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36. Sheshadri et al., *Why Hindu Rashtra?*
37. Lise McKean, *Divine Enterprise: Gurus and the Hindu Nationalist Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
38. See *Organiser*, August 26, 1996.
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3

Reinventing Public Power in the Age of Globalization

Decentralization and the Transformation of Movement Politics in Kerala

Patrick Heller

Class-based social movements have traditionally been concerned with capturing the state and wielding the instrumentalities of bureaucratic power to compensate for the inequities of market distributions. Redistributive goals have been pursued through a range of centrally coordinated interventions that have included wage support, direct transfers, universal service provision, labor market regulation, and progressive taxation. Both the class politics and policy regimes associated with social democracy have been played out at the national level. Kerala represents an important case of a sub-national trajectory of social-democratic development marked by a distinctive history of class-based mobilizations and redistributive social policies.

Globally and locally, however, the effectiveness and viability of this trajectory, and of redistributive strategies of development more generally, is increasingly in doubt. The most obvious problem is that globalization in its neo-liberal form has significantly reduced the nation state's latitude in using traditional instruments of redistribution. Just as critically has been increasing concern, born of the failures of planned development, about the ability of the institutional forms of the modern state—representative democracy and techno-bureaucratic administration—to promote equity.¹ If such doubts first emerged as part of a post-materialist politics in advanced capitalist societies, with in particular the rise of "new" social movements that extended the traditional left critique of market commodification to a critique of state bureaucratization, a similar shift can be discerned in many late developing countries. Thus a wide range of subaltern movements have challenged the post-colonial hegemony of the developmental state. But far from being anti-development, or representing a wholesale rejection of the modernist project of citizenship (as Escobar and other post-colonial theorists argue), many of

these movements remain centrally concerned with expanding the role of public powers to underwrite social citizenship.

What makes these movements “new” is that they have challenged the high modernist hubris that imparts the state and its technocrats with the vision and capacity for social transformation to the virtual exclusion of civil society.² The continuity that marks these movements (as opposed to the rupture presumed in the post-modernist reading) with the past (or “old” social movements) is that they are animated by a political project of expanding social citizenship and are, as such, strategically concerned with engaging the state. The rejection of bureaucratic modes of emancipation (and the attendant political emphasis on capturing the commanding heights of the state) has been accompanied by calls for transforming the very nature of the state and of representative politics, and specifically for deepening democracy through greater participation. These movements have taken a wide range of forms, and as a whole account for the flourishing of civil society that commentators have detected in Latin America, Africa, and South Asia. Of the many political projects that have emerged as a result, none has been more critical than the demand for decentralizing state functions and capacities to levels at which popular movements and organizations can play a more direct role in shaping public investment. The old social movement logic of redistribution from above has in other words been superseded (though not replaced outright) by calls for redistribution from below.

The potential implications of this strategic shift are difficult to exaggerate. On the one hand, democratic decentralization has the potential of leveling the playing field for effective political participation and creating new institutional spaces for civil society activism. On the other hand, given the significant role the state plays as a source of accumulation in much of the developing world—and notably in India—reconfiguring the state and how and where it deploys its resources can have a potentially dramatic distributive effects. The debate and struggle over decentralization looms even larger when one considers that a critical policy tool of neo-liberal economic reforms has been a variant of decentralization that effectively emasculates the role of the public sector. The capacity of social movements as such to reclaim the logic and discourses of decentralization as a vision and strategy of democratic empowerment and expansion of public decision-making emerges as a critical contested terrain of the second great transformation.

There are probably few examples in the world where the causal link between organized social movements and significant redistributive and social gains is as strong as in Kerala. Briefly put, a long history of social mobilization with roots in the late nineteenth century generated an upsurge of caste reform movements and peasant uprisings in the 1920–1940 period then crystallized into a lower class movement under the organizational umbrella of a the communist party which captured power in 1957. Repeated spells in power by the communists

combined with an almost continuous process of militant mass mobilization exerted unrelenting pressure on the state to expand social programs, regulate labor markets, and implement land reforms. Despite a two-decade period (1970–1990) of virtual economic stagnation, social indicators have continued to climb, and poverty rates have continued to fall. There is little doubt that no other state has been more consistently pro-poor or successfully redistributive than in all of India, and possibly anywhere in the developing world.³

Which makes the launching in 1996 by a CPM-led government of the “People’s Campaign for Decentralized Planning” rather intriguing. Widely regarded as the most far reaching and radical experiment in decentralization ever undertaken in India, the campaign’s political project has been nothing less than a frontal assault on the bureaucratic fiefdoms of the state and the patronage networks of the political system. The paradox here, in the words of the campaign’s key architect, is that “a state government launched a movement to force its own hand to radically restructure the mode of governance. Why should any state embark upon such a mission?”⁴

Though this question, as we shall see, overstates the agency of the state, it certainly calls for an answer. That answer, I shall argue, lies in a profound re-configuration of the relationship of social movements in Kerala to political parties and the state marked by a dramatic shift from traditional state-oriented distributive struggles to a mode of movement politics deeply embedded in civil society. This shift is inflected with both an important rupture and key continuities that link these two political moments in Kerala’s developmental trajectory. The rupture emerges from the fact that the redistributive project was predicated on building a centralized, commandist, and top-heavy state apparatus, linked to a highly disciplined political party and its mass organizations through quasi-corporatist structures. These structures more or less bypassed civil society, and equated lower class power with party control of the state. In contrast, the decentralization project seeks not only to devolve bureaucratic and political power, but to re-embed the state in civil society by promoting participatory democracy. The continuities relate to the dynamics of what has been a steady, if uneven, process of democratic deepening. The process has been driven by iterated engagements between social movements and state institutions centered primarily on issues of social citizenship, the most important political effect of which has been the differentiation of civil society from social structures. A second continuity has been with the CPM itself, and in particular its history as a social movement party.

MOVEMENTS AND DEVELOPMENT IN KERALA

Kerala’s achievements on the social front are well known. On all the key social indicators it has dramatically outperformed all other Indian states and even

compares favorably with developed countries. Literacy is over 90 percent and life expectancy has reached 72. Between 1957–1958 and 1990–1991, Kerala experienced the most rapid decline in poverty of any major state, including the Punjab and Haryana, India's capitalist growth success stories.⁵ Many factors have contributed to these successes, including historically higher levels of literacy and remittances from Kerala's migrant workers. But structural and institutional reforms have been the most important. Lands reforms in the 1970s virtually abolished landlordism and transformed poor tenants into small property owners. Labor market reforms and high levels of unionization leveraged the bargaining power of wage earners to the point that even informal sector workers have seen their wages rise rapidly. Social protection schemes now cover a significant share of the population, and an extensive network of subsidized food shops has practically wiped out malnutrition. Extensive health care and primary education systems have achieved almost universal coverage.⁶

Because Kerala's economy remains backward and growth rates have been, until very recently, modest at best, most observers have attributed these successes to state actions. Whether the task at hand has been getting teachers to teach, children to stay in school, landlords to surrender land, or mediating and enforcing wage rates and work conditions for over two million agricultural workers, the state has consistently delivered. These efforts, moreover, have been sustained over time and regardless of the political party in power. No major public service or redistributive program has ever been reversed, and this despite an increasingly precarious fiscal situation and a decline in Centre financial support. Sustained state intervention has moreover survived a history of fragile multi-party coalition governments. If we consider that Kerala's successes stand in sharp contrast to the overall failure of state intervention in the rest of the country, yet that it shares the same basic institutional, financial, and state structures, and has more often than not been ruled by the same Congress party that has done so little in other states, it is clear that the difference in the state's effectiveness lies not so much in the character of the state itself—as Kohli argues for the case of West Bengal—but in the nature of its engagement with society.⁷

By all accounts, Kerala has a vibrant, plural, and activist civil society. A wide range of NGOs, unions, and associations continually organize and articulate interests and exercise constant pressure on the state and its agencies. But much the same could be said of the rest of India. Between an Anglo-Saxon-style liberal constitutional order that has encouraged pluralism over corporatism and a dynamic and powerful repertoire of contention inherited from a prolonged liberation struggle, India has a long and storied history of voluntarism and popular forms of collective action. Why then has associationalism in Kerala produced a responsive state, whereas the rest of the country governments are better known for their benign neglect of needy citizens at best, and their predatory behavior at worst?

