CHAPTER - 9

CONCLUSION

9.1 Context of the study

Institutions have a prominent role in generating collective action. Institutional functioning also depends on the relative success of different actors who try to establish their interest in the institutional sphere (Eisenstadt, 1968). In practice the institutional system is never fully accepted, or accepted to the same degree by all those participating in it. The success or failure of any institution depends on the practices of the people affiliated to them.

Pierre Bourdieu brings the concepts of field and habitus into the formation of practice. The habitus of the individual or group, and the field they represent have a vital role in deciding their practices. Bourdieu identifies social structure as a combination of different fields such as political, religious, artistic and field of class differences (Bourdieu, 1992). He also identified voluntary sectors as a separate field (in Harris et al, 2004). The social structure and different fields lying under that structure have a key role in the production and reproduction of social practices. Each specific field has its own logic, the position of each individual and group within the field would be decided by the nature and volume of capital they possess. In order to understand the dynamics of each field we have to understand the inner power relations, conflicts and competition within each field. These conflicts, competitions and power dynamics of each field is a decisive factor in the production of practices of individuals and groups affiliated to them.

The field enters into individuals through their habitus. The habitus consists of a set of historical relation between positions deposited within individual bodies (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Every individual is closely affiliated to one field, which can prominently influence their habitus, and has a critical role identifying their practices. At the same time other fields can also have a minor influence upon individuals in their own way according to the capital he/she holds. The reproduction of the social order happens through the practices of the individuals who live within each society. Every institution that has an ideal dream in its origin will be
reproduced through the practices of the individuals and groups who are involved in their own activities and included in their respective fields. The success or failure of the institutions will depend on the practices of the individuals and groups related to them.

In this study we have adopted Bourdieu’s concept of field and habitus in the Kerala situation. Kerala society is a combination of different social fields, each of them is highly complex in nature. The political and religious fields and the field of voluntary action are strong, and each of them has its own power relations. In Kerala the overlapping effect of various fields upon the same individual or groups is also visible.

The People’s Planning Campaign launched in Kerala in 1996 was viewed as a dynamic movement for democratic decentralization. The uniqueness of the PPC was that it aimed to achieve its objectives by creating various participatory institutions such as Task forces, Neighbourhood groups and Beneficiary committees. The statutory institutions of gram sabha was also used as a tool for local planning. These institutions were intended to provide greater opportunities for citizens to participate in decision making, and implementation and monitoring of development activities. Though some changes occurred in the PPC during 2001, when it was renamed as Kerala Development Programme (KDP), because of the political change in the state, most of these local institutions were continued into this period as well. The institutions created by the PPC had a common orientation towards a collective goal that was to develop the means for local level participatory planning through mass mobilization. The PPC was also intended to generate a democratic civil culture towards participatory development and grassroots democracy, through the functioning of various participatory institutions.

9.2 Methodology of the study

While the functioning of institutions depends on the practices of individuals or groups affiliated to them, this is decided by the field and habitus that they represent. This study was an effort to carry out an analysis related to the dynamics of participatory institutions and the approaches adopted towards them by various social fields affiliated to these institutions. It has essentially two dimensions. First, one has to
understand the experience of the participatory institutions related to the decentralization process in Kerala during the PPC and KDP phases by analysing their internal dynamics. The other dimension was to analyse the approaches of various social fields towards the participatory institutions, which had a crucial role in deciding the practices of individuals and groups affiliated to various participatory institutions. Gram sabhas, Task forces, and women’s Neighbourhood groups (NHGs) were the prominent participatory institutions selected for this analysis. Political, religious and voluntary action fields are the three major fields analysed in order to understand their approach towards participatory institutions and democracy. This study has adopted the relational framework of Bourdieu by linking the subjective and objective versions of reality. The study has adopted Bourdieu’s relational framework because of its compatibility with the context of the study. This study relates the subjective and objective elements of reality by weaving them together according to the context of the study. Though the analysis linking the structure and agency has been used in sociology, the analysis of viewing society as a combination of different social fields, having different sources of capital and dynamics is the unique contribution of Pierre Bourdieu. While our study has emphasized the capacity of actors to intervene and their power relations within different social fields, this framework was helpful for such analysis.

