CHAPTER- 8
CIVIL SOCIETY-RELIGIOUS FIELDS AND PARTICIPATORY INSTITUTIONS

The democratic decentralization programme initiated in Kerala with the People’s Planning Campaign had an intention to develop a new civic culture in the state in favour of participatory democracy (Isaac & Franke, 2000). The wider network of institutions such as youth clubs, libraries and the literary movement, cultural association, and people’s science movement have all been considered as contributory factors in creating a new civic culture of grassroots democracy.

Apart from the network of the civil society movement, the role of religious and caste organizations in the making of modern Kerala is widely acknowledged (Tharakan, 2008: Tharamangalam, 2008). There was a progressive stream within such movements which emphasized the need for universalizing primary education, and fought against superstitions and unscientific practices within the religious system. The bargaining power of the religious and caste organizations over the elected government increased considerably after the liberation movement of 1959. This movement had developed through the alliance of religious groups and opposition political parties, which had been instrumental in ousting the first democratically elected Communist government in the state. Each religion and caste group in the state such as Nair Service Society (organization of Nair castes), Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (Organization of backward castes such as Ezhavas, Thiyyas), started to organize and attempted to establish their identity in society in various forms. They started to find out new tools for bargaining with the state by using their organizational strength (Tharakan, 2008). Each of these groups was searching to expand its own network to the grassroots based on religious and caste identity. They started several institutions as a part of institutionalization that could accommodate various streams of people from their own caste and religion. Caste and religion based gatherings at the local level started to be visible in different forms such as family associations, children’s groups, women’s Self Help Groups, prayer groups etc. In this context, an important question is whether the religious and caste groups in Kerala have been strengthening the public democratic forums such as gram sabhas, SHGs, or were
weakening them. Their approach to local governments is also an important question to be discussed.

This chapter is divided into two parts. One is the field of civil society and its approaches to participatory institutions. The other is the field of religion and its approach towards participatory institutions. We start the discussion by clarifying the term Civil Society, and how it is being operationalized in this study.

8.1 Civil Society: Conceptual foundations

Civil Society is a complex and broad concept which has variously been defined by different authors. Generally, civil society is viewed as an arena of society constituted apart from the state (Bhargava, 2005). It comprises more or less voluntary associations outside the state. It is also considered as a sphere outside the institution of family and kin (Sreekumar, 2003). Hegel viewed civil society as a non-political, non-public sphere. He included the market system, social classes, corporate, social welfare institutions and civil laws under the purview of civil society. He considered civil society as an arena in which individuals enter in order to articulate their purely private concerns and to influence one another. Marx defined civil society as a sphere of economic and physical relations which determine the nature of political institutions and ideology in a society (Sreekumar, 2003). It transcends the limit of regions and state and represents the commercial and industrial activities of a particular historical juncture. While Hegel viewed civil society as including the market system, social institutions and their ideology, Marx viewed it as a sphere of physical relations based on economic foundation (Gibbon, 1993).

Gramsci viewed civil society as a sphere of bourgeoisie classes which is used to complement and reinforce the machinery of state oppression. To him civil society is a sphere that has the capacity to influence the nature of the state. The hegemony of the bourgeoisie ideology over civil society and the state can be countered only through the domination of lower class interests over the bourgeoisie civil society and over the state. Politicization of civil society according to the lower class interest is a necessary pre requisite to develop such a counter hegemony (Gibbon, 1993). Proponents of the neo-liberal ideology viewed civil society as a means to downsize
the all-encompassing welfare state, and imagined it as a tool for making the state more efficient through private-public partnership (Stokke & Mohan, 2001)

Gramsci bifurcates the super structure of society into civil society and political society. He explained that political society represents the state and the oppressive measures that the state possesses. He said the political nature of the bourgeoisie civil society could be altered through political interventions which in turn can influence political society and the state (Sreekumar, 2003). Partha Chatterjee distinguishes political society and civil society as different spheres of society. He explained that autonomous civil society associations based on equality, freedom and individual rights can be viable only in western societies. Most of the institutions of the Third World do not conform to these standards. He argues that there is a domain between civil society and the state in the Third World i.e., political society. It is a sphere to articulate demands, and political negotiation with the state to accomplish the demands of the poor and marginalized. He considered civil society as a sphere of corporate capital which essentially work for the bourgeoisie (Mannathukkaran, 2010)

8.1.1 Kerala’s civil society and field of religion

Partha Chatterjee’s political society is a vague notion that entails movements, and non-party political formations. While we enter into the Kerala situation we cannot categorically differentiate the sphere of civil society into civil and political society. Kerala’s civil society itself was shaped by the struggles launched in the religious and political spheres in the last one and a half centuries (Tharakan, 2008). The Gramscian conceptualisation of civil society would be more suitable in the Kerala context. Though theoretically civil society is viewed as a sphere that represents bourgeoisie interests, the political interventions of Kerala’s civil society helped to alter the hegemony of bourgeoisie interests over it. Socio religious reform movements, political parties, class and mass organizations, literary groups, library networks and other civil society formations helped to alter the bourgeoisie ideology in the state in favour of the poor (Ganesh, 2003). Kerala society was able to develop its culture of public action through the politicization of civil society (Sen, 2002). In Gramscian language, the civil society-political society nexus and the politicisation of the civil society to benefit the poor created a state that responded quickly to public demands (Lieten, 2003)
Religious reform movements have played a progressive role in the formation of Kerala society, through their internal modernisation process (Panicker, 2005). They challenged the superstitions and rituals deep rooted in their communities and attempted to shape modern society. They also acted as an organized force to bargain with the state for the development needs of each community (Tharakan, 2008). These caste and communal organizations became an indispensable part of political negotiations in Kerala, which even had the role of shaping political coalitions and governments (Nair, 1986). The religious and caste organizations had the power to bargain with the state, based on caste and religious identities. These organizations are presently arguing for the strengthening of caste and religious identities and for the revival of old rituals and customs in modern forms (Panicker, 2005). This journey could be marked as a transition from reformation to revivalism.

In this study we have included class and mass organizations in the category of political field because of their direct affiliation with political parties. Under civil society we have included four groups. They are Youth clubs, Libraries, Registered charitable organizations and other organizations such as Traders associations and Pensioners unions. Religious and caste organizations are in a separate category that is in the religious field. Bourdieu and Wacquant viewed voluntary organizations as a field with their own stakes (Bourdieu & Wacquant in Sisiannen, 2000). They viewed voluntary organizations also as a field that has conflicts and consensus like in other fields. We consider civil society as a separate field for analysis along with the political and religious fields in this study.

8.2 Civil society and participatory institutions in Kerala

The active involvement of civil society organizations was expected during the launching of PPC. Youth clubs, Libraries, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Cultural associations and People’s science movement were the organizations comprising civil society, which were expected to play a facilitator’s role in linking local government with the people (Isaac & Franke, 2000). Kerala has had several mass movements for public awareness building. The total literacy campaign in Kerala was such a mass movement, to which various civil society networks such as libraries and youth clubs had contributed under the leadership of the Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishath (Parameswaran, 1998). In this back drop the expectation of the PPC to bring
the collective actions of civil society for the strengthening of grassroots institutions was relevant.

After two phases of democratic decentralization in Kerala we examine what the civil society organizations in the state have contributed to strengthen the grassroots level participatory institutions. According to the conceptualization of Bourdieu, apart from their major field of intervention various other fields can also influence the habitus of the individuals in their own way (Bourdieu in Bourdieu & Wacqant, 1992). Here, the role of civil society in forming the consciousness of the individuals is relevant. We have conducted an inquiry into the dynamics of civil society in relation to its interventions in participatory institutions and grassroots democracy. The major points of inquiry were the presence and the structure of organizations included in the civil society organizations, discussions among them on participatory institutions and democracy, and the activities undertaken by them to strengthen local planning and democratic process. We can also sought to understand whether they have initiated any kind of public education programme to strengthen participatory democracy.

8.2.1 Structure and presence of Civil society networks

The three panchayats have different social situations and background in the case of civil society organizations. Youth clubs, Libraries, Pensioner’s unions, Trade associations and the People’s science network are the organizations that I could observe in the panchayats.

There are four libraries in Kudayathur. They are functioning in various areas of the panchayat and named as Gandhi memorial library Kolapra, Public library Kudayathur, Public library Kanjar, and public library-cum-reading room in Koovappilly. According to the panchayat document (Kudayathur GP, 2001), there are 15 Youth clubs in the panchayat, and none of them has its own land and building. The Kerala State Service Pensioners Union has one unit in the panchayat, comprising 174 members. The traders organizations named Kerala State Vypari Vyavasayi Ekopana Samiti (KVVES) has one unit in the panchayat comprising 180 members. The Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishath (KSSP) had two units in the panchayat, in two places of the GP named Kolapra and Kanjar. They had become inactive after the People’s
Planning Campaign period. There are two registered Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) functioning in the panchayat. One is a local organisation called Kudayathur Development Society (KDS). It is a body of local people from various fields, formed to undertake development and social service activities. Initially, it was formed as part of a continuing education centre of the Kerala State Literacy mission, and later on it was separated, and started to function as an independent body. The other one is a NGO named Vikas Credit and Informal Banking services (VICIB), working in Kottayam and Ernakulam and Idukki districts of Kerala, by forming their own Self Help Group, (SHG) network.

There are four libraries in Venkitangu gram panchayat, working in different places, named Safdar Hashmi library and cultural centre Thoikavu, Sree Narayana library Venkitangu, Progressive Youth League Library Venkitangu and village library in Kannoth. There are 40 Youth clubs according to the panchayat document out of which only three of them have their own land and building. Fifteen of them are working either in rented buildings or temporarily constructed sheds. The Traders organization named Kerala Vyapari Vyvasayi Ekopana Samithi (KVVES) has four units in different localities of the panchayat, and altogether comprising 390 members. The Kerala State Service Pensioner’s Union has one unit in the panchayat which includes 226 members. The KSSP had one unit in the GP during the PPC phase, which became inactive because of the lack of active members, and then started to work again in 2005.

The number of libraries and youth clubs in Vallikkunnu is high. It has eight libraries in different areas of the panchayat, namely, Navajeevan Library, Jwala Library, S Mohammed memorial Library, Universal Library, Udhaya Library, Village renewal forum, and Shobana Library. Most of the libraries also function here as Youth clubs. The panchayat has formed a coordination system of the clubs working in the GP area called Clubs Association for Cultural Action (CACA). There are two KSSP units in the panchayat, one in Vallikkunnu and the other in Ariyallur. The Kerala State Service Pensioner’s Union (KSSPU) has one unit at Vallikkunnu comprising 360 members. Kerala Vyapari Vyavasayi Ekopana Samithi has its four units in the grampanchayat area, comprising 500 members. There is one NGO working in the panchayat namely Krishna Education and Cultural Society. It is a
NGO started and run by a social activist with his own land and building. They have different activities including a literacy centre, an old age home, and a children’s nursery.

