CHAPTER – 7

POLITICAL FIELD AND PARTICIPATORY INSTITUTIONS

The People’s Planning Campaign (PPC) launched in Kerala in 1996 was an effort to develop a participatory methodology for local level planning. It also envisaged nurturing a new culture of grass roots democracy in the state, and participatory planning (Isaac & Franke, 2000). PPC had introduced several participatory institutions to achieve these objectives. It also innovatively remoulded the institution of gram sabha (GS) as a tool for local planning. It was expected that these participatory institutions will serve the purpose of mobilizing people towards local planning (Kerala State Planning Board, 1999).

In the initial stage of PPC it was widely believed that the dense network of Kerala’s political organizations would be instrumental for mobilizing the masses to these participatory institutions, and to the activities of the panchayats. The proponents of PPC argued that the greater presence of political parties and their mass organizations would be supportive in creating a new political culture in favour of grass roots democracy. It was also hoped that there would be broader political consensus among the parties on the issues related to local development. (EMS Namboodiripad in Isaac & Sreedharan (eds), 2002).

Whatever may have been the expectations of a programme in its initial stage, ultimately the practices of the people are decisive in its success or failure. Pierre Bourdieu talked about the theoretical underpinnings of practices of the individuals and groups. He described practices as the different patterns and approaches that people follow in their day-to-day lives (Bourdieu in Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). He argued that practices of individuals or groups are closely related to the habitus and field comprising a set of objective historical relations between positions anchored in certain forms of power or capital. Habitus is a historically constructed product deposited within individuals that defines the nature of their practices in the living world. Bourdieu described social structure as a combination of different fields including political field, religious field, artistic field, field of class differences and field of power, each of which has its unique logic. He reiterated that every individual
is closely related to one field which can professionally influence his/her habitus, which has a critical role in defining their practices. At the same time as part of the total social field other fields can also have a minor influence on habitus in their own way. This influence would depend on the nature and volume of capital he/she holds. The influence of individuals or groups on the institutions would be prominently decided by the field and habitus that they represent. While we apply Bourdieu’s concept in Kerala’s political context, the history and dynamics of political parties representing the political field and their approaches to participatory institutions are important. The political field has a crucial role in framing the political habitus of the individual and group actors. Within the political field the approach of each political party that represents a specific institutional habitus is also pertinent in defining the political behaviour of the actors.

In the next two chapters we analyse the influence of various fields upon participatory institutions. For this purpose Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of field has been adapted to the Kerala situation. Kerala’s political, religious, and the field of civil society, have been selected for such an analysis.

This chapter focuses on the political field in Kerala by relating it with the participatory institutions and democratic practices. The analysis of the political field is pertinent because of its close affiliation with the functioning of local political institutions in Kerala. The election to local bodies in Kerala is on the basis of political party identity. Apart from the system of highly politicised governance at the local level, an assumption of the PPC about the increased involvement of political parties in grass roots democratic process needs to be discussed. It is also important to see how far the assumptions of PPC about the increased involvement of political parties and their mass organizations have been manifested in real life. In order to contextualise the political field we have included political parties and their mass organizations within this concept. Only the political parties represented in the elected local bodies have been taken for analysis. The enquiry on mass organizations of political parties has been restricted to the mass organizations functioning in the area of agriculture which includes farmers and agricultural labourers’ organizations, and organizations functioning among women and youth.
The following points are posed for discussion in this chapter. Has been there any change in the internal decision making process of the political parties after their interactions with local planning process and grass roots democracy? To what extent were political parties and their mass organizations able to provide space for the deliberations on local planning within their local forums? How have they involved themselves in local developmental issues? What efforts have political parties and their mass organizations made in educating and orienting their own activists and followers towards participatory institutions and democracy? How have they been involved in the local development issues? What are the changes that have taken place in the political process during the People’s Planning Campaign (1996–2001), and the Kerala Development Programme (2001–2006)?

7.1 Political dynamics of Kerala

It is necessary to briefly describe the dynamics of Kerala’s political field before we enter into a micro level discussion of the political dynamics of gram panchayats. Kerala had three major politically administered regions namely Travancore, Cochin and Malabar. Malabar was a part of Madras Presidency and was under the direct rule of the British, while Travancore and Cochin were princely states ruled by the colonial power through a series of treaties. The political processes of the Malabar region had developed through the national movement, and the formation of the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) which later on became the Communist Party in Kerala (Desai, 2001). The presence of such a national movement was less visible in the Travancore-Cochin region till the 1940s. The politics of these regions were dominated by caste and religious affiliated political groups such as the Joint political Congress, a political party dominated by Christians, Ezhavas and Nairs. The major slogan of the political movement in the Travancore-Cochin region was responsible government under princely rule. The political development in Travancore and Cochin was influenced by communal forces, while that of Malabar was shaped by the national movement, followed by class based mobilization led by communists (Nair, 1986; Chander, 1986; Desai, 2002).

The caste and religious reform movements that had a key role in the formation of modern Kerala later on also continued as a pressure force in politics, following the pattern of politics in the Travancore-Cochin region. Most of the religious groups
formed their own political parties and acted as pressure groups on governments. The correspondence between caste–religion and politics was strongly visible in Kerala even after Independence. This was strengthened after the liberation movement led by the opposition parties, under the leadership of Congress and religious forces such as the Christian Church and Nair Service Society against the first democratically elected government led by the communist party in the state (Nair, 1986). The liberation movement led by the opposition parties and religious forces was generated out of the resentment against the policies of the state government to implement land reforms and education reforms, which were against the interests of religious groups and opposition political parties. Since the 1960s, Kerala has had coalition politics in different forms. Both the Communists and the Congress were forced to join hands with parties that had a communal connection to form coalitions till 1981. Since 1981, the politics of Kerala has been clearly shaped into two coalitions, i.e. the Left Democratic Front (LDF) led by the Communist Party of India Marxist (CPI (M)) and the United Democratic Front led by the Indian National Congress (INC). Since then the major factions of the Muslim League (representing Muslims) and Kerala Congress (the majority of the activists were Christians and Nairs), two important communal based parties in Kerala, became part of the UDF. The presence of the Bharatiya Janatha party (BJP) increased in the state after the 1980s with the organizational back up of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) (Nair, 1986).

The first communist ministry in the state lost its place as the ruling coalition because of their attempts to introduce land reforms and education reforms bills, which were strongly opposed by Nair and Christian organizations along with the opposition parties, in 1959. Since then the communists have been wary of introducing radical reforms while the influence of special interests groups was high in the coalitions (Nair, 1986; Thomas, 1986). The role of communist parties and mass organizations in negotiating with the state for implementing welfare oriented programmes, and the culture of Kerala’s public action is well known (Veron, 2001). Irrespective of this history of mass mobilizations, Kerala lacked a mass movement that supported democratic decentralization. The attempts at land reforms had not furthered reforms based on decentralization, as it happened in West Bengal (Charvak, 2000; Gurukkal, 2001). The history of the Panchayati Raj in Kerala is one of aborted attempts, unkept promises and half-hearted efforts till the 1990s. Except for the constant support of EM
Sankaran Namboodiripad (EMS), the movement for decentralization even within the Left parties was stagnant in Kerala till 1996 (Parameswaran, 2000; Tharakan, 2004).

7.2 Political parties in the Gram panchayats

The three panchayats we have selected have different political parties in a majority. Vallikkunnu has been ruled by the Left Democratic Front (LDF) for the past fifteen years, and the last three terms continuously. It also has a history of continuous rule by the Left coalition for a long period. The LDF had 10 seats out of thirteen during their tenure of 1995 – 2000. They had ten seats out of eighteen during 2000–2005, and fourteen out of twenty two in the period, 2005–2010. The Communist Party of India Marxist CPI (M), Communist Party of India (CPI) and Janata Dal were the coalition partners. The Janata Dal and CPI did not have a continuous occupancy of seats. The Janata Dal had one seat in the 1995–2000 period, but had no seat in 2000–2005. They were able to win a seat in the 2005—2010 term. The CPI had a nominal participation with only one seat during 1995–2000. The Congress - I, and Muslim League (ML) are the coalition partners in the UDF who had two elected representatives in the grampanchayat. The Bharatiya Janata party (BJP) also demonstrated its presence in the grampanchayat with one seat in 2000–2005 and two seats in 2005–2010. In the UDF coalition, it is usually the Congress (I) that has a dominant presence. However, Vallikkunnu is dominated by the Muslim league (ML) in terms of the number of seats in the grampanchayat, and organizational strength within the UDF. (Vallikkunnu Panchayat, 1996, 2002, 2007)

Venkitangu was a United Democratic Front (UDF) dominated panchayat for years, though power shifted in the period 2005–2010, when they could not retain power. The Congress –I and Muslim league are partners in the UDF coalition that occupies the seats in the grampanchayat. During 1995–2000 the UDF won six seats out of eleven, in which the Congress- I had five and the Muslim League had one. During 2000–2005 the UDF won nine seats out of fourteen in which the Congress-I had eight seats and the Muslim League had one. The Communist Party of Marxist CPI (M) and Communist Party of India (CPI) are the partners in the Left coalition (LDF) in this panchayat. During the 2005–2010 period the LDF had the majority and they held twelve seats out of sixteen which was a setback to the UDF. The BJP had one

Kudayathur is the GP that alternatively chooses a different coalition of political parties. It is similar to the Kerala assembly’s pattern. The partners in both UDF and LDF coalitions are different in Kudayathur, compared to the other two GPs. The Congress -I, Muslim League and Kerala Congress (M), and Kerala Congress (Jacob) are the coalition partners in the UDF, while CPI (M) and Kerala Congress (Joseph) are the partners in the LDF. The LDF had five seats out of eight during the 1995–2000 period, while the BJP had one and UDF had two seats at the same time. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) had three seats and the Kerala Congress(Joseph) had two seats in the LDF coalition. In the elections of 2000 the UDF got a majority of seats, winning six seats out of ten, while the LDF won four seats. The Congress had four seats and ML and Kerala Congress (M) had one each in this period, while the BJP did not have any presence in the panchayat. The LDF had eight seats in 2005–2010 while UDF had won four out of a total of twelve seats. The CPI (M) had seven seats and the Kerala Congress (Joseph) had one seat during this time. Congress and Kerala Congress (M) got two seats each in this period (Kudayathur GramPanchayat, 1996, 2002, 2007).

The study has examined the presence and functioning of mass organizations of the political parties in the three panchayats. An emphasis was given to farmers and agriculture labourer’s organizations, youth organizations and women’s organizations. Only the CPI (M) and the Congress had mass organizations that were present in the areas of the three panchayats. Among them only the organizations of CPI (M) had grass roots units below the panchayat level. In the case of the Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI) both their units and the gram panchayat level forums were functioning in all the three panchayats as well. Youth Congress activities were limited to the panchayat level.

The all India Democratic Women Association (AIDWA) and Mahila Congress were the women’s organizations that have a presence in the three panchayats. The Mahila Congress had functioning units only at the gram panchayat level, while AIDWA had units at levels lower than the grampanchayat. The Muslim League had
its own women’s organization in Vallikkunnu, though it was not visible in the other two panchayats.