Three gram panchayats from three regions of Kerala, from different administrative regions, social groups and political backgrounds, namely Kudayathur, Venkitangu and Vallikkunnu have been selected for conducting case studies. The study sought to document the changes that occurred in the dynamics of participatory institutions during the different phases of decentralization, i.e. People’s Planning Campaign and Kerala Development Programme. It also analysed the changes in the approach of different social fields towards the participatory institutions during this period.

9.3 Major findings of the Study

Major findings of the study can be consolidated into five sections such as Participatory institutions and democratic practices; Local level planning and participatory institutions; Empowerment of marginalized groups through participatory
institutions; Political field and participatory institutions; and Civil society – religious fields and participatory institutions.

9.3.1 Participatory institutions and democratic practices

We first discuss the dynamics of participatory institutions such as gram sabhas, Neighbourhood groups and other people’s organizations. The process of organizing gram sabhas and inviting people to the gram sabhas was a collective effort during the initial three years of the PPC, while it became a ritual in the later stages. The people’s organizational committees at different levels and general Neighbourhood groups became inactive in the early years of the KDP. The organizing of gram sabhas became the responsibility of paid semi functionaries such as Anganwady workers, Literacy activists and Kudumbashree workers. This transition in organizing gram sabhas through people’s committees to paid semi functionaries, made it into a ritual than a collective process. Mass mobilization through participatory institutions was one of the crucial principles of the PPC. This principle was challenged because of the transition that occurred in the organizational aspects of the peoples forum such as gram sabha. PPC was viewed by its proponents as a popular experiment by mobilizing of people to the democratic forums. This view was an alternative to the liberal interventionist view of decentralization, which has viewed local institutions as instruments to implement the plans formulated through centralized system (Gurukkal, 2001; Heller, 2001). In practice, people’s forums such as gram sabhas came to be used as instrumental forums for planning rather than forums for mass mobilization as viewed by the proponents of participatory planning.

The attendance of local people in the gram sabhas of the three gram panchayats showed a declining trend. The attendance of marginalized groups such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and fisher folk was consistently higher in the respective panchayats during both PPC and KDP phases, while that of middle and upper middle class groups declined. Men outnumbered women in attendance in the PPC phase, while women outnumbered men since the middle of the KDP. The transition that took place in the process of conducting of gram sabhas reduced the possibilities of the middle and upper middle class groups intervening in the functioning of Gram sabhas. Field insights have indicated that the preferences of the middle class groups who were changing from participating in public institutions such
as gram sabha and public activities, to other activities that could provide more cultural and symbolic capital to them, rather than sharing public space with the poor.

The data showed that PPC as well as KDP could not undertake a mass education campaign in order to attract the middle and upper middle class groups towards participatory institutions, except for some efforts in Vallikkunnu through the Neighbourhood groups (NHGs) during the PPC phase. Since participatory political institutions were a new experience in Kerala, such a citizen’s education programme was quite relevant to make changes in thinking practices of the people. This was missing for the most part. Apart from the authorities who had initiated the decentralization process, the civil society organizations were not inclined to undertake such public education programmes. Some experiments of the Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishath were an exception to this general trend. The weakening of Neighbourhood groups, which otherwise could have been used as a tool for citizens’ education, also accelerated their decline. The experience of NHGs in Vallikkunnu has shown the possibility of NHGs functioning as a medium for citizens’ education, which have now become inactive.

Though the number of women, fishermen, and Scheduled Caste members were high in gram sabhas, this has not been translated into their participation in gram sabha deliberations. Their experiences showed that women could not break out of the subordinate habitus created by the patriarchal family system. The historical lack of cultural and symbolic capital affected the negotiation potential of Scheduled Castes and fishermen in participatory forums. The historical advantage of tribal people in Kudayathur in terms of the higher access to land and education together provided better cultural and symbolic capital to them, which has given them higher potential to negotiate for their rights. This advantage was visible in their rights based negotiations in the gram sabhas compared to the SC groups, fishermen, and women.