To answer this question, we have to unbundle the idea of civil society and recognize that not all forms of associationalism have democracy-enhancing effects. In contrast to the currently fashionable trend of viewing civil society as by definition good for democracy, it is important to recall that early theorists of civil society—notably Hegel and Marx—viewed civil society as the realm of the self-interested and the particular. If the right and propensity to associate is certainly a necessary part of democracy, it does not follow (as is often assumed) that all forms of voluntary action are good for democracy. Forms of association that are exclusionary, based on traditional hierarchies of authority or geared to securing rents or perpetuating privileges, certainly do not have democracy-deepening effects. For this reason it becomes critical to distinguish associative orders that favor encompassing rather than narrow interests and programmatic reforms rather than group patronage and rent-seeking.

At the risk of making a generalization that inevitably vulgarizes the complexity of the Indian picture, at both the national level and in most states (which for many reasons is the much more appropriate level of analysis for social movements in India), forms of association and demand articulation based on narrow groups or sectoral identities / interests have more or less crowded out more encompassing expressions of political life.⁸ With respect to the general configuration of organized interests, upper class and upper caste interests tend to be more effectively organized, and even though the poor have significant opportunities in the political arena, the effective exercise of citizenship for millions of Indians at the lower end of the social order is circumscribed by the persistence of traditional forms of social control and acute forms of material dependency. Certainly, movements emerge and are vocal but tend to be either limited to narrowly defined constituencies or sectors, or simply lack the scope and scaled-up capacity to be politically effective. Most notably, very few social movements have developed synergistic relationships with political parties.⁹ With the decline of the Congress Party's hegemony as a catchall party, these fissures have been translated to the political system, which is now increasingly dominated by re-essentialized identities of caste, religious community, and ethnicity (subnationalism). While it is certainly the case, as Guha argues,¹⁰ that the thrust of much subaltern activism in India is distributive (as opposed to the post-materialist logic of "new" social movements), the fragmented and issue-based character of movements has rarely (with the exception of farmer movements) in recent times translated into actionable redistributive policies. Thus while civil society remains vibrant, associational life strong, and movements lively, in the absence of programmatic parties and a state capable of insulating itself from rent-seeking pressures, the remobilization of primary identities over the past two decades has triggered a frantic and zero-sum scramble for preferential treatment that Pranab Bardhan has aptly described as "equal-opportunity plundering by all interest groups."¹¹ In this scramble, the interests of the poor

are rarely heard and the politics of social citizenship are conspicuous by their absence.¹² In this vicious cycle, the failure of the developmental state gives rise to “movements of rage” and the reassertion of primary identities.

In Kerala, civil society is certainly as noisy, but not as cacophonous as the Indian norm. Patterns of association are more likely to be horizontal, cutting across primary identities of caste and communities. Rural life in Kerala is characterized by a dense tapestry of cooperative societies, self-help groups, child care associations, and NGOs. The extensiveness and depth of the institutional infrastructure of civil society—that is, the reach of public legality and the presence of basic differentiated institutions of governance and socialization—have decisively shifted the locus of authority from traditional structures to rational-legal structures.¹³ Thus Kerala has the highest levels of unionization in the country, and unlike the national pattern, unionization and social protection schemes also encompass significant segments of the informal sector. The reach of authoritative state institutions and the extent to which basic social rights of citizenship have been institutionalized are most trenchantly reflected in basic indicators: 94 percent of births in Kerala are attended by trained health care personnel (compared to 34 percent in India) and 91 percent of rural females between the ages of 10 and 14 attend school (compared to 42 percent).¹⁴ Finally, political life has been dominated by a fairly stable electoral distribution between class-based parties, rather than the continuous and opportunistic realignments of communal and caste alliances that have become the hallmark of Indian electoral politics. This explains not only why the politics of social citizenship have commanded center stage in Kerala, but also why Kerala has been spared the caste and sectarian violence that has gripped the rest of the country in the past two decades.¹⁵

The particular modalities (programmatic parties, horizontal forms of association) and the overall intensity of citizen engagement with the state and its institutions in Kerala cannot, as is the case with most neo-Durkheimian theories of social capital, be explained with reference to long-term processes of socialization. If anything, pre-Independence society in Kerala was marked by a degree of caste segmentation and feudal dependency that was acute even by Indian standards. What distinguishes civil society in Kerala is not a particular culture that predisposes individuals to trust each other but rather the extent to which civil society—as a discrete realm of social life—has become differentiated from pre-democratic social structures, which in turn has given free reign to rights-based forms of political participation. This process of differentiation has not been one of linear and evolutionary modernization, but rather the political product of a history of acute conflict and recurrent episodes of social mobilization. That history has been treated extensively elsewhere but can be briefly summarized.¹⁶ The first third of the century saw the rise of three distinct movements: a socioreligious anticaste reform movement, the anticolonial movement, and contentious but disorganized in-

stances of agrarian protest. None of these movements, taken alone, was unique to Kerala. But to the extent that they converged both ideologically and organizationally under the political leadership of a programmatic cadre-based communist party (the CPI), they generated a socially transformative dynamic that has taken Kerala down a very different path from that of the rest of the country. Thus, in sharp contrast to the dominant nationalist Congress Party politics that sought to accommodate rural elites and downplayed class and redistributive issues, the Communists in Kerala explicitly tied colonial rule to the injustices of the caste system and the inequities of the agrarian system. The struggle against British imperialism became a struggle against the social and economic power of Kerala's landed upper caste agrarian elites. From the outset of mass politics, democratic rights in Kerala were about social rights.

This mobilizational trajectory reached an electoral watershed when the CPI won Kerala's first elections in 1957. Unlike in West Bengal, the Communists and their allies have never achieved a stable electoral majority, and have consequently been in and out of power. This, coupled with the fact that they have always remained suspicious of “parliamentary democracy”—having in fact been twice evicted from power by the central government—more than anything else explains why the Party has continually had to reinvent itself and build its mobilizational capacity. As a key party theorist notes, “[T]he Left does not have faith in the autonomous transformative power of the state government, which is only part of the overall bourgeois-landlord Indian state. Therefore, while in power or outside, they continue to mobilize the masses in support of the demands. The constant pressure from below is important in understanding the responsiveness of the state machinery.”¹⁷ Adding to this has been the bandwagon effect of other political parties embracing mass-mobilizational politics. Nowhere in India has the contentious repertoire of social movements become such an intrinsic part of routine politics.

The most demonstrable effect of continuous lower class mobilization has been the building of the most socialized economy and developed welfare state in the region. But as the state has responded to demands for social rights, it has also extended the reach of public legality, weakening the material and social hold of traditional dependencies. Thus an equally important effect of Kerala's history of social movements has been the deepening of democracy through a double movement of institution-building and civil society differentiation.

THE CAMPAIGN

By the mid-1980s it had become clear that Kerala's redistributive trajectory of development was in trouble. In both agriculture and industry, growth was

stagnant, and unemployment was climbing. The organized left in Kerala responded by abandoning militant class struggle in favor of a social-democratic strategy of class compromise. Industrial militancy fell dramatically and Left Democratic Front (LDF) governments made a series of strategic concessions to capital. In the 1990s, Kerala's economy did out-perform the national economy.¹⁸ But high unemployment levels have persisted, and liberalization has had a particularly acute impact on Kerala's economy, first with the reduction of Centre subsidies (most notably for the Public [food] Distribution System) and second with falling commodity prices (especially rubber) that have come with import liberalization. The resulting fiscal crisis of the state combined with ever more acute inter-state competition for foreign and domestic capital has only increased the pressure to relax labor laws, curtail social protection, and in general downsize the role of the state, in particular its developmental and planning role. If such pressures have seen a marked reduction in social commitments in other states, in Kerala powerful and well-entrenched unions and a political equation, marked by broad-based working and middle-class support for the welfare state, have ruled out downsizing. Addressing the structural crisis of the redistributive-developmental state has required an entirely different strategy. What has emerged has been a project to strengthen the public sector by devolving the responsibility of service provision and development to local governments.

