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## **Decentralisation and the Changing Geographies of Political Marginalisation in Kerala**

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### **Abstract**

One of the benefits often claimed for 'moving' the state closer to people through the institutional reforms of democratic decentralisation is an improvement in the inclusion of politically marginalised groups. Decentralisation promises to deliver both the closer physical presence of centres of government and the formalisation of practices of representation at the grassroots. These changes in turn are expected to provide opportunities for historically marginalised groups to improve their associational capacities, and to gain recognition as rights-bearing citizens.

This idea is examined through the experience of Kerala, which has one of the most thorough programmes of democratic decentralisation within India. Decentralisation has indeed provided new pathways to engage with local government. However attempts to 'rescale' the state to the local level have also reshaped existing institutional channels for representation, political discourses and everyday state practices, in ways which produce new micro-geographies of exclusion. This paper highlights the importance of these everyday experiences of marginalisation for programmes of state reform. It argues that if they are ignored, decentralisation risks reproducing narrow forms of majoritarian localism, and its potential to contribute to building substantive democracy will be lost.

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### **Key Words**

Decentralisation; Governance Reform; Political Space; Exclusion; Kerala (South Asia)

# Decentralisation and the Changing Geographies of Political Marginalisation in Kerala

## 1 Decentralisation, political space and marginalisation

For almost two decades, the relationship between states and societies in the Global South has become a key concern of 'mainstream' development practice, and the target of two forms of direct intervention for its improvement. The first is to promote a demand for democracy 'from below', through development projects and programmes that promote 'active citizenship' (Robbins *et al.*, 2008) and mould civil society into forms which are able to place effective pressure on the state to reform. This is the terrain of social capital and participatory development, both of which place urgent emphasis on 'the community' as a site of intervention (Mohan and Stokke, 2000, 2007; Li, 2007). The second is the crafting of institutions and practices that might provide 'good governance', both at the national level and through the decentralisation of the state. It is this second impulse, and particularly the implications of decentralisation for political participation and marginalisation, this is the central concern of this paper.

It is perhaps no surprise that state-society relationships in the Global South are seen by commentators from across the political spectrum as being in need of 'fixing'. Colonialism often produced highly asymmetric structures of local governance (Mamdani, 1996), and since Independence drives to 'develop' Southern societies have often suffered from the top-down simplifications of a modernist state (Scott, 1998), the development of para-legal systems of patronage (Chatterjee, 2004), or both. This legacy has produced what Patrick Heller calls the 'vertical problem' for current exercises in decentralisation:

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*'The problem is two-fold. On the one hand, there is the problem of how citizens engage the state. State-society relations tend to be dominated by patronage and populism, with citizens having either no effective means of holding government accountable (other than periodic elections) or being reduced to dependent clients. In the absence of clear and rule-bound procedures of engagement, citizens can not engage the local state qua citizens, that is, as autonomous bearers of civic and political rights. On the other hand, there is the problem of where citizens engage the state, that is, the problem of the relatively narrow institutional surface area of the state. Given that local government is often absent or just extraordinarily weak in much of the developing world, there are in fact very few points of contact with the state for ordinary citizens.'*

Heller, 2009: 85

Drawing up better 'procedures of engagement' – within which ideas of transparency and accountability feature highly – and expanding the 'institutional surface area' of the state have long been the targets of state reform as a result, and both have been important within the World Bank's good governance agenda since the early 1990s (World Bank 1997; Williams 2009). The narrow neoliberal version of this agenda is that it will deliver a demand-responsive state which efficiently provides its citizen-clients with the services which, in turn, ensure the conditions for market-led economic growth. The crafting of such institutional reform is recognised as a difficult problem, but one which can be solved by national government 'buy in' to reform programmes executed through the tutelage of international development experts.

The hubris and unintended consequences of this 'technical' reading of reform have been widely criticised for over a decade (see, among others, Craig and Porter, 2003; Mercer, 2003; Li, 2007). Over the same period, an alternative and more explicitly political case for decentralisation within the Global

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South has also been made, stressing its potential role in 'democratic deepening' (see, among others, Heller, 2001; Harriss *et al.*, 2004). Here, the evaluative criteria for reform programmes are their contribution to *substantial* democracy, defined as 'movement towards people's capacity actually to make use of democratic means to produce democratic ends' (Harriss *et al.* 2004: 14). This alternative approach also extends the scope of analysis of decentralisation, situating institutional reform within a context of political actors and forces which are given scant recognition within the good governance literature. From this perspective, 'moving the state' (Heller, 2001) closer to people is an inherently political project, in which the political parties and social movements promoting or resisting it, their ideological programmes, and the nature of their connections to their support bases, matter at least as much as the technical details of institutional design. Although coherent left-of-centre political parties perhaps offer the best chance of building substantive democracy (Heller 2001; Tornquist 2004), Jonathon Fox's work on 'thickening' civil society in Mexico offers important reminders both that space for political mobilisation exists even under authoritarian rule, and that the analysis of democratic political movements needs to be sensitive to their prior histories of mobilisation (Fox, 1996).

Such an analysis sets the first task for this paper, which is to provide an account of how a programme of democratisation through decentralisation unfolded in Kerala, and to outline the political forces which have shaped it. Why did Kerala's Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPI(M)) embark upon one of India's most ambitious programmes of decentralisation in the 1990s, what were the intentions of the reformists, and, some fifteen years later, how far have these been met by the institutional structures and processes currently in place in Kerala's local councils? Taken together, answers to these questions provide a picture of how far decentralisation has expanded the institutional surface area of the state, and begin to sketch out the ways in it has transformed existing patterns of 'patronage and populism'.

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The second task of the paper is to analyse the impact of these institutional changes on processes of political representation and marginalisation. In addition to the 'vertical' problem outlined above, Heller recognises that projects of democratic deepening face a 'horizontal' problem regarding the quality of associational life. Drawing on Tocqueville's insight that 'democracies function well when citizens make use of their associational capacities and recognize each other as rights-bearing citizens' (Heller, 2009: 85), he argues that civil society in India, as elsewhere in the South, is characterised by forms of 'durable inequality' (Tilly, 1998; 2007). These involve deeply engrained practices of exclusion, and undermine projects of state reform that rely upon understandings of citizenship as being universally, and mutually, recognised. Heller's response to this problem is that political participation is not *determined* by stock variables of social stratification, as is often assumed within political science, but rather that 'associational life is artifactual' (Heller, 2009: 100): the state can create fora for political participation which can themselves restructure civic identities. It is certainly right to emphasise this plasticity of associational life, and it follows from this that 'institutional design matters' (Heller, 2009: 100) insofar as it can potentially recognise, and perhaps circumvent, the domination of participatory spaces by stronger interest groups.

