achutanandan would act seriously on issues raised by the feminists; something that has not yet actualized.

The PPC, however, seemed to offer much: besides the 33 per cent reservation of seats, it has been further characterized as marked by a concern for gender equity, along with social justice and efficient implementation of developmental programmes (Mukherjee and Seema 2000). This experiment at micro-level planning tried to structurally integrate gender priorities into the planning process (rather than simply upholding them as normative ideals) through providing for a Women's Component Plan (WCP) to be implemented with ten per cent of the total grant-in-aid for the plan. This was later made mandatory. It was hoped that these measures would help build synergies between women's political empowerment and their active induction into socio-economic life as subjects of development in their own right.

Beginning actively in 1997-98, the Women's Component Plan (WCP) fell short of the expectations of policy-makers. The allocations for the WCP did not often come close to the stipulated ten per cent; besides, many of the projects allocated under it were stereotypical. Some effort to correct this was made in the second year of its implementation (Isaac and Franke, 2000), with guidelines being set and attempts to tackle gender stereotyping in project formulation. The serious inadequacy in the participation of women in the planning process was sought to be overcome through setting up need-based neighbourhood groups and including their convenors in the Village Assemblies.

The number of women who entered the local bodies has been quite large. A total of 6566 positions are reserved for women, of which 382 are seats for the president position. Now, the number of women in the LSGIs exceeds the 33 per cent. At present, the participation of women in the Village Assemblies – highlighted in PPC as the basic forums of local democracy -- have improved considerably mainly due to the integration of the vast network of women's self-help groups set up towards the end of the 1990 as part of the Kerala State's Poverty Alleviation Mission, the Kudumbashree, with the panchayats.

c.   A Quick Survey of Literature

There is general consensus in the existing literature on gender in the PPC that the substantial reservation for women was definitely a major step towards inducting women as participants in local governance and have often resulted in individual capacity building of women, they have also pointed out the limited interest of political parties in ensuring the actualization of the mandatory Women's Component Plan; their reluctance to politicize women as a group and even their hostility towards assertive women (Bhaskar 1997; Jain 1998; Chathukulam and John 2000; Radha and Chowdhury 2002; Sukumar and Thomas 2003; Muralidharan 2003; Vijayan and Sandhya 2004; Eapen and Thomas 2005).

About local planning, almost all the reports agree that practical gender needs are often well-addressed while projects that address strategic needs are

ignored or opposed. Indeed, the moral opposition seems greatest when the boundaries between these are not so clear – that is, when the effort is to address women's practical gender needs through means that essentially challenge entrenched forms of patriarchal power. For instance, Vanita Mukherjee and T.N. Seema mention how a scheme for training girls as auto-rickshaw drivers (not only a male preserve, but also a very visible masculine public role in Kerala) that aimed at generating greater income for women was crippled through public derision of the women who underwent the training and finally, had no takers, as it went against accepted gender codes and seemed to hold the possibility of upsetting established norms of sexual morality (Mukherjee and Seema 2000: 22 ; Vijayan and Sandhya (SAKHI) 2004: 39). The SAKHI report mentions another telling instance, in which a proposal for generating employment for women through starting a unit to manufacture cheap and hygienic sanitary napkins was booed out as 'indecent' (Vijayan and Sandhaya 2004: 47).

Many of the reports point out that the remarkable spread of self-help groups in the state has often given women much greater self-confidence as earners. However, many have also remarked about the consequences of tying women's empowerment to poverty eradication, which leads to the instrumentalist reduction of the former into a tool for the latter. Fourthly, many reports reveal the extent to which 'community solutions' were posed for gender conflict instead of the mobilization of women in anti-patriarchal struggle. The situation in the planning experiment at present, in sum, is as a

report put it: "The conscious efforts to alter the conceptual rationale of planning, under the decentralized regime, recognizing the market and domestic roles of women, and the gender differences in needs and interests, remained largely at the level of rhetoric in policy making and disappeared the level of implementation." (Eapen and Thomas 2005: 76). Gender Status studies recently conducted in 43 panchayats by the Kerala Institute of Local Administration, SAKHI, and SDC-CAPDECK revealed that women's subordinate status continues uninterrupted in almost all, and indeed, women are at least more visible in public precisely in panchayats which have had a history of strong political mobilization in the mid-20th century (for instance, Karivalloor-Peralam) (KILA, SAKHI, SDC-CAPDECK 2007).

However, most of these reports do not explicitly consider how the experience of the past ten years has impacted upon women's perceptions and assessment of, and expectations from politics. If it was also hoped that by the induction of a large number of women into local-level governance, women as a category would emerge as a political one – i.e., as a group conscious of common interests to be secured in society and economy, with a direct claim on state resources and well-defined rights as equal citizens – then, ten years past, it is certainly time to make an assessment of the ways in which this making-space within political institutions has impacted on women's perceptions of the nature and possibilities of politics, their self-perception as a distinct social group, and the social space that they may legitimately claim. This may require us to take an approach that is more sensitive to the

contemporary context in Kerala – we need to be alive to the fact that such change is being shaped by several processes, institutions and agents, at times unconnected or even antagonistic to each other. With the exception of one study that focuses rather narrowly on feminist politics in Kerala in the 1990s (Erwer 2003), such serious work on the transformation of women's lives and space in the political public here is grievously lacking. While it is important to study the numbers and the achievements of women who have entered local governance, it may also be important to go beyond such considerations to reflect upon the kinds of spaces and agency that this avenue has opened up for women. This, however, cannot be done by maintaining a singular focus on the expansion of local self-government and the new opportunities for women, to the exclusion of adjacent processes in the fields of politics and development that may be of equal importance.

d.   New Perspectives, Possibilities

The present report hopes to make a beginning towards constructing a richer and more complex account of women's entry into the public in Kerala since the mid-1990s. We do believe that it is pointless to assess the achievements of women members of the LSGIs without scanning a larger field to understand emergent challenges to gender justice and citizenship, so that one may ultimately reflect whether political decentralization and women's

representation in LSGIs has indeed been capable of rising to meet these challenges. This is not to say that focusing on the achievements of these women is unimportant. Nor is it to apply a feminist measure to assess the achievements of these women only to condemn them as victims of 'false consciousness' – in other words, sit upon (political) judgment. The historical significance of the 33 per cent reservation of seats in the LSGIs of Kerala for women can scarcely be belittled. It is for the first time since the 1940s – since the pre-Independence legislatures in the princely States of Travancore and Kochi -- that 'women' have been recognized as a political category in their own right. But besides, the question whether it offers opportunities for women to enter the almost-exclusively male domain of politics is all-important. The lack of women in politics demands immediate redress, and without the expectation that women be have as 'better and less corrupt' politicians or, indeed, they become gender justice warriors. Moreover, the enthusiasm for public life and knowledge of public affairs that women members have generally displayed all over India certainly serve the important feminist political goal of breaking down misogynist stereotypes about women's reluctance to enter public life.

That said, however, given that the political field generally remains hostile to issues of gender justice, feminist researchers cannot afford to discard their critical lenses. While we need to relax the assumption that women in power will somehow automatically fight for gender justice, we also need to relax the assumption that the entry of women into local governance

will automatically redress their abysmally low presence in politics. Indeed, as we were to find out in our research, conservative gender norms may be reiterated precisely through the availability of certain forms of agency to women. And 'bargaining with patriarchy' does have its limits; most importantly, we need to inquire about which women are able to bargain with patriarchy at all. This leads to the question whether the spaces and agency opened up for certain kinds of women masks parallel processes of disempowerment of other women, and eventually to the larger question of understanding what women's critical agency may be, under emergent neoliberal contexts of extractive growth, welfarist regime based on 'responsibilization' of the subject of welfare, and crucially, within a conservative interpretation of the concept of 'gender' in prevalent discourses of local development and politics.

Given this goal, we hope to take our inquiry beyond political decentralization. How exactly we propose to do this is summarized in the following points:

- Instead of concentrating on political decentralization, we propose to focus on *three* processes that unfurled side by side in this period, covering the major portions of the fields of formal politics and oppositional civil society. These are: (a) the opening up of a number of spaces within formal institutions of local self government under the 33 per cent reservation of seats as part of

political decentralization. (b)   The creation and functioning of the State-wide network of self-help groups constituted by women from below-poverty-line families under the aegis of the State Poverty Alleviation Mission, the Kudumbashree.   (c) The burgeoning of struggles around degradation of the environment and destruction of livelihoods outside both politics and local governance, in which poor women, who are affected more drastically by these changes, are active participants. The exploration of 'adjacent' processes will help us to produce rich comparative insights. The focus on the women who are now at the interface of

development and politics – through the expansion of the machinery of   social welfare -- is interesting not only because women are now emerging as central targets and agents of welfare governance, but also because this group has been an important catchment area from which women have been inducted into local governance. An active circulation of women between this area and local governance is evident today. Thus becoming the President of the Community Development Society, the highest tier of the Kudumbashree self-help group structure at the village panchayat level, is often a passport to candidature in local elections. However, though the Kudumbashree was envisaged as a 'state-centric civil society' that would work independently alongside the village level local body, it has been heavily penetrated by political parties, particularly the CPM, from the second tier (the ward-level Area

Development Society) onwards. Also, focusing on women in the oppositional civil society is important to examine what forms of agency are emerging outside the state's openings, and how they relate to the latter. In sum, our effort is to make sense of women's opportunities in and through decentralization within the larger and more complex picture of women's entry into the public in the period from the mid-1990s onwards.

- Secondly, we bring to bear on our empirical work on the present, a feminist historical perspective. In other words we seek to understand our empirical observations in the light of the critical history of gender, politics, and development in Kerala so that shifts are perceived and reflected upon. This means that we introduce a generational comparison in the first chapter, on women in politics and governance, between women who entered politics in the decades of the mid-20th century and those who entered local governance in the mid-1990s. The comparison does bring insights into the shifts in the manner in which politics is conceived by the two generations, the gendered implications of current institutional changes, and allows us to ask what this may mean for the 'de-masculinisation' of high politics. This also allows us to ask whether the identification of poor women as principal targets, and the induction of large numbers of women as agents in the new welfare disbursement network that Kudumbashree represents, really alter the androcentric structure and culture of the development

bureaucracy, entrenched here since the 1950s. This perspective also helps us avoid presenting the oppositional civil society as a monolith, allowing us to take note of implications of the chronological differences of its many strands.

- Thirdly, our methodology has been crafted out of specific elements to gather more than numbers and quantifiable achievements. Originally we had planned to combine a questionnaire survey along with qualitative fieldwork –semi-structured and in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, memo-writing, and participant observation --and textual analysis. However in the field we found that the questionnaire was less useful, for two reasons: one, it did not seem to be yielding anything more than what we could learn from available analysis of larger data sets; two, for many of our interviewees, especially the women outside the formal institutions of politics and governance, it represented the state. Striking discrepancies were noted between what many of our interviewees wanted to be formally written up in the questionnaires and what they told us in interviews. Thus we decided to use the survey in a much more limited way. Statistical analysis in this work uses State Election Commission Data for 2005, and also data which we collected as part of fieldwork, of aspects not available in the former source.

- Fourthly, while we were not interested in simply reducing women's experiences into numbers, we were also wary of replacing this with

an equally questionable romanticisation of 'women's voices'. Thus, we certainly listened to 'women's voices', especially those of women marginalized from mainstream politics and governance, but also sought to record and interpret the rich narratives we collected from the field through interviews within emergent and historical contexts. We however, do not claim to have resolved the tension between listening to women's voices and placing them within discursive and non-discursive contexts. The tension between these two imperatives is certainly evident in our writing, especially in our accounts of marginal women's battles in oppositional civil society – and indeed it may be necessary to retain the tension than offer unsatisfactory resolutions one way or the other. Such resolutions would only affirm our own location within the dominant as privileged researchers researching marginalized women. Further, not allowing the tension to dissipate also lets us reflect on critical political agency in these troubled times.

- Fifthly, our concern for the futures of democracy, and our conviction that democracy cannot be complete without gender justice, informs our fieldwork deeply. This again forces us to go beyond numbers. The material we have produced lets us engage with major ongoing debates on civil society and social democracy in general, as well with those on postcolonial democracy in India.

e.   Research Process

The research process for this project permitted reciprocal learning between researchers, quite unlike the top-down flow of information in the cascading structure. This, we believe, has allowed us to cover what may rightly be called a vast canvas in a relatively short time. Many of us straddled public activism and academics, and each brought equal amounts of insights and experience into the team. Work was divided up between specific groups in, or members of, the team early on, and regular meetings were held through the two-year period. The early meetings, in August 2006-December 2006 were around the framework, followed by discussions of methodology and fieldwork. After fieldwork took off in 2007, experiences and observations from the field were shared actively in the meetings, held monthly until June 2007 and bi-monthly afterwards.

We had planned our fieldwork in such a way that writing on specific segments could be covered in specific time periods, so that reflection and writing could begin right away. We produced three articles on specific sections – one, a paper on widows' mobilization in Kerala, which was presented as an open seminar at Centre for Development Studies; two, a paper on Malayalee women's mobility in politics and work in the late 20th century, which was presented at the seminar on Gender and Space at the Women's Studies' Centre at JNU,

New Delhi, in November 2007; and three, a paper on SEWA Kerala, presented at Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi, in February 2008. The present report, we must say, is a much shorter – and inevitably poorer – version of the book we hope to produce soon.

Many of our interviews – around 50 in number -- with lesser-known women activists in oppositional civil social movements have been documented on DVDs. We intend to further enrich this collection, and they will be formally become part of an archive, 'Women Speak Politics', at the CDS Library. It will be housed in the new Library building at CDS, soon to be commissioned, once the formal permissions to house them here are obtained from our interviewees. We also hope to cash on the CDS Library's plans to digitalize parts of it considerable collection. Our special collection on gender and politics at the Library now has close to 200 specially selected titles; we have also been incredibly lucky in that Dr Devaki Jain has kindly gifted her remarkable collection of books and documents to the CDS Library. The cost of shipping, handling, and preserving this invaluable collection will be met from funds set apart for the special collection.

<div align="center">**Chapter One**</div>

<div align="center">**Women in Politics and Governance: The Rise of Feminine Public Altruism**</div>

a.   Inhabiting Inhospitable Space: Early Women Entrants to Politics

Politics has been traditionally inhospitable space for women in Kerala, even for elite women. In the pre-independence legislatures of the princely states of Travancore and Cochin, the government nominated elite women to represent women's interests; by the 1930s, the Travancore government was nominating women of different communities as representatives of each. However, when women fought elections – as Anna Chandy did in Travancore – in the early 1930s they faced considerable hostility and heckling[1]. This situation continued into the 1940s too, and early feminists did raise this issue, but gained little relief.

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[1]   Anna Chandy, contesting in the 1931 elections in Travancore had to face a smear campaign. See Editorial, *Nazrani Deepika,* 16 June 1931. The exclusion of women from politics in Kerala is now well-documented in mainstream histories of the 'Kerala Model'. See Robin Jeffrey, *Politics, Women and Well-being: How Kerala became a 'Model'*, New Delhi: OUP, 2003.

Women, especially from the powerful upper caste communities, and from the educated elite strata of the backward castes, were more active in the national movement, in community reform movements, and in the communist movement in the 1930s and 1940s. The other stream of women's public presence was outside these, and largely around the securing of the interests of 'women' from the governments of Kochi and Travancore. This stream rarely consisted of organised groups; it was more often constituted by highly educated and articulate women – who may be called liberal feminists – who negotiated with the state for representation in legislatures, reservation in employment, and for women's presence in all the emergent fields in the modern public (Devika 2005). However, their public self-assertion often rested upon a reinterpretation of 'womanliness' to facilitate women's entry into the public, which was also clearly restricted to the newly educated elite. Outside the educated elite, in the sphere of politics, women figured, in some movements, as not so much gendered beings – as marked by caste (for the community movements), class (for the communist movement). In the national movement, however, women did figure initially as 'womanly women' under the strong influence of Gandhi's ideas of femininity, political struggle and subjecthood. However, almost by the 1940s, Gandhian women were leaving politics for constructive work. Many left, disillusioned by severely competitive politics[2]. This was so even in families that were ardently

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[2]   Indeed, the lack of match was evident in an appeal published in the *Malayala Manorama* in 1938, exhorting women to join the anti-

nationalist – for instance, Dr B Hridyakumari, the daughter of the well known nationalist leader Bodheswaran, explained her decision not to enter politics in the 1950s despite her great desire for public work in precisely these terms.

Increasingly, politics came to be constructed as a domain marked by a strong masculinist ethos – that is, if a woman was to enter this domain, she was to leave behind the trappings of 'Womanliness' to a significant degree. Autobiographies as well as recent interviews given to the media by women of this generation who were active in politics confirm this observation[3]. Once this was done, women and men could aim for the same goal: political power[4]. Interestingly, women of this generation did believe that claiming space within politics exempted them from the community's surveillance. In other words, to enter the political public, for a woman, meant a degree of freedom from the burden of embodying the 'purity' of the community one belonged to. Sexual

government 'Abstention' movement in Travancore. K. Gomathy, 'Streekalum Nivarttanavum' [Women and the Abstention Movement], *Malayala Manorama* 20April 1933, p. 3.

[3]   Annie Thayyil, a prominent woman politician of the 1950s, in an article reminded her reader that her childlessness did not indicate a wasteful, undisciplined life. "My books are my children," she wrote. "Your children will die. Mine will not. I will not allow people to forget me."(Thayyil 1954, p. 38).

[4]   She also retells her bid for political upward mobility, and how she was outplayed by Leela Damodara Menon. Thayyil, ibid.

self-discipline was a necessary requirement to claim a political-public identity; however, this was required of both men and women. In a recently published interview, the veteran Congresswoman Padmam S Menon reminiscences that women in politics in the 1940s and 50s enjoyed considerably higher mobility, and moved around on bicycles, and were much more free of social shackles (*Matrubhumi Weekly*, June 14 2008). Another veteran freedom fighter from Kochi interviewed also seemed to indicate that women who established themselves in politics suffered considerable opposition from their families, but usually managed to escape; indeed the more prominent ones did manage to 'ungender' themselves, and claim public-political identity. She claimed that women politicians were approached, in the 1950s, by members of the Malayalam film industry, to appear in roles in films, and this way apparently, they hoped to wipe off the sexual stigma that female actors had to face! The well-known early Malayalam actor Miss Kumari was apparently a prominent Congress activist, who was later invited to act in films. Padmam Menon herself was invited to act in a film. However it does not appear as if sexual slander is recent – Anna Chandy faced it and so did almost all women members of the Shree Mulam Praja Sabha (the legislative body in pre-independence Travancore); even a leader as prominent as Akkamma Cheriyan faced veiled accusations when she moved away from the Congress openly. What is clear, however, that women of this generation did not make the effort to take recourse in the ideal of the moral feminine or chaste wifehood when faced with slander; rather they drew upon the gender-neutral public identity to shield themselves

against the sexual double norm. Padmam Menon, who later became embroiled in a massive 'morals controversy' in the 1960s, involving a prominent leader of the Congress, P.T. Chacko, claimed that she was innocent. The controversy was over Chacko's alleged involvement with a 'mystery' woman, and finally, Padmam's name was made public. She revealed in the interview that though she was not the 'mystery woman', she had permitted the Congress to use her name to protect Chacko's reputation, because she was confident that as a well-known public person, she would not be suspect in the eyes of the public.

Different political movements prescribed different routes to reach political power, applicable for all aspirants – for the communists the route of dedicated mass mobilizations and administrative skills was prescribed. Outside the left, aspirants to political power had to be adept in building and breaking alliances, making decisions and choosing sides at opportune moments – in other words, respond shrewdly to 'strategic opportunities'. Of course, the left was accused by the Congress and the community movements as fostering authoritarian, anti-democratic styles of political functioning; in return, they were faulted for poor political morality. *It is to be noted that these norms applied to both men and women.* Even those who entered politics as the wives of prominent politicians had to project themselves not as wives but as dedicated political activists engaged in radical mass mobilization (for instance, A.K. Gopalan's wife Susheela Gopalan). K R Gauri Amma, arguably the most successful, powerful, and popular woman politician in Kerala's left,

was a successful woman leader who could play both the (equally masculine) roles of the political protestor outside the government, and of the decisive administrator inside. In the 1950s she publicly proclaimed that women did not really need four months of maternity leave, and that women should be appointed as bus-conductors, an exclusively male job[5]. The entry of the other prominent woman communist leader of these times, Susheela Gopalan, into politics, was heavily mediated by the presence of her husband, A K Gopalan. However, despite cast widely in the role of the 'comrade's wife', she did not feel obliged to couch her political ambitions and aspirations in altruistic terms; her later fame rested entirely on her work to further the agenda of communist mass mobilization.

Again, they had to play the game well. Leela Damodara Menon, active in since the 1950s, was one of the most successful women politicians in Kerala – she was a member of the Kerala State Assembly twice and of the Rajya Sabha once, and also the Indian representative at the UN. Her rise in Kerala's political scene was, as she herself put it, in the shadow of her husband, the powerful Congressman Damodara Menon. Through her political career, Leela switched political loyalties, and effectively steered herself to power, attaining prominence in the debates around the first communist ministry's education bill (Leiten 1977) – and earned for herself in many quarters the name of a ruthless player, something reserved for male politicians.

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[5] *Nazrani Deepika* 28 January 1959, p. 3.

Not surprisingly, women who entered politics were few, and those who succeeded, fewer. Certainly, the 'honorary masculinity' conferred on such women was always unstable. Women had to pay the high price – they had to risk their femininity, and this could involve considerable social cost to them if they failed to be upwardly mobile within the political field. However the role models for women who entered politics were largely women who conformed to the masculinist ideal of the female politician – prominently, K R Gauri Amma – right into the late 1980s and even in the present (say, J Mercykutty Amma, N Sukanya, Sindhu Joy). The numbers of women who entered politics in this way have remained few also because most women do not have the resources to leave behind gender, even temporarily.

At the same time, a large number of underprivileged women were mobilized in various struggles, especially on the left, in the late 30s, 40s, and 50s. These women often were a very visible presence in trade union struggles and those of agricultural labourers; they also held public protests by themselves (Lindberg 2001). However, they were rarely found in positions of authority, accessing political power; they were usually in the ranks, fighting for rights and resources. It is to be noted that such questioning did not always mean leaving behind gender, however militant such struggles might have been – i.e. gender was merely masked, never exorcised through its politicization. There are many stories of how women provided care to communist leaders in hiding; how they provided food, shelter, and protection, how they facilitated communications and so on. Also, many a

time, women were mobilized around specific issues related to the reproduction of the domestic domain – for instance, around food scarcity, price rise, safety of kith and kin, and epidemics. Of course, women workers did prominently participate in trade union struggles around entirely general demands however, their prominent presence in public protests often signalled an implicit division of labour in public mobilization – women participated as bodies, lending physical presence, while men not only participated but also planned, managed, and finally negotiated with authorities. Thus early on, a divide emerged between elite women, who could enter the field of politics and work to access political power, provided they left behind their feminine trappings, and non-elite women, who stayed outside this domain and within femininity, even as they participated in public protest.

In the 1960s, a questioning of dominant left mobilization as 'less political' from within the projection of Naxalite radicalism as 'truly political' politics happened. In this case, the challenge was from within politics, from within the left parties itself. Not surprisingly, the Naxalite intervention was largely a dispute between men over what constituted 'truly political politics'. Though women were certainly involved in such political work, barring a few, like Mandakini Narayanan, and Ajitha, who later went on to carve space for feminist politics in the 1980s, the Naxalite movement produced no prominent women. Though it idealized the radical political public for both men and women, it did not produce a critique of the conditions that prevented women from accessing it on equal terms. In any case, the question of gender was quite

firmly subsumed under the question of class in the Naxalite ideological horizon – women's wings of radical left groups continue to follow this line even now.

The divide between 'idealistic' public mobilization and opportunistic political manoeuvre seems to have widened within the mainstream left further around the 1980s – a period which saw strong challenge to left hegemony from the oppositional civil society in Kerala, but also one in which the middle-class began to assert itself. Several women who moved from the dominant left parties' trade unions and mass organizations to more 'flexible' platforms testify to this in our interviews with them. They justify their decision to move to other platforms such as the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP) in precisely these terms: as a way of getting away from 'corrupt' politics to platforms that allow social work. It is also important to note that platforms such as the KSSP were perceived to be more suitable for women – more concerned with public pedagogy, work around welfare issues, and less involved with street politics. A prominent KSSP activist from Thrissur, who was also very active in People's Planning in the 90s remarked thus:

> There are many like us who are interested in social activism…
> [KSSP] held out an opportunity to us. What it offered was not
> mere political activism. We organize women around issues of
> health and education and do what we can. [This activism] is

not ideological but practical. It would attract women and ordinary people.

This shift has continued into the 1990s, not necessarily in the direction of the middle-classified 'social' that KSSP pointed to: leading women activists have moved away towards mobilizing workers in other modes without necessarily moving out of the party. C.K. Sally, one of the most prominent senior activists of the CPI, who we interviewed, perceived a striking change in political activism in the recent years; she rated the loss of 'willingness to sacrifice' as the major perceptible change. This she felt reflects in the changing mode of mass mobilization; therefore she was now engaged in organizing women mat weavers not into a trade union, but into self- help groups. Interestingly her interest in organizing groups of weavers did not appear to be animated by the currently dominant culture of self-help but rather by the concern for the decline of wages and market access to mat weavers. These women thus seek an in-between space between mass mobilization and the new forms of association-making. The shift also involved an outflow, in the late 1980s, into the oppositional civil society as well – many feminists, activists in the environmental movements, and in other organizations came through the space that this 'divide' produced.