In 1996, a CPM-led LDF government launched the "People's Campaign for Decentralized Planning." The institutional details of the campaign have been explored in detail.¹⁹ Widely acknowledged to be the most ambitious effort at decentralization ever undertaken in India, the scope and depth of institutional reconfiguration has been remarkable.²⁰ During the five years of the LDF government (1996–2001), the nature of public authority has been transformed along four axes. First, there has been fiscal decentralization: 35–40 percent of all plan expenditures have been allocated directly to 1,214 local, block, and district *panchayats* and municipalities. Under the previous Congress-led government, *panchayats* received Rs. 477 million in grants-in-aid in 1995–1996. In 1996–97 the grants-in-aid jumped three-fold to Rs. 1,770 million and nearly ten times the pre-campaign figure, to Rs. 5,107 million in 1997–98.²¹ Second, there has been significant administrative decentralization. Local governments have been given new functions and powers of decision-making, and officials from many line departments have been brought under the authority of *Panchayats* and municipalities. Third, there has been political decentralization. Thousands of locally elected officials who were little more than agents of centrally or state-sponsored schemes now enjoy the authoritative decision-making power and the budgetary discretion to make and implement development policy. Fourth, planning and budgeting for local development takes place through a series of nested participatory institutions that begin with ward-level popular assemblies (*grama*

sabhas) and finish with task forces of local officials and activists that design specific development projects.²² The scale of participation has been of movement proportions: in the first round of *grama sabhas* of the campaign in August–September 1996, around 2.5 million people participated with an average of 180 persons per *grama sabha*, representing 6.97 percent of the population, or roughly one out of every five households. In the second year, participation increased to 7.16 percent of the rural population.²³ Over three hundred thousand people participated in development seminars that prepared extensive development reports for every local *panchayat* and municipality, and task forces of some twelve thousand produced over one hundred thousand projects.²⁴

Though the institutionalization of the campaign remains an open question, particularly in light of the LDF's defeat in the 2001 legislative elections,²⁵ there is little doubt that the reforms achieved to date represent a significant deepening of participatory democracy. First, by having devolved planning and implementation functions to local arenas, the campaign has for the first time in India meaningfully empowered local governments and communities to directly control local development. The entire planning cycle—which begins with the collection of local data and ends with the formulation of a comprehensive local plan that consists of hundreds of projects—is basically an extended exercise in participatory problem-solving, budgeting, and implementation. Second, both the institutional and the political logic of the campaign have been centrally concerned with levelling the playing field. The devolution of authority and resources to local governments has significantly reduced the transaction costs of participation, and the knowledge and capacity gap that has traditionally excluded ordinary citizens from playing an effective role in governance has been considerably narrowed by mass training programs, the active mobilization of civil society expertise, and concerted efforts to mobilize women, dalits, and *adivasis*.

Whether or not the campaign has produced efficiency gains in developmental expenditures is a question that calls for more detailed research.²⁶ The principal concern here is, however, not to evaluate the effects of the campaign, but rather to explore the conditions under which such an ambitious project of transforming the role of the state in development was undertaken.

EXPLAINING THE ORIGINS OF THE CAMPAIGN

If the rise of redistributive coalitions in the developing world has been the exception to the rule, so have successful cases of decentralization. India is a case in point. Despite the fact that the idea of empowered local governments has long been a staple of India's Gandhian heritage, from Nehru's Community Development Program to national and sub-national efforts to empower

India's *panchayats*, the history of decentralization, much like land reform, has been one of broken promises, slow political deaths, bureaucratic obfuscation, and hollow legislation.²⁷ Where local governments have been given some measure of power, they have more often than not been captured by local elites and transformed into instruments of patronage. Regional variations notwithstanding, the balance sheet is clear: with the well-documented exception of West Bengal, the process of shaping and implementing developmental initiatives, including the most basic of day-to-day public services, remains a top-down affair dominated by the bureaucratic and political elites of state capitals and their intermediaries, brokers, and fixers. As EMS Namboodiripad, party patriarch and patron-saint of the Campaign, once put it: "at the level of centre-state relations the constitution gave us democracy. At the level of state-*panchayat* relations, the constitution gave us bureaucracy."²⁸

Kerala, one might have thought, should have been an exception, with its long history of grassroots activism and the comparative weakness of local dominant elites (the prime culprits in the subversion of democratic decentralization). Yet the state in Kerala is an institutional replicate of its developmentalist Indian parent, born as it was at the intersection of an imperial bureaucracy and Soviet-inspired visions of planned transformation, and deeply imbued with a high modernist ethos of top-down development. As Sudipta Kaviraj notes of the India state, "By the mid-1950s such an over-rationalistic doctrine became a settled part of the ideology of planning and therefore of the Indian state. 'The state,' or whoever could usurp this title for the time being, rather than the people themselves, was to be the initiator and, more dangerously, the evaluator of the development process."²⁹ Without falling into the asocial and reductionist public choice view that sees a voracious, self-seeking predator in every bureaucrat and politician, the accumulation of such powers, exercised with little accountability from below, has inevitably produced interests and networks of privilege that have nothing to gain and everything to lose from a devolution of powers. The political solidity of this institutional configuration finds its class logic in the rental havens that the dominant proprietary classes—including bureaucrats and politicians—have all carved out for themselves.³⁰

In its demonstrated capacity to deliver social programs and its much higher degree of public accountability, the state in Kerala is a far cry from the proto-predatory states of North India. But the difference is more in the demand side of the equation—pressure from social movements and a vocal civil society for state action—than in the supply side, as the state in Kerala has not been spared the entrenchment and ossification of rent-seeking interests. The size and power of such interests, moreover, is in no small part a product of Kerala's redistributive project, and specifically the exponential growth of the service bureaucracy and the proliferation of (mostly unprofitable) public sector enterprises.

The political party equation in Kerala has also been unfavorable to any serious efforts at state reform. Because the Congress Party has fairly weak grassroots structures compared to the CPM, it has had little interest in empowering *panchayats*. The CPM's historical commitment to decentralization has not been much better. Though there has always been a strong grassroots democratic tendency in the party (what I call the social movement tendency), the party's historical roots in organized class struggles produced a hierarchical internal command structure and a fairly orthodox state-led and top-down vision of development borrowed in large part from Soviet planning.³¹ The CPM, moreover, has a direct stake in the bureaucratic state. The CPM's organizational heart is the CITU (Congress of Indian Trade Unions), its labor federation. Composed primarily of industrial workers employed in the public sector and government employees, many of its unions have gained significant control over state agencies through which they command important patronage resources and can exert centralized control over their membership. Having become power bases unto themselves, many have hardened, Olsonian-like, into narrow distributional coalitions.

To explain why the CPM—or at least key elements of the party—has now embraced decentralization and accepted a more independent role for civil society, three developments have to be singled out. First, the party has come to recognize the limits of its electoral appeal, and in a context of competitive party politics has identified democratic decentralization—with its attendant principles of non-partisanship, de-bureaucratized government, and sustainable development—as the key to appealing to new social formations. Second, the embrace of decentralization marks a tacit recognition that the redistributive capacities of the developmental state have exhausted themselves. The broad-based social movements that saw the expansion of social citizenship have been displaced by more narrow and sectoral interests. These distributional coalitions have captured significant rents (the bulk of non-plan expenditures goes to propping up grossly inefficient public enterprises and paying the salaries of an under-performing state bureaucracy), but have also blocked necessary state reform (and indeed remain quite hostile to the campaign). If a strong, centralized, and interventionist state did secure many of the benefits associated with the Kerala model (high levels of social development, extensive public infrastructure, basic institutional reforms), the second generation social development challenges Kerala faces (the quality, rather than the quantity of public services) call for a fundamentally different mode of governance. The fiscal logic of the campaign is revealing: by reducing rents and leakage through greater accountability, more can be done within existing constraints. Third, for all its successes in mobilizing broad segments of the working class, including wage workers in agriculture and other unorganized sectors, the CPM has largely failed to make inroads into some of Kerala's poorest communities, including *adivasis*,

fishworkers and Muslims. Fourth, despite a growth spurt in the early 1990s, Kerala's continued economic problems—in particular the lack of dynamism in commodity-producing sectors—has underscored the failures of the dirigist state, and has prompted calls for developing more flexible and decentralized forms of state intervention designed to nurture rather than to control economic activity.