This paper aims to investigate this 'horizontal' problem a little further, however, by looking more closely at the processes of inclusion and marginalisation which decentralisation sets in motion. Intentional projects of 'democratic deepening' do not operate within a vacuum, but overlay and have to interact with existing patterns of political recognition and exclusion. In addition, the institutions created through decentralisation have their own particular structures for political representation, and these are often far more uneven in practice than their designers would anticipate. Accordingly, this paper looks at the ways in which existing political players have sought to manage the changing institutional structures of Kerala's

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decentralisation, and the impact of this changing micro-political landscape on different groups among the rural poor.

The theoretical resources for this task come in part from Engberg-Pedersen and Webster's (2002) conceptualisation of political space. Their analysis encourages us to ask what systems of governance look like from poor<sup>1</sup> people's perspectives, arguing that poor people's political space is constituted by three factors: the institutional channels through which they can contest policy formulation and implementation, political discourses, and their own social and political practices. Decentralisation has impacts on all three, most obviously within the first, because 'rescaling' these institutional channels such that they are closer and more open to the poor has been one important justification for programmes of decentralisation. But decentralisation subtly alters political discourses too, in that ideas of local accountability or even 'ownership' of the state may come to the fore, and as Mohan and Stokke (2000) note, such discourses of localism can have an ambivalent promise for the poor. Finally, Engberg-Pedersen and Webster emphasise that political space cannot simply be created 'from above' through government action if this does not connect with poor people's experiences, histories and practices. Here, we explore this idea further, arguing that these social and political practices are always constructed spatially, reproduced through the micro-geographies of poor people's social relations. 'Moving' the state closer to people may facilitate practices of political engagement for some, but for others it may by-pass or cut across these networks, producing its own geographies of exclusion.

Thinking through the impact of decentralisation on political marginalisation in this way is important for two reasons. First, the analysis of political engagement in India (in both policy and academic debate)

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<sup>1</sup> Poverty is treated here as a relational condition defined by experiences of constrained agency and marginalisation, rather than an individual lack of income or other forms of 'capital' (see also Mosse, 2010; Williams et al., 2012).

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tends to be dominated by the stock variables of social stratification rightly criticised by Heller: political exclusion is seen as a problem of and for certain broad-brush categories, notably the Scheduled Communities<sup>2</sup> and 'women'. Replacing these homogenised entities with a more situated analysis of exclusion not only disaggregates these categories, it also avoids the conceptual weakness of subsuming the 'horizontal' problem of decentralisation within the 'vertical' one. Public policy in India is often concerned with measuring the participation of these 'marginalised groups', or legislating to 'design this in' through mechanisms such as reserving seats in local government: where it is usually weaker is in recognising and challenging the social relations producing marginalisation (caste/religious prejudice, gender discrimination) in the first place.

Second, it adds an engagement with space that is often surprisingly absent from calls for political analysis of programmes of state reform. Despite the widespread use of space as a *metaphor* (see, for example, Cornwall and Coehlo, 2007), a richer understanding of institutions and identities being constituted through inherently spatialised practices is often missing from this work. There is, however, something of 'spatial turn' (Silvey, 2010) within scholarship at the interface of political geography and critical development studies on governance in the Global South. Work here has looked at critically at conscious efforts to 'reform' the state, through programmes of institution building (Chhotray, 2008), fostering public participation (Li 2007; Mohan, 2007) and delivering empowerment (Kesby, 2007), all of which emphasise the inherently spatialised nature of governance practices (Ferguson and Gupta, 2002; Corbridge et al., 2005): this paper aims to add to this earlier work by highlighting the geographies of exclusion produced through decentralisation.

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<sup>2</sup> India's Constitution provides protection and opportunities to those categorised as Scheduled Castes (former 'untouchables') and Scheduled Tribes (ethnic groups outside the Hindu-Muslim mainstream, particularly those associated with forest-living). Categorisation of both is contentious, and the alternative claimed identities of *dalit* ('the oppressed') for the lowest castes, and *adivasi* ('original inhabitants') for 'tribal' groups do not necessarily map neatly on to governmental categories.

### 2 Democratic Decentralisation in Kerala

In the mid-1990s, Kerala embarked on one of India's most ambitious programmes of democratic decentralisation, which has made the State an internationally celebrated case of 'empowered participatory governance' (Fung and Wright, 2003). Decentralisation was kick-started in 1996 through the launch of the People's Planning Campaign, which devolved around 30% of State plan expenditure to directly-elected local self-government institutions: the municipalities in urban areas, and the *grama panchayats* (local councils of around 25-30,000 population) in rural areas. Fiscal devolution was supported by a 'bottom up' planning process, which encouraged direct citizen participation throughout. Regular ward-level public meetings (*grama sabhas*) were held where people could express local development needs: these were then integrated into municipal- or *panchayat*-level plans and budgeting in 'development seminars' which also offered opportunities for popular participation, and the execution of the development projects which emerged from this planning process was to be overseen by Beneficiary Committees with local input (for details, see Thomas Isaac and Franke, 2000; Thomas Isaac and Heller, 2003). Kerala thus took up the challenge of India's 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendments of 1993, which required all States to establish democratically-elected local councils as a fully-functioning third tier of government below the National and State levels, but went beyond many other States by marrying this requirement for localised representative democratic bodies with both significant decentralised resources, and institutionalised channels for direct citizen engagement.

The reasons why the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and its partners within Kerala's Left Democratic Front (CPI(M) and LDF hereafter) embarked upon this ambitious programme of decentralisation have been carefully analysed within the literature. Particularly following India's Independence in 1947, Kerala's political parties competitively mobilised different occupational and community groups to lobby for various forms of welfare provision. As a result, Kerala developed a set of welfare measures that went

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far beyond the scope and range of their equivalents elsewhere within India, for example by providing insurance and pension funds for groups of unskilled labourers (such as headload workers) normally excluded from such support. There were also multiple channels for interest groups to communicate their desire for this support 'upwards': via political parties directly, through their affiliated unions, or through caste or religious community organisations. More negatively, however, this had been done within an atmosphere of escalating and often highly partisan claims on the state's resources, such that by the 1980s this competitive form of mobilisation was seen as contributing to high labour costs and poor economic growth relative to other parts of India, whilst some groups remained 'outliers' (Kurian, 1995) to its welfare provision.