This process was important in shaping the ground support for political decentralization in the mid-1990s. The activists who fully supported the change within the mainstream left were closely connected to Kerala's

'People's Science Movement', the KSSP. The KSSP, in the 1980s, had made its mark in the public advancing an 'internal' critique of egalitarian Developmentalism of the mainstream left, which rested upon notions of the greater value of the ostensibly 'value-neutral' scientific perspective, as against the political/class biases of the powerful left trade unions. Being more civil, than political, space, KSSP did attract more women towards the end of the 1980s, when the relatively low level of women in the KSSP was noticed and attempts were made to rectify the gap. This included women with feminist ideas as well[6] – however, KSSP did not ultimately provide a platform for politicizing gender, and by the early 1990s it was amply clear that it was offering space not to the radicalized female political subject, but to entrenched female subjectivities oriented towards the public. This explains the shape taken by women's participation allowed by political decentralization: women's participation involved not any radical critique of gender but largely the extension of 'feminine' skills and styles of functioning into the public.

b.   Elite Femininity and the New Welfarism

The opportunities opened up by political decentralization in 1995 were presented as an expansion of the 'social', a new channel through which

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[6]   In the end-1980s, the KSSP organized a feminist awareness raising 'traveling theatre', referred to as 'Vanitakala Jatha', which addressed explicitly feminist themes. It also brought out a book of feminist songs, and organized workshops on several feminist themes.

women could possibly enter the field of development and democratize it. In hindsight, after more than a decade, it appears that the higher, state–wide levels of political and developmental decision-making have remained distinct from the lower levels of local governance, in which 'development' meant, in large measure, the highly expanded disbursal of welfare, and less on the expansion of the market sector (i.e. production and exchange).[7] There can be little doubt that the 33 per cent reservation has brought large numbers of women in contact with the institutions of governance[8]. The numbers of women now show a modest increase, for 2005, from the stipulated reservation, in all the tiers; it is now around 37 per cent of the total (see Appendix 2, Table 2 a.).

For this chapter we conducted some 152 in-depth interviews with women in different areas of politics and local governance, covering three generations. Besides 21 prominent women politicians of two generations active in political party work at the state level across the political spectrum, more than 40 'successful' women panchayat presidents in all three tiers –

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[7]   The State's *Economic Review* for 2007 points out that the spending of the local bodies still follows this pattern: for the period 2002-07, LSGI spending in Kerala has been highest in the infrastructure sector (77.13 per cent), closely followed by the service sector (76.17), with the productive sector trailing at 60.53 per cent.

[8]   The total number of women members in village panchayats is now 6026. See Appendix 2, Table 2a. for details.

those who have won three consecutive terms, either as president, or member first and later as president, and about 20 first-entrants. Eleven interviews were conducted with women leaders in urban governance. We also interviewed 10 Dalit women presidents (who are largely first entrants and limited to reserved seats); 4 tribal women presidents, and several women members and presidents from the coastal communities.

The large majority of the 'successful' group were fielded by the Left Democratic Front, the coalition led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM), by the CPM, or the other communist party, the CPI; a few were fielded by the rival Congress-led coalition, the United Democratic Front. They were aged between 35 to 60, with most interviewees falling in the 50-60 age group. They had gained entry mostly through the reserved seats; one reason why we count them as 'successful' because they have migrated to the General category. Caste-wise, most of our interviewees belonged to the upper castes or middle castes – Ezhavas, Nairs, Syrian Christian, and Muslims in Malabar – and a lesser number of Dalits. Most of these women had middle-level educational achievements ranging from high school completion to graduation – we found that this group could be further sub-divided into two groups -- 'the family connections group' and the 'retired government servants group'. Of these the latter had fairly high levels of education and administrative experience/exposure to public institutions. The former often had lower levels of education but their family connections made up for that. It is worth noting that these women are not proxies always, and even when they are, it does not

mean that they are passive. There was also a group which had both advantages. Most of our interviewees were married women often with teenaged and adult children.

From our interviews with women who have been 'successful' through their work in village panchayats, it seemed evident that the women drew not so much on political, as on social power. Three major insights that emerge from these interviews may be worth pursuing. First, examining their biographies, we found a common link: their previous public exposure was not of political agitation but of development activism, even though some did hold positions in party committees at the local level. Secondly, the majority of these women claimed to be from 'party families', families with a history of stable allegiance to a political party for two or three generations. This would mean that the ways in which these women are linked to their parties may differ significantly compared with the experience of first-generation women politicians. While for the latter entering politics often meant tensions in families and the labour of building up the parties, for the former, such pains are less intense. Both these have interesting implications, and point at distinct spatial configurations that may be further elaborated. Thirdly, both groups pointed to certain conditions that may be largely accessible only to new elite women, such as the presence of the husband/male member as escort and guide, and interestingly, access to cash. Both these are linked to the women's need maintain respectability in the local community. In other words, this seems to indicate a reinstatement of gender – the articulation of a feminine

'public altruism'. These women rarely identify themselves as politicians, or as desiring political power; they perceive of themselves as distant from both ways of conceiving politics: as dedicated political work for mass mobilization, or as the building of alliances and making the right decisions. Rather they project themselves as altruistic agents of welfare disbursal who 'give' welfare to the poor, and manage their disappointments and anger though the deployment of the 'gentle power of persuasion', which of course is historically perceived as typical of the ideal feminine.

Those of this group, who held positions within local committees of political parties, were usually relieved of those. This is truly in contrast to the experience of women at the higher levels – who are allowed to hold both positions. We found that women panchayat presidents often interpreted their parties' demand that they shift away from local party work as 'greater flexibility' or 'less submission to political pressures' – in fact greater mobility within the panchayat, the 'permission' to interact with people of different political persuasions and interests, though strictly limited to panchayat boundaries. In contrast, interviews with senior women politicians in the upper echelons of political parties, revealed considerable tensions on this count: they experience much tighter party controls on interaction and movement.

Secondly, women in local bodies generally tended to identify their role as 'fair distributors' of welfare benefits – and voiced their immense pleasure

at being able to fulfil the function of overseeing such distribution. The interviewees tended to view the resources distributed not in terms of 'people's rights', or 'group interests', but as governmental entitlements handed out to groups deserving uplift by the state. Given the emergent shape of local self governments in Kerala, this should come as no surprise. The relation of non-reciprocality between the state and these groups, and the shift of the aim of state welfare towards guiding citizens into self-help then, looks extraordinarily similar to the relationship of power posited between the ideal mother who disciplines through 'gentle power' and her children in the ideal modern family as imagined in Malayalee social reform of the early 20th century (Devika 2007). That 'group interests' are not acknowledged by the women themselves was also evident in the statements of some successful Dalit women presidents, who identified the prestige acquired through their representing of the whole panchayat, to flow to their families, and not to their communities.

The often-noted unevenness of welfare payments is not linked to the differential claims of different groups, or to the preferences of the local party committee, but to insufficiency of funds or to 'rigidity' of rules[9]. The language

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[9] While some studies have found much less bias in beneficiary selection along political lines, and corruption, as well, in Kerala's local self governments, they do admit that a clear political affiliation to the ruling party is certainly an advantage. One study, a comparison between a left-dominated and a non-left dominated panchayat,

of pacifism informs their perceptions of such 'insufficiency' – very frequently, the tendency was to remind the interviewer that "those who missed out this time could be covered in the next". Indeed, a considerable number of these women do project their 'natural' affability, approachability, their capacity to be empathetic, as factors that have enabled them to be successful. To quote from one of many such accounts:

> I'm happy and often satisfied by the fact that I could distribute the welfare benefits fairly across all sections of the panchayat community. However it is true that the same amount of assistance cannot be extended to all needy members at the same time. As the resources of the state are limited, some of them have to wait till the next time, and I could convince them to do so. After all, most of the welfare recipients are women and hence I can pacify them and persuade them to wait.

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observed that party involvement at all levels was evident in the former, and while non-left people were not necessarily excluded, the power to include or exclude lay overwhelmingly with the local party. See, Nair 2000.

However, the projection of the panchayat as 'feminine space' has apparently not been appropriated by all women interviewed, who, however, continue to access the discourse that constructs the good woman in interesting ways. This was especially pronounced in the 'family connections' group, especially among those who are better educated and young, who perceive their participation as a career opportunity, a chance to acquire new and marketable skills, and not as political activism. This may indeed be connected to the fact that the members of the 'family connections' group who have entered local governance are second or third generation , for whom this rarely signifies a decisive break of any kind. Family connections now seem to ensure much smoother entry, both at the higher, competitive levels and at the lower levels. Most women panchayat presidents enjoy considerable support from their families, especially husbands. The justifications of women's employment now seem to have gained greater application here. Many of them asserted that their mobility has brought gains not only in the form of an income, but also as greater acceptability for the family. To quote one of the most successful women panchayat presidents in Kerala, from the Alappuzha district: "I have been successful for three consecutive terms and now everyone knows me. Though my husband is a local leader of the DYFI, he is known after me. My children too get this recognition."

Further, she views her long and successful career as a panchayat president not as a springboard to a higher-level political career or more intense political activism, but as valuable, marketable experience that could secure her employment

By now I have learned all the rules and guidelines of the implementation of development projects. I have coordinated and implemented the development projects of various other government agencies. I know that my party may not give me another chance to contest as I have been here for three consecutive terms. Hence I need to find another job, and so earned a Masters' Degree through distance education. I think I can work with an NGO and the skills and abilities I have so far acquired may be utilized well there.

Just how influential this view of working in local governance is, was evident from what we observed in interviews with two women of different generations in the Alappuzha district. The first belongs to the earlier era of radical public action for redistribution of productive resources; the latter, to the 1990s.Both are very successful panchayat presidents. The latter however, sees it as training for a job – while she agrees that being president has brought her social respect, a job was always a 'dream'. The former told us how she gave up government employment to be a fulltime political activist in the

1960s, with the qualifying remark that, "if it were now, I wouldn't have done that". The opposition between political activism and employment is apparently wearing down, at least for elite women.

It is important to note that neither of these constitutes a critique of the masculinist ideal of the political subject. Indeed, all it does is to transfer this ideal to the higher realms of the political domain – thus moving up the political ladder also involves going closer to the masculinist ideal in greater or lesser degrees. Very few of these women have actually reached the higher levels and this is hardly surprising. Given the visible decline of the first route – that of mass mobilization – the second is more frequently resorted to. Thus women who reach the top have powerful sponsors and need to shrewdly utilize opportunities thrown up by factional fights between party patriarchs and other crisis situations. In sum, even though decentralization has created a whole group of 'successful women' who are widely endorsed in their locality, it holds no possibility of smooth entry into the higher realms of political decision-making.

This point is further supported by the fact that if one considers those positions of power within the machinery of local governance not covered by reservation norms (and thus entirely subject to the control of political parties), women certainly are much less present. It is widely perceived that considerable, indeed, decisive, power is exercised by the Standing Committee Chairpersons in panchayats, something also evident to us in the course of

fieldwork. The pattern described above is well-discernible in the gender break-up of the three major chairpersonships of standing committees of Finance, Development, and Welfare, in the panchayat: in 2007, women at the higher levels were few, but the distribution seems less influenced by gender. At the lower levels, women are somewhat more, but their presence is highly gendered. For 2007, of the total of 14 district panchayats, one- seventh of the finance committee chairpersonships were held by women; they also held one-seventh of the welfare committee standing committee chairpersonships; of the 14 development standing committee chairpersonships, one was held by a woman (see Appendix 2, Table 2e.). But as we go down to the second tier of local bodies, to the Block Panchayats, more women appear, but within a more drastically gendered pattern. Of 71 block panchayats (out of the 152 blocks in all), 62 have male chairpersons for finance standing committees, and only 2 have females; 62 of the 71 development standing committee chairpersons are male, and just 9 are female. However, in the welfare standing committees, women exceed one-third the total numbers. However, in the lowest tier, one finds, again, that though more women figure as welfare standing committee chairpersons compared to the other two positions, their presence is lower – about 20 per cent – than in comparable positions in the higher tiers. Going by our sample, women's share in the total positions goes up from 14.03 per cent in the village panchayats, to 17.84 at the block level, only to fall to 11.90 at the district panchayat level – the third tier which involves considerable political influence (Table 2e).

Interestingly, as far as our fieldwork goes, it appears that a sort of 'reverse reservation' is also at work -- the presence of a woman panchayat president often means that the standing committee chairpersons will all be male (Appendix 2, Tables 2f ; 2g.). In our sample of 57 male- and 57 female-headed village panchayats randomly selected, it turned out that in 44 of the latter, standing committee chairpersonships are held exclusively by men, and just 13 showed a mixed pattern, of one woman and two men. Exclusively male standing committee chairpersonships were also frequently found in the presence of a male panchayat president, but mixed chairpersonships appear to be more here. In the male-headed panchayats, the all-male group was 26, and the mixed (one man and two women) and 'more women' (i.e. two women and one man) groups together, 31 – less of a difference between the two figures, compared with 44 and 13 for the women-headed ones. It is worth reflecting whether this pattern signifies 'reverse reservation' – does the acceptance of a woman as panchayat president, very frequently, involves the tacit 'reservation' of the three major standing committee chairpersonships for men ? The opposite scenario – of a male panchayat president and three women standing committee chairpersons – is almost unthinkable, though we did find one panchayat in our sample where this is true. Even instances of two women standing committee chairpersons are comparatively rare in our sample. It is also worth noting, again, that women are largely in welfare standing committees -- indeed, the sole woman in the 'mixed' group, and one of the women in the 'more women' group is most often a welfare standing

committee chairperson -- a pattern that firms up in block level data too (Tables 2h; 2i).

Also, considering other non-reserved realms as far as women are concerned – the seats in the General, SC, and ST categories in village panchayats – much progress do not seem to be in evidence (Appendix Table 2. c.). The better gains of the ST women (16.29%) compared to the (elite) women in the General category (5.05%) are intriguing indeed; they probably reveal how more women are inducted precisely when men with the requisite skills may be less in number – and this is certainly the case with tribal men in Kerala. The same pattern may be found in the other tiers as well. Quite obviously, most women's entry into local governance is still largely through and because of reservations, ten years down the line, now. In the general segments open to both sexes, males continue to predominate and the less-than-10-per-cent presence of women in Kerala's legislative assembly since independence continues unabated in most of them.

The response of the 'successful' women to our questions about the local party leaders' interference in the panchayat's functioning may provide some pointers about the manner in which these women relate to them. Almost all claimed that the party did not interfere in any aspect (though some discreetly added," at least not in this panchayat", or simply that "the party has to be consulted on all major decisions") of local governance. Interestingly, many argued that the party's influence was restricted to the *nayam* – technically a

word that refers to a broad policy framework. However, in their elaboration of what this was, *nayam* seemed to be many things: sometimes it was just the broad policy framework, at other times, it looked like a set of rules for dealing with day-today administration and welfare allotment; at other moments, it appeared to be a set of priorities that were to be compulsorily followed as long as one stayed within the party; or it was somewhat like a specific habitus – something one 'knew' having grown up in a 'party family'.

As for their commitment to gender issues, most of the 'successful' women panchayat presidents agreed that more needed to be done for women. In politics, they felt that women are consistently undervalued and more subject to social regulation compared to their male counterparts. Most commonly, they referred to defamation and the resentment of male colleagues as the major hurdled they face. And they were often candid about their parties' indifference to the second-class citizenship they endure – indeed, they mention their husbands' support all the time. Many had strong views on gendering development – yet, interestingly, when they talked of the actual work they had done, it was usually a recounting of the many efforts that , at best, stay well within either (an androcentric version of) welfarism or the WID framework. Or worse. For instance, one district panchayat president first hotly contested men's claim over public spaces especially public libraries, and then spoke approvingly of the Library *Sangham*'s efforts to run mobile libraries that delivered books to women at home. A woman president in a village panchayat in north Kerala was gearing up for a welfare scheme to help

"marry off" all unmarried women. Unmarried women, she felt, represented a "social problem", and the project came under the measures for social security instituted by the panchayat. The latter of course is an exception but it shows how far the reiteration of dominant gender norms can go – and this project has now become reality (*Matrubhumi*, Kozhikode edition, July 6). Political decentralization had envisaged the setting up of *Jagrata samitis* – formal gender justice committees – to look into complaints of gender harassment in panchayats. These are not active in the larger number of panchayats; and their activity status seems to depend on not so much the 'successful' woman president's presence, as the interest taken by women's wings of parties, especially, the CPM's All-India Democratic Women's Association.

It needs to be reiterated that for all the articulation of the 'gentle power' supposedly characteristic of women, independent decisions regarding local governance made by the new women entrants, right ones or wrong, are not readily tolerated. What seems to be happening at the local level is the creation of a hypermoralized space – the 'community' – with which women are identified and which remains separate from, and controlled by, local politics. The strong grip on all decisions of the Standing Committee Chairpersons, who are usually experienced local (male) politicians, whose contacts with the party leadership and experience of political dealings far exceeds the newly-inducted panchayat president's, is something widely admitted to in all panchayats. Women who defy these boundaries pay a heavy price – especially women who try to go beyond the circle of local

politics. Here there is a difference between women politicians who have entered local governance who are not subject to such control and the new entrants to local governance who try for upward mobility. The experience of women who have fallen out with the party as presidents testifies to this – and the punishment for not yielding is permanent political exile. One such ex-president from Thrissur, a woman of considerable abilities, who was ousted by her party colleagues precisely because she attempted to initiate work to make a canal usable for local irrigation, a long-standing need of the local people, testified to this. In this case, the work on the canal was carried out with mass support from the panchayat, and of course such work would have brought her an independent mass base. Not only was she ousted, she also had to face considerable sexual allegations, and finally, her contact with the local party circles was completely axed. Now she is completely outside politics and earns a living through other market-based activities.

The possibility of upward mobility in the field of politics for these women, too, depends on the strength of their links with these locally powerful men. For instance, women need help from such men to mobilise funds from party supporters – it is certainly not becoming of a 'respectable woman' in Kerala (or even her husband) to be dealing in money with strange men. And respectability is now an indispensable eligibility condition to contest in local politics. As a ex-panchayat president from Kottayam district remarked:

Women need more funds [than men] to stay in politics.
They will have to travel at night; but we can't afford a bad
name. I have myself asked auto rickshaws to wait, and paid
300 to 400 rupees. Men have many sources – businessmen,
contractors, other organizations—who give them money.
Women can't directly tap such sources, especially newcomers
in politics.

However, there are the few women who have gained entry into the higher levels of politics through the panchayati raj institutions or through institutions of decentralized development who represent the new breed of 'superwomen'. These are elite women, highly qualified, with some degree of experience of public activism before they were inducted into the new institutions – sometimes with a background of KSSP activism. They are projected as the combination of excellent managerial skills and public adherence to bourgeois norms of respectability and femininity – an ideal particularly preferred and advocated by the AIDWA Kerala, the women's front of the CPM. In the recent factional fights within the left, Congress, and the BJP, prominent women activists have indeed accused of lacking sexual and political morality. It must be remembered that in the upper echelons, sexual slander can affect the political careers of male and female politicians alike if (and only if) they fail to secure upward mobility. The ability to survive such assaults on character depends upon the shrewdness with which the female aspirant for political power chooses sides. Thus the 'superwomen' still

remain heavily dependent on the patronage of factions, controlled by powerful male politicians.

Indeed, we also found interesting instances in which women of the earlier generation have successfully 'adapted' to present times. Particularly worth mentioning is the story that a very successful ex-district panchayat president, again, a senior woman schooled in public activism, told us, about dealing with the bureaucracy, the 'gentle way'. She argued that women leaders cannot deal with bureaucrats the same way men to – 'gentle power' is necessary when women handle such issues. More interestingly, she told us another story of how she managed to get rid of a corrupt panchayat official through, again, the 'feminine' way. She had to negotiate a very difficult situation, with a narrow majority in council and her own party colleagues resenting a woman's presence. She managed to slip out of their surveillance on a trip to Thiruvananthapuram, meet the Chief Minister directly, and make a complaint about the erring official. But when the ruling party (she was with the then-Opposition) managed to get him back, she resorted to precisely what she knew best – agitational politics. But such instances of effective flexibility are more the exception than the rule.

c.   Ironies, Tragedies and Opportunities

That entry into local governance is no foolproof passport into higher politics is also evident from the experience of women in urban governance,

who are also elite. These women are different from women in the village panchayats in that they are usually upper middle class, with very high education or professional qualifications. In urban spaces which are far more complex socially, and where extremely powerful and fast paced urban processes are presently unfolding, the language of feminine altruistic giving does not work much. Indeed, the professional qualifications of women chosen to lead urban bodies appear to be recognition of the need to generate efficient managers, rather than generous givers. Yet, however much the women themselves may try, the complex politico-economic forces unleashed at present in urban areas in Kerala work against them. Such failure or 'inefficiency' gets quickly translated into gendered accusations of women's inherent incompetence at dealing with complex situations. Mercy Williams, the Mayor of Kochi told us:

> Kochi's problems did not spring up one fine morning. The issue of waste disposal, the traffic congestion, the City Centre getting overcrowded – all these issues are old. But media and other politicians presented these as new issues before the public, and as my failures, as a woman. But I have tried to intervene effectively in people's issues. In this office, earlier, people could come only via agents. That is not the case today.

As Williams makes clear, her effort is to build for herself a base through improving administrative efficiency. However given the present

situation managerial and administrative efficiency in a rapidly urbanizing environment like Kochi cannot be carried out without strong support from political parties. As Williams points out, on her own, she has been able to root out corruption in the administration, which however, does not rescue her from gendered accusations of inefficiency. In this case, there is the implication that the female Mayor's role is the managerial one. This leads to a peculiar situation: the woman who plays the (gendered) role assigned to her, which has limited impact, given immediate circumstances in a city like Kochi; this limited impact, which leaves many more complex issues unattended, is however is read immediately as her failure 'as a woman'.

At the same time, when the woman leader in urban governance tries to build political alliances or support – i.e., makes the efforts to raise herself up as a politician—that is also read as somehow illegitimate. The recent experience of a woman leader in the Kottayam Municipality was telling indeed. This woman, a new entrant, was asked to resign from the post of Municipal Chairperson by her party leadership, and she refused. A non-confidence motion was tabled against her, but she survived it with the support of a group within her party that supported her, and members of the Opposition. She told us:

> Changing sides is something common in politics. My
> own party which should have protected me, turned hostile.
> Violence was unleashed against me. They say I'm too self-

willed and bold. Well, can anyone rule without that? Changing sides isn't anything new. Is there a rule that I alone can't do it? That was my situation. Now I have the support of [the Opposition] to rule. I haven't joined them. If I join them, that's the end! I'll push ahead this term like this. I won't fail. They are making false allegations of corruption, which are unproved.

In our other interviews with women leaders in urban governance, there was generally the unwillingness to approve of this leader's decision to stick to power, even among women affiliated to the party which is the Opposition in Kottayam, supporting here there. There was the impression that she had 'gone too far', that defying the party to play 'politics' was too much. This is in sharp contrast to public reactions to such shifts involving male politicians – for instance, in Palakkad, in 2007.

Thus a strange double-bind exists for these women: given the complex situation in urban areas, these women cannot work as efficient managers without strong negotiating and alliance-building skills; and when they try to do so, they are accused of 'politicking' and neglecting their managerial duties.

Other opportunities do exist for women in the lowest tier, which do not require conformity to the image of the Generous Giver. Indeed, there are panchayats where trope may not work – where environmental destruction

fuelled by extractive growth, like sand mining, or rock quarrying or destructive development, such as dam building, and the entry of the real estate interests, or waste dumping by cities, upsets the normal hum of routine village life. Interestingly, the narratives of many 'successful' panchayats presidents, which highlight their managerial and welfare disbursement skills, completely bypass serious issues in their respective areas that have been the raging debate in the media and which have provoked widespread public protests. The contrast between the silence maintained, in our interview with her, by a prominent woman president from north Kerala, generally acknowledged as one of the most successful women in local governance here, about the controversial spraying of the pesticide Endosulphan, which is said to have led to serious genetic damage among people, and which happened in close proximity to her panchayat, even though she was on the Advisory Committee of precisely the agricultural research institute that had advised the spraying, was intriguing indeed. It contrasted sharply with active role taken by two other women panchayat presidents in central Kerala in support of local people's agitation against extraction of natural resources, is striking indeed. Though all three women are of the CPM, their specific locations do seem to matter. The former is located in the northern Kasaragod district, where left dominance is largely unquestioned, while both the latter are in the Thrissur district where the left and the Congress are more evenly matched. In the former area, the woman panchayats president rides on the crest of the party's strength and the plaudits she has won are largely for administrative efficiency. In contrast, two women presidents from Thrissur have no such

readymade support base; for them, taking an active lead in popular struggles was important in gaining upward mobility. They were ward members and very active in the struggle against the degradation of the Muriyad lake, which was identified to be the cause of intense drinking water shortage in the area. The popularity they garnered in the struggles stood them in good stead, and they contested and won the elections to become panchayats presidents. Interestingly, both women have continued to actively support popular protests – actually, eight panchayats around the Muriyad Lake passed a resolution against activities that degraded the lake, under popular pressure. Interestingly, though the trope of the Generous Giver was irrelevant in each context, both these women drew upon a gendered discourse to describe their role – of the nurturer of the local people's wellbeing (as distinct from the liberal ideal of the generous giver). This self-perception of moral responsibility as nurturers towards the long term wellbeing of the people, and intricate understanding of the immediate environmental issues confronting the panchayats however, do not seem to clash with their ease with political power. Nor are they shy of articulating a critique of the design of decentralisation. Both were involved closely in the early campaign phase of political decentralisation, and argue that structurally, the whole project was based on a notion of development not friendly to long term nurturing of the people's wellbeing. The upward mobility of these two women was due to a combination of two factors: the relative lack of near-total dominance of any one political party, and a popular struggle beyond political divisions. Predictably, such situations are relatively few at present. But given that

environmental issues are beginning to impact the lives of ordinary people in rural areas, and because political decentralisation has had the unintended consequence of weakening centralised control of parties, such situations may increase in the future. Indeed, another interesting instance was that of a tribal woman panchayat president in the Wayanad district, who successfully fought off a dam, which threatened the whole community. This district is one in which tribal people, despite being a sizeable chunk of the local population, are woefully disempowered, and therefore, it is not easy for a tribal woman to win widespread popular support. Her success has now allowed her to build a strong base in the panchayat, not dependent on the patronage of the local party elite. In contrast, when women who were active in local environmental struggles enter local governance as presidents with the support of prominent political parties, or when women presidents try to raise such issues on their own, the effect is often disempowerment – as was evident in the experience of a woman panchayat president who was pushed out through a no- confidence motion, in which members of her own party participated, because she tried to find a solution to the mounting problem of waste mismanagement in her panchayat, which angered the powerful seaside resort lobby there.

