CHAPTER -6

PARTICIPATORY INSTITUTIONS AND EMPOWERMENT OF MARGINALIZED GROUPS

People’s Planning Campaign (PPC) initiated in 1996 envisaged the empowerment of different marginalized groups, particularly women, and Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. It has also given special emphasis to the development of the fishermen community, those who lag behind others on development indicators (Isaac & Franke, 2000). Different measures have been taken by the PPC to implement such an objective in practice. Special groups for women, Scheduled Castes (SCs), and Scheduled Tribes (STs) had been suggested in the gram sabhas for discussing the plans related to them. Separate special component plans have also been introduced namely: Women’s Component Plan (WCP) for women, Special component plan (SCP) for Scheduled Castes, and Tribal Sub Plan (TSP) for the tribal community. A special budgetary allocation has been given to each Local Self Government (LSG) to implement these plans (Kerala State Planning Board, 1999). Separate Task Forces had been formed in each LSG to frame the special plans for these groups. Along with these, separate chapters were suggested in the development reports of each LSG, and also in their plan documents of each year. These special considerations and plans had been continued also during the KDP phase, except for some changes made to the Tribal sub plan. The Government of Kerala decided to withdraw the fund for the Tribal Sub Plan from LSGs in 2002, and decided to implement it through the Scheduled Tribe department. The state government partially modified the decision after two years, and gave 50% of the TSP fund back to the LSGs (Kjosavik & Shanmugharatnam, 2006).

When we compare the status of women in Kerala with women in other Indian states, based on primary indicators such as literacy, rate of fertility, etc., they are not as poorly off as some others (Vijayan & Sandhya, 2004). When we compare it with indicators such as decision making power of women, atrocities against women and job participation of women, it is far behind many other states (Vijayan, 2007). The volume of the different forms of capital owned by SCs, STs, and fishermen groups,
such level of education, ownership over land is quite low. The lack of capital acted as a hurdle in their interactions with the rest of society.

This chapter analyses the involvement of marginalized communities in participatory institutions such as gram sabhas, Task forces, and women’s Neighbourhood groups (NHGs). We also analyse the special component plans of the selected GPs during the PPC and KDP periods. According to Pierre Bourdieu the influence and involvement of individuals or groups in their respective fields would depend on the power and volume of capital that they hold (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Thus, being groups with a historical lack of different forms of capital, we analyse the involvement of marginalized groups in participatory institutions and their negotiation potential within these institutions.

6.1 The concept of empowerment and its contextual implications

Empowerment is a concept that has been used in different contexts. It is used here in the context of life situations of the marginalized groups such as women, Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and the fishermen community. Empowerment is also related to two other concepts, i.e. exclusion¹ and development². It denotes a process of change from a condition when they lacked power, and that human agency and choice could not be exercised freely according to the will of the individual or group. Here, the process of disempowerment had been occurring because of the historical condition of exclusion of certain groups or communities from mainstream development (Getz, 2005). Empowerment has been described as a process of change from conditions of disempowerment to a condition in which there is greater control over many dimensions of life, in a context in which this ability was previously denied (Kabeer, 2001) Empowerment is a process of expansion in capability of individuals and groups to make choices where such a possibility did not formerly exist (Kabeer, 2001: 54). It also leads to the strengthening of an individual’s or group’s agency within them. Agency encompasses collective as well as individual reflection and action (Kabeer, 2001). At the deeper level of empowerment the structures that determine the distribution of resources and power undergo changes that decrease the reproduction of inequality. Improved economic conditions do not necessarily translate into empowerment for individuals and groups. Likewise, changes that lessen
structural inequality and discrimination must make real changes in the choices and outcomes available to individuals.

Women’s empowerment has been defined very specifically by different authors. Women’s empowerment entails developing a critical consciousness that strengthen women’s abilities to identify, question, challenge and change patriarchal gender power relations (Kabeer in Getz, 2005). It will challenge both the visible and invisible sources of patriarchal power. It is also viewed as an increase in collective action by women, and changes in gender power relations (Gurumoorthy in Getz, 2005).

In the specific context of PPC, the concept of empowered deliberative democracy has been adopted by PPC as well (Isaac, 2000). The idea of empowered deliberative democracy involves the direct involvement of ordinary citizens in the problem solving through which decisions are made (Wright, 2000). Here, the central theme is the public deliberation in the formation and implementation of programmes and projects at the local level. Empowered deliberative democracy is an attempt to change the institutional design in such a way that ordinary citizens are empowered to engage directly in deliberative problem solving and decision making at the local level.

The PPC sought to empower marginalized groups through their participation in the deliberative process, by engaging in the activities of participatory institutions such as gram sabhas, and Task force. It was expected that such a rights based deliberation will lead to the reproduction of institutional structure in their favour, and ultimately it will lead to changes in the balance of power that exist in society. The early part of this chapter describes whether empowerment has been realised in practice or not. As we have mentioned, the power and volume of capital that each individual and group holds has a crucial role in their interactions in the public sphere. This has also to be considered while we move ahead with these discussions.

6.2 Background of the marginalized groups in the GramPanchayats

Since our discussion is focused on the empowerment of marginalized groups it is relevant to examine the background and status of these groups in the selected panchayats. Venkitangu GP has a substantial number of Scheduled Caste (SC) households. They have 902 households in the GP area, spread largely in and around
eighteen colonies. 176 SC families are in Kudayathur, spread over six colonies, and other areas. Vallikkunnu GP has 687 SC families spread over 24 colonies and other areas of the GP. (Kudayathur GramPanchayat, 2002; Venkitangu GramPanchayat, 2002; Vallikkunnu GramPanchayat, 2002). A general factor observed among the SCs in the three panchayats is that most of them were depending on agriculture as a source of work and employment. However, they remained as agricultural labourers, not cultivators. The average land holding of the SC families is less than 10 cents, and most often it was five cents or less. The leaders of agricultural labourers’ unions emphasized that migration of agricultural labourers, including labourers from the Scheduled Castes, to the construction sector was phenomenally high in the past ten years. The other relevant fact is the lower educational levels of SC people. The responses from SC coordinators in the panchayats showed that SC members below 50 years of age who were educated above SSLC is less than twenty per cent of that group’s population. Government employees and migrants to West Asian countries from these groups in the selected panchayats was also quite low (Kudayathur GP, 2002; Venkitangu GP, 2002; Vallikkunnu GP, 2002).

The number of fishermen households in Vallikkunnu GP was 715 and were spread over the four coastal wards. Land ownership of fishermen was also limited to below 10 cents each for most of the families. Their level of education was also quite low, and the number of illiterate people in this group was high compared to the general population (Vallikkunnu GP, 1996, 2002). A report from a Non-Government Organisation (NGO) in the panchayat showed that illiteracy was fifteen per cent among the fishermen of the panchayat, while it was seven to eight per cent amongst the general population (Krishna Education Society, 2003). The report also stated that lack of education (even primary school level), practice of child marriage, lack of job diversification and lack of ownership of land were the major problems faced by the fishing community in Vallikkunnu (Krishna Education Society, 2003).

Compared to other tribal groups in Idukki district and elsewhere in the state, the condition of tribals in Kudayathur was better on the basis of several indicators such as ownership of land, education and employment. The Malayarayas of Kudayathur were in a comparatively better off economic position than other tribal groups in the nearby panchayats and district as a whole (Peter, 2003). Most of the
tribal families in Kudayathur had an average of 1-3 acres of land and several households had government employees among their members, which was less visible among other tribal communities in Kerala. The Christian Missionary Society (CMS) had established two churches in Koovappilly and Adoormala which are the prominent ST settlements in Kudayathur, in the latter half of the 19th century. Documents in Kudayathur GP state that Koovappilly church was established in 1872 (Kudayathur GramPanchayat, 1996). The church in Adoormala celebrated its 125th anniversary recently. The CMS started two schools in Adoormala and Koovappilly in the latter half of 19th century, which had a prominent role in educating the tribals. The economic capital formed through the ownership of land was supplemented by cultural capital formed through education. These two sources of capital together provided a different kind of upward social mobility to the tribal group in the GP compared to other tribal groups. Most of the tribal families in Kudayathur had converted to Christianity and later merged with the Church of South India (CSI). Though some of the Malayaraya families have not converted to Christianity they too reaped the benefits of the educational opportunities provided in that area.