It was against this background that the volunteer organisation, the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishat (KSSP) or 'People's Science Movement', began working closely with reformers within the CPI(M), undertaking a series of ambitious programmes around local participatory resource mapping, delivering universal literacy, and initiating group farming to reverse the State's long-term agricultural decline (Törnquist, 2000). Each programme consciously linked mass participation (coordinated through KSSP volunteers) to finding an alternative development pathway for the State, and although the energy of each campaign petered out after the LDF lost the State Assembly elections in 1991<sup>3</sup>, these experiments were important in shaping debates within the CPI(M). A major conference on Kerala's development experience was held in 1994 and concluded that decentralisation was central to the State's future development (Thomas Isaac and Tharakan, 1995), an argument that importantly gained the support of the respected CPI(M) leader EMS Namboodiripad. Ideological battles within the CPI(M) between these 'popular developmentalists' and the trade-union backed 'state modernisers' (Törnquist, 2000) continued,

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<sup>3</sup> Since 1982, control of Kerala's State Assembly has alternated between the LDF (in power from 1987-91; 1996-2001 and 2006-11), and the United Democratic Front (UDF), led by the Indian National Congress Party, holding power between these periods, and regaining it in the most recent State Assembly elections of 2011.

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overlain by factional struggles, but the former were able to push through the decentralisation agenda of the People's Planning Campaign when the LDF was returned to power in 1996. Heller attributes this success both to broad recognition that the 'old left' model of competitive union-based mobilisation was losing its economic and political efficacy, but also to the synergy between the CPI(M) and new forms of social movement, with CPI(M) reformers' joint membership of the KSSP being particularly important in allowing them to 'experiment with ideas outside the somewhat doctrinaire straightjacket of the party itself' (Heller, 2001: 154). Decentralisation in Kerala was therefore a process of administrative-institutional reform expected to deliver new opportunities for people's direct participation in local government. Simultaneously, however, it was a project of reform which emerged from within a particular party, gaining the support of the state CPI(M) leadership because of the positive effects they hoped it would have on broadening the party's own support base and strengthening its connection to its electorate.<sup>4</sup>

The basic structure of the reforms has survived the LDF's electoral defeats of 2001 and 2011, and although elements within a range of parties (including the CPI(M) itself) have clearly been opposed to the ethos of decentralisation, and the potential challenge to pre-existing patterns of party-based representation it embodied, some key indicators would suggest that Kerala has made 'a very decisive rupture with the past' (Heller, 2009: 95). The share of the state's total revenue devolved to local governments has remained high, dipping no lower than 17% since 1996, and has 'significantly altered the financial base of local governments in Kerala' (Government of Kerala 2009: 27). The 'invited spaces' for popular participation initiated within the PPC have been institutionalised, and at first glance show

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<sup>4</sup> Significantly, in Kerala, this political drive for decentralisation was not donor-driven, but emerged from struggles within the CPI(M) and its assessment of factors internal to Kerala. The fact that it was not based on the dependency of a political party (or the state more widely) on external donors which required it to embark on a process of institutional-administrative reform differentiates it from many other reform experiments (c.f. Li, 2007).

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signs of *over*-representing groups which had been previously marginalised within Kerala's politics: analysis of *grama sabha* attendance records in the first two years of the People's Planning Campaign indicates that participation rates of women and Scheduled Communities increased significantly, with the latter rising above their proportion of Kerala's total population (Chaudhuri and Heller, 2003: 30). More broadly, civil servants and politicians of all parties recognise the reforms' effects on improving the outcomes of local planning, and of popular engagement with this process (Heller *et al.*, 2007). These are significant elements of success that mark Kerala out as one of India's leading States in establishing decentralised local governance, but we need to examine these reforms' impacts on all three elements of poor people's political space highlighted by Engberg-Pedersen and Webster.

Looking first at the institutional channels that reform has opened up, it is clear that Kerala's decentralisation has provided *panchayat* offices which are well-staffed and well-resourced relative to their counterparts elsewhere in India, transferring many of the functions and functionaries of the Development Block to the *grama panchayat* and bringing them within physical reach of the majority of the rural population. Beyond these offices, embedded decentralised planning involves *grama sabhas* being held at least four times a year within every electoral ward of the State: rural Kerala's high population density places these public meetings and the homes of ward members within easy walking distance for most people. In addition, the neighbourhood groups of Kudumbashree, Kerala's poverty alleviation programme, bring rural women together into dense and intentionally state-facing social networks. These groups now engage women from around half of all households within the state (Oommen, 2008), and their activities support a range of local government functions (see Williams *et al.*, 2011) such that today, Kudumbashree women often make up the bulk of *grama sabha* attendees. Two questions remain about these changed institutional channels. The first is whether their apparent openness does make them accessible by all on the ground. The second is whether they focus too much

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attention on affairs within the boundaries of the *panchayat*, creating a spatial dislocation of Kerala's political system such that reformists have been unable link local engagement to 'decisive inroads into mainstream politics and government' (Törnquist, 2004: 212).

Turning to the political discourses which are intended to fill this space, reform promised to make a clean break with the competitive mobilisation of unionized groups, and to refocus local political debate on questions of development. Törnquist (2004: 213) claims that whilst it disrupted old patterns of party-political clientalism, this has happened alongside a wider depoliticisation within Kerala: the radical redistributive programme of Kerala's land reform era has been replaced with a focus on localised self-help (see also Thakaran, 2004; 2006), and it is therefore perhaps unsurprising that the last LDF Government's review of decentralisation looked to the *panchayats* to deliver improved revenue-raising and service delivery (Government of Kerala, 2009), rather than seeing them as providing opportunities for a radical rethink of State development strategy from below. The wider question that emerges is whether *panchayat* rule is allowing the 'politicization of democracy' by allowing the articulation of different political ideas and interests, or smothering such debate through a narrow and de-politicised vision of local development (Mohan and Stokke, 2007).

This links closely to questions about the everyday state practices – the distribution of welfare benefits, collective planning for area-based development, the conduct of *grama sabhas* – through which decentralised democracy has become institutionalised. The first is whether these practices, however well-intentioned, engage with the concerns and challenges faced by marginalised groups: in short, do they matter enough for the poor to engage with them? Second, does pressure to perform these everyday practices 'neutrally' for 'local development' itself de-legitimise forms of political activism which address these groups' *particular* interests. Thus J Devika and her co-workers (Devika et al. 2008) argue that women are very active within *panchayat* politics, but highly restricted in using their positions to

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address strategic gender needs. Election as a *panchayat* representative requires public adherence to restrictive social norms around ‘respectable’ female behaviour, and once in post, powerful party, age and gender hierarchies suppress opportunities for women politicians to mobilise women as a politicised category: instead, they exert pressure to behave ‘neutrally’ in working for a welfarist state.