It is often remarked about the 33 per cent reservations that it allowed space for non-elite women in local governance, to dalit, adivasi, and Muslim women. As mentioned earlier, these women were marginal to the political domain, albeit in different ways. Dalit women were confined to the margins of political mobilisations, and never freed of gender, and gender was never

really exorcised through its politicisation. Tribal women remain generally far away from modern politics until recent times: the number of tribal women in politics still remains abysmally low. There is an unstated 'selection process' at work, partly dictated by the need to handle bureaucratic workloads in the panchayat, and partly by the need to follow 'party discipline'. It is interesting that the dalit women who were favoured by all parties including the left parties seem to have been chosen for the formal education they have acquired, and less for their awareness of issues regarding their respective communities. Indeed, though the trade unions of Kerala, especially on the left, have traditionally included large numbers of dalit women workers, who are articulate (if one goes by research such as that conducted by Lindberg on cashew workers), well-aware of the modalities of political struggle, and committed, they are largely outside. The differences are significant, particularly the fact that these women do have considerable prior experience in politics, especially in militant political action.

Here again the ironies are conspicuous: these women who belong to and represent their respective groups also are answerable to the whole panchayat. The design of decentralised governance structures lends itself to such duality: group interests are acknowledged in welfare distribution but positions of power are supposed to be neutral. Since the claims and interests of different social groups are acknowledged in the norms of welfare distribution, 'neutrality' means the proper adherence to these norms. An acute consciousness of one's membership in an interest group and its specific

rights and claims on the state is then necessary to ensure such adherence. Thus unless the dalit/adivasi president is conscious of his/her status as also the representative of a social group with clear-cut rights and claims upon the state, such neutrality that ensures the strict adherence to norms of welfare redistribution may not be kept. This is indeed a problem in Kerala, in which the left and the non-left – barring the dalit parties and groups at the fringes of the political field – actively discourage the subordinated castes – dalits and adivasis -- from such consciousness, and encourage its subsumption under class. Particularly striking was one case of 'fair distribution', reported from a panchayat in Kozhikode district, in which the distribution of the Special Component Plan (SPC) fund to scheduled castes in the panchayat for renovation of houses aroused tensions, which led the panchayat president -- an dalit woman president herself -- to implement 'fair distribution' by dipping into the own funds of the panchayat to distribute similar benefits to other castes.

The inability to represent the community extracts a huge cost in terms of the community's support for the woman herself. One particularly telling instance was a contrast we found in between two tribal women activists from north-central Kerala, both of who had been active in a major anti-dam agitation, and who had both contested the elections as rivals. Of these, the woman who won and became the panchayat president, obviously had to carry a huge load of expectation, failed miserably to fulfil them, trapped as she was in decisions of the party elite. Further, she was also subjected to

violence by her husband as a way of disciplining her within the 'party line'. In contrast, her rival, who lost, continued in the anti-dam agitation and has now grown to be the major spokeswoman of her community, appearing in several public forums on their behalf. But despite such ideas of 'neutrality' that these women held, it was clear many a time that subtle, though powerful, forms of caste discrimination are deployed against these women. This ranged from denial of state-provided privileges and facilities, to outright denial of personal respect.

Besides, to use 'special' interests for the benefit for the whole community need not bring political advantage to the dalit woman – indeed such strategy could backfire grievously if the local leadership perceives this act as one of self-assertion. This may happen even when the woman in question does not occupy a SC/St reservation post, but belongs to a community stigmatized in the dominant caste order. The most recent case is the dismissal of a woman panchayat president of the fisher community in Thiruvananthapuram through a non-confidence motion tabled by members of both ruling side and the opposition, accusing her of corruption and nepotism. In her interview with us, she had anticipated this fate – pointing out that she had lobbied hard with the Minister of Fisheries (who hails from the fisher community himself) for a drinking water project that would benefit the whole community, but demanded it as 'our [community] interest'. This project, however, was dismissed by other members, and the upper caste Nair community, who declared that they did not need the 'fisherwoman's water'.

Indeed, it revealed how the mantle of the Generous Giver is not easily conceded to the non-elite woman. The panchayat president mentioned above, despite all these hurdles, did manage to perform efficiently in the panchayat; she feels that she has created for herself a mass base. She was apparently unseated by the work of the seaside resort lobby, but she had the support of the Tourism Department of the State, and remains confident. The heavy security arrangements on the day of the non-confidence motion, apparently, was to prevent violent protests against the non-confidence by local people, who she feels, are recognize the good work she has done there. It is quite possible that the local party may find that she is indispensable there, if she has indeed garnered ground support. Success stories like this may not be unheard, but what it reveals, also, is that it was precisely when she moved ahead of the Generous Giver's role to that of the political leader finding a lasting solution to a perennial crisis that affected the life of the whole population of the panchayat, that she was unseated.

In fact, the breach of the limit set by the local party leadership has at times had really violent consequences for the woman; punishments have ranged from slander and verbal insults, to physical violence through the husband. Tribal women were more forthcoming about talking of such forms of violent disciplining. Also, these women usually are younger, if better-educated, and they face the threat of sexual slander more (see, Appendix 2, Table 2d). It is striking that neither their mothers, who often have greater exposure to public life through the unions, nor their less-educated, more

needy counterparts, get much of the present opportunities. No wonder, so many of the women members, across caste and community – and in fact, the present Minister of Health and Family Welfare, P.K. Sreemathy herself -- publicly carry the suffix 'teacher' next to their names -- .so we have not just, say, Sreemathy or Nafisa or Mary, but often, 'Sreemathy Teacher', 'Nafisa Teacher', or 'Mary Teacher'. Historically, the teacher's position has been taken as specifying 'respectable' public femininity in Kerala. However, the 'teacher' image is not something a younger dalit woman has ready access too.

Here a contrast is certainly visible, at least in the abilities of dalit and non-dalit women to resist sexual slander and domestic violence. The instances of such resistance we found among the elite women were interesting precisely because they appeared to be able to resist on the strength of self-confidence about 'flawless reputations', both in the family and outside. A senior woman panchayat president from central Kerala, who was being abused by her husband over her alleged 'unfaithfulness', pointed out that she resisted him, since she was fully confident of her 'good reputation' not only in the family but also in the panchayat. Indeed, this woman enjoys considerable popularity in the panchayat, belonging to a reputed, politically powerful family, and a very popular figure. Such strategy may simply be unavailable to the dalit woman; we did come across one instance in which a young Dalit ex-panchayat president in northern Kerala who had to pay a huge cost: she too faced the same situation at home, but her husband left her, marrying again, and leaving her with no foothold either at home or in the party.

Age is, indeed, a major axis of social power in contemporary Malayalee society, and therefore the fact that women members and presidents of Dalit and adivasi communities are younger than their elite counterparts may be a significant factor limiting them. In Kerala, there is much greater expectation on women to heed such hierarchies and defer to elders– not surprising given that their accepted location is within the family and community. As Table 2.b of Appendix 2 reveals for election data from 2005, going by averages, women members are almost 10 years junior to men in each tier, and this gap is serious when viewed in the background of Kerala's political culture in which age and seniority in the party both matter. However, it is clear that the gap is much less between elite men and women (in the general and women reservation categories), except for Block Panchayats. The choice of younger women is usually justified by citing their better educated status; yet given that middle-aged and senior men and women do enjoy greater access to social power, the additional disadvantage it produces for underprivileged women cannot be ignored. When one compares the average ages of women panchayat presidents who have won from SC/ST/SC woman/ST woman wards, with the average ages of women presidents who have won from either the General wards or the Women reservation wards, a difference is apparent: the former are about 6-9 years younger than both the latter groups, on an average (Table 2 d. Appendix 2), and the difference diminishes as we move to the Block level (where, except for women in the Women Reservation group, the total numbers are really low for the others – 9 and 11). But if we were to compare

the incidence of women below the age of 30 in each group for the village panchayats, the difference is striking. Some 43.75 per cent of the former are below 30 while for the latter, the number is below 10 per cent.

d.   Muslim Women: Formal vs. Strategic Opportunities?

Muslim women were more limited to domestic and community spaces, in comparison with the women of the new elite communities in Kerala that made significant gains from the early 20th century community reform and the mid-20th century expansion of public welfare. The new opportunities have indeed brought a number of Muslim women into local governance, and some of them have achieved success braving death threats and threats of expulsion from the faith. Interestingly Muslim women who have entered governance seek to symbolically reiterate their allegiances to the faith, naming it as a condition for entry into the public through local governance, which ensures the community's acceptance. Thus many choose to wear the *hijab* as a way of proclaiming their submission to Islamic gender norms as they seek to enter the public – the aspirants to political power too find it a very useful strategy. Indeed, this is another way in which elite femininity gets reaffirmed – the *hijab* is indeed symbolic of elite Muslim femininity in Kerala, brought here by global Islam, which reached Kerala through migrants to the Gulf, symbolizing higher incomes and respectability – as a condition that permits women's participation in the public. Men are of course not encumbered in similar fashion: the burden of displaying allegiance to the community and assent for

its gender norms does not fall much on them, at least when compared with the women.

Muslim women politicians – of the Muslim League or the CPM -- often belong to the educated Muslim elite, who hold liberal personal values. Many of them possess skills found among elite women – many drive cars, and follow a daily physical exercise regime, and handle considerable wealth. These women too find the *hijab* a useful instrument. A leading woman politician of the Muslim League, who put on her *hijab* before we interviewed her, justified its use thus:

> When we enter the public we should do so as ideal Muslim
> women. If not men and other family members won't let their
> women associate with us in political activism. We must gain
> their trust, and that of the public. In this our dressing styles
> and behaviour are all important.

This is more characteristic of Muslim League women who identify Muslims as their major constituency. The Muslim women in the CPM follow such dress codes only minimally – and often when under threat, as in a panchayat in Kasaragod, where the woman president received death threats.

Interestingly while decentralization has brought new opportunities for women in the new institutions of local governance, the Muslim League does

not offer women a platform. Different women reacted to this lack differently. A woman president from Malappuram who we found was not articulate on either politics or local governance, explained her disinterest by pointing out that such spaces were not permitted to women by Islam, and that she was in her present seat merely to protect the interests of her community's party – the Muslim League. This makes an interesting contrast with another Muslim League woman politician, who left local governance for politics. She had been a councillor in the Kozhikode Corporation, and remarked that she left local governance to work as a party activist precisely because it appeared pointless to her to 'represent' the community/party when even basic minimal space was not being offered to women by the latter.

Indeed, women politicians in the Muslim League look towards not just the expansion of formal political spaces but also to strategic opportunities: interestingly, in the 1990s, such an opportunity came in the wake of a much publicized sex scandal involving a very powerful Muslim League leader in Kerala. In the public debate that followed, the Muslim League sought to make good use of the articulate, educated elite Muslim women in the party to fend off allegations raised by feminists. In this, the elite Muslim women politicians are equally savvy as any of their sisters in other communities. That strategic opportunities provide avenues to women to enter and establish themselves in high politics, equal or more important than formal expansion of political spaces through reservations etc. seems to be general across the political spectrum. The 'strategic opportunity' may vary—it could be a crisis, such as

the sex scandal mentioned above, or party factional wars (recently in the Congress, the BJP, the CPM), or even political agitation (such as the anti-Muslim BJP communal mobilization at Marad, Kozhikode, in which women took a very visible public role).

In fact this route offers another interesting contrast with the other avenue, the expansion of spaces for women's representation within the party's mass organizations. Many a time, it appears that such space is not claimed as one of rights, but as a handout from above. A senior woman politician on the left who has displayed keen interest in 'gendering political parties' pointed out this, "These days, the positions set apart for women inside political parties cannot be used to full advantage, precisely because they have been handed down to us…" She further remarked that women in political parties were more or less silent or silenced when the issue of sexual violence by prominent politicians was vociferously raised by feminists in the recent years. Referring to one such infamous case, she said, "All the evidence was there, but we were limited." She then drew a contrast between the poor performance of women in politics on such issues, and the considerably greater achievements of women leaders in the oppositional civil society.

This would have completely different implications for women's agency, in fact limiting it to 'women's concerns and interests', and as defined by the party elite. What is important is that both avenues do not hold any sure promises as far as the agenda of advancing women's citizenship is concerned.

In the former, women actively manoeuvre to widen the crevices in the monolith, and this may involve recourse to the most regressively gendered positions ("I obey my husband absolutely and will renounce public life if he orders me to")[10]. In the latter, women occupy a supposedly representative space, but may have no real say in determining the content of representation. Even the attempts to mainstream gender within party organizations may end up reinforcing male patronage – when they are perceived not as women's rights but as the munificence of the party.

A few general points seem to emerge from the above discussion: one, it is clear that women aspirants to political power may not be able to make much headway – irrespective of whether they seek to represent women, or simply aspire to access political power -- through the opportunities for decentralization in the present form. On the one hand, the division between the 'community' and 'local politics' prevents them from reaching out to grasp political power; on the other, without an acute sense of their status as

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[10]   Here there is a clear difference between the salutations to the husband's role offered by women of earlier generations, like Leela Damodara Menon's autobiography is titled 'In the Shadow of My Husband', who outgrew the shadows to become powerful politicians. There seems to be an inversion in the present generation: the active new–generation women politicians often have husbands who are not major figures themselves – yet, almost without fail, they reiterate their determination to 'obey'.

representatives of particular interest groups – be they women, dalit, or adivasis – the panchayat presidents may be unable to ensure 'neutrality' in welfare distribution and other matters. In both cases, the lacks can be solved, in the long run, only through the political parties committing themselves wholeheartedly to ensuring substantial representation to disadvantaged groups in the panchayati raj institutions, and in other positions of power within the panchayats which are not bound by reservation norms. The continuing relevance of oppositional civil social pressures, which reiterate the rights of women, dalits, adivasis and other marginalized groups on political parties, must be underlined here.

Secondly, though the women panchayats presidents in Kerala are rarely proxies in the strict sense, there are subtle ways of control to which they submit – which needs to be traced out in greater length. Indeed the violence endured by women who have been perceived to be non-submissive testifies to the tight, if less visible, nature of such control.

Thirdly, given the present functioning of the panchayati raj institutions as institutions distributing minimum welfare entitlements, which make them amenable to reproducing entrenched gendered self-perceptions, it is difficult to expect any serious challenge to established gender norms from women's participation in them. The question is not really whether these women actually adhere to these norms or not. Indeed the public reiteration of these norms appears to be an essential condition for acceptability in public. Beyond

that, one's ability to manoeuvre depends on the resources and connections one is able to make. As for the misogynist social ethos, it remains untouched whether such manoeuvres are successful or not. Here again, the relevance of independent critique of entrenched gender norms, which could exert pressure from without, and the urgent need for alternate platforms and networks for women in local governance, appear indisputable.

Chapter two

Women at the Interface of Politics and Governance: A 'Civil-Political Society'?

a.   The Kudumbashree: Between 'Responsibilization' and Politics?

In the egalitarian Developmentalist framework that was hegemonic in Kerala from roughly end of the 1940s to the mid-1980s, the organised sector male worker was the central subject. Women were addressed largely as managers of the domestic domain and development interventions were geared towards the rationalisation of the domestic sphere. In the Community Development Project of the 1950s, women were largely addressed primarily as caregivers for the family, and much effort was directed to improving such skills, adding some encouragement to income generation through home-based economic activities. The Central Social Welfare Boards established social welfare extension projects and encouraged the setting up of *Mahila Samajams* (women's associations) in the Second Plan, generally focused on domestic concerns (Eapen 2000:4).

In the domain of public politics, especially left radical politics from the 1940s, modern-educated lower middle class political activists – often mostly male school teachers, government employees, and lawyers -- mediated between the upper echelons of parties, and the masses. In Malabar (north

Kerala) where the communists grew in strength from the late 1930s through the establishment of an extensive string of youth associations, reading clubs, village libraries, and social service volunteer groups, mostly of men, by male activist-mediators (Kunhikkrishnan 1996). The 'social capital' that these mediators [1]activated arose from both their social location and educational achievements, and their closeness to political parties. However, most of the mediator- groups –especially school teachers and minor bureaucrats -- were intensely unionised and, in the latter half of the 20th century, organised some of the most militant strikes in Kerala's history. This, however, has lead to perceptible erosion in the social capital they commanded.

Indeed, the activation of social capital, especially by leftist educated new elite mediators in the 1940s, faithfully conformed to the three purposes of association-building on the basis of social trust that Tocqueville spells out: (1) a standing resistance to government; (2) a substitute for government; and (3) release and relief from private life. The first two of these, clearly, do indicate that the associations formed were likely to be oppositional: they indicate critical distance from state power. It also gestures at the possibility of public citizen, and not the householder. Indeed, the question of the communist activist's (assumed nearly always to be male) relation to marriage and family was a hotly debated one in the 1940s (Pisharady 1984).   This mediation did

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[1]   Here I draw upon not on Bourdieu's formulation of 'social capital', but on Tocqueville's reflections on associational life in America and the debate around Robert Putnam's formulation of the concept.

allow the left to first, (in the 1940s) to build up strong, enduring resistance to colonialism and state repression, and later, to corrode the disciplinary tendencies of the national-developmental state. Equally important is the fact that many groups positioned 'against the law 'were integrated very closely with the mainstream left, often in the mass organisations.

In the 1990s, political decentralisation was conceived of as a way of reviving engaged citizenship, to work with the state for development. This was tacit admission that the highly politicised workers' activism of the earlier period had stalled production, even if it had secured social development for a large section of society. The leftist political agenda of class equality seemed to move into the backdrop now. Through decentralised governance, social welfare, which had been hitherto claimed as 'people's rights' – in other words, a political right – became first of all, subject to 'responsibilization' (i.e. the idea that the recipients of welfare must be made 'responsible' citizens capable of prudent and productive use of welfare; said another way, 'responsible for their own welfare'). The logic of micro-credit and micro-enterprise thus made sense to planners. Secondly, it began to be concentrated around a certain apolitical and hyper-moralised notion of the local community. Thirdly, at the very heart of this new regime of welfare is the 'empowered woman from the below-poverty-line family'. The 'social capital' and the civic associations identified as effective for the operationalisation of the new regime of welfare, predictably, were strikingly different from the Tocquevillean model: in this case, they needed to generate not critical distance

from state power but the willingness to be its agents; not to form an alternate locus of power but become the very vehicles of government. Importantly, the new associations were not to free citizens from the confines of domestic life. The gender of the new subject of welfare seems important here.

Kudumbashree was begun in 1998 by the government of Kerala with the aim of eliminating poverty within 10 years, by 2008. The present structure, however, began to evolve earlier, in 1991, when the Community-Based Nutrition Programme (CBNP) was initiated by the government of Kerala with active help from UNICEF to improve the n nutritional status of women and children. In this initiative three-tiered structures composed of neighbourhood groups (NHGs) federated into area development societies (ADS) at the ward level, which were in turn federated into a community development society (CDS) at the panchayat level, were formed composed exclusively of women from families identified as underprivileged through a non-income-based index. The success of the CDS model in urban Alappuzha and in rural Malappuram led the government of Kerala to scale up the strategy to the whole of the state in 1998 under the name Kudumbashree, with the State Poverty Eradication Mission taking the responsibility of implementation through the Department of Local Self-government. The Kudumbashree has since followed a multi-pronged strategy, which includes: (a) convergence of various government programmes and resources at the community-based organisation level; (b) efforts to involve the CDS structure in local level anti-poverty planning; and (c) development of women's micro-enterprises, and

thrift and credit societies. Indeed, it has been widely hailed and rewarded for its innovativeness and unprecedented reach. While micro-credit is one among the many strategies initiated in the Kudumbashree strategy, it has been gaining in importance and visibility within the programme. Kudumbashree was conceived to be a state-centric civil society, an autonomous body in the panchayats – the village panchayat president was to be the patron of the Kudumbashree apex body at the village panchayats level, but beyond that, formally, the panchayats exercises no formal control. The local government bodies, in the initial stages were wary of this prospect, and later a consensus was evolved that (a) No government body should use CDS to bypass the local body (b) The autonomy of CDS should not be questioned by local body (c) local bodies have a right to know what is happening, especially when the local bodies' funds are being used (d) The CDS systems are subsystems of local bodies, but not subordinate to them (Kadiyala 2004: 33). At present, the Kudumbashree network consists of 1,83,362 neighbourhood groups, organized under 1057 Community Development Societies (Muralidharan 2007).

The vast majority of BELOW-POVERTY-LINE women are interpellated as subjects of the new welfare precisely as familial beings, representing their respective families. These new associations -- self-help groups of below-poverty-line women set up by the State's poverty alleviation mission under the name 'Kudumbashree' (Prosperity of the Family) – thus reinforce familial ties rather than provide the resources to critique them. However, as we will

see, the new associations being located in the neighbourhoods, or in the community, *some* of the women do step out of familial spaces. These are the mediators between this state-centric civil society and the bureaucracy – young women, generally less-well-off, but not always underprivileged --with high school education and possessing some accounting skills. It is these women who are of interest to us given the overall objectives of this study. We seek to obtain a closer view of the nature and extent of the public citizenship the new women mediators are able to access through their work in the self-help group network, and their implications for the feminist political goals of securing better presence for women in all areas of the political domain, and advancing gender justice in the community.

Thus this part of the report is focused on a large number of in-depth interviews with the Chairpersons of the Kudumbashree apex body in the panchayat, the Community Development Society, who are full-time public workers, and with members and presidents of the second tier, the Area Development Society, in seven districts of Kerala selected to represent the political and economic diversity of the State. We also interviewed ward members and panchayat presidents who entered public life through the Kudumbashree network, and important officials in the Kudumbashree Mission at the district level and at the State Mission Office (See Appendix, Table 2.a). The latter part of this chapter also draws upon our interviews with members and office-bearers of SEWA Kerala, development workers in the

Kerala Mahila Samakhya Society[1] (MSS), and members of four widows' associations, all of which offer underprivileged women significantly different paths towards accessing citizenship.

b.   The Contemporary Uses of Social Capital

Many of the civil social associations that Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2000) praises as cornerstones of democracy are curious in that they are strictly apolitical – that is, they provided important outlets to individuals to escape loneliness and anomie but are not concerned with social power.

Indeed, the single most striking point that emerged in the course of our numerous interviews and interactions with women in leadership positions within the Kudumbashree network is their sense of relief from confinement in domestic space. The intense desire for a life 'outside', away from the 'narrow',

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[1]   The Mahila Samakhya is a women's welfare programme under the Central Government's Ministry of Human Resources. It was started in Kerala in 1998, under the Department of Public Education. It offers gender education and education in development to empower women and girls of the most underprivileged sections, and currently works through women development workers, called *sevini*s, who form women's groups, and works along with both governmental and non-governmental agencies. In Kerala, the MSS works in Idukki and Thiruvananthapuram Districts.

and the pleasure to be had through the social intercourse it offered was expressed by almost every single interviewee. The officials of the Kudumbashree Mission too inevitably flagged this as a, or the, highlight of this programme. Further, members, leaders, female and male ward members and officials, all were enthusiastic, precisely about the social capital that this released.

Investigating how the social capital thus released through the formation of these new civic associations – self-help groups of below-poverty-line women – is utilised may provide interesting clues into the nature of the citizenship these women enjoy. In the case of Kudumbashree, we saw that three kinds of competing authorities seek to utilise the newly produced social capital – the political parties, the panchayat, and the Kudumbashree Mission officials. Given the all-pervasiveness of political parties in Kerala, the presence and influence of the political parties is not surprising. In fact, such efforts were noted in earlier studies on Kudumbashree, for instance, the one by Suneeta Kadiyala, who reports on political parties vying to capture the CDS in the Alappuzha Municipality (Kadiyala 2004: 46). We found that the leaders of the CDS – the CDS Chairpersons (CDS CPs) and leaders of the ADS in panchayats have clear-cut, if indirect, political affiliations. Though most of them are not full-fledged politicians, many belong to 'party families' and have worked at the fringes of mass organisations of political parties. As our research shows, the typical CDS CP in the village panchayat is a woman aged between 30-50, more to the younger side, educated up to the tenth or twelfth

class, usually of an OBC caste, and with clear affiliations with mainstream left politics. The CDS CP is a full-fledged party worker only in those districts of Kerala in which the left's domination is remarkably strong. No wonder, too, that the responsibilities of the Kudumbashree representative from the ward is frequently compared with that of the (female) representative of the ward in the panchayats, for both are largely concerned with welfare activities and less with local party politics. The CDS Chairperson (CDS CP, henceforth) is however considered to be below the panchayat president, and in both cases the difference is that the latter is openly affiliated to parties, while the former is expected to maintain strict neutrality between political parties – in reality, the former often maintains informal but real links with particular parties. This is the reason why there is an active circulation between these positions – there are many instances of the panchayat ward member later becoming a Kudumbashree representative from the ward and vice versa, and even of the former panchayat president becoming the CDC CP and vice versa.

It must also be noted that the CDS CP typically belongs to the better-off section within the below-poverty-line category; some actually admitted to be 'APL [above-poverty-line] in real terms' – and it was also evident that such women were more confident and had more time and energy to spare for CDS activities than their less well-off counterparts. Indeed, the emergent advantages to a 'creamy layer' within the below-poverty-line category via Kudumbashree had been noted by an earlier evaluation (Reynders et al, 2002). Indeed, a CDS CP from the Idukki district who was exposed to the gender

and citizenship education offered by another government programme, the Kerala MSS (KMS), who belongs to the poorer sections of the below-poverty-line category, remarked that this was indeed the difference between the Kudumbashree and the KMS – the latter sought to educate and empower the most underprivileged women while the former tapped on women equipped with skills, who always enjoyed an advantage over their disadvantaged sisters.

In any case, the CDS CP's position is now viewed as a ticket to enter local governance as ward member. Since the Kudumbashree network seems overwhelmingly dominated by the mainstream left parties (as our interviews show), women with other political ambitions – such as many dalit women of the Kerala wing of the Bahujan Samaj Party – do migrate to the rival microcredit networks set up by the Church and other community organisations. Many of the CDS CPs have some experience at the fringes of party politics; often, they have secured promotions within the party hierarchy through their work in the Kudumbashree. Others have been approached by parties and now are affiliated to either the party or its women's wing. The numbers of Kudumbashree women contesting panchayats elections on party tickets are growing steadily. This is the reason why there is an active circulation between these positions – there are many instances of the panchayat ward member later becoming a Kudumbashree representative from the ward and vice versa, and even of the former panchayat president becoming the CDC CP and vice versa.

