Chapter 4

Public Controversy over the Solid Waste Treatment Plant in Vilappilsala

This chapter deals with the debates on the crisis of solid waste management in Thiruvananthapuram Corporation due to the dumping of municipal solid waste in Vilappilsala — a village in the outskirts of the city. The chapter explore the tension between the urban and rural public over solid waste treatment plant in Vilappilsala, and also the negotiations of rural public with the government. It tries to explore how various stakeholders like villagers, city dwellers, authorities of Vilappil grama Panchayat and Thiruvananthapuram corporation, Kudumbashree, state government, political parties, elected representative, Judiciary and media of this particular controversy are involved or how they contributed their share in the shaping of public controversy over municipal solid waste in Vilappilsala. The chapter will take insights of sociology of theory to understand the paradoxes and internal ambivalence in the centralised waste management system in Thiruvananthapuram and waste crisis in Vilappilsala due to the waste treatment plant. Through the detailed analysis of the villagers’ protest, it also focuses on how the villagers developed a critique against the political system. It is very much necessary to give a brief introduction to Thiruvananthapuram Corporation and Vilappilsala to understand how the solid waste disputes have been arisen due to the dumping of municipal solid waste at Nedumkuzhi Mountain in the Vilappilsala village.

4.1. Profile of Thiruvananthapuram Corporation

Thiruvananthapuram is the southernmost district and the capital city of Kerala. It is claimed to be one of the ancient cities and popular temple towns in India.272 Thiruvananthapuram municipality was formed in 1920 and it had been upgraded into corporation before the formation of the state of Kerala.273 Thiruvananthapuram Corporation came in existence in 1940 and it was divided into 24 wards. C.O.

272 See the website of Thiruvananthapuram Corporation www.corporationoftrivandrum.in accessed on April 03, 2018.
273 Ibid.
Madhavan was the first mayor of the corporation.²⁷⁴ According to the recent Census Report (2011), the corporation has a population of 9,57,730 and a floating population of more than 1,00,000. It has a better sex ratio of 1040:1000. The corporation is a part of Thiruvananthapuram parliament constituency and Thiruvananthapuram legislative assembly, and has an area of 243 Sq.KMs.²⁷⁵ Western side of the corporation is Arabian Sea and the other sides are surrounded by Puthencode, Nedumangad, Nemom and Athiyannor Block Panchayats. The citizens of the corporation have a mixture of political orientation and most of them are sympathisers of Communist Party of India [Marxist] (CPI (M)). The Indian National Congress has good influence in the corporation and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) also has influence in the corporation. There are other political parties like Indian Union Muslim League (IUML), Communist Party of India (CPI), Kerala Congress, National Congress Party (NCP), Socialist Unity Centre of India [Communist] (SUCI), Welfare Party of India (WPI), Socialist Democratic Party of India (SDPI) having their presence in the corporation area. Thiruvananthapuram Corporation has 100 wards at present. After the recent Local Self Government (LSG) election (LSGE) in 2015 CPI (M) led Left Democratic Front (LDF) managed to bag 43 seats while INC led United Democratic Front (UDF) bagged 21 seats and BJP led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in 35 seats.²⁷⁶ It was 51 seats for LDF, 40 seats for UDF and 6 seats for BJP in the 2010 LSGI election.²⁷⁷ Presently LDF is in power in the Corporation governing council, and LDF has been governing the council for a long period. Other than these political parties, there is a presence of various religious organisations like Jamaat-e-Islami, Vishwa Hindu Parishat (VHP) and Rashtriya Swayam Sevak (RSS) in the corporation and they have much influence in the society and the members of these organisations except RSS and Jamaat-e-Islami are part of different political parties. The members of Jamaat-e-Islami are purely linked with WPI and members of RSS are linked with BJP. Apart from this some Dalit

²⁷⁴ Ibid.
²⁷⁵ Ibid.
²⁷⁶ http://lsgkerala.gov.in/pages/electiondetails.php?intID=4&ID=167&In=en accessed on April 03, 2018
organisations like Dalit Human Rights Movement (DHRM), Kerala Dalit Panthers (KDP) have much influence in the city.

4.2. Profile of Vilappilsala Village

Vilappilsala is one of the wards of Vilappil grama panchayat and it is 16 kilometres away from Thiruvananthapuram city centre. This panchayat is a part of Vilappil village, Nemom block panchayat, Neyyatinkara Taluk, Kattakada legislative assembly constituency and Thiruvananthapuram parliament constituency. Vilappil grama panchayat is surrounded by Thiruvananthapuram Corporation and six other grama panchayats. The panchayat has a rural character and most of the people are practicing agriculture as their primary employment, while some are in the field of construction work or engaged in different kinds of jobs on daily wages. Chovallur (neighbouring ward of Vilappilsala), one of the wards of Vilappil grama panchayat, where the solid waste treatment plant is situated. Most of the areas of this ward are hilly and there are several water streams’ origins.

The citizens of the panchayat have different political orientations and the main political parties of this panchayat are CPI (M), INC, CPI, SUCI and BJP, and other parties like IUML, SDPI and WPI also have some followers. This panchayat consists of 20 wards and out of these LDF has bagged 10 seats while BJP has 7 and UDF has 3 seats each, and LDF has managed to be in power of the governing body in 2015 LSGI election. In 2010 election the scenario was different, UDF was in power with 9 seats while LDF had got 6 wards and BJP managed to win 4 seats. In the 2010 elections of local self-government institutions, INC’s representative Vinod Raj was elected as the member of this ward and R. Damodaran Nair as the member of Vilappilsala ward, but in 2015 election CPI managed to win both the wards (Chovallur- J. Sunitha and Vilappilsala- P.

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278 Sobhanakumari (ex-president of Vilappil grama panchayat) interviewed on June 09, 2016 at Vilappilsala
279 Ibid. Aruvikkara grama panchayat, Vellanad grama panchayat, Poovachal grama panchayat, Malayinkeezh grama panchayat, Kattakkada grama panchayat and Vilavurkkar grama panchayat
280 Ibid.
After the closure of solid waste treatment plant in 2012, in the next local self-government election (2015) CPI (M)-led LDF came back to power in the panchayat.