The participatory discussions adopted in Kerala’s gram sabhas was highlighted as a possibility to strengthen the deliberative and discursive democratic process. Public spiritedness and citizen consciousness of the participants were the basic elements of nurturing such a practice of democracy. Our field evidence indicated that the discussions in the gram sabhas did not rise to such a level of public discourse. It was restricted to the level of individual demands rather than collective
demands for public goods and services. Aggregation of common interests over rigid individual or group interests did not occur here, which acted as a hurdle to elevating gram sabhas to be considered as forums of deliberative democracy. The disinterested attitude of political parties and civil society organizations in Kerala in nurturing such deliberative democratic forums also affected the quality of discussions in gram sabhas. The reluctance of the middle class, political parties and Civil society organizations in using gram sabhas as a deliberative forum, made it a formal and non-participatory institution, rather than a participatory space for direct democracy.

9.3.2 Local level planning and participatory institutions

The People’s Planning Campaign attempted to develop a participatory methodology for local level planning, and had also developed participatory institutions such as Task forces to formulate plans, and Beneficiary committees for plan implementation. We have analysed the dynamics of Task forces in the selected Panchayats. Special emphasis was given to the Task forces in the productive sector, and the Task forces that were functioning for the empowerment of disadvantaged groups such as women, Scheduled castes, Scheduled tribes and fisherfolks. Task forces were expected to function as local planning boards comprising experts from different sectors. The experiences of the gram panchayats show that they were eager to bring in experts from various walks of life in the early part of the PPC, while such attempts declined at the closing stages of the PPC. The Panchayat development committee and the subject wise sub-committees in Vallikkunnu helped them to recruit and retain a number of experts in the activities of the panchayat, while it was lacking in the other two gram panchayats.

Training gaps acted as hurdles in bringing attitudinal changes among all actors connected with local planning. Most of the training programmes focused only on the office bearers of each Task force, and did not reach the other members who did not have prior experience in local planning.

After the PPC, Task forces became forums of members with low expertise and nominal involvement in the planning process, rather than active local planning boards. The expectation of the pioneers of local planning about the gradual capacity building at the local level, and about the acquisition of skill and vision of local development
(Chandrasekhar, 2001), was not realised in practice. The participation of Task force members in project formulation was limited in Venkitangu and Kudayathur to the expression of their opinions. The participation of Task force members was visible in the formulation of plans in Vallikkunnu.

People’s participation was the major advantage envisaged in local planning, which can transcend the limitations of bureaucratic central level planning. The experiences of the gram panchayats indicate that the danger of bureaucratization of planning may not be avoided in the case of decentralized planning as well, unless deliberate attempts were made to make it participatory in nature. There is a possibility for bureaucratization in local planning too, though it is considered as an inherent problem of centralized planning. Constant capacity building of various actors related to decentralization was needed to make local planning actually participatory in nature. This kind of capacity building of different stakeholders, particularly Task force members, was lacking in both PPC and KDP phases.

Team work of elected representatives, officials, and political activists was visible in plan formulation of the gram panchayats during the initial phase of the PPC. The people’s organizations such as Panchayat development committees formed in the gram panchayats were working in Vallikkunnu and Kudayathur. These organizations stimulated team work. The role of volunteer resource persons was of particular significance in this stage. This team work eroded during the KDP phase when the local planning process became more official in nature. The withdrawal of resource persons during the KDP phase, local factors such as conflicts between civil society organizations and the changes in the approach of political parties because of the changes of ruling parties in the gram panchayats and the state, hampered team work during the KDP period. Field observations indicate that rather than getting instructions from above, institutions that evolved at the local level such as Panchayat development committees and their subject wise sub committees, had helped the gram panchayats to formulate plans and go ahead with their own initiatives. The environment of freedom and encouragement provided to the gram panchayats in the early period of PPC was helpful to develop such team work. This kind of encouraging attitude was not sustained after the PPC, that adversely affected team work in gram panchayats that had evolved through local initiatives.
The efficient use of resources was indicated as an advantage of decentralized planning (Aziz, 2002). The studied panchayats showed that this was not necessarily true in all cases. We found that gram panchayats could not maintain an accurate data base about their development status, though they went through fifteen years of local planning efforts. This has resulted in wastage of money and replication of activities. The weak monitoring and evaluation of activities and the absence of social auditing also furthered the wastage of resources. Our evidence suggests that the absence of accurate database, lack of monitoring and public vigilance created inefficient outcomes even in decentralized planning.