There were also interviewees from the Kudumbashree and the MSS programme –who argued that party connections were a practical necessity irrespective of whether one had political ambitions or not, since women's mobility was poor in Kerala. In this case, 'party connections' are a strategy to overcome the limitations on women's access to the public – it may not indicate firm connections. A MSS development worker from Idukki put it succinctly:

I'm not an office-bearer or anything but a worker of the CPM – the All-India Democratic Women's Association [AIDWA], that is…once I got into the party, everyone knew me… once you are a party worker you won't be isolated, and they will co-operate [with you]. For instance suppose you got trapped in town after seven o'clock in the evening, one of them will say, "*Chechi* [older sister], you don't go alone", and will come along with you in the auto rickshaw. They help you because of the connection … I don't have membership but I tag along with party people claiming that I'm a party worker.

The same argument was put to us by a CDS CP from Idukki, a widow with children, who told us that she sought the protection of the opposition party when ruling party members, began to interfere in the functioning of the CDS. They unleashed a slanderous campaign, leaving used condoms at her doorstep to paint her as a 'loose woman'; her teenaged son was attacked. She flagged the fact that she was single – and that the disabilities imposed on single

women cannot be overcome by simply being brave. However, in both cases, the women admitted that such protection came at a cost, and that they had to work much more to establish themselves as impartial leaders not swayed by their affiliations. Moreover, these experiences only reveal that free access to public space for women is often something accessed through the protection of powerful political parties, and not something that can be claimed as a fundamental right, even by women in institutions as legitimate as the CDS or the MSS.

However, the claim of CDS CPs to be impartial may not be necessarily untrue. The periodic elections to the CDS once in two years ensure that a shift occurs in the leadership. Kadiyala's study of 2004 indicates that there was indeed the threat of the capture of CDSs by a few powerful women and that there was considerable unwillingness to move out after two years (Kadiyala 2004: 43; also, Anand 2002). But we noticed that most of the CDS CPs we met were in awe of local party leaders and powerful persons in the panchayat, especially the Chairperson of the Welfare Standing Committee (who is mostly male). Studies on decentralisation in Kerala do indicate that corruption is not significant in the distribution of welfare. Our interviewees did reveal that while they gave impartially to people of all parties, they did admit that they used their contacts among the underprivileged to build ground support for their respective parties or mass organisations affiliated to the party. The most commonly mentioned beneficiary of such implicit political work was the women's organisation affiliated to the CPM, the AIDWA. Given this interest,

it may be even necessary for the CDS CP to remain neutral in the distribution of welfare to ensure that her political work is effective. Yet there are clear pointers to the contrary. The influence of ward members who represent the local party is widely admitted by both the panchayats bureaucracy and the local party workers in the panchayats. In our interviews this was reflected in the marked difference in the views of women who claimed that they had no politics, and women who admitted clear-cut party affiliations: while both largely claimed to be neutral, the former had far more stories to tell of how they had resisted the attempts of local party workers and ward members to influence the beneficiary lists, while the latter had almost none. Importantly, our other interviewees – members of widows' associations, SEWA Kerala workers, and development workers with the Kerala MSS -- were fairly united in their view that closeness to the ruling party in the panchayat was necessary, though not always indispensable, for steady access to welfare benefits and to overcome bureaucratic delay.

At the same time, the Kudumbashree network is now closely linked with the panchayats, and all welfare benefits from the panchayats were to flow through it. Early controversies about this network centred around the state's creation of a civil society amenable to it through channelling all welfare benefits through it– thus other development NGOs organising women protested against their exclusion from state welfare and remained defiant, refusing to join it. Now the linkage is complete, and hence the panchayat has a very clear stake in the social capital produced in and through the

Kudumbashree. Indeed, almost all our interviewees, even when they were indignant about it, pointed out that the panchayat's authority was not easily defied, and that such defiance would freeze welfare flows through the Kudumbashree. The panchayat's demands on the labour of the Kudumbashree women are thus largely unchallenged. We found that the narratives of the leaders were quite ambiguous when they described their relation with the panchayat. We found that while the CDS CPs were often harshly critical of the heavy workloads they had to carry, the underprivileged remuneration, the impossible demands on their limited skills and time, and insensitivity of the panchayat to the enormity of the mediating work that they did. Indeed, some instances appeared to be hugely disempowering – shocking instances of an emergent 'work-for-welfare' regime. For example, in the Alappuzha district, in the wake of the epidemic of chikangunya in 2007, the Kudumbashree women were entrusted with the work of chikangunya eradication, and this was carried out under such unsafe conditions, that many women fell ill with chikangunya and other serious ailments like leptospirosis. Not only did the women receive zero compensation, they were asked to do this dangerous and laborious work for an unbelievable pittance, unthinkable in Kerala where the average (male) worker receives a wage much higher than the official minimum wage of Rs 125. In the northern district of Kasaragod, Kudumbashree women were rendering free services as cooks and indeed, collecting cash and provisions, to feed the participants arriving for the local youth festivals in schools; in some parts of the Thrissur district, Kudumbashree women were cleaning up public places in the panchayats as

voluntary service, or for a negligible remuneration. Across the districts, women were being drafted to conduct a variety of surveys for the state and other agencies, again, for a pittance. Kudumbashree women also participate in the process by which the state shifts welfare obligations on to the local community: they are entrusted the work of implementing specific welfare projects, which involve care activities – such as the destitute-rehabilitation project, the *Aashraya*. Interestingly enough, the *Aashraya* was mentioned by many of the CDS CPs we interviewed as the project they felt "most good about" and which required "service mentality". This work drew on the women's gendered sense of moral duty and often very heavily on their time and energy. But they were enthusiastic, and this is not surprising, as such activity does bring gendered moral credit, useful when one seeks to gain space within the hypermoralised space of the local community fundamental to the new regime of local governance – which is clearly distinct from the male space of local politics. In Kozhikode District, a CDS CP told us that when the women complained about the mismatch between workload and remuneration in the below-poverty-line list validation work that they had to do, the Welfare Standing Committee Chairman told them, publicly, that they should not seek personal gain, and that the government was implicitly paying them through the allocations for the (mandatory) Women's Component Plan.

CDS CPs often complained bitterly about these responsibilities, but felt that it was not too costly to defy the panchayat's direction; nor did they want to raise it as an issue among the groups. Many of them pointed out that they

personally and as a group, enjoyed "good relations" with the panchayat, and unlike earlier days, the panchayat was "affectionate". To raise this issue, they feared, may upset the current felicity. And they were all too aware that the friendly relations that they had with the panchayat rested upon their willingness and ability to mobilise social capital through bringing underprivileged women's self-help groups and make it available to the panchayat to extract low-cost development labour.

The third authority is that of the Kudumbashree Mission office, which has the mandate of transforming underprivileged women into responsible economic agents through micro-credit and micro-enterprise. Most of the District Programme Coordinators we interviewed were worried that the panchayats' use of Kudumbashree women as a cheap labour for development activities, and the political parties' rising influence within the network, will equally thwart their own efforts to induct women as empowered agents into the market. They were openly critical of the gender norms that prevent women from accessing training and making contacts and the unwillingness of families, political parties, and the panchayats to concertedly attack these and also concerned about ways of increasing the honorarium paid to the leaders. However, it was clear that the Kudumbashree Mission bureaucracy also felt that the panchayat's authority was difficult to surmount; further, some of them even felt that Kudumbashree women were useful not just to local government, but to the state in a larger sense, to extend the 'eye of the state'. In this case, social capital serves the state, and indeed, paradoxically, may

break up local solidarities. One of the District Programme Coordinators was jubilant that the Kudumbashree women could conduct local surveys that opened up whole localities to the state's governmental gaze. The interview was conducted when the Kudumbashree women were validating the below-poverty-line survey which had been conducted, and he remarked:

Now no one can lie about themselves. Now the surveys are being conducted by women who belong to those localities. Earlier they could lie that they had no TV, or that they didn't have a well, because the enumerator wasn't a local person. Now if someone lies, the Kudumbashree women will know, they will call out. Now they can't even lie about the number of *sarees* in the house. If someone lies that she has only three, her neighbour will cry out that she has not three but four and not of the colours mentioned.

Clearly in this new regime of 'responsibilized' welfare, the CDS CP is an important conduit of governmental power. She connects officialdom to the local domestic world, encourages the generation of social capital, and ensures that it is made useful to the above-mentioned authorities. However, the Kudumbashree being 'state-centric civil society', the CDS CP's political affiliations are not expected to inform her work in the self-help group network. Except in districts or areas where particular political parties have unquestioned dominance, these affiliations are always kept discreet. Indeed the feeling seems to be that they have to be so, *necessarily*, if she must exert

influence over those sections of people in the panchayat who are of a different political affiliation. Parties field panels and indeed, in the Thrissur district where the LDF and UDF are more or less equally matched, we found that the CDS elections are often as charged as the panchayat elections. Besides, the CDS CPs are also proximate to the panchayat, both to members and officials, and this raises their levels of influence among the welfare recipients.

The single most striking gain from women's entry as mediators of the new welfare seems to be the knowledge these women have gained of the rules and procedures of welfare distribution, which they do pass on, to a greater or lesser extent, to other women. However, there is indeed a difference between learning to follow rules and procedures/helping others to follow the same, and learning to observe whether others, especially higher-ups, are following the rules or not, and opposing deviation from the rule. Many of our interviewees complained bitterly that the higher-ups – panchayat members and officials – often flouted rules, but very few reported that they had openly opposed this.

Thus, as far as the question of underprivileged women's access to full citizenship is considered, the space that the CDS CP occupies in the public, however, is at best ambivalent. On the one hand, these women are important to all the three authorities at the local level; on the other hand their subjection to gendered norms of femininity is, indeed, accentuated. It is also a precarious space – for only as far as the CDS CP works to shape governable subjects out

of underprivileged women can she retain 'friendly relations' with the panchayat, and the local political party leaders. Again, this is no entry-ticket to the higher echelons of politics where elite status, education, and familiarity with the political public count heavily.

The reiteration of gender conservatism, moreover, was a common feature among all our interviewees, and this involved more than sexual conservatism (which, apparently, affects public men as well, to a lesser degree perhaps, but nevertheless). The exceptions were striking: they were women who had prior exposure to NGO work, or to gender education programmes that emphasised women's access to citizenship, like the Kerala MSS Programme in the Idukki District. Some of the most active and successful CDS CPs were women with such exposure – like the (now ex-) CDS CP of Kooraachundu panchayat in the Kozhikode District, who had links with the feminist movement via her group, and were able to occupy the role of the local manager of social capital very successfully, but also take on the more political role of the women's rights activist, braving considerable opposition from the panchayat. Significantly, one such CDS CP told us that she was wary of politicians (though she had political affiliations, which did not match with the ruling party in the panchayat), and that she often fought the panchayat's efforts to use the women's labour for free.

This was not true of the overwhelming majority of our interviewees, who inevitably drew upon a clearly gendered notion of 'selfless service'.

Significantly, they drew upon the strongly gendered discourse of 'service', evoking either biological essentialism or biological foundationalism. Obviously, there may be no reason to believe that they really believe in this; nevertheless the perceived necessity of the public reiteration of such gendered norms is significant. Their desire for power over the mass of welfare recipient women is also evident – in their summoning up of moral and pedagogic authority over the mass of below-poverty-line women. Interestingly, the CDS CPs complained of not so much responsibilities of a pedagogic nature, as those of a technical nature, such as accounts-keeping. Above all, the projection of a sexually pure image of oneself also seems necessary. This is hardly surprising – indeed in a society in which the discourse of sexual purity weighs heavily on women, and even on men, such verbal confirmation is a necessary condition for women's public presence. In one instance, a Kudumbashree group secretary confided to us that she was sexually attacked by a panchayat official; she chose to keep quiet because complaining would give her a 'bad name', and worse, her family would stop her from participating in Kudumbashree for good. In almost all districts, the CDS CPs complained that the mandatory training for micro enterprises which required that women stay away from home for four to five days was a snag; they argued in favour of training that would not clash with domestic responsibility/respectability.

Certainly, the women's support for conservative gender ideology does not warrant a reading that emphasises their passivity; indeed, the women are

acutely aware of the emergent advantages to men – many of them were caustic about how easy credit has increased the woman's domestic burdens, and how men benefit from women's triple burden. Nor does it render less valuable their great desire for public life evident in many, many of our interviews. However, it does reveal the extent to which the reiteration of patriarchal values, which are routinely deployed against 'deviant' women, is achieved, ironically, through 'empowered' women.

Also, the CDS CPs' understanding of patriarchy is largely family-centred, and there was hardly any mention of gender inequality as a phenomenon marking public spaces or the workplace. Their narratives about interventions in gender issues in the panchayat revealed that they do not perceive patriarchal control as a pervasive presence; rather, it is recognised as a breach in the 'moral economy' of gender hierarchy – when men who are bound to be protective as (superior) guardians and good providers to (inferior) women and children neglect these duties and turn negligent and violent. Interestingly, the same logic is applied when the women speak about their relations with the panchayats: most of the women remarked that the single largest change for them after decentralisation was that the state became 'local and intimate'. This new-found space, however, was not claimed as citizens' rightful space, but as an extension of the humanised, if patriarchal, family – with all the implications of women's subordinate status, masked, however, by the 'moral economy' of gender and sentimental ties. Indeed, many CDS CPs referred to the panchayat office as 'just like home', and the

officials to be like 'our own brothers and fathers', such that one always got a seat whenever one visited the panchayat – as one woman out it, like the way a married woman was welcome to visit her one's father's or brother's home. When CDS CPs protested against the panchayat, it was inevitably over the breach of such moral economy and sentiment – even complaints over the alarmingly disempowering use of the Kudumbashree women's labour for the panchayat's development work, surfaced only when the panchayats appeared to breach the understandings implicit in the moral economy that bound the panchayats and the women below the poverty line. This became explicit in the wake of the roaring controversy over the below-poverty-line survey validation conducted by the Kudumbashree. Many below-poverty-line families were apparently dropped from the new list and this led to severely gendered accusations against Kudumbashree women. Post-this controversy, there was a perceptible shift in the CDS CPs' description of their relation with the panchayat – there was a deep sense of betrayal by the panchayat, a breach of trust and the moral obligation to protect.

Indeed, it is also worth noting that gendering governance in Kerala has not involved the gendering of the development bureaucracy – of the 152 Block Development Officers (the most powerful officer at the Block level), only 11 are women – less than 7 per cent. The Kudumbashree Mission office too retains male preponderance in its upper echelons – not a single District Mission Coordinator we interviewed was female. The Programme Officers at the State level – except for the executive director and the public relations

officer – are all male. Nevertheless the Kudumbashree Mission seems to signal the shift towards a more humanised patriarchy in the development bureaucracy, in the place of the earlier, more blatantly male centric model of development bureaucracy.

However the humanised hierarchy is still a top-down structure of power. The CDS CPs are still heavily dependent upon the panchayat bureaucracy. While the women claim that bureaucracy is humanised now, there are indications that this is not always the case. The Charge Officer, usually an officer working under the panchayats given additional charge (with no extra allowances) who is responsible for accounts keeping and has to help the CDS CP prepare various reports for the District Mission Office, wields considerable indirect power especially when the CDS CP's accounting skills are poor. Interestingly, few CDS CPs had a clear idea of the powers and responsibilities of the Charge Officer. Some of them reported heavy tension over deadlines and report submission with even the officials at the Kudumbashree District Mission Office, who are generally rated as more human, and we did observe some of these tensions in the monthly review meetings held in the District Mission offices. Also, our interviews with the less- and more- successful micro-credit groups showed that the bureaucracy was not evenly human to all women: the closer the women seemed to be with the panchayat and local politics, the better the treatment they received. No doubt this closeness to the bureaucracy is a major source of influence for the CDS CP – and less capable women are certainly dependent on her as mediator

with the panchayat. One reason why the bureaucracy's control appears manageable now is because there are two different bureaucracies dealing with the CDS – that of the District Mission, and of the panchayat – which can be alternately resorted to, and indeed, used as protection against the other.

It may well be argued that the Kudumbashree efforts to transform women into autonomous economic agents will not succeed until the widespread perception of women as secondary earners for the family ends – this is old wisdom, well-known since the days of WID. And even for the limited mandate assigned to the Kudumbashree Mission, which falls largely within the WID framework, the radical politicisation of gendered familial roles is inevitable. Of the three distinct sources of authority with stakes in the network, the Kudumbashree Mission alone recognises this connection, and some steps towards critical gender education – called 'gender self-learning' -- are being initiated cautiously, but it is still too early to comment on this. However, it must be noted that the concern about creating 'gender awareness' through yet another round of pedagogy – training – among women of the self-help groups is not new. Indeed, it was voiced by a leading architect of political decentralisation and local level planning as early as 2005:

The issue of transforming the women NHGs into genuine instruments of women empowerment must be addressed...neither micro-credit nor micro-enterprise by themselves will necessarily lead to the empowerment of women. Empowerment requires a conscious

intervention for which the economic activities play a facilitative role. The challenge is to design and implement a gender awareness programme for women and men that is linked to their daily life experience. (Isaac et al. 2002: 15)

The issue is whether the present structure of the self-help group helps or hampers the fostering of women's collective interests. Right now, the notion of 'group interests' that informs the Kudumbashree network is essentially means a collection of individual interests, the interests of particular families. Each member participates in the group not really for a common collective goal, but to better her (family's) interests, which is accepted as the *collective* goal. Gender training is unlikely to make a dent, given these structural peculiarities.

But given the present tendency of both local governance and politics to reinforce gender divides rather than question them, it appears that Kudumbashree women do not promise an alternate politics. Even within the State Mission's perception of their agency, these women are not politicised subjects but consumers who are engaged in self-help through micro credit and micro enterprise. No wonder then, that the Memorandum of the Kudumbashree lists discrimination by gender and caste not as issues of power, but as "social evils". Early evaluations of the programme -- right from before it was scaled up from the 'CDS Experiment' in two districts, to after it had been established all over the State – indicate that gender issues and

concerns have never ever been central in any way to the everyday activities of the network, nor did they affect its structure; gender awareness was noted to be poor among the members (Oommen 1999; Reynders et al 2002; Anand 2002; Muralidharan 2003. The strong gender conservatism that we noticed in the majority of our interviewees, too, makes sense when viewed thus. Importantly, it needs to be recognised that the agency granted to women as consumers, both in the Kudumbashree and elsewhere, has been firmly located within domestic space and concerns; it has been noticed that the discourse of consumption in Kerala does not upturn gender, at least for the elite.

And it needs to be noted that the possibility of entry into local governance that the Kudumbashree work seems to open is a strictly limited one – the hypermoralised 'local community' of the new governance agenda into which women have been admitted is simply not the space of local politics or alternate political activism. It is true that the Kudumbashree women make for the larger part of the sizeable presence of women in the Village Assemblies – yet it has been widely noted that their presence is largely passive, and their active participation is about individualised welfare distribution, and not about the creation of collective assets or discussion of collective issues and interests. In any case, such visibility in the Village Assembly is not matched with the ability to negotiate with local body on development priorities and free development labour. Indeed, many CDS CPs were completely ignorant of the limited autonomy that the CDS actually enjoys from the local body; in any case it appeared useless to them, in real

terms. The 'public' into which the Kudumbashree women have been released is bounded on all four sides by the community, the panchayats, the Kudumbashree Mission, and local political parties; within this space, however, they have supervisory roles. Thus the jubilation voiced by the women at their moving out of domestic confinement is real indeed, but to assume that either this 'sense of empowerment', or the social capital generated through their release, will necessarily liberate women from patriarchal power may be a gross mistake. In other words, the powerlessness in women's lack of mobility (among other things) cannot be separated from the patriarchal social structures that produce it as an effect. Only if the latter are challenged powerfully will the former effect finally cease to trouble women.

c.   The Fickle Subject of *Aanukoolyam:* Emergent Challenges to 'Social Capital'

Given the intense penetration of political parties, especially the mainstream left, into the Kudumbashree self-help group network, it may be argued that we are witnessing a variant of what Partha Chatterjee calls 'political society' (Chatterjee 2003). To elaborate, this may be 'political society' under the new regime of responsibilized state welfare – maybe better called the 'civil-political society'. The mainstream left parties in Kerala thrived precisely on a militant political society, parts of which were either absorbed into the mass organisations, or remained in close proximity to it. This spoke the language of 'people's rights' and claimed state welfare in those terms, as

110

citizenship. Through the left parties, 'people' – actually the male worker – overcame the disciplining of the developmental bureaucracy and indeed, was positioned in belligerent opposition to the bureaucracy in general.

This strange hybrid of the present, this 'civil-political society', however, looks different. Certainly, it is composed of welfare recipients, but the content and spirit of state welfare have changed, and so has its central subject – now it is the informal sector woman/ housewife who is at the heart of the new regime of responsibilized welfare. The civil-political society runs on rules and procedures, and its mediators' skills are largely in these areas. It rarely challenges legality directly. It is as close to the local bureaucracy, fully acceptable to it, as or more than it is to political parties – for the former, it is a source of cheap labour for development and an instrument to extend governmental surveillance on the underprivileged, for instance, when used to collect information about the underprivileged. Political parties, however, seek to extend ground support through the women mediators, the CDS CPs and office-bearers of the upper tiers. The women mediators are often close to the left, but they do not speak the language of 'people's rights' to the state – a practice which was so central to the mid 20th century egalitarian Developmentalist reinterpretation of the extension of the infrastructural power of the state, the core of left hegemony. The middle- and lower-middle class educated, employed, male mediators of the earlier political society in Kerala were themselves politicised and unionised to a high degree. In contrast, the less-educated, lower middle class female mediators for the new

111

civil-political society, often with better access to resources than others in the below-poverty-line population and with political support/affiliation, but their major advantage is their familiarity with rules and procedures to make welfare claims to the state. They claim to be 'non-political', inspired by the gendered desire for 'service', and remain more or less distant from the Malayalee public sphere – even when they become ward members.

We are seeing in the present the slow but steady demise of the 'older political society' dependent on the mainstream left. Indeed, in the present context the mainstream left is increasingly abandoning its 'older political society' (for instance the head load workers) as, which was far more closely integrated with organised political parties more formally as a drag on the economy. All political parties, however, are keenly interested in transforming the Kudumbashree, originally planned as a state-centric civil society, into the new 'civil-political society'. The left's special interest in the Kudumbashree network is not surprising, given its long standing interest in fostering a 'people' beyond community affiliations. If the 'people' of the 1950s left discourse was understood in terms of politicised class, the left's 'people' of the mid-1990s and after is understood in terms of consumption shortfall. The 'underprivileged' are welfare recipients --those who do not consume enough. In a way the (female) subject of *aanukoolyam* – the development benefit – within it, is replacing the socialist subject of 'people's rights' in mainstream left politics and discourse of welfare in Kerala as the consumer-citizen's sun rises in Kerala's horizons. The other ideological and welfare systems that

oppose the left in Kerala – largely of the organised religious and community organisations– do recognise the common interest of the left and the state bureaucracy in the creation of an 'underprivileged' unmarked by religion or community, and their strategy has been to create their own micro credit networks to compete with the Kudumbashree.

What is interesting, though, is that this new political subjectivity—that of the subject of *aanukoolayam* -- appears much less amenable to control by political parties – or the state itself – as the women mediators complain, with great irritation. In fact, this complaint completely upset all the arguments about the efficacy of associations to produce social capital, which then, we were told, leads of engaged citizenship for women. Apparently, the social capital that emerged in and through the groups could be completely undermined – as many of our interviewees reported, the sustained application of social pressure and even of 'direct action' by other members of the group were necessary at times. But apparently, while the huge majority of welfare recipients still adhere willingly to responsible repayment, building ground support for political parties and commitment to becoming responsible economic agents through micro entrepreneurship among the subjects of *aanukoolyam* is really hard. Most of our interviewees are worried about the instability of the *aanukoolyam*-seekers – their political affiliations too are not stable; they are quite unlike the 'committed' -- the faithful and grateful -- inhabitants of the earlier political societies in Kerala. Worse, many do not necessarily stay with the mainstream left, or the state network, and will

readily migrate to other micro-credit networks which look like making better deals. Most interviewees felt that in this matter, the (eminently elite and feminine) 'gentle power of persuasion' was not effective any more; most opined that both the state's legal power and the party's word of command on its cadre and sympathisers should be exerted to restrain the mobility of the subjects of *aanukoolyam* across credit networks. The CDC CPs – the female mediators – consider themselves to be at a respectable distance from the subjects of *aanukoolayam*, even when they were economically closer to the latter.

Managing the subjects of *aanukoolyam*, therefore, is tricky business: the risks of seeking political mobility through the civil-political society are very high; indeed quite unlike the experience of male mediators of earlier political societies. The recent fiasco of the below-poverty-line list validation has left the Kudumbashree women high and dry. The Kudumbashree women were entrusted the job of validating the new below-poverty-line list prepared by officials; their intimate knowledge of the panchayats probably increased their efficiency. However, since this made many presently- below-poverty-line families disappear from the list, the fury of such people fell upon the hapless Kudumbashree members, who, in many panchayats were facing heavy hostility – we came across instances of physical violence against Kudumbashree women, and indeed, many CDC CPs told us that if the names of many below-poverty-line families are found omitted from the finalised list, then "Kudumbashree women won't be able to go out into the street".

The subjects of *aanukoolayam* do not seem to be passive; nor do they meekly accept the semi- pedagogic and semi-bureaucratic authority of the CDS CP. Indeed, from the fear in the CDS CPs' words it appears that these people have the power to violently exile them back into the confines of individual domesticity. Nor do they tolerate too close a scrutiny by the state when it may potentially affect consumption possibilities. Similarly, some attempts to market products using the CDS network have also led to backlashes when it was perceived that the products were rather high-priced and that Kudumbashree office-bearers were receiving commissions. Also, the women who enter local governance through the Kudumbashree, have far better 'contacts' through their welfare work, but the local expectations on them are also higher. This is the context in which the statements made by several of our interviewees, that they did not desire to contest panchayat elections because it will lead to "inconvenient" situations, by which they meant being subject to party commands, which may make them unable to fulfil expectations loaded on them. Significantly, such comments were rarely made by women in panchayats where specific parties command unchallenged dominance: here the problem of 'fairness' did not apparently arise because the party laid down what was 'fair' – and indeed, was powerful enough to keep the mobility of the subject of *aanukoolyam* under control.