All of these factors in turn have helped strengthen the political position of the social movement tendency in the party. This tendency has always coexisted with the corporatist and centralizing elements of the party. But in contrast to the CPI, the CPM in Kerala has always remained critical of the transformative capacity of the bourgeois-democratic state and has emphasized the political necessity of direct, mobilized forms of democracy.³² In the intensely competitive environment of Kerala's electoral politics (where outcomes generally hinge on marginal percentage shifts), the CPM's comparative advantage has always been its activist and mobilizational capacities, an advantage honed from periodic stints in the opposition. Tendencies towards organizational sclerosis and machine politics have thus been kept in check by recurrent episodes of rank and file militancy. The contrast with the West Bengal CPM, which has been in continuous power for over two decades and has developed pronounced oligarchical tendencies, is highly illustrative.³³

Marked as they are by cross-cutting alignments and constant repositioning, the exact boundaries of the corporatist and social movement tendencies are difficult to identify. The divisions do however roughly parallel the oft noted, if often exaggerated, difference between old and new social movements.³⁴ The corporatist faction (known locally as the CITU faction) has its power base in the larger industrial and public employees' unions and subscribes to the view that popular struggles can be advanced only through the party's disciplined organizational structures. The strategic thrust remains state capture, with corporatist structures securing significant shares of the social surplus for organized elements of the working class. In contrast to the narrow economism of many labor movements (e.g., the myopic character of Indian labor federations), the CITU faction has stubbornly defended broad-based entitlement programs. But while it has in the tradition of Marxist movements developed a class critique of the state (i.e., as an instrument of dominant class interests) it has not developed a critique of the organizational power of the state and of rent-seeking as a form of surplus extraction. Finally, the corporatist tendency remains deeply suspicious of civil society activity that is not subject to party discipline.

The social movement tendency of the CPM can be distinguished from new social movements in its explicit concern with redistributive goals. Moreover, in sharp contrast to what Bardhan in the Indian context has dubbed the anarcho-communitarian view of decentralization,³⁵ the tendency is also committed to strengthening the state, albeit through new institutional articulations of the local and central state. But in keeping with what might be labeled a

neo-class (if not post-class) movement logic, it recognizes other sources of domination and exclusion, including patriarchal and bureaucratic power, that go beyond the traditional labor-capital conflict. The social movement tendency has extensive ties with civil society organizations, including significant cross-cutting membership with the grassroots "people's science movement," the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP). The resulting discursive shift is evident in the increasing but cautious introduction of the language of civil society (a term traditionally associated in party language for its "bourgeois" origins)—including non-partisanship, accountability, participation, and decentralization—into party thinking and even cadre training. For the social movement tendency, the significance of democracy is located less in the concept of working class power and its organizational expressions (party and state) than in the nurturing of democratic practices, both through institutional reform (making the state more responsive) and by capacitating citizens (enabling participation and empowerment at all levels of governance). It is in this sense that its project has become one of reinventing public power.

These political shifts, it should be emphasized, have taken place against a backdrop of economic and social developments that have significantly weakened, if not marginalized, the corporatist tendency. The social basis of the organized left has been transformed by the long-term stagnation of the manufacturing sector and the growing size of an educated middle class, itself the product of the welfare state. But the most palpable and devastating blow to the corporatist vision of state-directed development has come from the widely perceived deterioration of public services. In comparative terms, the quality of Kerala's public health and educational services remains decades ahead of any other Indian state. But by local standards, and specifically those of a literate and increasingly middle class society, even a marginal decline in the quality of provision has produced widespread public disaffection, including carefully researched critiques by social movements.³⁶ Though blamed in large part on an unaccountable bureaucracy, the deterioration of the public sector has also been explicitly tied to the commodifying logic of globalization and the cost-cutting imperatives of neo-liberalism. To quote Planning Board member and CPM leader Shreedharan Namboodiripad:

The state is withdrawing from social sectors—education, health and other services. Despite advances, educational and health institutions, especially at local level, are facing severe crises because of the resource crunch. This can be overcome only if it is planned at the local level and that all maintenance and other support work is done locally. Thus a major portion of devolved funds are going to the improvement of educational and health services. They [*panchayats*] are also mobilizing voluntary resources in the form of labor and contribution. The point is that both rich and poor have a common interest to contribute to improve these institutions. . . . The WB/IMF [World Bank/International Monetary Fund] have committed to the retreat of the state. Here, we are trying to make the

state more active at the local level of the economy and social services. Decentralization is our answer to the IMF/World Bank globalization agenda. It is the most integral part of our resistance.³⁷

Faced with these threats to the sustainability of Kerala's social democratic developmental trajectory, the crises of a state bloated by excessive commitments and beleaguered by vested interests, the CPM leadership seized on the democratic Left's critique of bureaucratization and developmentalism and endorsed democratic decentralization as the centerpiece of its political platform in the 1996 election.

MOVING THE STATE

Genuine democratic decentralization is synonymous with a fundamental re-configuration of institutional and political power, and necessarily invites resistance from entrenched bureaucratic and political interests. That this deadlock has been broken in Kerala must be attributed to two key developments from above. The first was the fact that the social movement tendency within the party received the full support of the party high command. The second was that this tendency could operate from the vantage point of a highly autonomous though strategically embedded state agency, the State Planning Board (SPB). When the CPM came to power in 1996, the board was given the institutional status of a supra-ministry, and all its ranking members were appointed from the social movement faction. Five of the six board members were in fact from the KSSP. They in turn recruited a cell of roughly thirty officials redeployed from various departments, the majority of whom were also KSSP members. The board enjoyed the full support of the chief minister, and maybe most importantly the party patriarch, EMS Namboodiripad (who passed away in 1999). The board became the platform from which reformers could orchestrate their decentralization project independent of the power and influence of the corporatist political bosses.

Institutionally empowered and politically protected, the board administered a home-grown brand of shock therapy. It rammed through a legislative budget amendment that in a single stroke devolved 40 percent of plan allocations from line departments to *panchayats*. When members of legislative assembly and some ministers protested their loss of control over developmental (read patronage) funds, they were publicly rebuked by Namboodiripad. A Leninist party being what it is, the Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) quietly fell into line (though the CPI Ministers remained reluctant partners).

The board simultaneously launched a massive publicity campaign in the press and party forums denouncing what it called "the corrupt bureaucratic-politician nexus." A first round of state-wide ward-level *grama sabhas* were

held. By the time financial resources began to flow into local government coffers, the political costs of opposing decentralization had become too high. In a classic pincer movement, the board effectively isolated the patronage elements of the party and state bureaucracy by aligning itself directly with grassroots activists and a newly empowered political constituency of some 14,173 elected *panchayat* officials.³⁸

If movements in Kerala in the past rallied against exploitation by dominant caste groups, or propertied interests, the campaign has built support by attacking the predations and inefficiencies of the bureaucracy and politicians. In doing so, it has tapped into a very palpable strain of discontent that cuts across class lines and has offered the movement powerful frames of contention. Across the political spectrum, NGO activists, CPM theorists, academics, and journalists, as well as a large number of reformist bureaucrats, all point to the patronage interests of state-level politicians, the centralized power of ministries and their line departments, and the power of some public employees' unions as being at the heart of the crisis of the Kerala model of development. At opening presentations of *grama sabhas*, a favorite theme was to critique the existing process of planning as alienated from the people, overly bureaucratic, and incapable of delivering the goods. Songs and street plays from the campaign "vilified and caricatured development bureaucrats."³⁹ These criticisms are not of state power or state intervention as such, but rather of the insulated and narrowly technocratic character of the high-modernist state. The committee that designed much of the campaign's legal and regulatory architecture summed up the institutional logic of the campaign succinctly: "In participatory governance patronage has no place."⁴⁰ The call is for democratization of state power and specifically the devolution of planned development. Indeed, the campaign is popularly known as *Janakeeya Aasoothranam*—people's planning with its connotations of deliberation—rather than decentralization.

The specific criticisms leveled against the bureaucracy are familiar ones. On the one hand, it is viewed as being fundamentally undemocratic and unresponsive. In the uncompromising words of the Committee on the Decentralisation of Powers: "At present offices and systems, including those under the control of the Local Self Government Institutions (LSGIs) are not people-friendly. A thick veil of secrecy hides inefficiencies, arbitrariness, corruption and nepotism from public gaze."⁴¹ On the other hand, it is accused of being overly centralized as well as balkanized, and as such incapable of taking up the new developmental challenges that Kerala faces. Vertically organized line departments have created a culture of departmentalism in which local officials are more concerned with fulfilling scheme quotas than with meeting local needs. The problem of fragmentation is acute: a former director of agriculture estimated that more than thirty different departments work in the agricultural sector, making it virtually impossible to coordinate inputs such as credit, irrigation, seeds, and agro-machinery.