These criticisms point to potential limitations of Kerala’s reforms, and here we are particularly concerned with their implications for poor and marginalised groups. In terms of Heller’s ‘vertical’ problem, decentralisation has clearly rescaled many governance practices to the local level, but questions remain about who is active within this expanded surface area of the state, and to what extent has this provided institutional channels for political representation that are open and accessible to the marginalised. With regard to the ‘horizontal’ problem, CPI(M) modernisers saw transcending polarised political identities and re-engaging with the public as one of the potential benefits of decentralisation (c.f. Manor, forthcoming), but how far has this changed forms of political subjectivity, and how is this affecting the participation of previously marginalised communities? Both sets of questions relate to the nature of the political space which reform has opened up, and we investigate these through the everyday geographies of inclusion and exclusion within this changing public sphere.

### **3 Everyday Geographies of Decentralisation**

The field research we report on here was conducted as part of a wider research project on the impact of participatory governance initiatives on poor people’s political empowerment in Kerala and West Bengal. The Kerala research was based in two *panchayats*, each selected to represent conditions within two of the poorer Districts in the State: as outlined below, the political contrasts between them allow us to uncover some of the underlying logics through which decentralisation operates, and to highlight in

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particular their impacts on processes of political inclusion and exclusion.<sup>5</sup> Fieldwork for the project was conducted from September 2008-April 2009 (supplemented by follow-up interviews in late 2010): this consisted of interviews with over twenty local resource persons (elected *panchayat* representatives, political leaders, and civil servants) per *panchayat*; a further fifty interviews per *panchayat* with purposively sampled groups of households from communities facing different forms of marginalisation; and focus group work and participant observation. Our selection of marginalised groups was made after detailed discussion with key informants and focus-group work, and structured to ensure that we interviewed groups traditionally seen as ‘outliers’ to Kerala’s social development trajectory and also others locally recognised as poor and marginalised. We therefore worked with Scheduled communities in each *panchayat*, but beyond this also with groups who had unstable or deteriorating livelihoods (small farmers in both *panchayats*, artisans in Palakkad, and Muslim petty traders and labourers in Wayanad). Their differing experiences of economic, social and political marginalisation were explicitly intended to show how decentralisation was reshaping the institutional channels and language through which political interests were expressed, and the everyday practices of political engagement, for contrasting groups within ‘the poor’.

### ***Palakkad: Decentralisation under a locally-dominant party***

Palakkad District, the heart of Kerala’s rice-producing area, is also one of the core power-bases of the CPI(M) within the State. From the late 1950s, Kerala’s land reforms had transferred land ownership to former tenants through a process of social mobilization which had strongly shaped the politics of our case-study *panchayat*. It was the Ezhava community, officially recognised as ‘OBC’ or one of the ‘Other

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<sup>5</sup> Case study based research cannot capture all local political conditions which exist within Kerala, but project dissemination workshops in CDS, Trivandrum (December 2009) and JNU, Delhi (October 2010) provided valuable confirmation that neither were atypical, and that the underlying logics we identify below were of relevance elsewhere across the State.

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Backward Castes', that had been particularly active within this struggle locally. As a result, many had become small farmers, and the community was now central to the local CPI(M)'s activity. This had also afforded the CPI(M) a well developed grassroots organisation and a degree of dominance over local politics, such that the new institutional spaces produced by decentralisation were overlain by the CPI(M)'s pre-existing dense organisational presence. The party's women's association, agricultural labourers' union (KSKTU) and peasant farmers' association (Karshaka Sangham) all had broad local membership, and community-level party meetings (*tharayogam*) were regularly held in every ward, where party members discussed supporters' needs and questions, or dealt with their grievances. The Ezhava caste remained central to the local leadership of the party, and KSSP activists, who are often drawn from public sector professionals, were not present within the area. The *panchayat* therefore offered insights into how an 'old left' local leadership was adapting itself from mobilisation based around agrarian struggles, to decentralisation and the associated challenges of managing a more participatory and 'developmental' form of local government.

Reflecting on these challenges, local leaders described them as an opportunity that had revitalised the party's fortunes, an interpretation backed by the party's improved performance in *panchayat* elections (it held all 15 *panchayat* seats at the time of our research). Whereas agricultural labour struggles were losing their ability to galvanize party supporters, under the People's Planning Campaign 'party and ward members took the initiative to go to each and every house to ensure maximum participation' (*Panchayat* President, Palakkad: 11/03/09). The success of this engagement was, in turn described as changing the class composition of the party's local support:

*People from different walks of life, top to bottom, in the new generation joined with party now. Now the public identifies the Communists to be 'middle class' people. Various caste people, even the higher caste*

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*people have started joining with the party. Even the elite class people who never joined till then. That is the difference from the earlier period.*

*(Panchayat Vice-President, Palakkad: 22/03/09)*

To support this changing image of the party, and the demands of work within the decentralised *panchayats*, the social composition of the party's elected representatives had changed. The same vice-president explained how he had recruited a middle-class woman from a Congress party family to stand as a CPI(M) *panchayat* member. He did this because social skills, education and respectability were all deemed important attributes of an electable *panchayat* ward member, and local female agricultural labourers 'didn't have much vision or knowledge about society which a candidate is supposed to possess' (interview, 22/03/09).

At first sight, this certainly suggests that decentralisation had changed the composition and the discourse of the local CPI(M), but we need to recognise both the social exclusion inherent within this selection of the 'right' representatives, and also the ability of the party's everyday practices to survive this make-over intact. The local party certainly had not relinquished its internal discipline<sup>6</sup> and centralised control, and a local CPI(M) representative was at pains to make clear the distinction between those routine administrative duties (such as issuing birth certificates) which *panchayat* ward members could be entrusted to enact independently, and more contentious issues, such as dealing with land boundary disputes, which needed to be resolved through the public intervention of the party:

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<sup>6</sup> The CPI(M) insist that their elected members follow party *nayam*, a term which has multiple referents: "sometimes it was just the broad policy framework, at other times, it looked like a set of rules for dealing with day-to-day 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'." (Devika et al., 2008:60)

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*That's our way ... the issues are brought to the party, and the [ward] member gets a second place as far as the party is concerned... our duty and responsibility is to execute the party's instructions. Whatever the party decides, we are supposed to execute. Here the people believe in the party and come to meet the secretary of the party. Some people may mistake the member as more powerful and come to the member.*

(CPI(M) ward member, Palakkad: 15/02/2009)

Decentralisation was thus allowing the CPI(M) to change the public face of how, and through whom, the party did business whilst maintaining tight control over what ward members did on a day-to-day basis. This control extended to the Kudumbashree groups, where the local CPI(M) were not only active in choosing precisely which women would get the party's backing to become office-holders of the groups, but were also carefully managing elections for these allegedly non-political positions (held during our fieldwork in November 2008) to ensure that they did not provide any form of public platform for rival parties. In one incident reported to us a known Congress Party supporter was vying to become the president of a Kudumbashree group: when she complained to the District Kudumbashree offices that elections for the position had not been properly conducted, the local (male) *panchayat* member intervened with party backing to intimidate the group out of existence.

