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Comparative Notes on Indian Experiences of Social Democracy: Kerala and West Bengal

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Abstract

This is a draft chapter for a book that compares, in historical perspective, the conditions for democracy, economic development and well-being in India and Scandinavia. Within India, we compare the states of Kerala and West Bengal. Though Kerala has been described as the ‘Scandinavia of India’ for its public actions in favour of citizen rights, land reform, welfare policies and most recently decentralisation, the Left there has not been successful in also fostering interest representation beyond the dominance of parties or building a growth coalition so as to combine economic growth and social justice. The Left has failed to reconcile – through practice, policy or social institutions – the interests of dynamic business, precarious middle classes and underprivileged labour. Kerala’s development has been dominated since the 1990s by the dynamics of globalization, economic liberalism and labour migration, and the full potential of high education levels has remained untapped. Achievements with regard to social justice are more the outcome of broad mobilisations in society than of leftist policies. In West Bengal, after initial improvements in rights and well-being brought by agrarian reform, the Left’s continued reliance on patronage networks and more recently, policies that favoured big companies and external investment, led to stagnation and electoral defeat.

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Comparative Notes on Indian Experiences of Social Democracy: Kerala and West Bengal

In this chapter we compare, both with each other and in some measure with Scandinavia, what we consider to have been the most outstanding experiments in social democracy that India yet has seen – the development experiences of the states of Kerala and West Bengal.¹ We are well aware that this description of the politics and policies of these states under governments led by communist parties may give offence to a good many Indian scholars and activists, including good friends, and so it calls for explanation. What we mean by social democracy is a politics based on political equality and that strives to realise social justice, by democratic means, and in such a way that the realisation of social justice and democratic deepening serve each other. This, we hold, is the promise of the Constitution of India, albeit that the commitments that it makes to social and economic rights were relegated to the non-justiciable Directive Principles. These are statements of good intention intended to guide future government policy, but no more than that. The Nehruvian state, though with inadequate determination, certainly intended to make a reality of them, and so to take a social democratic path. And this is what the Communist Party of India sought to achieve, in practice, after the final defeat of its attempts to pursue a revolutionary line in 1951. In Kerala, especially, and in West Bengal, the communist parties have had considerable success in realising greater social justice by democratic means, at least before their recent retreats under the onslaught of neo-liberalism.

The record of Kerala, sometimes described as India's 'Scandinavia' (as by Subramanian 2012), is well known, and amply documented. While *dalits*, tribals and fishing communities have often remained marginalised, and the neo-liberal growth pattern during recent decades has among other things undermined the Kerala model (George 2011) – even to the extent that inequality in consumption in the state now has no parallel among Indian states (Oommen 2014:190) – the

¹ This is a draft chapter for a book that compares, in historical perspective, the conditions for democracy, economic development and well-being in India and Scandinavia. The volume is edited by Olle Törnquist and John Harriss with Neera Chandhoke and Fredrik Engelstad, and has the provisional title *Reinventing Social Democratic Development: Insights from Indian and Scandinavian Experiences*. John Harriss thanks Christopher Gibson and other colleagues in the School for International Studies for helpful comments on a first draft of the chapter.

analysis of the poverty elasticity of growth, in the major Indian states over the period 1958–1997 by Besley, Burgess and Esteve-Volart (2007) showed that the highest elasticity was achieved in Kerala. The state stands first in regard to most human development indicators; access to education has been such in Kerala that it has always had the highest level of literacy amongst the major states; and the quality of health care helps to account for the fact that the state has the highest life expectancy in the country (74.2 years compared with the all-India figure of 66.1 [according to *Economic Survey* 2014 Table 9.1]). The achievements of the state in regard to education and health are due in part to high levels of citizen awareness and participation, through organisation in civil society, as Moni Nag noted many years ago (1989). Even though neo-liberal informalisation has made strong inroads since the late 1980s – with new and unregulated service sectors employing large numbers of low paid workers including migrant labourers from other parts of India, and vulnerable workers in the older informal sectors of the economy – some of the legal underpinnings for labour organisation and capital-labour relations remain in place. There may still be more regulation of unorganised or informal sector activity in Kerala than there is anywhere else in the country.

The story of West Bengal in regard to the realisation of social democratic objectives is more problematic. As Kohli has written, the case ‘evokes controversy’, in part because its balance sheet of achievements and shortcomings under the long-running rule of a Left Front, is decidedly mixed. In terms of per capita income, poverty and human development West Bengal is an average state (as shown, for example, in the charts accompanying Subramanian’s analysis [2012-1, 2012-2]). The performance of the state in regard to the provision of health care and primary education is quite dismal. ‘After three decades of left-leaning-rule’, Kohli says, ‘the high levels of poverty and low levels of human development in the state are a real blot on the left’s record’ (2012: 193). Yet poverty has declined rapidly from initially very high levels, according both to Besley-Burgess-Esteve-Volart who found the state’s poverty elasticity of growth to be second only to that of Kerala, and to Dev and Ravi (cited by Kohli) who found that West Bengal had the best record of all in regard to the rate of poverty reduction. Kohli argues that ‘this decline in poverty is a result of deliberate redistribution and robust economic growth in the context of good governance, tell-tale signs of social democratic politics at the helm’ (2012: 195). Kohli’s

argument can certainly be criticised for special pleading – with regard both to the claim of ‘robust economic growth’ and that of ‘good governance’ in the state – but the idea of a social democratic orientation is surely justified as far as outcome is concerned.

We go on to offer a comparative analysis of the political drivers and other characteristics of the socially transformative projects of the two states, and of their limitations, as they have evolved historically, focusing on the four dimensions highlighted in the introductory chapter, and with some reference to Scandinavian experiences: (i) collective action with the formation of political collectivities with different members, content (interests, ideas and identities) and forms (mobilisation and organisation); (ii) the linkages between state and society, including state efficiency and capacity and its relations to society in terms of rule of law, accountability, and democratic representation and participation; (iii) social citizenship rights and policies, including rights in working life and in the context of labour regimes; and (iv) structural conditions for growth coalitions between sections of labour and capital, and between labour and agricultural producers, often facilitated by the state.

Kerala²

If, as we discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, relative social and cultural homogeneity and the absence of feudalism, successful late industrialisation and a relatively unified working class allowed for broad alliances and energised a growth coalition and state implementation of social democratic policies that constituted the basis for the Scandinavian welfare state, how did Kerala, India’s historically most socially diverse state, only weakly industrialised, come anywhere near it? There are four partially overlapping phases: (i) the formative years of the Kerala model until the first government in 1957; (ii) the problems of development during the politically divisive years until

² Olle Törnquist is the lead author of the section on Kerala. He would like to acknowledge the special importance of comments and suggestions made during several sessions in March 2013 and November 2014 by Professor P.K. Michael Tharakan, Professor K.K. George and their colleagues at the Centre for Socio-Economic and Environmental Studies, Kochi. When nothing else is specified, the following analyses are based on their studies, as well as Törnquist’s (see their works in the list of references, and references therein). Similarly, J.Chathukulam, J. J. Devika, B. Ekbal, K.N. Harilal, T.M.T.Isaac, M. S. John, M.A. Oommen, J. Prabash and a number of their colleagues and related practitioners have all contributed important insights, as well as Professor Robin Jeffrey. All remaining mistakes are those of the lead author.

about 1987; (iii) the attempts to renew the 'Kerala model' until 2001; and thereafter (iv) the stagnation of the Left and the rise of neo-liberal growth.

The formative years

Most scholarship on the comparative history of social democratic development draws attention to the importance of relative cultural homogeneity and socio-economic equality. This was the case in Scandinavia, where Christianity, the absence of strong feudalism, relatively egalitarian peasant communities and pre-democratic local governance through parish councils constituted foundations for the rise of social democracy. The emergence of social democratic politics and development in Kerala is thus a major puzzle – in view of its religious diversity and historically extreme caste and feudal systems. It has been suggested that the absence of religious homogeneity in Kerala was compensated for at an early stage by what M.G.S. Narayanan (1972) has labelled a 'cultural symbiosis', so that different religious communities could live side by side without major conflicts and cooperate in vital aspects of public life. This, Rajan Gurukkal (1987) has argued, was rooted in economic interdependence at the time. Most of the important communities were dependent on stable production and distribution of each other's products. These included the Muslim and Christian international trading communities along the Malayalam speaking coast of what was later to become Kerala; the Hindu sects in the rice cultivating mid-land; and the tribal people of the highlands who were involved in intra-regional trade of spices and forest products.

Caste, however, remained divisive. There is a certain irony in the fact that the territories that came to make up the modern state of Kerala, where India's most social democratically oriented policies evolved, had the most rigid and elaborate system of caste differentiation in the whole of India. Different authorities accent different elements in the subsequent history of Kerala's experience of social democracy but there is a fair agreement upon the underlying factors, notably on the contribution of social reform movements in the princely states of Travancore and Cochin from the mid-19th century. Later, in the 1930s when Kerala was affected by the world economic crisis, class grievances were added to the civil and social rights agenda under the influence of

socialists and communist leaders – who were important, too, in the anti-feudal struggle in British-governed Malabar in the north.