The three panchayats also have staff who have a semi-official status in the panchayat. They were appointed on a contract basis by giving them a nominal honorarium, and they function as a major force for voluntary action. Promoters appointed for the literacy programme, Aganwady workers, Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA), and Kudumbasree activists are the groups who carry out the activities of the panchayat on a voluntary basis, that are lying even out of their jurisdiction.

Our descriptions so far suggest that civil society organizations are denser in the Malabar region than the other two regions. It is reflected in terms of the number of Youth clubs, Libraries, and their wider presence in the various areas of the panchayat. The political history of the Malabar area had quite different from the other two regions. The Congress Socialist party which had its roots in the Malabar area has greater engagement with Libraries, reading rooms and people’s organizations like arts and sports Clubs with broad political objectives. It had used these people’s organizations to widen its mass base (Gopalankutty, 1989).

8.2.2 Day-to-day activities of the organizations and their involvement in local level Planning

The analysis of the day-to-day activities of civil society organizations during the PPC and KDP phases will be helpful to understand how far they were active in the society, and to what extent they have been able to contribute to social mobilization. Another issue that needs to be noted is the discussions on participatory institutions and local level planning taking place within CSOs. The following part of this chapter would focus on these issues. The level of activism of the same organizations in different panchayats would also be different. This would serve the purpose of a comparative analysis as well.

Libraries are one of the important components of civil society that could make changes in the consciousness and awareness levels of people. They can organize different kinds of programmes, and can also take the role of facilitator to serve the
Libraries in the selected GPs have been serving multiple purposes simultaneously. While they have been serving as reading rooms and libraries as their primary functions, they have also been carrying out awareness classes, seminars and discussions on different contemporary issues. Libraries have different forums for dealing with different stakeholders, such as children’s forum, women’s forum etc. Apart from this, they have been conducting vocational training courses. The libraries in these three panchayats were also similar in their functioning. The secretary of Kanjar library in Kudayathur commented, “In addition to the library functioning we had been organizing awareness classes on various topics such as environment, energy conservation, health, and contemporary development issues”. The library secretary from Kollapra in Kudayathur pointed out that they have different forums in the library such as children’s forum, farmer’s forum, student’s corner etc. The libraries in Venkitangu also followed the same pattern in their functioning, except for one library called Safdar Hashmi cultural center, which was functioning as both youth club and library. They were organizing many field based activities that are normally undertaken by youth clubs. The patron of Safdar Hasmi club, who was also a panchayat member stated, “We had been very active in the literacy campaign. We normally organize blood donation camps and medical camps”. The Sree Narayana Library in Venkitangu also conducted intensive field based awareness activities in the event of outbreak of chikungunya. The libraries in Vallikunnu have shown some difference in their day to day functioning. Most of the libraries in Vallikunnu perform multiple roles as clubs and cultural centres. Libraries in Vallikunnu often organized film festivals, and village festivals, by including arts and sports competitions. Four Libraries out of eight were functioning also as youth clubs, and they organized volleyball and football coaching camps. Most of the libraries in Vallikunnu have the practice of organizing celebrations on their anniversaries. The libraries in Vallikunnu
are still able to maintain a momentum in the society with their wide range of activities.

There is also a central library system in Vallikunnu led by the panchayat library that has the scheme for exchanging books between the libraries in the gram panchayat area. This also enables coordination among libraries in the panchayat. The former librarian of the central library who was also a teacher by profession commented, “The libraries in Vallikkunnu are still carrying out multiple activities. They organize various cultural camps, theatre camps, film festivals, sports training camps etc. They also have the practice of celebrating their anniversaries in a festival mode. The Central library had a key role in coordinating the libraries since its inception during the PPC phase”.

The vibrant civil society in Kerala has facilitated the emergence and survival of a large number of cultural movements which do not have direct political affiliation. The local village libraries were the centre of nationalist organizations during the emergence of nationalist and communist movements (Tharakan & Isaac, 1995). The Congress Socialist party in the Malabar region opted for village libraries as central points of their intellectual activities at the local level (Gopalankutty, 1989). This historical phenomenon is visible in the experience of libraries in the Vallikkunnu GP area. Unlike Putnam’s (1993) argument of social capital formation through voluntary organizations and clubs that are non-political in nature, the political movement and political history of a region contributed to the development of strong civil society networks of village libraries particularly in the Malabar region and all over Kerala. Rather than the civil society-political society divide as described by Partha Chatterjee (Mannathukaran, 2010) civil society formation through a political movement is visible here.

Notwithstanding the earlier importance of libraries, they face considerable challenges in recent times due to transformations in village society. A major change is that the number of people coming to the library has declined in the last decade. The secretary of Kolapra library of Kudayathur pointed out, “Now a days only 5–10 persons per day are coming to borrow books. Moreover, the number of young people is very low among the new members”. The situation in Venkitangu is no different. Only a few children are approaching libraries due to the new school curriculum,
which forces the children towards additional studies. The president of Sree Narayana library in Venkitangu indicated, “The number of readers has drastically reduced in the last one decade. Most of the members are school children. Only 5–6 persons are coming every day to get books issued to them”.

The situation in Vallikkunnu is a little different. They had carried out an experiment of ‘Women’s library’, a library exclusively providing books to women as a project of the People’s Planning Campaign, under the leadership of the Central library in the panchayat. This initiative created a situation where hundreds of women acquired the reading habit, and they used to wait for books to be issued through the Women’s library. The former librarian of the Central library who served during PPC and KDP phases recollected, “The starting of the Women’s mobile Library made unexpected changes among women. Even Muslim women who normally hesitated to come out of their homes approached volunteers to get books. The reading habit of women also influenced their children’s reading habit. We were compelled to start a Children’s library within the Central library. We renovated the Central library. Only 1000 books were there in the early period of PPC, now it has been increased to 20000, and we appointed a full time permanent librarian”. This could be taken as an example of exploring new possibilities to nurture the reading habit even in the changing cultural scenario, which does not encourage the reading habit. Their activities focusing on women and children helped to bring about the renovation of the library at the panchayat level. Except for this case in Vallikkunnu, the general activities of libraries and the numbers of readers, particularly youth, had declined.

8.2.2.1 Discussions and interventions of Libraries on participatory institutions

While linking local democracy and participatory institutions with the functioning of libraries, the pertinent question is to discern the extent to which the subject of local planning and participatory institutions have been discussed within the library system. What were their interventions to strengthen local democracy and participatory institutions? Since the libraries are the cultural centres of the panchayat which comprise several social activists, discussions within them on participatory planning and democracy and their interventions to strengthen grass roots democracy is quite relevant.
While we examine the discussions that have taken place within the libraries about participatory institutions and local planning, these activities seem to be limited. The level of involvement of libraries to strengthen grassroots forums is also not high. The library representatives in Kudayathur responded that the subject of democratic decentralization had never been included in their routine discussions, seminars or classes conducted under the umbrella of the library. The subject of strengthening participatory forums was also not discussed in the library committees. In the case of their involvement in local development issues or association with panchayats, libraries had organized medical camps in association with the panchayats during the outbreak of chikungunya fever. Kudayathur library in association with the gram panchayat had organized eye camps for detecting cataract. Library representatives have a view that panchayats have given less emphasis on cultural activities, which in turn affected the involvement of libraries in panchayat. The secretary of Kolapra library commented, “Cultural issues have been neglected by panchayat. Thus, we did not have much of an opportunity to intervene in the activities of the panchayat”.

The situation in Venkitangu was also similar in this respect. The revival of libraries had not been on the agenda of the panchayat from the initial PPC phase onwards. Except for medical camps and health awareness classes, no other discussions and initiatives have come out from the libraries in Venkitangu. Library representatives stated that irrespective of the PPC and KDP phases, the libraries had been neglected in the local plans of the panchayat. The president of Sree Narayana library who had been associated with the panchayat since PPC indicated, “We had organized awareness classes during the outbreak of chikungunya. Except for this, the association with panchayat was very limited”.

While the two cases may suggest a negative picture of library activities in relation to the panchayats, in Vallikunnu there were attempts from both the libraries and the panchayat to co-operate and strengthen the participation of the libraries in panchayat activities. Most of the libraries in Vallikkunnu had organized discussions on participatory planning and institutions in the PPC phase. The participation of library committee members in organizing gram sabhas, and in cultural activities such as theatre camps, sports camps of the Panchayat was quite high. The secretary of S.
Muhammed memorial library, who was also a panchayat member during the KDP phase recollected, “Library representatives actively participated in gram sabha discussions on education and culture. Our representatives were there in the education, and culture Task force of the panchayat too”. The panchayat had also organized several programmes in association with libraries. It included the distribution of books to the libraries, providing infrastructure to them, organizing football and volleyball camps under the patronage of the Clubs and Libraries, providing newspapers and magazines to them, setting up the women mobile library etc. The project for distributing magazines and newspapers to the libraries has been continuing for the last fourteen years since the initiation of PPC, without any interruption. The panchayat also gives assistance to the libraries for organizing film festivals, theatre camps, village festivals etc. The President of the Navajeevan library commented, “We organized film festivals and village festivals with the help of the panchayat”.

One could make an observation that Vallikkunnu witnessed a mutually reinforcing phenomenon in terms of the co-operation between the panchayat and libraries as a part of civil society network. The library officials were continuously involved in the planning process of the panchayat irrespective of the change from PPC to KDP. This intervention helped the panchayat to develop several attractive projects in the cultural sphere. The continuity in the panchayat in terms of Left rule also helped the libraries to go ahead with their activities. Though there was such continuity in Venkitangu, the intervention of libraries in panchayat planning was very weak from the beginning. The inherent weakness of the library in that panchayat may have influenced their interventions in the panchayat. In Kudayathur too, the library system was too weak to be able to intervene in the strengthening of the democratic process.

Dialogue between panchayats and libraries is also important in this context. Such a dialogue rarely took place in Venkitangu and Kudayathur, while it was noticeably higher in Vallikkunnu. Vallikunnu panchayat had brought in the coordinated force of the libraries into the activities of planning and participatory institutions right from the beginning of the PPC. This has made a difference in the panchayat. Evidently, dialogue between Local Self Government and civil society
organizations such as libraries has been instrumental in their involvement in the local planning and democratic process.