But the attack on the command-and-control state has gone beyond a critique of its inefficiency and has also taken a distinctly redistributive tone. High-level officials and CPM leaders routinely claim that up to 50 percent of all public expenditures are siphoned off by the “corrupt politician-bureaucrat-contractor nexus” and that only a determined struggle against “development as patronage” can restore these “rents” to the people.⁴² Speaking of MLAs, who have traditionally exercised direct power of plan allocations in their districts, a key CPM leader explained the party’s “new thinking”:

In Kerala primitive accumulation has taken the form of corruption. The Party has taken the view that they [MLAs] should have no say in development activities and that their functions should be legislating. We want to destroy the politics of patronage. When decisions are made at the grama sabha level, patronage will be exposed. The only way to undermine patronage is through popular participation.⁴³

But what marks the campaign as distinct from most state-led reforms is that in challenging bureaucratic and political fiefdoms and responding to the threat posed to Kerala’s social compact by globalization, the state has explicitly resorted to creating new mobilizational spaces.⁴⁴ The campaign’s official literature and the writings of its key architects explicitly argue for tapping into the transformative capacity of civil society organizations. For one Planning Board member the logic is simple: “Politicians and bureaucrats want to hold onto power and the only way to dislodge them is through a social movement.”⁴⁵ Making his case for democratic decentralization, especially with respect to Kerala’s crisis of accumulation, Thomas Isaac writes that “Defending the public infrastructure in education, health and other sectors is no longer possible without improving the quality of their services. All these necessitate a reorientation of the mass movements towards *direct intervention in the development process* in order to improve productivity or improve the quality of services.”⁴⁶ A permanently mobilized civil society thus emerges as the primary goal of the campaign, and in stark contrast to the technocratic and neo-liberal view of transformation, planning becomes “an instrument of social mobilization” and specifically a means of re-engaging citizens in the process of public decision making:

The bureaucratic departmental approach to development has to give way to an integrated, democratic vision. . . . The extremely sectarian bipartisan division and clientalism is a major impediment in the development process. In short, the objective of the People’s Campaign for Decentralized Planning is not simply to draw up a plan from below. The very process of planning is such as to bring about a transformation in the attitudes of the participants themselves. Such a transformation cannot be secured through government orders alone. It requires the *creativity and the social logic of a movement*.⁴⁷

The fact of the state exhorting the masses to participate is hardly notable or especially democratic in itself. What is notable is that in this instance the state has actually reduced the transaction costs of collective action by decoupling significant resources and authoritative decision-making power from traditional centers of power and devolving them to the grassroots. Budgetary allocations by *panchayats* are now the end product of a long, open process of multi-layered deliberation which has, if nothing else, significantly raised the costs of political capture and rent-seeking. Equally telling, and revealing of the extent to which the CPM—or at least of faction of it—has come to accept the autonomy of civil society, is that mobilization has not been orchestrated through party structures, but has rather been nurtured by creating new and largely non-political (though not a-political) associational spaces. The CPM has explicitly instructed its local branches (which historically have directly controlled CPM-led *panchayats*) not to interfere with the new deliberative structures of local budgeting and has banned local party structures from discussing beneficiary lists for local development projects. Of course, local political equations can often subvert the most carefully designed procedures, but the pattern of resistance to the new institutions underscores the stakes of reform. Just how dramatically the campaign challenges old political habits is captured by the lament of one local CPM official at odds with the campaign: “What kind of party are we if we can’t decide who gets a cow?” Traditional networks of privilege—MLA’s, some public service unions, a range of bureaucrats (most notably state engineers) and parties with weak grassroots structures (including the CPI) have openly resisted the campaign. And ultra-leftist elements within the CPM itself, no doubt threatened by the shift away from the party’s traditional state-centric position, have even accused the campaign of being a Western-inspired and funded plot to weaken the left in Kerala.⁴⁸

THE ROLE OF MOVEMENTS

A sustained process of social transformation, and in particular one that involves significant institutional realignments, requires an “ecology of actors” that answer to different but complementary organizational logics.⁴⁹ Because democratic decentralization threatens existing patronage networks and introduces significant uncertainties, political parties are most likely to support reform only when the internal balance of power shifts from traditional party brokers to more grassroots factions. Social movements can play a critical role in occasioning such a shift not only by mobilizing public support for reform, but also by popularizing more participatory institutions and processes through prefigurative actions. Moreover, because democratic decentralization goes beyond legislative acts and resource reallocations, its effectiveness and most importantly its sustainability require far more than the capacities of

the state. Civil society organizations and social movements have a critical role to play in making the state more democratic. First, the associational networks of civic organizations and movements can provide vital information about social needs as well as the mobilizational infrastructure that makes continuous and meaningful participation possible. Second, civil society organizations, be they rotating credit schemes or contentious social movements, help develop and nurture the democratic and technical capacities of individuals, and often promote forms of demand-making that are far more deliberative than those of more hierarchical organizations.

In Kerala, the political opening for decentralization was created from above, but it is civil society that provided the critical informational and mobilizational resources. This is most evident in both the ideological repertoires of the campaign and in its policy tools. To attack state-led development and "departmentalism" and to celebrate autonomy, local initiative, transparency, and accountability, is to speak the language of social movements, not technocrats or Leninists.⁵⁰ Most of the techniques and favored projects of the campaign—rapid rural appraisal, local resource mapping, community water management, rotating credit schemes, self-help associations—come from a repertoire of practices that NGOs and some of the more proactive *panchayats* have been developing for years.⁵¹ These pilot projects have not only popularized grassroots planning and sustainable development strategies, but have also provided much of the practical knowledge that went into designing the campaign. As early as 1978, the KSSP had created about six hundred rural science fora that functioned as informal *panchayat* planning boards, and during the 1990s the KSSP sponsored twenty-five model *panchayat* projects, experimenting with grassroots planning and sustainable development strategies that served as templates for the campaign. Other NGOs and quasi-governmental institutions have been experimenting with low-cost housing, smokeless *chulas*, watershed management techniques, e-government, and horticulture.

The role of the KSSP and its forty-eight thousand members has been critical. Although an autonomous association, the KSSP which has its roots in the educational community has always shared the mass mobilizational and democratic empowerment politics of the CPM's social movement wing. It has not, however, shared the CPM's growth-centered vision of development or its democratic centralism. The KSSP first came to prominence in the mid 1970s, when it successfully challenged a government project (which had CPM support) to construct a dam in Silent Valley. It has consistently argued for more decentralized and sustainable development, and has focused the bulk of its activities on democratizing knowledge (through the publication and dissemination of literature that brings "science to the people") and promoting grassroots planning. Its organizational structure is quintessentially of the new social movement variety, marked by strong local branches, rotating

leaders, the absence of any permanent staff, and a workstyle known locally as *parisbattikata* and characterized "by informality, simplicity, frankness, friendship and the absence of rigid hierarchical structures."⁵² And though the KSSP has consistently maintained its autonomy, refusing to endorse political parties and rejecting all offers of outside funding, it has also successfully partnered with government, providing for example the bulk of the activists for the Kerala government's Total Literacy Project in 1991.