While landlordism dominated in Malabar, the reform movements evolved in the context of the commercialisation of agriculture involving both plantations and small holdings, which developed in Travancore in the 19th century, and later in Cochin. The princes of these centralising states fostered agricultural development by countering the powers of upper caste *nayar* aristocrats and large landowners through giving rights instead to the tenants. The social pacts between the princes and these tenants recall the way in which the Swedish kings and the state linked up at times with peasant proprietors, and leaseholders on state land, against the landlords. The pacts fostered inclusive economic growth in commercial agriculture which in turn called for educated people in the expanding services, trade and the colonial and princely bureaucracies, as well as for basic literacy among the increasing numbers of smallholders who engaged in the cultivation of tapioca, coconuts and rubber along with coffee and spices (Tharakan 2006).

Underlying social reform in Kerala there was also the early influence of Christian mission activity which encouraged a sense of their self-worth amongst historically subordinated, oppressed and marginalised people – bringing about the ‘ideological and material undermining of the centuries-old, rigid, and oppressive caste hierarchy’ (Singh 2011: 290. See also Woodberry 2012). This in turn may have contributed to governments’ engagement in education, given that they may have feared lower castes’ turn to the missionaries (Jeffrey 1976:81). The role of the missionaries in regard to literacy in Kerala should not be over emphasised, however. Michael Tharakan (1984, 1998) points to the significance of the often competitive demands by various reform movements for basic education even very early in the 19th century, in conjunction with the need for literacy for government jobs and in the context of the commercialisation of the economy.

These developments generated lower caste mobilisations which were broadly similar to the emergence at about the same time of the liberal educational, religious and temperance movements in Scandinavia. In addition to being encouraged by the local rulers, because reform served their interests in countering the powers of the *nayar* (upper caste) landowners, there were also social reformers from amongst the higher castes and non-Hindu communities like the Syrian

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Christians who worked to bring about change in their own communities. Here are the roots of Kerala's civil society. Finally, Prerna Singh (2011) adds the importance of sub-nationalism when under-represented groups came together against non-Malayali *brahmins*. But how did it come about that this combination of bourgeois oriented development and struggle for civil rights took a social democratic turn?

A few comments by historians stand out as particularly important in understanding how basic social democratic ideas evolved. Generally, according to Robin Jeffrey, the combination of the undermining of the extreme disabilities imposed on the low castes and the collapse of the matrilineal kinship system brought about social disintegration and, he says, 'Marxism ... came to fill an ideological void keenly felt by thousands of literate people' (1978: 78). Several leaders of reforming caste organisations such as the Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam of the low ranked *ezhavas*, turned to politics, including some of those who eventually became important communists, most prominently Mrs. Gauri and V.S. Achutanandan. This was also the case of upper caste social movement activists such as E.M.S. Namboodiripad – later one of India's finest communist leaders – who as a student had been a member of the reform organisation of the *namboodiri brahmins*. According to 'EMS' himself, 'the caste organisations in Kerala pioneered the mobilisations of the peasantry against the prevailing social order which was extremely oppressive to poor people' (Nag 1989: 420). Finally and equally important, the huge numbers of subordinated *pulayas*, the agricultural workers, were also mobilised as were the tillers who fought feudal landlords in British governed Malabar in northern Kerala. This calls for a somewhat more detailed analysis.

Five interrelated processes stand out in the ways in which caste and religious community based social reform movements came to provide a strong rural social base for the left in Travancore and Cochin, and linked up with the anti-feudal struggles in Malabar. First was the increasing emphasis by several subordinated caste groups and activists on universal more than on group specific civil rights. Michael Tharakan draws attention to a significant shift by the turn of the century from often competitive demands on part of the elites in the subordinated communities themselves for education and government jobs to more mass based organisations demanding wider varieties of rights and services for broader sections of the population. For example, Arnold

et al. (1976:356) point to how radical leaders of the low ranked *ezhava* caste linked up in the early 1930s with Muslims and Christians in demands for equal rights and opportunities. Even if literacy and basic education became unusually widespread in Kerala by Indian standards, however, and even if it became acceptable that women went to school, education was mainly to the benefit of the middle level castes and religious communities (Tharakan 1998, 2006, 2011). This meant that the efforts in 1957 of the first communist government in the state of Kerala to establish more inclusionary rights, to which we shall return, were very contentious.

Second, as in Scandinavia, major transformations of popular political priorities and organisation occurred as the world economic depression hit Kerala in the 1930s. The struggle for civil and social inclusion and equality, which had so far been framed by special caste and religious demands through the reform movements in the context of commercial agriculture, was now combined with the increasingly important class differences and demands made by new popular interest based movements. The absence of class distinctions within the lowest caste groups in particular meant that some caste movements for social reform could be fairly easily politicised on class lines, as EMS realised and as Manali Desai (2001) has shown in the recent literature. This was especially important with regard to the subordinated *pulaya* caste of agricultural workers. The *pulayas* had tried to set up their own reform movements but were relatively unsuccessful given their limited resources and weak leadership. Having been slaves until the early 19th century, most *pulayas* were still bonded labourers. When their community organisations proved ineffective and became sectarian, the broad masses turned instead to class oriented movements led by socialists and communists (Tharakan 2011). Meanwhile workers in the coir and cashew factories also joined the labour movement.

Third, moreover, the growing importance of class interests within the low ranked *ezhava* caste in particular could also not be handled within its own reform movement. The majority of the *ezhavas* were poor, had their primary base within coconut production and toddy tapping and little land of their own. They aligned themselves with socialist and communist led movements. The same applied to some of the better off *ezhavas* who wanted stronger action against the persisting discrimination that they experienced. By contrast, poor sections of the Syrian Christians had

stronger landed roots. Several of them migrated to Malabar and typically they became opponents of land reform along with their better off community fellows. (Tharakan 2011).

Fourth, while peasants in Malabar fought unreformed feudalism, agricultural labourers as well as many tenants, toddy tappers and coir- and cashew industry workers in Travancore and Cochin struggled for redistributive justice against evictions and for decent wages and employment conditions. They all agreed, however, on the need for land reforms and thus came together around such demands within the framework of new popular interest and educational movements, facilitated by the Congress Socialist Party (CSP), founded in 1934 (a legal organisation and part of the mass movement orchestrated by the Congress). The most important communist leaders in Kerala were initially members of the CSP.

Fifth, even if none of the top level socialist and communist leaders came from the subordinated *pulayas* and only a few from among the low ranked *ezhavas* but rather had a background in privileged Christian or Hindu reform movements – including among the upper caste *nayars* and *namboodiris* – they ‘embedded’ themselves in wider popular struggles. This combination of civil and social rights and the anchoring of socialist and communist leaders in broad popular movements are in contrast with the West Bengal experience.

By the late 1930s, the radical movements and socialist leaders built left wing parties, including the Kerala section of the Indian Communist Party with leaders such as *A.K. Gopalan*, *P. Krishna Pillai* and *E.M.S Namboodiripad* in the forefront. These movements and parties expressed the issues of civil and social inclusion more in terms of equal rights for all than for particular communities, and integrated them with demands for social and economic justice and for democracy, national independence and a unified Malayalam speaking state of Kerala. In Kerala, ‘[T]he struggle against British imperialism became a struggle against the social and economic power of [the] landed upper caste agrarian elites. From the outset of mass politics, democratic rights in Kerala were about social rights’ – whereas elsewhere in the country it was generally the case that ‘the dominant nationalist Congress party politics ... sought to accommodate rural elites and downplayed class and redistributive issues’ (Heller 2005: 85; see also Desai 2001 for more detailed exposition of this argument).

The Kerala communists shared in the vicissitudes of the Communist Party of India through the war years and in the period between 1946 and 1951. This is when the Party pursued a trade union based revolutionary line, with roots in Bombay and Bengal, and was ruthlessly crushed by the Congress-led government. Meanwhile a number of socialist intellectuals and trade union leaders played a part in the struggles as well as in the new post-independence government of Travancore-Cochin. They formed parties which still hold influence in some pockets of Kerala. But the communists were much better organised, even to the extent of holding on to Stalinist ‘democratic centralism’, and retained a broad, radicalised social base, amongst peasants and workers, combined with the struggle for a unified Kerala. It was this, together with the establishment of a disciplined party and the new communist priorities from the early 1950s of working within India’s democracy that made it possible for the Kerala party to win office in the state in the first elections of 1957.

In short, several factors related to our four analytical dimensions stand out as structural and political preconditions for the remarkable emergence of social democratic development in Kerala. First, with regard to political collectivities, at an early stage in history, some scholars suggest, mutual economic dependence between different religious communities compensated for the lack of the cultural homogeneity that has often been seen as a basic prerequisite for politics of social democracy. Second, with regard to state–society relations and social pacts as well as social rights and related political action, the growth and needs of the export oriented agrarian economy in the South, supported in part by a growth pact between the princely states of Travancore and Cochin and the tenants against the landlords, facilitated sub-nationalism and the establishment of broad coalitions among subordinated castes and religious groups against India’s most rigid caste system, for equal civil, political and social rights. Third, again in relation to political collectivities, these priorities were combined by major sections of the *ezhavas* and the *pulayas* in particular – in the context of the local effects of the world economic crisis and anti-colonial struggle – with increasingly radical class based demands and movements, in Malabar in northern Kerala too. The focus was on land reform and on employment and workplace rights. Fourth, this integration was facilitated by some socialist and communist leaders from lower castes, though especially by those from upper castes who had strong roots in the civil and

political rights movements. Thus there was a broad based coalition, generated from below rather than by way of clientelist or elitist party leaders, in favour of equal rights as well as class issues, with a focus on land reform, as well as for an independent India and unified Malayalam speaking Kerala.