The data from the gram panchayats showed that decentralised planning succeeded in making changes in certain sectors such as housing, latrine construction, drinking water supply and construction of infrastructure such as roads, and bridges. Poor and marginalized sections were also benefited by such activities. At the same time gram panchayats could not make such an impact on the productive sector which was one of the basic objectives of the PPC and the KDP. Most of the productive sector plans were the replication of department schemes. Along with the lacunae in the planning process the structural changes that occurred in the economy also negatively influenced the productive sector plans of the gram panchayats. The transition of the state’s economy from an agrarian one to a non-agrarian one in terms of the percentage of income and employment in the state also restricted the involvement of the gram panchayats in the productive sector.

Institutional innovations were needed in the production sector of the gram panchayats in order to overcome the withdrawal of people from agriculture, when most of the land holders found sources of income other than agriculture. Institutional innovations to address the issues of labour scarcity, withdrawal of people from agriculture, and higher production costs, were lacking in the productive sector plans of the gram panchayats during the PPC and KDP phases. Some institutional innovations were visible in the paddy production sector of Venkitangu, which is also of recent origin, while such innovations were not visible in the other two Grampanchayats.

Long term vision and integrating the different sectors of development are the basic perquisites of planning. Our data show that gram panchayats followed the path
of ad hocism rather than taking a long term approach. Though there were five years plan documents, these were kept on the shelves and they followed the practice of yearly planning. This has resulted in the neglect of long term development concerns of the gram panchayats. More emphasis was given to individual beneficiaries and short term development activities. As argued by scholars such as Chandrasekhar (2001) the emergence of alternate visions and trajectories of development were absent in practice. Broad and alternative visions of development had been surpassed by populist and clientelist practices by the political parties through targeting their voter base. The attempts for strengthening the local market and domestic economy as explained by Prabhat Patnaik (2001) were not visible in the field. Such a long term vision and planning were absent in the discussions and planning process of the gram panchayats.

9.3.3 Participatory institutions and Empowerment of marginalized groups

The empowerment of marginalized groups was one of the key objectives of the PPC and KDP. The attendance of SC, ST and fisherfolk has been high in gram sabhas right from the beginning of the PPC. Women outnumbered men in gram sabhas from the middle of the KDP term. The increased attendance of these groups has not been translated into higher participation in deliberations in gram sabhas, except in the case of the tribal people in Kudayathur.

Though women were active in their own local groups such as Self Help Groups (SHGs) they did not speak in a public forum such as gram sabhas, where men were also present. They could not overcome the restrictions of the subordinated habitus that was imposed on them by the patriarchal power structure. Women were not able to engage actively in the public discourses in gram sabhas, and they also could not raise the discourses on gender relations in such public forums. As envisaged by the women empowerment theories, they were not able to critically analyse the hegemonic power structures that visibly or invisibly controlled them. They could not alter the historical habitus and were not able to achieve the capabilities to transform and empower themselves.

Historical subordination and the lack of cultural and symbolic capital, due to their backwardness in education restricted the interventions of Scheduled Caste
people and fisherfolk in gram sabhas. The field insights showed that many of the fishermen who attended gram sabhas were not even able to read the booklets circulated in gram sabhas. These limitations prevented them from nurturing their own agency into a radical transformative one, rather than follow the old patterns of subordination.

Bourdieu’s argument about the occupation of social space and the link between the possession of cultural and other forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1977), is quite relevant here. The higher cultural capital acquired by the tribals in Kudayathur through better educational opportunities, and the possession of better economic capital through the ownership of land, together made them capable of occupying the public space like the gram sabhas more effectively than SCs and fisherfolk. The traditional practice of conducting village assemblies among the tribal group of Malyarayas and their high degree of dependence on agriculture also promoted their better participation in gram sabhas and Task forces.