Historical narrations show that Malayarayas had been actively interacting with the rest of the population. The commercialization of agriculture which was highly visible in the Travancore region of Kerala influenced the life of Malayarayas, who were dealing with high value cash crops like cardamom and pepper. The interaction with non-tribal population, and the compulsions created because of their engagement in commercialized agricultural activity induced Malayarayas to invite CMS missionaries to establish schools in their areas of habitation (Tharakan in Peter, 2003). Malayarayas were exposed to education and market to a greater extent than other tribal groups in Kerala (Peter, 2003).

6.3 Participation of the marginalized groups in institutions of the Gram panchayats

Gram sabhas, Task forces and women’s Neighbourhood groups are the micro level participatory institutions we have analysed in this study. Gram sabhas and Task forces have given special emphasis to the empowerment of marginalized groups, while women NHGs are exclusively meant for women. The Government of Kerala had initiated a poverty eradication project named Kudambashree in 1998, which was
intended to work through women Neighbourhood groups (Oommen, 2006). Kudambashree also had the objective of empowering women. Thus, it is also appropriate to analyse the functioning of the NHGs in the selected GPs.

6.3.1 Presence and participation of marginalized groups in Gram sabhas

From the discussion in the chapter on gram sabhas (Chapter 4) we observed that the attendance of marginalized groups in the gram sabhas was substantially higher in all the three panchayats. Women’s attendance in the gram sabhas also increased after 2002, with the expansion of the Kudambashree programme in the panchayats. We also found that NHG members were increasingly participating in the gram sabhas, because the responsibility of organizing gram sabhas was placed on them. Further, most of the SCs, and the fishermen community attended gram sabhas for seeking benefits, because of the higher incidence of poverty among them. The attendance in the tribal area of Kudayathur GP and fishermen area of Vallikkunnu GP continued to be good compared to the other regions, though there has been a decline in numbers here as well.

Though the attendance of SCs, women and fishermen was relatively high in gram sabhas, this has not been translated into their participation in gram sabha activities. Though women outnumbered men in the gram sabhas after the start of the Kudambashree programme, this was not reflected in their participation in gram sabhas. Responses showed that women usually remained silent during discussions. They were not able to break the male dominance in GS, though they outnumbered men. Most often they were not even aware of the existence of a special component plan for them. They could not overcome the historical lack of power and capital, even though the new opportunities were to enable them to come out of their subordinated status. The culture of silence actually acted as a hurdle in their rights based deliberations in the public sphere and the empowerment process itself.

The evidence from the study shows that the historical habitus of the subordinated women was reflected in the public space such as gram sabhas as well. They were not able to critically analyse the hegemonic power relations imposed over them through patriarchal structures, as envisaged by the women empowerment theories (Kabeer, 2001). The rights based equal deliberations that were expected by
the PPC were not realised in practice. The study indicates that women were not able to achieve the capabilities to involve themselves in public discourses in forums such as GS. Though they were active in women’s forums such as NHGs, most of them were silent when they came into a public forum like GS, where men also participate. Women occasionally raised demands in the GS but most of them were limited to the level of individual benefits, rather than general development issues and issues related to gender equality.

The responses about SC participation were also not noticeably different. They attended gram sabhas as silent participants, or as participants who were only speaking for individual benefits. They identified themselves as subordinated subjects who were always waiting for some charity from the government. Thus, their interventions in gram sabhas were limited to being a group of receivers of benefits, donated by the government. They were not asking questions about the utilization of the SC component plan and the utilization of the general fund. Another factor was their lower educational status that acted as a hurdle in understanding the issues discussed in meetings, and to respond to them. Educated middle class among them, who were small in number, were not interested in attending the gram sabhas. These people were able to overcome the hurdles that they had historically faced through greater access to education, and chose to affirm their middle class identity by staying away from public institutions like Gram sabhas.

Empowerment is envisaged as a process of achieving control over the various aspects related to their own life (Kabeer, 2001). Developing their own individual agency is an integral part of empowerment. Agency is an individual as well as collective reflection and action. Though the SC people were widely participating in gram sabhas, they were not able to use their agency as a transformative one that could transform their position from subordination to one that was equal to other citizens. Bourdieu argued that culture plays a key role in the positioning of a group within a social hierarchy. For those at the higher end of that hierarchy it provides the means to maintain it, while those at the lower end have limits to their aspirations, and it also creates discrimination and blocks mobility (Rao, 2004). The lack of cultural capital, because of historical subordination and lower access to education, restricted the capacity for articulation of the SCs in gram sabhas. This again affected their mobility
and potential for developing a deliberative and discursive space within the public forums.

The responses from fishermen’s households indicated that more than sixty per cent of them are not even aware of the local planning process. They were attending GS and vehemently articulating individual demands, while their lower education status restricted them from understanding the details of general plans and the expenditure pattern. Many of the respondents agreed that they were not educated enough to read the documents provided in the gram sabhas. They were also not interested in a public discussion in a public space. Evidently they were not able to break the historical habitus which constructed their passive approach to public space, even after their continuous involvement in the public space through NHGs and gram sabhas. Bourdieu had argued that all cultural practices are related to educational level and social origin (Bourdieu, 1989). Their educational backwardness acted as a hurdle to the fishermen, in understanding the materials distributed in the GS and responding to them.

The Malayaraya’s involvement in the gram sabhas of Kudayathur was higher in comparison to SCs of the other panchayats. Their higher exposure to public institutions was the compound effect of higher access to cultural and economic capital in term of more access to education and land. Unlike other tribal groups, the Malayaraya group of Kudayathur got land and education which acted as capital for further mobilization and exposure to the public space. The ST middle class groups who gained cultural capital through higher access to education and employment were willing to participate in the GS and public deliberations. This was different from the experience of other middle class groups in the three panchayats. Due to the participation of middle class STs in gram sabhas, they were able to raise effective democratic deliberations. The experience of the middle class among tribals in Kudayathur was found to be in contrast to experiences of other middle classes in the GPs, in terms of attendance and participation in gram sabhas. Though there are government employees in most of the families, unlike other middle classes most of the tribal families in Kudayathur still have agricultural activity. They also face the problem of public transportation and lack of drinking water. Their dependency on agriculture as a source of income, and the backwardness in terms of public utility.
services may be factors that still motivate the tribal middle class to regularly attend gram sabhas. As another study has shown, they had had the practice of conducting local councils for discussing their own issues in the locality (Peter, 2003). This could be considered as a micro level democratic process which had provided earlier experiences of democratic practices through the traditional system. This traditional practice of local democracy may have contributed in their higher participation in gram sabhas.

6.4 Functioning of the Task forces for the marginalized groups

Separate Task forces had been formed in each GP, particularly for women, SCs, STs and fishermen’s development. The special Task forces had greater difficulty in locating experts and bringing them into the planning process. This was particularly visible in the case of SC and fisheries Task forces. One SC Task force member from Kudayathur who was active during both PPC and KDP phases commented, “We had only one expert in our Task force. He was a retired district education officer. He joined the TF in 2004, and we had no experts in our Task force before that”. This lacuna was also visible in Vallikkunnu and Venkitangu. It should be noted that the people from other communities were very rarely included in the Task forces for SCs and fishermen. The former Task force chairperson of fisheries sector in Vallikkunnu during the PPC phase commented, “The members of the fishing community were able to give only suggestions for the projects. They were not educated enough to understand technical matters and to prepare the projects. Thus, preparation of projects became vested with officials”.