Problems of development and party priorities

By contrast with the successful struggles for civil and social rights and land reform during the formative period, the leftists, with communists in the forefront, who won the first Kerala elections in 1957, were confronted with a number of new challenges.

The broad and increasingly class oriented alliances of social movements along with parties rooted in them, which had paved the way for the broad based struggle for social democratic development and the electoral victory, recall several aspects of the fledgling labour movement in Scandinavia during the first part of the century and its alliances in the early 1930s with agrarian movements and parties. It was very difficult in Kerala, however, to introduce anything at all comparable with the Scandinavian growth pact between capital and labour.

Industrialisation in Kerala was lagging behind. There was relatively strong labour organisation. Yet workers in unevenly developed production and trade were an insufficient base for a broad movement. Moreover, the state had to comply with the national government's development strategy of import substitution and heavy industries. This made it difficult for Kerala to advance on the initial basis of its own comparative advantages of high levels of education and export of agricultural products (as happened, for example, in Mauritius and Costa Rica; see Sandbrook et al. 2007). The Kerala government tried instead to facilitate a growth pact among labour, peasants, farmers and industrialists, based on land reform and investments in inclusive state regulated education along with other social rights and policies. These, thus far, had generated a number of improvements for the poor and for women in general, which do stand out as unique in comparison with most other states in India, but had primarily been to the benefit of the somewhat better-off farmers and middle and upper classes and their organisations. Land reform and more inclusive education were thus expected to increase production and incomes, strengthen democracy and serve as a basis for industrialisation.

One does not know if this pact would have been possible. The reason is that not only was land reform a divisive issue, resisted by all possible legal and political means by most of the larger landholders, perhaps especially within the Syrian Christian community. In addition, the emphasis on more inclusive state led education was contentious. Many powerful groups and their educational institutions and privileges were affected. Their private state-supported educational institutions were not to be confiscated, but would be subject to more unified rules and regulations, while there would be possibilities for underprivileged sections of the population to benefit as well. Moreover, the Communists, it was argued, also tried to dominate sections of the supposedly independent executive sections of the bureaucracy. Opposition came together in an anti-communist ‘liberation struggle’, supported by the United States. Finally the central government under Nehru, actively influenced by Indira Gandhi in her role as all-India chairperson of the Congress Party, imposed presidential rule in Kerala in 1959 (Jeffrey 1991).

It took until 1967 before radical movements and parties were again able to secure leftist governments in power, in 1967–1969, 1970–1977, 1978, and 1980–1981.³ The government between 1970 and 1977 under Communist Party of India (CPI) leader Achutha Menon was stable thanks to its alliance with the dominant Congress Party⁴. But this stability was at the expense of divisive conflicts between Menon’s CPI and the larger Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) that had been formed as a result of the split in the communist movement in 1964. CPI-M was outside government and objected fiercely to the authoritarian and occasionally repressive all-India state of Emergency 1975–1977 (imposed by Congress and supported by the CPI). Moreover, the CPI-M had retained most of the associated organisations at the grass root level. These grass roots interest organisations among small farmers, tenants, agricultural labourers, labourers in the informal sectors and industry, as well as workers and white collar workers in the public sectors, in addition to women’s and youth organisations and cooperative associations and cultural and educational groups, constituted a particularly important force in sustaining the demands for civil and social rights and land reform, even though there were also ‘mass organisations’ related to other political parties, as well as communal groups, including Muslim

³ For the most comprehensive review of Kerala communism until the 1980s, see Nossiter (1982)

⁴ Actually, some analysts question whether it is correct to categorise the 1970-1978 governments ‘leftist’.

organisations. Increasingly many independent civil society associations come closer to influential politicians and parties during this period.

There is no doubt about the relative success of the left in Kerala from 1957 until 1959, and during these subsequent periods up to 1981, in pursuing social democratic oriented reforms, and in ensuring that major advances were not entirely undone when it was out of office. These results depended substantially on the strong legacy of basic social and economic reforms in Kerala and the intense electoral competition between leftist and more conservative parties in Kerala which made both leftists and rightists quite sensitive to popular scrutiny and priorities. The expansion of Mother and Child Health Centres, for instance, continued, because all parties knew that people wanted them; and so many other welfare reforms were introduced and kept alive over the years, including unemployment relief, pensions for agricultural and other workers as well as widows, subsidised housing, public distribution with subsidised prices of essential food, meals in schools and pre-schools, minimum wages and more. This history is in contrast with the decades of leftist dominance in West Bengal from the 1970s until recently. The development of a synergistic relationship between social movements and the political party is what has marked Kerala out (Heller 2005). The extent of political awareness (encouraged by widespread newspaper reading) and of participation in associational activism was one of the critical factors, in Moni Nag's view, in explaining the better access to, and use of health facilities in rural Kerala by comparison with West Bengal (Nag 1983, 1989). Heller, much more recently, has noted that the difference between Kerala and the 'proto-predatory states of North India' lies 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' (2005: 88).

In spite of these advances, however, and from the point of view of the four dimensions that we believe are crucial in the politics of social democratic development, the leftist political and interest organisations actually disintegrated from the early 1960s and especially during the scattered periods in power between 1967 and 1981. Their priorities became increasingly divisive and a contradiction evolved between distributive welfare policies and land reforms, on the one hand, and accumulation and investment of capital generating economic growth on the

other (recently summarised in comparative perspective in Sandbrook 2014). In our analysis, this was not an inevitable conflict. Rather it was rooted in the politically divisive and clientelist character of the distributive policies that did not foster inclusive economic growth, in contrast to what had proven possible in Scandinavia. Most fundamentally, the divisiveness and clientelism evolved because the united front strategies were no longer driven by clear cut socio-economic interests and popular demands from below for specific policies, or by the idea of facilitating agreements between employers and trade unions such as might have fostered growth and equity. In terms of welfare policies and rights as well as political organisation, the special interests of the various groups, their leaders and followers, were often given priority rather than unifying state policies and rights for all, irrespective of organisational affiliation. Instead, the leftist coalition governments rested on compromises within the elite between the special interests of the various parties and their leaders. This process generated problems of corruption too. Equally devastating, the benefits and welfare measures were not conditional on whether or not they were supportive of economic development.

There were similar problems with regard to state–civil society relations beyond the parliamentary electoral system. In Kerala – as happened as well in Scandinavia – the participation of different interest groups in policy making and implementation had evolved on the basis of decades of social and political struggle. In Scandinavia this was partly rooted in pre-industrial corporatist representation, which was then democratised by liberal associations and the labour movement – in other words, by the crucial people and organisations themselves. These interest and issue organisations gained representation along with concerned experts in various commissions and agencies on all levels as well as through public hearings. In Kerala, however, state–society relations beyond elections were increasingly dominated by parties and individual politicians and bureaucrats, even if there was less dominance by a single hegemonic political party as in West Bengal. In fact, the competition between parties and within civil society and among unions and social movements goes a long way to explaining why the Kerala communists have had to consider various interests and have thus retained a substantial following (cf. Heller 2013).

It is true that land reforms were finally realised in Kerala in the 1970s.⁵ These achievements, like the advances within health and education and the general human development indicators pointed to in the introduction to this chapter, are outstanding by Indian standards and did away with landlordism. Neither the land reforms, however, nor educational advances beyond basic literacy included the weakest sections of the population. While tenants benefitted (and often developed special interests of their own), there were many exemptions and the tillers were only granted rights to their huts and small plots on what was usually infertile land. Moreover, the tribal people and the fishing communities were outside the reforms. Further, the reforms were implemented during a period of conflict between CPI and CPI-M and without elected representation at the local level; the latter is in sharp contrast with the tenancy reforms in West Bengal some ten years later.

In addition, the reforms were not adequately followed up with measures to foster production. Sometimes the new owners developed interests in less employment-intensive crops, and even engaged in land speculation. The better educated privileged groups could develop new and profitable ventures and secure good jobs outside agriculture, and the former tenants from lower ranked communities gained education and land thanks to the reforms and welfare measures, but neither group developed agricultural and other production activities of the kind that would generate new and better jobs for the underprivileged sections of the population. These remained marginalised, even if they now had the ability to read and write and enjoyed some access to health services.

Meanwhile many investors avoided Kerala, claiming it was difficult to cooperate with its strong trade unions. And increasingly, from the mid-1970s many better educated and trained Keralites and their families sustained or improved their standard of living by way of migrant labour work in the Gulf countries in particular.

⁵For the land reforms, their character and effects, see at first hand Raj and Tharakan 1983, Herring 1989, Franke 1992, Törnquist 1991, 1996.

Attempts at renewing the ‘Kerala model’

Efforts were made to break out of these dynamics during the 1987–1991 Left Front Government under E.K. Nayanar, in which there was no participation of caste and community based parties. Several innovative policies such as decentralisation were initiated and a number of new campaigns for full literacy and more democratic and socially inclusive education, local development plans, and cooperation towards improved rice production were supported. Most of these pioneering campaigns were introduced under the inspiration of left oriented civil society groups, especially by the People’s Science Movement (KSSP) with its tens of thousands of members, not least in local educational institutions, including those in rural and semi-rural areas. There was a major stumbling block, however, in scaling up the civil society initiatives to more universal local movements and policies as the government was unable to realise the decentralisation of politics and administration (Törnquist 1995).