In the case of agricultural labourer’s organizations, there was only the presence of CPI (M) organizations in the field. The organizations of Congress were not active in any of the three panchayats. The organizations of CPI (M) called Karshaka Sangham (Farmers’ Association), and Karshka Thozhilali Union (Agricultural Labourers’ Union) were the only organizations that had been functioning in all the three panchayats. There were farmers’ organizations of the Communist Party of India (CPI) in Venkitangu, which did not have much of a presence at the grass roots level. Though the presence of the BJP was observed in all the three panchayats, their mass organizations were hardly visible except for the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS).

7.3 Internal elections and decision making within the political parties

Political parties are the leading force behind the administrative and democratic process in the gram panchayats, through party based elections and the system of administration. This makes for a situation where the democratization of the political parties becomes a necessary prerequisite for nurturing democratic culture in society. Since democratic decentralization is about the democratization at the grass roots, such a discussion is a relevant one. There could be different indicators to assess the democratic functioning within a political party and its mass organizations. One indicator could be the promptness in conducting internal party elections and choosing office bearers through a democratic process. Prominence to decentralized decision making and the preferences given to local issues in local forums of the parties could be another indicator. These two reasons are indicative of their importance. Democratic decentralization cannot be taken as an existing principle in the society without being practiced by the political parties. The second reason is related to the practical aspect of the administrative process. Since considerable resources and power have been devolved to the local level, the responsibility of decision making also needs to be transferred to the local level. The local development plan and issues need to be discussed at local forums of the political parties, to make it a political process. Thus, apart from the decisions coming from the higher bodies of the political parties,
discussion and decision making at their local level forums on the issues related to local planning and development is also required.

7.3.1 Elections in political parties

The following portion of this chapter reviews the experiences of the three selected panchayats. We will initially focus on the internal elections within the political parties. The Indian National Congress (Congress I), Communist Party of India Marxist (CPI (M)) and Muslim League (ML) are the parties that have a presence in all the three panchayats. These parties have adopted similar election procedures all over the State because of their widespread presence across the State. Local leaders of CPI (M) in the three panchayats suggested a similar view about their election process. They indicated that CPI (M) usually followed the practise of timely elections. They conducted internal elections once in every three years. The former local secretary of CPI (M) in Vallikkunnu stated, “we are strictly following the statutory rules for organizational elections. We conduct internal elections every three years except on some occasions when the party central committee takes a decision to postpone elections”. Responses of the leaders from the other two GPs also supported the contention that the CPI (M) conducted regular elections within the party.

Another point of inquiry was the method of electing committee members at the local level. The information from the field provided a general picture that the CPI (M) followed a regular election process at the local level. Their normal practice was to present a panel of members before the general body of party members at the local level. The representatives of the higher committees chaired the session for conducting elections. The members of the general body were allowed to make alternative suggestions and to contest places on the committees. The respondents made it clear that though there were chances for contestation, normally controversies did not occur. A former local committee member from Kudayathur commented as follows, “We give space for democratic elections, whereas group-wise competition based on particular interest groups are rare within the party system”. The response from Venkitangu was slightly different from the other two panchayats. The party leaders in Venkitangu opined that group wise competition was not a common phenomenon in the party in the earlier years, while it has increased during the last two elections because of the factionalism that is now visible within the party system. A former local committee
member of CPI (M) from Venkitangu said, “Group wise competition was not a common phenomenon within party elections. In recent times it has happened here and there because of factionalism within the party, not because of democratic intentions”. He also pointed out that due to the factionalism within the party, there was group wise competition in the last elections at Venkitangu, which led to the expulsion of some members from the party, including those who had tried to canvas votes for a particular group of people during party elections. Another leader made it clear that though an individual has the right to contest, group wise canvassing for particular interests is not allowed according to the party constitution. This was intended as a measure to prevent vested interest based group formation within the party.

In the case of Vallikkunnu and Kudayathur the CPI (M) was able to follow this organizational principle in their elections, while it was challenged in Venkitangu. Factionalism within the party in Venkitangu reached a stage that a group of activists was expelled and came out of the party and formed a new parallel organization called ‘Idathupaksha Ekopana samithi’ (Left Coordination Forum). This factionalism significantly affected the organizational strength of the party in Venkitangu. Due to the factionalism within the party, elections have become a tool for establishing the dominance of particular interest groups within party. This tendency was clearly visible in Venkitangu, where the party split into two groups following party elections, which severely hampered the unity of the party and its mobilization capacity.

The responses from the Congress party leaders were different from the CPI (M). The Congress leaders in the three grampanchayats had an almost similar view about their internal elections. The significant point in their views was that internal elections within the party did not take place for a long time. They indicated that there had been no elections in the Congress party for the past fifteen years. The Congress mandalam (panchayat) secretary in Venkitangu responded to a question on internal elections as follows, “Normally elections have to take place every three years. However, the last elections were actually held fifteen years ago”. The leaders from the other two grampanchayats also gave the same response. These observations indicate that the Congress party failed to pursue a democratic process by holding organizational elections. An additional point of inquiry was about the method of forming committees within the Congress, in the absence of democratic elections. The
observations from informants suggests that the party has either followed the method of sharing power based on group equations within the party, or on nominations from the higher bodies, which were based on group considerations. The Congress mandalam secretary in Vallikkunnu who spoke on the method that they followed to elect office bearers in the absence of elections stated, “We have been conducting interim conventions and approving a panel of office bearers, and most of them were coming through the nomination method”. A former panchayat President and Congress Block secretary in Kudayathur also said, “We did not have internal elections for a long time. We followed the method of nomination in this period”.

The absence of elections and factionalism within the party affected the activities of the Congress in the three panchayats. This tendency has manifested itself in different forms in different panchayats. Factionalism within the party affected their election results in Venkitangu panchayat during 2005 panchayat elections, where they had continuously, and for long, been the ruling party. The severe factionalism at the local level prevented the elected representatives from performing as a team and they were not able to get adequate results in local development. Factionalism and the absence of democratic elections within the party affected their organizational activities at the local level in Vallikkunnu and Kudayathur too. In the case of Kudayathur, an incident to nominate someone as party mandalam secretary without discussing it with the local party leaders created a situation where party activities in the locality remained stagnant for two years. Vallikkunnu was a place that was less affected by factionalism within the Congress. One significant factor we can perceive from the responses is that the absence of elections, and severe factionalism within the party, has had an adverse impact on the organizational activities of the Congress at the local level. This was reflected in Venkitangu and Kudayathur.

The other factor noted during field work is the organizational functioning of regional parties. The presence of regional parties is more visible in Kudayathur panchayat. Different factions of Kerala Congress, i.e. Kerala Congress (M), Jacob and Joseph are functioning in the panchayat. Observations of the leaders of these parties provided the sense that they are following a system of nomination within the party organization. Nomination is the informal rule approved within these parties, though their constitution provides for elections. Kerala Congress (M) mandalam president of
Kudayathur, who spoke on the mode of selecting office bearers within the party said, “Though we have a system of elections in our constitution, we generally follow the nomination system”. The other Kerala Congress group leaders also stated the same view. The Janata Dal has a presence in Vallikkunnu panchayat. Their local leader said they have the practice of approving the submitted names before the general body, by a higher committee such as the district committee or leaders of that level. The Janata Dal mandalam president commented, “We have a system of organizational elections every three years. It will be almost like approving the names submitted by the higher committees”. Thus, it can be perceived that most of the regional parties follow the system of nomination from above, instead of conducting elections. The experience of the Kerala Congress groups in Kudayathur GP is interesting since these parties were formed out of the personnel interests of the leaders. They follow a highly individualistic leader centric way of functioning.

The information from the field indicates that the internal democratic process of the Congress and the regional parties, except for the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML), was weak within the UDF. The CPI (M) to some extent followed the process of regular elections, though their organizational system also fell into acute factionalism in areas such as Venkitangu. The absence of democracy within the political field and in the institution of political parties may have affected the development of democratic conceptions of political activists and followers. In a field that is closely affiliated to their habitus, the political system could not provide models of democratic practice to them. Studies show that factionalism created obstacles to the internal democratic process also within the CPI (M). Though the CPI (M) followed formal democratic procedures, recent experiences of the party show that formal consensus are either imposed from above or came out of the majority of one faction in the internal elections.

7.3.2 Internal decision making process, and coordination between political parties and Panchayats

The administrative and development roles of panchayats have multiplied substantially with the introduction of democratic decentralization in Kerala. The responsibilities of the political parties have also multiplied as key actors in the local administration. This has increased the relevance of discussions on local development issues and plans in
their local forums. The proponents of PPC, particularly EM Sankaran Namboodiripad (EMS) also emphasized the increased participation of political parties and mass organizations in local planning as one of its objectives (Namboodiripad in Sreedharan & Issac (eds), 2002). This paradigm change in the functioning of local development activities also necessitates changes in the decision making practices of political parties.

In this context the coordination between the political parties and the grampanchayat, either as opposition parties or as part of the ruling coalition is important. This has increased the relevance of discussions within political parties on local planning and development issues in their local forums, along with the discussions on the implementation of higher committee decisions. Otherwise, the political involvement and coordination of the local administrative process will not be possible. In order to make local planning as a political agenda political parties had to place local development as a specific agenda in their committees and there was need to allocate specific time for discussing it. The following sections of this chapter will discuss these matters in greater detail.

The questions that figure in the following discussion are: what were the means of coordination between local committees of political parties and their own party’s elected representatives in the panchayats? Were there any changes that have occurred in the internal decision making process of the political parties? Have they been able to conduct any substantial and sustained discussion on the agenda of local development and administration in their meetings? Are they concerned with the strengthening of participatory institutions?

### 7.3.2.1 Approach of the political parties towards the People’s Planning Campaign

We will separately consider the coalition partners of LDF and UDF in the three panchayats. The first point to discuss is the broad approach of the political parties towards the People’s Planning Campaign. Since CPI (M) is the major party in the LDF coalition we begin by analysing their experience in the three panchayats. They have been continuously in power in the Vallikkunnu panchayat during the period of 1995–2010. They held power in Kudayathur between 1995–2000, but they could not
capture power in Venkitangu till 2005. The CPI (M) has taken appropriate measures in Vallikkunnu to link the party with the People’s Planning Campaign program. Even before the official launching of PPC the party had decided to participate in the local planning experiment initiated by the Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishath (KSSP), known as Panchayat Level Development Programme (PLDP). This programme was started before the launching of the PPC, and immediately after the 1995 Panchayat elections. This connection with the panchayat came out of the relation between the panchayat President and the organizational network of KSSP. The president was able to convey to the party the possibilities of such collaboration and succeeded in gaining the party support. The GP president during the PPC phase commented, “I was aware of the potential of that programme. It was a programme implemented in selected panchayats of the state. I approached the KSSP leaders and they agreed to provide technical support for our activities. I was also able to convince the party committee about the programme”.