It is precisely this willingness to engage the state and political organizations that has underscored the KSSP's most significant contribution to the campaign—the creation of a policy reform network that has bridged the CPM/state and civil society and served as the incubator of the campaign. Membership in the KSSP has provided an arena in which CPM cadres could experiment with ideas outside the somewhat doctrinaire straitjacket of the party itself. The reform networks among activists also included educational and research institutions, most notably the Centre for Development Studies and the Centre for Earth Sciences Studies. Over the past few years, these institutes have sponsored a series of seminars and conferences that helped crystallize thinking on decentralization and expanded the policy circle. This not only drew in critical segments of the academic and professional communities, but also helped create a public policy debate outside the highly charged and acrimonious arena of party politics. In building the basic architecture of the campaign, the planning board could draw on a wide and diverse body of knowledge and experience and has sustained synergistic linkages with civil society. Local level experiments have been scaled up and consolidated. New intermediate planning institutions, interactive training seminars, and systematic procedures for aggregating local plans at higher levels have created a dynamic feedback loop. The continuous institutional fine-tuning that has marked the campaign has been made possible by the active engagement of a core group of activist officials (in particular senior Indian Administrative Service [IAS] officers in the Local Government and Finance Departments) who have blurred the line between state and society by developing direct lines of communication with grassroots actors. Diffusion and learning has been facilitated by dense networks of activists and in particular the symbiosis between the KSSP and the SPB. In drawing on KSSP activists to run the campaign the SPB plugged into the KSSP's associational networks and also profoundly changed the work culture of the board. The KSSP cell in the board in effect transformed a 9 to 5 bureaucracy into a round-the-clock operation. Cell officials spend the majority of their time attending meetings in the field and problem-solving on the ground. In their disposition, energy, and commitment they are far more akin to social movement entrepreneurs than to bureaucrats.

The mobilizational resources civil society has provided have been equally critical. Much of the initial publicity for the campaign came from *Janadhikara Kalajathas*, science and arts theatrical processions presented by over one

thousand artists and organized around KSSP repertoires of critiquing "current development processes" and "exhorting the people to approach the *grama sabbas* to chalk out a new path."⁵³ The campaign has involved a massive amount of institution and capacity building, as local actors have had to learn how to design projects, evaluate costs, manage finances, gather data, and implement programs. Though department personnel have been redeployed, they have often been recalcitrant partners. Elected officials have thus had to rely substantially on the input of trained volunteers. With the help of KSSP activists and volunteer experts and a number of academic faculty (all working without pay) the campaign has provided training to over one hundred thousand elected representatives, officials, and ordinary citizens four years running. As is true of many social movements, the campaign's mobilizational success is rooted in exiting activist networks: 70 percent of state-level volunteer key resource persons and 66 percent of district resource persons (who have played the critical role of facilitating the participation) had prior experience in literacy campaigns.⁵⁴ Though training has been given a formal character by linking different sectoral programs to a range of educational and government institutions (e.g., Kerala Agricultural University and Institute of Local Administration), civil society inputs remain crucial. Most training in project design takes place through a form of horizontally networked learning in which innovative *panchayats* organize and hold organized district and state-level seminars in areas in which they have achieved notable successes.⁵⁵

In response to resistance from the bureaucracy, and in particular engineers charged with reviewing the technical viability of local projects, the Planning Board also mobilized a Voluntary Technical Corps (VTC). To recruit what one planner called "this wedge against the bureaucracy" the Planning Board launched a publicity campaign using the slogan, "life doesn't end at fifty-five," to get skilled retired professionals to volunteer their expertise. Over five thousand engineers, accountants, agronomists, and doctors joined the VTC. In a manner that closely resembles Judith Tendler's (1997) description of how the state government of Cereia in Brazil created a core of committed government workers and community activists, the Planning Board has actively worked to instill a sense of mission in the VTCs and local resource persons by distributing awards, publicizing achievements, and in general lauding the contributions of these volunteers.

Beyond qualitative assessments of how civil society has shaped participation, there is also robust quantitative evidence of how movement activities have transformed the social configuration of participation. Data from the Planning Board show that participation in *grama sabbas* was stable in the first two years of the campaign.⁵⁶ But a disaggregated analysis of the social profile of participation reveals dramatic changes. In 1996, Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe (SC/STs) were only half as likely to participate as the population at large. Similarly, the participation ratio of women to men was only 0.4, and

overall women represented only 28 percent of total participants. But by the second year of the campaign, participation rates for both groups had grown dramatically. In 1997, SC/STs were almost one and half times more likely to participate than the population at large. The participation ratio of women to men climbed to 0.68, representing 41 percent of participants. These gains were, moreover, geographically widespread. In 1997, the level of SC/ST participation exceeded the overall level of participation in 760 *panchayats*, compared to 267 in 1996. And whereas in 1996 women out-participated men in only ten *panchayats*, by 1997 the number grew to 155 *panchayats*. Overall, 786 *panchayats* experienced an increase in women's participation.

While it is difficult to isolate the determinants of this social deepening of participation, the effect of social movements on associational crowding-in is clear. In the first year of the campaign, the SPB and the KSSP were openly critical of the low levels of subordinate group participation. The SPB enlisted women's groups to provide targeted training, and the KSSP stepped up its efforts to form neighborhood groups (*ayalkutangal*) of twenty-five to fifty families at the sub-ward level as well as women's credit and savings self-help groups. Recognizing the higher social costs to participation that subordinate groups face, the neighborhood groups were designed to act as prefigurative forms of participatory planning ("a place to practice face to face democracy"), preparing residents, and in particular women, for more active and informed involvement in the planning process.⁵⁷ The mobilizational effects have been well documented in a number of cases. In local case studies, researchers directly attribute increased levels of participation in the second year to the associational spillover from neighborhood groups and self-help groups.⁵⁸

CONCLUSION

Social movements are by nature cyclical, and patterns can be cumulative or discontinuous. Shifts in the political opportunity structure shape not only movement strength, but also movement success. Movement cycles in Kerala have been particularly sharp, marked by peaks of mobilization that translated directly into political and institutional transformation (class formation in the 1940s, electoral success in 1957, land reform in 1970, labor market reform in the 1970s). But movement pressure has also been continuous, generating the demand-side dynamic that has underwritten Kerala's redistributive path of development. This institutionalization of contentiousness can most readily be explained by a highly competitive polarized political party system that has put a premium on mobilization, and in particular a mass-based political party whose oligarchical tendencies have been kept in check by its own electoral shortcomings. But it is the existence of a differentiated

civil society—both an effect and a cause of movements—more than anything else that explains the cumulative and in particular democratizing impact of social movements in Kerala.

The resurgence of movement activity that has marked the campaign flows directly from a political project that was backed by the state. Breaking through the logjam of political and bureaucratic interests opposed to decentralization required the political initiative of a programmatic party and the instrumentalities of a pilot agency that could successfully circumvent traditional power brokers and build direct political ties with local forces. But the working template itself was the product of multiple inputs from civil society, and institutional reform has been shaped by a continuous process of learning and feedback made possible by policy networks that have blurred the boundaries between state and society. Because of its movement character, the campaign has benefited from constant negotiation and re-negotiation of methods and goals, and has thus captured many of the synergies that can result from blending the institutional capacities of the state and the associational resources of civil society.

The movement associated with the campaign defies simple categorization. It is certainly more diverse, more loosely organized, more decentralized, less hierarchical, and concerned with a wider range of social issues than its class-based predecessors. Yet the continuity with the project politics of the past is significant. First, the movements associated with the campaign have maintained a central concern with redistributive issues that have been extended to include broader definitions of social exclusion, including patriarchy and bureaucratic domination. Second, engagement with the state, and the expansion of public authority, are strategic movement goals. But rather than capture a singular state as an instrument of social transformation, the campaign represents an effort to transform the state into a set of more localized, accountable institutions that can serve as the permanent basis of participation—which leads to a last and more general point. As movements necessarily oscillate between the politics of mobilization and institutionalization, sustaining a transformative trajectory depends on delicate equilibria of actors and institutions. There is little doubt that the crystallization of lower class organized interests and the increase in state intervention that has defined Kerala's redistributive developmental trajectory certainly produced its share of entrenched interests and institutional ossification. This has not, however, produced the political sclerosis that public-choice and neoliberal views of participatory democracy would predict. In the context of a differentiated civil society and an electoral system based on competitive mobilization, there is always the possibility of political reconfiguration. And what makes such reconfiguration possible is precisely what a participatory democracy has most to offer: the dynamic tension between the contestatory logic of social movements and the interest aggregation of political parties.

NOTES

I would like to thank Mary Katzenstein, Raka Ray, Michael Watts, and Gillian Hart for their extensive and extremely useful comments.

1. See the introductory essay in A. Fung and E. O. Wright, *Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance* (London: Verso, 2003).

2. See James Scott for an extended discussion of high modernism (*Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998).

3. For the most explicit comparative assessments internationally, see Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, *Hunger and Public Action* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989). For comparisons across Indian states, see Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, *India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995).