The lack of grass roots level training also severely affected the functioning of the special Task forces. One Task force member who is also a panchayat member in Kudayathur stated that she was not aware of the special component plans for women, though she was a Task force member. Intensive training was required to overcome the limitations in terms of the lack of capabilities of special Task force members. Such an intensive training at the grass roots level has not yet happened. Deliberate efforts are needed to overcome their historical lack of cultural capital and lower knowledge levels. Capability building was a core component of the empowerment process. This emphasis had not been given to equip the special Task force members during both the PPC and KDP.
While reviewing the participation of the members in the preparation of projects in the case of SC, ST and women Task forces, the responses showed that there were differences in their functioning in comparison to other Task forces. In the case of women’s Task force their active involvement in Kudayathur and Vallikkunnu in the PPC stage was due to the presence of Women development committees (WDC). This involvement weakened after the PPC, and the WDC was merged with Kudambashree during the KDP phase. WDC has become a body controlled by officials than a group of women, after the Kudambashree started functioning.

The women panchayat members were not able to conduct a uniform movement for the benefit of women, because of the influence of political parties over them. It was argued that women’s political participation will result in building a polity and civil society in which women’s voices shape governance in new and presumably better ways, and it was also expected that this emerging women’s force would become effective agents of social change (Getz, 2005). The responses from the study show that there was no consensus among elected women representatives in the GPs on the issues related to women. Their views were fragmented, influenced by the views of the political parties. They could not overcome the divisive politics in favour of women as a group.

In the case of SCs, the TF members from the panchayats revealed a general observation that their involvement in formulating the projects was limited only to the extent of attending the meetings and giving suggestions. The SC coordinator in Kudayathur who has been working since the KDP phase commented, “The Task force members attend the meetings and present their requirements. Other than that they were not capable of giving any innovative suggestions to empower the community”. The former chairperson of the SC Task force in Vallikkunnu during the PPC phase commented, “In the PPC phase there were some educated people in the TF. It functioned actively, whereas in the second stage it became a nominal body. The panchayat could not bring in more of educated people into the Task force, and also, they were not able to retain most of the active members. The writing of projects became a duty of officials”. The TF members from Venkitangu made the statement that lack of educated members acted as a hurdle in the active functioning of the Task Forces.
We could examine some factors as reasons for the ineffectiveness of the SC Task forces. Unlike the agricultural Task force or health group, they have no professional officers in charge of the functioning of this Task force. Normally, the Village Extension Officer (VEO) was assigned the position as convener of such a Task force, and who was already burdened with many other responsibilities. This happens in the case of women Task force as well. The Integrated Child Development Scheme’s (ICDS) supervisors are assigned the charge of this Task force. Like VEOs they are also engaged in many other activities.

The Government of Kerala appointed one coordinator for each panchayat for the SCs and STs during the PPC phase. They had the responsibility of facilitating the formation and implementation of projects under the special component plan for SCs and STs. From fieldinterviews the indications are that after the PPC, the SC coordinator started to act as part of the staff of the Block Panchayat even though they were appointed to help the GPs. All the SC coordinators in the three panchayats indicated that they visited the GPs once in a week, and they spent much of their time in the Block offices by doing various work suggested by the Block authorities. The lack of professionally trained officers as conveners of TFs, and the absence of educated members were the major lacunae found in the functioning of the SC Task forces. A study conducted by the Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA) also reached the conclusion that SC Task forces were largely inactive (Remakantan & Retnaraj, 2006). Lack of educated members, non-availability of experts, and absence of full time trained officials in charge were the major obstacles in their functioning. Pierre Bourdieu had argued that symbolic systems are not simply instruments of knowledge. They are also instruments of domination (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Here, education and knowledge act as a symbolic system of both domination and subordination. The SCs who were relatively weak in education and skills, faced hurdles in developing projects to overcome their economic and social backwardness. The SC Task force did not get any assistance from other general TFs because of the low symbolic value assigned to them by the others. No structural transformation happened in the position of SCs in the social space other than reinforcing the existing subordinate one.
The lack of educated members was also a hurdle in the functioning of the fisheries Task force in Vallikkunnu. The former chairperson of the Fisheries Task force during the KDP phase commented, “The members were attending the meetings. A major lacuna in TF functioning was the lack of educated members. The members gave suggestions for the projects but they were incapable of translating their ideas into projects. Therefore, most of the projects were prepared by only the officials”. In the case of the ST Task force in Kudayathur, it was functioning comparatively better because of the presence of many educated middle class members who were regularly participating in its activities. One Task force member who was a school teacher commented, “There were many educated people in our group. We had team spirit. Many of the earlier members are still there in our Task force.” It has shown that the participation of educated middle class group made a difference in their (Task force’s) functioning. This also corroborates the role of power and volume of capital acquired by each group. The tribals in Kudayathur acquired a certain power out of the economic and cultural capital through historical opportunities provided by ownership of land and access to education. This has become an instrument for their further mobilization.

Bourdieu observed that occupation of social space depended on cultural capital along with other forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1989). Here, education and the employment opportunities acted as a source of cultural capital and facilitated the mobility of tribals in Kudayathur. The economic capital acquired through higher ownership of land and the commercialization of agriculture led them towards the acquisition of more cultural capital, that is, education. The combined effect of different forms of capital together provided mobility to STs in Kudayathur, compared with other tribal groups. A study conducted in Wayanaad district among three different tribal communities reached a conclusion that the poorest group among the tribals, i.e. Paniyas were unable to articulate their demands in public forums, whereas the comparatively well off group viz Kurumas were actively engaged in public forums (Madhavan & Herbert, 2010). This also reaffirmed the observation that holding different forms and volume of capital will make changes in the positioning of various social groups in social space.
A notable factor in the functioning of special Task forces is that the involvement or cooperation of other Task forces was very limited. Every Task force was asked to prepare projects in its own area for the empowerment of marginalized groups. For e.g. the education Task force was to prepare education projects for SCs and STs, the industrial Task force was to prepare projects for industrial activities of women and SCs. Coordinated action by the other Task forces by giving preferences to the marginalized groups would have been helpful to overcome the lack of expertise in Task forces in these groups. Such efforts were missing in the functioning of Task forces, except in the functioning of the industrial Task force in Vallikkunnu.

6.5 Projects for marginalized groups

Decentralization has made substantial improvements on the basic infrastructure of marginalized groups, particularly SC and ST communities. The list of projects implemented by the GPs for the marginalized groups such as women, SCs, and STs has been given as appendix (See 6.A, 6.B, 6.C, 6.D) of the thesis. It shows that the GPs had spent substantial amounts of money to provide assistance for constructing houses and latrines, purchasing land for building houses, electrification of houses and, providing drinking water to the SC and ST families. The documents of the three GPs indicated that GPs had done much to improve the basic infrastructure facilities of SC and ST households.

The table below (6.1) indicates that gram panchayats had spent considerable amounts of money for the improvement of infrastructure facilities of the SC households. The same interventions happened in the case of tribals in Kudayathur GP too. They constructed 36 houses for STs during the 9th and 10th plan and built 82 latrines in ST houses (Kudayathur GP, 2002, 2007). The table (see Appendix table 6.A, 6.B, 6.C, 6.D) shows the projects implemented by the GPs for the SC and ST communities. This also showed that the interventions for the electrification of houses, providing drinking water supply and expanding road facilities to the SC and ST colonies and habitations had been undertaken by the grampanchayats. The evaluation report of the committee that examined decentralized planning in Kerala also emphasized the considerable changes that had occurred in the infrastructure facilities of SC, ST households all over the state (Oommen et al, 2009). The economic backwardness of the SC families had acted as an impediment in finishing projects of
individual schemes. The former secretary of Venkitangu GP who served the panchayat during both PPC and KDP phases commented, “We had much difficulty in finishing the housing scheme for SCs. Though we allot the money, they use the money for some other purpose. Thus, sometimes we could not spend all the funds earmarked for them”.