We were, however, to discover that the subjects of *aanukoolyam* do not always abandon the language of rights, in our interviews with activists of the

widows' associations in Kerala, mainly in the Wayanad district. The members of the widows' associations adamantly drew upon such language; indeed, one of their leaders, K.P.Rugmini Amma, resisted stoutly the idea that welfare for widows was the dole, arguing in a rather older political language, that it was part of 'people's' and 'workers' rights' – and that widows were not "workers who had lost their husbands". It was evident to us that we were encountering the radicalised subject of *aanukoolayam*, in these interviews – women who stubbornly claimed a welfare category, the widow, and remade it into an interest group. And in their politics, these radicalised subjects of *aanukoolyam* displayed remarkable mobility, always complicating the categories into which the state tried to reduce them. In our interviews, they presented themselves as not just helpless widows, but as 'workers whose employer died', 'tax-payers', 'female heads of households', 'widowed housewives wailing at the injustice of a callous state', 'CPM family members' and 'law-abiding citizens'. Interestingly, the widows' associations displayed a range of strategies to enter the political public. The leaders of the most radicalised group of widows were part of the left's now-unwanted political society, who had however, refused to stay in the passive part of the new civil-political society but chosen to move into the oppositional civil society, drawing on the language of rights. There was another group which sought to work more closely with the left, not refusing 'civil-political society' but retaining the language of rights for widows. Indeed, the mainstream left is trying to organise widows now – and not surprisingly, the language of its organisers is strikingly free of reference to 'people's rights', and full of the

sentimental concern of the welfare state for the minimal entitlements of the welfare-recipient.

d.   Local Governance, Development and the Politicised Woman Worker

Like elsewhere in India, in Kerala too SEWA has been involved in organizing informal sector women workers – specifically, bamboo workers – since the 1980s, an effort that continues in the present. However, SEWA Kerala, located in the city of Thiruvananthapuram, and organizing workers in largely rural and coastal areas around the city, has had an interesting history in that it proved to be responsive to larger processes shaping women's work in Kerala in the 1980s and the 1990s. The steady loss of work that women faced through to the decline of traditional industries, and the steady inflow of incomes to families of Malayalee migrants to the Gulf since the late 1970s, combined with the intensification of ageing in this post-demographic transition society, created a high-demand situation for female domestic labour, which, however, received relatively poor remuneration, and remained almost entirely unspecified and unregulated. Besides, given the low prestige of domestic work, it may be reasonable to hypothesize that women who entered it would be extremely vulnerable and marginal – which appears to be corroborated in our interviews with SEWA workers. SEWA's intervention, while comparatively small, is interesting as a model of feminist trade unionism in the present context of women's shift from better organized

sectors to the unorganized sector, and given the unfavourable terms in which women enter the market for domestic labour. At present, SEWA Kerala's domestic labour union is around one thousand strong, and counting members of the Women Bamboo Workers' Union, the total membership is about 4000.

SEWA Kerala's origins are in the oppositional civil social space that expanded here in the 1980s, as a result of a critique of Nehruvian development, and of mainstream politics, which ignored issues of marginal groups and subsumed gender and caste oppression to class exploitation. It began with the efforts of women activists supported initially by the Catholic Church, working with fish workers on the coast in southern Kerala, and in response to male domination even in alternate trade unions. Registered in 1983, in the next two years, SEWA tried to organize women bamboo workers and fish workers, aiming to strengthen women's traditional work. Some of the early struggles were for supply depots for bamboo workers and better vending and transport facilities for women fish vendors. By 1985, however, SEWA began to think of alternate forms of employment for women in the face of sharp decline in incomes from traditional forms of work – and given the context in which impoverished women workers were moving from traditional employment into domestic work, it took the initiative to train a group of such women in home-nursing. SEWA sought to create demand for this service through distributing leaflets in hospitals; and demand grew. In the late 1980s, SEWA began to train women in catering and set up canteens in several public institutions. Recently, however, it has focused on organizing and training

domestic workers. Thus, SEWA's initiatives have been responses to larger changes in women's work in Kerala. While women's informal sector work was certainly neither highly lucrative nor secure, their movement into domestic work was a setback in that it relocated the space of their work from the public to the domestic – and that too, in a space were employee-employer relations are informal and sometimes outright non-contractual, informed heavily by oppressive norms, especially of caste.

The SEWA intervention is also interesting for reasons other than poverty alleviation. Irrespective of whether it may be categorized as 'feminist' or not in the sense of directly attacking the sexual division of labour or wage differentials in the labour market, it is interesting to feminists, who, as Rajeswari Sunder Rajan notes, "…are seeking to identify spaces for women in the public sphere that derive from functions and identities other than the reproductive, the symbolic, or the legal, that family, community, and state traditionally grant them." (Rajan 2000: 73-4). She notes that identifying women's work as a possible locus in civil society from which one may begin to think of 'women' as a collectivity does not require the idealization of work or the double burden that working women carry (ibid. 74). Further, she argues that shared conditions of work and interests may function as a "voluntary community", a possibility that feminists need to work upon strategically in the present context, in which there is "an official, public, recognition of the agency of women workers in national life" (ibid. 75). While cautioning that this may be a "meagre and compromised space", she goes on

to calls attention to the possibility that the transformation and expansion of such spaces may allow "women's exercise of agency to activate their rights and the resist community strictures and control" (ibid. 75-6).

Our interviews with workers and staff of SEWA Kerala, which organises female domestic workers – arguably among the most deprived sections of Malayalee society, going by our figures – provided a sharp contrast to the family-centeredness of Kudumbashree in that it largely disregarded the dichotomy between 'housewife' and 'worker' . The SEWA Kerala too has thrift and credit networks but is also a trade union; the SEWA women identify themselves as both (domestic) consumers and (public) workers and citizens. In other words, SEWA's equal emphasis on women's right to safe workplaces and steady income, and their right to safe homes rests on a richer understanding of patriarchal power. SEWA advances a feminist model of trade unionism, which takes into consideration women's position as domestic consumers, and thus avoids the contradictions that Kudumbashree fosters. Its location at a critical distance from the state also ensures that its members are not subject to the 'work-for-welfare' regime that panchayats appear to be promoting. Indeed some of our interviewees are very active in Kudumbashree micro-enterprise and micro-credit – quickly rising to the leadership of the group, given their prior experience of thrift and credit and greater access to information. However, most SEWA women (including these successful women) complained vociferously that they could never achieve upward mobility in the Kudumbashree network despite their

superior abilities and experience precisely because of the nature of their work, which required them to stay away from their villages for long periods. Indeed, here the relevance of the observation of the evaluators of the Kudumbashree made in 2002, that the shift towards self-help groups foregrounds and advantages housewives rings true (Reynders et al 2002). Nevertheless, given the fact that SEWA workers display much better awareness of gender issues (even when they often submit to social structural pressures, for instance to pay dowry in arranged marriages), have a sense of collective interest of women, and indeed are more familiar with public issues and mores, and backed by a respected organisation, SEWA Kerala, we would expect them to be at the forefront of local governance and development.

Strikingly, we found that 52 out of our 58 worker-interviewees, and all the organizers, had reasonable knowledge of politics, and clear-cut party preferences, most of it 'inherited' from their families, but in many cases, evolving over time through encounters. Here we found a striking distinction between 'active' and 'passive' participation in politics: the movement from 'passive' to 'active' participation involves moving from the status of a welfare recipient to full participation in the political process as citizen. Except for two workers, no one said they sought 'active participation' – a willingness to invest their considerable gender awareness and other capabilities for public life, such as the capability to work collectively, in the political domain – though many women revealed that they had been invited by the political parties they supported to contest panchayat elections. This was in striking

121

contrast to the enthusiasm with which many of these women spoke of how being better informed was a great advantage in participating in Kudumbashree self-help groups. Politics was perceived, most commonly, to be a field in which they would either lose their autonomy, or end up losers anyway since they would lose their earnings through work and earn the wrath of local politicians. As one of our interviewees remarked:

I don't have any other skill; I'm not educated either, so it won't be easy for me to find a better job. My health isn't too good, so I can't do manual labour too much. I am too independent to toe the party line even though I have party spirit… so they won't have me after five years … and I will make many enemies, I'm sure. Well, in any case, after five years of being a ward member, mixing with politicians, who's going to employ me as a domestic worker? People will be scared! Everyone will think that I have lots of influence!

In contrast, most expressed interest in 'passive participation', as welfare recipients. Some workers who had participated in Village Assemblies did feel that they had a clear edge over others in articulating their views and interests, but said that the gains made were due to their party affiliations and not the pressure they exerted as citizens. Indeed, political citizenship itself is widely perceived to be outside their world. A majority of the workers we interviewed told us that what they desired most was 'control over life': which included mobility, independent decision-making, freedom from domestic violence, caring for families, and carving out respectability in their local communities. Participation in politics did not figure in this list.. Maintaining 'passive

participation' while rejecting 'active participation', thus, seems to be a survival strategy for women who suffer severe social disadvantage, but are individuated and gender-aware to a considerable degree.

Clearly, to borrow Nussbaum's terminology, we have here 'internal' capabilities, but no 'combined capabilities' (Nussbaum 1998:775). By the latter she means the state of internal preparedness combined with suitable external circumstances for the exercise of the function. The non-enthusiasm of these workers for public citizenship may also be because increasingly, public citizenship appears to be thrust upon people who have few other choices. In contrast, the aspiring and existent middle classes may now choose between public and consumer citizenship, since the latter has been endowed with considerable resources as a result of the Gulf Boom and other factors.

If agency may be understood as the ability to control one's levels of involvement in others' projects and take up strategic positions to their advantage, SEWA's intervention has been successful in advancing the agential capacities of domestic workers. On the one hand, it has allowed workers to make strategic choices about what work to do, where to work, how long, and under what terms, and to make use of both traditional obligations and the modern contractual relation in their negotiations with employers. On the other, SEWA's efforts at building collective agency and promoting public and gender education hold considerable promise in heightening both workers' bargaining capacities at home, and their familiarity

with the public. Of these, the first gain, no doubt, may have arisen partly from the fact that the demand for domestic labour may have risen considerably in Kerala, especially in the context of a rapidly ageing population and larger incomes among sections of the people due to the Gulf migration. Indeed, private sector domestic service providers who have imitated the SEWA model to various degrees have taken advantage of this upswing in demand. In one such agency, we found that while the worker is expected to pay a certain sum as commission to the agency, she was allowed to bargain independently with the potential employer about the conditions and nature of work and wages.

The second aspect of SEWA's intervention, which is usually not imitated, makes the crucial difference. SEWA's consistent work at shaping domestic workers collective agency is matched by its efforts to protect their members rights and entitlements within their homes. In a society in which women domestic workers are growing in numbers, and poor women are doubly jeopardized by heightening domestic burdens in the wake of deteriorating family and community networks, and by exclusion from politics and the public, the efforts at shaping a sense of citizenship are of vital significance.

Yet, clearly such efforts as the above are insufficient to assure the entry of domestic workers into either politics or local governance. The domestic worker has never been regarded as central to the notion of 'worker', or even the 'informal sector worker', and indeed, she remains outside both public and

consumer citizenship; and the worker-identity shaped through SEWA's efforts, which does not rely upon the worker/consumer binary, does not blend into either. The state has given scant attention to SEWA's experience in designing its poverty-eradication drives in the 1990s despite its apparent usefulness. As the organizers pointed out repeatedly, neither political parties nor mainstream unions have recognized SEWA's status as a trade union (though SEWA has obtained registration as a trade union recently); nor have they taken on board gender issues so central to SEWA's campaigns. The fact that SEWA organizers and workers consistently rated politics an outright hostile space only reveals the extent to which mainstream politics and the oppositional civil society remain mutually exclusive despite the apparent promise of decentralization to take on some of the issues raised by the latter, including gender justice, the inclusion of Dalits and Adivasis in development, and so on. Thus contrary to evocations of the 'people' in Kerala's experiment in political decentralization, the basic challenge seems to remain the same: how may the re-vision of sense of the 'political' raised by oppositional civil society inform mainstream politics and local governance, so that the interests of women, Dalits and other disadvantaged groups are addressed effectively?

What is worrying, though, is the lack of linkage of the Kudumbashree with earlier efforts to organise and politicise women around issues of livelihood and gender, in the civil society, such as SEWA. In fact in the late 1990s, the formation of the Kudumbashree network was perceived as an outright threat to an independent civil society, and as conflicts with large

NGOs working in adjacent areas, like the Gandhi Smaraka Gramaseva Kendram, revealed, the state was uncompromising in limiting welfare benefits to members of its network alone (Kadiyala 2004). The Kudumbashree seems to be occupying more and more space in the interface of politics and development given their proximity to both the bureaucracy and the left. SEWA Kerala, which represents, is finding that less and less of government support is forthcoming – and that its limited resources cannot match the flood of *aanukoolayam* from the state. The non-connection between these earlier efforts which are fairly successful experiments is regrettable indeed, for it would have potentially led to the transformation of each. We found at least one successful tie-up between an NGO, *Uravu*, which offered women training in livelihood skills and environmental awareness, and Kudumbashree in Wayanad, which seems to have benefited both: the Kudumbashree women are gaining skills to produce marketable goods, and the NGO now interacts with a much larger number of people. Close interaction with independent civil social initiatives could have helped to radicalise the concern about gender evident in the Kudumbashree; the former would have benefited from Kudumbashree strong links with the bureaucracy to tackle common concerns.

However the Kudumbashree CDS CPs and the SEWA organisers have a common foe: both complained equally of rise of the 'fickle' subject of *aanukoolayam*, who cannot be trusted, erodes work ethics, and is even disloyal to the organisation. When SEWA members talk of this, they also articulate an implicit critique of Kudumbashree as partially responsible for the rise of the

126

welfare recipients through which the flood of *aanukoolyam* inundated society, made worse through other micro-credit groups making offers – and indeed, because the latter does not give precedence to the woman worker over the income-earning housewife. The MSS development workers too complained of how the flood of welfare through Kudumbashree almost wrecked their efforts to educate tribal women about gender justice and citizenship. The Kudumbashree seems to have set a norm – henceforth, all association-building among underprivileged women, in order to work – must involve some or other kind of *aanukoolyam*. This is serious damage indeed, as far as the prospect of women's full citizenship is concerned, for 'social capital' formation and use seems to be increasingly directed exclusively towards non-political activities.

This is in fact a general trend. One finds that activists who led very public struggles for social justice in the 1980s are increasingly moving into the formation of self-help groups, seeking to chart out a 'mid-way', in an effort to combine a form of social association that enjoys (gendered) respectability with a more radical agenda (a parallel, perhaps, is with the senior woman politician, C. K. Sally, mentioned in Chapter 1). A good example is well-known liberation theology activist from the 1980s, Sister Alice, who led truly inspiring struggles for the impoverished fisher folk in north Kerala. Sister Alice disappeared from the public view after the Catholic Church disapproved of her work (and her family too, as she mentioned in a recent interview), but re-entered public life as the organiser of an NGO building self-

help groups among coastal women. In her interview, Alice points to the broader shifts in society that have considerably disabled militant struggle against social injustice, and argues that activists must come to terms with these changes (*Matrubhumi Weekly*, March 18, 2007, 8-13). The question, of course, is how.

Perhaps a strong-willed turn towards the small producer-norm, and not the further extension of welfare redistribution, is called for, especially because the subject of *aanukoolyam* should not be romanticised or celebrated. While much less amenable to state or party control, they are not free-playing subjects, but strongly subject to the pushes and pulls of consumerist society. Also, it needs to be taken on board that the subject of *aanukoolyam* is not singular: the below-poverty-line women of the disempowered communities (such as the coastal communities) have much less space and ability to manoeuvre than below-poverty-line women of other groups. Dalit political formations do point out how the active fostering of welfare recipient status is rendering invisible the unequal access of different social groups to productive resources. However, alternate forms of conceiving citizenship are emergent – for instance the sense of environmental citizenship that emerges from our interviews with women activists in tribal mobilisations and environmental struggles, discussed later in this report. A nuanced critique of the present regime of liberal welfarist citizenship in Kerala – both of its obfuscation of unequal access of groups to resources, and its tacit support to consumerism –

seems necessary. All the more so, because the subject of *aanukoolayam* in Kerala is gendered.

Reflecting on the means to 'repoliticise' the subject of *aanukoolyam*, two things are apparent: one, there is the need to claim welfare as citizens' rights rather than as minimum entitlements handed out by the state cannot be overstated. This appears all the more urgent for the poorest sections of society, who are too small to be a vote-bank. Our interviews with women development workers of the MSS working with tribal women, arguably one of the most marginalised groups in Kerala, bring this out vividly. The MSS *sevinis* – development workers -- spoke of how tribal women, who had no political clout, were now beginning to make *collective* demands, beyond the individualised welfare allotments, in the Village Assemblies – for instance, a *sevini* told us how tribal women in a Village Assembly in Idukki had demanded a washing ghat on the river bank, at a closer location. Such demands, she reminded us, are not automatically forthcoming when the whole idea of welfare is individualised. Further, through the MSS, the women learned not just to follow rules and procedures, but also to raise questions when authorities disregarded these rules. Another *sevini* described how the tribal women in the MSS group questioned a panchayat secretary who did not take down the minutes of the Village Assembly and demanded that the minutes be read out before the Assembly adjourned.

Also, a stronger critique of gendered constraints on women's entry into the labour market and the productive sector as entrepreneurs would be required. And it would also require a far more nuanced sense of what economic agency might mean to different groups of women. For instance, tribal women interviewed argued that the Kudumbashree's efforts to transform them into responsible economic agents might have worked better for them if the notion of economic agency it subscribed to included attaining food security, besides merely income generation. Suneetha Kadiyala in her study in 2004 agreed that the Kudumbashree's criteria to identify the poor were transparent and multiple, yet tended to homogenise. "While the community has a say in identifying the poor," she notes, "they have no say in characterizing poverty within their communities." (Kadiyala 2004: 42) This scepticism about homogenisation should also work to question the uniform definition of 'women's economic agency' spread through the Kudumbashree.

e.   **Development Voluntarism and the Politicised Woman**
Volunteer

It was observed, above, that familiarity with public issues and a heightened commitment to gender justice among women does not guarantee full inclusion in local governance and development. Indeed, it appeared as though the former qualities were rather unwelcome. SEWA workers felt that those who posses such qualities are more likely not to be hindered and lacking in upward mobility. In other words, individuals' possession of such

abilities does not alter set structures which privilege the below-poverty-line housewife over the below-poverty-line woman worker. Likewise, it must be pointed out that providing intensive gender education to women development workers, while useful it itself, does not change the andocentric structure and culture of the development bureaucracy. As in the earlier case, here too, such politicisation could actually drag the women downwards, when the larger structure remains inflexibly against them.

It is important to make this point since the CDS structures are currently run by poorly paid women volunteers – recently, the honoraria received by the CDS CPs have been raised, but they are still small, compared to the ever-increasing and complex workloads foisted on them. As noted earlier, the Kudumbashree's 'empowered' status remains very highly dependent on the attitude of the bureaucracy. The gender- unequal culture and structure of the development bureaucracy remains intact and the Kudumbashree does not represent any radical change in this respect. Our interviews with the officials of the Kudumbashree Mission revealed that they reposed a lot of faith in a gender education programme planned for the near future. We, however, feel that the issue needs to be tackled at the structural level. As long as the 'humanised hierarchy', which rests on gendered assumptions, the problem cannot be solved by radicalising gender training alone. That the gendering of governance cannot take place without *both* the dismantling of bureaucratic structures and cultures in a more gender-equal direction, and greater democratisation within specific programmes, such that field-level workers

receive better material rewards and attention for their views from authorities, seems evident.

The history of the MSS Programme in Kerala brings this sharply into focus. It was initially fostered in Kerala by a well-known feminist who was the State coordinator, and the women who became village level workers acquired a remarkable a deeply political understanding of gender. The programme hierarchy too was considerably weaker in this earlier formative stage and so the workers came to look upon themselves as not so much paid development workers, but women's rights activists. Both these distinct features probably clashed too sharply with the patently anti-democratic and misogynist bureaucratic culture entrenched here since the mid 20th century and soon the feminist was removed from her post. Recounting those times, the MSS *sevinis* remarked how they had to struggle for voice, futilely, while their self -perception as women's rights activists would not let them abandon their work. The new coordinators were women, but this made no difference. Indeed, the *sevinis* seem to have been in outright conflict with the authorities for a long time since then, and doubly oppressed – on the one hand, despite the fact that they developed remarkable citizenship capacities, they were still underpaid overworked insecure development workers at the bottom of the programme hierarchy; on the other hand they were victimised by authorities for politicising gender and demanding democracy in the day to day functioning of the programme. Strikingly, the second generation of MSS *sevinis* appeared to be far less assertive and compliant with orders from

above. However, later, after the appointment of a new State coordinator, someone perceived to be someone committed to gender justice, the *sevinis* were noticeably more forthright in their assessments of the development bureaucracy. This will of course last only as long as the new coordinator is allowed to stay in her position. In other words, the *sevinis*' opportunities to put their higher levels of gender justice awareness and commitments to good use seem completely dependent on the shifts in the upper levels of the development hierarchy. The MSS represents a serious effort to alter the culture, though not the structure, of the development machinery, but this obviously has its limitations.

The message seems evident: while the induction of a larger number of women into positions of power in local development institutions, as into institutions of local governance, is important – especially because it weakens popular gendered ideas that women are unfit to wield public power. But gendering governance cannot be simply that. Nor can it be the addition of gender training to existing structures. Gendering governance has to involve the democratisation of hierarchical institutional structures and the de-masculinisation of bureaucratic cultures. Inculcating women's activism in women development workers without dismantling hierarchies only produces effects that may be disadvantageous to them. This is relevant for the Kudumbashree too: unless Kudumbashree women claim the space they have gained within the panchayats as their right as citizens and not as the concession granted representatives of the welfare beneficiaries, they represent

the positive gendering of governance very partially, no matter how much gender training they undergo. And to represent 'women's interests' the Kudumbashree needs to build links with others engaged in the same struggle, within the state and outside. There is thus good reason to ask for a scaling up of MSS and more intimate interaction between MSS and Kudumbashree, and also closer alliances with movements outside the sphere of formal politics – like SEWA Kerala, or Gandhi Smaraka Gramaseva Kendram.

Chapter three

Women in Oppositional Civil Society: Retrieving Politics in the Age of *Aanukoolyam*

a. New Geographies

In this section on oppositional civil formations, we highlight some aspects of the engagement between mainstream political society and the heterogeneous communities that have been marginalized or excluded from the Kerala model of welfarist citizenship. All marginal groups are obviously not marginalized in the same manner; indeed, the whole idea of margin and center has been problematized in feminist theory since the 1960s. However, by scanning the diversity within the forms of discrimination and exclusion, as well as the new forms of mobilization, we gain some insights into the manner in which women's citizenship (including its denial) is experienced. Our fieldwork included women profiled by their historical exclusion or invisibility in mainstream politics: Dalits, coastal communities, Adivasis, environmental mobilizations, sex workers, and sexual minorities. These are not "separate" groups in practice: Adivasis are often engaged in environmental struggles, while lesbian suicides have been most common in Dalit communities. Obviously, these groups have complex and varying internal histories, as well as overlapping histories that are not our focus here and will be dealt

with in our edited volume and the individual works and publications produced by the members of the research team. However, some of the fieldwork allows us room to question the dominant frameworks through which development ideologies and decentralization are conceptualized. In this section, we highlight issues of governance, development, and the violence of the liberal welfarist citizen-state contract as it speaks the language of power to these communities. What is also remarkable is that among these communities we were able to learn about new and emergent mobilizations that redefine development and re-imagine decentralization and citizenship in ways radically different from their elite or mainstream counterparts. We pull together certain key ideological threads of developmental visions, decentralization, and citizenship that criss-cross the diverse experiences.

Women from marginalized communities are getting political representation at a time when the body of Kerala is undergoing a radical surgery propelled by economic impulses ranging from the intensive promotion of tourism, development symbolized by high-rise buildings and shopping complexes, the spectacularization of consumption, and the creation of special economic zones such as Technopark in Thiruvananthapuram and Smart City in Kochi. As paddy fields give way to housing units, the coast is taken over for tourist resorts and new mega-projects such as the building of a container terminal in Vizhinjam are envisioned, a new body of Kerala emerges that reshapes the very space of

development, and creates new geographies of governance, both centralized and decentralized. The new globalized "local" is an entangled space of power play of multiple forces of capital -- global, national, and state-driven -- and of diverse projections of what "development" is coming to signify. The reterritorialization of Kerala – one that can perhaps be imagined through metaphors of drastic surgery and organ transplants -- involves the displacement and dispossession of communities, especially those that depend on natural resources and traditional livelihoods such as Adivasis, Dalits, and the fishworker communities. Thus land struggles and land rights emerge as a new language of political resistance, ironically at a time when technocratic desires have acquired unprecedented legitimacy – the ongoing land struggle at Chengara, mentioned in the introduction is indeed the latest chapter. In fisher folk settlements and fishing villages across the 590-kilometer coastline, tourist resorts have already radically recreated and dominated the beaches, as in Kovalam, even as new mega-resort projects in Beypore and Bekal threaten the displacement of the communities who do not hold title deeds for the land. Inland fishing, which, unlike the ocean, attracts women, is similarly threatened by newly sprouting resorts hungry for water views and water-based tourism: as a woman from our focus group discussion commented, "Our *thozhilidam* (workplace) is vanishing." The new Coastal Zone Regulation law, still in process, redefines the coastline in ways that activists argue will provide room for unbridled privatization and expansion of tourism, leading to the uprooting of fishing villages.