### 4.3. Introduction to Vilappilsala Solid Waste Dispute

The solid waste treatment plant occupied an area of forty nine acres of land and the storing capacity of this plant was nearly 300 hundred tonnes of garbage per day. This plant was converting 90 tonnes of bio-degradable waste into bio-manure every day and aerobic reaction and mechanical composting were the technologies being used for treating the waste. Waste being converted in this plant into bio fertilizer or manure was delivered to the Fertilisers and Chemicals of Travancore limited (FACT), Kochi. A huge amount of rejects after the treatment of bio-degradable waste and the untreated waste (including bio-degradable and non-degradable waste) from this plant were dumped as open landfills as well as sanitary landfills in the premises of the plant. Inside the solid waste treatment plant there is a leachate treatment plant building, but installation of the machines is not yet done due to the strong resistance from the villagers.

Sometime in the early 1990s, Thiruvananthapuram corporation had purchased twelve acres of land in Nedumkuzhi with the help of the then United Democratic Front (UDF) led government of Kerala. The Corporation announced that they would make an herbal garden in that place, but it was an eye wash. K. Karunakaran of Indian National Congress (INC) was the Chief Minister of the state at that time. When the Corporation had explained the project of herbal garden, the people of Chovallur ward accepted the

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284 FACT is India’s first large scale fertilisers unit established in 1943. (See this link http://www.fact.co.in/ContentPage.aspx?sid=1 accessed on April 05, 2018).
285 Leachate means liquid that seeps through solid wastes or other medium and has extracts of dissolved or suspended material from it. It will contaminate ground water as well as surface water, which is harmful to the public health and environment. To reduce its harmfulness Vilappilsala solid waste treatment plant has installed a waste water or leachate treatment plant with the help of central government’s JnNURM.
286 C.S Anil (General Convener of Samyuktha Samara Samithi) interviewed on June 17, 2016 at Peyad, Vilappilsala.
287 Kannonth Karunakaran was a well-known congress politician of Kerala. He became Chief Minister of Kerala four times and he holds the position of union minister of industries.
proposal whole heartedly, for an offer was given that several villagers would get job in this garden. This is how the state used their strategy to get a dumping yard in the village, and the state used the ignorance of the villagers over the state and its way of operations.

However, the Corporation’s plan was to make use of this place for dumping the solid waste collected from the Thiruvananthapuram city. The corporation had been dumping solid waste in Kanikanumpara in Vilappilsala since the mid-1990s. Now their plan was to use the newly acquired land as dump yard. The villagers were eagerly waiting for the herbal garden and the number of job vacancies, but the corporation came with trucks loaded with solid waste from the city.

The residents of Chovallur ward resisted the dumping of solid waste from the city in the new site for landfill. Even though the villagers were protesting, the corporation did dump the waste until the end of 1990s. Due to public antagonism, the state government finally decided to start a solid waste treatment plant in the locality to process the solid waste from the Corporation in 2000. Government succeeded to start the project by making people convinced about the advantages of this project, and the corporation also offered numerous job vacancies for the villagers. The proposed plant was going to process the bio-degradable waste only and the rest of the waste including plastics dumped in the yard. But people were not aware that the plant was going to process bio-degradable waste only, and the job vacancy offer was again an eye wash strategy of the Corporation to pacify the villagers. Their expectation was that the technology would dispose all the waste and they would not struggle anymore.

The solid waste treatment plant project had been proposed originally in another place called Veli which was inside the Corporation itself. Nevertheless, due to strong protests against the dumping of solid waste in Vilappilsala, the state government decided to start the project in another location.

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288 C.S Anil (General Convener of Samyuktha Samara Samithi) interviewed on June 17, 2013 at Peyad, Vilappilsala.
289 Ibid.
290 Ibid.
291 C.S Anil (General Convener of Samyuktha Samara Samithi) interviewed on June 17, 2016 at Peyad, Vilappilsala.
opposition from the inhabitants of Veli, the project was shifted to Kanikanumpara, the present location being proposed. This plant was a product of blind technological adaptation of the solid waste treatment plant at Vijayawada in the State of Andhra Pradesh. Before starting the construction of Vilappilsala solid waste treatment plant, the corporation took the representatives of all political parties to Vijayawada to show and convince them about the effective and successful functioning of the treatment plant.\textsuperscript{293}

All the representatives were convinced after seeing the plant and they informed their consent to the corporation for establishing a plant in Vilappilsala. The plant in Vijayawada was working efficiently for the plant was situated in a place with less population. Also, the hot and dry climate of Vijayawada played a role. Due to such an arid climate, the solid waste contained very less moisture, and hence easy to process. Contra to this, in the case of Kerala, the climate is normally wet as it rains here almost 7-8 months annually and hence the moisture content in the solid waste is very high, and hence difficult to manage the waste. None of the representatives who visited the Vijayawada plant realised this difference in climatic conditions. Nor any expert raised this technical problem. Following this, the Poabson’s Private Limited\textsuperscript{294} installed a solid waste treatment plant modelled on the Vijayawada Plant at Vilappilsala. The plant was inaugurated in 2000 by E.K. Nayanar, the then Chief Minister of Kerala.\textsuperscript{295}

The whole area (49 acres) of the plant, as per design, is divided into four sectors; solid waste storage and treatment unit, leachate treatment unit, bio-fertiliser storage house and the dumping yard of rejects as well as plastics after the treatment (see the figure 2). Apart from these main sectors, an office and accommodation supported by a canteen worked at the plant site. The solid waste treatment plant is situated in two acres of land approximately, and it is divided into eight sectors. One sector contains machines and

\textsuperscript{293} C.S Anil (General Convener of \textit{Samyuktha Samara Samithi}) interviewed on June 17, 2016 at Peyad, Vilappilsala.