Table 6.1

Assistance provided by the GPs to the SC community

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>particulars</th>
<th>Name of GP</th>
<th>Quantity (Numbers)</th>
<th>9th Plan</th>
<th>10th Plan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Houses Constructed</td>
<td>Vallikkunnu</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>116</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Venkitangu</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>119</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kudayathur</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latrines</td>
<td>Vallikkunnu</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Venkitangu</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>155</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kudayathur</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houses Repaired</td>
<td>Vallikkunnu</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>64</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Venkitangu</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>111</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kudayathur</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>57</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (Plan Documents Kudayathur, Venkitangu, Vallikkunnu GPs 2002, 2007)

Other than the individual beneficiary schemes, and community projects like road construction and drinking water supply, projects to overcome the educational backwardness of the SCs and projects to ensure sustainable livelihood for them were lacking in the gram panchayats. Though they initiated some projects such as providing study materials and special tuitions to SC and ST students, they lacked continuity. The school based special coaching for ST students at Kuduyathur that was started in 2007 could be considered as an exception. In a panchayat such as Venkitangu which has a larger SC population, they could not carry out comprehensive self-employment programmes or projects in the education sector that would have been helpful to overcome their economic and educational backwardness. Though a
number of SCs were engaged in the agricultural sector as daily wage earners, the GP could not carry out agricultural mechanization and skill development training of SC youth.

Vallikkunnu GP had made some attempt to address the issue of employment diversification of SCs by starting a paper works unit and a hollow bricks unit for them, but these attempts ended as failures. The lack of managerial abilities and scientific feasibility study were the major reasons behind the failure. Such an issue had not been discussed by the SC groups in the gram sabhas or Task forces. As we have discussed above, the inability of their own Task forces to form innovative projects acted as an obstacle to their attempts to formulate and run the projects. Lack of expertise and the neglect of grampanchayats also acted as impediments in the framing and implementation of quality projects by the GPs for the empowerment of SCs.

Quite often, knowingly or unknowingly the grampanchayats’ interventions affirm their (SCs) subordinate position in society rather than emancipating them from it. GPs purchase land for SC families in water logged areas, where land was available at low cost, and established the colonies for SCs there because of the higher land price elsewhere in the panchayat. Arrangement of SC habitation in colonies also effected restrictions in their interactions with the rest of society. Their interactions with society are necessary to overcome their cultural isolation. Otherwise, it will again strengthen their lack of cultural capital and facilitate their continuation as a subordinated subject. The structural changes in the economic sphere, particularly the alienation of land from marginalized groups such as SCs has again reinforced their subordinate status. The increasing land prices in Kerala either forces them to sell the land for their survival, or prevents them from acquiring land in good locations (KSSP, 2006). This historical backwardness in terms of low access to power and capital again acts as a hurdle in their negotiation potential even in the participatory institutions.

In the case of ST projects the Kudayathur gram panchayat has given emphasis to individual beneficiary projects of housing, construction of latrines, and house electrification. Along with this they focused on building roads to the ST areas and implementing drinking water supply schemes for STs. The better involvement of educated people in ST Task forces was also reflected in the better implementation of
the projects prepared for them. The self-employment schemes initiated by the GP such as tailoring units and bag making units ended as failed attempts.

Though Vallikkunnu GP has a substantial population in the fisheries sector they could not undertake more projects to address the development hurdles of the fishermen community. They could only undertake the project of distributing boats and nets for fishing to marine fishermen in the GP area. All the other projects that they had undertaken such as prawn cultivation and shell cultivation were not directly beneficial to the fishermen, who depend on marine fishing. A study conducted in Calicut district of Kerala came to the conclusion that most of the projects implemented by the GPs during the PPC were not directly beneficial to the marine fishing community, while they have given emphasis to inland fishing and fresh water fish cultivation (MITRA, 2003). The GP could not undertake any project for fish processing and product diversification. The limitation of the GPs to intervene in this sector was also revealed through the responses of the informants. The standing committee chairperson of the GP, who has been holding the position since the PPC commented, “This is an area that needs large capital investment. Due to the technological innovations, interventions became very costly. One large boat with a capacity to employ 30-40 fishermen will cost 40 lakh rupees. We have limitations in providing a subsidy for such a purchase. The government allowed us to give only 25% subsidy. We submitted a comprehensive plan for a fishing village to the district panchayat, including provisions for a housing complex for the homeless, systems for fish processing and marketing, which was not approved”. The responses showed that the coordinated interventions of all three tiers of the LSG and the fisheries department were needed to initiate a comprehensive project in the fisheries sector. In spite of this, each tier of LSGs and state departments were implementing their own projects in different ways. This kind of isolated interventions did not make for any improvement to the lives of the fishermen.

John Kurien observed that because of the use of sophisticated technologies, fishing became an activity that needed larger capital investment. The new fish harvesting technologies initially raised the output, but in the long term resulted in damage to the coastal eco system. The investors who entered from outside the fishing community became wealthy and the traditional fishermen who had no employment
options other than fishing were forced to continue their miserable lives in the same sector (Kurien, 1998). While a society has gone through such a crisis, limited interventions from the GP may not be enough to overcome it. The reasons for the backwardness of the fishing community, i.e. the lack of ownership of land, poor education, poor health conditions, lack of diversification of labour, and uncertainty in the employment opportunities have not been addressed by the decentralized planning either in the PPC or in the KDP phases.

Structural changes in the economy also make the lives of the fishermen harder. Ten to fifteen people live in small houses in poor localities. They could not find better land for housing, even though the panchayat and the Government are providing money to purchase land. The limitation is that the GP could provide only 25000 rupees for purchasing one cent of land. However, land price in the nearby areas is more than 1.5 lakh for a cent of land in Vallikkunnu. The Government had allotted 45 houses in the GP area for fishermen as part of the tsunami rehabilitation project in 2007. The GP could not implement it because only five fishermen families were able to acquire land for building houses. The Development standing committee chairperson of the GP for the last three terms commented, “The land issues of other deprived groups such as SCs and STs have been highly debated in Kerala. Nobody talked about the land issue of the fishermen. You know 10-15 people are residing in small houses here, and unless the government intervenes, they would continue to be landless”. This experience shows that the historical problem of landlessness acted as a hurdle against the mobility of the fishermen community. As Tharakan (2004) observed, fisher folk are the community that has been left out of land reforms along with the tribals. The structural changes in the economy in terms of marketization of land have also denied them the opportunities to move ahead. The land market has expanded phenomenally in Kerala during the last two decades (KSSP, 2006), which has forced the poor to sell their land to meet the necessities of life, and has resulted in the accumulation of land by the rich. Along with this the land price became unaffordable to the poor, which led to their alienation from land. The legal hurdles such as Coastal Regulation Act also acts as an obstacle in using their own land in the coastal area for their house. Here too, we could observe that the lack of capital restricts the mobility of the community, irrespective of the fact that they were provided
new opportunities such as the chance to voice their views through participatory institutions.

6.5.1 Empowerment of women and the projects of the grampanchayats

When we analyse the projects under the women’s component plan (WCP) initiated by the gram panchayats we could bring them under some major categories. Assistance to establish small scale industrial units, various self-employment training programmes, awareness programmes and the projects coming under other general categories such as housing. The projects under the small scale industrial units, and self-employment training were prominent among them. Kudayathur GP started up vermicompost units, soap making units, tailoring units and note book binding units during the 9th plan. They started a bag making unit during the 10th plan. Vallikkunnu GP started food processing units, soap making units, readymade garment units during the 9th plan. They also started green mussel cultivation units, paper works unit and a canteen during the 10th plan. In Venkitangu GP they distributed sewing machines and started a women’s canteen during the 9th plan. They could not start up any new units during the 10th plan.

The GPs also organized several self-employment training programmes. Kudayathur GP organized training for making handicrafts, driving, and tailoring for women. Vallikkunnu GP organized several self-employment training programmes. Venkitangu GP set up training for making milk products, beautician training, handicrafts making, and training for making plates with betel leaves. As a different experience, Vallikkunnu GP started a women’s mobile library and a school of performing arts for women. They also organized football and volleyball training for girls.