137

## b.	The Paradox of Inclusion

In this context, the roles played by women elected from traditionally underrepresented communities question the very politics of inclusion of the excluded into decentralized governance. The inclusion of women marked by their specific identities, such as "Dalit", "Adivasi" or "fisher folk" is marked by a paradox – mentioned in Chapter One --in which once elected, they must propel dominant logics of development or represent the interest of the whole, rather than that of a part. In that respect, the politics of inclusion always ends up excluding the "included" since these candidates can no longer represent the "special interests" of the "minority" that they stand for. In other words, the political citizenship granted to the "minority" or "marginal" woman is undermined by her cultural citizenship. Three instances from our fieldwork illustrate this. In a north-western district, a tribal woman president faced a volatile issue as panchayat president when a waste disposal project was planned on the banks of the river that flows through the panchayat. The project was supported by her party although it was opposed both by Adivasis of the area who feared that their drinking water source would be polluted and by environmentalists. When she opposed the dumping ground project, her political bosses covertly withdrew support, leaving her publicly vulnerable. She was physically assaulted by the local hooligans and the police who were both protecting the interests of the private waste management group. "I went through hell because I was threatened with murder and insulted by my

138

comrades," she said. The quality of her resistance was quite unlike her elite counterparts: she publicly slapped a police inspector who beat up a young protestor. Although the party could not oppose her publicly given her powerful presence, they waged a covert battle against her. When the assembly elections arrived, the party was forced to give her a ticket due to her leadership role in a popular struggle, but they settled scores by fielding her from another constituency where she did not stand a chance of winning, and by making sure she lost by getting her own party people to vote against her. We see how an individual who is groomed and nurtured by the party for the value of her dual identities as woman and as Adivasi is discarded and politically undermined when she contests the dominant logic of development and asserts herself in a political struggle involving the rights of the community or protecting the locality against destructive development.

In another instance, a remarkably well-informed and committed woman panchayat president, a member of the coastal community, in a coastal panchayat in south Kerala, which has the single largest number of tourist resorts in the state, similarly invoked both the ire of the party and of the tourist lobby when she sought information regarding the legality of permits issued for coastline construction. In many ways she was an atypical representative of the Latin Catholic fishworker community that she came from. A church-grown activist, she was part of the party's fishworker union, had an undergraduate degree, and came from a relatively well-to-do family. When she began questioning resort constructions in the panchayat, the tourist

mafia threatened that they would cut off her hands and legs and throw her in the ocean. She was voted out in a no-confidence motion in which 12 of the 22 panchayat members from three parties, the CPM, the CPI, and the Congress ganged up against her. The ruling party members thus played a key role in upsetting their own party's two-decade electoral hold over the locality. The no-confidence motion was tabled and voted upon in a meeting with unprecedented levels of security with a bomb squad, a dog squad and two hundred policemen including the DSP guarding the panchayat premises (*Malayala Manorama*, July 31, p. 3).

Dalit women in panchayats are also caught in the double bind of contemporary representational politics because the assertion of cultural identity and the battle for special interests that propel them women often effectively undermines their exercise of political citizenship while in power. They enter into the system as representatives of the Scheduled Castes, and yet they are reluctant or unable to represent caste interests within local governance. In contrast to their counterparts of early 20th century Travancore who argued for the interests of the groups they represented, today's representatives reflect guilt and unwillingness to argue for the rights of their communities. The assumption is that the inequalities that define the distance between the general and reserved categories, which the earlier representatives attacked with so much determination, have somehow ended, or that the 'welfarist resolution of the caste question', supported by both the left and the right in Kerala, has actually worked. Indeed, there is a huge divide between

these women and the Dalit women in oppositional civil society who reject the welfarist resolution of the caste question.

Interestingly, we found that certain civil social spaces which are generally anti-mainstream left in Kerala were more hospitable to women's activism in marginalised communities such as the dalit and fishworker communities. No doubt, the self-assertions of these women were the 'unintended consequence' of the moves to extend the Catholic Church's quasi-governance over its flock. Among civil social spaces, what is striking is the role of the Church of South India in providing spaces for critical Dalit women's perspectives, especially in Kottayam district. The Dalit women who came together to create spaces for discussion of caste and gender within the Church were much better educated than their counterparts in northern Kerala and closely connected to the Church. Even though the Church offered a strictly limited space, the women were able to use it critically to some extent, and it produced most of the major names in Dalit women's activism in Kerala, such as C. J. Annamma, Iniyammal, Achamma John, and Rosamma.

While the battles these women fought were by no means less intense, moving into peripheral political space from the dubious guardianship of the mainstream left seems to involve much larger physical and material risk, and many Dalit communities and Dalit women have shared in this equally or more. The case of a prominent BSP woman activist in the north Kerala district of Kasaragod, a CPM stronghold, illustrates this quite well – her account of

the violence she endured in her move from the CPM to the BSP. Such violence, as she implicitly points out, is provoked not just by defiance of the dominant political party's political directions, but also by the attempts of subordinate castes to acquire symbolic capital that helps to build group solidarity. Her account of how the irate CPM activists broke up their efforts to hold a cultural festival to revive the community's culture, and her livelihood activity, a group effort of her self-help group, testifies to this.

The present opportunities in governance have largely been accessible to the Dalit women who remain within the fold of the dominant left. Notably, no Dalit woman has reached any significantly high level of the political hierarchy; now the reservations ensure that they reach up to the level of the panchayats president. On the other hand, rejecting the guardianship of the left, for whatever reasons, may lead groups and individuals to other political and civil social platforms. There are Dalit women activists who have rebelled to join other political parties – even the BJP – and join hands with oppositional civil social activists, for instance, in the recent struggle by a Dalit woman-auto driver, Chitralekha, in Malabar, against the left unionised workers' violent efforts to prevent her from earning a livelihood. Similarly, the Adivasi panchayat president from Mananthavady found a job with the Forest Department to coordinate the Participatory Forest Management Program, in which role she visits remote and poor hamlets in North Wyanad and helps form *Vana Samrakshana Samitis* (Forest Conservation Groups).

The "progressive" rhetoric on caste publicly mouthed by the parties breaks down at the panchayat and local level as well as within parties into the covert and overt language of caste prejudice, discrimination, and power inequality. A coastal woman panchayat president, who challenged upper caste men in the party, said she had worked hard to prove that she could perform better than male members do. One senior male party member insisted on calling her "*nee*" and "*edi*" – derogatory references that highlight the difference in their status and position her as clearly inferior to him. "Caste discrimination is embedded in the inner recesses of their souls," said she. Her remarkable achievement was her solution to the 40-year old drinking water crisis in her panchayat. When she successfully negotiated a Rs 1.25 crore project to bring drinking water to 11 coastal wards, she was accused by other members of favouring her own community and of making decisions on her own without consulting them. She said she had struggled on her own through the bureaucratic labyrinth of the government secretariat, and then finally got the water issue resolved with the intervention of the fisheries minister by evoking the sentiments of the coastal areas. Yet this single striking achievement by a woman panchayat president was dismissed by one party member: "Who will drink the water brought by a fisherwoman?"

It is important, however, to note that dalit women activists have chosen to engage with decentralized governance, seeing opportunities in it. A good number of the dalit women activists we interviewed, irrespective of whether they were in mainstream (the BSP women) or in the civil social

mobilizations, have indeed been alive to the liberal possibilities of interest-group representation accorded by political decentralisation: women from both locations have actively contested the panchayats elections. Dalit women activists located in the political periphery and in civil society look upon the opportunities created by decentralisation as a chance to represent an interest group, and not individual interests. While there is the understanding of caste power as all-pervading and of anti-caste politics as extending beyond securing representation in state bodies, taking a share of the state power is viewed as a strategy to access resources without which no sustained attack on caste power is possible.

The gender politics of decentralization creates a curious space where mainstream political parties are forced to include women from traditionally excluded communities, and yet have to actually exclude, marginalize or attack the kind of political transformations that the inclusion of marginalized interests imply. An interesting play of spaces occurs here in gendered decentralization that actually seeks to transform the public/private, masculine/feminine correlations by inverting them so that the feminine/marginal occupies the public space. To resolve this inversion of power relations, the party simply displaces them into its "inner" domain, so that the party projects a feminine public visage – its female candidate -- while its inner, unregulated arena disciplines or subverts the feminine/marginal. The category of 'woman' only masks the inequalities of caste and class politics as they move to the inner domains of party structures. The "Dalit" woman

candidate, tied to her multiple marginal identities, is not twice valorised but doubly marginalized through a logic of representation in which she must represent the interests of the whole and not "special interests" of the "minority" in public and then left to pay the price for her caste/community identity in the inner domain of the party. The political citizenship granted to the "marginalized woman" in public is undermined by her cultural citizenship within the inner domain of the party.

c. Violence and Citizenship

Violence is not an incidental part of women's citizenship in marginalized groups; it is in fact integral to the very script in which the citizen-state contract is written. In political struggles, for example, Dalit women have borne tremendous amounts of suffering in prisons, loss of physical health, and material resources. Lindberg's interviews – as well as other writings on workers' and landless labourers' struggles in Kerala – reveal a common pattern: women were usually at the forefront of agitation, often providing 'cover' for men against police violence, shouting slogans and providing physical presence, but they were rarely in the leadership or in negotiations with authorities. This, however, does not mean that women were treated with less brutality. Indeed, the contrary. Besides being in the forefront of public agitation, since the late 1930s right into the 1980s, women workers also often provided the domestic support for political struggle and the violence they bore may have been actually more when the struggles were

outlawed. In the later public agitations the men were always prominent in managerial roles in agitations, in planning, and in the negotiations.

However, what is striking is that even when they talk of 'normal times' of contemporary Kerala – i.e. when no public agitation is on, or when it has ended, the narratives of Dalit women activists construct 'political activism' as a non-stop struggle for survival against the onslaughts of the state and the dominant forces in politics – they are full of accounts of going to court, finding bail, getting people out of police stations, helping to find succour to victims of violence, filing complaints with various state agencies – on a daily basis. Such activism leaves much less resources and energy for political work through and in public debate and opinion formation. Indeed, this is only reconfirmed in recent, visible, mass struggle for land by dalits and adivasis. In 2001, a young tribal woman, C K Janu (who, interestingly, had left the CPM to form her own organisation), had represented the Adivasi Dalit Agitation Committee in negotiations after a fairly long agitation at by tribal people Thiruvananthapuram, with the then-Chief Minister of Kerala, the Congressman A.K. Anthony, and agreed into an agreement that land distribution would commence on January 1, 2002 and be completed on December 31, 2002. Further, a proposal to allow Adivasis to enjoy the provisions of the Panchayati Raj (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act (1996), which allowed a degree of self-governance, was also advanced. This however was never honoured, and, the Adivasi Gotra Maha Sabha activists entered an area under the Muthanga Wildlife Sanctuary in February 2003,

after the December 2002 deadline had elapsed. The result was widespread violence both by the state and civil society in the Wayanad district (where vast areas of adivasi land have been usurped by powerful communities) – and women, including their very well-known leader, Janu, took most of the brunt. Tribal women protestors were molested, and C.K.Janu the prominent woman in the leadership of the movement, was beaten up severely by the police before her arrest, something unthinkable in the case of elite women politicians of comparable stature. In the ongoing land struggle by landless dalits at Chengara, in which activists have occupied land at the Harrisons Malayalam Estate, demanding productive land (and not the minimal house-plot), sexual violence against women activists has been used to break the will of the protestors.

A feminist reading of gendered decentralization must also make the connection between the violence in the domestic sphere and the violence of the citizen-state contract. For fishworker women of the Latin Catholic community in Thiruvananthapuram and Kollam districts, we found that domestic violence leads to on the one hand to collective silencing of the issue and on the other, to an overall sense of disempowerment and vulnerability, ironically, as we observed in one case, when the woman chooses to pursue the case into the public sphere of law. Feminist and women's resources to deal with violence against women remain sadly deficient. The undermining of female subjectivity and of selfhood that is an integral part of domestic violence also in turn translates to an undermining women's agency. Clearly,

once the woman is no longer a powerful actor in the home, her natural domain, her agency in public is dubious.

Without comparing between the two, it may be argued that violence is foundational to the citizenship of sexual minority groups as well. Here the community and family's violent suppression of "deviance" works in consonance with that of the police, the hospitals, and the mental institutions. Our interviews with women of sexual minorities, again, are full of narrations of the experience of violence, and from both family and outsiders. Sex workers too speak of violence as an everyday 'normal' experience, something they have to endure if they are to find work. Indeed, the demand for freedom from violence – perpetrated by the family, the community, and the state – as a fundamental condition for full citizenship, reverberates across the whole spectrum of oppositional civil society from well-off, educated, academic feminists to sex workers, who are routinely abjected from mainstream society.

d. Sexuality and Citizenship

Sexual minorities and sex workers have historically been invisible in Kerala's public. Unlike the dalits, tribal people, and the people of the coast who were accommodated at the fringes of mainstream politics and as governmental categories under the pastoral care of the nationalist-Developmentalist state or other systems of governance like that of the Catholic Church, these groups remained *abjected*, invisible in discourses of politics and development. The former groups were thought to be amenable to

reform – indeed, conceived to be in the 'waiting-room of development'; elite discourses of 'uplift' that debated their well being have proliferated since the mid-20th centuries both outside the developmental state and inside. The latter, however, were not considered amenable to reform; hence they were to be dealt with through penal practices or rehabilitation into the former group.

This was the situation until roughly the early-mid 1990s: both groups were considered 'abnormal' (in medical discourse) and venal (in religious discourse). Importantly, both were considered dysfunctional to development because they seemed to be engaged in non-productive labour and non-procreative family practices; they did not apparently add to society's resources – material or human. Hence within development, all they received were rescue homes and other such semi-penal measures of 'moral improvement' They were also considered irrelevant to politics, as they are small minorities with not only porous but also fluid boundaries, and surveying these groups statistically is notoriously difficult. Their electoral clout is of course negligible, and the horror they provoke in the dominant ruled out any interest towards them from mainstream and institutionalised politics. Interestingly, they were mostly invisible in oppositional civil social mobilisations of the 1980s including that of the feminists. Even when they actively took part in protests – for instance over the Kunhibi case – they remained abject and hence vulnerable to state violence in a way elite feminists were not.

At present, both mainstream politics and the institutions of local governance, and the massively-expanded machinery of welfare redistribution are grounded upon allegiance to heterosexist and conservative gender values. 'Successful' women in panchayats declare their allegiance to the hallowed institution of marriage and devotion to their husbands; in the Kudumbasree, the situation is the same. The agency of women in these newly emergent spaces is perceived as eminently gendered; often biological deterministic/foundationalist arguments about 'femininity' are deployed to explain women's 'successes'. The public reiteration of these values is essential for a successful public career for women (though we have of course no proof that women actually adhere closely to such norms in everyday lived life). Given this situation, the expansion of welfare and self-help, and political decentralisation in the state has left the abjection of sexual minorities and sex workers within welfare disbursal institutions mostly untouched.

Around the mid-1990s, however, the sex workers found themselves suddenly functional to development. This was in the wake of the global effort to contain the AIDS pandemic, specifically in the wake of the failure of efforts to educate the general public taken up in the early 1990s. The new strategy focused on retrieving the abjected prostitute as 'sex worker', whose work and agency were now to be understood in liberal terms. Through NGOs, the state made efforts to establish surveillance through opening safe spaces – dropping centres – where sex workers could use when they were not working to rest and to store their belongings. Peer educators were selected who were to bring

other sex workers to the shelter, to hold meetings discussing safe sex and other issues of sex workers' rights. Along with this, efforts were made to end police harassment, raise issues of bodily integrity and physical safety. The drop-in centres served as important converging points, especially important as Kerala has no large brothels. These became spaces of congregation which could have served to shape a sense of collective interest and identity. However, they came to be phased out in favour of weekly meetings. Meanwhile, the sex workers seized the limited visibility they were granted to assert themselves in public with the help of activists in the NGO FIRM, which approached the question from a rights perspective. These assertions became more frequent and powerful in the early years of the new millennium and took the form of rallies, meetings, theatre; sex workers publicly feted filmmakers who they felt did not demonise multi-partner sex. However, such assertions were also often driven by the need for visibility in the media, and fell in place, inadvertently, with the media-driven 'dramatisation of politics'. Thus some sex workers, more articulate and confident than others, began to represent the sex workers, to the detriment of sustained effort to foster a larger leadership from the ranks of the sex workers who could then take the mobilisation forward on their own. But even the creation of the exceptional individual to voice the concerns of the group was a difficult process –as is evident in Nalini Jameela's effort to write and publish her autobiography, this involved rejecting the elite reformer-activist's authority and the scripts he produced about her (Jameela 2007). Also, becoming 'condom teacher' did not prevent the police arrests and harassments, which the possession of the

condom provoked. Despite these hitches, by the early years of the new millennium, the category of the 'sex worker' had become a familiar one in Kerala – the effort of the early group of sex workers (mostly female), , seemed to have paid off, at least to some degree. It must be noted that this visibility was shaped not just by the favourable moment – the influence of global governmentality – but also involved a great deal of endurance and sacrifice of work opportunity by the early group of (mostly female) sex worker-activists and support from activists in NGOs which adopted a rights-based perspective. The weakness of this visibility was that it became increasingly media-driven – significant individuals came to be increasingly perceived as somehow representing the mobilisation as a whole, and a group of leaders from the sex workers who could take forward the mobilisation into a strong trade union did not emerge.

The visibility gained by the sex workers also created a great deal of ire among the dominant feminist groups, which perceived this in fairly paranoid terms – i.e. as insidious globalisation in support of exploitative global sex tourism. Throughout their period of public self-assertion, the sex worker activists faced the public wrath of the feminists – revealing the underlying gender conservatism in dominant Malayalee feminism. Also, Dalit activists were often sceptical about the political implications of sex worker activism for Dalit women. The boundaries between the 'respectable' poor marked by deprivation, and the non-respectable abjected poor who bear sexual stigma have always been flimsy, but now they are all the more so, given the

contraction of welfare and the heightening of the paranoia over the 'collapse of sexual discipline' in the wake of the fears of globalisation. The feeling that sex work activism – or activism around sexual identity in general -- does not really open up any reliable avenues for social mobility for dalit women has been voiced by some dalit activists.

The present is a period of backlash: the global anti-AIDS efforts have changed track, moving away from focus on utilising sex workers as peer educators. The state, however, cannot simply abject the sexworkers – however, the state's efforts at present to address their issue may be described as a humanised version of rehabilitation – the Trafficking and HIV/AIDS project, the Muvattupuzha sex workers' project – which tries to assimilate sex workers into the category of BPL women, the now acceptable category of welfare beneficiaries in the state. The efforts of the NGOs too have waned with drop in funds for rights-based interventions, which in turn affects their ability to protect the sex workers' spaces from the community's violence. The recent efforts to reinstate sex workers driven away from their homes in the Bangladesh colony in Kozhikode have remained half-way. The withdrawal of activists and NGOs, in the absence of a coherent and capable group of sex worker leaders/activists, has cost much and sex worker activism is at a low ebb now.

The sexual minorities have gained much lesser amounts of visibility than the sex workers – and here too there are significant internal variations.

For example, the male sex workers – who are gay, bisexual, or transgendered persons – have gained more visibility than lesbians. The latter have been the most vulnerable group. The research on lesbian suicide have revealed the extent to which the inability to escape local pressures from family and community and the woeful lack of economic resources drive lesbian couples to suicide – which also shows that they lack the physical mobility, and the access to the 'informal social world' that sex workers have. In such a situation, greater visibility may be positively harmful – there have been instances in which lesbian couples coming out have faced tremendous violence from their families and communities Thus even the [strictly limited] visibility obtained by sex workers is unavailable to this group. The numbers of significant individuals from these groups in public are also very few – though gay desire has now actually gained greater discursive space. Actually here the gender disadvantage does work against lesbians as fewer of them have access to elite and male- centred intellectual circles.

Visibility, of course, is not citizenship; it is merely one of the conditions that enable a group to claim citizenship. As mentioned earlier (in the second bullet point) the present regimes of welfare and local governance are not inclusive of the sexual minorities and sex workers in that they rest upon conservative gender values. Also, these groups are not considered functional to development – despite assertions to the contrary by sex workers, who claim to provide an important service, especially in the context of waning global support for the retrieval of sex workers as agents of AIDS-control. The public

assertions and life writing by members of these groups, and the present interviews do allow us a view of how members of these groups conceive of citizenship. However the imaginings of citizenship and community by members of these groups have not been limited to the desire for inclusion within the prevailing framework. First, it is evident that members of these groups conceive citizenship as much more than the ability to participate in and influence public decision-making processes. For them, creating space within the community – and not just the liberal public – is of vital importance. For the community, as much as, or even more than the state, fosters the horror of other sexualities and public assertions of sexual identity, denying thereby the right of these groups to normalcy. This probably resonates in the demand that many of them made for the 'right to live in peace'. Thus their strategies involve not just making demands to the state and lobbying for legal reform through national networks, but also the clearing of discursive space in the local public sphere. Secondly, citizenship involves for them not just the ability and opportunity to engage in rational deliberation over public life and the redistribution of social resources, but also the ability and the opportunity to participate in, and foster affective ties. This is probably what underlies the persistent demand for 'family' and 'community' made in the interviews and in Nalini Jameela's autobiography – and it may be necessary to differentiate this demand, made by members denied access to such institutions, from the conservative right-wing embrace of 'family values'. For the imaginings of family and community by members of these groups seem remarkably focused on the fact that the family can indeed be the space of affective ties, and pay

less attention to the family as a structure of social obligations. This applies for their imaginings of 'community' as well. An important feature of such imagining of family and community is that these seem to be constituted by not so much social ties structured by kinship or property relations, as love and warmth – and hence may indeed be much less solid and binding than the institutionalised versions of family and community. Thirdly, their sense of citizenship involves resistance to the prevailing shift of the discourse of citizenship from the bearer of rights to the recipient of welfare benefits. This is well-evident in Nalini's autobiography. Certainly, many of these people – for instance Nalini -- claim legitimate worker-status – i.e. they claim to be productive workers contributing to social welfare as a whole also, as legitimising their claim of full citizenship. Also, Nalini actively resists the tutelage of elite activists in direct and indirect ways, sometimes through straightforward critique or through 'returning the gaze'. In both ways, she refuses to be the subject of the welfare handout – the *aanukoolyam*, even as she claims material resources. For the sexual minority women, such claims to 'social usefulness' however are very rarely available. However, though they suffer often great dependence upon middle-class activists – since their options are decidedly fewer -- this does not seem to have made them turn automatically into the subjects of the welfare handout. Not surprisingly, these people face tremendous physical and emotional violence from all sections of society, even when they may be better-off.

Given this, it appears that for members of these groups, the human rights discourse is a key weapon. Such efforts are only beginning to be made, especially by sexual minority women, in the State. The recent workshop organised by Sahayatrika for women development workers of the Mahila Samakhya Programme in Kerala made an effort to introduce the issue of rights and rights protection as relevant for local level development intervention to the women development workers. It is vital to secure gains here – the findings of the study on lesbian suicides clearly indicate that lesbians are trapped in narrow local spaces. If so, the only permanent solution to their plight is the extension of welfare benefits at the local level to them. At the same time, a critical understanding of the limits of the liberal promise, and political strategies that acknowledge the overarching presence of patriarchy in the civil society as well as in the state, are equally vital since it is clear that the civil society poses an equally formidable hurdle to the sexual minorities/ sex workers' assertion of dignity as citizens. Thirdly, the challenges of developing a local leadership with strong public skills from among these groups can no longer be ignored if the public presence of these groups is to be sustainable. Perhaps this is the only way to finally escape welfare handouts – by strengthening the trade union model, above the NGO-model or the feminist group-model -- for sex workers. Similarly a strong internal leadership that redefines human well being and asserts the unalienable human rights of sexual minorities to welfare needs to emerge.

In conclusion, the experience and the demands of sexual minority women and sex workers in Kerala reveal important flaws in the texture of political decentralisation and decentralised development. Firstly, it reveals the extent to which the idea of 'gender' has been imported in a particularly partial way – partial to a liberal feminist interpretation: as another way of reiterating the importance of generating income generation and livelihood activity by women and their presence in the state. This lacks the radical thrust of the concept as it appeared elsewhere and thus does not help to highlight the issues of groups stigmatised by sexuality. Secondly, it shows that the present strategy of improving welfare redistribution through expanding the reach of the welfare machinery through the creation of a state-centric civil society – the Kudumbashree – does not necessarily solve the problem of lack of access to welfare for all marginalised social groups. In fact assimilative strategies of the state that force a choice between welfare and sexual identity do not indicate the health of democracy and go against the spirit of political decentralisation, which apparently offers separate representation to marginal groups through quotas. The presence of an oppositional civil society that maintains a critical distance from the state even as it demands welfare and recognition from the state seems essential for such representation to be fulfilled in substantial, rather than formal, terms. Thirdly, the discourse centred upon the rights-bearing citizen seems to be quite alive at the margins of society, among people denied access to the field of dominant politics. This appears to be asserted differently by the sex workers and sexual minorities – while the former tie it to their reinterpretations of the social usefulness of sex work, the latter link it

to their reinterpretations of unalienable human rights. In both cases, the non-reciprocal relation of power between the state and the citizens that informs the subject of the welfare handout is resisted through advancing other notions of citizenship.

e.   From *Avakaasam* (Right) **to** *Aanukoolyam* (Handout) :
The Coastal Communities

Our fieldwork in the coastal districts of Kerala is significant in highlighting the plight of communities that are dependent on traditional livelihoods in the context of radical geo-economic changes. Perhaps the single most striking shift in the political citizenship of women from Kerala's largely below-poverty-line fishing communities is evident in the way they use language to position themselves with regard to the state. If we heard the word *avaakasam* – a right that is also a demand directed toward the state – from former women activists who had played important roles in the fishworkers' struggles of the 1980s, today the word that we heard echoed in women's voices in coastal villages is *aanukoolyam* – a concession that is granted by the state. The language of rights has a politically normative subject whose fundamental sense of "natural" justice includes the right to challenge the state, to wage a struggle against the state, and to question entrenched relations of power that the state represents.

In contrast, as discussed in Chapter 2, the language of handouts denotes a subject that is fundamentally ambiguous about its political position as to whether it is within or without the state's realms of power even as it is uncertain about its own power to wage a struggle to secure the handout. The gender politics of decentralization reforms in the coastal communities have to be located in this new, hazy space of reconstruction between a citizenship of rights and a citizenship of *aanukoolyam*. The *aanukoolyam* referred to here, and as pertinent to Below Poverty Line communities such as the fishworkers who rely on traditional livelihoods, is quite distinct from the special citizenship grants claimed by other socially disadvantaged classes of women.