\textsuperscript{294} Poabson's Private Limited started its operation in Kerala in 1962 as a contracting firm known as Poabson groups and later it diversified into multi-disciplinary business activities under the name of Poabs group. This company is focused on various business activities like granite mining and crushing, ready mix concrete, plantation and farming, organic bio-manure and fertilizer manufacturing, municipal solid waste management projects, engineering and contracting, wood based industry and furniture production (see this link http://www.poabs.in/ accessed on 11 August 2017)

\textsuperscript{295} Erambala Krishnan Nayanar was an active leader of CPI (M) and he became the Chief Minister of Kerala three times.
apparatus of the plant and rest of the seven sectors are reserved for storing waste of each day of a week (Monday to Sunday), and each day approximately 300 tonnes could be stored.²⁹⁶ The garbage was taken for segregation and processing into the machinery area by escalators after the completion of 30 days of aerobic reaction²⁹⁷ in the storage area.²⁹⁸ The technology used for waste conversion is aerobic reaction and mechanical composting (Edward and Kumar 2009:3). The numbers 1,2,3,4 and 5 (see figure 2) represent the number of week waste undergone aerobic reaction. For example, number 5 indicates that the waste dumped already finished 5 weeks of aerobic reaction.

![Figure 2: Functional Organisation of the Plant (Source: Edward et. al. 2009)](image)

²⁹⁶ Pramod (Junior Health Inspector of the plant) interviewed on June 17 2013 at the plant, Nedumkuzhi, Vilappilsala.
²⁹⁷ Aerobic reaction of waste happens in the presence of oxygen which produce carbon dioxide and water. This water is called leachate which is toxic in nature.
²⁹⁸ Ibid.
The solid waste treatment plant project at Vilappilsala was intended to collect solid waste from Thiruvananthapuram Corporation and transfer it to the plant owned by the Corporation. The bio-degradable waste was processed and converted into the manure or bio- fertilisers under the control of the Poabson’s Private Limited. The agreement was that the processed waste (i.e. bio-manure) would be collected by the Fertilisers and Chemicals Travancore (FACT), a fertiliser company in the public sector. The FACT distribute or sell the collected bio-manure from the plant to the farmers with the help of authorised dealers. Basic facilities for the solid waste treatment plant were arranged by the state government and it was handed over to Poabson’s Private Limited for the Plant’s installation and day to day operation. As part of providing basic facilities to the plant, the Corporation occupied more land in the vicinity.

In later period (in 2007), Poabson’s Private Limited went back from the agreement and handed over to the corporation which will be discussed in the next section. After the handover, the plant was functioning under the control of the Centre for Environment and Development (CED), a quasi-government agency. It was only 90 tonnes of bio-degradable waste out of 300 hundred tonnes per day used for the processing. Rest of the garbage, that is 210 tonnes, was disposed by land filling method.

4.4. Emergence of the Protest

The villagers protested against the functioning of the plant when they realised that the plant was creating pollution and they demanded for its immediate closure. People of Chovallur and Vilappilsala wards started their protest under the Janakeeya Samrakshana Samithi (hereafter, Samithi). The villagers argued for the immediate closure of the plant or shifting of the plant to somewhere within the Corporation. We

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299 Sreekailas (Vice President of Samyuktha Samara Samithi) interviewed on June 09, 2016 at Vilappilsala.
301 Ibid. The area has increased from twelve acres to forty nine acres.
302 The Centre for Environment and Development was established in 1993 as an autonomous research and development, training and consultancy organisation focusing the various fields related to environment and development. It is an agency accredited by Ministry of Environment and Forest (MoEF) for solid waste management. (See this link http://cedindia.org/organization/about-ced/ accessed on April 11, 2018).
303 Ibid.
can divide the protest into two waves according to their nature and responses. There was a gap between the two waves. The resistance during this intermediary period was weak as it was not organised due to the inactivity of the protest forum. The first wave of protest against the plant was started immediately after the establishment of the plant (in 2000) and it was suppressed by the government with the help of the police force. Mummott Rajan, the then block Panchayat member, died because of police brutality. Police also charged number of cases against 23 local residents. Following this, on 18 January 2001, a massive protest including women and children was organised by the same forum. Again the government suppressed the protest by using police force and several protesters were injured and hospitalised. The police charged several cases against the protesters and some were remanded by the court.

In the wake of the installation of the plant, it started polluting the area and by contaminating water streams. The main pollutants were the greenhouse gases like methane and carbon monoxide and the leachate seeping out from the moisture contained in the solid waste at the landfill. The solid waste being deposited also contained meat waste from slaughter houses and medical waste (that included body parts). The strong odour being produced by putrefying flesh caused breathing trouble to the villagers. Because of the waste from meat and chicken stalls, and fish markets, the population of dogs also increased in the village and this turned into a serious threat to the village life.

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304 Sreekailas (Vice President of Samyuktha Samara Samithi) interviewed on June 09, 2016 at Vilappilsala.
305 Ibid.
306 Ibid.
307 Sobhanakumari (Ex-President of Vilappil grama panchayat) interviewed on June 09, 2016 at Vilappilsala.
308 Baiju John. 2012. "Kandupakarthuka Ee Kannukalile Thee." Madhyamam, 09-13, 13; as per the Municipal Solid Wastes (Management and Handling) Rules, 2000, medical waste should not be a content of municipal solid waste.
309 Ibid.
A water stream named Meenampalli thodu is originated from the hill close to the treatment plant. The corporation was dumping approximately three hundred tonnes of solid waste in this plant every day. Once dumped, the waste was kept for 30 days to enable aerobic reaction, for the solid waste consists of high level of moisture. For the making of manure it is necessary to avoid the content of moisture from the waste and the highly toxic fluid known as leachate that comes out of the dumped waste gets mixed with the water of Meenampalli thodu. This highly toxic fluid (leachate) flows to the water stream directly and contaminates the surface and ground water. Water from this rivulet joins the River Karamana which is the lifeline of Thiruvananthapuram city. The

Figure 3: Map of Thiruvananthapuram (Source: compiled by the Author, not on scale)

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310 Sobhanakumari (Ex-President of Vilappil grama panchayat) interviewed on June 09, 2016 at Vilappilsala.
311 Ibid.
312 Ibid.
River Karamana consists of seven drinking water projects for the Corporation. Through the vast network of drinking water supply, the waste from the city dumped in the Vilappilsala village returns to the city and creates high health and environmental risk for the urban population. This is the *boomerang effect* (see Beck 1999) of waste as a risk.