GPs used the money from the Women component plan for implementing general projects that should have been possible only by using general funds. Assistance to women for building cattle sheds, buying cattle, constructing houses, were some among them. They also provided assistance for vegetable cultivation, floriculture units, rabbit and goat rearing units. Venkitangu GP earmarked money for the renovation of houses owned by widows. In the three panchayats they earmarked money for providing a revolving fund to the women NHGs (Kudayathur
From the experience of the projects implemented by the panchayats we can say the following. Most of the small scale units begun by the women either closed down or became inactive after one or two years. Except for the vermicompost unit the other units did not survive in Kudayathur. The green mussel cultivation unit was the only successful attempt in Vallikkunnu, while paper products, and the canteen and food processing units became failures. The biogas unit was the only venture that succeeded in Venkitangu. As we have suggested earlier, the lack of management efficiency, team work, non-availability of raw materials, lack of marketing facilities and backward-forward linkages have been given as reasons for these failures.

Most of these projects had been started through women NHG’s under the Kudumbashree programme. It was argued that Kudumbashree would be able to alleviate poverty through the small scale units of women and through their entrepreneurship (Oommen, 2006). This objective has not been realised. Along with this, the women who were engaged in the small scale units stated that they were not able to make more than rupees fifty per day as wages or profits out of such units. The biogas plant at Venkitangu seems to be an exception. This has shown that women who were engaged in such units had not been able to earn a minimum subsistence income even after performing the dual responsibilities of home and as a worker in a unit. The other noticeable factor is that most of the projects started by the GPs affirmed the traditional gender role assigned to women. The projects were not able to break the traditional gender based division of labour to men and women, and to introduce an egalitarian concept in division of labour. The football and volleyball training begun by the Vallikkunnu GP and the auto driving training initiated by Kudayathur were the exceptions. As Kabeer (2001) observed, a critical view and consciousness about the existing pattern of development, and a critical perception of patriarchy is the prerequisite of women’s empowerment. The PPC had given more emphasis to women’s empowerment in terms of allotting funds and suggesting different processes of protecting the interests of women. It largely failed in generating the critical consciousness among women who were involved in the process. Further the PPC hardly attempted to challenge the existing gender roles. Though the GPs
started several training programmes, they had no assurance that the trained people would be employed in such activities later. The training programmes ended as fund spending activities, rather than activities targeted on women’s benefits. The women who were assigned to manage the units did not get any professional training either, from the GP or from any other institution, particularly on management aspects. Women who had no prior experience in managing enterprises actually faced the challenges to run the enterprises, and did much better. The GPs could not provide sustainable support to the units as an attempt by the new entrepreneurs.

Panchayats considered the distribution of revolving funds to the Neighbourhood groups (NHGs) as an easy way to spend the money coming under the WCP. This tendency was more visible in Vallikkunnu and Kudayathur in the KDP. From the middle of the KDP phase GPs started to reduce the amounts earmarked for Women’s component plan. A woman elected representative in Vallikkunnu during the KDP phase commented, “The GP has not been earmarking ten percent of the total plan for the WCP. They had been allotting rupees one lakh or so for name sake. The GP claimed that money would remain unspent if it is earmarked for WCP.” She added that even the women GP members were not aware that ten percent of the total plan fund was allotted for WCP. The same tendency was visible in Venkitangutu GP. They included general projects under WCP such as women’s housing, latrine, house repair etc. or reduced the actual amount earmarked for the WCP.

The GP addressed the practical gender needs of women through the projects for livelihood, providing infrastructure to women headed families etc. They have done much less to address their strategic gender needs which would have been helpful to change the male domination in the family and society. There was no clarity among the planners about the distinction between practical and strategic gender needs which had been an impediment to formulating suitable projects for women’s empowerment (Vijayan, 2007). The Women’s development committees in Vallikkunnu and Kudayathur had awareness classes on gender status of women in the PPC phase, but they could not proceed with them. The three panchayats had initiated women’s status studies as projects under the WCP, though none of them was able to finish it and prepare the report. The former panchayat President from Vallikkunnu during the KDP phase commented, “We had attended the training of women status study as a team.
We also collected some field information. However, we could not prepare the report of the study.” The football and volleyball training at Vallikkunnu and auto driving training at Kudayathur were the only projects that challenged the existing male hierarchy in the respective field. The girls’ football team in Vallikkunnu was selected as a state level winner at the sub-junior level (Vallikkunnu GP, 2007).

Bourdieu argued that an agent’s struggle in social space will depend on the position he or she occupies in the social space. Capital is important to change the structure of the field and social space (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The PPC’s attempt was largely focused on the economic empowerment of women while it failed in highlighting women’s subordination as a cultural and historical issue. This lacuna in perception restricted the attempts to enhance the cultural and symbolic capital of women, and was, therefore, missing in the planning process. Though the GPs initiated a women’s status study in the middle stage of the PPC, none of the three GPs could finish that process in a fruitful way. The attempts to empower women through the expansion of their economic capital also failed to an extent because of the inadequacies in planning strategies and techniques. As a result, there was no effort to radically alter the gender power relations in the society which were indispensable to bring substantial women’s empowerment.

6.6 Neighbourhood groups and empowerment of women

Neighbourhood groups (NHGs) have been used as a tool for poverty eradication and women’s empowerment by the Government of Kerala through setting up the Kudumbashree programme all over the state in 1998. It began in 200 Panchayats in the state, and then expanded to all institutions of local government in the state during 2002-2003 (Oommen, 2006). Though the Kudumbashree project had come into existence in Vallikkunnu, Kudayathur and Venkitangu in 2002, these three panchayats had the experience of prior experiments of women NHGs before Kudumbashree. Vallikkunnu had the Community based nutrition programme (CBNP) and Poverty alleviation programme (PAP) that started in Malappuram district in 1994. They formed NHGs all over the grampanchayat as a part of this project. In Kudayathur they formed the NHGs and Women’s development committee at the panchayat level as an apex body of NHGs in 1999. They also had 70 NHGs across the panchayat before starting up Kudumbashree in 2002. In Venkitangu too, they
experimented with NHGs under the banner of *Stree Shakti* project initiated by the Mullassery Block Panchayat. More than fifteen NHGs were formed under the umbrella of ‘Stree Shakti’ in Venkitangul. NHGs were closely associated with the Kudayathur panchayat from their inception, while they had not interacted closely with the panchayats in Vallikkunnu and Venkitangul in the initial phase. NHGs in these three panchayats were converted into NHGs under Kudumbashree after the Kudumbashree started in those panchayats. At the same time various parallel organizations had formed their own Self help groups in these Panchayats. A micro finance institution and NGO namely Vikas credit and informal banking services (VICIB) and a local NGO named Kudayathur development society (KDS) formed their own Self help groups in Kudayathur. Religious and caste organizations such as the Catholic Church, Sree Narayana Dharma Daripulana Yogam (SNDP) and Nair Service Society (NSS) also formed their own SHGs in the gram panchayat area. NSS and SNDP formed their own SHGs in Venkitangul and Vallikkunnu as well. The NGO called Krishna Education Society formed SHGs in Vallikkunnu and other NGOs named Evangelical Social Action Forum (ESAF), and SKS Micro Finance Ltd formed their SHGs in Venkitangul.