The role of libraries is important in bringing changes in the understanding and awareness level of people through their interventions. Discussions, classes, and seminars are the tools for such a process of increasing their levels of knowledge. This kind of public education has not been undertaken by the libraries in the panchayats, with a focus on strengthening participatory institutions, and democracy. Some efforts had taken place in Vallikkunnu in the initial part of the PPC. They could not proceed with it after the PPC.

The library network in Kerala is a good instance of state supported civil society. Village libraries all over Kerala had been brought under the umbrella of the Kerala State Library Council, and financially supported by the state. Though the libraries had been set up as part of voluntary activism they could later on join the state in making a cultural transformation of society. This synergy was developed by the expansion of state activity through the civil society network (Stokke & Mohan, 2001). This also negates the traditional perception of the state and civil society as antagonistic and with separate spheres.

It was hoped that a kind of state-civil society synergy could be brought to the micro level through engagement between gram panchayats and civil society organizations (Isaac & Franke, 2000). The experience of our study indicates that this kind of synergy developed only in Vallikkunnu in the Malabar region, while the other two GPs are in Travancore and Cochin regions, and failed to develop this kind of cooperation. Interventions by the state through state supported programmes were needed in the cultural field in order to transcend local limitations in building up such a mutual engagement. The PPC was an attempt to lead Kerala society from literal literacy to development literacy (Parameswaran, 1998). Libraries and cultural associations had a significant role in the total literacy campaign of the 1990s led by KSSP, with state support. PPC could not create such a mass momentum in the cultural domain of the state, to orient the people towards the culture and practice of local democracy.
The weakening of the library system is quite evident from the responses of the respondents. This has affected their potential to influence the various groups of society, and it also affects their capacity to bring changes in society.

8.2.3 Interventions of Youth clubs

The other important agency that can be viewed as a part of civil society in Kerala are Youth clubs. Youth are presumed to have the dynamism to bring about changes in society. We need to examine how far the Youth clubs have actually been able to effect changes. Have they considered the strengthening of participatory institutions as a prominent programme in their agenda? What were their interventions that could promote participatory and local planning institutions?

As we indicated earlier, the strength and presence of the Youth clubs in each of the three panchayats is different in terms of numbers and activities. The responses from the Kudayathur panchayat showed that though there were fifteen clubs, only four of them were actually functioning. They conducted sports competitions, medical camps, and blood donation camps in their own locality. The president of KPMR club Koovappilly commented, “We usually organize medical camps, study tours, and mountaineering programmes. We have also undertaken some social service activities like helping the poor for constructing houses, and latrines” The activities of the Clubs in Kudayathur were not constant, and were almost seasonal in nature. Some of them opted for volley ball and football practice as a routine activity.

The number of Clubs is higher in Venkitangu than in Kudayathur. There were forty Clubs in number, but only four of them were functioning. The youth coordinator of the panchayat indicated, “Though the number of clubs was forty on paper, only four of them are able to show their presence in society”. According to him the four clubs focused on four areas. The Mahatma club in Karuvanthala focused on cricket and football, Vivekananda in Thoikavu concentrated on kabaddi, Yuvajana club in Kuruvanthala focused on football, while Safdar Hashmi in Thoikavu focused on cultural activities. We also note that among the four, two of them clearly uphold their political partisanship. Safdar Hashmi club works in accordance with the Leftist perspective, while Vivekananda club works as a body affiliated to the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS). The patron of Safdar Hashmi club shared his view, “We
will give membership only to the people who believe in social equality and secularism”. Thus, while they are part of civil society, they are also trying to create their own institutional habitus which would help to shape the individual habitus, and likewise the experience of the members.

The Clubs in Kudayathur have undertaken various activities such as medical camps, blood donation camps, and uniform distribution to school children as their major activity. Three Clubs were involved in the sports activities that we mentioned earlier. Safdar Hashmi club was very active in social service from its inception. It has a library associated with the Club. It was involved in the literacy campaign in 1990. They have the practice of organizing seminars and discussions on contemporary topics. In 1992, on the event of the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the Club activists had observed a one day fast to convey the message of religious solidarity to the people. However, though this Club has a rich tradition of activism, its activities were reduced after 1990s. Their involvement in the PPC in 1996 was not as active as the literacy campaign in 1990. Their cultural activism in terms of number and variety of programmes has been reduced to the celebrations on their annual day during the last decade.

The Youth clubs in Vallikkunnu showed a different pattern from the other two panchayats. Here as well, there was a much larger number of Clubs that was listed, but a much smaller number was active. Out of fifty two registered Clubs only fifteen of them were regularly carrying out programmes. A noticeable factor here is that they have their own building and they have the practice of organizing their annual celebrations in a festival mode. Most of them were also concentrating on regular sports training and participating in competitions. Football and volleyball were the major sports items on which they have been focusing. One should remember that although the volume of activism has come down considerably during the last decade the Clubs in Vallikkunnu are still able to attract youth through the activities focused on sports. They also organized various social service activities such as road cleaning, constructing new roads, holding health classes, and blood donation camps. A committee member of the Apollo club commented, “We regularly conduct training in volleyball. Apart from that, we organize several other voluntary activities”.

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Involvement of youth clubs in local planning, and the activities to strengthen participatory institutions is the next point to be discussed. What was observed in all three panchayats was the good participation of youth clubs in the programmes of Keralotsava organized by the panchayat. During the PPC the Keralotsavas had a festive mood, while it had declined during the KDP. Youth clubs were still participating in this programme. This is a link between the panchayats and the Clubs. In all the three cases the representatives of the Youth clubs were involved in the organization of this programme. The perception from the interviews in all three panchayats was that the vigour of the programme has considerably reduced in the last few years. Every year, an amount from the plan fund of the panchayat had been earmarked for this purpose.

Regarding the discussions on and awareness of participatory institutions by the Youth clubs, the responses were not impressive at all. No initiative had been taken by the youth clubs of most places to discuss the subjects of gram sabha participation, panchayat administration or democratic decentralization in any of their forums. The interventions in Vallikkunnu are an exception to this general feature in the other panchayats. Youth clubs had not even made any effort to improve the quality and attendance of gram sabhas.

The involvement of Youth clubs in some areas of activism was visible here and there in Kudayathur. The clubs had been associated with the panchayat in conducting medical camps and distributing medicines during the outbreaks of chikungunya and dengue fever. One Club in Kudayathur had made an effort to repair the road passing through a hilly area of the gram panchayat. Other than this, no initiative has come out of the Clubs. Except for health activities, and participation in the Keralotsava, there was no visible involvement in panchayat activities from the Youth clubs in Venkitangu. The only exception was a seminar conducted by the Safdar Hashmi club at the launching of the PPC. It also carried out some activities to support the functioning of health sub centres of the panchayat. The patron of the Club commented, “We have given support to conduct health check-ups in our clubs. We have also conducted several health awareness classes with the help of the PHC”.

In Vallikkunnu, from the beginning of PPC, there were lots of joint activities by Clubs and the panchayat. The Club’s participation in various activities such as the
construction of canals, boat jetty and sea wall was significant. The former President of
the panchayat during the PPC phase recollected, “We called the panchayat level
meeting of Youth clubs on several occasions. Their participation in voluntary
activities was appreciable”. However, this kind of mass participation was not
sustained in the KDP phase in Vallikkunnu. Some of the Clubs even conducted
discussions about the PPC during the PPC period. Though they had organized such
discussions they could not conduct mass scale public education programmes that can
effect changes in people’s thinking on local democracy and planning.

It is important to discuss the synergy between Youth clubs and the panchayat
in the activities organized during the PPC phase, and also to an extent in the
programmes organized in the first two years of the KDP. The panchayat has formed
an association of fifty six registered Youth clubs in the panchayat, namely Clubs
Association for cultural Action (CACA). CACA has conducted several activities with
the cooperation of Youth clubs. The Keralotsava of the panchayat had been conducted
for four years under the patronage of CACA. They organized a week long
programme for welcoming the new millennium of 2000. It was a big festival, in
which all the villages participated in a celebrative mood. The chairperson of CACA
recollected, “You know it was a memorable event. We organized a big procession
starting from three directions of the panchayat. After the convergence of that
procession in the panchayat ground, we had a night long display of cultural
performances. All of them were performed by various Youth clubs”. The Panchayat
had given a small grant to the Clubs to organize this event. The panchayat purchased a
big curtain set which can be used by any Youth club, for their cultural events. The
panchayat also gave a sports kit to each Club. Some of the Clubs have been selected
as regional training centres for volleyball and football, to provide training to youth
and school children. They have been able to continue the programme for fourteen
continuous years. It is notable that except for this programme they could not continue
other activities such as the joint cultural activities of Clubs under the umbrella of
CACA after 2001, the first year of KDP. The CACA became inactive in the latter half
of KDP. The panchayat was no more able to organize any mass voluntary activity
with the co-operation of the Clubs after the PPC. However, the strengthening of gram
 sabhas or grass roots democratic forums has not been on the agenda of youth clubs in
Vallikkunnu either during the PPC or the KDP phase.
From the above description it could be concluded that the synergy between panchayats and Youth clubs was rarely found in Venkitangu and Kudayathur. The interventions of Youth clubs in the activities of gram panchayats were very scarce in both cases. Their interventions were limited to organizing some medical camps, health check-up and resurfacing of roads in some areas. It is also relevant to note that there was no difference during the PPC and KDP phases in the approach of the Youth clubs to the panchayats. The Youth clubs in Vallikkunnu were different from the other two panchayats in terms of numbers and regularity of interventions. The synergy between the panchayat and the Clubs has been clearly visible in Vallikkunnu till the first half of KDP. The intervention of Youth clubs in panchayat activities was missing in the latter half of KDP. In all the three panchayats any attempt of the youth clubs to strengthen the gram sabhas was not seen at all. The activities undertaken by them to educate the public on participatory democracy and local planning were also low.