Under the leadership of the protest forum, the villagers collected water from different parts of the village to understand the pollution. The samples of the polluted water were displayed by the protest group as part of their campaign all over the Panchayat against the plant, highlighting the health risks involved. Gradually, the rest of the villagers understood the severity of the problem through media and social workers as well as from their personal experiences, and joined the protest. Gradually all the villagers started supporting and participating in the social movement.

The second wave of the protest began on 09 January, 2011 with the formation of a new protest group named *Samyuktha Samara Samithi* (hereafter, the Forum). The Forum started a relay hunger strike against the working of the plant and tried to give awareness to the people about the risks of the plant. The protesters announced that their life is important than their politics, religion, class and caste, affirming a new form of biopolitics. After the formation of a new governing body in Vilappil grama panchayat following the Local Self Governance Institutions elections in 2010, Sobhanakumari (INC-UDF), the newly elected president, started an indefinite hunger strike. After completing four days of hunger strike, her health condition deteriorated and she was forcefully arrested and hospitalised. Four other representatives of the social movement resumed the hunger strike. On the fifth day of hunger strike the then Chief Minister

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313 Ibid.
314 Ibid.
315 Ibid.
316 Ibid.
317 Vellimangalam Chandran (the then member of Vilappil grama panchayat), M.R. Biju (the then member of Thiruvananthapuram Zilla panchayat), P. Sobhana (the then Chairperson, Health Standing Committee, Vilappil grama panchayat) and A. Asees (the then Chairperson, Education Standing Committee Vilappil grama panchayat). The noticeable thing is that A. Asees belongs to CPI (M) and his party CPI (M) has been trying to defend this protest to protect this plant.
318 Sreekailas (Vice President of *Samyuktha Samara Samithi*) interviewed on June 09, 2013 at Vilappilsala.
of Kerala, Oommen Chandi and other ministers (UDF) finally sat down for negotiation with the protesters. Chandi agreed their demands and requested to stop the hunger strike. Following this the indefinite hunger strike unto death was withdrawn but the local public continued with relay hunger strike for getting the solid waste treatment plant permanently closed.

On 20 September 2011, the committee announced that they would not allow even a single load of waste being transported to the plant. Following this announcement, the government asked them to give it three months’ time to find an alternative and the committee agreed. However, the state government and the Corporation authorities did not take any initiative in this regard and the protesters resumed their resistance against waste transportation. The Vilappil grama panchayat closed down the solid waste treatment plant on 21 December 2011 by using article 232 of Kerala Panchayat Raj Act, 1995. On 23 January 2012, the High Court of Kerala made a judgment in favour of the Thiruvananthapuram Corporation and ordered police protection to waste transportation. Following this verdict the Forum decided to organise a demonstration in front of the state secretariat at Thiruvananthapuram on 30 January 2012. However, succumbing to the pressure from the Corporation, the state government decided to implement the judgment of the High Court. On 13 February 2012, the Corporation and the state government tried to transfer waste to the plant with the help of police, but the protesting villagers could defend this successfully.

A huge amount of solid waste was stored in the dumping yard because of less amount of waste being processed as noted before. The increased amount of solid waste dumping became a reason for social risks along with health and environment risks. Due to the unbearable odour from the waste, presence of domestic flies, and the contamination of water, many of the people living near the plant have abandoned the village and migrated

319 C.S. Anil (General Convener of Samyuktha Samara Samithi) interviewed on June 17, 2013 at Peyad, Vilappilsala.
320 Article 232 deals with the dangerous and Offensive Trades and Factories inside the Panchayat. It gives power to Panchayat for shutting down any factories working without license.
321 Ibid; It is an enactment to establish a three tier Panchayat Raj system by the seventy third amendment of Indian Constitution.
322 Mathrubhumi, 14 February 2012, p. 1.
to different places.\textsuperscript{323} Due to this, the price of the land and other properties went down.\textsuperscript{324} People from other villages were reluctant to engage in marital relationship with Vilappilsala villagers. Similarly, wedding proposals from Vilappilsala have been out rightly rejected by marriage brokers.\textsuperscript{325} Apart from this, the village was under militarisation due to the presence of a large number of police which created a terror in the mind of villagers. Health problems were being reported from Vilappilsala since the early days of the plant’s working itself. When the number of cases increased, the health department conducted a survey and identified that the nearby area of plant was polluted.\textsuperscript{326}

The Forum declared that they would continue the hunger strike till they get the closure order of the solid waste treatment plant from the government. The villagers announced that “this protest is for our right to life, not for namesake. To drink a drop of water in future, we are ready to die”.\textsuperscript{327} Villagers understood that they lost their healthy life due to the working of the plant; according to them they were trying to protect their next generation’s right to life through this protest. Their movement, according to the Forum, was not for getting any new facilities from authority but for defending their life and livelihood. Protests that are directly linked to the immediate living conditions of publics may become stronger and complicated, which is very difficult to be suppressed by the state. From their experiences of the last 13 years, they realised that their life is in trouble due to the highly pollution created by the solid waste treatment plant. This realisation initiated the emergence of the social movement against the risks of waste.

4.5. Stakeholders’ Interventions in the Controversy

For the existence of human being, cities and civilizations have a very important role. However, cities produce waste and urban dwellers have been struggling with numerous problems associated with garbage disposal and pollution for thousands of years (Pellow,

\textsuperscript{323} C.S Anil (General Convener of \textit{Samyuktha Samara Samithi}) interviewed on June 17, 2013 at Peyad, Vilappilsala.
\textsuperscript{324} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{325} John, Baiju. 2012. "Kandupakarthuka Ee Kannukalile Thee." \textit{Madhyamam}, 09-13, 12
\textsuperscript{326} C.S Anil (General Convener of \textit{Samyuktha Samara Samithi}) interviewed on June 17, 2013 at Peyad, Vilappilsala.
2002:1). Nowadays waste generation and disposal are not only a technical issue but has political, social and economic dimensions due to the increased public awareness of the risks involved. In the case of Vilappilsala, solid waste was transferred from the city of Thiruvananthapuram and this waste was produced as part of the urbanised/consumerists life of the urban dwellers. Management of solid waste in the city turned to be a political issue for both Vilappil grama panchayat and Thiruvananthapuram Corporation which led to the formation of a ‘publics’ around the waste controversy, deliberating its diverse aspects.