### 6.6.1 Expansion and the financial activities of the NHGs

Kudumbashree is a government project through grampanchayats, and we would focus our discussions on the NHGs under Kudumbashree. Venkitangul GP formed 117 NHGs during 2002-2003. It had increased to 145 in 2005, and then was reduced to 109 during 2006-07. The Community development society (CDS) chairperson in charge, in Venkitangul, commented, “For the last three years we faced challenges from SHGs of ESAF and SKS. Many of our NHGs had stopped functioning, and members joined those groups.” There were 70 NHGs in Kudayathur in 2002 when the Kudumbashree programme started, and the number increased to 86 in 2005, but was reduced to 79 during 2007, and then again increased to 94. Seventeen groups have been started recently after, 2007. The former CDS chairperson, working during the KDP phase stated, “The Vikas Credit and Informal Banking services (VICIB) units were working here. They attracted many of our members through various offers. This really made an impact on us”. Vallikkunnu GP has 50 NHGs under Community based nutrition programme and it expanded to 150 during 2003, and to 259 during 2007-08.
They succeeded in sustaining the groups in Vallikkunnu though they faced several challenges. The CDS chairperson commented, “During the last three-four years we have faced challenges from SHGs of caste organizations such as Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam, and Nair Service Society. We took a decision that we will not allow dual membership. They are making many offers to the Kudumbashree members such as a higher amount of loan, loans for personal purposes etc.” NGOs such as VICIB, ESAF and SKS were charging 13-14 percent interest from the members while Kudumbashree was charging only one percent. They were trapping members by offering higher loans, ranging from 15,000 to 20,000, while the Kudumbashree NHGs were able to give only lower amounts of 5000-10,000, as loans. A former CDS chairperson from Kudayathur who was in charge after the KDP period indicated, “Normally people fall into such traps. They take higher loans for purchasing furniture and household appliances. Initially, people will not think about the interest. Their procedures are really tough in case of failure in repayment. Some women have dual membership. They took loans from each place and could not repay them. Finally, they went out of the NHG network itself”. These instances showed that the parallel SHG networks in the panchayats that function mainly through NGOs really act as business enterprises through microfinance. They were charging high rates of interest and exploiting the consumer culture of the women.

The responses from interviewees showed that members of Kudumbashree generally kept financial discipline by promptly paying the subscription and repaying the loans. This observation is endorsed by the Kudumbashree leaders in the panchayats. The Kudumbashree chairperson from Vallikkunnu replied, “Most of the members of NHGs were paying the subscription and loan amounts promptly. The office bearers of the NHGs have informed us in case of default and we have been interacting with the defaulters. We allowed an additional ten months for repayment in such cases, and most of them paid within this time limit.” At the same time, it was noted that the NHGs in SC settlements of Venkitangu and the fishermen’s settlement in Vallikkunnu were dissolved several times because of the inability of the members to pay the subscription promptly and to assure the prompt repayment of loans taken by them. The chairperson of the ward level Area development society of Kudumbashree in the fishermen’s area of Vallikkunnu indicated, “We had Kudumbashree units in the fishermen’s areas. Many of them stopped their activity.”
The inability of members to make prompt payments of subscriptions and loans was the major reason for their dissolution. Along with that they could not find educated members who were able to maintain the accounts and management of the NHGs. Educated people among them were not willing to undertake the responsibilities’.

The lack of education of the members acted as a hurdle in the functioning of NHGs in the fishermen’s area. The NHG units that were able to find educated people to lead the NHGs succeeded in their functioning. However, in these places too they faced difficulties in mobilizing more money as subscription because of the poverty.

During a Focus group discussion (FGD) in a NHG of the Scheduled Caste living area in Venkitangu, the members stated that they were forced to dissolve the NHGs several times because of the immediate necessity of money. The secretary of Aiswarya NHG commented, “We are not giving loans now-a-days. We dissolved our NHG several times. When we had a shortage of money, we dissolved the NHG and shared the money that had been paid, and were forced to start all over again. We did not have sufficient balance to provide money to members. We normally dissolved the NHG where there was lack of employment and an acute shortage of money”. The former Kudumbashree CDS chairperson also admitted that this happened in the case of NHGs having SC members, mostly in SC colonies. The field evidence confirmed that NHGs in SC areas are lagging behind other NHGs in running micro enterprises.

A study in Malappuram district (Anand, 2002), and another study in Wayanaad (Madhavan & Herbert, 2010), revealed that women’s NHGs are not active among the poorest of the poor. It is pertinent to note that the government schemes that were designed to help the poor actually excluded the poorest of the poor in practice. Their capabilities have not developed to a stage where they can pay even a minimum amount to participate in an institution such as the NHG. This reveals that a kind of minimum capital or capability is needed to participate even in the Self help movement. These groups face the powerlessness arising out of extreme poverty.

### 6.6.2 Micro enterprises and economic empowerment

The common factor found among the Kudumbashree units is the lack of sufficient small scale enterprises under the units in the Income Generation Programme (IGP).
Compared to the number of Kudumbashree units, the number of micro enterprises seems to be very low. In Vallikkunnu only 31 enterprises were working, out of 259 NHG units, whereas it was lower than 10 in Kudayathur, and 50 in Venkitangu. Most of the small scale enterprises in Venkitangu were engaged in the retail marketing of items such as rice, grocery, and clothes. They were also engaged in soap making and pickle making. A few of them were engaged in other productive activities such as cultivation of vegetables, banana and rice by taking land on lease. Kudayathur GP and Kudumbashree provided loans to more than 50 groups, but only ten of them have survived. The units were engaged in candle making, vermicompost making, dairy unit, goat rearing and cow rearing. Some of the vermicompost units, candle making units and dairy units were sustained only for a short time. The NHGs in Vallikkunnu were engaged in coir making, notebook making, cotton bag making, and in direct marketing. The majority of the units here was engaged in direct marketing. They have units engaged in cultivation and processing of green mussels. They also have a soap making unit working under the tsunami rehabilitation project called the Society for Assistance to Fishermen (SAF) initiated by the Government of Kerala, which got the best unit award from the state government for the year 2008-2009.

Poverty eradication of families through women was visualized with the functioning of the NHGs. It was expected that several small scale enterprises would emerge under the umbrella of NHGs that would provide subsistence incomes for the women (Oommen, 2006). The experiences in these panchayats showed that this hope had not been fully realized through the functioning of the NHGs. Only one fifth of the NHGs in the panchayats were engaged in any kind of small scale enterprise even after a decade of the establishment of the Kudumbashree. An evaluation of Kudumbashree also stated that the number of income generation programmes is quite low while compared to the number of NHGs (Oommen, 2006). Another relevant fact is that the number of units that had survived for longer periods is very low compared to the number of units established. The number of units that could provide a survival income to the members was also very low. More than two thirds of the units could not provide at least fifty rupees per day to each member engaged in small scale entrepreneurial activity. As we have mentioned above, the units that considered backward and forward linkages, such as green mussel cultivation units and coir units in Vallikkunnu, the milk supply unit in Kudayathur and the bio-gas plant in
Venkitangal have functioned for 4–5 years. Quite recently, Kudumbashree organized monthly markets at the panchayat level for Kudumbashree products. They also started a project called ‘Samagra’ for branding and packing. This branding system has not been practiced in the selected panchayats of our study. Lack of professionalism was a major problem observed in the management of small scale units.

The gender specific factors of being overburdened in the family and workplace, inability to stay for training over long periods, or stay away from home, also acted as hurdles in the functioning of women entrepreneurs. They were forced to compete with the mainstream national and multinational companies who have high capital support and advertising techniques. Though there are ward and panchayat level federations for Kudumbashrees they could not provide professional management for the maintenance of small scale units. In this context a suggestion by the development standing committee chairperson from Vallikkunnu to develop a cluster based management system for different categories of units is quite relevant. The important factor is that the small scale units cannot be sustained as isolated units. Well planned production networks and marketing system were needed to sustain themselves in a world of severe competition. The decisions to opt for specific products in the units were very unscientific, and many of the NHGs in the same areas were engaged in similar or identical activities. Except for providing loans from the thrift of the members and arranging external loans, the real financial objectives of the NHGs, i.e. poverty eradication through the income generated out of Income Generation Programmes (IGP) largely failed in practice. In most of the cases the members could not earn even a subsistence income from such activities. This has turned into an additional burden in their life instead of a source of livelihood. Being Kudumbashree members, women were forced to engage in other public activities organized by the GPs as well.