But when the Left Front lost the elections in 1991 (partly because of sympathies for the Congress after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi) civil society based campaigners began prioritising democratic decentralisation and planning from below. They also won support from concerned scholars and from several mass based interest organisations as well as from the generally respected communist leader E.M.S Namboodiripad. During the next Left Front government, between 1996 and 2001, therefore, the new alternatives moved ahead through the State Planning Board and the now well known ‘People’s Planning Campaign’ (PPC).⁶ This was in spite of stiff resistance, not only from the Congress-led political front but also from within the Left Front itself and from several of the related unions and other organisations which held on to rigid conceptions of class politics and ‘democratic centralism’.

Essentially the PPC was based on the distribution of more than one-third of the planning (investment) budget to the local governments – on the condition that they developed proposals through participatory planning to be facilitated by a comprehensive set of rules and advice, and by well trained resource persons.

⁶ For references regarding the PPC, see the writings by Tharakan, Törnquist, Isaac and Franke and Heller in the list of references and further references in these works. For recent important contributions, see also Rajesh (2013) and Harilal (2014).

In terms of our four dimensions of social democratic development, the PPC was innovative. The missing growth coalitions between state level organised capital, labour and farmers, combined with social provisioning as in Scandinavia, intended to overcome the idea of a zero-sum game between growth and redistribution, were now to be fostered instead on the basis of local negotiations between government, labour and employers within the framework of participatory development institutions. Conventional unions and employers' organisations were expected to take part, but special space was also provided for wider participation from informal workers and the self-employed. Social and economic compromises would be facilitated by way of democratically prioritised investments (via the planning budget) in publicly approved projects, as well as distributive welfare measures and special schemes to foster equal rights for all, including for *dalits* and women. Social rights and welfare policies would thus be of immediate value for a majority of the population as well as serving as a basis for economic development.⁷

With regard to political collectivities and state–society relations, the divisive party- and related interest group politicisation, which had evolved from the mid-1960s in particular, would *not* be countered by neo-liberal market and civil society measures, as suggested by the World Bank, but by democratic fora for participation, along a long chain of popular sovereignty from neighbourhoods to representative groups and committees at higher levels.⁸ These channels of supplementary democratic participation were expected to undermine divisive lobbying by different interest groups. The same channels of participation were also to keep politicians, bureaucrats and related contractors accountable, thus curbing corruption.

⁷As Patrick Heller put it 'There is no gainsaying that the empowerment of the working class in Kerala – and specifically its capacity to capture a share of the social surplus – precipitated a crisis of accumulation'. But Heller also argued, on the basis of his research in the state in the early 1990s, that 'the class conflicts underlying the crisis have proven to be neither immutable nor irreconcilable' (quotes 1999: 9). He thought that a class compromise – to allow for the formation of a kind of a corporatist settlement – was at least feasible in Kerala around the turn of the 21st century, for he considered that labour had already made significant strategic concessions. But by the time of the publication of his book in 1999 the CPM, or at least reformists within the party, had already embarked on the People's Planning Campaign (2005: 90-91). This was intended to address the developmental challenges of the state but by the very different route of radical decentralisation, the devolution of bureaucratic and political power, and the re-embedding of the state in civil society through the promotion of participatory democracy (Heller 2005: 81).

⁸There was thus a kind of three-way dynamic between central (here at the state level) and local government, and civil society, similar to that identified by Judith Tendler in her analysis of successful governance of development in Ceara in Northeast Brazil (Tendler 1997). There has also been a dynamic inter-relation, from an early stage, between struggles for rights (initially on the part of oppressed low castes who were also landless workers subject to ruthless exploitation) and the formation of the broad social base of the left – a broad democratic community.

In contrast to Scandinavian social corporatism, the basis for which was insufficient in Kerala (given weak industrialisation with fragmented unions and employers' organisation in addition to 'soft' public administration), the organisational basis was democratic decentralisation with a number of new supplementary participatory institutions. This has recently been stressed on a general level by Patrick Heller (2013). In the Scandinavian setting, as shown by Hilde Sandvik in this volume, Heller's argument brings to mind two of the bases for the welfare state, the absence of strong guilds and the importance of the pre-democratic parish community meetings among all property owners and leaseholders of public land. These attended to, for instance, poor relief and local development. This local community was certainly unable later on to handle the new interests and challenges associated with the rise and development of capitalist industrialisation during the 19th century, and the huge numbers of people deprived of means of production. It laid the basis, however, for the pattern of joint organising and sharing of economic resources (including local taxation) and of social responsibility that have been crucial in the Scandinavian model.

Initially the PPC was quite successful but faced after some time a number of stumbling blocks that prevented substantial political and economic transformation. The Left Front lost local elections in 2000 and state elections in 2001. There were five major problems. One was insufficient linkage between measures in favour of social security and production on the basis of Kerala's comparative advantages, including commercial agriculture and sectors drawing on the state's relatively high quality education services. Second, there were unresolved problems in regard to the relations of liberal-representative democracy and direct democracy in the policy process, which ideally would have been tackled through discussion with progressive administrators, politicians and scholars. As recently reemphasised by K.N. Harilal (2014), blurred lines of responsibility and representation undermined deliberation between vital partners in social democratic development, generating distrust amongst them, and abuse of funds. A related third problem was the want of a viable strategy for involving the 'conventional' interest and issue based organisations among farmers, labourers and industrial workers, related to the mainstream Left, in new plans and priorities. Fourth, it was particularly difficult to engage middle classes given that welfare and production measures were targeted rather than universal.

As is well known from other efforts at social democratic development (see Chapters 1 and 2), the involvement of sections of the middle class is crucial for gaining majorities, and providing broader interests in the welfare state. Even many young people with middle class aspirations lost interest in the campaign. Finally, sections within the major left party (the CPI-M) and the Left Front made attempts, on the one hand, to take over and benefit from the PPC, or on the other to forge campaigns against it. They did this by not supporting leading local campaigners as candidates in elections and by slandering and isolating major PPC leaders. Thus PPC was further weakened and radically altered as the Left Front lost elections.

It is true that decentralisation has survived, that there is now more space for local democratic action and that a few pioneering schemes remain – such as productive ventures at the neighbourhood level among poor women. But democratisation has not been sufficiently substantive to compensate for divisive party politics and the neglect of local representation in the implementation of the land reforms. In the end decentralisation has not fostered social democratic development.

Stagnation of the Left and the rise of neo-liberalism⁹

The efforts of civil society activists together with leftist political reformists from 1987 until 2001 to bring about change were impressive, but they did not succeed in generating a new democratic formula for the combination of equity and growth. Still, they have provided positive and negative lessons. Already, from the 1990s, the increasing rates of economic growth in Kerala were more related to the liberalisation of the Indian economy. Increasingly, Kerala's 'wealth' was saved by the extensive remittances from the now more than 2.5 million migrant labourers, primarily in the Gulf countries. The common present estimate is that they send back about USD13 billion per year, equivalent to more than a third of Kerala's GDP. The competitive power of Keralites in international markets rests on previous struggles for civil and social rights and public investments in education. It is certainly not the underprivileged and poorly educated people who are competitive in these job markets. Moreover, in spite of this inflow of capital, the current growth rate (of around 8%) is only on a par with the other well performing Indian states. Most

⁹ When nothing else is specified, see footnote 1 for references; additional important references include George 2011 and 2011a and Oommen 2014.

seriously, the remittances have not been well used to foster Kerala's own welfare system and its economic development. Rather have they mainly been used for consumption, house construction and investments in property and the service sector, often generating more imports and speculation. There are also severe problems of environmental destruction. Still, the previously serious unemployment problem has been somewhat reduced (the current figure is about 7%), and there is paradoxically large scale immigration from other parts of India of about the same number of low paid labourers for the construction and service sectors in Kerala as of emigration by comparatively well paid Keralites to other countries. While the State Planning Board has recently announced a long term perspective plan (produced by a New Delhi based think tank!) with the aim of taking the state in the direction of a Nordic model, there is little semblance of social democratic development in the actual transformation of Kerala during the recent decades.¹⁰

With regard to social rights and policies the most obvious trends are rather the growing inequalities, reduction of earlier efforts at a welfare state and the lack of new middle class interests in it. While sections of the old middle classes that were crucial partners in the historical achievements may still be interested in defending what remains of the welfare state, the most vulnerable people, between one-fourth and one third of the population, including the *adivasis*, *dalits* and workers in the old informal sectors, agriculture and industries, are badly affected and have little bargaining power to put up a fight. The various parts of the Left would certainly like to alter this situation but remain unclear about priorities and roadmaps.