The state government has played a diplomatic diversion to escape from its responsibilities. The authority of Corporation of Thiruvananthapuram tried to defuse the protest of villagers by resorting to the High Court of Kerala into the dispute. Both the High Court and the Supreme Court have played a crucial role in this public controversy.

When the solid waste treatment plant was established in Kanikanumpara in 2000, Poabson’s Private Limited had argued that the plant had a capacity of 300 tonnes of waste treatment per day. A committee of eighteen scientists headed by Dr. R.V.G Menon was sent to the solid waste treatment plant by the government for assessment of the plant’s working conditions, storage capacity, processing capacity and infrastructure in the wake of rising protests. The Committee identified that it was one of the best solid waste treatment plants in India but it had only a storage capacity less than two hundred tonnes per day. This identification by the committee changed the argument of Poabson’s Private Limited over the efficiency of the plant. The plant was modelled on the Vijayawada solid waste treatment plant in Andhra Pradesh and hence, the Committee pointed out that this would be suitable only for a less moisture climate and less populous places like Andhra Pradesh. The Villagers were arguing that there was a huge corruption of public money happened over the plant. The plant was handed over to the Poabson’s Private Limited for thirty years under the agreement that the

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328 Ibid.
329 Ibid.
330 Ibid.
Corporation would pay Rs. 49,999.00 per day to the company if the Corporation fails to deliver three hundred tonnes of waste every day.\(^{331}\)

The Corporation was unable to send (or not ready to send?) 300 tonnes of solid waste to the plant and hence causing a huge loss of money every day for the Corporation as it paid the penalty under the agreement.\(^{332}\) After the assessment of the RVG Menon committee it has become clear that the company increased its profit by illegally extorting public money from the Corporation, as the plant had only a storage capacity of 200 tonnes of waste per day contra to its claim. At the same time the Pobason group demanded that they need more money from government for the day-to-day operation of the plant and threatened that otherwise they would stop functioning. On top of it, in 2007 the Corporation had given 7 Crore rupees to the company for installing advanced technology and purchasing new machines.\(^{333}\) Nonetheless, the company abandoned the project in 2007 and handed over the plant to the Corporation and claimed Crores of rupees in compensation from the government.\(^{334}\) But the Corporation denied these allegations by the Forum and the media, and claimed that the Corporation did not lose a single penny, and as an additional benefit, got the plant from the Company.\(^{335}\)

The plant was eventually handed over to the Centre for Environment and Development (CED)\(^{336}\) by the Corporation in 2008 for continuing with its operation. But this governmental agency was unable to process the waste eco-friendly, adding to the crisis.\(^{337}\) After getting the charge from the Corporation, CED increased the storage capacity of the plant to 300 tonnes per day. The CED used pesticides to keep away domestic flies, mosquitoes, and other bugs and pests from the accumulated waste and

\[^{333}\text{Khan, M Shajar. 2012. "Vilappilsalayil Puthiya Samaramukham." Malayalam, 84-91, 87.}\]
\[^{334}\text{John, Baiju. 2012. "Kandupakarthuka Ee Kannukalile Thee." Madhyamam, 09-13, 13.}\]
\[^{335}\text{Ibid.}\]
\[^{336}\text{The Centre for Environment and Development was established in 1993 as an autonomous research and development, training and consultancy organisation focussing the various fields related to environment and development. It is an agency accredited by Ministry of Environment and Forest (MoEF) for solid waste management. (See this link http://cedindia.org/organization/about-ced/ accessed on July 11, 2018).}\]
\[^{337}\text{Ibid.}\]
these pesticides also became a component of the leachate, making the water streams more toxic.\textsuperscript{338}

At this juncture, the High Court of Kerala appointed advocate Meera as a single member advocate Commission to assess the conditions of the plant, and she visited the site on 14 January 2012.\textsuperscript{339} The Court also mentioned that a senior engineer of Pollution Control Board should go with the advocate Commission. The Commission met and discussed the issues involved with the local public, protesters and the Corporation and panchayat authorities and submitted her report to the High Court. The report stated that three hundred tonnes of waste arrived at the plant every day but the plant had only ninety tonnes processing capacity per day.\textsuperscript{340} It is clearly visible that each day the plant hence disposed 210 tonnes of waste (which contains non-degradable as well as plastic waste) as open landfill inside the plant which made a serious disturbance to the environment. The report also said that the pollution from the plant created serious health issues in the village. The then Mayor of the Corporation, Chandrika argued that the report has been framed under the political pressure and the Corporation would not accept the report.\textsuperscript{341} She added that the Corporation would file a petition against this at the High Court.\textsuperscript{342} It is unfortunate that CED, a government agency for environment protection has done such anti-environmental activities in violation of article 48(A) of the Indian Constitution.\textsuperscript{343}

Both the local self-government institutions (the corporation and the Vilappil grama panchayat) consist of five mainstream political parties, which are INC, CPI (M), CPI, IUML and BJP. These political parties have their committees in both Vilappil grama panchayat and in Thiruvananthapuram Corporation, and they have different political standpoints regarding the controversy. In the case of Thiruvananthapuram Corporation, all the elected members of its Council and the political parties (within the Corporation)

\textsuperscript{338} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{340} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{341} K. Chandrika (Ex. Mayor of the Corporation), interviewed on June 16, 2013 at the Corporation office, Thiruvananthapuram.
\textsuperscript{342} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{343} Article 48A of Indian Constitution is that “the State shall endeavour to protect and improve the environment and to safeguard the forests and wild life of the country”.