Our fieldwork thus indicated that decentralisation had provided a means through which the CPI(M) had revitalised and extended its control over the locality, a control which was being backed up by both its micro-management of the official spaces for participation this offered, and also through the considerable resources which were at the *panchayat's* disposal. There were very few complaints that these resources were being used in a corrupt fashion by the party, and a high proportion of our interviewees had received some benefit from local government in the form of welfare payments, loans and subsidies, or via *panchayat*-administered anti-poverty programmes. Importantly, however, local

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party members were quick to link these benefits to a narrative of the CPI(M)'s own generosity and efficient management. Beyond this discourse of 'developmental' and 'apolitical' management of decentralised government, of course, the CPI(M) was also actively involved in the openly partisan world of electoral competition, and here the party demonstrated its strength more directly: in one instance during our fieldwork, a taxi driver who had dared to display a rival political party's sticker on his auto-rickshaw had been forced to leave the *panchayat* under threat of violence.

This 'micro-management' of decentralisation was having different effects on the democratic engagement of poor and marginalised households across the different groups we studied (Table 1). For the Scheduled Caste Cheruma community, changing occupational patterns were increasing political marginalisation. In the past, Cheruma households had primarily worked on local farms and were closely linked to the CPI(M) through its affiliated agricultural labourers' union, the KSKTU. Mechanisation of paddy harvesting had forced households to search for other jobs, in construction or on rubber plantations, over a wider geographical area. For many, this meant periods of residence outside the *panchayat* and responding to different short-term employment opportunities as these arose. This need to be mobile was impacting on participation within local political activities: most Cheruma households mentioned making considerable efforts to attend *grama sabhas*, CPI(M) *tharayogams* and political rallies, but the degree of committed activism required to follow a political career was simply not compatible with their irregular working patterns. At the time of our interviews, no Cheruma households held leadership positions within the local CPI(M), and this was echoed our interviewees' description of their somewhat passive relationships with both the *panchayat* and the party.<sup>7</sup> Unpicking the basis of this

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<sup>7</sup> It is difficult to capture this neatly through interview quotations, but the following exchanges indicate something of this:

*Do you go to the tharayogam?*  
Regularly

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passivity from caste relations is difficult. Many Cheruma interviewees were at pains to note the CPI(M)'s record on attacking casteism: however, their 'uneducated' status gave them a palpable sense of inferiority, both within dealings with the Ezhava-dominated local CPI(M), and in participation in mixed-caste Kudumbashree units, where Cheruma members again left office-bearing roles to higher caste members. Thus although Cherumas were often loyal CPI(M) followers, and making strenuous efforts to maintain and demonstrate their own links to the party, they held little decision-making power at the *panchayat* level.

[Table 1 about here]

The other Scheduled Caste community with whom we worked, the Nayadis, was extremely politically isolated. Their absolute deprivation and social inferiority remained pronounced, compounded by their 'polluting' traditional occupations (hunting and receipt of alms), and they had no history of affiliation to any political party. Despite the local CPI(M) professing that they had made efforts to engage with Nayadi households, the everyday operation of decentralised government had largely by-passed this community. Most interviewees were unaware of *panchayat* activities and anti-poverty programmes, with one older and educated individual being virtually the only link between the community and a wider political world. He assisted his caste fellows by filling out forms or visiting the *panchayat* office on their behalf, and had

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*But you still lack facilities?*

(No answer)

*What other forms of aid are due to you from the panchayat?*

See, how can we know? They'll decide and give us.

(Cheruma household interview, 10/04/2009)

*Do you attend Grama sabha?*

Oh yes

*Do you attend local residents (tharayogam) meetings?*

Of course

*Do you participate in the discussions?*

No, we are not educated: we only answer to the questions, if anyone asks.

(Cheruma household interview, 05/04/2009)

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himself attended recent CPI(M) rallies: this was, however far from the direct participation envisaged by decentralisation's promoters.

Turning to two of the *panchayat's* OBC communities, the dominant Ezhava caste, and the numerically smaller Viswakarma castes of craftworkers, differences in engagement with decentralisation were more extreme. Unlike the Cheruma community, the Viswakarma artisans were self-employed, with their traditional occupations of carpentry and brass-work organised intensively using the immediate family's own labour, including that of female household members. Partly because of this, families found it hard to connect to the rhythms and opportunities of the decentralised state. For example, women's social contact outside the household and caste-fellows had been restricted, and so the Kudumbashree programme, and its expectations of women's integration with wider *panchayat* activities, was seen as threatening existing caste norms. The Viswakarma castes had made various attempts to link up to wider caste associations and workers' unions in the past, but these had repeatedly fallen apart due to both inter-personal jealousy and pressure from the local CPI(M). In the early 2000s, the community had attempted to form a local unit of the Viswa Karma Sabha, the Kerala-wide association for these castes, but the CPI(M) had undercut their activities by holding *tharayogams* in the neighbourhood and directly assisting individuals needing help from the *panchayat*. This increased engagement was, however, taking place on the party's own terms: no-one within the community acted as a leader or a spokesperson in their relationships with the party, and individuals realised that good connections to the party were needed to get things done. To step outside this form of brokerage and to organise the community independently was to expose oneself to a degree of risk:

*Okay. You hinted at a threat you had...in what way?*

Politics won't flourish if community organisations are active.

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*How do they (the CPI(M)) show their anger?*

They will come and ask me to withdraw.

*They say it straightforward? The leaders?*

Yes.

*Who are the leaders here?*

No big leaders will come...the *chotta* leaders [minor party figures] execute these things.