In terms of political collectivities, sections of business are well organised and influential. The rapidly expanding new middle classes have few stakes in the state, finding it inefficient and corrupt, and they mainly opt for individual solutions in addition to family and community solidarities. The growing problems with unsecure employment relations and need to arrange social security have not (yet?) generated the renewed interests in public welfare systems that have come about in Latin America, Indonesia and East Asia. Meanwhile some from the

¹⁰http://www.ncaer.org/study_details.php?cID=1&pID=26;
http://www.kerala.gov.in/docs/publication/2013/kc/may_13/58.pdf
<http://www.indiaenvironmentportal.org.in/files/file/Kerala%20Perspective%20Plan%202030.pdf> (most recently accessed 25.11.2014).

vulnerable sections of the population are abandoning the Left and returning to communal solidarities; even the BJP is making inroads, including among *ezhavas*. The trade unions are mainly defensive and rarely present in the new dynamic private sectors of the economy, which typically have informal employment relations. It may now only be the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) which does some organising among informal labour. Almost no efforts are made by Kerala unions to work amongst the large numbers of poorly paid migrant labourers from other parts of India, though there are some reports of scattered efforts by unions from outside Kerala. This does not mean that there are no protests on the parts of hard hit people in Kerala. Many *adivasis* agitate for land, some fisher folk claim basic rights, and numerous people resist dispossession and environmental degradation of their land and neighbourhoods. But the actions tend to be scattered and even if some support is coming from various political parties and civil society, including via media, the outcome is rarely positive. There is certainly new activism in civil society, including campaigns by KSSP against the high prices paid for medicines by ordinary people. And there are also protests against corruption as well as moral policing by conservative Hindu and Muslim communities. But coordination beyond what is possible through commercial and new social media is poor.

Meanwhile the political parties sustain their strong influence over citizen organisation, even over self-help and residential groups as well as town hall meetings. Political organisation and leadership are certainly not a problem as such, as long as vested interests of the parties and leaders are kept at bay, including in the wake of local and state elections. Positive efforts are made by some of the leaders in the previous People's Planning Campaign, for example by engaging in demonstrations against the rampant corruption in the state, and by initiating popular attempts at organic cultivation and the cleaning up of the cities along with pioneering local governments. The much applauded initiatives have then also gained the support of the CPI-M.

Several of the critical factors involved in the recent transformations and efforts at change in Kerala relate to the linkages between state and society. Confidence in public governance is low and the current government is ridden by more or less confirmed allegations of corruption. The main linkages between state and society remain personal, via lobbying and through the equally mistrusted parties and leaders. While personal networks and clientelism are characteristic of the

non-left parties, the CPI-M in particular is far better organised; but it is also, as several analysts put it, centralised and has a culture of loyalty and obligations in return for favours. In short, while spontaneous protests, civil society organising and social movements remain frequent in Kerala, their room of manoeuvre is constrained, and there is perhaps no space for an alternative political movement such as the Aam Aadmi Party in New Delhi, even if it were to be more rooted in social and economic interests and had a programme for change.

Further, in spite of some rethinking of the problems of combining representative and participatory governance (Harilal 2014), not much has changed with regard to the persistent dominance of parties and politicians when people try to come together and take their problems to local government. In view of Scandinavian and other cases of social democratic development there is an obvious need for institutionalised channels of representation in government for significant interest and issue organisations and involved individuals. While local government institutions are now in place, they remain weak and little happens without the intervention of MLAs and state level ministers. Quite against the spirit of democratic local governance, even ‘pork barrel funds’ (enabling individual members of the state legislature to spend money for development in their electoral constituencies) are now in place.

The mainstream Left seems not to have an alternative view of how to foster equity and growth under the new neo-liberal conditions. A catastrophe similar to that which has occurred in West Bengal, with the massive defeat of the Left, is most unlikely however, given the Kerala communists’ historically more solid roots in popular movements and organisations, and the stiff competition between parties and political fronts which is supported by Kerala’s more vibrant media. The left parties remain relatively less corrupt than others; there is no viable alternative within the present electoral system; and the leftists uphold a general vision of the need to defend the interests of the weak in society. Finally, there seems to be a growing opinion within the Left of the need to combine efforts to defend the least well-off with industrial and other development and response to the aspirations of the middle classes.

Such a social democratic orientation implies, however, good organisation of the most crucial actors, and democratic channels (in addition to the much too dominant parties) in order both to revive the welfare state and to bring about more inclusive and environmentally sustainable

economic development. Kerala has now bypassed the stage of industrial development that was envisioned but never really was achieved in the 1950s and onwards, in favour of post-industrial activities. Hence the state has little of the broad labour movement and a production oriented class of employers that grew out of the industrialisation of the economies of the Global North, capable of negotiating social pacts that allowed for the combination of growth and welfare, facilitated by the government. As a result, scholars agree, Kerala faces three major challenges. One is that of how to negotiate the current phase of rapid primitive accumulation of capital which dispossesses the weakest sections of the population of their land, livelihood and housing without providing decent alternatives. The actors involved are not just multiple groups of vulnerable people and big business and the government, because many workers and middle classes, in particular, may also benefit from a new pattern of growth. The historical Scandinavian experiences were mainly about pacts between the labour movement, the farmers and the rural poor to defend the interests of the farmers and rural poor in the process of industrialisation. While this may still be relevant in the rural settings of Kerala, urban problems are equally challenging. Here the experiences from cases such as Indonesia may be more relevant. There the ability to negotiate urban development and liveable cities between business, middle classes, labour and the urban poor was basic to the election of the new populist president Jokowi. Campaigns such as those now launched to foster clean and sustainable cities, might have the potential for opening up similar dynamics.

The second challenge is how to foster coalitions against extractive growth driven by abusive and corrupt governance, aiming to benefit from cheap commodities and labour, in favour instead of institutions that foster more inclusive and job generating development. There are signs in parts of the Global South that unorganised workers, contract labour and the self-employed, as well as those middle classes suffering from precarious work and social conditions, can at times form alliances in favour of employment regulations and welfare state policies. Yet this certainly remains a challenge. In addition, the new middle classes in Kerala have few stakes in previous public welfare policies and public provisioning (because of targeted rather than universal policies, followed by privatisation) and can often find individual solutions.

The third and possibly most fundamental challenge, therefore, is the need, emphasised above, to develop supplementary channels of democratic representation of the actors capable of negotiating such agreements under unfavourable conditions. This is certainly not to undermine the current parties, parliaments and executive administration but it is necessary if vested party interests as well as clientelism are to be countered, and in order to foster trust in impartial public welfare and other services. Relevant examples include Scandinavian social corporatism with representation especially in commissions, reference groups and agencies that oversee policy implementation, as well as through extensive hearings (cf. Svensson in this volume), and also the extensive participation in various councils and consultative meetings in Brazil (though some say with insufficient rights in decision-making; Baiocchi et.al. 2013). In other contexts similar efforts have been spurred by the need to handle unavoidable tasks such as the reduction of public subsidies of fuel in favour of more investment in welfare policies and the promotion of inclusive production. In Kerala an analogous issue might be the need to increase relevant taxes so as to reduce speculation in land and other forms of property and to fund similar sorts of measures.

Conclusion

As social democratic development is about political equality and social justice, politics to that end presupposes that various interests can be combined with universal rights and broad alliances. Given these uphill tasks, it has often been argued that a precondition is that societies are culturally and socio-economically relatively homogeneous. Kerala, however, shows that it is possible to foster social democratic development despite historical diversities and inequalities. In view of our four analytical dimensions, what was so remarkable about Kerala's formative phase until the late 1950s were the broad alliances from below for universal civil, political and social rights in the additional context of class based politics of development. Socio-religious reform movements were formed from below and socialist and communist leaders came from them. Some groups and movements attended to their own problems, but many focused on the state too and found that it made sense not just to ask for special favours but rather to demand equal rights of citizenship. Initially this coincided with the joint interests of the princely states and farmers in fostering commercial agricultural production through tenancy reforms, education and health – an early social growth pact. And by the late 1920s and early 1930s, it coincided also with the

growing importance of even broader class based interests in anti-feudal reforms and improved labour relations, as well as the anti-colonial struggle and that for a unified Malayalam speaking state of Kerala. This constituted the basis for the communist-led first government of Kerala (1957–1959).

During the second historical phase from the late 1950s until the late 1980s, the unique combination of the four dimensions of social democratic development disintegrated. Kerala's agricultural and commercial based growth combined with civil and social rights reforms did not fit well with India's central level development coalition for heavy industrialisation and import substitution. Further, while there was comparatively broad unity in Kerala among the lower classes in favour of some kind of land reform, many of those who felt threatened put up strong resistance which was further intensified and broadened in opposition to efforts at democratising education. Finally the left government was overturned and replaced by presidential rule. Thus the broad alliances from below were weakened in favour of centralist party political divisions, extending down to the lowest grass roots and civil society organisations, between the Congress, the religious-community and the leftist parties. In efforts to win elections and get back into office, the Left itself formed top-down fronts, even including in them communal interest based parties. The separate parties in the government used, then, their positions to gain resources and mobilise members and voters. This generated further fragmentation among interest based mass organisations and civil society associations. However, various important social welfare policies were initiated, as all parties had to support movements and groups with their special requests to win elections. So Kerala's reputation for fostering human development spread around the world. But the legacy of increasing universality in spite of diversity was often replaced with political targeting. And the previous combination of rights and welfare reforms that fostered economic growth was weakened. Thus evolved a conflict between distributive politics and economic growth. Land reforms were not followed up; the interests of the tillers were set aside and less productive new interests evolved among the former tenants. Increasingly, after the mid-1970s, many Keralites opted for a better job and future outside the state, as migrant labourers, thanks to their relatively good education.