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they belong to had supported the construction of the solid waste treatment plant in Vilappilsala. The City Corporation was ruled by the LDF under the leadership of CPI (M) and they strongly endorsed the establishment of the plant. Interestingly it was the same political party in power at the state government as well as in Vilappil grama panchayat when this solid waste treatment plant was installed. In 2000, Vilappil grama panchayat had taken stand in favour of the Corporation and the local units of all political parties active in the panchayat supported this except BJP and CPI. As we have seen earlier, later the issue became more complicated and Chovallur villagers formed a protest forum against the plant by keeping away political parties from its leadership, because they did not want any political interference from these parties. Gradually, the local committees of all parties in Vilappil changed their standpoint and supported the movement except CPI (M). CPI (M) began to extend their solidarity to this public protest only after losing their electoral majority in the panchayat council in the 2005 elections. When the Vilappil grama panchayat shut down the solid waste treatment, the protesters detained the treks that transported solid waste to the dumping yard at the plant, the double stance of the political parties once again got exposed. All political parties (except CPI) city units along with district committees in Thiruvananthapuram have taken a firm stand against the closure of the plant which was contradictory to their stance in the village. In other words, throughout this controversy all elected members of the Corporation Council were supporting and protecting the plant, irrespective of their political affiliations, while simultaneously the same political parties offered support to the public protest in Vilappilsala.

Following the panchayat’s ban on transportation of waste to the Plant, the then corporation councillors of BJP started a hunger strike in front of the Corporation office in Thiruvananthapuram against the decision of the Vilappilsala Panchayat to shut down

344 C.S. Anil (General Convener of Samyuktha Samara Samithi) interviewed on June 17, 2013 at Peyad, Vilappilsala.
345 Every single political parties has their political interest to come to the power positions.
346 The INC led UDF have managed to get the power in panchayat body and BJP also managed to some influence due to this protest.
347 Ibid.
the plant (panchayat has used article 232 of Kerala Panchayat Raj Act, 1995 which mentioned earlier) on January 16, 2012. The then district committee president of BJP inaugurated this protest and demanded immediate action against the irresponsibility of both state government and Corporation authority and he argued for resuming the working of the plant. Ashok Kumar, one of the then BJP councillors of the Corporation, demanded resumption of the functioning of the plant with immediate effect. The irony is that, simultaneously the Vilappil grama panchayat and Nemam block panchayat committees of BJP were participating in the detention of treks loaded with waste! BJP was thus trying to use the controversy as a political tool against both INC and CPI (M), accusing them for double stand, while taking a double stance.

K. Muralidharan, one of the then M.L.As of INC argued that the closure of the solid waste treatment plant by the panchayat was a wrong decision. He mentioned that not a single plant might exist in this state if all panchayats would start to oppose. Sasi Taroor, one of the then M.Ps of INC and former Central Minister of State for Human Resource Development, India who represented Thiruvananthapuram Lok Sabha constituency made a statement in the Parliament against the closure of the plant. However, N. Sakthan, the then M.L.A and Deputy Speaker of Kerala State Legislative Assembly who belonged to INC, offered his solidarity to the panchayat. He had participated in the protest by violating Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973, and he argued that the plant should be closed within six month. INC also had always taken a double stand related to this controversy because they wanted to

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348 Article 232 deals with the dangerous and Offensive Trades and Factories inside the Panchayat. It gives power to Panchayat for shutting down any factories working without license.
350 Mathrubhumi, 12 June 2012, Nagaram, p. 2.
351 Kerala Kaumudi, 1 January 2012, p. 2.
352 In 2010 panchayat election, in Vilappil grama panchayat, INC came to power with the help of BJP elected members. BJP never tried to withdraw their support to panchayat governing body when they are opposing INC.
353 Member of Legislative Assembly.
354 Mathrubhumi, 02 June 2012, p. 3.
355 Mathrubhumi, 02 June, 2012, p. 3.
357 Curfew.
358 It is an act to consolidate and amend the law relating to Criminal Procedure which was enacted in 1973. It deals with public nuisance, prevention of offences and maintenance of wife, children and parents.
protect their interests in both state government and Vilappil grama panchayat. When they were in power and not in power they used to change their standpoint to play against CPI (M), their main political opponent.

When the Deputy Mayor of the Corporation Happy Kumar presented the budget of 2012-13 year which allotted money for the solid waste treatment plant, the Council members of CPI under the leadership of B. Sobhana\textsuperscript{359} protested.\textsuperscript{360} Interestingly, the Deputy Mayor of the Corporation belonged to CPI only! The district committee of CPI took stance in favour of the protesters and they had contributed their share in this protest from the beginning.\textsuperscript{361} But their councillors in the Corporation took a diametrically opposite standpoint, but the party never took any action against them for indiscipline. Similarly, the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) kept stoic silence related to this issue for 17 years except a request once given to the state minister for industries and information science by its committee at the Vilappil panchayat. Notably, both the minister for urban affairs and minister for grama panchayat in the state government belonged to IUML.

The state government continued with its double stand on the issue. Manjalamkuzhi Ali, the minister of urban affairs, visited Vilappilsala and announced that working of the solid waste treatment plant was making pollution and hence causing health hazards, but did not show any interest in visiting the plant.\textsuperscript{362} M.K Muneer, the minister of grama panchayat in the UDF ministry also has never taken any initiative for solving the tension between local governments.

Courts played a crucial role in this public controversy, especially the Kerala High Court and Supreme Court. The High Court of Kerala had mentioned that if state government was not ready to give protection to the functioning plant, Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) may be deployed.\textsuperscript{363} In her report to the Court, advocate Meera had also

\textsuperscript{359} The then Chairperson of Health Standing Committee, Vilappil grama panchayat.
\textsuperscript{360} Mathrubhumi, 27 February 2011, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{361} C.S Anil (General Convener of Samyuktha Samara Samithi) interviewed on June 17, 2013 at Peyad, Vilappilsala.
\textsuperscript{362} Pramod (Junior Health Inspector of the plant) interviewed on June 17, 2013 at the plant, Nedumkuzhi, Vilappilsala.
\textsuperscript{363} Mathrubhumi, 25 February 2012, p. 1.
mentioned that there was no facility to segregate plastic waste from other wastes and that the construction of waste treatment plant was not yet completed.\textsuperscript{364} The report gave a clear picture of the status of the plant which was not at all in favour to the Corporation. The High Court of Kerala however, gave permission to the Corporation to re-open the solid waste treatment plant and directed the state government to give protection to the plant. The High Court of Kerala pressurised the state government to take action without mercy to the public who were struggling for their livelihood and defending their social identity. It was in this context that the Vilappil grama panchayat appealed against the judgment of the High Court.\textsuperscript{365} The Supreme Court of India also granted permission to the Corporation of Thiruvananthapuram for re-opening the solid waste treatment plant. However, the state government was failed to implement the order of Supreme Court due to the strong resistance of the local publics.