6.6.3 NHGs and involvement of women in the public space

An important observation in the study concerns the changes that have occurred in the case of women following their interactions in the public space, and after they became members of NHGs. There were more changes seen among women who were engaged at the leadership level. The women who worked as members of CDS, ADS and as Secretaries of NHGs gained different capabilities as leaders. The responses of
women who were in leadership positions in Kudumbashree are interesting. A former CDS chairperson from Kudayathur during the KDP phase commented, “I am really indebted to Kudumbashree. You know I was not even able to speak in a public meeting before joining Kudumbashree. Now I am confident enough to address a big gathering.” An ADS chairperson and former panchayat member from Venkitangu during the KDP stated, “It was really a shift from the kitchen to a public space. I was unaware about how to approach a government office. Now I am confident of entering into any office”. The changes were visible among ordinary members as well, in terms of public exposure. At a Focus group discussion in Vallikkunnu, the members indicated that they have undergone several personal changes after joining the NHG. They indicated that they are now capable of approaching public institutions and officers, and have also acquired knowledge in several matters. The members of NHGs in Kudayathur stated that they have to interact regularly with the public. The NHG members in Venkitangu pointed out that even Muslim women who were not coming out of their homes, have now started to come out and attend meetings. These responses show that Kudumbashree activities provided an exposure to women to be able to function in the public space. It also helped them to develop several personality traits to interact with the public, panchayat authorities, and officials. It enabled many of them to talk in public meetings. The former CDS chairperson from Vallikkunnu during 2006-2009 commented, “Earlier we had a scarcity of women candidates to contest in local body elections. Now Kudumbashree alone can provide many capable women leaders in the GP”. This kind of public exposure provided women with the ability to play an effective role in public life, which is a remarkable change. The recent government decision to provide fifty percent seats in the LSGs to women has also helped them to reap the gains of this public exposure.

Amartya Sen (2000) observed that the impact of greater empowerment and independent agency of women includes the correction of injustices that blight the lives and well being of women vis-à-vis men. The availability of opportunities and spaces that were earlier denied to women can be considered as expanding their capabilities which will lead to their empowerment. Sen also pointed out that providing more capabilities and choices will lead to a community or group towards the empowering process and the path of development. The women in NHGs got a new public space and opportunities to engage in that space. We can observe that an
element of empowerment has occurred to them and which has provided more capabilities and choices that made them more successful in public life.

Though women as NHG members have gained several advantages in terms of public exposure, this has not led to changes in the family atmosphere, that provide any privilege to women. Although women were able to raise their voice in their own forums (all-women groups) they still hold a subordinate position in public forums such as gram sabhas that included men. The responses showed that time spent by the women outside their homes increased several times because of their participation in various public activities and entrepreneurial activities though that has not made any change in the division of labour within the family. I had asked the women a question, ‘How are you managing the household tasks and outside responsibilities at the same time?’ They responded that they have not made any compromises in their household tasks. Most of them were not getting any assistance from male family members in carrying out their household tasks. An ADS chairperson in Vallikkunnu commented, “I did not get any support from my husband in sharing household tasks. I have been waking up early every morning, almost at 4 a.m., and have been doing the household tasks. Most of the days I have been going back to my home during lunch time to serve lunch for my husband. The majority of us share the same situation.” Responses from Focus group discussions and interviews of Kudumbashree leaders in other Panchayats had the same response.

Naila Kabeer (2001) argues that legitimisation of women’s participation through institutional support should lead to changes in women’s sense of self, the formation of a larger collective voice, and changes at the structural level by shaping democratic processes and generate changes in gender power relations. We have seen that the participation in NHGs had made changes in the self perception of women, in terms of their ability to interact with the public, engage in public spaces etc. Such changes, however, did not extend into making structural changes in other areas. It has not made any noticeable impact within the family in terms of gendered division of labour and power relations within the family. The Kudumbashree programme could not succeed in nurturing critical consciousness among its members about the existing gender relations. After more than a decade of experience in 2009, only the Kudumbashree could initiate a gender education programme called Gender Self
Learning Programme (Kudumbashree, 2009). A criticism of Kudumbashree is that it has provided continued endorsement to the traditional gendered division of labour rather than altering it (Devika & Thampi, 2011). The lack of critical consciousness prevented the organized movement of women against any kind of male domination in the three panchayats, though they were highly organized in number through the NHGs.

Kudumbashree members admitted that they are still reluctant to raise their arguments in gram sabhas. The presence of male officials and panchayat members in the CDS meetings also forced them to keep silent even after a decade of women’s NHGs functioning in the panchayats. A woman grampanchayat member in Venkitangu commented, “Some of the male members attend these meetings and dictate matters. Very rarely do women members speak in CDS meetings”. I was present at a meeting in Kudayathur, where the standing committee chairman of the GP was giving instructions, and CDS members silently obeyed them. Though women’s exposure to public space has increased, they could not voice their own opinions in public meetings, which were led by men or dominated by them. Decisions were made by male functionaries, even related to the functions of the Kudumbashree.

Women’s role in decision making within their families has not changed to any noticeable extent. During the Focus group discussion, women in Vallikkunnu indicated that decisions about key issues at home, whether it was about building their house, education of children, spending money for various purposes, were made by men. A former ADS chairperson who was also a member of the grampanchayat during the PPC phase commented, “Economic self sufficiency of women is important for their participation in decision making processes within their home. How can a woman who takes money from her husband for paying the NHG subscription be self reliant in decision making?”. It showed that the economic self reliance of women continues to be a distant dream in the case of the majority of NHG members.

Some Kudumbashree leaders, during interviews revealed that they had bitter experiences within the family, due to which they started to interact more often in the public space. A woman leader even shared the experience that her relations with her husband reached the stage of divorce. An ADS leader in Kudayathur commented, “We may be a little late in reaching home after attending a meeting in a distant place.
Travelling after dark is still considered as a bad practice in the case of women. We are forced to limit our activities because of the restrictions of our own family. Quite often I got extremely bad comments from men who were sitting in the bus stop”. This indicated that in order to make changes in the patriarchal power structure, the orientations of males are also quite necessary. The habitus of the male which has been structured in their interactions with the patriarchal dominant fields of polity, religion and economy also needs to be restructured in accordance with the empowering process of women. Kerala’s decentralization initiatives could not bring out the issue of gender discrimination into a mainstream public discourse. It could not create the spaces for discourse within the family and the public space about gender equality and forms of discrimination through which women are subordinated.

An important fact is that though women had been organized in substantial numbers as members of Neighbourhood groups (NHGs), they could not convert this organized force to prevent atrocities and exploitation against women. The former CDS chairperson in Kudayathur during the KDP phase commented, “The NHGs had no culture of discussing atrocities and exploitation against women in the locality. If somebody raised such an issue they took the approach that they need not intervene in household matters. Members who raised domestic issues could not get the support of others”. During the Focus group discussion the NHG members in Venkitangu and Vallikkunnu commented that it is better not to intervene in family issues, though they are harming women. Even child marriages, of those under eighteen years are taking place in the regions of Vallikkunnu and Venkitangu, among Muslim groups. The responses from Kudumbashree leaders and members of both the places indicated that such issues had never been discussed by them. The responses from Kudayathur showed that though drinking illicit liquor and the beating of wives after drinking was high in the gram panchayat area, they could not carry out any organized move against it.

We could note here that the institution of Jagratha Samiti (Vigilance committee) that was formed to prevent atrocities against women had not been functioning in the gram panchayats. A panchayat member in Vallikkunnu commented, “We could not form it here for a long time. It has started to function only recently. The panchayat level committees of Jagaratha Samithi considered some complaints
recently. The lower level committees at the ward level are still not functioning”. A former GP member in Venkitangul during the KDP phase also commented, “We formed the committees here, but there was no follow up to make them function”. The same responses have been given from Kudayathur.