From the mid-1980s, impressive but constrained attempts were made by leftists inside as well as outside mainstream politics to break out of this vicious circle by reinventing the dynamics of the formative period through decentralisation to villages, blocks and districts. All the major dimensions of social democratic politics were considered. Broader forms of democratic participation were initiated to include old as well as new organisations and groups. Priority was given to civil and social citizenship rights for all. Such rights and policies would be combined with locally negotiated agreements on economic development priorities. Successful pilot cases were developed by civil society groups and then scaled up through the State Planning Board, with at least partial support from the Left government. The initial outcome was promising but problems soon arose. The new local participatory institutions were not independent and solid enough to reunite divisive groups and interests, to combine representative and direct forms of democracy, and to resist party political distortions. This in turn undermined the focus on equal and non-partisan citizen rights and welfare policies; and targeting which excluded broad sections of the middle classes made things worse. Finally the localised (and often rural and semi-rural) settings of the campaign made it difficult to negotiate new and dynamic growth coalitions.

Decentralisation and the space for local democratic politics survived the People's Planning Campaign but not the efforts to revive the dynamics of social democratic development. India's economic liberalisation combined with radically increasing migrant labour remittances set the pace instead for social and economic development. Economic growth has gone up and the unemployment problem is less severe than earlier, but class differences have increased and the welfare state has been severely weakened. The less well-off have few chances to defend it, trade unions have lost influence, the large numbers of cheap migrant labourers from other states are unorganised, and the new middle classes have few stakes in public welfare, preferring instead private services. Meanwhile political parties continue to dominate most interest and citizen organisations. Some efforts are being made to build alternatives but these remain emerging processes. State–society relations are undermined by distrust (for good reason) in public governance and the persistent dominance of personal networks and of parties and leaders with vested interests. Increasingly large sections of the mainstream left want to foster equity and growth in spite of neo-liberal conditions and are too dependent on voters to repeat the mistakes

made in West Bengal. But the Left is short of visions and a roadmap. There is a need to reduce the negative effects of the current primitive accumulation of capital as well as to foster coalitions in favour of more inclusive development. Both require better supplementary forms of representation of the most important interests involved, and ways of engaging the new middle classes in public governance and welfare. Little is gained in this process by the current State Planning Board's measuring of Kerala against ideals drawn from the Nordic states; rather is there a need to reread Kerala's own experiences of *politics* of social democratic development in comparative perspective.

West Bengal¹¹

The social context

All those factors that scholars have found to be important in explaining the relative success of social democracy in Kerala, and its endurance through periods when the Left has been out of office, have played very differently in West Bengal. Indeed the absence of some of these factors helps to explain the recent, stunning, collapse of the parliamentary Left in the state. Manali Desai presents a persuasive argument to the effect that though the two states shared comparable structural conditions – high levels of insecure tenancy, oppressive landlordism, high levels of landlessness, exceptionally high person: land ratios, and higher levels of proletarianisation than elsewhere in India – their communist parties were and remain very different, essentially because of the very different ways in which they have related to popular movements. Structural factors were, she says, 'refracted through leadership strategies and tactics, and the specific character of the nationalist movement in the two regions' (2001: 41). The critical points to which she draws attention are that (i) in Kerala the CPI grew out of the anti-colonial movement (as we explained briefly above), whereas in Bengal it grew very largely in separation from it; and (ii) that the CPI in Kerala developed out of mass based, grassroots organisation (see above), while the CPI in Bengal was more isolated from popular movements. Bengal, dominated by the great city of Calcutta, was much more urban and industrial than was Kerala, and the city was home to the

¹¹John Harriss is the principal author of this section of the chapter. We are grateful to Pranab Bardhan, Robin Jeffrey and Ronojoy Sen for very helpful comments. We take full responsibility, however, for remaining errors of fact or judgement.

bhadralok – the mainly upper caste, relatively well-off, educated minority that has generally dominated modern Bengali politics (Kohli 1990: 367).¹² The principal leaders of all of West Bengal’s political parties have always been drawn from amongst the upper castes, as have all of the chief ministers of the state, to date. Bengali communists, who came from amongst the *bhadralok* – they are described by Basu and Majumdar as an ‘indigent middle class intelligentsia’ (2013: 175) – did engage with trade unions from the first; and they were involved in peasants’ protests – notably in the Tebhaga movement of 1946-47 – and in local revolts. But it took until the later 1960s before they gave any priority to mass organising among farmers and the rural poor.

The particular social characteristics of Kerala – the exceptionally rigid and elaborate caste system, and the close correspondence of caste and class – which lay behind both the powerful development of caste and social reform movements and their politicisation into class conflict – were not replicated in Bengal. There the caste system was much more flexible, and the correspondence of caste and class was much weaker. Bengal did not experience the development of caste and social reform movements in anything like the way that happened in Kerala.¹³ There were caste movements – such, notably, as that of the *namasudras* (now regrouped under the banner of Matua Mahasangha – but they were few and far between. There was also nothing at all comparable with the needs within commercial agriculture in Kerala for bourgeois liberal changes, initiated by socio-religious reform movements among Christians and better ranked castes, or with the alliance between tenant farmers and the princes of Cochin and Travancore against the old landlords. There was nothing comparable, either, with the experience of ‘social disintegration’ that Jeffrey identified in Kerala. Nor, we may speculate, given the more limited presence of Christian missions, was there comparable encouragement for the reshaping of their subjectivities on the parts of members of the lower castes. Both the dominant *jotedars* and poor tenants and share croppers might all come from the same caste, whereas it was rarely the case that landlords and tenants and labourers were not well distinguished by caste in Kerala. Nag

¹²Basu and Majumdar describe the *bhadralok* as ‘educated colonial intermediate classes’, born from amongst the Bengali rentier class (2013: 170). Kohli describes them as a ‘gentleman elite’, that eschewed economic enterprise (2012: 196).

¹³Atul Kohli comments at length on the reasons for the fact that, unusually in India, ‘caste issues did not arise as the most significant issues for political mobilization in Bengal’ (1990: 398).

argues that ‘One reason for the lack of a strong rural base of left oriented political parties in West Bengal is that it never had caste organisations of the type Kerala had. The caste system in Bengal was never very rigid ... and its caste organisations did very little to enhance the social and economic condition of their fellow members (1989: 425). The consequence was that ‘[T]he political parties in West Bengal did not have the advantage, as in Kerala, of infiltrating the large, centralised caste groups, already struggling to achieve their social and economic rights’ (1989: 420). Given these structural opportunities, but also thanks to their focus on universal civil and social rights and innovative mass based strategies, the leftists in Kerala managed to develop broad alliances in spite of religious communalism and divisive casteism. And while colonial Bengal had the reputation of being the most educationally advanced part of the country, the educational system was elitist and urban oriented. It was there largely for the benefit of the *bhadralok*. There was nothing like the demand from below for basic education that existed from an early date in Kerala.

Then, whereas the Kerala party had its origins in the CSP, a legal organisation that was part of an extraordinary mass movement, the CPI in Bengal grew up outside the Congress movement.¹⁴ It faced both much greater repression at the hands of the British than did either the Bengali Congressites, or the leftists of Kerala in the CSP, and it also confronted greater resistance from within the Congress movement. In Bengal the anti-Gandhian position in the Congress was held by upper caste gentry and landowning classes, whereas by the 1930s the agrarian mobilisations that were taking place in their part of the country meant that the leftist leaders in Kerala faced much less resistance from dominant peasants and landlords within the Congress party (Desai 2001: 49). ‘The nationalist field in Bengal ... posed greater obstructions to the CPI winning political hegemony’ (Desai 2001: 50). And as both Desai and Nag point out, the caste barriers between upper and lower castes had already crumbled by the 1930s to a greater extent in Kerala than in Bengal. Activists and organisers from the CPI, who were almost all from the higher castes, when they started to work in the countryside in the later 1930s, had a much harder task on their hands in winning the trust of those whom they sought to mobilise. Nag writes of the ‘relative inability of the Bengal CPI compared to the Kerala CPI in mobilising peasant

¹⁴ Bose and Majumdar say that Bengal ‘witnessed the birth of an alternate political culture to the Congress- and Muslim League-led nationalisms by the 1930s’ (2013: 174).

movements, until the late 1960s' and suggests that it is explained 'partly by its elitist origin and by the nature of its growth' (1989: 422). The CPI in Bengal was essentially an urban movement, whereas in Kerala there was no very clear urban/rural distinction. The upshot of all this was that by the time of independence and into the 1950s, the Bengal CPI had 'limited political power compared with their Kerala counterparts' (Desai 2001: 53). The party had nothing like the broad, radicalised social base and alliances with wider left oriented social movements and civil society organisations (CSOs) that has been identified by historians of the CPI in Kerala. Subsequently, too, the CPM in West Bengal remained wary of social movements related to CSOs, as was clearly shown in some of the writings of Prakash Karat – now the general secretary of the Party – during the 1980s (on which see Törnquist 1991: 71-2)

As in Kerala there are distinct phases in the West Bengal attempts at social democratic development. The formative years of class struggle, urban and rural, concluded with the coming to power of the first Left Front government in 1977; the second period until around 1993 was characterised by successful party-driven agricultural development achieved through modest land reforms and decentralisation, together with improvements in agricultural technology; the third period until the collapse of the parliamentary Left in the 2011 elections was marked by problematic initiatives in industrial development and temporising with neo-liberalism in such a way as to destroy what Basu and Majumdar (2013) describe as the 'social imaginaire' of social citizenship – in which popular classes have access 'to sustainable livelihood and a cultural sense of belonging' (2013: 169) – that the Left had established as the political common sense of West Bengal.