The party in Kudayathur also succeeded in forming a team of activists who were interested in local planning. Initially, the involvement of party leaders was not visible in the PPC. Later on, the state committee of the party instructed the party leaders to involve themselves in the campaign, which made for changes in Kudayathur as well. After this instruction from the party, one of the local leaders joined as a resource person of the campaign, and he was assigned the responsibility of coordinating the party and panchayat activities. The standing committee chairman and former local secretary of CPI (M) commented, “I was not there in the picture at the launching phase of PPC. According to the decision of the party state committee, my name was suggested as Resource person”. The involvement of the party leadership in the campaign helped the panchayat to build a team comprising party activists and others. A KSSP district committee member also joined the campaign with the status of Key resource person (KRP) in charge of the panchayats, who was also acceptable to the local CPI (M).

The CPI (M) was not the party in power in Venkitangu. Initially, their members were reluctant to join the campaign, while the party state committee instructions made the necessary changes. The local party members were then involved in the campaign with the rationale that the campaign was started by the Left
Democratic Front (LDF) state Government. A former panchayat member from CPI (M) recollected, “We had an initial dilemma in the absence of direct party instructions to be involved in the campaign. After the clear party directions we were all active in the campaign, notwithstanding the fact that the Congress was the ruling party here. We took it as a programme launched by the Left government. Our activists were also involved as Resource persons”.

This response has shown that the CPI (M) as an organization decided to join the PPC, because it was a state wide programme launched by the Left government, and led by the party. The party’s direct involvement in the campaign by assigning party leaders to the State planning board and allocating Resource persons from the Party has given more strength to the campaign. The CPI (M) took the PPC as an opportunity to expand its mass base and to overcome the stagnation in the electoral base (Nazim, 2010). A study from West Bengal has shown that Panchayati Raj Institutions and the party—public relations through that tremendously helped CPI (M) in their party building in rural West Bengal (Bardhan, 2009). The responses from the field show that the decision of CPI (M) to launch the campaign within LDF tenure was a deliberate one to expand the their party base, and this made changes in the involvement of their party workers at the local level, during the PPC.

Vallikkunnu was ahead in the grass roots planning process with a pilot project of PLDP. Here, the party suggested that their own activists were to be involved as Resource persons and as workers in the campaign. Party workers were not involved in the early stages of the programme in Venkitangu and Kadayathur gram panchayats. But they got themselves involved when the party conducted an interim review and suggested that the leaders and activists should be involved in the campaign. This instruction had been passed on to the lowest levels of the party, which made for increased involvement of party leaders and workers in the campaign process.

The coalition partners of the LDF, except for CPI (M), had not taken any specific steps to be associated in the campaign. They joined their coalition partners of LDF in the campaign process without having discussions about the PPC within their party forums. The secretary of the CPI local committee in Venkitangu indicated, “Initially our belief was that it is very difficult to implement the concept of PPC”. This shows that even a partner within the LDF was sceptical about the viability of the
campaign. The coalition partners of LDF were not noticeably interested in the campaign even at the state level, and they were reluctant to be involved in its processes (Parameswaran, 2001). Thus, though the LDF launched the PPC as a campaign, their own coalition partners, whether at the state level or local level, were not convinced about the probable effectiveness of the campaign. This had created impediments to transacting the campaign among the Left as a whole. It also acted as a hurdle in developing a common understanding among the Left on democratic decentralization.

In the case of the Congress party and the Muslim League (ML), they were in the opposition in Vallikkunnu and Kudayathur, while in Venkitangu they were the party in power during the PPC phase. They decided at the local level to cooperate with the campaign, though they were in the opposition in Vallikkunnu. The ruling LDF coalition accepted their cooperation in Vallikkunnu. The Congress mandalam president in Vallikkunnu commented, “I was the mandalam president of the party. I had the view that we should cooperate in any activity that is for the common good”. He also pointed out that party leaders were participating in the opening meetings of the PPC at the state level. The Muslim League leader in Kudayathur pointed out that the ML state committee had sent a circular that urged their workers to be involved in the campaign. Muslim League leaders from Venkitangu and Vallikkunnu had also indicated the same. The situation within the Congress party in Venkitangu was different. Though they were in power in the panchayat the party had not communicated any official decision to be involved in the PPC. The former Development standing committee chairman and President of the GP during the KDP period stated, “The party was not bothered about such a programme. There was no official decision of the party to be involved in the activities of the PPC”.

The experiences showed that there was an official party decision within the Muslim League, like CPI (M), while such a decision was not explicit from the Congress leadership at the state level. In Vallikkunnu, the local party took a decision to cooperate with the Campaign, while it was not evident in Kudayathur and Venkitangu.

Though Congress leaders became a part of the state level advisory council that was formed for the implementation of the PPC, they complained that it was a party
programme of the CPI (M) to develop their party cadres (Kannan, 2003). The Congress party was not interested in being actively involved in the campaign by realising its possibilities. The indifference of the Congress party towards the CPI (M) led campaign was reflected in their approaches at the local level too. The highly divided political field of Kerala with different groups and their peculiar interests, did not accept the PPC wholeheartedly, even though it was expected that there will be consensus among major political parties over development issues at the local level.

The approach of the Congress party in Vallikkunnu was different because of the political history of the Congress in Malabar, which had developed through people’s mobilization in its formative stage, when the Congress socialist Party was an integral part of the Congress party (Gopalankutty, 2004; Desai, 2001). The Congress party in Vallikkunnu still keeps grass roots contacts with the people. Unlike other partners of the UDF including the Congress, the Muslim League took a positive approach to the decentralization project. As a regional party they attempted to use the local institutions to expand their party base at least in a place such as Malappuram district where they have a strong presence.

7.3.2.2 Coordination system between political parties and Panchayat

In a democratic system where the political parties lead the administration, the relation between party and government is of crucial importance. Several measures have been taken to coordinate the activities of the party and the government at the central and state levels. The party based election system and administrative process have been extended to the third tier of government, including the local bodies of Kerala, particularly after the enactment of the Kerala Panchayat raj Act 1994. The following part of this chapter will discuss the coordination between the political party and the elected members of respective parties in the Panchayat, and between the coalition partners, viz. LDF and UDF.

The CPI (M) in Vallikkunnu had three levels of coordination during the PPC phase. They had a coordinator to manage the activities of the panchayat, who was also a mainstream party activist. A former panchayat member who was also a coordinator recollected, “From the launching phase of PPC we had a coordinator at the panchayat level. The person who is to be the coordinator is decided by the party”. This system continued in the phase of 2005—2010 too. Along with this they introduced a wider
system for better coordination and to avoid conflicts. Joint meetings of the two local committees of the party in the panchayat (Ariyallur and Vallikkunnu) were convened to discuss issues related to the panchayat. This had become a practice when introducing new programmes, and when there were sensitive issues. A former President of the panchayat during the PPC phase responded, “I had been discussing matters with party members before taking decisions in the panchayat meetings or Panchayat development committees by convening a joint meeting of the two local committees⁴”. The President of the gram panchayat was able to bring a better coordination between the party and the panchayat during the PPC phase.

Along with these two systems the CPI (M) in Vallikkunnu also had the practice of discussing local development issues in a joint forum of gram panchayat members of the party and party leaders. This forum was named as subcommittee or Parliamentary party⁵ committee. This system of coordination was functioning in Kudayathur and Venkitangu gram panchayats too. This was acting as the only coordination system in these two panchayats, between the party and the panchayat. The system of coordination in these two panchayats was not as democratic as in Vallikkunnu, in the sense that they had no practice of open discussions within the main committee of the party on local development issues. The local secretary of CPI (M) in Venkitangu commented, “We discussed panchayat issues in our party subcommittees. Such issues were normally not discussed in the party local committee”.

The experience was different in the case of the Congress party. They had no system of party subcommittee or parliamentary party committee in the three panchayats. They had no system for discussing local development issues in their local mandalam committees. In Vallikkunnu they had the practice of inviting their panchayat members to the party mandalam committee. Panchayat members had an opportunity to report panchayat matters in the mandalam committee, in case any discussion on the panchayats was initiated. Rather than the clarification of issues during discussions, they could not consider local development issues as an important matter for discussion in their committees.

The coordination between the Congress party and the gram panchayat was very weak in Kudayathur and Venkitangu. The Congress block secretary in Venkitangu commented, “The party was not involved in panchayat matters. The
President was free to take decisions related to local planning”. The mandalam president of Kudayathur suggested that, “The president of the gram panchayat in the KDP phase was able to decide on local administration matters on his own. The party did not intervene”. According to the Congress constitution the elected members of the local bodies have to be invited to the local level committees of the party at each level (All India Congress Committee, 2007). This condition was not implemented by the gram panchayats except for Vallikkunnu. While the Congress was in power the administrative leadership was more individual centred, rather than a team activity. This tendency was visible both in Venkitangu and Kudayathur. The Muslim League leaders in the three panchayats also indicated that they had no system of coordination between panchayat members and the party.

The coordination between the CPI (M) and the panchayat in Vallikkunnu weakened in the KDP phase. The system of coordinator and party subcommittee were working in the KDP stage too, though the more democratic practices of joint meetings of the party local committees were reduced. The local secretary of the party during the KDP period commented, “The system of appointing a coordinator was there in the second phase as well, and subcommittee meetings were also going on well. Except for these, we could not continue the system of frequent discussions within the party by convening joint local committee meetings during the KDP phase”.

The above narrations have shown that the party-panchayat coordination within the CPI (M) was functioning during both PPC and KDP phases whereas such a system was weak in the Congress. In Vallikkunnu, the CPI (M) introduced a more democratic system of joint meetings of party local committees in the PPC, though they could not proceed with this system in the KDP phase. The better coordination between party and panchayat facilitated a team work in administration during the CPI (M) rule, while the administrative leadership in Congress seemed to be more individual centric. The party subcommittee is the main element of coordination within the CPI (M) in the three cases.

The process adopted to link the CPI (M) with the panchayat in Vallikkunnu was a participatory one during the PPC phase. This was from the leadership of a panchayat President who wanted to bring greater participation into the decision making process. The involvement of KSSP workers in the panchayat activities, and
the synergy between the party and KSSP activists also contributed in supporting participatory decision making within the CPI (M). After the PPC phase the panchayat President in Vallikkunnu changed, and the participatory decision making on local issues through a joint local committee meeting of the party was abandoned by the party. The CPI (M) could not introduce such a democratic decision making process in Venkitangu and Kudayathur. These indicate that participatory decision making within the parties, particularly in matters related to local planning, have not been sustained either within the CPI(M) or within the Congress. Even though the chances for local decision making have been enhanced after the PPC the political parties did not succeed in developing a sustainable participatory system for local decision making within their local forums.