The experience of Vallikkunnu in the PPC phase has brought out the possibility of a synergy between local government and Youth clubs. The panchayat had initiated a dialogue with Youth clubs and attempted to co-ordinate certain activities with them. Their interventions in panchayat forums were fruitful in the first 5-6 years since PPC began. Later on, this trend changed. There was no effective internal discussion within the Youth clubs about participatory institutions and local democracy. It could be argued that for the sustenance of a deliberative intervention from civil society, sufficient interventions through diverse democratic forums were needed, rather than a campaign process. Until this conceptual discussion and internalization happened within the civil society organizations, their interventions will cease after the initial enthusiasm. It can also be suggested that regional history and culture are contributing factors in deciding the levels of interventions of any civil society groups, including youth clubs. Isaac and Franke (2000) have argued that instead of taking civic culture as historically determined, and given the PPC approaches, it is shaped by the nature of civic and political engagement. They claimed that the campaign sought to nurture a civic culture that will promote grass roots democratic institutions. Youth clubs are a major part of civil society in Kerala. If their argument has been realised the active involvement of Clubs would have been visible in Kerala’s democratization attempts. This was missing in experience.
As we had discussed earlier, every institution has its own institutional habitus (Reay et al, 2001). The institutional habitus of Kerala’s Youth clubs has primarily been created through their interventions in arts, sports and social welfare activities. The role of the Youth in public action and political mobilization of the state is well recognized (Nair, 1986). Their role in bringing the Youth to the public sphere is also important. But they could not expand their institutional habitus to intervene in the activities that can strengthen grass roots democracy. The experience from the gram panchayats showed that Youth clubs have been associating with gram panchayats in organizing arts and sports events such as the Keralotsava. The coordination of Youth clubs at the panchayat level in Vallikkunnu gram panchayat has brought about possibilities of voluntary activities associated with the panchayat, though such attempts were limited to the PPC phase. In his writing, Robert Putnam views associationism as a necessary precondition for self-governance (Putnam, 1993). The experience of our study shows that just any kind of associationism would not contribute to better self-governance. The nature of the voluntary field that constitutes associations and the institutional habitus of the individual associations are important in this regard. If they do not bear the politics of local self-governance and grass roots democracy as core ideas in their functioning, their priorities will be confined to areas such as arts and sports activities.

The institutional habitus of Youth clubs was not mature enough to internalize the concept of democratization of the grassroots. The decentralization efforts undertaken by the gram panchayats also failed to deliver a wider programme to the public sphere, including Youth clubs. Limited attempts that were seen only in Vallikunnu, however, lacked continuity.

8.2.4 Interventions of Non-Government Organizations

The organizations registered by the Charitable Society Act, and getting funds both from government and nongovernment sources through various projects, is categorised here as Non-Government Organizations (NGOs). They also uphold a professional approach in their functioning, through trained and paid staff, and professionals. Only three organizations of that kind could be identified in the three panchayats. Kudayathur GP had two such organizations while there was one in Vallikkunnu. No such organisation was seen in Venkitangu gram panchayat. Kudayathur Development
society (KDS) and Vikas Credit and Informal Banking services (VICIB) were the agencies functioning in Kudayathur, and the Krishna Education and Cultural centre was the organization functioning in Vallikkunnu.

There are some similarities and differences in the functioning, and day-to-day activities of these NGOs. Kudayathur development society is a registered charitable society, working with the objective of undertaking both welfare and development activities in the locality. Its major area of functioning is to provide vocational training to youth by undertaking projects from various government agencies such as Social Welfare Board, Youth Welfare Board, Nehru Yuvak Kendra, and Jan Sikshan Sumsthan. It organized medical camps, and awareness classes on the issues of environment protection, and energy conservation. Computer training programmes too were conducted by this NGO. It has also started Self Help Groups in the panchayat area. VICIB is a professional NGO who has its branches in four districts. It is a registered body, while the entire activities of that organization were controlled by a single individual. They also used the channel of SHGs for marketing their products. (VICIB, 2006).

Krishna Education and Cultural Society is a NGO started by an individual and is a registered body in Vallikkunnu. It has undertaken various activities such as the formation of women SHGs, running a play school, organizing women empowerment camps and classes, conducting activities for propagating the message of communal harmony and national unity, campaign to spread awareness about the Panchayat Raj institutions, conducting literacy classes, and preparing a master plan for the development of coastal areas (Krishna Educational & Cultural society, 2003). The working area of Krishna has been restricted to two panchayats namely Parappanangadi and Vallikkunnu. The individual centric mode of functioning is the characteristic feature in the case of VICIB and Krishna, while team work is visible in the management of Kudayathur development society (KDS). We also observed that most of the activities of VICIB followed a business mode and profit orientation rather than social service, while the other two agencies are more service oriented in their functioning.

The other point of inquiry was the relation of civil society organizations with local bodies, and their involvement in strengthening participatory institutions. What
we could observe was that the relation between NGOs and panchayats is not always collaborative in nature, but was sometimes conflicting too. The co–operation between Kudayathur development society and Kudayathur panchayat was of a collaborative nature during the rule of Congress led United Democratic Front (UDF), i.e. 2000—2005. The panchayat had sought their association in many activities and the office bearers of KDS had a close relation with the panchayat at this time. The relation between GP and KDS became antagonistic during the Marxist led Left Democratic Front (LDF) rule of the panchayat, i.e. 2005 -2010. The link between KDS office bearers and panchayat leaders during LDF rule was very weak, that acted as a hurdle to cooperative efforts. The Secretary of KDS stated, “We organized Keralotsava in one year as an agency for the panchayat. We had acted as an implementation agency of the panchayat in several projects during the KDP phase. It was a golden era of us”. KDS activists worked as facilitators of gram Sabas during the UDF led KDP phase. The secretary of KDS said that they kept away from the activities of the panchayat after 2005, during the LDF rule in the panchayat. The LDF representatives had a different version about this problem of lack of cooperation between the LDF and the KDS. According to them, during the UDF phase, the KDS had been ‘blindly accepted’ (in their way of expressing it) as the sole agency for implementing panchayat projects. This had created many issues in terms of transparency, and also acted as a hurdle against the participation of various other groups in the activities of the panchayat. The leader of the Democratic Youth Federation of India, a youth organization of the CPI (M) commented, “We do not have any problem with KDS. The problem was that the projects such as Keralotsava, which used to be conducted by forming an organizing committee had been given to the KDS without sufficient discussion. This had led to the reduced participation of youth clubs in panchayat activities. The financial accountability was also under question”.

The experience of KDS indicated that the political stand of both the panchayat and the NGO are influential in bringing about collaborative efforts. Sometimes, the panchayats assigned activities to NGOs by bypassing peoples’ organizations because of political favouritism, which resulted in an unfavourable environment for the NGO–Panchayat collaboration itself. The political affiliation of NGO leaders too could act as a hurdle in bringing about mutual collaboration.
Kudayathur development society has expertise in various domains especially in areas such as vocational training and bio-compost production. As an NGO which was formed for the development of the panchayat, their expertise could have been used by the panchayat as part of the collaborative effort. The KDS had started a bio compost unit project with the collaboration of the Kudayathur panchayat during the KDP phase, which was then successful in establishing several units in the GP area, and had even percolated to all areas of the panchayat through Kudumbasree networks. Such co-operation was lacking after the UDF rule due to party politics. Here, we could observe that the dream of the proponents of PPC, that there would be co-operation between various agencies within the Panchayat over common interests, by ignoring political differences, has not been realized.

The rigid party approach of the political parties also acted as a hurdle in creating the civil society-panchayat synergy. GPs could not utilize the expertise of local NGOs by transcending the differences in certain matters such as their party identity. Due to the dogmatic approach of the political parties and the grampanchayats, the expertise of the NGOs remains to be fully utilized.

The experience of the VICIB was different from that of KDS in the panchayat. It had been attempting to develop a parallel system in the same development sectors in which the panchayat was working. The NGO formed its own SHGs all over the panchayat by fragmenting Kudumbashree NHGs created by the panchayat. VICIB had never attempted to have a dialogue with a panchayat and to find out a common area of cooperation. The former Kudumbashree CDS chairperson who was in charge during the KDP phase commented, “They were offering attractive remuneration to Kudumbasree workers and persuading them to join their SHGs”. The case of VICIB could be taken as an instance to understand how an NGO can weaken a participatory institution and the local government system.

The experience of the Krishna Education and Cultural Society in Vallikkunnu is somewhat different. They have an education centre for continuing the literacy programme which was working in association with the panchayat. They also conducted a panchayat empowerment programme in two panchayats and published two separate booklets. The names of the booklets are “Gram sabhayum Ningalude Adhikarangalum” (gram sabha and your rights), and “Nammude Adhikarangal”
They conducted public education programmes and home visits along with these booklets. The President of the organization had been actively involved in the People’s Planning Campaign. The organization has conducted several self-employment training programmes for the Kudumbasree groups. They have a favourable attitude towards strengthening the PanchayatRaj system. The President of the NGO commented, “There are several areas in which we can co-operate with the panchayat. Recently, I we started an old age home. The panchayat President is the chairperson of that committee. We can also work as an implementation agency of different projects planned by the panchayat”. The feedback from the panchayat representatives was that lack of transparency in the functioning of the NGO made the panchayat disinclined to choose them as an implementing agency of the Panchayat.

From the above discussion we could say that the political ideology and background are important factors in deciding the approach and involvement of NGOs in participatory institutions. Likewise, the political background of the grampanchayat was also a decisive factor in carrying out joint programmes with NGOs in the panchayat. This has come out very well in the experience of Kudayathur Development Society and Vikas Credit and Informal Banking Services (VICIB) in Kudayathur. The experience of Krishna showed that even though a NGO is individually managed, if its orientation itself is friendly to participatory institutions, it will make a difference in its activity. Here, it could be observed that the habitus of the President, who controls the activities of Krishna has been transformed into being friendly to local planning with his involvement in the PPC. The significant presence of party politics both within the panchayat and the NGO leadership made it difficult to build any co-operation between them. Politics also came in the way of fulfilling the principle of PPC about the co-operation of various civil society groups with the panchayat, irrespective of differences in political ideology. The efforts of NGOs, as a part of civil society, to educate the public about participatory democracy seems to be limited, expect in the case of Krishna in Vallikkunnu.

8.2.5 Interventions of other Civil society groups in participatory institutions

Other than Libraries, Youth clubs and NGOs there were also groups that had their presence in these panchayats. Two important groups were identified in the three grampanchayats. The Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishath (KSSP) is one among them.
Another group is the Kerala State Service Pensioners Union, (KSSPU) which has units all over Kerala. The role of KSSP in developing grassroots experiments to strengthen participatory institutions and democracy is well known and acknowledged (Parameswaran, 1998; Isaac & Franke, 2000). KSSP is a people’s science movement that originated in Kerala in 1962, and started its experiments in local planning in 1972, by forming village science forums all over the state. Identifying local development needs and resources, and to tackle them with local expertise was the main objective of this institution. Since then they have been contributing extensively to develop local planning. The experiments carried out by KSSP in 1995 in five panchayats of Kerala, and named Panchayat Level Development Programme (PLDP), contributed several ideas in the formative stage of PPC in 1996 (Parameswaran, 2000). The PLDP project that was started in five panchayats, later on spread to 25 panchayats all over Kerala, including Vallikkunnu GramPanchayat. We discuss the KSSP, and its attempts to strengthen local democracy and participatory institutions.

