



Research Paper

## ‘Civil Society: Talented Strength of Indian Democracy: The Experience of West Bengal and Kerala’

Pradeep Adhikary

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Department of Political Science

Chaudhary Charan Singh University, Meerut, UP

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### Abstract:

We are living in rapidly changing times. Rapid economic growth is spreading across much of Asia today. India is being proclaimed to be one of the future economic superpowers of the world. New patterns of production and consumption are sweeping across the country. The wave of liberalization and globalization has created new industries and new opportunities. The service sector has begun to dominate the Indian economy, leaving agriculture and manufacturing/industrial sectors way behind. There is a new buzz of optimism and energy cutting across our society today. In this progressive environment, there is also the stark reality of hunger, poverty, and deprivation. Nearly a third of India's districts are facing growing violence feeding on such frustrations of the youth. Around the world, security concerns are dominating policymakers. Terrorism in its myriad manifestations is spreading across the globe. Rapid economic growth is associated with growing inequalities of income & wealth, around regions, countries, and communities. Environmental degradation and climate change are other consequences of this growth trajectory. In this milieu, new societal challenges are emerging; and many of the old challenges have been persisting. Governments are attempting to balance policies for change with a measure of continuity. Unlike an earlier era where governments, especially democratic ones, were seen as agencies working to bring about improvements in the lives of their people, they are now becoming a part of the problem. Democratic accountability and efficient use of public resources are the twin challenges of modern states, including the Indian state. In some respects, the new era has legitimized the roles of the for-profit private sector in contributing to this rapid economic growth.

**Keywords:** Civil society, Globalization, Environmental Degradation, Accountability, Decentralization, Communist.

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### I. Introduction:

This is a draft chapter for a book that compares, from a 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 favor of civil rights, land reform, welfare policies, and most recently decentralization, the Left there has not been successful in also fostering interest representation beyond the dominance of parties or building a growth coalition 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 labor. Kerala's development has been dominated since the 1990s by the dynamics of globalization, economic liberalism, and labor migration, and the full potential of high education levels has remained untapped. Achievements in social justice are more the outcome of broad mobilizations in society than of leftist policies.

What is civil society? Today almost everyone agrees that civil society refers to uncoerced associational life distinct from the family and institutions of the state. Civil society is also often thought to be distinct from the economy. Where to draw the line, however, is a matter of some dispute. Some thinkers, particularly liberals and especially libertarians (Walzer 2002; Lomasky 2002) include the economy in civil society. Others, especially but not exclusively those on the left, exclude the economy (Cohen and Arato 1992; Keane 1998). Still, others include economic relations only to the extent that they are folded into associational life, so for example,

professional associations and trade unions might be included but GE or Microsoft is not (Post and Rosenblum 2002). Despite differences in definitional boundaries, contemporary interest in civil society focuses predominantly on associational life rather than market or exchange relations. Few theorists of civil society, even libertarians, are interested in studying GE or Microsoft as loci of uncoerced civil activity. This represents a significant shift from classical theories of civil society found in the work of Ferguson, Smith, and Hegel for example (Ferguson 1995; Smith 1976; Hegel 1991). For both classical and contemporary theorists, civil society ends p.363 is understood as a sphere distinct from yet in a particular relationship with, the state. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, it was the hard-won freedom of the economic sphere vis-à-vis the state that naturally begged to be studied, analyzed, investigated, and criticized.

West Bengal:

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 proletarianization 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 is 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 the mass-based, grassroots organization (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 Kerala, and the city was home to the *bhadralok* – the mainly upper caste, relatively well-off, educated minority that has generally dominated modern Bengali politics (Kohli 1990: 367).<sup>10</sup>

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 politicization into class conflict – were not replicated in Bengal. There the caste system was much more flexible, and the correspondence between 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.<sup>11</sup> 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 their 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 sharecroppers might all come from the same caste, whereas it was rarely the case that landlords and tenants, and laborers were not well distinguished by caste in Kerala.

Then, whereas the Kerala party had its origins in the CSP, a legal organization that was part of an extraordinary mass movement, the CPI in Bengal grew up outside the Congress movement.<sup>12</sup> It faced much greater repression at the hands of the British than did either the Bengali Congresses, 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 mobilizations 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 organizers 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 mobilize.

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 characterized by successful party-driven agricultural development achieved through modest land reforms and decentralization, 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 temporizing with neo-liberalism in such a way as to destroy what Basu and Majumdar (2013) describe as the 'social imaginaries 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 of Class struggle among the Bengali workers were 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, filmmakers, playwrights, actors, and producers, all inclined to the left) had helped 'the communists capture the imagination of the ... middle classes of Bengal'<sup>13</sup> – 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).