7.3.2.3 Coordination between coalition partners

Since the panchayats are ruled by coalitions of political parties, the relations between coalition partners is very important. It is interesting that both in the UDF and LDF, the coordination committees at the panchayat level was working only at the time of elections. The main function of this committee appears to be the selection of candidates and organizing the election campaigns. It is viewed as a forum of local leaders of various political parties. The LDF had a committee of their elected grampanchayat members and party leaders, while such a system was absent in the UDF. Though the LDF had such an institution at the panchayat level, which was known as LDF Parliamentary party committee, the frequency of meetings of this committee was low. The parliamentary party committee of LDF members worked well in the PPC phase in Vallikkunnu, but it became stagnant in the KDP stage. The mandalam president of Janata Dal indicated, “In the stage of PPC the panchayat President was taking the initiative to convene meetings of the LDF parliamentary party committee. This practice stopped when he left office. After that there has been no collective discussion within LDF before reaching any decision”. The Communist Party of India (CPI) leader in Venkitangu stated, “The CPI (M) representative was the convener of the panchayat level committee. He was hesitant to call meetings. Meetings had been convened only once in a year or so, particularly when there were differences between the coalition partners”. The experience of Kudayathur is similar.
In the case of the UDF there was no coordination between UDF panchayat members. The UDF committee meetings at the panchayat level were held only at the time of elections. The Muslim League state counsellor in Venkitangu said “The UDF committee had been meeting only for election preparations. We did not have the practice of discussing local development issues within the UDF committees. The UDF representatives in Vallikkunnu and Kudayathur also indicated a similar state of affairs in those panchayats. However, despite the lack of a formal means of coordinating the activities of coalition partners in the UDF, indications from the interviews suggest that relations between UDF partners are more harmonious than in the LDF. Relations between CPI (M) and CPI in Venkitangu were antagonistic, while relations between the Congress-I and Muslim League were far friendlier.

Since the panchayats have an overarching political management, the vision of political parties and coalitions about the development of the panchayats is important. The election manifestos that the coalitions place before the public are important in this context. They had to be evolved through inner party discussions and deliberations between coalition partners and parties. The present study analysed the process of preparing manifestos by the parties and coalitions in the panchayats. The election manifesto of Vallikkunnu during 1995-2000 elections had been prepared through a collective process of deliberations and discussions within the CPI (M) and between coalition partners. A Resource person of PPC who was also an activist of the KSSP recollected, “For the first election after the Panchayat Raj amendment Act 1994, some people who were concerned about local development met together and we prepared a draft manifesto after detailed discussions. That draft had also been discussed by the parties within the LDF coalition in meetings. After that there was no collective effort as such”. The Congress party leaders in Kudayathur stated that they assigned somebody to write the manifesto and gave it official approval in the UDF committee, without much discussion. In the case of CPI (M), they said they had been assigning this responsibility to some intellectuals in the panchayat, and what they wrote was later formally approved by the party and LDF. It can be noted that the preparation of manifestos is not the result of any collective effort except in Vallikkunnu and that was in the elections just before PPC.
7.3.2.4 Nature of discussions within the political field on local development and participatory institutions

Since political parties are key actors in the panchayat administration, the discussions on local governance that take place in the local forums of political parties are relevant for us to review. The agenda of discussions within local political party meetings, time allotted to local governance and development issues, discussions on participatory institutions, discussions on special component plans for marginalized sections are of particular interest. The succeeding sections of this chapter will discuss these issues.

We can begin this review by examining the experience of parties within the Left coalition. Since the CPI (M) is a major party in this coalition, we start with their experience in different panchayats. As we mentioned in the earlier section, Vallikkunnu GP adopted a more democratic practice in their discussions during the PPC phase. They had been conducting joint meetings of party local committees, to discuss matters related to the panchayat. In the case of Venkitangu and Kudayathur, discussions on local development within the party forums were not participatory as in Vallikkunnu. The discussions on local development in both the GPs were limited to the sub committees of the party comprising elected panchayat members of the party and party leaders.

The analysis of the content of discussions within the party committees is important to understand the changes that took place through decentralization. The discussions in the CPI (M) local committees in Kudayathur and Venkitangu have largely been focused on the issues reported by the higher level Area, district or state committees, such as organizing the campaigns decided by the party, collection of working funds etc. The former local secretary and standing committee chairman of the Kudayathur panchayat remarked, “We were convening party subcommittee meetings and framing the issues to be discussed in the grampanchayat. We were also conducting the review of panchayat activities here. These matters were not discussed in the local level (panchayat level) committee of the party. The local committee’s discussions were largely focused on the reporting and discussions on higher committee’s decisions”. He revealed that they had the practice of discussing panchayat development issues within a team comprising panchayat members of the party, resource persons and other PPC activists. This was an informal forum
functioning during the PPC phase. In Venkitangu the CPI (M) was in the opposition. The party had the practice of discussing local development issues only in the subcommittees. Such discussions were not extended to the party local committees. Local committees discussed these matters only when they were organizing protests or struggles against UDF led panchayats. The party leaders from both the gram panchayats agreed that the implementation of higher committee decisions continued to be the major part of the agenda in local committee meetings. Specific time had not been allotted in the CPI (M) local committees in Kudayathur and Venkitangu to discuss local development issues.

The pattern of discussions in CPI (M) in Vallikkunnu changed during the KDP. The practice of joint meetings of the local committee vanished after the PPC. Even discussions within the party subcommittee were reduced to populist issues such as beneficiary selection, sharing of funds at the ward level and discussions on roads, rather than comprehensive evaluation of projects and discussions on long term development issues. The former village president of the Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI) commented, “The party was in power in this panchayat during the KDP phase as well. The team and the president were not able to attract people in this phase”. We should note here that it was a woman who became President after the phase of PPC, who had a low profile in the party. She herself stated that she was not even a member of the party local committee during that period. Being a woman with low profile in the party, she had limitations in guiding discussions within the party. The lack of discussions within the party forums affected the mobilization capacity of the party and the party’s capacity to politicize local development issues. CPI (M) in Vallikkunnu also did not provide specific space within their local committees, or on their agenda, for discussing local development issues after the PPC.

The CPI (M) had taken an apathetic approach to the issues related to the panchayat after the PPC. The discussions within the party were considerably reduced in the KDP phase in Venkitangu too. Here, the party had changed from a supportive approach, and the discussions within the party forum focused more on allegations against the UDF led panchayat. The CPI (M) leaders of the three places gave a common reason for the apathy of their party in the KDP phase. The local committee secretary of Kudayathur mentioned, “The treasury block during the KDP phase
created hurdles for the functioning of the panchayats. Along with this, the KDP attempted to bureaucratise the local planning process. Debates related to the funding and origin of PPC also affected the process. The role of voluntary activism had been substantially reduced in this phase. This forced most of the activists to withdraw from the programme. This indifference was also reflected in the party”. The leaders from Kudayathur and Venkitangu indicated similar views.

Along with this, the change in the party in power in the panchayat (CPI (M) to Congress) affected the party interventions in Kudayathur, while the change in the leadership of the panchayat was noted as a reason for change in Vallikkunnu. The change in the state government, and change in the PPC programme to KDP were major reasons highlighted by the Left leaders in Venkitangu for their withdrawal. However, it is clear that more than the commitment to the Left government led PPC programme, the CPI (M) could not maintain the commitment to democratic decentralization in the KDP phase through effective discussions within their committees. They started to withdraw from active interventions in the decentralization activities after the PPC, when the state government changed from LDF to UDF rule. The responses from the field show that CPI (M) activists were active in the PPC phase while they became largely apathetic towards the decentralization process after PPC. This happened even in Vallikkunnu where the Left coalition was in power. The party programme of CPI(M) had stated that the role of Local Self Governments in a people’s democratic state was as follows, “The people’s democratic state is conceived as a big network of local bodies starting from the village level, which is elected directly by the people and having sufficient power and financial autonomy. The party will initiate activities for mobilizing the public into the activities of local governments”. This statement indicates that the party programme has given utmost importance to Local Self Governments in the democratization of the state. In the initial phase of PPC the state leadership of CPI (M) also took the PPC as an opportunity to expand their mass base (Nissim, 2010). But CPI (M) could not disseminate these views down to the lower level, and could not sustain their interventions after PPC. The responses from the field indicated that there was a deficit in a long term view among the party activists at the local level, and also among the CPI (M) leaders themselves. They envisioned decentralization as a programme that had to be initiated only when the party was in power, and when it is a party initiated...
programme. Rather than a commitment to decentralization, they expressed their commitment to a Left government initiated programme. This indicates that notwithstanding the official interventions during the PPC phase, the party could not accept decentralization as its major programme. As Tharakan (2004) said EMS Namboodiripad had been a staunch supporter of decentralization, and worked within the party for its acceptance and implementation. However, CPI (M) did not continue their commitment to the decentralization project after PPC, particularly after the demise of EMS Namboodiripad.

Olle Tornquist (2001, 2007) argued that decentralization was a programme that had been put forward by the reformist group within CPI (M) and with the support of Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishath. This had been opposed by the traditional Leftists within the party. While we adopt Bourdieu’s analysis of the political field, the groups who hold more symbolic capital in terms of legitimate authority will dominate the system according to their will (Bourdieu in Harris et al, 2004). E.M Sankaran Namboodiripad and the other proponents of decentralization within the party were trying to alter the institutional habitus of the CPI (M) which had not practiced the concept of participatory democracy earlier, in favour of grass roots democracy. The reformist group within CPI (M) faced the lack of acceptance to go ahead with their agenda of democratic decentralization, and could not gain much support within the party structure, after the PPC. The change in the ruling coalition of the state in the 2001 elections, from LDF to UDF, and the debates that emanated in Kerala society about foreign funded experiments in decentralization made the political situation antagonistic to the movement in favour of decentralization. The proponents of decentralization within CPI (M) lost a general acceptance in the political field because of the debates within the party against decentralization, particularly after the demise of EMS Namboodiripad. These developments compelled them to make compromises on their earlier stance, and they have stopped their activities in favour of decentralization.

From the beginning of PPC onwards, democratic decentralization was not a matter of discussion in LDF parties other than CPI (M). The Kerala Congress mandalam vice president in Kudayathur commented, “We had been discussing party apex committee decisions within our committee. We were not regularly discussing
local body issues except in the instances of allegations about the spending of funds, and malpractices in the beneficiary selection”. The CPI local secretary in Venkitangul mentioned, “We normally discuss political issues such as campaigns of the party and fund raising. We were discussing local development issues only on the occasions of beneficiary selection, and division of funds between wards”. The Janata Dal leader also said the same about Vallikkunnu. It is to be noted that even regional parties like Kerala Congress (J) were not concerned about local issues. Their discussions were prominently focused on the implementation of the party’s district or state committee decisions. The lack of discussion among LDF partners on the issues of local development also created hurdles in making decentralization as a programme of the left as a whole.

7.3.2.5 Discussions within UDF

The reactions of UDF on the issue of democratic decentralization were different from LDF right from the beginning of the PPC. The UDF shared power only in Venkitangulu during the PPC. Congress-I and Muslim League were the major partners within the UDF in Venkitangulu. Most of their discussions in the other two panchayats were focused on criticizing the panchayats rather than supporting them. There was some cooperation by the Congress-I in Vallikkunnu gram panchayat activities in the PPC. They had a practice of inviting their panchayat members to the party mandalam committee. Though the panchayat members were invited to the party mandalam committee, discussions of local body issues were not a usual practice in their committee meetings. Discussions on this subject took place only on the occasions when somebody raised such issues in the meetings. Except for those instances, discussions in the Congress mandalam committee were limited to the reporting from apex committees, i.e. block committees, district committees and Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee (KPCC). The mandalam committee secretary of the Congress (I) from Vallikkunnu commented, “We had no practice of putting panchayat matters as a special item in the agenda of our meeting. We normally discussed political issues in the committee meetings”.