The formative years

Class struggle among the Bengali workers was vital in the communist attempts during the late 1940s to initiate revolutionary struggles, and in the 1950s, after the CPI had changed its tactical line to one of critical support for India's democracy, the party continued to grow through trade union activity. By this time, too, a powerful cultural movement (involving writers, film-makers, playwrights, actors and producers, all inclined to the left) had helped 'the communists capture

the imagination of the ... middle classes of Bengal'¹⁵ – and sentiments of regional nationalism, fired by that movement, eventually contributed to the displacement of class struggle in communist politics in the state (Basu and Majumdar 2013: 170). In the late 1960s, after the split in the communist party, the CPI-Marxist [CPM] in particular began to focus on the rural scene. Until this time, as Arild Ruud has argued, 'the West Bengal CPM had politically been largely urban-based and oriented' (Ruud 1994: 360). How very different this was from the Kerala experience.

After many years of economic stagnation in the state, in the context of a serious and badly handled famine in 1966 and of divisions within the Congress party, a United Front (UF) government, not led by but decisively influenced by the communists, took over the Writers Building in Calcutta for a brief period in 1967. There was an upsurge in popular movements at this time, and the mass base of the CPM grew through the later 1960s with increasing class polarisation. A popular peasant leader, Harekrishna Konar, as the minister responsible in the UF government, drafted land reforms but was soon preoccupied by the Maoist-led revolt in Naxalbari. Kohli argues that it was the 'success of the Naxalites among the peasantry [that] forced the CPM to take peasant support seriously' (1990: 371). Labour unrest, peasants' struggles and divisions in the UF government led to its fall and a period of presidential rule. In the 1969 state elections, however, another UF government was elected with stronger communist representation, and this time the CPM initiated militant peasants' and rural labour struggles. These, however, in combination with continuing unrest among urban labour, and Naxalite-inspired terrorism in Calcutta, led to the fall of the second UF government in early 1970, and to another period of president's rule. Subsequently, a Congress government led by Siddhartha Shankar Ray in 1972–1977 unleashed state repression against both Naxalites and the CPM – but, ironically, this left the latter as the principal oppositional force. The party's leaders, convinced by now of the failure of the revolutionary line of communist politics, were committed to the parliamentary means to power, and they consolidated their control over party cadres. 'Thus emerged a distinct corporatist culture of the party and its affiliated organisations based on the principal of democratic centralism in which central control superseded democracy' (Basu and

¹⁵ Elsewhere, Basu and Majumdar describe the communists as having become 'a hegemonic cultural force in Bengal' by the 1960s (2013: 180).

Majumdar 2013: 186). This was the party that triumphed, in 1977, in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's Emergency, in the state assembly elections, with an agenda of social justice that was to be achieved (in practice, if not in the rhetoric of the party leaders) by social democratic means.

The Left Front in power

Atul Kohli described the CPM-led Left Front government in the 1980s – in its first decade in office – as a party regime with the following critical characteristics: (i) coherent leadership; (ii) ideological and organisational commitment to exclude propertied interests from direct participation in the process of governance; (iii) a pragmatic attitude toward facilitating a nonthreatening as well as a predictable political atmosphere for the propertied entrepreneurial classes; and (iv) an organisational arrangement that is simultaneously centralised and decentralised so that the regime is both 'in touch' with local society and not being subjected to local power holders. These regime attributes, Kohli argued, made 'the institutional penetration of society possible, while facilitating a degree of regime autonomy from the propertied classes' (1987: 11), and he thought they made it feasible for pro-poor redistributive reform to be accomplished. Richard Crook and Alan Sverrisson, in a comparative study of decentralisation in twelve countries, concluded that the evidence suggested that West Bengal's system of decentralised local government (through the three-tier panchayat system) had been most successful in regard to poverty reduction, substantially because 'conservative elites were challenged locally by groups supported externally by an ideologically committed government' (2003: 252). Their conclusion seems to bear out Kohli's point regarding the fourth of the regime characteristics that he distinguished.

These observations were based on the practical achievements of the Left Front in the early years of its long administration of West Bengal, when it realised modest but effective agrarian reforms, including the registration of sharecroppers through Operation Barga and some redistribution of land – not much in absolute terms, but in the end accounting for about 20 per cent of all the land that has been redistributed in the country as a whole. It was calculated that tenancy reform and land redistribution benefitted almost half of rural households (Sengupta and Gazdar 1997). And the LF established the panchayat system of local government. None of this was carried through

without opposition from local elites, and it was possible only because of the organisational strength of the CPM. There are different views amongst scholars as to how effective the agrarian reforms were in regard both to poverty reduction and to the improvement of agricultural productivity – though there is now fairly broad agreement that the success of West Bengal agriculture in the 1980s, when the state out-performed all the other major states, certainly depended as well on rural electrification, increased exploitation of groundwater and the cultivation of new varieties of paddy, or in other words on the development of the forces of production.¹⁶ There is no doubt, however, about the effectiveness of the reforms in consolidating the support base of the party in rural society, amongst both the rural poor and middle peasants, who benefited from interventions to ensure ‘fair’ prices. This support base, and the panchayats, established ‘a highly effective rural apparatus’ (Beg 2011: 80) on which the party depended for its long hold on political power. As recently as 2009, only two years before the LF was finally routed in state assembly elections, Partha Chatterjee commented on the argument that ‘[T]he continued effectiveness of this structure ensures the continued electoral support for the LF’ (2009: 42).

Chatterjee also referred, however, to a second explanation for the extended electoral success of the LF, which is that it depended upon a form of clientelism. Törnquist argued, early on in the period of LF rule, that ‘poor people in West Bengal may vote communist for the same main reason that motivates other poor people in other places to support, instead, reactionary parties – they simply stand by the best possible patron’ (1991: 69). And according to Arild Ruud’s analysis of the way the party ‘conquered’ rural Bengal, from his study of Burdwan/Bardhaman:

The Marxist movement was in a way new and old at the same time. It was new in mobilising the masses and particularly the low castes in a broad movement, and old in the sense that it to a large extent behaved and was perceived of as a patron, only more just and more potent than the old patrons (1994: 379).

The significance of clientelism is richly attested in more recent empirical studies by Pranab Bardhan and his colleagues (2009, 2011, 2014).

¹⁶ An early statement of this argument is by Harriss 1993; more recently see Kohli 2012: 205.
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The impact of the ways in which the LF operated in rural society has been analysed by Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, in writing about what he calls the ‘party society’ that was established in West Bengal, and that had its roots ‘in the violent class-based movements of the poor peasants as they fought against the domination of the landlords’ (2010: 53). Their eventual success depended upon the ‘strong and coherent organisation of the left parties’. Then, as a result of their mediation ‘between classes and communities, the social and political interaction in the village changed substantially ... (and) ... “party” [he is referring here to political parties in general, not to the left parties alone] began to play a vital role in almost every sphere of social life’ (2010: 54). Bhattacharyya continues, with regard to the structure of local power: ‘Power was now an effect of organisational and popular support for a family, rather than its location in the caste or economic hierarchy. This did not necessarily offer room for the poor or the *dalits* to occupy leadership. Rather, the leadership now shifted to a new elite – that was less dependent on land and wielded educational and cultural capital – typified in the figure of the rural schoolteacher’ (2010: 55). The kind of reciprocal relationship between the communist party and communities that became established, Bhattacharyya thinks, made for prolonged social peace and for the ‘permanent incumbency’ of the Left – until the profound strategic errors of the Left leadership, which began to stack up from the later 1990s, reached a tipping point, and the Left’s control over the party-society collapsed.

From about 1992–1993, rates of agricultural growth in West Bengal began to decline, and, whereas in the previous period of high growth rural inequality had tended to decrease, it now began to increase again, as the rate of growth of rural employment, and average earnings of agricultural labour households declined (Chattopadhyay 2005). At the same time, substantially because of increased salaries for the white-collar public sector employees who, with the rural poor and a section of the middle classes, constituted the alliance that supported the Left, the state government was unable to invest adequately in the provision of the education and health services that rural people increasingly sought¹⁷. Kheya Beg has it that ‘The CPM’s lack of political will or imagination to tackle education and social services for the unprivileged has been attributed to the pervasive social conservatism and patriarchy of the party’s *bhadralok* ... leadership’ (Beg

¹⁷ On this see comments by Bardhan and his colleagues (2014).
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2011: 84). The LF generally neglected, too, the large mass of those employed in the informal sector – to which more and more people had to turn as the only possible means of supporting themselves. Yet, Rina Agarwala tells us, ‘Politicians in West Bengal [including those from the CPM] have rarely been directly involved in improving the livelihoods of the state’s informal workers’ (2013: 117). As she says, the neglect of these workers by a party that based its power on a platform of social justice – what Basu and Majumdar describe as the political common sense, or ‘social imaginaire’ that the Left successfully established – is striking. Given this neglect, and the decline of the organised working class in the context of the economic liberalisation that was encouraged by the LF after its adoption in 1994 of a ‘New Industrial Policy’ – which encouraged ‘enclave’ development in SEZs and Agro-Export Zones – it is not surprising that it should have begun to lose support in the cities, even though the government was fairly successful in maintaining a higher rate of economic growth than most other states (according to Kohli’s calculations, 2012, Table 3.1). Over the years, too, Bhattacharyya says, ‘the governmental institutions (such as the panchayats) which once helped the party to respond innovatively to popular demands ... became dated and ineffective. .. [The panchayats often being] turned into an extension of the bureaucracy under partisan control’ (2010: 56-7). Party cadres in some cases began to act more and more like local mafias, depending on thuggery: ‘Petty extortion – ‘collecting for the party’ – became common; larger scale rackets by CPM goons were assured impunity, thanks to police collusion’ (Beg 2011: 85). Dissatisfaction with the behaviour of party workers played a significant part in the rout of 2011 (see Bardhan et al. 2014).