4. T. M. Thomas Isaac and Richard Franke, *Local Democracy and Development: People's Campaign for Decentralised Planning in Kerala* (New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2000), 316.

5. The annual decline was 2.26 percent on the headcount index and 3.93 percent on the poverty gap index (Guarav Datt and Martin Ravallion, "Why Have Some Indian States Done Better Than Others at Reducing Poverty?" Policy Research Working Paper No. 1594, World Bank, Washington D. C., 1996, 30).

6. For detailed reviews of the data, see V. K. Ramachandran, "On Kerala's Development Achievements," in *Indian Development*, ed. Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 205–356, and K. P. Kannan, "Poverty Alleviation as Advancing Basic Human Capabilities: Kerala's Achievements Compared," Working Paper No. 294, Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum, 1999. For a discussion of the informal sector, see Patrick Heller, *The Labor of Development: Workers in the Transformation of Capitalism in Kerala, India* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999).

7. Atul Kohli, *The State and Poverty in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) attributes West Bengal's relatively strong performance in poverty alleviation to the regime characteristics that derive from the CPM's programmatic, cohesive, and pro-poor character.

8. This is the central theme in the Rudolphs' seminal overview of Indian politics (Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susan Hoeber Rudolph, *In Pursuit of Lakshmi: The Political Economy of the Indian State* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987]).

9. The exception of course is the Hindutva triad of the BJP, RSS, and VHP. These are, however, by definition communal movements built on social exclusions which are moreover internally dominated by traditional hierarchies of patriarchy and caste. They are on both counts reactive movements (Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* [Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997]) opposed to the project of social citizenship. At the other end of the spectrum, the CPM has nurtured mass movements. But despite its programmatic commitment to social citizenship, the organizational primacy of electoral politics, "democratic centralism," and a resilient patriarchal culture have often resulted in the subordination of movement demands and identities to party control. For the case of the women's movement, see Amrita Basu, *Two Faces*

of Protest: Contrasting Modes of Women's Activism in India (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

10. See the introductory chapter in this volume.

11. Pranab Bardhan, "Sharing the Spoils: Group Equity, Development, and Democracy," Unpublished paper, University of California, Berkeley, 1997, 16.

12. Pratap Mehta ("India: Fragmentation Amid Consensus," *Journal of Democracy* 8, no. 1 [1997]: 56–69) makes this point forcefully.

13. A survey conducted by the Confederation of Indian Industries found that Kerala ranks first among all states—including far more urbanized states—on the rule of law indicator (Bibek Debroy, Laveesh Bhandari, and Nilanjan Banik, "How Are the States Doing," Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies and Confederation of Indian Industry, 2000). For a more qualitative assessment of reach of public legality that explores the degree to which a wide range of material conflicts are mediated and adjudicated through formal rational-legal institutions, see Patrick Heller, "Degrees of Democracy: Some Comparative Lessons from India," *World Politics* 52 (July 2000): 484–519.

14. Kannan, "Poverty Alleviation," 12 and 20.

15. There has been a notable rise in recent years in political violence, especially in the northern districts of Kerala. This violence has, however, been strictly between party activists (most often between CPM and BJP cadres).

16. See Heller, *The Labor of Development*; Ronald Herring, *Land to the Tiller: The Political Economy of Agrarian Reform in South Asia* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983); K. P. Kannan, *Of Rural Proletarian Struggles: Mobilization and Organization of Rural Workers in South-West India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988); and Dilip Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India: Malabar 1900-1948* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

17. Thomas Isaac and Franke, *Local Democracy and Development*, 141–42.

18. In contrast to dire predictions that the Kerala model has become economically unsustainable because of an assumed direct trade-off between social and economic investment, Kerala's per capita gross state domestic product grew at an annual 4.52 percent between 1991-1997 compared to 4.02 percent at the national level (Montek S. Ahluwalia, "Economic Performance of States in Post-Reform Period," *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 6, 2000, 1638). See also K. N. Harilal and K. J. Joseph, "Stagnation and Revival of Kerala Economy: An Open Economy Perspective," Working Paper No. 305, Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum, 2000.

19. World Bank, "Volume I: Overview of Rural Decentralization in India" and Volume II: Approaches to Rural Decentralization in Seven States," September 27, 2000; R. Véron, "The 'New' Kerala Model: Lessons for Sustainable Development," *World Development* 29, no. 4 (2001): 601-17; Thomas Isaac and Franke, *Local Democracy and Development*; T. M. Thomas Isaac and P. Heller, "Democracy and Development: Decentralized Planning in Kerala," in *Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance*, ed. A. Fung and E. O. Wright (London: Verso, 2003); and S. M. Vijayanand, "Issues Related to Administrative Decentralisation and the Administering of Decentralisation," paper presented at the Workshop on Decentralisation organized by the Institute for Social and Economic Change at Bangalore, May 31 and June 1, 2001.

20. A World Bank report on the impact of the 1993 Panchayati Raj constitutional amendments in 1993 found that Kerala has the greatest degree of local expenditure

autonomy and is the most fiscally decentralized state in India, and second only to Colombia in the developing world (2000: vol. I, 28–29).

21. In 1998–1999 the figure was Rs. 6,061 million and Rs. 7,279 million the next year. See World Bank (2000), Vol. II, 130, table 9.

22. There are 990 village *Panchayats* and 58 municipalities in Kerala with an average population of 29,580. Each *panchayat* has 10–12 wards, with a single elected councilor for each ward.

23. These figures are from the State Planning Board which collected attendance figures (based on registration of participants) from every *grama sabha*. A 7 percent participation rate equals roughly 10 percent of the electorate and amounts to approximately one participant for every 3.5 households (Shubham Chaudhuri and Patrick Heller, "The Plasticity of Participation," Working Paper, Columbia University, 2002). Comparisons are by definition problematic, but there is little doubt that this represents the highest level of participation in any Indian state (World Bank, 2000) and compares favorably with the city of Porto Alegre and the province of Rio Grande do Sul in Brazil, the most celebrated and carefully documented case of direct participation in budgeting (Gianpaolo Biaocci, "Participation, Activism, and Politics: The Porto Alegre Experiment," in *Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance*, ed. A. Fung and E. O. Wright [London: Verso, 2003]).

24. Government of Kerala (GOK), *People's Planning: Towards a Handbook*, Kerala State Planning Board, 1999, 20–23.

25. Though the Congress-led United Democratic Front government has shown far less enthusiasm for the campaign, it is publicly committed to preserving decentralized planning and has, under significant public pressure, maintained the same relative terms of fiscal devolution.

26. The preliminary review of data collected from seventy-two randomly selected *panchayats* indicates that local level planning has generated significant gains. Key respondents from a cross-section of government and civil society (n = 838) judged the campaign to have significantly improved upon the delivery of basic services and development projects, including assistance to the poor (S. Chaudhuri, K. N. Harilal, and P. Heller, "Does Decentralization Make a Difference? The People Campaign for Decentralized Planning in the India State of Kerala," New Delhi, Report submitted to the Ford Foundation, 2004).

27. Even the latest flurry of decentralization initiatives triggered by the 1993 constitutional amendments does not appear to have produced significant institutional change (World Bank, 2000).

28. As cited by V. K. Ramachandran at the International Conference on Democratic Decentralisation, Trivandrum, May 27, 2000.

29. Sudipta Kaviraj, "Critique of the Passive Revolution," in *State and Politics in India*, ed. Partha Chatterjee (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 62.

30. Pranab Bardhan (*The Political Economy of Development in India* [New York: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1984]; Bardhan, "Sharing the Spoils") has provided the most influential general theory of this class-based subsidy regime. For a fascinating account of how the rent machine penetrates down to the local level, see R. Wade, "The Market for Public Office: Why the Indian State Is Not Better at Development," *World Development* 13, no. 4 (1995): 467–97.

31. Party officials proclaim their long-standing commitment to decentralized development. But this has certainly not been the party practice historically. As E. M. S.

Namboodiripad, the CPM's most influential figure and leading proponent of the campaign, remarks about his experience as Chief Minister in 1967 with respect to the District Council Bill: "It was revelation to me that no member of the Council of Ministers except the *Panchayat* minister and myself was prepared to transfer power to district councils and *Panchayats*. Neither the bureaucrat nor the political leader who is supposed to control him was prepared to part with power" (cited in K. Nagaraj, "Decentralisation in Kerala: A Note," Discussion Paper No. 2, June, Kerala Research Programme on Local Level Development, Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, 1999, 2).