In the case of Venkitangulu and Kadayathur the Congress-I had no practice of discussing local panchayat issues in party mandalam committees. Unlike in Vallikkunnu, the UDF was continuously in power in Venkitangulu, and they also had
the same leadership in the panchayat for a long period. The party leader’s comments made it clear that there were no discussions within the party mandalam committee on panchayat administrative matters except the discussions personally targeting office bearers of the panchayat. The District Congress Committee (DCC) member and former panchayat President commented, “Factionalism within the party was severe here. Party committees were not discussions on developmental issues and administration of the panchayat. Most often the discussions were to target persons like me, who was there in the leadership of the panchayat”. The Congress Block secretary made it clear that they were only discussing ‘political agenda’ in party meeting’s. Panchayat and administration were not ‘political agenda’ to them. The organizational system of the party was too weak in Kudayathur because of factionalism. They could not take up local issues for discussions within the party. Congress leaders indicated that discussions during the PPC phase were focused on allegations against the LDF led panchayat. Local planning and development were not issues of discussion within party forums.

The responses of Muslim League leaders from the three panchayats were almost similar. Though there was an official circular from the state committee suggesting that panchayats and activists were to be involved in the PPC process, this was not reflected in their internal discussions at the local level. Though their panchayat members were involved in the planning process, the party itself was not involved in discussions on local planning. The leaders from the three panchayats provided a similar view that they discussed such issues only in the case of ‘allegations’, and events like ‘beneficiary selection’ and ‘fund sharing’. Muslim League members of the opposition coalition in Vallikkunnu had raised several allegations against the LDF led panchayat. Their leader also pointed out that except in such instances they did not discuss local planning issues. The Muslim League leader indicated that the major agenda in the committees remained the discussions of higher committee decisions, and day-to-day organizational activities. While they were in the opposition both in Kudayathur and Vallikkunnu, they were vigilant to raise issues against the panchayat, and discussing allegations, while development issues had not been discussed within their local political forums.
Though the proponents of PPC such as EMS Namboodiripad (in Isaac & Sreedharan (eds) 2002) had called for all party cooperation on local development, after the initial cooperation in the PPC, activists of the opposition (non LDF) parties lost interest in the programme. The UDF government came to power in 2001 and brought changes to the PPC, to alter the campaign mode of the PPC into a routinised bureaucratic process (Tharakan, 2009). Even though they (UDF) were not, in principle, against decentralization, they were concerned that the campaign mode of the decentralization process will give more prominence to the CPI (M), which had the capability to mobilize people through class and mass organizations. This basic difference in their interpretation of the concept itself was reflected in their approaches in the gram panchayats, and only the initial interventions in Vallikkunnu displayed some cooperation with the panchayat.

7.3.2.6 Discussions on Special Component Plans

The level of discussions that took place inside the political party forums on the special component plan for women, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes was an issue that was discussed in our interviews. The responses were quite illuminating. All the political party leaders from the three panchayats responded that these issues were never discussed in their committees. The participation of women in the decision making forums of the political parties was also very low. Even the presence of women in the local committee of CPI (M) in all these panchayats was less than three, i.e. they were only one fifth of the total strength. The same is true in the case of the Congress-I too. Women panchayat representatives held lower positions in the party committees, which restricted their interventions in the decision making process. Though the number of the Scheduled Caste population is relatively high in the panchayats, particularly in Venkitangu, their special plan was rarely discussed in the political forums. This lack of interest is also reflected in the poor implementation of the special component plan for SCs and the Women component Plan in the selected panchayats, that we have elaborately discussed in chapter six. The lack of political capital among SC groups is reflected in the political apathy towards their development. The political capital of each group is created either through their organized strength or their presence in the political leadership. SCs and women as particular social groups lack this political capital which could have been used as a tool
in negotiating for their rights with political parties and the state. This shows a clear relation between the possession of political capital by various groups and its effects on their negotiation potential in acquiring their rights.

7.3.2.7 Discussions within mass organizations

This section of the chapter would examine the internal discussions within mass organization on the issues related to local development. Farmer’s organizations, women’s organizations, and youth organizations have been considered for analysis.

We can take the case of farmers and agricultural labourers’ organizations to begin the discussion. The main question they were asked was, have they been discussing the agricultural plan of the panchayat in their committees. The Karshaka Sangham, the farmer’s organization of CPI (M) and their agricultural labourers’ organization named Kerala State Karshaka Thozhilali Union were the only organizations that I could find active in the field.

The responses from the Karshaka Sangham leaders in Kudayathur and Venkitangu were almost similar. The area leader of Karshaka Sangham in Kudayathur who was active during the PPC and KDP pointed out, “We could not discuss local agricultural issues regularly in our committees. We had taken some initiative to make sure that the benefits of the plans such as distribution of fertilizers and seeds are reaching the legitimate beneficiaries”. The former panchayat secretary of Karshaka Sangham in Venkitangu admitted that except for following the activities suggested by the higher committees they did not discuss any local agricultural issues in their committees. What he said was, “Nowadays there are no real farmers in the leadership of the organization. Most of us are retired government servants, and those who view agriculture as a secondary source of income. Most of the time, party (CPI (M) branch secretaries were carrying out the organizational activities of Karshaka Sangham at the lower level”. This indicates that the organization’s capacity to mobilize genuine farmers into the activities of the organization has substantially reduced. Moreover, at the lower level, units of the Sangham are inactive, which makes for a situation where the CPI (M) branch secretaries are forced to undertake their activities as well. The experience of Karshaka Sangham in Vallikkunnu seems to be different. Responses of the leaders suggest that earlier they had the practice of discussing issues related to
local agriculture in their committees. They were able to mobilize many farmers for this purpose. Activities of Panchayats included measures designed for the rejuvenation of agriculture in the PPC phase. The area president of the Kerala Karshaka Sangham, commented, “We had the practice of discussing local agriculture issues in our committees in the PPC stage. We could mobilize people in various activities of the panchayat because of such discussions. But we could not maintain the system in the stage after PPC”. After the initial enthusiasm in Vallikkunnu they could not bring in local issues of agriculture into discussions within their forums. The leaders agreed that most of the discussions in the organizations were centred on higher committee decisions and their implementation.

The history of the Kerala Karshaka Sangham itself showed that it had emerged out of the specific interest of overcoming problems of tenants and farmers, and particularly against the oppression of colonial rule in the Malabar region. They acquired organizational strength from the grassroots struggles that had emerged from the local level (Desai, 2002). This had also contributed immensely to the party building process of the communist party. Our field study indicated that the organizational capacity of farmers’organizations was declining, and even local leadership of such organizations is from retired government servants, and other people who are not primarily dependant on agriculture as a source of income. The other interesting finding is that the Karshaka Sangham is unable to conduct its own activities as a mass organization at the grassroots level. The organizational units of Karshaka Sangham in the selected panchayats are largely inactive and the office bearers of Karshaka Sangham mostly depend on the CPI (M)’s lower level functionaries for conducting their day-to-day activities. Farmer’s organizations could not bring local level agricultural issues into political discussions, and their activities had been reduced to the level of rituals that mechanically followed the instructions from the area, district and state committees. They could not intervene in the local planning process as a way to address local agricultural issues.

In the case of the Kerala State Karshaka Thozhilali Union (KSKTU) their focus was more on the payment and renewal of welfare funds of labourers. They also organized campaigns demanding the expansion of welfare schemes such as pensions for agricultural labourers, assistance for their children’s studies, and the marriage of
their daughters. There were some local planning initiatives in Venkitangu and Vallikkunnu by this organization during the PPC. The KSKTU village secretary in Kudayathur indicated, “The issues of local planning had not been discussed in the party forums. Our focus was on the welfare of the labourers”. There were some differences in their discussions in Venkitangu. The village secretary of the KSKTU in Venkitangu commented, “We had initially been discussing local agricultural issues in our committees and had given some suggestions for projects. But we could not continue the same process later after the shift from PPC to KDP. The Union involvement in panchayat activities was also reduced considerably. This has affected our discussions as well”. The KSKTU had been regularly participating in the voluntary activities initiated by the panchayat during the phase of PPC in Vallikkunnu. The KSKTU was able to ensure the wider presence of agricultural labourers in the activities such as reconstruction of irrigation canals, removal of weeds from the paddy fields etc. They also had the practice of discussing the panchayat plan document in their local committee meetings. The village secretary of KSKTU from Vallikkunnu commented, “Initially we had discussions in our committees based on the draft of the plan document prepared by the panchayat. Several times we submitted alternative or additional suggestions. After the initial two years of KDP we could not proceed with this practice”. He agreed that the major agenda in the discussions of the committees remained the implementation of programmes suggested by the higher committees.

Venkitangu is a panchayat with a large area of coal land\(^7\) for paddy cultivation. In such a panchayat the mass organizations of political parties in the agricultural sector were not able to discuss local agrarian issues in their mainstream forums. They could not discuss the issues of reducing paddy fields, conversion of paddy land for non-agricultural purpose, increasing fallow lands in the panchayat, depletion of water resources, unavailability of agricultural labourers, mechanization of agricultural activities etc. They could not develop the practice of discussing and intervening in local agricultural issues, rather than mechanically implementing the decisions of the area, district or state committee of their organizations.

The experience of agricultural labourers’ participation in the PPC in Vallikkunnu shows that they still have the potential to become an agent of social
transformation, once they are mobilized. They have contributed substantially to the activities designed to rejuvenate agriculture, undertaken by the gram panchayat during PPC phase. But they could not continue this contribution in the KDP. After PPC the union withdrew from the collaborative efforts with the panchayat. The respondents indicated that there is an acute shortage of agricultural labourers. Further innovations and skill up-gradation of the labourers that can be helpful for the mechanization of agricultural activities is also a necessity. These agricultural issues were not discussed by the agricultural labour unions, in a forum where they can be addressed through local planning. It was noted that the organized groups (trade unions) in Kerala were much more consumption oriented than with production (Chander, 1986). Since they were organized in an agitation mode they could not alter their focus into constructive activism, which could also make changes in the development of the agricultural field. Such a constructive approach was expected of the class and mass organizations from proponents of the PPC. The experiences of our study indicate that Chander’s observation is relevant even now while we examine the intervention of farmers and agricultural laborers organizations in local agricultural issues during the PPC and KDP phases. They were not interested in undertaking local agricultural issues other than organizing agitations for welfare oriented demands.

EMS Namboodiripad once said, “The labourers, farmers and mass organizations who are fighting for their demands should also simultaneously emerge as a social force that can contribute immensely to the local planning process (Namboodiripad in Isaac & Sreedharan (eds), 2002). Even though Namboodiripad made such a call, the institutional habitus of the mass organizations formed out of a culture of agitation, and following instructions from above, were reluctant to accept a constructive role in society. The experience of the trade union movement, whether it is agricultural labourers, toddy tappers, coir workers, or beedi workers showed that they developed by undertaking struggles based on specific local issues and later on linked them to mass movements (Oommen, 1971; Jose, 1977). The movements that had initially adopted this kind of bottom-up approach, later on gave way to top-down hierarchical ordering and mechanical functioning. This shift actually made them incapable of taking up local issues. After the PPC, the political parties did not undertake any movement to reorient their mass organizations according to the changing scenario of decentralization and local planning. Though decentralization has
provided more opportunities to the mass organizations to directly intervene in people’s living issues at the grass roots level. Their insensitiveness to such a programme made them incapable of using these chances.