The KSSP’s presence in Kudayathur and Venkitangu was very limited. KSSP had two units in Kudayathur during the PPC phase, but over the years since then, they have become inactive. The Kanjar unit in Kudayathur had a team of women activists who were very active in the panchayat women’s development committee. They had a unit in Venkitangu during the PPC, which was inactive for a five years, and became active again in 2005. Though their units were not officially functioning, their activists were present in the field, especially in the activities related to the panchayats. There are two units of KSSP in Vallikkunnu, one in the Vallikkunnu region and the other in the Ariyallur area, and both of them were very active. They used to intervene in panchayat planning activities by organizing awareness classes on various topics such as health, empowerment of women, energy conservation etc.

The intensity of KSSP interventions varied from panchayat to panchayat and in different periods. The person who acted as a Key resource person (KRP) came in through the nomination of KSSP in Kudayathur. He was a district committee member of the KSSP. He coordinated the activists of the KSSP in the panchayat, who were a small number, and organized various activities. Two district resource persons were also from this organization, and they have been convening two Task forces. The
pivotal contribution of KSSP in Kudayathur was reflected in the area of women’s empowerment. Women activists of the KSSP unit had been among the leadership of the Women development committee (WDC). They had been able to form women Self Help Groups all over the panchayat. They conducted several awareness classes including classes to discuss the issue of gender discrimination in society. The former Key resource person of the GP during PPC commented, “I became the KRP of the panchayat as a nominee of KSSP. There was a team of women in the KSSP unit and they provided the leadership for forming the Women development committee in the panchayat”. KSSP units became inactive after the PPC phase and the new panchayat was not interested in seeking the help of former KRPs and DRPs for its activities. The KRP said, “The new panchayat included me in the activities in the beginning phase of KDP, but later they showed their distaste, and dropped me and our friends from key activities”.

The KSSP unit in Venkitangu was not strong enough to intervene as a team. The district secretary of KSSP was from the same panchayat. He was also the district coordinator of the People’s Planning Campaign. He had given advice and support to the panchayat as an expert in the field. There were other KSSP activists who were also involved in the PPC in their individual capacity. The former district coordinator commented, “The UDF led panchayat had been seeking our help and advice to form projects. They were interested in bringing new ideas as projects. They wanted the programmes to be attractive to the people”. The power line mapping, hot box distribution etc., were the projects that came out of the ideas of KSSP.

In Vallikkunnu the units of KSSP were strong in terms of membership and scope of activities. We have already discussed in the previous chapter that Vallikkunnu had joined in the pilot experiment of KSSP for local planning, namely PLDP as one among twenty five panchayats in 1995. This enabled this panchayat to start the local planning exercise ahead of the other two panchayats, who started it in 1996. KSSP activists had also been active in framing the manifesto of the Left Democratic Front (LDF), preceding the panchayat elections in 1995. Immediately after the elections to the Vallikkunnu GramPanchayat, the state government launched the Panchayat Level Development Programme (PLDP), with the support of the KSSP. The panchayat formed Neighbourhood groups, Ward and Panchayat level
development committees, and subject committees such as education, agriculture and industry. KSSP activists had been giving intellectual leadership in all these activities. The KSSP launched several campaigns in the panchayat such as the preparation of a biodiversity register, social forestry programmes, and installation of smokeless choolas in houses, as joint efforts of the panchayat and the KSSP. The former regional secretary of KSSP who was the convenor of the agriculture subcommittee during the PPC phase commented, “We were considered as the activists of both the panchayat and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)). There was no distinction between KSSP and party workers during the initial 2-3 years of PPC. We initiated several campaigns. It was a period when we got a wider approval of the public”.

The relations between the panchayat and the KSSP weakened by the closing stages of PPC itself. There were also differences in their perceptions of various issues. Interestingly, all those differences were related to environmental protection. The panchayat had given its sanction for a private resort by violating the Coastal Regulatory Zone (CRZ) Act. The KSSP took up the matter against the resort in court. The panchayat produced a fake document in the Court in favour of the resort, and they got a favourable verdict. The district committee member of the KSSP who was also a Key resource person during the PPC period pointed out, “We were all aware that it was a fake document. The panchayat had made modifications in the grampanchayat minutes. That was one of the events that ruined our relationship”. The second was also an environmental issue. The panchayat had land near the Kadalundy River, which they had allotted as lease land to private parties. It was an area with a thick mangrove forest. The forest department had taken steps to protect the mangrove forest. The individuals who took possession of the land were destroying it, by plucking mangroves and filling the riverside by putting mud from the river, to make it a filled land. The panchayat took a stand favourable to the lessees, and decided to renew the lease agreement with the private parties. The KSSP approached the court and the court instructed the government of Kerala to protect the mangrove forest. It was later on declared as the first ‘Reserved mangrove forest’ in Kerala. This further acerbated the relations between the KSSP and the panchayat. There were more conflicts between the KSSP and the panchayat, one of which was the case of protecting the sea turtles habitation area, and another was in the implementation of the World Bank assisted water supply project named Jalanidhi.
With all this, the regular meetings between the panchayat and the KSSP ceased. The KSSP activists’ involvement in panchayat activities was also considerably reduced. This withdrawal became more visible during the KDP phase, when there was a state level set back to the PPC in its transition to KDP. The KSSP district committee member opined, “In the KDP phase they learned how to do things without us. Activities became rituals rather than doing something with good participation. The legal battle also caused wounds in the minds of both teams. We thought it is better to withdraw”. At the end of the KDP, the KSSP conducted an eight year evaluative study of PPC and KDP and presented their reports in public meetings of elected members, politicians and PPC activists, called ‘Vikasana Jana Sabha’ (People Development Assembly). In this report it is recorded as follows, “The first phase was attractive because of mass participation, while the second phase concentrated on expenditure rather than focusing on increased people’s participation and actual development outcome. The process has become more bureaucratic oriented” (KSSP, 2005).

Along with this, debates were also raised in Kerala society, particularly from extreme Left groups, accusing the PPC was getting an imperial project implemented through the KSSP (Sreekumar, 2003; Isaac, 2005). This also lowered the morale of KSSP activists, and discouraged them from further interventions. The KSSP regional secretary from Vallikkunnu commented, “We were all portrayed as agents of imperialism. This was really painful. Even some CPI (M) leaders turned against us. This made us inactive in the process”.

Harris argues that civil society is established in relation to institutions that are defined by the state. Networking between organizations is more important in community action (Harris, 2001). The local synergy between political parties, CSOs and local actors together can create acceptance and legitimacy to the CSO’s ideology over others. This kind of a synergy can acquire more legitimacy and symbolic capital. In Kudayathur and Vallikkunnu the relations between KSSP and CPI (M) were very cordial during the PPC phase. This enabled many joint efforts, particularly in generating development models in Vallikkunnu. The relation between KSSP and the panchayat broke down after the change of the party in power in Kudayathur, while it worsened in Vallikkunnu at the closing stage of the PPC, because of the rift between
the KSSP and the grampanchayat on different matters. This reduced the joint actions in the GP. Since then the KSSP could not break the political approach of the CPI (M), which attempted to exclude the KSSP from the panchayat.

The hegemonic position of political parties in Kerala society is well recognized (Harris, 2001). A civil society organization such as KSSP was not strong enough to act in the public realm through confrontation with the CPI(M) on issues of local development. Since administrative control of the grampanchayat is associated with the political power of CPI(M), the KSSP became helpless to go ahead with their initiatives.

The KSSP could not make any effort to empower the people, but chose to help the panchayats in a more official capacity. As a people’s science movement which focused on the liberating potential of knowledge, KSSP’s interventions to raise the consciousness of people towards participating in democratic institution may have made an impact in terms of empowering people. This kind of intervention would have been helpful to increase the involvement of people in the local democratic process. Most of the KSSP’s activities were in the nature of supporting the panchayat to develop model projects rather than developing a critical outlook among people to examine the activities of the panchayats. Except for some classes and seminars, they could not regularly undertake any educational programme for the people. Even the conflicts with the panchayat could not be made into public issues and discussed in the gram sabhas, but became legal matters.

Olle Tornquist talked about reformist interventions within the CPI (M) to bring in a democratization process into the party. (We had a detailed discussion on this aspect in the 7th chapter). The KSSP was considered as the backbone of such a reformist group within the party (Tornquist, 2001, 2007). The experience in Vallikkunnu confirms this macro level observation with micro level evidence. Here as well, the reformist agenda of the KSSP failed in the face of the traditional and dogmatic approach of the party in the arena of development. The KSSP was not able to overcome the centralization of power within the CPI (M) and the habitus of the party leaders that was created through a historical process. These internal conflicts hindered collaboration and association between political parties and civil society organizations. The habitus of CPI(M) leaders who were always dealing with power,
and the habitus of KSSP activists who were talking about decentralization of power from power centres to each individual, was different from each other (Parameswaran, 1999) and resulted in conflicts. This again challenges the views of Putnam and others (Putnam, 1993; Stroke & Mohan, 2001) about possible convergent action between the state and civil society organizations by ignoring the differences between them. Our experience shows that conflict is essential even within the members of CSO’s on certain common issues. Conflicts are also visible in between the converged action between CSO’s and the various tiers of governments, which were controlled by the political parties.

The responses from the representatives of the pensioners union of the three panchayats were similar in nature. Their organizational activity was observed in all three panchayats. There was also similarity in their organizational presence in the three panchayats, as a structured organization. They have been organizing membership campaigns, fund collection, felicitation of senior aged members, and were organizing family gatherings, etc. In all the three panchayats. The office bearers of the Kerala State Service Pensioners Union (KSSPU) stated that there was no organizational decision to involve themselves in panchayat planning activities. Since they are a group of retired individuals from various departments of the government, they have the potential to contribute significantly to the local planning process.