32. When the CPI split in 1965, the most of the party's rank and file joined the CPM. The CPI has relied largely on its ties to the bureaucracy to maintain its influence, while the CPM has built its support through local level organs, most notably the agricultural laborers' union, the KSKTU. The CPI's support for the campaign has been lukewarm at best.

33. According to one political commentator, critics of the campaign from within the CPM argued that the party is losing its discipline and becoming a social democratic party. They argue that the West Bengal model of decentralization—in which *panchayats* have been given significant implementation responsibilities but no independent planning functions—would be the more appropriate model (Interview, Madhavan Kutty, August 16, 1999).

34. Olle Tornquist ("Making Democratisation Work: From Civil Society and Social Capital to Political Inclusion and Politicisation: Theoretical Reflections on Concrete Cases in Indonesia, Kerala, and the Philippines," Research Programme on Popular Movements, Development and Democratisation, University of Oslo, 1997) draws a similar distinction between "state-modernizers" and "popular developmentalists" and has developed the most extended analysis of the evolution of these tendencies.

35. Described as "the diverse array of social thinkers (from postmodernist cultural anthropologists to grassroots environmental activists and supporters of the cause of indigenous people and technologies) who are both anti-market and anti-(centralized) state" (P. Bardman, "Decentralized Development," *Indian Economic Review*, 31 [1996]: 2, 139–56).

36. The KSSP commissioned and published an extensive study of Kerala's rural health care system and, having documented the general decline in the use of public sector facilities, called for going from quantity to quality provision (K. Kannan et al., *Health and Development in Rural Kerala* [Trivandrum: Kerala Sastra Sahitya Prishad, 1991], 151).

37. Interview, August 16, 1997, Thiruvananthapuram.

38. Judith Tendler argues that a similar top-bottom alliance was critical to the success of decentralization in the Brazilian state of Cereia (Tendler, *Good Government in the Tropics* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997]).

39. Thomas Isaac and Franke, *Local Democracy and Development*, 145.

40. Government of Kerala (GOK), Committee on Decentralisation of Powers: Final Report: V. 1, part A and B, December 23, 1997, 3.

41. GOK, 1997, 46.

42. The Committee on the Decentralisation of Powers reports that an informal opinion survey among *panchayat* presidents found that 40 percent of funds spent on road construction (an expenditure preferred for its skimming returns) "do not go into the work for various reasons" (GOK, 1997, 46). The committee also added that the

blatant manipulation of beneficiary committees (required for all public works) was "an insult to the literate and politically aware public of the State" (46).

43. Interview with CPM official, 16 August 1997.

44. This basic idea here of creating "autonomous arenas of popular power" has been at the heart of the Brazilian PT (Workers Party) experiments in popular budgeting, most famously in the city of Porto Alegre. The parallel is of interest not only because the PT's support for creating decentralized budgetary processes evolved out of an explicit critique of the patronage politics of Brazilian cities, but also because the PT is the social movement party *par excellence*. Having said this, the PT's thinking on the question of civil society autonomy has a longer history, and is articulated more explicitly than in Kerala. Most notable is the fact that in Porto Alegre—where grassroots popular budgeting has been the norm for over a decade—the PT has never institutionalized the process on the grounds that rule-making power and initiatives must be left to Porto Alegre's neighborhood assemblies (interview with Tarso Genro, Mayor of Porto Alegre, December 16, 2001). For a comparative discussion of decentralization in Kerala, Brazil, and South Africa, see Patrick Heller, "Moving the State: The Politics of Decentralization in Kerala, South Africa and Porto Alegre," *Politics and Society* 29, no. 1 (2001): 131–63.

45. Interview, E. M. Shreedharan Namboodiripad, 13 August 1997.

46. Thomas Isaac and Franke, *Local Democracy and Development*, 45, emphasis mine.

47. Thomas Isaac and Franke, *Local Democracy and Development*, 1, emphasis mine.

48. In 2002 a party intellectual, M. N. Vijayan, published an article in an obscure Malayalam language journal called *Patdam*, claiming that the campaign had been inspired by the World Bank and the CIA. The accusations were gleefully given full coverage in the mainstream Malayalam press (which has a long-standing antipathy to the CPM) triggering a series of recriminations in the CPM. For a discussion, see Asha Krishnakumar, *Frontline*, August 15, 2003.

49. Peter Evans, "Looking for Agents of Urban Livability in a Globalized Political Economy," in *Livable Cities? The Politics of Urban Livelihood and Sustainability*, ed. Peter Evans (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

50. M. P. Parameswaran, a prominent KSSP leader, notes that as early as 1972 the KSSP was promoting the concept of sustainable development well before it became fashionable in development circles (personal communication, May 23, 2000, Thiruvananthapuram).

51. For an account of the role of the KSSP, see M. P. Parameswaran, "Role of the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad in the Movement for Democratic Decentralisation," paper presented at the International Conference on Democratic Decentralisation, Thiruvananthapuram, May 23–27, 2000. See also Thomas Isaac and Franke, *Local Democracy and Development*, chapter 4, and Véron, "The 'New' Kerala Model."

52. T. M. Thomas Isaac, Richard Franke, and M. P. Parameswaran, "From Anti-Feudalism to Sustainable Development: the Kerala People's Science Movement," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 29, no. 3 (1997): 36.

53. N. Jagajeevan and N. Ramakanthan, "Grama Sabhas: A Democratic Structure for Development Planning," paper presented at the International Conference on Democratic Decentralisation, Thiruvananthapuram, May 23–27, 2000, 3.

54. Thomas Isaac and Franke, *Local Democracy and Development*, 90-91.

55. The seminar schedule for early 2000, for example, included "the total sanitation village," "micro hydel projects," "social auditing," "rain water harvesting," "labour contract societies," and last but not least, "rabbity."

56. The data is for 990 *panchayats*. For a full account and analysis, see Chaudhuri and Heller, "The Plasticity of Participation."

57. M. P. Parameswaran, "From Voters to Actors: People's Planning Campaign and Participatory Democracy in Kerala," Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad, Trichur, 2001.

58. In one *panchayat* alone, B. Manjula ("Voices from the Spiral of Silence: A Case Study of Samatha Self Help Groups of Ulloor," paper presented at the International Conference on Democratic Decentralisation, Thiruvananthapuram, May 23-27, 2000) documents the formation of two hundred women's micro-credit schemes. See also T. N. Seema and Vanitha Mukherjee, "Gender Governance and Citizenship in Decentralised Planning," paper presented at the International Conference on Democratic Decentralisation, Thiruvananthapuram, May 23-27, 2000, and Vanita Mukherjee, "Democratic Decentralisation and Associative Patterns," unpublished paper, Trivandrum, 2002.

4

Feminism, Poverty, and the Emergent Social Order

Mary E. John

I

It is a sign of our times that when it comes to giving a face to poverty in contemporary India, that face will, more likely than not, be female. Whether it be the endangered girl child or the destitute widow, the images are compelling. Concepts such as the feminization of poverty emanate from everywhere—whether from the state, NGOs, or women's groups, not to speak of international organizations. Much of this visibility is arguably a mark of success, the result of sustained feminist initiatives. The women's movement in India can count itself among the lucky ones—an "old" social movement that has played a substantial role in contemporary struggles, ebbing, flowing, and reinventing itself in myriad ways. Indeed, when compared to other social movements, the impact of "women" on contemporary institutions, ideologies and practices may well be unique. And yet, for reasons that I hope will become clearer in the course of this essay, thinking about issues of women and poverty today seems to throw up more questions than answers, and the future has never been more uncertain. In other words, we are not in the fortunate position of being able to build on cumulated wisdoms, and even less in a situation of consensus over the issues at stake. There is perceptible fatigue in some quarters as the movement ages, with old problems persisting even as the world is being so rapidly transformed. Not everyone believes that the multiple strands and differences that have come to characterize the Indian women's movement should be counted among its strengths.

Precisely because of the experience of being overtaken by enormous changes, by events few would have predicted at the time but which are bound to cast a long shadow into the years ahead, it may be useful to step