7.3.2.8 Discussions within women’s organizations

One of the major objectives of the Peoples’ Planning Campaign was the empowerment of women (Isaac & Franke, 2000). Several measures had been implemented by the PPC to achieve this goal. A special component plan for women named Women’s component plan (WCP) was introduced, and a women’s Task force for planning the projects for women and children had been envisaged. Separate women’s groups were proposed in gram sabhas. A committee named Jagratha Samiti was to be formed in each panchayat and ward to prevent atrocities against women.

The major political parties in Kerala have their own mass organizations among women. In this context, have women’s development projects, and activities related to the empowerment of women in panchayats been discussed among the women’s organizations of political parties? The following discussions of this chapter focus on this topic, for which information was sought and acquired from the organizational representatives of All India Democratic Women’s Association and Mahila Congress of the three panchayats, along with feedback from the Women’s League in Vallikkunnu.

The initiatives of AIDWA in each of the three panchayat appear to be different. In both Vallikkunnu and Kudayathur, there were factors favouring discussions of local planning within AIDWA. These panchayats had taken the initiative in the initial phase of PPC to form a Women development committee (WDC). Kudayathur grampanchayat formed Self Help Groups of women all over the panchayat. The office bearers and committee members of WDC were AIDWA leaders in Vallikkunnu and Kudayathur. This encouraged the development and practice of discussing the panchayat’s women development plan and the activities of the WDC in the committee of AIDWA. A member of WDC and the present village secretary of AIDWA in Vallikkunnu recollected, “We had been discussing the women’s component plan of the panchayat in our committees during the PPC. The WDC in the panchayat was very active in this period. Office bearers of both the bodies were
usually the same people. We had given several suggestions to the Panchayat to develop projects under the Women’s component Plan”. She pointed out that even after the PPC, discussions on WCP took place in the committees of AIWDA for two to three years. This practice was effectively eroded in the second half of the KDP. The convener of WDC during the PPC became the chairperson of the welfare standing committee of the Vallikunnu grampanchayat during KDP. She was also a leader of AIDWA. This provided an opportunity for the panchayat and the AIDWA leaders to work together. Even after such a favourable environment, the WDC eventually stagnant in Vallikkunnu. This had a negative effect on the joint functioning of AIDWA and WDC. In time, the discussions within AIDWA on local issues also stopped.

The discussions in Kudayathur on panchayat plans within AIDWA during the PPC phase were lively and regular. The leaders of AIDWA and WDC of the panchayat were the same. The activities of WDC stopped after the change in ruling party in the panchayat, and simultaneous discussions within AIDWA on panchayat activities also came to a stop. The joint activities had provided a group of leaders to both the AIDWA and panchayat, which became an asset in the activities of the panchayat. The village secretary in Kudayathur commented, “We were initially discussing the WCP and its projects in our committees during PPC. We initiated several self-employment programmes, and awareness programmes. Our activities stopped when the ruling party of the panchayat changed. Eventually the practice of discussions within the AIDWA committees also stopped”. Political change in the panchayat affected the involvement of AIDWA in the activities of WDC. The AIDWA leadership was not actively engaged with the democratic decentralization process in Venkitangu Panchayat. AIDWA leaders in Venkitangu also accepted that the women’s component plan and Jagratha samitis were not a discussed within their committees.

The women workers’ movement in Kerala had the tradition of undertaking struggles in various areas, for instance the right to wear upper garments and covering their breasts, and for decent working conditions in the workplace. The factory level women’s committees among coir workers in Alleppy were even involved in the issues of atrocities against women within the factory and the family (Meera, 1988).
Women’s organizations could not follow this tradition in the last decades where women are unsafe and subjected to various kinds of atrocities. The women’s organizations in the grampanchayats could not even use the space of Jagratha Samithis which were formed to prevent atrocities against women. Further, they did not explore the possibilities of local planning to address the strategic gender needs of women. They could not maintain their autonomy, and functioned as front organizations of political parties. The subordinated position of women within the political field, and the marginality of women within the institutional habitus of political parties actually challenged the autonomy of women’s organizations. AIDWA was able to intervene in the local planning in Kudayathur and Vallikkunnu and enhance women’s mobilization through the women’s development committees in the grampanchayats. They could undertake this because of the autonomy that they had earned through their initiative in the mobilization of women, though they could not maintain the same in the KDP stage.

In the case of the Mahila Congress, their organizational strength in the three panchayats was different in terms of activities. One common factor was that they could not form their unit committees in these panchayats at a level below the panchayat. The Mahila Congress Panchayat committee was functioning in the Vallikkunnu Panchayat, in both the PPC and KDP phase. The mahila Congress leader indicated that they did not discuss the Woman Component Plan and women’s empowerment Programme of the panchayat in their mandalam committee. The mandalam committee member, who was also a former panchayat member pointed out, “We had political issues to discuss in the committee. Unlike AIDWA, we did not get the opportunity to interact closely with the Panchayat plans”. According to them the panchayat plan is not a ‘political issue’ to discuss, while they had a political agenda as suggested from the higher committees. The Mahila Congress leader in Kudayathur stated that the Mahila Congress Mandalam Committee in the panchayat was inactive for a long period because of factionalism within the party, and it resumed functioning in the last two years. The Mahila Congress leader in Venkitangu stated that she was the person from the grampanchayat who was in charge of the Kudumbasree. She was involved in the activities of WCP too, while the Mahila Congress as an organization was not involved in the planning and implementation of WCP.
Though the network of women’s NHGS has started to increase at a prolific rate in these three panchayats, discussions within the women’s organizations to strengthen them has not taken place. There were even political contests between women in neighborhood groups to capture the leadership. Women’s organizations could not suggest their own representative to the leadership level of NHGs, their ward level committees and their panchayat level forums. They were liable to approve the instructions from political parties. The subordinate political position of the women in the party structure is visible here as well.

7.3.2.9 Discussions within youth organizations

Active involvement and participation of the youth is an indicator of the vibrancy of any movement. Youth movements have had a key role in making Kerala politics more vibrant. It has also contributed several new leaders to political parties (Nair, 1986). Youth organizations have been examined to ascertain what kind of discussions take place within them and particularly on local planning and development. Youth Congress, the youth organization of Congress (I) and the Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI), the youth organization of CPI (M) have been the major organizations in the selected panchayats. A Kerala Congress (J) leader was a respondent in Kudayathur, while leaders of the Youth League have provided responses from Vallikkunnu. The All India Youth Federation (AIYF), the youth organization of the Communist Party of India (CPI) leaders gave their views in Venkitangu.

The responses of DYFI leaders in the three panchayats were different from each other. The DYFI leader from Vallikkunnu had the view that during the PPC they had been discussing the panchayat plans and programmes in their committees, especially in the panchayat level committee. The former village president of DYFI commented, “We had the practice of discussing panchayat plans in our committees, and were also discussing what could be our contribution to the plans”. He continued, “The panchayat had been convening meetings of mass organizations and political parties during the PPC period to make such a campaign become a success. The CPI (M) also instructed us to discuss such issues”. This kind of discussions continued to about midway of KDP. After the PPC the panchayat could not undertake any activity that could gain wider public attention. The DYFI supported the panchayat in
Kudayathur while the LDF was in power during 1995–2000, and they refrained from supporting the panchayat after the panchayat elections of 2000, when the UDF came to power in the GP. They have conducted several protest against the panchayat in the latter stage, by taking the role of an organization in the opposition. Their leaders admitted that they had no practice of regularly discussing local planning issues within their committees even during the PPC phase. The former secretary of DYFI stated, “Such discussions were not usually in our agenda. We discussed such issues occasionally, when some allegations were raised against the panchayats, especially during the UDF period”.

Since the DYFI was continuously in the opposition in Venkitangu, they had the practice of discussing panchayat plans in their committees. Most of such discussions were concentrated on the allegations against the UDF led panchayat, and planning of protests on such issues. They also emphasized that though they were in the opposition, they helped the LDF members to organize gram sabhas and undertake their responsibilities as panchayat members. The former secretary of DYFI stated, “We were normally discussing public works in the panchayat. We also supported LDF members to fulfil their responsibilities”. The DYFI had taken a watchdog’s role, since the start of the PPC (1996) to 2005, till the LDF came to power in the gram panchayat. This kind of a watchdog approach is also needed to strengthen democracy.

The Youth Congress in Vallikkunnu had also participated in the campaigns planned by the panchayat during the PPC. They discussed local development plans in case allegations were raised against the LDF led panchayat. Otherwise, discussions on local planning were not on the agenda in their mandalam committees. The Youth Congress led several agitations against the panchayat in both the PPC and the KDP periods. The former mandalam president of Youth Congress during 2000–2005 commented, “We were not discussing local development issues as a special item on the agenda in our committee. However, quite often we discussed allegations against the panchayat. We conducted several struggles on such issues and we also participated in the campaign programmes launched by the panchayat during the PPC phase”. In Venkitangu, though the UDF was in power local planning and providing support to the panchayat were not concerns in Youth Congress meetings. The leader
provided said, organizing programmes suggested by the apex committee was a regular item in the agenda of their meetings. The Youth Congress leader from Kudayathur indicated that their organisation was not active in the panchayat for a long period because of factionalism within the Congress. Thus, they could not undertake any kind of organizational activities and discussions.

Though the youth front (J) (Joseph) and youth front (M) (Mani) are the youth organizations of regional parties of Kerala Congress (J), and Kerala Congress (M) respectively, they did not have the practice of taking up local issues for discussion and action. They focused their activities only on implementing the suggestions of higher levels of officials in their group. As an organization in the opposition, the AIYF at Venkitangu had the practice of discussing local development issues, particularly the allegations against the panchayat, and then organizing protests based on them. The secretary of the AIYF mandalam committee said, “several times we discussed the panchayat development plan by putting it as a special item on the agenda in our committee meetings. We criticized the panchayat openly on many instances, and organized struggles”. The youth league leader from Vallikkunnu indicated that except for discussions on the apex committee’s instructions, local development issues were not a matter for discussion within their committees.

The youth organizations were more interested in conducting struggles against the panchayats led by political parties opposed to them, in the case of any lapses. This was quite visible from the approach of DYFI in Kudayathur, DYFI and AIYF in Venkitangu and Youth Congress in Vallikkunnu. Except for such instances they had no regular practice of discussing panchayat development plans in their committees. The DYFI in Vallikkunnu during the PPC stage was the only exception. Here too, they could not maintain the momentum for long. The DYFI had made some attempt to mobilize people to attend gram sabhas in the PPC phase, while such attempts were lacking in other organizations. The potential of the youth organizations to mobilize youth, to involve them in the local democratic process has not been utilized by the youth organizations. Similar to other mass organizations, the major agenda of discussions in youth organizations are the instructions from above, and issues related to local youth have been neglected by them. The proponents of PPC such as EMS Namboodiripad visualised the active role of mass organizations in mobilizing the
people towards the participatory institutions. Since these mass organizations are a greater political force in Kerala, there was the expectation about their mobilization potential. In order to realise this potential they had to change their political practices by making their systems sensitive to participatory institutions and democracy. For this, the issues of local development, and the functioning of local democratic forums had to be regularly discussed in the mass organizations. Our study reveals that such attempts were limited compared to the expectations.