#### Organization of Rural Peasant and Worker:

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 for the UF government, drafted land reforms but was soon preoccupied with 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). Labor 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 labor struggles. These, however, in combination with continuing unrest among urban labor, and Naxalite-inspired terrorism in Calcutta, led to the fall of the second UF government in early 1970, and 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 organizations based on the principle of democratic centralism in which central control superseded democracy' (Basu and 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 organizational commitment to exclude propertied interests from direct participation in the process of governance; (iii) a pragmatic attitude toward facilitating a non-threatening as well as a predictable political atmosphere for the propertied entrepreneurial classes; and (iv) an organizational arrangement that is simultaneously centralized and decentralized so that the regime is both 'in touch' with local society and not being subjected to local power holders.

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 realized 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 percent 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 the 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 organizational 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 outperformed 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.

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

The impact of how the LF operated in rural society has been analyzed 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 organization of the left parties'. Bhattacharyya continues, concerning the structure of local power: 'Power was now an effect of organizational 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).

From about 1992 or 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 labor 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. 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 imaginary that the Left successfully established – is striking. Given this neglect, and the decline of the organized working class in the context of the economic liberalization that was encouraged calculations, 2012, Table 3.1).

Kerala:

Introduction:

If, as we discussed relative social and cultural homogeneity and the absence of feudalism, successful late industrialization, and a relatively unified working class allowed for broad alliances and energized 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 industrialized, 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 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 socioeconomic 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 – because 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 labeled 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 socially 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.

Social Relations:

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 marginalized 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 regarding literacy in Kerala should not be overemphasized, 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 commercialization of the economy.

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

#### Rural Peasant and Worker:

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 organizations such as the Sri Narayana Dharma ParipalanaYogam 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 organization of the namboodiri brahmins.

Five interrelated processes stand out in how 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 organizations 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.

Second, as in Scandinavia, major transformations of popular political priorities and organization 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 politicized on class lines, as EMS realized and as Manali Desai (2001) has shown in the recent literature. This was especially important concerning the subordinated pulaya caste of agricultural workers.

Third, moreover, the growing importance of class interests within the low-ranked Ezhava caste in particular could also not be handled within its reform movement. The majority of the ezhavas were poor and 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 laborers 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 organization 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 democracy, national independence, and a unified Malayalam-speaking state of Kerala. In Kerala, '[T]he struggles 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 a 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, several 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 that still hold influence in some pockets of Kerala. But the communists were much better organized, even to the extent of holding on to Stalinist 'democratic centralism', and retained a broad, radicalized 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.

#### Radical Mobilization:

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 several 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 labor 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 labor. Industrialization in Kerala was lagging. There was a relatively strong labor organization. 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 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 labor, 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 several 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 organizations. Land reform and more inclusive education were thus expected to increase production and incomes, strengthen democracy and serve as a basis for industrialization. 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.<sup>3</sup> The government between 1970 and 1977 under the Communist Party of India (CPI) leader Achutha Menon was stable thanks to its alliance with the dominant Congress Party. But this stability was at the expense of divisive conflicts between Menon's CPI and the larger Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPIM) 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 organizations at the grass root level. These grassroots interest organizations are among small farmers, tenants, agricultural laborers, laborers in the informal sectors and industry, as well as workers and white-collar workers in the public sector.

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 prioritizing democratic decentralization and planning from below. They also won support from concerned scholars and several mass-based interest organizations 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).<sup>4</sup> This was despite 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 organizations 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. In terms of our four dimensions of social democratic development, the PPC was innovative. The missing growth coalitions between state-level organized capital, labor, 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 based on local negotiations between government, labor, and employers within the framework of participatory development institutions.

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 organizations, 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 organization 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 favor of postindustrial activities.

## **II. 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 regarding the mass of the rural people, including agricultural laborers 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 organized industrial labor for the benefit of capital.

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 regarding 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 regarding social justice are the outcome of broad-based mobilizations 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 organizations, from trade unions and peasant organizations 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.

A second main conclusion is that after the informal alliance between the princes and the tenants in Travancore and Cochin in favor of agricultural growth there was later 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 concerning 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). 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 decentralization 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. Since the 1990s it has rather been the dynamics of globalization 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 recognizing the need to reconcile the interests of dynamic business, precarious middle classes, and underprivileged labor.

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