For all the contradictions that were entailed in the adoption of neo-liberal policies by the LF in West Bengal – when, ironically, the same policies were being opposed by the central leadership of the CPM – it remained in office thanks to strong party organisation, patronage politics and the legacy of its earlier social and economic reforms, and, it must be said, thanks to a divided opposition. It was only when the LF sought to take over fertile agricultural land for industrial projects in the notorious cases of Nandigram and Singur that it finally wrecked the class alliance on which it had for so long depended (an account of this is given by Beg 2011). The Left destroyed its rural apparatus and with it West Bengal’s experiment with social democracy.

Conclusion

As we noted in the introduction to this chapter, the achievements of the Left Front in West Bengal in regard to social democratic objectives, were decidedly mixed. It was successful in breaking the hold of the landlord class and in raising living standards amongst the rural poor¹⁸ – though without creating an adequate base for dynamic non-agricultural development, or the creation of more productive jobs outside agriculture. Still, several analyses, as we reported, show that West Bengal was more successful in reducing poverty over the period of the Left Front than most of the rest of the country. Yet the state's record in other ways through the decades of LF rule was dismal, as it was in regard to education and health. What accounts for the disappointments of social democracy in West Bengal?

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that an important part of the reason for the failure of the Left Front was that it came to depend too much on the disbursement of patronage to supporters, through the centralised apparatus of the CPM in particular, when the resources of the state were so much constrained by its commitments to public sector workers on the one hand, and to capital on the other – through the deals that were done to encourage investment in the state. The Bengali *bhadralok* had not succeeded as entrepreneurs, and the gap that was left by their failure was filled by Marwari traders, immigrants from Rajasthan (Basu and Majumdar 2013: 171). There was not much of a Bengali bourgeoisie at all, and so the capitalist class of the state remained outsiders, especially as the communists made use of appeals to sub-nationalism against them (Kohli 2012: 200). Capital flight, for the capitalist class of the state, was always a possibility. There was very little chance, therefore, of the development of a growth coalition in West Bengal, though the commercial, mainly Marwari elite, with interests in the rice mills of the state, prospered, not least because the LF relied upon them to reduce the costs of rice procurement for the Public Distribution System (Harriss-White 2007). There were, indeed, quite close links between what was left of big capital in the state – mainly Marwari – and the communists. The LF government seems initially to have aimed to realise 'balanced growth' rooted in agricultural development, whilst compromising with the 'national bourgeoisie'. To this end labour militancy

¹⁸ John Harriss did not at first recognize, in 1991, the village in which he had lived ten years earlier, because so many small huts had been replaced by *pucca* houses – indications of improvements in living standards that had followed from agrarian reform and the improved productivity of agriculture (Harriss 1993).

was reduced – while no efforts were made to include informal labour, and after 1994, as it sought to invite capital in from outside, the LF advertised the state as having India’s largest and cheapest non-unionised labour force. But, as we have pointed out, the efforts of the LF to woo national and international capital – in spite of the sacrifice that it imposed upon labour – failed when it failed to deliver the land required for major investments.

A further part of an explanation for the failure of Bengali social democracy is that the left parties moved away from class struggle to incorporate people through patronage, rather than integrating them from the bottom up, of which there was more in Kerala. And linkages with civil society were weak, while civil society itself was much weaker than in Kerala. Nag (1989) commented on the extent to which the differences in the quality of health care between Kerala and West Bengal had to do with the much more extensive mobilisations of people in Kerala around health issues than was the case in West Bengal. Beg has it that the CPM ‘failed to innovate a relationship between social movements and political office’ (2011: 98). The party neglected the rights of the unorganised working class, as Agarwala has shown (2013), and the Left Front remained ages away from the liberties and investments in health and education that were made in Kerala. In the end, sadly, lacking for so long in effective opposition, retaining political office remained an end in itself for the Left Front in West Bengal.

Conclusions

Our analyses of the experiences of Kerala and West Bengal highlight, first of all, the significance of the relationships of state, party and society. In Kerala the Left parties were born of broad-based social movements that were also part of the struggle for independence from colonial rule; in West Bengal the communist party was largely outside the main nationalist movement and was built on a narrower base in the trade union movement. Only later did the party build a base of rural support, on the strength of which it eventually took power in the state and then maintained it for 34 years. The party acted, scholars maintain, as a patron in regard to the mass of the rural people, including agricultural labourers and both small and medium farmers, and then it forfeited their support through ill-advised adventures in neo-liberalism. The Left Front in office never bothered much for informal sector workers, who were becoming increasingly numerous, and

largely sacrificed the interests of organised industrial labour for the benefit of capital. At no stage did the Left Front encourage the participation of non-party organisations in the policy process. The Left in Kerala, on the other hand, emerged in the first place by drawing on the support of non-party organisations and allowed for, and even encouraged, their participation in the formulation and implementation of policy. Later on the leftist parties were much more dominant in relation to interest organisations and citizen groups, but by contrast to West Bengal they were less hegemonic, always having to compete with the Congress and its allies.

In what we have described as the ‘formative period’ in Kerala the four dimensions of social democratic development came together, by way of broad alliances from below for universal civil, political and social rights, and in the context of class based politics. Movements grew from below, and left leaders embedded themselves and their parties within them. During this period remarkable advances were made in regard to civil, social and political rights, and such strong constituencies were built around them that social interventions continued to be strongly supported even in subsequent periods when the Left was out of office. To a significant extent the achievements of Kerala in regard to social justice are the outcome of broad-based mobilisations in society, rather than being due entirely to the actions of the Left parties. Opposition parties, to the right of the Left front, were until recent years never able entirely to reverse the advances that were made toward social justice. In Kerala, as also in West Bengal, the Left targeted and provided support to particular groups and allies in party-related organisations, from trade unions and peasant organisations to cooperatives and cultural groups. Tillers and especially *adivasis* and people in fishing communities did not benefit much from the land reforms, which were inadequately followed up with measures to support small cultivators, and were not backed up with any measures to encourage participation in local government. Over time, the broad-based Left movement was taken over by fronts led from above by increasingly divisive leaders and that included parties which developed their own vested interests. Because of this, distributive welfare policies could not also (as in Scandinavia) foster accumulation of capital and economic growth. Clientelism and patronage spread as did corruption – though some of the negative effects of these developments were

constrained by the pressures of intense electoral competition. The same constraints did not obtain in West Bengal, where for a long time the Left exercised dominance that came close to hegemony in state politics. Over the years, the aspirations and vulnerability of the new middle classes were not really considered, either in Kerala or in West Bengal, so that they had little stake in state welfare policies. We have explained how these developments were sought to be reversed in Kerala, by means of the People's Planning Campaign, and how such advances as were made through the Campaign in the later 1990s, have subsequently been checked as Kerala, too, has been increasingly influenced by the politics and policies of neo-liberalism. There is now, in Kerala and in West Bengal, an urgent need to open up channels of representation for different interest groups, outside and beyond the electoral process – perhaps inspired by Brazilian experiments with participatory councils and Scandinavian experiences from public commissions and hearings.

A second main conclusion is that after the informal alliance between the princes and the tenants in Travancore and Cochin in favour of agricultural growth there was later on no success on part of the Left in either of the states in building growth coalitions. After independence Kerala was unable to draw on its comparative advantage with regard to education in an alternative development strategy (though it was used, later on, for individuals' benefit through migration, and is now sought to be drawn on under neo-liberal policy). Industrialisation was weak in both states and land reform while relatively advanced in Kerala, by comparison with the rest of the country, did not generate much growth. Labour in Kerala won better wages than in other states which, given insufficient improvement of productivity, held back investments beyond construction, some services and property speculation. In West Bengal moderate agrarian reforms were partially instrumental in bringing about a high rate of growth in agriculture, at least for some time, but not enough to generate industrialisation. The West Bengal party therefore opted for external investments, holding wages down and neglecting in particular informal workers. Finally, enforced land acquisition for the benefit of the big companies but without proper negotiation and compensation, paved the way for the total defeat of the Left in West Bengal.

In Kerala, meanwhile, the attempt to renew broad-based development from below, by way of democratic decentralisation and local planning, had only limited success. The new local institutions were not solid enough to reunite divided groups and interests and resist party dominance and patronage. From the 1990s it has rather been the dynamics of globalisation and economic liberalism that have dominated Kerala's development, generating high growth but also undermining the welfare state, and generating both increased inequality and environmental destruction. The most disadvantaged protest but usually lose out nonetheless. There is criticism of mismanagement and corruption but there are no strong alternatives in terms of governance. The Left lacks a new roadmap, even while recognising the need to reconcile the interests of dynamic business, precarious middle classes, and under privileged labour.

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