One general factor emanating out of the study is that the institutional habitus of the political parties and mass organizations have not undergone any major change after their involvement in democratic decentralization. The main item of discussion within the local forums of political parties and mass organizations continued to be the reporting and implementation of instructions from the higher level committees. They could not give prominent space to the discussions on local development issues within their local political forums. This has created obstacles to the development of democratic decentralization as a major agenda of the political field in the state.

7.4 Political education on grass roots planning and democracy

The political education process is important in any political system to internalise the values and ideology of any new programme introduced in the democratic polity. This is relevant in the case of all political parties, who have an recognisable role in the training of their allies. There are different ways to internalize the concepts of a new programme. Discussions within the party forums are one among them, which we have already discussed in this chapter. The next important manneris through political education programmes within the parties. All political parties in Kerala have their own internal political education programmes in the mode of camps, classes, and lectures. These methods have been used to disseminate a new concept within the political parties.

The People’s Planning Campaign was an innovative programme in Kerala state, which attempted to bring in new democratic culture to enhance and further grass roots democracy and participative institutions. What was unique of such a culture was the increased emphasis on local planning and democratic process within the political system, the ability to highlight the common aggregated interests over the
divisive individual and group interests, and mobilizing the masses to participate in the local planning process through grass roots institutions (Isaac & Franke, 2000; EMS Namboodiripad in Isaac & Sreedharan (eds), 2002). The idea of participatory planning was new to the political parties in Kerala, and therefore, constant political education programmes were needed within them, on the concept and practice of grass roots planning and democracy. This was required to bring in a new political culture favourable to grassroots democracy by replacing the political culture that had been focused more on macro level political issues.

We can discuss the experiences of the different political parties in each of the panchayats of our study. The CPI (M) at Vallikkunnu had made considerable effort for in-house education during the PPC. However, such a drive could not be maintained after the PPC. The former local secretary of CPI (M) during the PPC period and the President of the panchayat during 2005 to 2010 phase recollected, “We had included the issue of democratic decentralization in our party classes during PPC”. He also pointed out, “We had been instructing our activists to attend gram sabhas”. He indicated that they could not maintain this practice in the KDP phase. Though they had conducted some classes in the initial stage of PPC they could not undertake a mass education programme reaching down to the grass roots level of the party. In the case of Venkitangu and Kudayathur, different factors affected the performance of the CPI (M). The party had conducted seminars and classes in both the panchayats during the PPC stage. They had withdrawn from such activities in the KDP stage. The party leaders from both the panchayats gave different reasons for this withdrawal. The local secretary of CPI (M) in Kudayathur stated, “We organized some classes and seminars in the PPC phase, but could not proceed with it in the KDP stage. We lost power in the panchayat, and at the same time the PPC turned into KDP. After the change to KDP the nature of the campaign itself was transformed”. The CPI (M) had made some effort in Venkitangu to orient their allies on the concept of PPC. The CPI (M) local secretary indicated, “We had taken some initiatives in the PPC phase by conducting classes and seminar discussions. We lost interest after the government changed, and the PPC became KDP”. Though the reasons were different in these panchayats it is evident that any consistent attempt to educate their own activists was lacking in the CPI (M). Their commitment was seen
to be related more to the LDF led Government at the state level and their programme than to democratic decentralization.

The analysis of the experiences of Congress Socialist Party (Formerly Communist party in the Malabar region), undivided Communist party and CPI (M) indicated that they had given extensive importance to the internal education programme within the party, particularly when they launched a new programme (Gopalankutty, 2004). They had organized party classes and cadre camps for disseminating their ideology among the activists. Party classes were the backbone of the Congress Socialist party that was active in the 1930s, and the undivided Communist Party functioned till 1964. After the party division in 1964 the CPI (M) also adopted intensive political education programmes to orient the activists of the party. Field observations in the present study indicated that there was a substantial decline in the political education programmes of the CPI (M) in the studied panchayats. They could not give emphasis to the training of cadres on the concept and practice of democratic decentralization, though it was a new concept to them. Their attempt was restricted to brief training in the initial phase of the PPC. After giving instructions for interventions in the decentralization process in the initial phase of the PPC, the CPI (M) was reluctant to give any kind of official instructions to the party activists about their involvement in decentralization activities.

A strong political orientation was needed under the leadership of political parties, particularly the Left, who were leading the decentralization campaign in Kerala. Such an attempt was missing from the Kerala CPI (M). The experience of the decentralization programme initiated by the Left parties in India and other countries such as Brazil and Philippines showed that they have taken it as a serious political project and continuously oriented the political activists to engage in that process. The studies from Bengal showed that the CPI (M) had directly instructed the activists to participate in gram sabhas, and political activists also engaged in the dissemination of development programmes there. The CPI (M) took decentralization as a platform for party building in Bengal (Bardhan et al, 2009). In the successful democratisation attempts in Brazil and Philippines the Left parties working there took the political orientation of the activists as a serious activity (Biaochi, 2003; Racamora, 2004).
In the case of other coalition partners of CPI (M) in the LDF except for CPI in Venkitangului there was no initiative from other parties to educate their allies on democratic decentralization. Except for the fact that they were involved in the local planning activities along with CPI (M), ideological discussion within those parties was absent.

The experience of Congress -I in Vallikkunnuli was different from the other two panchayats. They had included the subject of democratic decentralization as one among various subjects in their study camps in the initial phase of PPC. They conducted such classes only three times. A former mandalam president of the Congress-I party recollected, “In the launching phase of PPC we had brought a decentralization expert and he had taken classes for our workers. This happened thrice. We could not continue this in the KDP phase”. He also pointed out that the internal education system of the party had weakened. The Congress had had such an initiation only once at the district level in Kadayathur. The Congress block secretary and the panchayat president during the KDP phase stated, “We had convened a meeting of elected representatives in the district level, initiated by the district Congress committee. This happened once during the PPC. I cannot recollect any other similar attempt”. Though the Congress-I was the ruling party in Venkitangului for a long period, the party had not undertaken any internal education programme on democratic decentralization. The District Congress Committee member from Venkitangului pointed out that except for the talk of leaders, they had no practice of organizing any party education programme during the last one and a half decades.

Among the UDF coalition partners, the Muslim League and Kerala Congress (M), the situation was not different. The Muslim league state counsellor from Venkitangului pointed out, “Our party state committee produced a circular calling for party activists to involve themselves in the PPC campaign. We have the circular at all levels of the party committees for preparing the activists. We also requested the activists to attend gram sabhas. There were, however, no specific classes or education programme on decentralization within the Muslim League”. The Kerala Congress (M) mandalam president from Kadayathur also admitted that they could not organize such classes or discussions focused on democratic decentralization.
From the above descriptions of political education programmes on democratic decentralization within the political parties, we could infer that efforts of the parties to educate their activists was lacking. Though the CPI (M) had done some initial work in the panchayats, they abandoned it when they lost power at the state level. They have exhibited more commitment to the LDF government led PPC programme than democratic decentralization. As a party that had initiated the campaign at the state level, they did not undertake any mass education programme to make people aware of the principles of democratic decentralization and participatory institutions. In the case of the Congress, except in Vallikkunnu, there was no meaningful effort from the party in furthering such training. The involvement of the LDF and UDF coalition partners were also quite limited.

7.4 Political struggles and protests against local bodies

The struggles and protests emanating from political parties and mass organizations on the issues related to the administration of the panchayats, and malpractices in local governance can also be considered as political sensitivity towards local planning and development. The struggles highlight the local development issues that emerged out of peoples’ demands can be considered as a sign of making local development as a political project. Hence, the local level struggles can be viewed as attempts to strengthen participatory democracy. The agitations led by opposition parties by raising allegations against local bodies need not necessarily be taken as a symbol of strengthening local democratic practices. It could also be the replication of macro level politics played by political parties following a rigid party political approach. Hence, it is relevant to analyse what kind of struggles and protests were raised by political parties and mass organizations in the panchayats.

At the outset, it should be noted that no party had initiated struggles and protests when their own party or coalition ruled the panchayats. This is true in the case of both the LDF and UDF. Political parties and mass organizations carried out struggles while they were in the opposition bench of the panchayat. The struggles and protests led by the parties and their mass organizations can be broadly categorized into two. One, are the struggles highlighting local development issues and sufferings of the local people. The other category include the struggles undertaken by the group
to bring malpractices and maladministration issues of the panchayat to the attention of the local public.

The struggles focusing on issues of local development and sufferings of the people were lower in number compared to the other category. In Kudayathur the DYFI and CPI (M) organized several protests against the panchayat in the KDP phase on the issue of drinking water shortage in the hill areas of the panchayat. The UDF had done the same during the LDF period. The former panchayat secretary of the Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI) during the KDP phase commented, “Drinking water shortage became acute in the hilly areas, particularly in tribal areas. We made it an issue and the panchayat attempted to solve it”. In the case of Venkitangu, there were separate struggles by the DYFI and All India Youth Federation (AIYF), the Youth organizations of the CPI (M) and CPI respectively, on the issue of drinking water shortage in the riverside areas, where the salinity of water is a crucial issue. The DYFI also raised the issue of the construction of a public crematorium, and the deteriorating quality of panchayat roads. The AIYF mandalam secretary for the last eight years pointed out, “The salinity of the ground water in the riverside areas is very high because of the closeness of the sea and a river. This creates acute drinking water shortage in the riverside areas. We conducted several struggles on this issue, and as a response the panchayat implemented small water supply schemes here”.

The issue was different in Vallikkunnu. It was a struggle related to the environment, with the staunch support and involvement of the Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishath (KSSP). The Kadalundy riverside area of Vallikkunnu panchayat was declared as a Reserved Mangrove Forest by the department of forest, government of Kerala. The land on the riverside was owned by the panchayat, which had been given on lease to private parties for agricultural purposes. The possibility of renewing the lease agreement became difficult after the reserve forest declaration. The Opposition parties, particularly the Congress–I and Muslim League joined with private parties who were holding the land and started protesting against the panchayat, by alleging that the declaration had been introduced because of the panchayat. This was also an area where the coconut husk was soaked in the river for extracting coir. The low price of coir products pushed this industry into stagnancy in
the area. The opposition also alleged that the declaration made it difficult for employees who were involved in extracting yarn from the coconut husk, to earn a living. The UDF had organized several protests against the panchayat on this issue. The Muslim Youth League Panchayat vice president argued, “It creates problems for the peaceful life of the people in the riverside. It also pushed many coir workers into starvation”. The panchayat could not arrive at an amicable political solution to the issue. The secretary of the coir workers union, Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) commented, “In fact the industry was in a difficult condition for long years because of price fall. Now the situation has changed, but we cannot use the riverside for such activities because of legal restrictions”. Here, it is worth mentioning that local development also has a bearing on political issues in some instances. A decision which favours one group creates difficulties for others. The panchayats have to acquire the capacity to deal with such local political issues. The panchayat could not arrive at an amicable settlement by solving the issue of rehabilitation of coir workers in this area.