The responses of KSSPU leaders made it clear that many of their members had been associated with panchayats in their individual capacities, even in the absence of any organizational decision to be associated with panchayat activities. The panchayats had made an attempt to include retired officials from various departments in the Task forces during the PPC. Later on, these efforts from the panchayats declined. The district committee member of KSSPU in Vallikkunnu commented, “There was no official decision to participate in the activities of the panchayat. Those who were already active in social activities entered into the activities of PPC on their own initiative, or through their friend’s circles. Some of our members are also panchayat members and Task force members”. The same response was made by representatives of KSSPU in Kudayathur and Vallikkunnu. As participants in the gram sabhas, people of the middle class were conspicuous by their
absence, and only a few were sufficiently interested to attend gram sabhas. A former President of the Venkitangudi unit of KSSPU said, “Most of our members only want to concentrate on their own personal matters. Very few of them are engaged in social activities. Only a few among them have been attending gram sabhas. Most of our members were not concerned about such matters”. Democratic decentralization was not discussed within the organization as part of classes or seminars organized by them. In Vallikkunnu, in the PPC phase, they organized one class on this topic.

There was not much effort from the panchayats after the initial enthusiasm to bring in retired people to the activities of the panchayat. The secretary of KSSPU in Kudayathur opined, “The panchayat President has been making a request in our general body, to co-operate with the panchayat, whenever we invite her for any meeting. Experts were not approached individually”. Pensioners union is an expert group at the local level, which also has its presence in every panchayat in Kerala. Their official involvement in the local planning process was negligible. The state government made a public request to the retired officials and experts to provide their services in the PPC, as members of block and district level technical expert groups. This brought in these people into the functioning of the panchayats. Local bodies were also interested at that time (early PPC) to bring in their maximum participation. This, however, was not kept up for long. The apathy of the pensioner’s group towards public forums such as gram sabha could also be taken as a reflection of Kerala’s middle class’s approach towards public action. They did not want to intervene in any activity that was not a benefit to them, and activities that did not give them social recognition within their own status group. Middle class people consider the grama sabha and other public institutions as institutions of and for the poor. They did not consider local body forums as suitable for such social recognition and symbolic value formation. The activities included in the PPC create more interest among the local common people, especially to the poor.

A study by Harilal et al (2004) observed that associational life in Kerala increased during the PPC period. They also argued that different sections of civil society became more active during this period. The experience of our study does not confirm such an observation. We could not document collective actions of this kind except for some experience in Vallikkunnu during the PPC.
Another important factor is that though some developments took place in the case of regeneration of CSOs they were not sustained and did not survive after PPC. Any joint effort of the various civil society organizations was not visible in the gram panchayats, for the creation of a new civic culture, as expected by the pioneers of PPC. The public realm of Kerala did not accept grass roots democracy as a serious concern. A common communicative space did not develop during the period of the PPC or the KDP, which was necessary to make the democratization process as part of public discourse. Public discourse and intercommunicative space are viewed as pre-requisites for the existence of an active public space.

8.3 Religious field and Participatory Institutions

Early in this chapter we spoke of the attempt to form structured caste and religious organizations down to the grassroots level. This kind of institutionalization of caste and religious organizations that reached the grassroots level created a situation where each individual can be involved in his/her own caste or religious institution’s activities. The spread of caste and religious organizations all over the state greatly increased in recent decades, particularly during the last two decades (Panicker, 2005). The higher involvement of middle and upper middle classes in the caste and religious activities was also visible in this period. Lower participation in public institutions: the withdrawal of middle and upper middle class groups from public activities has also increased during the last decade. The withdrawal of the middle class who had been leading the movements for the poor, has created hurdles to any further movement in favour of poor and marginalized (Tharakan, 2008). Thus, the effect of the functioning of caste and religious organizations in the activities of public institutions, particularly the institutions related to panchayats is quite relevant. We will discuss the activities of religious and caste groups in the selected panchayats in the following section of this chapter. Also, the discussion would be focused on the changes that have occurred in the functioning of caste and religious organizations in terms of their presence and volume of activity during the last two decades. How far have their activities strengthened or weakened the public institutions such as gram sabhas, Self help groups of the Kudumbashree, and panchayats, directly or indirectly?
8.3.1 Structure and presence of Religions/Caste organizations

Muslims, Christians and Hindus are the religious groups found in these three panchayats. The Muslim community is widely spread in all areas of Vallikkunnu, while it is limited to half the area of Venkitangu, and one third of Kudayathur. Christians are a very small number in Vallikkunnu while it is relatively high in Venkitangu and Kudayathur. Roman Catholics (RC) are the only Christian group in Venkitangu, while Catholics and groups that are included in the Church of South India (CSI) are present in Kudayathur (Kudayathur GP, 1996; Vallikkunnu GP, 1996; Venkitangu GP, 1996). The major sub groups of Muslims in Vallikkunnu are Sunnis and Mujahid. They also have their own sub groups, fragmented from main groups, and based on ideological differences. Two sub groups of Sunnis and Mujahid are active in Vallikkunnu (Vallikkunnu GP, 1996).

The two major caste groups found among Hindus are Ezhavas (OBC) and Nairs (upper caste), while a few Brahmin families are also resident in these panchayats. Most of the Malayaraya tribe group in Kudayathur have converted to Christianity and joined the CSI. Various scheduled caste groups are found in Vallikkunnu, Venkitangu and Kudayathur Panchayats while their presence in Venkitangu is comparatively high, i.e. nearer to ten percent of the total population.

Most of the religious and caste groups, except SCs, have their organizations in the three panchayats. Sree Narayana Darma Paeripalana Yogam (SNDP), the organisation of Ezhavas has five Sakhas (units) in Vallikkunnu, four Sakhas in Venkitangu, and one Sakha in Kudayathur. Their sakhas in Vallikkunnu were started in the last ten years as also two out of four in Venkitangu. The other two SNDP Sakhas in Venkitangu are forty five years old, and the Sakha in Kudayathur is also as old. The Nair Service Society (NSS) has two karayogams (units) in Vallikkunnu, two units in Venkitangu and one unit in Kudayathur. One Karayogam out of two in Vallikkunnu was started only in 2004, while a Karayogam which was inactive for a decade was revitalized in 2000 in Kudayathur. The Nair Service Society (NSS) units in Venkitangu were also reactivated between 2001 and 2004. The total number of families in SNDP Sakhas in Vallikkunnu is 600, while it is 1080 in Venkitangu and 220 in Kudayathur. In the case of NSS it is 400 in Vallikkunnu, 200 in Venkitangu, and 73 families in Kudayathur. SC organizations are not active in Vallikkunnu. The
Kerala Pulaya Maha Sabha (KPMS) had their units in Kudayathur during the 2002–2005 period, but it became inactive later. The SC organizations called Vettuva Maha Sabha and Paraya Maha Sabha had started their units in Venkitangu after 2000. The Vettuva Maha Sabha has eight Sakhas in the Panchayat with 700 members. They also have a Panchayat committee for coordinating the activities of units.

Catholics have two churches in Kudayathur and two churches in Venkitangu, while the CSI has two churches in Kudayathur. Both churches together in Venkitangu have 1190 families and 4200 members. In Kudayathur the RC church in Chakkikkavu has 95 families and 450 members. The Sunni group is the only group in Venkitangu, which has six Mahals. There are 3 mosques with the Madavoor division of Mujahids and two mosques associated with the Madhani group in Vallikkunnu. Both the Sunni divisions have ten Mahals in the Panchayats with two madrasas under each Mahal. The four Muslim groups in Vallikkunnu namely E K Sunni, AP Sunni, Mujahid (Madavoor) Mujahid (Madhani) have their organizations of children, youth and students in the Panchayat. These organizations have also become strong in the last two decades. The Jamaat-e-Islami has also become stronger in the last decade in Vallikkunnu and Kudayathur, while it does not have any noticeable presence in Venkitangu.

8.3.1.1 Activities of Religious and Caste organizations

The nature and volume of organisational activities of religious and caste groups have multiplied during the last two decades. The major developments observed are the attempts of caste and religious organizations to develop structured organizational systems to the grass roots level. In the case of Hindu organizations they have tried to spread their organizational activities to new regions where they had not been active earlier. The other fact that was observed is that they introduced several subgroups within their units to bring in the involvement of various strata of people under the network of these organizations. They started to bring in some uniformity in caste and religious rituals and practices through organizational interventions; which was helpful to develop caste and religion based identity consciousness among their members.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries were a period of institutionalization and inward orientation of caste and religious groups, which were used to strengthen their
organizational capacity at the grassroots level. Institutionalization of the church happened in the case of Christianity during this period (Tharakan & Isaac, 1995). Hinduism was undergoing through internal reforms during this period. Various Hindu groups, particularly the forward castes and Other Backward Caste (OBC) groups also started to follow the path that was taken by religious minorities who have undergone the process of institutionalism. Caste and community organizations adopted different ways to create an identity feeling among their population based on caste and religious based identity (Panicker, 2005). This institutionalization process was visible in the three gram panchayats as well.

Changes in the number and volume of activities during the last two decades can be observed from the experience of SNDP and NSS in the panchayats. Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) had no units and presence in Vallikkunnu in 2000. As we mentioned earlier they had only two Sakhas (Units) in Venkitangu. This situation had changed within a decade, and they established their presence in Vallikkunnu and Venkitangu within a very short period. The SNDP secretary in Vallikkunnu stated, “Generally our organizational system in the Malabar was weak. Vallikkunnu was also not an area promoting caste based organizations. Now the scene has changed”. The secretary of a SNDP Sakha in Venkitangu commented, “Initially we had only two units here. Now we are strong enough with four units in different parts of the panchayat”. Their membership, activities and organizational strength in Kudayathur have also multiplied substantially.

The same experience has been repeated in the case of the Nair Service Society (NSS) as well. They had earlier only one unit in the Nair community concentrated area of Vallikkunnu. They could not expand their activities to other areas of the panchayat for a long time, but they have expanded their activities by starting a new unit in Vallikkunnu in 2005. The secretary of the new NSS unit stated, “Though the other NSS unit was very old, one area of the panchayat was unrepresented. Now we are organized as a caste, though some families who have an extreme political stand and with communist background have not taken membership”. The NSS has been able to rejuvenate inactive units in Venkitangu and Kudayathur as well, and they have started functioning. The NSS secretary in Kudayathur opined, “Though the NSS
Karayogam (unit) was founded in 1966, it was inactive for a long period. Only in 2000 were we able to revive it. Now we have our own land and building”.

The SNDP and NSS units were able to acquire land and buildings within a very short period through the contributions of community members. The other relevant point is the expansion of organizational activity through sub systems within the caste and community organization units. SNDP have women’s units, youth units and prayer groups within each Sakha. They also have family associations of SNDP families with the participation of twenty families in each association. This system is functioning in Kudayathur, but has not yet reached Venkitangu and Vallikkunnu. The former SNDP Sakha secretary of Kudayathur commented, “The family associations are a new idea of SNDP. It is a good method to create caste feelings within our people”. These organizational structures are of new origin, which have developed during the last ten years.