(Artisan interviewee, 20/03/2009)

By contrast, the Ezhava community was central to the day-to-day working of both the *panchayat* and the CPI(M). A significant number of Ezhava households had benefited from land reforms to become small farmers, while approximately half of the community remained landless and were primarily reliant on labouring work. All sections of the community were affected by the long-term decline in the profitability of paddy production, but were closely integrated with the CPI(M)'s efforts to ameliorate this agrarian crisis through its labourers' (KSKTU) and peasant farmers' (Karshaka Sangham) unions. Through these unions' actions, all farmers, whatever their caste or political background, accepted the agricultural wage rate the CPI(M) had brokered, and adhered to local party's directive against converting their fields to less labour-intensive crops such as rubber. Equally, the Karshaka Sangham was important in offering farmers a powerful collective voice within the *panchayat*, and directing its public works programmes towards activities that supported farmers, such as repairing irrigation canals and ponds. Ezhava political representatives were leaders within this careful deployment of CPI(M) brokerage and *panchayat* resources: the wider Ezhava community was predominantly supportive of the party, and strongly

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represented within core panchayat activities (Kudumbashree, NREGP<sup>8</sup>, and *grama sabhas*), providing a sense of political entitlement even to those of its members who had seen limited financial benefit from this engagement.<sup>9</sup> In marked contrast to the CPI(M)'s deliberate attempt to undercut the Viswa Karma Sabha, the caste association of the Ezhava community, the SNDP, was tolerated within the panchayat, albeit with some restrictions. The SNDP, like the VKS, was a Congress-leaning organization in Palakkad District, and so its local leaders stressed that they were exclusively engaged in non-political matters. They deemed this essential for the local SNDP's continued co-existence with the CPI(M):

*Neither the SNDP organization nor any other political parties are interested to take part in the grama sabha. If [we raised] demands there, it wouldn't have any result. None other than [CPI(M)] party supporters has a role.*

(Local SNDP unit secretary, interview: 19/03/09)

The fact that one-party dominance was combined with competent management ensured that the CPI(M) continued to enjoy local electoral success, with party members suggesting that reforms had boosted their vote share. But decentralisation had not just increased the 'institutional surface area' of

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<sup>8</sup> The National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme – the scheme under which local public works programmes were completed, central to both the panchayat's planning and its anti-poverty efforts.

<sup>9</sup> Again, interview transcripts only capture something of this sense of entitlement, but contrast the confident tone of these comments from Ezhava labourers with those of their Cheruma counterparts in footnote 7:

*Which is your party?*

The poor should be in the poor man's party.... the hammer and sickle [i.e. CPI(M)].

*Got no help for repairing the house?*

We applied but they gave it to poorer families.

*Do you attend Grama Sabha?*

Yes, I go.

*You applied for assistance there?*

Yes.

*You say that the poorer families are getting these...?*

Yes. Our turn will come one day soon.

(interview, Ezhava labourers, 11/04/2009)

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the state, it had also allowed the CPI(M) as the locally dominant party to ‘thin’ or crowd-out political space. Caste societies could have provided an alternative means for groups which were numerically small within the panchayat to connect with regional or all-Kerala associations of their fellow caste members, but were being deliberately squashed or sidelined by the CPI(M). The party justified this by claiming that under decentralisation, the *panchayats* provided the only proper mechanism for political representation. At the same time, there was little recognition of poorer households’ differing abilities to take up opportunities of ‘invited’ participation provided by decentralisation. The local CPI(M) could therefore stake a monopoly claim to a discourse of ‘discipline and development’ (Chatterjee, 1997), regardless of its marginalising impacts on the social conservative, the socially stigmatised, or those simply too busy earning their living elsewhere to engage.

### ***Wayanad: Decentralisation within party-political flux***

Wayanad is a hill District which has been socially and politically quite distinct from many other areas within Kerala. Traditionally, it had been largely ‘Tribal’, and *adivasi* communities comprised 20.9 % of the *panchayat*’s population according to 2001 census (and 17.7% of the District as a whole). Many other groups – Muslims, Hindus, and Christians – were more recent incomers to Wayanad, their in-migration over the last 100 years driven by the development of cash-crop agriculture which had in turn involved widespread dispossession of *adivasi* groups from their land (Jose Kjosavik and Shanmugaratnam 2007). Political leaders of all parties primarily came from the same richer strata of these settler groups: the Muslim League and the Congress Party (allied within the UDF), and the CPI(M) were actively vying for control of the *panchayat*, but none had particularly well established organisational structures on the ground. As a result, local politics were fluid, as illustrated during our fieldwork by a change in control of the *panchayat* when an important local leader of the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) switched his party’s support from the LDF to the UDF in return for the latter making him *panchayat* president.

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Although this sparked wider debate about the NCP's position within Kerala's state-level politics, local protests against the move were relatively muted and in our in-depth interviews (completed within six months of the change) all parties reported working together amicably within the *panchayat* board:

*In Wayanad, political fervour is not that great. Politics is just one part of their life...not more. In this panchayat, there has been a very cordial climate. See, the present panchayat president is a major political opponent of mine but it never affects our personal or familial relations. About the change...Two ward members changed sides and we took the possible advantage...that's all.*

(Senior Muslim League leader, interview 24/04/2009)

This fluidity and 'relaxed' attitude was indicative of limited organisational penetration by all political parties. Historically, Christian and Hindu settler farmers were largely Congress supporters, Muslims were with the Muslim league, while many *adivasi* farm workers had simply followed the political allegiances of their employers. More recently, however these relationships were changing: the CPI(M) had made long-standing efforts to organize within labouring groups (including the *paniya* tribal community), and 'feudal' bonds between farmers and their labourers had weakened, particularly in the last ten years as workers had been laid-off following a crisis in the area's cash-crop farming. The CPI(M) had gained some political ground as a result, as shown by its short-lived control of the *panchayat* after the 2005 elections, but within a context where NGOs had been more active than political parties in both grassroots organisation and engagement with poorer and more marginalised groups<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> One prominent local NGO, RASTHA, had been involved in a range of activities within *adivasi* communities from the mid-1980s: these had included informal education, public health interventions, and the establishment of savings-and-credit groups which pre-dated the Kudumbashree programme. Elsewhere in the District, *adivasi* struggles (under the leadership of to CK Jamu) to reclaim land appropriated from them had been the focus of more conflictual politics from the 1990s: the CPI(M) had responded by establishing its own *Adivasi Kshema Samithi* ('tribal land society') to undercut Jamu's support base.

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As a result, decentralisation posed a rather different problem of political management within the Wayanad case-study: how could the new spaces of participatory local governance be filled by parties that were themselves rather poorly embedded within the local area? All parties needed to build up their activities to match the dense institutional network which decentralisation had delivered, and two clear trends were noticeable as a result. First, there was a degree of independence of operation for elected *panchayat* members of all political parties which exceeded that of Palakkad. Muslim League, Congress and NCP ward members undertook most decisions without reference to their parties, and even within CPI(M) there was greater autonomy for Ward members over most day-to-day *panchayat* affairs, with only issues likely to lead to open public conflict being brought before the local committee.

Second, the *panchayat's* Kudumbashree units were also largely free from top-down political control. Attempts by local ward members to influence the elections for Kudumbashree office-holders in 2008 had been comprehensively rebuffed by the women themselves, and that the fact that a CPI(M) supporter had retained the chair of Kudumbashree's local apex body even though the UDF held control of the *panchayat* board was widely cited as evidence of this independence. Kudumbashree women, themselves often trained and skilled through prior engagement with NGOs, were instead an important potential resource for political parties seeking to develop their support base:

*You need not see politics as a bad vocation. We can spot able cadres from among [Kudumbashree] women. They too have interest in public life as well. Their space is widening. There was a time when you couldn't get a woman candidate. Housewives gained a lot from these. They now have the competitive, sportsman spirit. Now they are familiar with banking practices.*

(Local Congress leader, interview 25/04/2009)

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The CPI(M), with its reputation for representing women's interests and indeed for establishing Kudumbashree in the first place, was clearly gaining from this, but so also was the Muslim League.