After the closing of the solid waste treatment plant by the Vilappil grama panchayat, the state government of Kerala showed its irresponsibility in solving the controversy as well as the tension between two local self-government institutes. State government tried to get 118 acres of land for starting a new solid waste processing plant in Nemom constituency.\textsuperscript{366} The member of the Nemom legislative assembly N.Shakthan (deputy speaker of the state) defended the proposal of establishing a new solid waste treatment plant successfully by mentioning that he would not allow such a polluting plant in his assembly constitution.\textsuperscript{367} The government announced after a while that they acquired land in the Mangalapuram technocity in Thiruvananthapuram to start the Plant, but this move from the government’s side never got materialised.\textsuperscript{368} Similarly, a plastic waste treatment plant at Nedukoltheri prison was proposed, but once again the state government failed to keep its words.\textsuperscript{369} Another proposal was to start small scale solid

\textsuperscript{364} Kerala Kaumudi, 18 January 2012, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{365} Mathrubhumi, 18 April 2012, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{366} Mathrubhumi, 25 June 2011, p. 16.
\textsuperscript{367} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{368} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{369} Ibid.
waste treatment plants inside the city itself.\textsuperscript{370} Though this new proposition came up in
2009, the land acquiring process is yet to be started.

Due to the strict order from the High Court, the state government had unlocked the plant
to restart waste treatment. The police failed to give protection for transporting the
machines for the installation of the leachate treatment plant. The protectors successfully
defended the transferring of solid waste to the plant. Following this, the state
government called for a compromise meeting that failed to attain a consensus from the
villagers for dumping waste for few months to find out another solution for the crisis.\textsuperscript{371}
Therefore, as an alternative, the government requested the corporation to dump the
waste in stone quarries.\textsuperscript{372} The Corporation disagreed with this suggestion as most of
the abandoned stone quarries were the origin of water streams.\textsuperscript{373}

It is visible that the state government continuously failed to arrive at an alternative
method to solve the public controversy over the waste and to dispose the solid waste
scientifically and eco-friendly. The state government had decided to send the waste to
Veli and Murukkumpuzha for the construction of railway platforms but it was not
feasible due to public resistance at these localities. It shows that the government always
tried to dispose the waste by land-filling that aggravated pollution and ground water
contamination. These actions of the government indicate that it has not drafted any
policy related to waste disposal and does not have any vision to control the waste
generation as well as its scientific disposal. As per the Municipal Solid Waste
(Management and Handling) Rules, 2000, the land filling of waste is only possible if it
neither recyclable nor processable, and the rules strictly blocking the landfilling of
mixed waste as it found as apt for processing. It shows that corporation cannot do
landfilling as the waste from city was mixed waste. But unfortunately, corporation was
going behind the landfilling method, as this method was considered as last option.

\textsuperscript{370} Kerala Kaumudi, 24 December 2011, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{371} K. Chandrika (Ex. Mayor of the Corporation), interviewed on June 16, 2013 at the Corporation
office, Thiruvananthapuram.
\textsuperscript{372} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{373} Ibid.
Public controversies always bring out its internal dynamics. In the case of Vilappilsala waste controversy, with the help of various stakeholders the truth behind the solid waste treatment plant came out and people started resisting the dumping of waste in their village. Because of strong resistance from all sides, the state government failed to remove waste from the capital city which led to the spreading of dengue fever and other diseases. Due to this, the government declared a curfew in Vilappil grama panchayat as well as in the Thiruvananthapuram city along with closure order to all slaughter houses and meat stalls working without valid license on October 21, 2012.\textsuperscript{374} It was found that the slaughter house waste was simply dumped into pits after the closure of the Vilappilsala plant which creates public health risk in the city.\textsuperscript{375}

Meanwhile, the public of Thiruvanananthapuram corporation were determinant to act against the stopping of Nedumkuzhi solid waste treatment plant and they decided to give full support to the Corporation regarding this issue.\textsuperscript{376} The residential associations from various parts of the Corporation held a meeting to express their standpoint and extended their support to the Corporation.\textsuperscript{377} The urban public is the beneficiary of this solid waste treatment plant and it is their need to keep this plant alive, and they demanded for the reopening of the plant.\textsuperscript{378}

Fifteen Malayalam newspapers,\textsuperscript{379} five English newspapers\textsuperscript{380} and six Malayalam news channels\textsuperscript{381} were active in the region during the controversy. Television channels did not pay much attention to the controversy. When the researcher interviewed one of the reporters of Amrutha Television (Thiruvananthapuram bureau), she conceded that they

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item\textsuperscript{374}\textit{Malayala Manoram}, 22 October 2012, p.4
\item\textsuperscript{375} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{376}\textit{Kerala Kaumudi}, 29 January 2011, p. 2.
\item\textsuperscript{377}\textit{Mathrubhumi}, 03 March 2012, p. 14.
\item\textsuperscript{378} K. Chandrika (Mayor of the Corporation), interviewed on June 16, 2013 at the Corporation office, Thiruvananthapuram.
\item\textsuperscript{379}\textit{Malayala Manorama, Mathrubhumi, Deshabhimani, Madhyamam, Thejas, Varthamanam, Deepika, Veekshanam, Siraj, Chandrika, Janayugam, Mangalam, Janmabhoomi, Rakshtra Deepika, and Kerala Koumudi.}
\item\textsuperscript{380}\textit{The Hindu, the New Indian Express, Deccan Chronicle, the Pioneer, Times of India.}
\item\textsuperscript{381}\textit{Asianet News, Kairali People, Amrutha TV, Reporter, Indiavision, Jaihind TV.}
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
never took the waste crisis seriously. They made news only for their daily news programs and the duration of news clips was a maximum of two minutes.\(^{382}\)

Unlike the television channels, newspapers like *Mathrubhumi, Madhyamam, Malayala Manorama* and *Kerala Kaumudi* attempted to bring out the issue into public sphere, although in a limited manner. Weekly magazines such as *Madhyamam, Malayalam, Kalakoumudi* and *Mathrubhumi* published several stories regarding the controversy while linking it with Kerala’s waste problem in general.