The NSS has Bala Samajam and Mahila Samajam, the units of children and women respectively under each Karayaogam. They started these associations after 2000. The president of Venkitangu south Karayogam said, “We have women’s groups under the Karayogam. We organize family gatherings and competitions of our own members. We are also planning to form a children’s unit”. The Scheduled Caste organizations like Vettuva Maha Sabha (VMS) have also been following the same kind of institutional functioning during the last decade. They too have family gatherings and women’s units.

The multiplication of various groups within Islam and the spread of their sub organizations such as organizations of children, youth, and women is a tendency observed in the selected panchayats, particularly in Vallikkunnu. Two Sunni groups were trying to establish their dominance over the community through the activities of different sub organizations. The same tendency is visible in the case of Mujahid. Two Mujahid groups are present in Vallikkunnu. The EK Sunni group is the major group of Sunnis found in Kudayathur and Venkitangu, while the other groups are of very small number. Each of these groups within Islam has its sub organizations of students, children, women and youth in Vallikkunnu. Organizations of the EK and AP Sunni division are functioning in both Venkitangu and Kudayathur. Both the EK and AP Sunni divisions have organizations of children, youth, and students in Vallikkunnu.
The children, students, youth and women’s organizations of both Mujahid groups also function in Vallikkunnu. The Jamaat-e- Islami Hind also has children, students, youth and women’s organizations in the panchayat. The Mujahid Madavoor division leader and the Muslim youth league Panchayat Vice president commented, “All versions of Muslim groups are active here. Two divisions of Sunnis have their organizational activities, and two groups of Mujahid are functioning in this area as well. After 2000, the Jamaat-e-Islami also started to function in Vallakkunnu. Each of the groups is trying to expand its own influence within the community through their activities. They were establishing mosques, Madrasas and forming organizations within each stratum of the community”. The Mahallu committee President of Venkitangu commented, “The EK division Sunnis are the major group here. We have our own organizations among children, students and youth, working in connection with the mosque”. In Venkitangu they have their own children’s organization called Sunni Bala Vedi (SBU), youth organization named Sunni Yuva Jana Sangham (SYS), and student’s organization called Samastha Kerala Sunni Students Federation (SKSSF). In Venkitangu they are mostly affiliated to their Mahals. The Mujahid leader of Vallikkunnu stated, “The Mujahid mosques here had been established in the last three or four decades. In our case three out of five mosques have been established in the last fifteen years”. Each of the groups has its Madrasa for training children on theological principles. Some Madrasas in Vallikkunnu and Kudayathur provide residential training to the students.

In the Christian community they have family units, including 40 to 50 households, namely Kudumba units (family units). There are mother’s forums, prayer forums, and Vincent de Paul society for charitable activities under the Catholic churches. They also give Bible lessons to children on Sundays. Family units are part of the structure of the church that connects the church to the grass roots level. These are almost the same in Kudayathur and Venkitangu. The Church of South India (CSI) churches also have their youth forum, mother’s forum and Sunday school. A trustee of the church while describing the structure of the Catholic church in Kudayathur said, “We have a committee to undertake the day-to-day activities of the church. The representatives of family units are included in it. Along with this we have the representatives of mother’s forum, prayer groups and Vincent De Paul society. This makes it is easy to communicate the decisions of the committee to the families and
various organizations”. The Catholic Church in Kudayathur has its Self Help Groups of women as well.

In the case of organizations of Scheduled Caste people, the Kerala Pulaya Maha Sabha (KPMS) in Kudayathur was active during 2004 to 2008, when an educated person was their leader. They focused on cultural transformation of the community rather than making it a militant organization. They conducted several awareness classes to focus on the issues of the drinking habit, tobacco consumption, and about the relevance of higher studies. They formed sports clubs of children, which was an attempt to orient the new generation. The person who provided leadership for these activities, and who was also a former vice president of the KPMS in Kudayathur commented, “We focused on the cultural transformation of the community members. The drinking habit was very high among them. They were also not aware of opportunities for higher education. The non-conducive family environment placed hurdles in the educational advancement of several intelligent students. We tried to address these issues through the community work among them. I could not proceed with the activities because of my health problems. The activities later stopped”. The KPMS member and the literacy worker of the panchayat indicated that the KPMS activities are currently limited to issues of delivering certificates for various purposes. In the case of the Vettuva Maha Sabha (VMS) in Venkitangu, they are replicating the pattern of SNDP by forming family units, conducting struggles for their rights, organizing family gatherings etc. Since the number of educated members is high in Venkitangu, their leadership is stronger than KPMS in Kudayathur. The secretary of VMS in Venkitangu said, “We have a panchayat committee for coordinating the activities of Sakhas. We have conducted family gatherings for discussing our issues”.

From the above descriptions we can see that the religious and caste organizations in the panchayats have undergone several changes in the last two decades. They were able to establish their organisational units to the grass roots level during the last two decades. The SNDP and NSS who did not have strong networks in the Malabar region spread their presence to those regions during last ten years. The different Muslim groups also tried to reach into different strata of their population by forming their own forums such as children’s forum, student’s forum, youth’s forum,
women’s forums, prayer groups, and mother’s forum. All these organizations adopted a strategy that each of the members of their caste or religion was to be involved in at least one of these groups. Earlier, this strategy was adopted within the Christian groups, which was taken up by other caste and religious groups as well. The expansion of institutionalization of the religious and caste groups would lead to the strengthening of the religious or caste habitus of the individuals.

K.N. Panicker (1995) observed that Kerala society was passing through a process of higher form of religiosity and the strengthening of religious and caste identities during the last three decades. Caste organizations are attempting to strengthen identity consciousness among their own constituencies and groups. The strengthening of caste and religious identity is making the caste and religious habitus of the individual much stronger than earlier, through their continuous engagement within caste and religious organizations.

The lack of leadership can be attributed as a reason that has affected the mobilization capacity of SC organizations, while other groups have benefited from leadership from the educated middle class. The historical backwardness of the SC community in terms of their education and economic conditions, which were also instrumental in impeding their mobilization.

8.3.1.2 Making practices uniform

An important observation in the panchayats related to caste and religious organizations is in making religious and caste practices uniform. Muslim and Christian communities had already implemented uniform practices through the institutions of church, mosque and organizations to which they were associated (Tharakan & Isaac, 1995). This tendency was evident in these panchayats as well.

Hindu caste organizations also started to follow the same path in the last two decades. The representatives of SNDP and NSS have given information to corroborate this observation. The SNDP had the system of marriage registration within the organization, while it was not followed earlier. Such a system has not been seen in the Malabar region. The secretary of SNDP in Kudayathur stated, “A document named Vivaha Pathrika (marriage agreement) is compulsory among the caste members. We will not participate in the marriage of people who are not willing to
sign it”. If someone from any other caste or religion, or scheduled caste, whether boy or girl, wanted to get a spouse from the Ezhava caste he/she should become an SNDP member before the marriage. This practice had not extended earlier to the Malabar region, while they are planning to implement it now. The local leaders of SNDP became the priests in such functions and they have been organizing all the preparations for these ceremonies. The SNDP leader in Venkitangu commented, “We have been bearing all the expenses of funeral functions of our caste members. We have an Ezhava crematorium where we have been conducting the funerals of our members”. He continued, “You know it is the crematorium only for our people (Ezhavas). We would not allow members from another caste to conduct their funerals here”. This shows that caste feelings have reached such a level, and a group that ostensibly follows the teachings of Sree Narayana Guru, and who had taught “one caste, one religion, one God for men” has changed to following an exclusionary practice.

The NSS also has started to implement the marriage registration system and funeral functions under the leadership of caste leaders. The president of NSS in Venkitangu commented, “We have been undertaking all the responsibility of funeral functions. We have the practice of marriage registration too”.

The practices implemented among women Self Help Groups (SHGs), led by caste and religious organizations were also helpful to support the patriarchal system and superstitious practices. The SNDP Sakha secretary in Venkitangu commented, “We have a one hour group prayer before starting the meeting of our SHGs. The members should come after a bath and should wear the uniform of SNDP. We have not been allowing any woman to participate in the meeting during her menstrual periods”. The SNDP leader in Vallikkunnu also pointed out that they were giving emphasis to caste organization based activities and spiritual factors in their SHG meetings, rather than economic aspects. The newly emerging institutions and caste practices also affirmed the subordinate position of women within the social hierarchy. The system of women SHGs is used for strengthening caste and religious identities among women. The social capital generated through women SHGs is used to establish the symbolic power of the caste/community groups, rather than strengthening the public institutions and secular space. From the preceding
discussion it could be summarized that the unification of religious practices came to be used as a tool for the strengthening of religious and caste identity. Earlier, this was only visible among Christian and Muslim communities, and it has spread to other groups too in the last two decades. The influence of the religious field on the habitus of individuals became stronger through this process. Thus, the caste habitus of the individuals and families are getting to be more powerful.

Introducing new rituals and practices and establishing them among the caste is a process embedded within the growth of religiosity. In this stage religiosity would be symbolised through rituals and practices, rather than mere belief in a particular religion (Panicker, 2005). This process is an integral part of the institutionalization of the religion. When the nature of religiosity entered from religious reformation to identity formation, caste and religious organizations became tools for identity formation rather than internal reformation. Rituals and practices became tools for the strengthening of identities and unity among the caste/community members.

8.3.2 Religion/Caste interventions and local governments

The direct interface of the religious and caste organizations with participatory institutions, and local self governments is also relevant for a discussion. A major intervention of the caste and religious organizations was the formation of their own Self Help Groups among women. SNDP has its own SHGs in Kudayathur, Vallikkunnu and Venkitangu. NSS also followed in the same way. The Christian church has its SHGs in Kudayathur, while such SHGs have become inactive in Venkitangu. Muslim leaders in Venkitangu said that they had formed women’s SHGs in Muslim majority areas. In all these cases they have been allowing only their caste/religion members to become members of the SHGs. The SNDP secretary from Vallikkunnu said, “This is the forum only for SNDP members. We do not have any APL/BPL discrimination”. The religious and caste groups were using SHGs to conduct their activities. The SNDP secretary in Venkitangu stated, “Now we do not have any difficulty in getting people for our processions. Women SHGs have become a source for such activities”. The NSS also organized SHGs in Vallikkunnu, Venkitangu and Kudayathur. The NSS President in Venkitangu commented, “We have women SHGs here. They have been carrying out some entrepreneurial activities. They have also been organizing our pilgrimage programmes”.