The institutional space that had been created by decentralisation had thus enforced a change within local political parties, who were still catching up with the opportunities it offered for (re)connecting to grassroots groups. A rather heterogeneous group of actors was filling this space because the existing political elite needed to draw upon those with independent experience of organisation and development work gained through NGOs, or even caste and community groups. The political discourse of *panchayat* leaders also had to adapt to these changing institutional patterns. Perhaps unsurprisingly, all political leaders described cooperation and a freedom from narrowly partisan political behaviour as central to the proper functioning of the *panchayat* board, alongside the individual integrity of the ward member. At first sight, therefore, Wayanad appeared to be tackling aspects of Heller's vertical problem of decentralisation effectively, opening up new institutional channels for contact with the state whilst remaining free from single-party capture. Alongside this, however, day-to-day operation of the *panchayat* suffered from some of the same limitations seen in Palakkad: *grama sabhas* did not have the 'buzz' of the heyday of the People's Planning Campaign, and much of their activity was focused on the implementation of the NREGP. In addition, Wayanad's loose and 'relaxed' party control also meant that coordinated planning was largely absent. Put simply, there was relatively little conflict between members and parties because the *panchayat* was making relatively few collective decisions: in most cases, budgets and tasks were simply sub-divided to individual ward members. This was a far cry from the integrated planning envisaged within the People's Planning Campaign, but was also a form of political accommodation that had consequences for the political inclusion of the poor, seen by the contrasting fortunes of groups of marginal farmers, Paniya (*adivasi*) labourers, and Muslim labourers and traders.

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Marginal farmers had been particularly hard-hit by Wayanad's acute agrarian crisis, caused by simultaneous price crashes and crop failures in key capital-intensive cash crops such as coffee and pepper. Several interviewees had had to resort to distress sales of land, and most were now more actively searching for support from the *panchayat*, including a growing engagement with Kudumbashree, and the formation of local farmers' collectives (*pata sekhara samitis*) through which (rather limited) subsidised fertilisers and seeds were distributed. Political affiliations within the group were, however, weak and varied, and in marked contrast to Palakkad, no party had the ability to control key elements of agrarian relations such as wage-rate negotiations. This lack of broad political organisation was also evident in that few benefits of government write-offs of agricultural debt had 'trickled down' to this group: larger farmers had the resources and political connections to hold the banks at bay until this support could be accessed, whereas marginal farmers had largely been left to face foreclosure alone.

Muslim labourers and petty traders were faring somewhat better. Labourers had access to off-farm work, including relatively well-paid construction and timber cutting jobs, and some men had made the risky but potentially lucrative move to work in the Arabian Gulf states. Petty traders typically combined running small shops and businesses in the urbanising centre of the *panchayat* with labouring jobs, or limited income from smallholdings. Both groups now had growing engagement with the *panchayat* and access to its resources, with the majority of households taking part in the Kudumbashree programme, and through this accessing employment under the NREGP. Unlike the more isolated marginal farmers, these links were actively being built-up by the Muslim League who saw the potential for mutual benefit. Kudumbashree's savings activity helped traders and labourers to bridge shortfalls in income, and promotion of the groups provided a mechanism for the League to step up its engagement with the community.

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The most economically destitute and socially marginalised group we worked within in Wayanad was the Paniya community, a Scheduled Tribe that had historically been agrarian slaves. They were dependent primarily on farm work, and the slump had forced a number of families to seasonally migrate to Karnataka, often under harsh pay and living conditions. Linguistically isolated from Malayalam society, an attempt had been made to provide the community with a voice in *panchayat* affairs through holding *adivasi* community assemblies (*uurukuttams*) in parallel to the regular *grama sabhas* held in their electoral wards, and their ward member was a young Paniya CPI(M) activist elected to the *panchayat* on a seat reserved for the Scheduled Tribes. Despite these structures promoting inclusion, it was clear that there was a mis-match between the political mobilisation of the Paniya community, and its members' day-to-day engagement with *panchayat* activities. Political mobilisation had centred around the issue of *adivasi* land rights in the hills, but support for the community's pressing material needs was much weaker: take up of the *panchayat's* anti-poverty activities was very poor within the community, and although their Ward member was a Paniya himself, he was failing to draw down government resources marked for the community.

The wider picture then, was one where the lack of single-party dominance at the *panchayat* level was actively promoting political mobilisation to 'fill out' the institutional structures decentralisation had created. This led to a more fluid political space than in Palakkad, with a range of parties and other organisations involved, but one where a traditionally somewhat detached (and economically elite) leadership was more able to mobilise its vote-base than it was to use the institutions of decentralised democracy constructively. Sub-dividing *panchayat* resources among ward members was symptomatic of this: it increased individual autonomy but sidestepped any attempt at collective decision making. For some, this was delivering results, as shown by one Muslim League ward member who had worked with the District council, the District committee of his party, and even with opposition State politicians to

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pursue his constituents' interests, and who above all worked closely with office staff to drive through programme implementation in his ward:

*We will check the accounts; help the staff sort it out and so on. Co-operation matters much; that's my conviction. Never omit anything, never offend anybody: you can get things done.*

(Muslim League Ward Member, interview 26/03/2009)

This was, however, an able and educated politician working in a ward where any tensions between his core support base and the developmental needs of his wider constituency were limited: most households in his ward were Muslim, and the majority of these were legitimate 'targets' for forms of assistance the *panchayat* could deliver. His actions contrasted markedly with the universally-recognised weakness of the Paniya Ward Member, who was more concerned about his wider standing within the CPI(M) than he was with engaging with his own community:

*Q: [Your Ward Member] belongs to the Paniya community. Is this an advantage for the Paniya people for development or for getting more benefits?*

*A: [Loud Laughter]. We don't get any benefits because of this. He doesn't even know how many houses are in this colony... He doesn't know anything.*

(Paniya community interviewees, 13/02/2009)

This individualisation of control meant there was a 'double lottery' at work for poor and marginalised groups: they had to be lucky enough first for their interests to be of electoral consequence within their ward, and second to have an elected member capable of acting upon them. As a result, one *dalit* activist argued that decentralisation had been a step backwards for the Scheduled Communities. Under the old system, bureaucratic control over key resources earmarked for these groups (including the Special

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Component Plan and Tribal Component Plan) was rule-bound and highly paternalistic, but activists could learn these rules to access benefits on their communities' behalf. By contrast, decentralisation had made local power brokers pivotal to resource allocation within far more informal systems of control. The odds were stacked against the poorest and most marginalised understanding how to negotiate these systems because their absolute poverty undermined the very activities, such as participating in Kudumbashree groups, that would sustain day-to-day engagement with the *panchayat* and facilitate such learning.