In the fishworkers' communities, based on our fieldwork in the districts of Thiruvananthapuram, Kollam, Alappuzha, Thrissur, Kozhikode and Kannur, we argue that the re-ordering of women's political space is simultaneously accompanied by the shifting of the symbolic and imaginative terrains in which women's political subjectivity and citizenship may be crafted. This network of new and old spaces is marked by the cultures of a new domesticity that the politics and Age of *Aanukoolyam* represents. That is, the New Political Order and the New Global Economic Order are synchronized by a New Domestic Order which in turn rewrites the lives and the cultural and political citizenship of Below Poverty Line (BPL) women in keeping with the Age of *Aanukoolyam*. The New Domestic Order emerges amidst a set of coincidences (1) displacement of means of livelihood (2) displacement from living spaces and from "work spaces" (3) increasing

territorialism of quasi-religious forms of governance (4) the transformation of women's local organizing units formed during the mid-1980s for the struggle against multinational fishing companies into microcredit self-help groups.

The last decade has seen a devastating set of changes that have pushed large sections of this population inhabiting 222 coastal villages below the poverty line. For traditional fishing communities in Kerala, the space in which the safe continuation and reproduction of life may be imagined no longer exists. From a life ecology that was characterized by unmeasured sea wealth as a permanent, unchanging resource of food and sustenance by the use of traditional skills, the fishworkers, since 1987, have become subservient to the international capital interests that have taken over the fish economy with high investment technologies that include deep sea fishing and trawling.

If the ocean's wealth can no longer be taken for granted, neither can the coastal land which is the traditional living space for this community. The 590-km stretch coastline has now become potential prime property for the tourism industry with long stretches now already occupied by resorts inhabited by white tourists. New Coastal Zone Management laws and tourism development projects threaten the living spaces of these communities many of whom have been traditionally occupying the land without legal deeds or *pattayams*. The one million fisherfolk who inhabit the coastal areas are under threat of displacement given the state's deep interest in marketing "God's own country."

Given the deepening inscription of community identities, the quasi-religious community itself functions as a primary site of citizenship that is more powerful than the state for immediate life issues. This is true with regard to the Latin Catholic community in the southern districts - Mukkuvar community who are Dalits, and the Muslims of Malappuram, Kozhikode and Kannur. The activities of these community organizations should not be seen as primarily religious, in fact, their primary occupation is governance of both religious and secular issues that affect the community. Thus the most striking instances that have visibly brought fishing community women into the public sphere of struggle have been linked to these organizations. The Catholic Church in Thiruvananthapuram, in the era when it was infected by liberation theology, in the 1970s and 80s, provided the space for women's organizing and for the inflow of feminist ideologies from Europe and elsewhere in India. The *Theeradesa Mahila Vedi* (Coastal Women's Forum), the only labour-based women's movement in Kerala, grew in the fishing community, through the organizing space given by the church in 1970s and 80s. The power of the church continues, although it no longer sponsors progressive gender ideologies.

The culture of the New Domestic Order is most clearly marked by the growth of thousands of state-initiated micro-credit women's self-help groups, the Kudumbashree, in the fishing communities. Each unit has ten to fifteen members who put in Rs 10 every week. After six months, they are eligible for

a bank loan which they can use to run a small business. These promote a Mini-Entrepreneur Femininity, one that fosters small domestic cultures of management, account-keeping, and the running of small businesses in the intimate space of the community. As a fish-worker woman from Alappuzha insightfully commented, "self-help groups are like tied boats. They don't move, and they have no direction."

In the Latin Catholic fishing communities of Thiruvananthapuram, where there was a long history of women organizing for women's rights, feminist activists of the time had built up local women's units under the banner of *Theeradesa Mahila Vedi*. A few years ago, these local units, formed exclusively to deal with women's issues such as domestic violence, rape, and labour issues of fishworker women such as transport, market conditions – have been transformed to self-help groups. The critical energy built up through years of women organizing for women's rights now has flowed into the confined domesticity of microcredit.

The New Domestic Order – the retreat of women from fish work – is both spontaneous and forced. As feminist scholars have noted, the second-generation women in Dalit communities are developing new cultural notions of femininity that resemble middle class femininity so that the daughters of fish worker women are not taking up traditional work done by the mothers. Thus a range of activities – fish vending, drying fish, peeling, fish cutting, fish processing for export – are not done by younger women as it once was. It is no longer natural for the girl child to follow the mother into her profession, instead, they remain married, at home, affiliated to self-help groups, or

entering into the service sector through organizations such as SEWA Kerala. This does not mean they are unproductive, in fact, what we saw was the demand to be productive, the demand to be a Mini-Manager – from home. So Muslim women who traditionally do not go out to sell fish, or remain at home, still wanted "a job we can do from home." Affiliated to the managerial culture of the Kudumbashree is the envisioning of the home itself as a mini-entrepreneurial space.

The elected women representatives of fishing communities thus work in this context of the Age of *Aanukoolyam*, of the emergence of a New Domestic Order, and of the sponsorship of Mini-Entrepreneur Femininity. No ward member we met had taken up any women's issues, any issues relating to the community, or any labour issues relating to women. Instead we found that this new political identity is structured by both the culture of domesticity, the culture of *aanukoolyam* and by the culture of mini-entrepreneurship that mark the new subjectivity of the below-poverty- line woman. It is interesting too that all the elected representatives enjoyed "gender peace": they came from seemingly well-run families, and enjoyed a stable married life. None of them had any previous history of rebellion or any marked points of fissure within family life, they all had "clean records" to match their public life. Only a few CPM-affiliated women had any history of previous political activism; others had no history of political activism or of feminist activism. Many had been groomed into public identity from Kudumbashrees. In fact the Kudumbashrees provide an ideological continuity from the mini-

entreprenneur to the ward manager. Our interviews also can be interpreted to read a natural symbolic relation between the ward and the home, where the ward becomes the extended home. So for instance, Safia, an Indian Union Muslim League panchayat member took us proudly around Beypore panchayat to show the streetlight she had caused to put up, the roads she had repaired, and the houses for the poor that she had won. Similarly, this sense of home and flock could be seen in the Congress member, Philomen Rani, from Valiathura, who said that she was tending to her constituency as Christ tends to his flock. This picture of domesticity was also affirmed by Thahra, in Kannoor, who had got the below-poverty-line red cards converted to below-poverty-line blue cards so that people could apply for passports to go to the Gulf countries. The ward provides an intimate space for the nurturing of the community's basic needs – electricity, roads, homes – so that it is a political metaphor of the home, where woman still performs her primary maternal role as nurturer and caretaker. This role is clearly not a controversial one, but it is one that requires hard work and significant tussle with the panchayat bureaucracy which resists the newly inducted women members with a range of tactics including lost or missing files, absent contractors, and infinitesimally slow progress. Here again, the greater struggle of those women who are have little access to the elite 'feminine', mentioned in Chapter 1, is evident.

We also found a marked class difference between the poorest families in the locality and the woman member, who always hails from more privileged families in the same locality. No woman member is a fish worker,

which also alienates her from any labour issues that affect the women in the community. These issues are still left to fish workers' unions and federations. There is a clear dissociation of class and labour politics from the women members' lives. Similarly, there is the absence of feminist organizing or feminist work on the ground with minimal exceptions along the coastline. Thus gender politics – at least a critical gender politics that works to generate women's awareness – is absent. On the other hand, one of the main achievements cited by several panchayat members is that they started new women's self-help groups, which again encourages cultures of mini-entrepreneurial femininity and a new domesticity. Given the presence of self-help groups, and the absence of a live culture of labour/class politics, the absence of feminist initiatives on a popular level, the BPL women and their panchayat members are left in the grey zones of the culture of *aanukoolyam.*

f. Indigenous Languages, New Connectivities

If the fish workers represent the communities who have not been able to create economically or culturally intelligible links with new forms of governance, power, and citizenship where global and local forces intersect, several – certainly not all -- Adivasi communities and women leaders provide an interesting contrast. Once again, we must note the internal diversity of these communities, both within *gothrams* (tribes) and between – they are as varied as the modernized Mala Arayas, the orthodox Kurichiyas, the adaptive Kanis, or the tribe that has preserved most their cultural resources such as the

Kadas, the unique cultural group of the Muduvas, and the Chola Naikas who have a highly developed system of ecological conservation. Here the inner resources of the oldest inhabitants such as the reliance on forest-based, ecologically viable forms of livelihood, the traditional forms of governance such as *oorukootam* (village gathering), the struggles against "development", the battle for land rights, and the philosophical divergence from the track of developmental modernity have worked in consonance with a new set of international and national sensibilities and initiatives regarding ecology and environment.

This is not to romanticize the state of the communities involved: in fact, the Adivasi struggle against the violence of the Indian state is long-standing (to the point that elders reminiscence fondly about the *rajahs* or kings who gave them autonomy in return for forest produce), and the destruction of their traditional livelihood sources unparalleled. However, the emergence of bio-capital initiatives that include the re-evaluation of traditional medicine, herbs, and indigenous knowledge, the interest in organic food, the lust for patents of "natural medicinal sources" by global multinationals, as well as transnational sensibilities and initiatives in environmental conservation and the heightened awareness of the fragility of the tropical rainforest biome have all created a context in which many Adivasi women engaged in decentralized governance and forest management programs have acquired a sense of agency and purpose. (It could be suggested that our research coincides with a period in which the post-modern western body discovers that its healing

energy may rest in the resources of the poorest communities of the 'east'). Coupled with this is the empowerment that many women seem to feel when the marginalization of the Adivasis as "sub-human" and irrelevant to the political process is being challenged for the first time in history. Our fieldwork suggests that despite the presence of entrenched political forces, the threat of direct physical assault, and the general unintelligibility of the languages of governance, many Adivasi women bring a tremendous sense of enthusiasm, commitment and energy to their roles as panchayat members/presidents, as development workers, and as individual leaders. The fact that they are able to travel, attend meetings and training sessions, and gain accessibility to officials and political leaders makes them more confident in taking up leadership roles in many levels in their villages, or even to challenge the oppressive agents of the state such as police and forest officials. Many women walk long distances through forests populated with elephants, and trek through high hills for their work in development programs. Of special significance here is that programs such as Participatory Forest Management and *Vana Samrakshana Samiti* (Forest Protection Committee) have created some conditions needed to transform the meaning of development in forest localities despite their many limitations.

A host of parallel initiatives such as the Mahila Samakhya Society (MSS), the Kudumbashree Self-Help groups, the Participatory Forest Management groups like the *Vana Samrakshana Samitis* or Ecodevelopment Committees have acted to a great extent as training grounds for the social and

political roles some of the women are able to take on and carry forward successfully. For example, a Malapulaya panchayat member in Marayoor, Idukki district, was able to lead a struggle for land which forced the government to allot 1.5 acres of land to 242 families and develop it into a model Adivasi rehabilitation settlement called Indira Nagar. She has taken the initiative to encourage her people to revive paddy and dry cereal cultivation for food security. Even after her panchayat term is over, she continues to be active: she has started a Balavady (primary school) in the settlement and is planning to develop an adult literacy center. Another (now former) panchayat president of Pulpally, Wayanad district, who belongs to the dwindling Kalanady tribe, played a key role in a struggle against a dam that would have uprooted hundreds of families in different localities. It may be significant that political parties have their own "Adivasi organizations" thus generating an unexpected space of relative autonomy for women. In some wards, where there is a larger percentage of impoverished Adivasis, women members have been able to make a difference, gaining confidence and trust, sanctioning houses or funds to buy domestic animals, or securing National Rural Employment Guarantee cards. Some women, who work in the panchayat, Kudumbashree as well as in the Participatory Forest Management groups in their own villages, have gained significant social standing and are recognized as leaders by the community.

Adivasi women who stay within the terms set by political parties, however, are inevitably in a position of hostility with their counterparts

engaged in social or ecological struggles for survival outside the domain of formal politics. These may represent some of the strongest women leaders: for example, one of the most powerful leaders we interviewed was the block panchayat president of Manthavady, who is a staunch CPM full-timer. Dismissing the Adivasi struggles for their traditional lands which have been usurped by powerful plantation owners, development projects and tourism initiatives, she argues that Adivasis must, with the support of the CPM, encroach on public lands and forests, as well as culturally assimilate into mainstream society. In a case where the "minority" internalizes the ideological views of the mainstream, she blamed Adivasis for creating their own impediments to development: "lethargy, sense of failure, lack of unity, lack of education and awareness" as well as their tendency to ape the outsiders rather than retain communal bonds once they were financially sound.

Adivasi women engaged in development processes, however, often stress the need for the "Adivasi way of life" to be the model of development that is brought to their areas. This is particularly true for the forest-dwelling Adivasis, who prefer to live in the "protection of the forest". Access to natural resources, including the right to collect Non-Timber Forest Produce, tubers, honey, and fish, is vital to their survival. Many of these women, who are employed as anganwadi teachers, forest guards, tribal promoters, and non-government individuals in Participatory Forest Management Programs, and forest protection committee presidents, are confident and well-respected

workers in their fields. As noted earlier, the meaning of development has changed drastically from dams and schools to forest conservation and sustainable living practices for the women who work in these areas due to the presence of the Participatory Forest Management, *Vana Samrakshana Samiti,* and Ecodevelopment Committees. A former panchayat president in the Wayanad district, , suggested that the state adopt a multi-layered approach in which Adivasis are offered rehabilitation settlements on forest fringes in lands they identify so that those who wish to move out may do so, and elders and others who wish to be forest-dwellers can continue to lead their traditional lives. "Whoever wants to should be able to have the best of both worlds so that the ancient indigenous knowledge systems and life visions will be conserved for all humanity. We could even start schools for teaching indigenous medicine, ecologically viable land use and water harvesting systems, and knowledge about forest biodiversity," she said.

This is again not to argue that tribal people are somehow isolated from liberal ideas of property ownership – indeed not, as tribal land struggles post-the new millennium show. Besides the recent tribal land struggles, in which women were prominent in the leadership (C.K.Janu was a leading spokesperson and leader of these struggles), especially, the Adivasi Gotra Maha Sabha's struggles in 2001 and 2003, which more or less demanded liberal land ownership for adivasis, it may be noted that new visions and definitions of development have emerged through Adivasi struggles in which Adivasi women have played key roles against massive development projects

in the 1980s and 1990s that fit into dominant ideologies of development. These include the Peppara dam struggle in Thiruvananthapuram district where women were at the forefront. Other lost anti-dam struggles include the opposition to the Karappuzha dam in Nellarachal, Wayanad, where hundreds of families were uprooted for a project that was entangled in corruption and litigation. In contrast, the opposition to the diversion of the Bhavani River in Attappady to the Bharatapuzha basin was a victorious agitation where Adivasi women physically obstructed the bulldozers. This was a particularly striking instance where the state was trying to divert the major water source of Attappady, a drought-prone area, to the Bharatapuzha in the name of taking Kerala's share of the Kauvery River waters, as if Attapady is not a part of Kerala. Similarly, the fifteen-year struggle to save the Chalakkudy River and Athirappilly waterfalls from a hydro-electric project has involved Kada Adivasi women from the very start of the river protection movement. Geetha, one of the leaders, is fighting several high court cases against the dam and displacement, taking classes, and addressing audiences and media throughout Kerala.

The problematization of the boundaries between what is termed 'primitive', 'backward', 'Adivasi', 'modern', 'advanced' and mainstream domains in their minds is perhaps one of the most important aspects of the politicization of women. A woman of the Paniya tribe, one of the most impoverished in Kerala, remarkably contrasted what may be rephrased as the "wealth of the poor" and the "poverty of the rich" at a gathering at Poothadi

panchayat in Wayanad: "Our people do not ask for too much and want so little, but even that little is denied to us; whereas the settler communities ask for too much, and are never able to reach their goals, and so always remain poor."

Domestic violence, gender discrimination, dowry, the inevitable debt traps, and family suicides are becoming common among the Adivasis. Yet, unlike in the coastal fishing communities, we find that the philosophical resources and life practices of forest-dwellers are becoming more and more relevant in the non-linear development loop now imagined by marginal environmental activists all over the world. This is hardly to suggest a return to some primordial developmental phase, but rather, to point to the newness of the emergent imaginaries. One striking example is the *Vasantha Sena* (Spring's Army), started by a group of women to protect the Periyar Tiger Reserve. *Vasantha Sena* emerged from a combination of energies that mark contemporary Adivasi life and is therefore an interesting history of global intervention that sparked off unplanned mobilization. *Vasantha Sena* represents the dynamics of the new forms of global/local governance that unwittingly spark off unpredictable energies at the local level. It is neither indigenous nor global, yet it draws from the threads of both to weave its own pattern of action.

VASANTHA SENA: Spring's Army

The India Ecodevelopment Program was initiated in 1996 in the Periyar Tiger Reserve (PTR) with World Bank Aid as part of participatory forest management and reducing forest exploitation and dependence of fringe people, Eco Development Committees (EDC) were formed in all the settlements and colonies in the vicinity of PTR. A number of unique ventures were initiated to wean people from forest destructive livelihoods – like poaching, cinnamon bark collection, liquor brewing, sandal and ivory smuggling and so on – and given forest protective roles, with uniforms, designation and payment. It has been hailed as one of the most successful conservation venture in the whole country. A series of trainings were given to these EDCs on forest ecology, biogeography, wildlife identification, watershed protection and so on. A number of these groups are running viable and economically sustainable ventures in ecotourism as guides, doing unique programs like bamboo rafting, night patrolling, birding and butterfly watching as well as rare wildlife observations; they do some farming and produce spices with organic certification for export; they have an outlet for their produce including home-made chocolates, and other eatables, medicinal oils, soaps, honey etc.

It was at this time that a few women under the leadership of Noorjahan, Usha, Saroja (a Paliya tribal woman), Latha (a Mannathi), Lakshmi et al decided to join the protection work on their own. They met the officials in charge of the program and they instructed the women to form a group and come with a clearcut program. They were informed that they will not get any employment or monetary support which they were not asking for anyway. They were informed that they will not get any employment or monetary support which they were not asking for anyway.

82 women from the Periyar Colony, Paliyakkudi, Kollam Pattada colonies 2, 3 &4, Kollam Pattada Vanitha and Kurishumala 1 came forward voluntarily to take up day time forest fringe patrolling. *Vasantha Sena* was inaugurated on October 21 2002. The route selected by them is an 8km stretch in the Thekkady Range – an area rich in Sandal trees and frequently visited by smugglers and firewood collectors. Most of these women actually earn a living by firewood collection from the forests. They usually earn up to Rs.100/- per day although they cannot go every day as it is tedious work.

More and more women showed interest in joining the Sena although in the beginning they had to suffer a lot of ridicule from their family members an others. Men were indignant about the audacity of women to take up forest protection and patrolling which is traditionally a male domain. They laughed it away saying that it is women who go every day

175

to fetch firewood, tubers, honey and other non-wood forest produce (NTFP) to interior forest and so why cannot they do protection, regeneration and data collection work?

No one would believe that the group would last or they would continue to do the patrolling. But it is now more than 5 years and they are proud to say that they haven't missed even a single day of patrolling.

They have been provided a rucksack, a raincoat which is a green uniform and a few flasks by the Department as well as a few well-wishers. They have registered their group which has an Executive Committee of seven members, a chairperson and a cheque member. They are entrusted with a few works now and then like cleaning, cooking for camps, building gutters, a few watershed and soil conversation work, seeding, nursery raising and planting.

They have been awarded the P.V.Thampi Endowment Award from the Cochin Science and Technology University, the Amrita Devi Vaishnavi National Award from the central govt and also a few monetary funds from well wishers. The money has been put in a fixed deposit and is used to give loans, scholarships, and help for education at the beginning of the academic year. Some of them have received trainings on lantana furniture making, natural dye use and block printing, tie and dye

works and so on. They do all the anti-plastic campaign among tourists and provide paper bags for the needy for a cost. A number of ventures are being initiated to provide employment for the group – like a catering unit, a nature walk for tourists, 'a day with the *Vasantha Sena'* experience for the sensitive travellers, food packs for students, a marketing unit at Kumily for the organic fruits and vegetables these women produce etc. they have also started a medicinal plant garden to be opened up for the tourists.

g. Redefining Development

Arguably, the 33% reservation of seats for women in local governance may be framed as a project in which the political agency of the "Third World" woman is seen as an object for development. Similarly, the theoretical filters through which the "Third World" woman's agency is conceived also serve to make her the subject of political, economic and cultural structures rather than a creator. It would seem necessary that state interventions, international initiatives, global funds, development training ("capacity building"), intellectually elite leadership, or mass/collective movements are necessary to restore, enhance, or even create the conditions under which her agency might evolve.

Clearly, women in many oppositional civil social mobilisations have challenged the current understanding of 'minimum entitlements', especially the dalit women and the members of the widows' associations. They demand it as citizens' rights, thereby demanding a say in defining what the 'minimum entitlement' should be. Dalit women activists demand full citizenship centred on rights to full access to productive resources, and not just welfarist minimum entitlements. In fact, activists in both locations offer stiff resistance to being reduced to subjects of *aanukoolyam*, much before the outright challenge offered to such reduction by the ongoing land struggle at Chengara. The Dalit women activists' and widow activists' involvement with welfare has been to claim it as a right, or to create welfare resources of their own. This, in other words, represents the effort to extract the liberal political promises of interest-group claims in decentralization in politics and development extended by an essentially illiberal society.

Yet one of remarkable parts of our fieldwork demonstrates how individual women have taken steps that are extraordinary in terms of how they re-imagine the idea of development or of women's political agency. Fieldwork among Adivasi women and on environmental issues shows that transformations are happening on the ground in terms of how women, especially "the grandmothers of the world", are creating new paths and new visions. They open up a space for rethinking the agency of women of the "underdeveloped" world that is lost when the individual is generalized into the mass or the collective.

Such an example is Mariamma of Kumarakom panchayat, Kottayam district, also known as *Kandalammoomma*: "grandmother of mangroves." The mangroves in the estuary where the largest wetland of Kerala, the Vembanad, reaches the sea with its load of priceless productive soil from five rivers is under threat. The mangroves are being cut down and the area taken over for houses, industries, and tourism. Mariamma arrived in the area as a daughter-in-law, and watched her father-in-law first plant mangroves to protect their land from being eroded by the lake waters. She realized that the plants with strange roots that grow near the small stream flowing by her home were holding back the soil and preventing bank erosion. The 70-year old Mariamma has been planting mangroves, not simply on her personal property, but in all needed areas in the locality, and also maintaining nurseries of saplings. Mariamma's strange obsession made sense when the tsunami hit the coastline. She became an "expert" resource for the panchayat, and now goes out for awareness programs to schools, other panchayats, and supplies saplings for afforestation programs.

Another "grandmother" – Darlyammoomma –lives atop a sand dune that resembles a miniature Grand Canyon. The peculiar landscape has been created by sand mining in the Neyyar River, in Neyyattinkara near Thiruvananthapuram. When everyone around sold out their property and moved in abeyance to the sand mining mafia, Darlyammoomma alone stayed

put, with a sickle and a few dogs to protect herself. "If I move, the question itself will disappear," she says.

The coastal wetlands of Kannur in north Kerala abound with mangrove, bird and fish diversity. During winter, thousands of migratory birds come to these areas in search of the fertile soil, food, breeding and nesting grounds. Hunters and real estate investors have also started pouring in proclaiming that all this is wasteland. Narayani, who has been living in Chemballikundu since she was born, does not think so. All around her she sees the bounty of nature which has kept her family alive: the rice, coconuts, yams and tubers, vegetables and greens, the fresh water, and the winged visitors. Marooned in this small island, the 75-year old Narayani and her army of six dogs scared away all intruders. There is pressure on her to sell the land and to go to the city, but she says: "What will happen to the birds if I go away? I have been seeing them for so many years. They bring in messages from all over the world. I have to be here until I die to protect them."

In the Periyar Tiger Reserve, Kumily, a young Mannan girl in her early twenties, Lata, has started a tribal museum. She also organized a unique ecotourism venture and won the Sanctuary Asia award for Young Naturalists in 2007. Along with the museum of artefacts, utensils, musical instruments, implements, hunting and fishing gear used by the Mannan tribe, she takes visitors on a nature trek and interprets the forest, wildlife, and conservation

principles. Her venture has become an economically viable enterprise which supports a number of Mannan youngsters with sustainable livelihoods.

Lakshmikutty Kani of Mottammoodu, who was active in the anti-Vamanapuram dam movement, is a medicine woman who informally teaches several Kani youngsters their age-old indigenous herbal healing system. She appears as a speaker on several platforms to oppose the bio-patenting of life-forms, including medicinal plants and herbs identified by the Adivasis: "They (westerners) come here, they learn from the Adivasis, go back and do experiments, and then come back to us when they find out we were right. Why are Keralites so foolish? Don't we remember how hard we struggled to sweep them (colonizers) out of here? Can't they learn from the East India Company?" Lakshmikutti Kani is a prolific writer: she authors poetry as well as longer essays on the life and practices of the Kanis, some of which has been stolen from her and published without acknowledgment by a forest department official named C. K. Karunakaran.

The 95-year old Thankamma Vaithyar is a midwife and healer who makes her own oils and medicines and has a lot of patients whom she treats and feeds free of cost. She has clear notions of how wild biodiversity and indigenous knowledge systems can be conserved for the whole of humanity. Unlike Lakshmikutty, she laughs away the idea of biopiracy because she believes that the plants will be effective only if they grow in their natural

habitat, and when the medicine is administered with the appropriate chanting ("marunnum manthravadavum").

The steering power exercised by individual women does not negate the general belief of most women that their survival struggles take place within a political and legal structure controlled by the hegemonic state. Within this conflict, it is never possible to question the legitimacy of the structure because even when the powerful are forced to recognize rights, they still control the parameters within which the struggle occurs. Thus, Kali, a Irula woman from Attappady, said, "We are not saying it is wrong or useless to struggle for rights within a determined power structure because this can be a way of accumulating experience and strength. But this is not an arena where one will really win rights. Real rights have to be exercised, they have to be lived."

Perhaps this can open up a whole new way of thinking about decentralization and about development, outside the system of representational quotas, proportions, statistics, numbers about biological life that are always consonant with the tools of governance and of state-building.