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The field study showed that caste and religious organizations were using SHGs as a tool for undertaking activities of their organizations. They also challenged the activities of Kudumbashrees, and the SHGs led by the panchayats by forming parallel caste based SHGs that also had Kudumbashree members. These organizations had several conflicts with the panchayats. The secretary of SNDP in Vallikkunnu recollected, “The panchayat had instructed the Kudumbashree members not to become members of other groups. We challenged it. It is the basic right of our member families to form our own SHGs. We can provide more services than the Kudumbashree SHGs”. The functioning of caste based SHGs became a challenge to the existence of Kudumbasrees in the three panchayats.

The approach of caste/religious groups to public forums such as gram sabhas was not supportive in nature, except for Kudayathur. There is a practice of announcing gram sabhas in the church and mosque in Kudayathur. A trustee of Chakkikkavu church stated, “The panchayat used to give the gram sabha notice to the church. The priest has been making an announcement about it after the prayers. Earlier, the priest too used to attend gram sabhas. It facilitated peaceful procedures in the meeting”. The practice of linking religious institutions with the organizing process of gram sabhas was not visible in the two other panchayats. The Panchayat’s interactions with religious institutions such as the church and mosque was good in Kudayathur, which contributed to the participation of related groups in gram sabhas. The caste and religious organizations in the three panchayats have not made any attempt to strengthen the democratic forum of gram sabha.

Most of the caste and religious organizations have a view that their caste/religion has not benefited by the gram sabhas or the panchayat. The former Trustee of Thoikavu Church in Venkitangu commented, “We the Christians are a group that was not getting any benefit. So we were not interested in attending any gram sabha”. The NSS President in Kudayathur said, “Most of our members hold the view that they will not get any individual household benefit by participating in the gram sabha”. The representatives of these organizations viewed public forums such as gram sabhas as instruments for getting benefits for individual households. Some among them have the perception that gram sabhas can also be used as tools for caste based bargaining. The secretary of SNDP yogam in Vallikkunnu commented, “Earlier
we were not interested in attending gram sabhas. Now we have a view that our members should perceive gram sabhas as an instrument for bargaining and attaining maximum benefits for our members”. This kind of partisan concept would ultimately weaken the public democratic forums that can serve the purpose of a coordinating force among people irrespective of religions and caste identities. Along with this the caste and religious bases of negotiations will hamper democratic deliberations based on equal citizenship.

We have seen that the middle class groups, who have been the backbone of pro-poor movements in Kerala are withdrawing themselves from activities that favour the poor (As Tharakan 2008 also observed). In our study, we have already seen that middle class groups are apathetic towards public institutions. The higher involvement of the middle class and youth in the caste and religious organizations has been observed in the field. They are changing their preferences of involvement from participating in panchayats to the identity based caste and religious organizations, that could provide more acceptance to them among their own group.

The number of Muslim women in the leadership of ward level committees of Kudumbasree Neighbourhood groups is very low in Kudayathur. Though they were members of NHGs they have not been entering into the leadership roles. An explanation that I heard was that though the community is participating in the democratic process, they are not favouring the greater involvement of women in the public space. This is more rigid in Kudayathur where there were a larger number of Muslim priests and their families. A former teacher and a member of the Muslim community from this village stated, “Kanjar is a place of Muslim priests. The priests in the mosques of almost all neighbouring areas are from Kanjar. Their families have been more rigid in religious practices. They have not been allowing women to engage in public activities to a higher extent, and have been instructing them to wear purdahs”. A Mahallu (jurisdiction of a mosque) committee President in Venkitangou pointed out, “As a religion we do not favour the public involvement of women. Some educated people among us have a view that it could be allowed, but the majority do not favour this practice”. This comment shows that though the opportunities for women in the democratic process has increased, religions restrictions place hurdles on their involvement and leadership in public forums. Dress codes, formal and
informal rules and customs imposed on women, are ways to create a different kind of institutional habitus linked with religious identity. This makes the religious habitus of individuals stronger than in the other fields that can influence them.

The SC organization in Kudayathur was not strong enough to make for any significant involvement in the local bodies. Though the Vettuva Maha Sabha (VMS) at Venkitangu was organizationally strong, the special component plan for SCs and the projects for SC development were not subjects for discussion among them. At the same time they had been involved in macro level issues such as reservation, and atrocities against SC members. They have participated in several protests related to reservations. The VMS secretary in Venkitangu pointed out, “We could not discuss the gram panchayat’s projects for SCs. Our representatives were not there in such committees”. Though they have started to respond against atrocities against them as an organization, they have not intervened in development issues related to SCs. The SC organizations in both Venkitangu and Kudayathur have not taken up special component plans and projects under this plan as an issue in discussions. This shows that rather than participating only in macro level activities, the micro level involvement at the local level was not forthcoming from the SC groups. The incapability of local leadership may be a factor that made hindrances in such involvement. The low educational status of the community members is also an important factor contributing to their involvement in local planning.

8.3.3 Summary

We have examined the dynamics of civil society and religious fields in this chapter, linking their involvement and approach towards participatory institutions. Our study showed that the density of civil society organizations is visible in Vallikkunnu which is in the Malabar region, as compared to the other two GPs that are in Travancore and Cochin. The unique political history of the Malabar region that had a tradition of a strong nationalist movement and involving of congress socialist party may have contributed to this difference. The approach of Putnam which ignores the political history of a region in the creation of a vibrant civil society is contested through our own experience.
A general tendency that could be observed from our study is the weakening of the Libraries and Youth clubs in the gram panchayat areas. The transformation taking place in rural society weakened the secular voluntary movements in society. Our study indicates that the synergy between libraries, as a part of civil society and gram panchayats as a forum of state was developed only in Vallikkunnu while the other two panchayats did not show any sign of the developing it. This also suggests that local political and contextual factors are important in developing such synergy. An intensive attempt by focussing on cultural aspects was needed to transcend such local limitations. Such a movement was lacking during the PPC and KDP phases.

Likewise, the expectations of the pioneers of PPC i.e. the nurturing of a new civic culture in favour of grassroots democracy have not been reflected in practice. The active involvement of Youth clubs and Libraries was missing in the grassroots democratic process. The institutional habitus of Kerala’s Youth clubs has mostly been with arts and sports activities and welfare activities. Interventions in the arena of democracy were new to them. The People’s Planning Campaign and the grassroots democratization process initiated by the gram panchayats were not capable of transforming their habitus according to the objective of grassroots democracy. Putnam viewed associations as a necessary pre-requisite for good local self governments (Putnam, 1993). Our study indicates that associations that were not oriented to strengthening local governments will not make any contribution in that dimension.

The experience of the study indicates that the mere presence of voluntary organizations and Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) will not make any difference in local governance. The political approach of the voluntary organizations (VOs) and NGOs and their approach towards local self governance is also important in making a difference in local governance. Bourdieu is very sceptical about an action that is free of any specific interest (Sisianen, 2000). Voluntary Organizations who are engaged in social activities have their own peculiar objectives that may conflict with the nature of public institutions. Contestations based on ideological differences make the relations between VOs and GPs non cooperative in nature. This phenomenon was visible in Vallikkunnu where democratic decentralization was an important programme among different groups through public discourse during the PPC. This idea lost its acceptance when conflict arose between KSSP and the political
leadership. Since the power of the GP is associated with political power, KSSP was not able to go ahead with their own agenda in the society. KSSP’s attempts to strengthen grassroots democracy was viewed as a reformist intervention within CPI(M) and the Left. This kind of reformation faced hurdles because of the lack of ideological consensus between the major faction in the party and the KSSP activists. Democratic ways to transcend these conflicts were not seen in Kerala during the democratic decentralization process.

In the religious field a factor observed is the increase in the number and organizational activities of caste and religious organizations during the last two decades. Institutionalisation of the religion which was visible among religious minorities in earlier times was strengthened among Hindu groups during this period. Religious and caste organizations formed their own organizational structure among various sections of the population such as women, children, youth etc. Institutionalization of religion made the caste and religious habitus of the individuals much stronger than earlier.

The caste and religious organizations have an apathetic approach towards public institutions such as gram sabhas and local bodies. The middle class groups who are leading such organizations have a view that these local institutions are not giving any benefit to their caste and religion. Some of them viewed such public institutions only as a tool for caste or community based bargaining. The gram panchayats also could not explore the possibility of the involvement of caste and religious organizations in mobilising the people to participate in the democratic forums. This kind of attempt was missing from the GPs except for examples in Kudayathur.

1 Chickengunea is a fever spread by a particular kind of mosquito which has become a public health problem in Kerala, See Thomas, Benson and K. Rajesh (2011) : Decentralization and health sector in Kerala.
2 In a study Aziz et.al also observed that the youth were not interested in any other activity of the GPs except arts and sports activities, See Aziz, Abdul (2002) A comparative analysis of governance and planning, in Abdul Aziz et.al (eds), Decentralised Governance and Planning: A comparative study in three south Indian states.
3 The debates emanated in Kerala society about the origin of PPC were targeting KSSP activists. Because of such allegations most of the activists who were associated with the democratic decentralization process were forced to withdraw from the campaign, See Tharakan, P.K.M (2009): Evaluation report of Cap Deck programme.
4 KSSP had organised wider public education programmes during PPC phase. They later on proposed this as a project to the Kerala State Planning Board. KSSP as well as KSPB could not proceed with such a mass education campaign later on. See. Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishath (1999): A hand book for citizens education (in Malayalam).
Mahals are the areas under the jurisdiction of Mosques of the Muslim community, which have the places for burying the bodies of community members.

The Sunni group Muslims in Kerala are divided into two separate groups namely E.K. Sunni and A.P. Sunni. E.K. Sunni formed under the leadership of E.K. Aboobakkar Musliyar. The A.P. faction was formed under the leadership of A.P. Aboobakkar Musliyar. Likewise the Mujahid group is also divided into two groups. One group was formed under the leadership of Hussain Madavoor while other group continued as parent organisation. See Thangal, M.J (2000): Neunapaksha Rashtreeyam Dharshanavum Douthyavum.

The term community is used here in a different meaning than a normal sociological meaning of the community. Here community means a converged group of different sub castes in a particular religion coming under an umbrella organisation. For e.g, different sub castes of Nairs joined to form Nair Service Society (NSS), see Panicker, K.N (2005): Fascisathinte Nalukal (Malayalam), P.124-128.