## 4 The Exclusions of Decentralisation

The promise of decentralisation is that moving the state closer to people gives all groups opportunities for their voices to be heard and the space to participate politically, even if they lack the skills or resources to negotiate directly with higher-level bureaucrats or politicians. The problem in practice is that these new institutional channels do not necessarily match with the everyday practices of poorer groups. Successful engagement has to work around their pressing material needs, and requires their active participation both in official forums such as public planning meetings and in the more complex and opaque processes of political lobbying. As is well recognised in the literature, poor individuals are often less able to take up these opportunities due to limited time, financial insecurity, and a whole host of exclusionary barriers, from lack of educated status to restrictive gender norms. Kerala's decentralisation provides a 'best case' scenario for reviewing responses to these problems based around good institutional design: resources and staff have been devolved to the *panchayat* level, mechanisms of participatory planning have been institutionalised, and 'manufactured' forms of public engagement through Kudumbashree have explicitly aimed to strengthen poor women's voices in local government. Beyond these institutional responses to marginalisation, decentralisation had brought its own unintended consequences for the organisation of the local political system, and here we need to look

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beyond the contrasting party-political situations of our two case study *panchayats* to understand the underlying dynamics at work. The established dominance of the CPI(M) in Palakkad enabled it to present itself as fully engaging with the required norms, discourses and practices of reform whilst retaining *panchayat* resources within the party and using these to boost its own electoral support. All parties in Wayanad had the different problem of trying to 'fill out' the new institutional structures: without the density of party organisation of Palakkad's CPI(M), this was allowing a heterogeneous group of actors to participate in the political spaces they had produced, and resulted in increased autonomy for elected Ward Members.

What underlies these initial differences, however, was a common logic of how these new political spaces were operating. Control over government resources differed in each, but for both, reform had redirected significant amounts of the state's revenue and activity to local government. Because the *grama panchayats* have become significant political prizes in themselves, this had fuelled political competition but also altered the form this took. Decentralisation had intensified parties' focus on the *panchayat* and ward level, strengthening the hand of numerically larger groups (Muslims in Wayanad, Ezhavas in Palakkad) and leaving many smaller groups more isolated as it did so. For those marginalised by this new electoral calculus, connections 'outwards' beyond the *panchayat* were becoming more difficult: invited networks for participation (Kudumbashree, *grama sabhas*) were entirely *panchayat*-facing, and alternative avenues for wider political representation via unions, or caste or community groups were being eroded by this, or even actively squashed (as in Palakkad). The one exception was the mobilisation of Wayanad's Paniyas around the issue of land rights, but significantly, this had not delivered material benefits to our interviewees, nor had it developed lasting political 'capital' in the form of useful connections or institutional learning.

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The laudable aim of initiating development-oriented and autonomous local councils through decentralisation had its own unintended consequences that were reinforcing these effects of rescaled political competition. The drive to instil political discourses of building consensus and ensuring the ‘neutrality’ of government operation were entirely understandable within Kerala’s reforms, given the perceived need to break with the competitive ‘demand politics’ (Rudolph and Rudolph, 1987) that had dominated the State until the 1990s. Over time, however, these ideas were being connected to a series of increasingly standardised local government activities focused on forms of ‘self-help’ achievable within the spatial and financial boundaries of the *panchayat*. In the *panchayats* we studied, what was needed to expand the political space of excluded groups was a clearer articulation of how local government needed to work *differently* with the particular forms of marginalisation each faced – whether that was the stigmatisation of Paniyas and Nayadi identity, or the different economic challenges faced by Cheruma or Viswakarma groups – but the need to perform a particular version of decentralised good governance seemed to mitigate against this. Again, some groups, such as Palakkad’s small farmers, were better than others in connecting up to the standardised benefits that the *panchayats* had to offer, the irony being that the denial of difference in political discourse was having highly differential material outcomes. We can therefore see some particular ‘dangers of localism’ (Mohan and Stokke, 2000) as the unintended consequences of Kerala’s reform: political networks that extended beyond the local scale were being attenuated, and political horizons were being narrowed to the *panchayats* and their prescribed activities. This is, in turn, reproduced a rather narrow, majoritarian localism, that left many of the forms of exclusion or mal-recognition central to Heller’s ‘horizontal problem’ unaddressed.

These findings suggest two wider lessons for those promoting decentralisation and other forms of participatory governance reform in the Global South. The first is that programmes of reform need a flexible re-thinking of the nature of political marginalisation. The primary means by which reformers

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have sought to counteract the power of dominant groups in India have been to require the physical presence of 'the people' in appropriate numbers in democratic arenas, and this has been implemented through mechanisms of seat reservations (for women, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes), and through rules of quoracy for public meetings such as the grama sabhas. As this paper has shown, this is an insufficiently dynamic way of thinking about political marginalisation, particularly as institutional reform itself will generally restructure, rather than remove, the processes through which marginalisation occurs. In short, it is the interactions between groups (and their particular forms of exclusion), structures of political society, and structures of governance which matter in how and whether 'marginalised' people get their voices heard. This needs a more context-specific understanding of marginalisation than is often present within programmes of governance reform, particularly when, like in India, fixed, broad-brush and state-recognised forms of marginalisation dominate public and academic debate. It also requires a more careful political analysis of institutional restructuring itself, such that the second-round effects of reform on processes of representation can be anticipated.

The second is that to expect marginalisation to disappear solely through the 'correct' performance of a set of reformed government practices is probably a forlorn hope. These performances *do* send important and powerful messages – about the rights of citizens to participate, or of Kudumbashree women to represent their families – and it was striking that within our case-study areas, decentralisation was widely acknowledged to have brought in a 'cleaner' and more responsive form of government. But to assume that this is the *only* task required to expand the political spaces open to the poor is an analytical mistake, in that it assumes that the 'horizontal' problem of lack of mutual recognition by citizens will be tackled sufficiently by addressing the 'vertical' problem of expanding their engagement with the state. Practices of exclusion are too durable and too extensive to be tackled through 'neutral' operation of formal practices of government alone: the processes producing marginality and mal-

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recognition need to be named, and confronted directly. This, then, is to admit the fundamentally *political* tasks involved in addressing the marginalisation of the poor.

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