In the case of print media, most of the news reports appeared in the local news columns and rarely some news reports got highlighted on the first pages. It is important to note that most of the news reports appeared in the newspapers when some major events occurred in connection with the controversy. No newspapers or TV news channels were but giving news reports or analytical articles related to the relay hunger strike that put forward several demands including the permanent closure of the treatment plant.\(^{383}\) It shows that most of the newspapers have actively participated in regulating the deliberations in the public sphere by activating a gate keeping mechanism that was shaped by their vested interests and circulation strategies. This point contrast with Varughese (2017) which underscores that the media has a crucial role in activation of rich deliberation in risk controversies in Kerala particular.

**4.6. Kudumbashree in Solid Waste Dispute**

Along with the villagers, the Kudumbashree workers in Thiruvananthapuram city also turned to be active participants in the controversy. As part of the waste management in the city of Thiruvananthapuram, Kudumbashree workers have been collecting the solid waste from the houses, flats, apartments etc. and each household pays them a meagre amount as remuneration for collecting the garbage. Most of the Kudumbashree workers belonged to lower class and lower caste backgrounds and all of them are women. They are working in the field of waste collection and transportation for the Corporation. They


\(^{383}\) T.T. Sasi (member of *Samyuktha Samara Samithi*) interviewed on June 09, 2013 at Vilappilsala.
are not permanent employs of the corporation and not even getting payment from the corporation. A fixed amount given by the household when they collect waste.

After the closure of the solid waste treatment plant, most of the Kudumbashree workers lost their income so they decided to protest for their labour rights. Kudumbashree workers of the corporation conducted a protest march on against the closure of solid waste treatment plant on 24th December 2011 at the State secretariat in Thiruvananthapuram. It was inaugurated by M.G. Meenambika, the then district secretary of Janadhipathya Mahila Association (All India Democratic Women’s Association). They were arguing for the reopening the plant, and also demanded for permanent appointment as staff of the corporation. The Kudumbashree workers protest was clearly against the corporation and not against the villagers. Their protest was but turned by the corporation against the villagers’ protest, highlighting the ‘plight’ of the poor women labourers who have lost their livelihood. This incident led to a tension between two disadvantaged groups and this particular context arguments of both are equally valid. Corporation wanted to get this situation to negotiate with the villagers by keeping Kudumbashree workers in the front side. As part of this conspiracy, the corporation authorities also declared that the Kudumbashree workers would not lose their jobs if a new project is implemented. Even though they worked for the corporation, the authorities never considered them as their workers; they were working on contract basis. The hypocritical attitude of the Corporation is explicit as instead of providing the Kudumbashree workers with any labour benefits, the Corporation even collected seventy rupees per month as ‘service charge’ from these workers! After the closure of the solid waste treatment plant, most of the workers lost their jobs because

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384 C.S Anil (General Convener of Samyuktha Samara Samithi) interviewed on June 17, 2013 at Peyad, Vilappilsala.
385 All India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA) is an independent left inclined women’s organisation to work of attaining democracy, equality and women’s emancipation. It is one of the wings of Communist Party of India (Marxist) and founded in 1981 as a national level mass women’s organisation. (See the website of AIDWA http://www.aidwaonline.org/contact accessed on July 16, 2018).
386 C.S Anil (General Convener of Samyuktha Samara Samithi) interviewed on June 17, 2013 at Peyad, Vilappilsala.
387 Kerala Kaumudi, 22 December 2011, p. 3.
388 C.S Anil (General Convener of Samyuktha Samara Samithi) interviewed on June 17, 2016 at Peyad, Vilappilsala.
Corporation did not offer them any storage facility to keep the waste collected from the city.

Throughout the Vilappilsala public controversy over waste we can see the tension between the villagers and the Indian political system. The villagers tried to protect their social identity that was challenged by the authorities. Along with the social identity of the villagers, their livelihood, everyday activities of life and fundamental rights were threatened. In this particular case we see the different kinds of publics formed around the waste and the meaning of waste is different for all publics. For the city dwellers, waste is a nuisance which should be dumped somewhere, and it shifted into the Vilappilsala. Waste is a social risks for the villagers due to the accumulation which threaten their whole life. For Kudumbashree workers, waste is part of their livelihood. For political parties waste is tool for mobilising people to get the power in the elected bodies.

4.7. Conclusion

The government, political parties and judiciary have kept away villagers’ fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution of India which made serious disturbance in their day to day life. In the context of the solid waste controversy discussed in this chapter, the technoscientific life has created social, health and environmental risks. However, these risks were politically and technologically shifted to another location away from the city by developing a centralised waste management system. Thus, the villagers of Vilappilsala turned out to be the prime victims of these risks, although they were not the producers of these risks.

The villagers, however, quickly recognised such a political strategy while they learned more about these risks and tried to protect their social identity as well as livelihood by exposing the politics of waste management through their social movement. Throughout this case study, it is clear that the credibility of and trust in government officials and technology were challenged and the failure and ineffectiveness of the existing solid waste treatment technologies and the waste management policies were exposed. The paradox is that, solid waste treatment plants are meant for reducing the harmfulness of
waste by disposing the waste scientifically and eco-friendly; however, in reality solid waste treatment plants add up to the pollution and increases the risks faced by the people. The case of the solid waste treatment plant at Vilappilsala exposes this paradox of waste management. As part of the active public engagement in this controversy, the hidden agenda behind the waste management crisis came out in the public domain, which helped the villagers to defend their social identity. This chapter attempted to understand how different actors (stakeholders) shaped the public deliberations. The chapter also endeavoured to understand how the political system in Kerala responded to the controversy while aligning themselves with the city-dwellers. The controversy, as argued in the chapter, exposes the inherent paradoaxes and internal ambivalences in the centralised waste management systems in urban areas, which simply shift the risks of waste to another location outside the city, instead of resolving the very problem of waste generation. As part of finding a solution to this solid waste management crisis, the corporation has recently decided to adopt Alappuzha model of municipal solid waste management, as it got more attention in the mainstream. Alappuzha model is considered as one of the successful model of solid waste management and a detailed analysis of this model will be done in the next chapter.