An observation from the field was that Kudumbashree members have been used by the gram panchayats as a cheap labour force to have work done by them. During a Focus group discussion in a Neighbourhood group in Venkitangul, the members observed that they attended many inaugural functions. They also carried out many activities for the panchayats. For example, they distributed tablets (medicines) to prevent filaria in households. The members of the NHG at Kudayathur stated that they participated in house visits to prevent dengue fever, distribution of bleaching powder at the household level, and taking up various surveys for the government and panchayat such as livestock survey, survey about old age etc. The NHG members from Vallikkunnu said that they carried out many activities for the panchayat. The Kudumbashree members were allotted the role of serving gram sabha notices both in Vallikkunnu and Kudayathur. The members and leaders of Kudumbashree made the observation that quite often gram Panchayat members were assigned their work to the Kudumbashree, and scolded them for the faults that occurred. The Kudumbashree initiative has turned into an unpaid or low-paid forced involvement of members for the panchayats. The Kudumbashree members were forced to undertake many functions rather than enjoy a voluntary style of functioning.

6.7 Summary

Empowerment of marginalized groups was one among the key objectives of the People’s Planning Campaign, which had been continued in the KDP phase as well. This chapter has analysed the empowerment process of women, SCs, STs and fisher folks in the context of participatory institutions in Kerala. The term empowerment has been used in a multidimensional sense, essentially envisaged as a process that gives greater control to the marginalized people over many areas of their lives. It is also viewed as an increasing capability to exercise choices in their lives.

The attendance of SCs, STs, and fisher folks in gram sabhas has been high right from the initial phase of PPC. Women have outnumbered men from the middle
of the KDP onwards, i.e. 2002-2003. However, the high level of attendance by these
groups has not been translated into higher participation in the deliberative process in
the gram sabhas except in the case of tribal people in Kudayathur. Women were
largely silent in the public forums where men were also present. At the same time
they have been very active in their own (i.e. women’s groups) forums such as women
NHGs. They could not overcome the restrictions of the subordinated habitus imposed
upon them by the patriarchal power structure. As envisaged by the women
empowerment theories (Kabeer, 2001), they could not critically analyse the
hegemonic power structures that visibly or invisibly control them. Their inability to
alter the historical habitus through engagement and discourse meant that they could
not achieve the capabilities to transform and empower themselves. Historical
subordination and the lack of cultural capital, in terms of poor education, restricted
the negotiation potential of SCs and fisher folk in public forums, such as gram sabhas.
They could not develop their own agency into a radical transformative one, rather
than protecting the system of subordination. The higher level of economic and
cultural capital that tribal people of Kudayathur had was acquired through the higher
ownership of land and improved access to education. These made the tribe’s
interventions in Kudayathur GP, gram sabhas and Task forces more vibrant.

The special Task forces for SCs and fishermen faced hurdles in preparing
projects and making plans for their community. A lack of educated members and non
availability of experts were the major difficulties that they faced in functioning. Task
forces from other sectors too were not contributing much towards the development of
marginalized groups. As Pierre Bourdieu had argued, knowledge acted as a symbolic
system of domination as in the case of SCs, and fishermen, in their empowerment.
Education and knowledge took the form of symbolic capital that acted as a hurdle in
the empowerment of SCs and fishermen.

The experience of the projects implemented under decentralized planning for
the SCs, and STs, showed that basic infrastructure facilities of such groups such as
housing, latrines, access to drinking water and roads to their habitations and colonies
had improved considerably. The Special Component Plan for these groups has a
crucial role in these achievements. However, the special component plan largely
failed in improving their livelihood opportunities, educational standards, and health
status. Local body interventions cannot gloss over the inequalities faced by the SC communities, mainly manifested in their low access to land and education. The recent trends of increased conversion of land into a commodity, and commoditisation of education have also worsened their lives, particularly for those who lack both the economic and cultural capital to compete in the market with others. These developments in the society also hindered their mobility towards a better life. In the case of fishermen too, the GP could not make any substantial intervention to enhance their livelihood opportunities. The empowerment of the marginalized communities will continue to be a dream till the structural issues of inequalities are addressed. The coordinated action of the various tiers of local bodies is lacking in this dimension.

The increased technological dependence of fish harvesting and the increased requirement of capital together made changes in the production relations in the fishing sector, and made the fishermen more dependent on donors of capital (Kurien, 1999). Along with this, the destruction of the coastal ecosystem due to the rampant use of fish harvesting technologies and the lack of diversification of jobs made the sustainability of their livelihood far more difficult. The coordinated actions of the various tiers of local bodies and departments of the government were needed to address such complex issues, which was missing in practice. The plans of the local bodies failed to address the life issues of the marginalized groups in a comprehensive way by considering their historical contexts. The mere implementation of the guidelines from above are not enough to address these dynamic situations. Such creativity was missing in the special component plans of the local bodies.

In the case of empowerment of women, most of the programmes undertaken by the grampanchayats under the Women component plans (WCP) could not be sustained after a short span of time. In most of the cases where the women engaged in such income generation activities they were not able to earn even a minimum survival income out of such activities. The activities undertaken within the preview of the WCP programme largely followed the traditional gendered division of labour by protecting the interests of patriarchy. The Women component plans were largely confined to income generation activities. Programmes from the GPs to address the issues of patriarchal dominated gender relations and strategic gender needs of women were hardly in existence. The decentralization attempts in the GPs largely focused on
economic empowerment whereas it could not address the women’s subordination as a cultural issue, having deep historical roots.

In the case of Women NHGs, they succeeded in keeping financial discipline in their activities. They also succeeded to a great extent in providing assistance to their members in the form of loans, without the formal institutional complexities. When we come to the objective of poverty eradication through micro enterprises, they were not anywhere near their targets. The number of units engaged in any kind of enterprise is lower than the total number of working NHGs in the panchayats. Most of the women who were engaged in micro enterprise activities could not earn a subsistence income out of their activities, except in a few cases. In such a situation the income generation activities actually increased their physical exertion than earlier, without sufficient benefits. The NHGs provided a new exposure and confidence for women to engage in public life. But they could not critically challenge the gender power relations and gender based division of labour within the family. They could not make any alteration in the decision making process within the family by breaking the male domination, which could have led to the alteration of the power structure inside the family. Decentralization, and institutions that were started from the PPC, failed to a great extent in creating a critical consciousness among women to understand the existing familial and societal power relations in a gender perspective. The attempts that started during the PPC phase with gender status studies in the grampanchayats ended as a half cooked attempt. Decentralized institutions could not generate a public discourse in the local communities about the existing gender relations and the need for egalitarian gender relations within the family and society. The study also highlights the fact that though women NHGs were a part of the state’s attempt to eradicate poverty from society, in practice it excluded the poorest among the poor. The experiences of NHGs in the fishermen’s area of Vallikkunnu and NHGs in the SC colony of Venkitangu have provided evidence in this direction.

In the last three chapters we discussed the functioning of participatory institutions and their link with different development sectors and social groups. This chapter has examined the effects of participatory institutions and local planning in the empowerment of marginalized groups such as SCs, STs, fisher folks and women. The next two chapters will examine the influence of various social fields upon
participatory institutions. We will analyse the dynamics of the political field, the religious field, and the field of voluntary action by linking them with their interactions and approach to participatory institutions.

1 Social exclusion could be understood as a process which distances and places persons, groups, communities and territories in a position of inferiority in relation to centers of power, resources and prevailing values, See Remakanthan Retna raj (2006): Decentralization and social exclusion of Scheduled castes in Kerala.

2 The concept of development has been used by Amartya Sen, as a process of expanding real freedom that people enjoy in their life. According to him, freedom is central to the process of development. Amartya Sen (2000): Development as freedom.

3 Social world can be represented as a space with several dimensions constructed on the basis of principles of differentiation or distribution, constituted by the set of properties active within the social universe. Pierre Bourdieu (1985): ‘The social space and the genesis of the group’.

4 A study by KILA on the Special Component plan for SCs also observed that the percentage of funds used by the GPs for the livelihood promotion of SCs was quite low. See. Remakanthan & Retna Raj (2006)

5 The number of members of fisher folk families in Malappuram district is higher than the state average of fishermen families and also higher than other fishermen families. See. Kerala state planning board (2009): Human development report of the fisher folk in Kerala.