The protests in the second category emanated out of allegations against the panchayat representatives. In Kudayathur the UDF raised the issue of misappropriation in the project for constructing the panchayat office. The CPI (M) local secretary was the convener of the Beneficiary committee. This has also given a different dimension to the UDF agitations. In the KDP phase, the CPI (M) led struggles on issues of malpractices in the construction of a boat landing centre, and misappropriation in the spending on refreshments at panchayat meetings. They used the provisions of the Right to Information Act and collected expenditure details from the panchayat, and exhibited them publicly at the Kudayathur junction. The DYFI and CPI (M) organized several meetings on this issue. The alleged misappropriations in Venkitangu were in purchasing land for a taxi stand, and in giving license to private boat services in the Enamavu Lake, a fresh water lake in the panchayat. Several protests had been organized by opposition parties on different issues in Vallikkunnu. The UDF had carried out protests on the alleged misappropriation in the construction of the boat landing centre, sea wall, and the observations on the local fund audit report against the panchayat. Youth organizations were at the forefront of the protests in all the cases. A question that I addressed to certain political leaders was whether such political issues were raised in the gram sabhas. Their answer was,
silence. This gives the indication that they did not consider the gram sabha as a forum for raising the public voice of the panchayat administration.

Most of the protests were led by opposition parties, based on political identities. The time nearer to elections were a specially favoured time to raise these issues and publicize various “wrong doings”, or issues that would immediately get the attention and support of the people. Drinking water has been a serious issue for protests in the three panchayats, and the panchayats also take substantial interest in this matter. It could be noted that local issues related to agriculture, or issues connected to youth development, protection of women from atrocities, subjects related to the implementation of the special component plan for SCs and STs had not attracted the attention of political parties and organizations as issues that need to be focused on and to be included in their protests. The macro level political practice that raised protests focused on populist issues, and allegations attracting public attention have been followed at the micro level units of the political parties as well. Replication of this practice might have brought in a hurdle to creating a new kind of political practice from below, which could have strengthened participatory institutions. We found that none of the political struggles led by the parties had raised these issues in gram sabhas, as issues for public discussion. It appears they could not recognize gram sabhas as a forum for social auditing and public debates for the common good. Rather than organizing protests in the streets, they could not inculcate the culture of social auditing and public discourses within the public forums.

A significant point is that almost all struggles had been carried out by political parties and organizations while they were in the opposition. This kind of blind opposition would have affected the political party’s involvement in providing constructive support to the local bodies, which was the expectation of the PPC. It may be accepted that a critical approach of political parties and organizations will be helpful in making the local political process more accountable to the people. In this respect, the critical interventions of the opposition may have a positive outcome. Along with this, however, it should be observed that they should also be able to provide constructive support to the local bodies irrespective of party borders, which was not happening in the panchayats.
In order to develop a new political culture in favour of grassroots democracy the political practices too have to be changed. The local level issues have to be developed from the grassroots through democratic forums and have to be publicly debated. Such struggles should emerge out of genuine public demands rather than rigid party political interests. The experience of the study reveals that such a genuine political practice from below was lacking in the political field.

7.5 Summary

According to Pierre Bourdieu, the political field is characterised by competition for the legitimate right to speak on behalf of others, that produces symbolic capital. The balance of power in the political field is influenced by resources (in terms of different forms of capital) of political institutions, actors, and the relations among them. Local governance in Kerala is highly politicised in the sense that even the elections to the gram panchayats are held on political party lines. In this context the approach of the political field and the institutional habitus of each political party towards local governance and participatory planning are very relevant. In the initial phase of PPC it was hoped that the large network of political parties and their mass organizations will contribute towards mobilizing the masses in the participatory planning process, and to the creation of a new political culture favouring participatory democracy. Changes were needed in their political practices, particularly in areas such as practicing internal democracy within their organizational structure, the internal decision making process, the orientation of the activists on local democracy, party local government coordination, and the understanding of the parties on local political struggles, in order to realise the expectations of the PPC.

The responses on the internal democratic process suggested the infrequency of timely and regular elections in the Congress-I and regional parties, except for the Indian Union Muslim League. The CPI (M) conducted regular elections, though their organizational system was also dragged into acute factionalism in areas such as Venkintangu. Though the CPI (M) followed a formal democratic system in the studied cases, the recent experiences of the party showed that their formal consensus is either imposed from above or came out of the majority faction in the election process. This also raises questions about the occurrence of formal regular elections and democratic practices within the party. In a field that is closely related to the
habitus of the political actors, the weakening of the internal democratic practices may have affected their understanding of democracy.

The CPI (M) was involved to a greater extent in the grampanchayats during the PPC. The official instructions from the party to participate in the Left government initiated programme actually made for a higher degree of involvement in Kudayathur and Venkitangu. The party in Vallikkunnu was active from the beginning of the PPC. The association of the CPI (M) and the Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishath ensured good results in developing a better party-panchayat coordination. They were able to develop a very democratic coordination and decision-making system on the issues related to the party and the panchayat, by convening joint meetings of the two local committees of the party in the GP area. The system of discussing local planning issues within party local committees disappeared during the KDP phase. The discussions of local planning were confined to party sub committees for panchayat administration in Venkitangu and Kudayathur even during the PPC phase, and their involvement in local planning activities was considerably reduced after PPC.

The less enthusiastic approach of the UDF partners at the state level towards the PPC was also reflected in their responses at the grampanchayat level. However, the approach of the Congress-I party in Vallikkunnu was different. The party-panchayat coordination in the Congress led grampanchayats was very weak. There was no system of coordination between the party and panchayat and between the coalition partners of the UDF, except at the time of elections. During the UDF rule in Venkitangu and in Kudayathur, the panchayat administration was concentrated in a few people. The democratic decision-making had given way to a decision making process that was concentrated in a few people.

The CPI (M) activists became largely apathetic to the decentralization process after the PPC and the introduction of the KDP. This happened in Vallikkunnu too, where they remained in power during the KDP phase as well. The major factors explained by the respondents were the change of the Left government, changes that occurred in the campaign mode of PPC, bureaucratisation of the activities during the KDP phase, and the debate that emerged about foreign assistance to decentralization activities. The party programme of CPI (M) gives utmost importance to the LSGs in the democratization of the society. In practice, CPI (M) activists in Kerala viewed
only the PPC as a Left government initiated programme that had to be supported. Other than that, they could not view decentralization as a tool for social transformation, as envisioned by the party programme and leaders such as EMS Namboodiripad. They exhibited their commitment only to the Left government led PPC programme rather than the idea of decentralization. The party as a whole could not cover all LSGs as a major area of intervention.

The position of the reformists within CPI (M) who had been arguing for decentralization within the party faced a reduced influence after PPC. The debate over funding, the transformation that happened to the decentralization programme after PPC, and also the demise of EMS Namboodiripad who had been constantly arguing for decentralization, altogether affected the ability to continue their efforts in favour of decentralization. The reformists and leaders such as EMS Namboodiripad had been attempting to remould the institutional habitus of CPI (M) in favour of grassroots democracy and democratic decentralization. The debates within CPI (M) and the apathetic approach of the Congress-I together made for a situation where there was no spokesman for further movement in favour of grassroots democracy. In Bourdieun terms the groups who were arguing for decentralization lost legitimacy and symbolic capital and consequent power in the highly divided political field in Kerala, which made any further mass mobilization for decentralization very difficult. Even after the decentralization the major agenda in the committees of political parties and mass organizations continued to be the reporting and discussions on higher committee decisions. They also could hardly discuss the comprehensive long term plans for the development of the locality, but instead focused on rather than focusing on clientelistic and populist short term plans.

There was no serious effort from political parties to make alterations in the institutional habitus of the class and mass organizations, which were moulded out of agitation activities. Parties largely failed to inculcate the language of broader social responsibility among them, more than the language articulating specific group rights. It is very difficult to arrive at a common understanding among various groups working in the same field because of the different interests and demands sustained among them,
The experiences of the mass organizations in Vallikkunnu were different in nature. These organizations actively participated in the activities organized by the panchayat during the PPC phase. They also often discussed local planning issues in their internal discussions. The distinct political history of Malabar may have also contributed to the unique mass mobilization during the PPC phase.

The attempts to orient political activists to the idea of democratic decentralization by the political parties were scarce. The inadequacy of the political education programmes by political parties in favour of decentralization acted as one of the hurdles in altering their institutional habitus in favour of decentralization. This also have affected interventions of their activists and leaders in the activities related to local planning and democracy

There has not been much change in the institutional habitus of the political parties and political field at large even after their interactions with the democratic decentralization process. Not much has changed in the political culture at the grass roots in terms of internal democracy, decision making process, politicising the local level issues, or in using the new institutions for deliberative processes and orienting the political activists on democratic decentralization. The objective of the PPC, to bring attitudinal changes among the actors related to PPC, continued to be a distant dream.

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1. The concept of institutional habitus constitutes a complex amalgam of agency and structure and could be understood as the impact of a cultural group on the individual’s behavior as it is mediated through institutions. Institutional habitus have a history and established over time. In the context of the present study as distinct institution each political party possesses a unique history and institutional habitus. See, Reay, Diane, Miriam David and Stephen Ball (2001): Making difference?: Institutional habitus and higher education choices.

2. The Kerala Congress is a party formed after the division of Congress in 1964. After its formation it has again divided into several groups. Each of the groups became known in the name of their leader. See Pulikkunnel, Joseph (2004): Kerala Congressinte Sthapana charithram (Malayalam).

3. Factionalism refers to internal dissensions or conflicts within organizations. For more details about internal factionalism of Congress party in Kerala see, Kurup, Radhakrishna (2004): Politics of Congress factionalism in Kerala.

4. CPI(M) has two local committees in Vallikkunnu namely Vallikkunnu and Ariyallur, based in two regions.

5. Parliamentary party committee is the name operationally used in the panchayats by the political parties to name the committees consists of elected Gram Panchayats members from each party or, coalition and the party or coalition leaders

6. Centre for Development Studies (CDS) conducted a research programme called Kerala Research Programme for Local Level Development (KRPLLD) with assistance from the Netherlands. It was a research programme for encouraging research based on local issues. Panchayat Level Development Programme (PLDP) was one programme among KRPLLD programmers which was undertaken by the Integrated Rural Technology Centre (IRTC), the research institution of KSSP. Some of the tools developed by PLDP were used for PPC. This gave rise to the allegation that PPC was a an idea that had
foreign origins, which was introduced to undermine Marxist ideology. A faction among CPI(M) became the advocates of this view. For more debates on PPC see Sreekumar, T.T and S.R. Sanjeev (Eds): Kerala Vikasana Samvadhangal (Debates on Kerala Development).

Coal land are paddy fields in Central Kerala which are used only for paddy production that bears the role of water storage during the rainy season. These fields are interconnected and separated from other land areas.

Youth front (J) is the youth organisation of Kerala Congress (J) (Joseph), and Youth front (M) is the youth organisation of Kerala Congress (M).

The term political culture refers to patterns of individual attitudes and orientation towards politics among the members of the political system. Political culture is formed through a historical process.