Concluding Reflections

The mid-1990s and after were characterised by the enthronement of (a certain variety) of liberal feminism as the avenue towards full citizenship for women. The results of the experiment, as we have seen, are mixed. The numbers of women who have entered the local bodies have exceeded thirty-three per cent of the total number of seats. However we noticed a 'feminisation' of local governance, which did not really constitute a critique of the masculinised domain of politics. Elite femininity appears enthroned all the more firmly within the new spaces opened up for women, and the shape taken by decentralised governance and planning in Kerala – especially the expansion of individualised welfare distribution through the local bodies – seems to have accentuated this process.

In our interviews with successful women panchayat presidents, a significant group identified as the source of their comfort within local governance, the possibilities for deployment of feminine altruistic capacities; another tended to view the new spaces as similar to the spaces of paid work, valuable for the social mobility it offered the family and the individual. Unlike earlier times when politics was indeed a space in which 'un-gendered' women could occasionally seize power reserved for men, the new spaces, which held out the promise of political empowerment for women seem to be reinforcing dominant gender norms. Women in local governance seem to be located within an emergent, hypermoralised space

of the 'community', as distinct from the space of local politics, which continues to be dominated by male politicians and marked by masculinist values and styles of functioning. The control of the latter over the former is unmistakable, and evident in the fate of exile that women who try to be too independent in local governance generally find out. In the rapidly urbanising municipalities and cities, however, such delineation of realms is not readily achieved. The managerial role women are expected to carry out cannot be fulfilled without political manoeuvring; however, the latter activity brings (mostly elite) women leaders considerable discredit, and hence they end up losing both in governance and politics, unlike their rural counterparts, who may succeed in governance, though not in politics.

No doubt, there is now a new set of elite 'superwomen' in the upper echelons of politics, who have been in local governance, but who possessed prior experience of political activism. These women conform entirely to dominant norms of femininity, speak a certain qualified liberal feminist rhetoric – importantly, they address 'women' as their constituency -- but have to still rely on 'strategic opportunities' in politics to gain upward mobility – and hence ultimately conform to the masculinist rules of the game.

There are however openings for women at the local level, which do not require them to don the garb of the Generous Giver. This is particularly so

in panchayats faced with crisis situations, especially extractive growth due to rapid urbanisation, which results in the destruction of the environment, especially water resources, and loss of livelihoods. Here the figure of the Generous Giver has little relevance, and indeed, women may lead struggles against such common issues, and indeed gain acceptance as leaders. Given that environmental issues are beginning to impact the lives of ordinary people in rural areas, and because political decentralisation has had the unintended consequence of weakening centralised control of parties, such opportunities may increase in the future.

The present opportunities of decentralized governance have largely been accessible to women of the marginalised communities -- Dalit, tribal, and coastal women -- who remain within the fold of the dominant left. It is not the earlier generation of working class women with experiences in public struggles who have gained from political representation, but their daughters, who have had a better education as well as a greater familiarity with norms of middle-class respectability and feminine behaviour. They are more vulnerable to disempowerment through sexual slander, subject to control by more seasoned politicians, and more dependent on the support of families, especially husbands. These women are also caught in the double bind of contemporary representational politics because the assertion of cultural identity and the battle for special interests that propel the disempowered women often effectively undermines their exercise of political citizenship while in power – therefore, the 'paradox of inclusion'.

The paradox of inclusion occurs because on the surface, the project of political decentralisation appears to a liberal one that acknowledges specific interest groups with clear cut claims upon the state, but functions, in reality as a system in which political parties are dominant, and one which distributes welfare among several governmental categories.

As for Muslim women, many of them do function as successful village panchayat presidents, often braving threats from fundamentalists, relying upon the support of the left parties. However, interestingly, we found that Muslim League women politicians were keener to make use of 'strategic opportunities' to establish themselves within the party and gain upward mobility. In fact the strategic opportunities are perceived to be at least as important as the expansion of formal spaces for women.

In sum, it appears evident to us that the large numbers of women in local governance does not mean (a) that women have gained free entry into all levels of the political domain (b) that considerations of gender justice do not really inform local-level politics and planning deeply. Further it appears that given that the masculinist culture of high politics remains untouched, women still need 'strategic opportunities' and (at least the semblance of) sponsorship by senior and powerful male politicians to gain upward mobility into that realm. Further, as far as the experience of women in urban governance indicate, women's shifting from the role of manager to that of the politician, especially on their own and without

powerful [male] sponsors, is not acceptable. As far as advancing the interests of gender equality are concerned, not much headway seems to be in sight, if one is to go by the implicit commitment to elite gender that marked the majority of our 'successful' interviewees, and their acceptance of the not-always-open control by local politicians. It is precisely where the party controls weaken, and where political and economic conditions that prop up the elite feminine Generous-Giver role are simply non-existent, that women are able to make their mark in local governance *without recourse to social power but through accessing political power*.

It seems to us that the women in the panchayati raj institutions may benefit from the creation of a nation-wide organisation of such women which would work as a platform from which they can advance collective demands, and which could put counter-pressure on state governments and political parties. This organisation must necessarily be autonomous and run through allocations from the Central budget, and with a sufficient number of internal platforms for democratic and transparent functioning. Secondly, state funding of women's election campaigns – with full funding offered to independent woman candidates unsupported by parties -- besides increasing salaries – seems important. Thirdly, and most crucially, the state needs to put more pressure on political parties to encourage them to field more women in the general categories and importantly, to ensure fair representation of women in the currently unreserved posts, especially, Standing Committee Chairpersonships.

The second major context we explored was that of the vast expansion and shift of state welfare from 'people's right' to state-determined minimum entitlements tied to self-help and forms of work-for-welfare. Here the below-poverty-line woman is identified as the central agent of welfare – the welfare recipient, in other words, is gendered. The CDS office bearers/ presidents and the women ward members and often, even the women panchayat presidents share the same space – that of the hypermoralised 'community' subordinate to that of local politics – and hence sometime jostle each other for space. As our interviews with Kudumbashree CDS CPs revealed, this position is indeed a powerful one – yet it does not guarantee mobility into the upper realms of politics, or access to the panchayat as a matter of right. While this does guarantee 'contacts' – and thus generates social capital, the women have no real *collective* control over how such social capital is to be deployed, to what ends. It is true that individual women who become CDS CPs are using this to gain access to local governance; however, this gain should neither be overrated nor treated as an end point. And the gender conservatism so conspicuous in our interviewees did reveal the extent to which the reiteration of established gender norms still works as a basic condition for entry into public life. While the intense desire for public life displayed by many of the CDS CPs we interviewed cannot be dismissed, one cannot help seeing that below-poverty-line women have been released not into the public, but into a highly governmentalised space bounded on four

sides by the panchayat, the Kudumbashree Mission, the community, and the political parties. Indeed, this even stands in the way of the avowed purpose of the Kudumbashree Mission: to transform underprivileged women into full-fledged and responsible economic agents.

More worrying, of course, is that the CDS CP's utility to the panchayat, the Kudumbashree bureaucracy, and the political parties rests upon her ability to control the welfare recipients, widely accepted to be 'fickle' and difficult to control. The focus on welfare has created not politicised subjects aware of their rights but the subject of *aanukoolyam* – the welfare handout. While much less amenable to state or party control, the subject of *aanukoolyam* should not be celebrated -- they are strongly subject to the pushes and pulls of consumerist society. Also, it needs to be taken on board that the subject of *aanukoolyam* is not singular: the below-poverty-line women of the disempowered communities (such as the coastal communities) have much less space and ability to manoeuvre than their counterparts in other groups. On the one hand, the alternate political mobilisations do point out how the active fostering of welfare recipient status is rendering invisible the unequal access of different social groups to productive resources (e.g. the dalit groups). On the other hand, even the Kudumbashree organisers are citing this as a problem – not even the state can satisfy the subject of *aanukoolayam*. The present orientation of the local bodies towards welfare distribution needs to be radically altered towards gainful investments in the productive sector if women are to be

transformed into full fledged economic agents who enjoy autonomy in decisions relating to the fulfilment of material need. This has to be coupled with a plural understanding of what economic agency and autonomy might mean to different groups of women. Further, unless policy makers draw upon a more politicised sense of 'gender' and not the version currently in use in Kerala, which only reinforces the male-female binary, sexual minorities and sexworkers will never gain access to welfare.

Interventions *within* governance may not be able to put forward a full-fledged critique of the present welfare recipient subjecthood and its implications for gender. But even to access liberal welfarist citizenship (which would be hospitable to interest group politics) fully, women may need more than gender learning (while it is, no doubt, valuable an exercise) by itself. The commitment of the state and the political parties to end the barriers between the 'higher' and 'lower' realms of politics and the bureaucracy seems necessary if women are to rise above being efficient managers (at best) and become decision makers in the highest political and bureaucratic circles. However, without truly democratising both the structures and cultures of politics and the bureaucracy – given the fact that local governance combines the two and the newly-inducted women are subject to both – the positive gendering of governance will remain an elusive goal. The point is to increase the numbers of women at all levels of government and politics, *and* improve the voice of women at the lowest rungs, so that masculinist control is gradually dismantled –without

assuming that the former will automatically lead to the latter. Secondly, given that more effective models of critical gender learning and organisation are available in Kerala, both in civil society (SEWA) and in the government programmes (the MSS) – the government could well learn from these earlier initiatives by effectively linking with them.

However, alternate forms of conceiving citizenship are emergent – for instance, in the dalit women activists' narratives, which point out how the present regime of liberal welfarist citizenship in Kerala obfuscates the unequal access of groups to resources. The sense of environmental citizenship that emerges from our interviews with women activists in tribal mobilisations and environmental struggles critiques the minimum entitlement-centred welfarist citizenships' tacit support to consumerism – and both critiques seems necessary. All the more so, because the subject of *aanukoolayam* in Kerala is gendered.

Lastly, we would like to emphasise the fact that oppositional civil social movements in Kerala has to gain a great deal of self-reflexivity, and indeed – work hard to retain their independence from both state and the media while actively engaging with both. This is particularly true of those movements that have been largely elite-driven in their history – here we would mention the feminist movement and the environmental movement.

191

Feminism in Kerala has been recently pluralized, and rather rancorously, but the dominance of elite women has been conspicuous in Kerala's feminist network, the Stree Vedi. The feminist struggles against sexual violence by politicians throughout the period have inadvertently led to the tightening of sexual conservatism and legitimised a conservative interpretation of women's rights and agency, which excludes sexual minority women and sex workers. The distance that Dalit women activists sought to maintain with official feminism in Kerala is also striking. It is telling indeed that Dalit feminists who were key early figures in the network never gained upward mobility within the network. The situation remains the same, though Dalit feminists have closely shared many positions taken by the prominent members of the Kerala Stree Vedi, such as the official feminist position on sex workers and sexuality in general. It looks as though precisely those techniques of marginalisation at work which ensured Dalit women's marginal and powerless presence in mainstream political mobilisations were at work here too: a similar division of labour in which elite women plan, manage, and negotiate struggles, and provide them their public face, and non-elite women providing the bodies that create the actual physical public presence. It is striking that mainstream feminism reproduces the two primary modes of exclusion at work in Malayalee society, through which elite society and gender norms are constituted – it perpetuates both the deprivation of the Dalits and the abjection of all those people stigmatised by sexuality. Certainly, the work of feminists in the new local level institutions as

'gender trainers' or as facilitators of panchayat- level Jagrata samitis is valuable; but it is striking that a larger critique of the state's efforts to authorise liberal feminism as the authentic version feminism is hardly forthcoming from official feminist quarters. The challenge therefore is to shape a mode of critical engagement with the state and the media, *and* to pluralize feminist activism without rancour and moralism. Indeed, our research does indicate points at which feminists may engage with the state on political decentralization – for instance, our work does bring out the almost universal experience of violence by marginal women as they try to access citizenship. At a very general level, the awareness that the issues of patriarchal power that feminists raise cannot be settled through state-determined minimum entitlements is something that should not be allowed to de down.

The environmental movement in Kerala, too, needs greater self-reflexivity – it needs to shed its elite moorings. In the late seventies and the early eighties, the environmental movement was marked by the emergence of two distinct languages of expressing concern over environmental destruction. The context of their emergence was the scepticism over the dominant ideology of egalitarian Developmentalism in Kerala which was voiced from the civil society. One of these was the feminised voice of concern about the destruction of prelapsarian nature – a 'sentimental critique' that yearned for the pure and original form of nature. The other was the masculinised, technocratic language of cost-

benefit analysis of the KSSP in which nature is primarily a measurable and quantifiable resource. Both these languages are basically elite and the representation of the environmental struggles drew upon one of these languages, throughout the eighties, right up to the present.

In the 1990s, several far-reaching changes – especially galloping consumption and urbanisation of the Malayalee elite -- worked to shift the burden of suffering due to environmental damage on to the poorest and the most disempowered sections of Malayalee society. An important fact accelerating this was no doubt the rising levels of consumption among the elites. So the environmental struggles of the present – over sand mining, quarrying etc – are the struggles of the poor. Not surprisingly, such struggles are often initiated by women. The deleterious impact is borne much more by women and environmental destruction does not recognize the public/domestic divide. Therefore the struggles are frequently around drinking water, waste dumping, damage to houses through quarrying etc, and women are active participants and initiators. Yet these struggles occupy much less media attention. The reason is precisely that the language spoken by these women initiators is not the binary language in which equally essentialised figures, the 'nature lover' who romanticises Nature, and the diehard rationalist ruthless technocrat, are pitted against one another. Another significant development of the 1990s was the rise of the media, especially visual media and satellite television.

The opening up of sites of enunciation for alternate politics was a feature of this development. Media visibility rivalled public mobilization as the way of getting issues of concern – and this was accessed by almost all groups seeking public status and attention. As the media began to shape political issues, the importance of the two elite languages for the articulation of concern for the environment increased, ironically, in times in which environmental struggles were burgeoning among poor women who spoke neither of these. Plachimada, where the struggle against Coca Cola took place, is a telling instance where an environmental issue gained attention primarily because the adversary was a multinational corporation. The intervention of a variety of male agents – politicians, elite environmental activists, the local panchayat leaders – all ensured that the women's initiative was sidelined. Instead, one of the senior women leaders, Mayilamma, was built up as the 'mascot of the movement' embodying 'pure femininity' against the evil, rapacious masculinity of global capitalism.

However, now environmental concerns are often important in local planning in the panchayats, for example, in watershed management. But action on environmental issues takes place only when enough public pressure is mounted on the panchayats. The popular struggle at Muriyad, Thrissur district, is an example. So too is the Eriyankudi struggle, which successfully prevented the sand-mining and quarrying mafia from destroying paddy land. The women who have been active in these

struggles have faced tremendous odds including outright physical violence. Interestingly, such interventions are much less successful when there is an overarching dominance of political parties in an area – the Endosulphan issue in Kasaragod is a case in point. However, what seems evident is that such dominance may be less efficacious in the future if one goes by the defiant postures against commands from above taken by local party workers in villages affected by waste dumping from urban areas. This may be merely an expression of the NIMBY (Not in my backyard) attitude but may indeed be expanded to NIABY (Not in anybody's backyard) one through grassroots activism.

The increasing concern of the panchayats about environmental issues is also bringing greater legitimacy to the work of individuals and groups who were previously dismissed as eccentric or marginal – Mariamma of Kumarakam who plants mangroves, and the organization, *Uravu*, in Wayanad, are good instances. However, it is to be noted that none of these actually speak the elite languages of concern for the environmental – they do not rely upon such binary constructions. These do point to the fact that environmental destruction cannot be addressed through minimum entitlements and that the constitutional status of local bodies actually weaken the chain of command of parties are important here. Often popular pressure is crucial in turning the panchayats to this direction, especially when the issues are of environmental destruction. The work of environmental activists and groups, however, are usually through and in

the language of the state – the experience of the River Research Society in Aathirappally and elsewhere illustrates the limitations of this approach well. Projects created thus are usually top down and bureaucratic and under the panchayat's control and will – and bound to fail. Indeed, it seems clear that a move back to public mobilization – women are already prominent here -- over garnering media visibility may be necessary to exploit the concern evident at the local government level about environmental issues.

The experiences of the feminist and environmental movement it appears, offer valuable lessons. From both, it appears that de-emphasising a critical relation with the media and the state may ultimately be undoing for alternate forms of politics. These are times, however, in which the severely dispossessed and the marginal are finding voices, agency, and critically different ways of conceiving citizenship. There is indeed a need to bring the alternate languages that dismantle elitist and gendered binaries may be brought into the public. All the more so because these struggles bring up an implicit critique of liberal welfarist citizenship – both in their understanding that environmental destruction is not remedied through minimum entitlements, and in their critique of individual property rights as often inimical to the long-term well-being of the locality. The fundamental premise of much theoretical discussion around the agency of the Third-World woman too often centres on her lack of agency to be remedied by global and local development-

missionaries. In our fieldwork, however, we came across women who exercise agency the provenance of which seems to be what William Connolly has called the 'politics of becoming', the sort of politics "by which new constituencies struggle to modify the register of legitimate diversity" (Connolly 2005:68). As such, such politics shake up the established and its agents may be labelled 'eccentric' or 'unreasonable', and hence, to engage in the 'politics of becoming' is to "propel a fork in time, throwing a wrench into the established code of obligation, goodness, identity, justice, right, or legitimacy" (ibid. : 122).

Our interest in the present theme stemmed from the fact that most of us have been interested and active in oppositional civil social movements. It seems, therefore, appropriate to conclude with a reminder from Theodore Adorno: "The almost insoluble task is to let neither the power of others, nor our own powerlessness, stupefy us." (Adorno 1978: 57). The problem with the state-centric civil society is that it resembles too closely the Foucauldian penitentiary: while subversions do occur in the penitentiary, it is defined by practices and attitudes that produce fully regulated social bodies. There is the need to retrieve the civil social as oppositional for a richer politics and a space for alternate visions. These are visions routinely laughed at by 'policy makers' and mainstream politicians as pipe dreams of the powerless. However, the stupefaction induced by the power of others that Adorno talks of can be combated only

through non-elite utopias of participation that tell us, indeed, of what might be.

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Appendix 1.

FIELDWORK: interviews and focus group discussions

Table 2.a

Fieldwork in the Kudumbasree network

Districts	Interviews				Focus Group Discussions
	CDS Chairpersons	ADS members∗	Ward members ♦	Officials°	
Thiruvananthapuram	20	4	4	4	3
Alappuzha	21	3	3	1	3
Idukki	17	4	--	--	1
Thrissur	31	5	6	1	4
Kozhikode	13	6	--	4	6
Wayanad	8	3	2	1	3
Kasaragod	13	3	3	2	2
Total	123	28	18	13	22

∗   Includes ADS presidents.
♦   Includes ward members and panchayat presidents who entered
        public life through the Kudumbashree network.
°   Mainly the District Mission Coordinators and officials at the
    State   Mission office, Thiruvananthapuram.

Table 2.b

Other Organizations

Organization	Interviews	Focus group discussions
SEWA Kerala	58	3
Widows' Associations (various)	45	3
Kerala Mahila Samakhya Society	36	3
NGOs (Uravu, GSGVK)	13	2
Total	152	11

Table 1.c
Interviews and Focus Group Discussions with women activists in the oppositional civil society

Movements	Interviews	FGDs
Women activists from tribal communities	87	10
Women activists from coastal communities	80	20
Dalit women activists	30	--
Women activists in sex worker organizations/sexworkers activists	17	--
Women activists in sexual minority groups/HIV positive people's groups	23	--
Total	237	30

Table 1. d.

Interviews with women in politics and local governance

Group	Interviews
Women in local bodies (rural and urban)	82
Women in mainstream politics	21
Women in youth organizations	17
Women in service organizations	12
Women in trade unions	6
KSSP women	14
Total	152

Appendix 2.

Table 2 a.

Numbers of female and male members in different tiers of the panchayati raj institutions (PRIs) for 2005

	Village panchayat	Block panchayat	Corporation	Municipality	District panchayat
Male	10,104	1249	194	1102	213
Female	6026	747	121	649	128
Total∗	16130	1996	318	1754	341
% of women in total	37.35	37.42	38.05	37	37.53

Source: State Election Commission 2005

∗   Excluding members on who data is incomplete**.**

Table 2 b.

Average age of women members in different tiers of the PRIs for 2005

	Village panchayats		Block panchayats		Corporations		Municipalities		District panchayats	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
General	44.43	43	51.79	42.6	45.60	44.93	43.98	43.22	46.60	44
Women reservation	--	38.70	--	41.05	--	39.59	--	39.57	--	44.76
SC	39.48	37	42.48	37.07	44.9	--	41.02	40.21	41.01	--
SC woman reservation	--	34.99	--	35.0	--	36.0	--	32.66	--	31.14
ST	37.07	29.27	33.66	26.01	--	--	26*	27.33	48.12	-
ST women reservation	--	30.25	--	37.0	--	--	--		--	37*
Av. Age	47.29	39.54	50.41	40.57	45.4	39.94	43.67	39.14	45.84	43.17

Source: State Election Commission 2005

∗   A single member

Table 2 c.

Numbers of female and male members in General, SC, and ST categories in different tiers of the PRIs, 2005

	VILLAGE PANCHAYAT		BLOCK PANCHAYAT		DISTRICT PANCHAYAT		CORPORAT-ION		MUNICIP-ALITY	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
General (% of total)	9274	468 (5.05)	1080	69 (6.01)	184	13 (6.60)	201	12 (5.97)	1002	55 (5.20)
SC (%)	1122	95 (7.81)	155	12 (7.16)	21	0	10	0	108	14 (13.08)
ST (%)	22	21 (16.29)	12	6 (33.33)	2	0	0	0	1	0

Source: State Election Commission 2005

Table 2 d.   Women panchayat presidents at block and village level: Average age and numbers below the age of 30 in each category

Women panchayat prsidents	Village panchayat		Block panchayat	
Won from	Av. Age (total no.s)	No. below 30 yrs (% of total)	Av. age (total no.s)	Below 30 yrs (% of total)
SC/ST/ST woman/SC woman wards	34.77 (32)	14 (43.75)	38.55 (9)	2 (22.22)
General category wards	43.38 (57)	3 (5.26)	43.09 (11)	3 (27.27)
Women's reservation wards	41.17 (265)	20 (7.54)	43.46 (31)	1 (3.22)

Source: State Election Commission, 2005.

Table 2e.

Numbers of Women and Men in Chairpersonships of Standing Committees in Village, Block, and District Panchayats

Note: For village panchayats, the sample was obtained from 6 districts; two village panchayats were randomly chosen from every block. The total sample is 114, more than one-tenth of the total number of village panchayats. For block panchayats, all nearly blocks in seven districts were covered, and the total sample is 71, half the total number of blocks. All 14 of the District panchayats were covered.

PANCHAYAT	FINANCE STANDING COMMITTEE		DEVELOPME-NT STANDING COMMITTEE		WELFARE STANDING COMMITTEE		TOTAL PANCH-AYATS (POSITIONS)	% of women in total positions
	M	F	M	F	M	F		
Village (%)	103 (90.35)	11 (9.65)	99 (86.84)	15 (13.16)	92 (80.70)	22 (19.30)	114 (342)	14.03
Block (%)	69 (97.18)	2 (2.82)	62 (87.32)	9 (12.68)	44 (61.98)	27 (38.02)	71 BPs (213)	17.84
District (%)	12 (95.12)	2 (4.88)	13 (87.80)	1 (12.20)	12 (67.08)	2 (32.92)	42 DPs (42)	11.90

Source: Fieldwork data

**Table 2 f.   Gender composition of Standing Committee
Chairpersonships in village panchayats with male presidents**.

District	Total GPs random selected	Male panchayat presidents	Standing Committee Chairpersonships		
			All-male	Mixed*	More♣ Female
Thiruvananthapuram	24	12	9	3	0
Kannur	18	9	3	6	0
Alappuzha	24	12	7	4	1
Pathanamthitta	20	10	4	4	2
Kottayam	22	11	2	7	2
Wayanad	6	3	1	2	0
Total (No. of female welfare standing committee chairpersons)	114	57	26	26 (17)	5 (4)

*'Mixed' refers to a 'one woman, two men' pattern.
♣ 'More female' refers to a 'two women, one man' pattern.

Source: Fieldwork data

Table 2g. Gender composition of Standing Committee Chairpersonships in village panchayats with women panchayat presidents (general and reservation).

District	Total GPs random selected	Female Panchayat presidents	Standing Committee Chairpersonships		
			All-male	Mixed	More female
Thiruvananthapuram	24	12	12	0	0
Kannur	18	9	9	0	0
Alappuzha	24	12	8	4	0
Pathanamthitta	20	10	6	3	1
Kottayam	22	11	8	3	0
Wayanad	6	3	1	2	0
Total (No. of female welfare standing committee chairpersons)	114	57	44	12 (8)	1 (1)

Source: Fieldwork data

Table 2 h.   Gender composition of Standing Committee Chairpersonships in block panchayats with male presidents

Note: Sample randomly selected from our total sample of 71 to match the number of women- headed panchayats in each district.

District	Total BPs	Male panchayat presidents	Standing Committee Chairpersonships		
			All-male	Mixed	More Female
Thiruvananthapuram	4	2	2	0	0
Kannur	6	3	0	2	0
Alappuzha	12	6	3	3	0
Kasaragod	2	1	0	1	0
Palakkad	8	4	1	3	0
Kollam	6	3	2	2	0
Kottayam	10	5	1	2	2
Total (No. of female welfare standing committee chairpersons)	48	24	9	13 (10)	2 (2)

Source: Fieldwork data

Table 2 i.   Gender composition of Standing Committee Chairpersonships in block panchayats with female presidents

District	Total BPs random selected	Female panchayat presidents	Standing Committee Chairpersonships		
			All-male	Mixed	More Female
Thiruvananthapuram	4	2	2	0	0
Kannur	6	3	2	1	0
Alappuzha	12	6	5	1	0
Kasaragod	2	1	1	0	0
Palakkad	8	4	1	3	0
Kollam	6	3	2	1	0
Kottayam	10	5	3	2	0
Total (No. of female welfare standing committee chairpersons)	48	24	16	8 (8)	0

Source: Fieldwork data