The special task forces for women and SCs faced many hurdles in their functioning. The shortage of educated members and non availability of experts was a major hurdle that they faced in their functioning. The task forces of other sectors have not shown much interest in developing projects for marginalized groups. Knowledge acted as symbolic system of domination, which had taken the form of symbolic capital. The lack of symbolic capital acted as a major hurdle in the empowerment of SCs and fisher folk.

The experience of the projects implemented under decentralized planning for the SCs and STs showed that the basic infrastructure of those groups including housing, latrines , access to drinking water, and roads to their habitations and colonies, had significantly improved. The special component plans for these groups had a crucial role in these achievements. Notwithstanding these improvements the special component plan largely failed in improving their livelihood opportunities, educational standards and health status. The limited scale of interventions of the panchayats was not adequate to address the structural inequalities faced by the SC community. In the case of fishermen too the gram panchayats could not undertake any significant intervention to enhance their livelihood opportunities. The structural changes in the fisheries sector in terms of higher levels of mechanization and need
for more capital investment also imposed limitations in the interventions of gram panchayats. This indicated that in certain situations the macro level economic changes and interventions had made the micro level interventions irrelevant.

In the case of the empowerment of women, most of the programmes undertaken by the gram panchayats under the women component plans (WCP) could not be sustained after a short duration of three years. In most of the cases women who were engaged in these income generation activities were not able to earn even a minimum survival income out of such activities. The activities under the WCP largely followed the traditional gendered division of labour. They could not challenge the patriarchal gender roles and address the strategic gender needs of women. The objective of women component plan, to address the gender inequality in society through development planning at the local level continued to be a distant dream, even after the PPC and the KDP. The attempts of the GPs largely focused on economic empowerment while it could not address women’s subordination as a cultural issue that had deep historical roots. The study indicates that the attempts at economic empowerment of women through local planning could not make many gains in actual practice. The attempts to make radical changes in the gender power relations in society were missing in the women component plan of local bodies. Though the number of elected women representatives increased in the local bodies they could not raise collective demands for women, irrespective of the divisive party politics. This political party approach hindered the politicisation of women's issues and to use the organized force of women to realize such demands.

Political parties and their mass organizations have not shown noticeable interest in the issues of the marginalized at the local level. The leaders of SC organizations were not sensitized on the possibilities of interventions at the local level that could help their communities. The mass organizations representing women and SC organizations could not politicise the local development issues of their constituents. They could not perceive local planning forums as stages of negotiating for their rights.

Women’s Neighbourhood groups in the gram panchayats largely succeeded in keeping financial discipline in their day-to-day activities. They also succeeded in providing assistance to their members in the form of loans without much institutional
complexity. However, their objective of poverty eradication through micro enterprises could not be reached. Most of the income generation programmes were not sufficient to provide even survival income to the NHG members. Actually, it had imposed an additional burden on women, rather than providing substantial income to them. NHG activities provided a new exposure and confidence to women, to engage in public life. This, however, could not pose any significant challenge to the gender power relations and gender based division of labour within the family. The study also indicated that though the women NHGs were part of the state’s attempt to eradicate poverty, in practice it excluded the poorest among the poor. The experiences of NHGs in the fishermen's area of Vallikkunnu and NHGs in the SC colony of Venkitangu provided evidence to support this statement. Our experience suggests that the rhetoric of viewing NHGs as a panacea for poverty eradication through micro enterprises has not been realized in practice. They were not able to convert their activities from the role of Self help institutions into income generating enterprises, which can provide an adequate livelihood for the members. The experience also suggests that though the social gathering of women was enhanced through NHGs they could not convert this social power into a higher level of empowerment, which could overcome the subordinate status of women in society. This shows that unless groups are able to develop critical consciousness among its members about their own status in the family and society there cannot be any change in the subordinated status of the suppressed group. This also indicates that government programmes, which give prominence to poverty eradication do not necessarily address the issue of gender relations in their activities.

9.3.4 Political field and Participatory institutions

The balance in the political field is influenced by resources of political institutions, actors and the relations among them. Local government in Kerala is highly politicized, where the elections to local bodies are conducted on a party basis, and administration of local bodies are controlled by political parties. In this context the institutional habitus of each political party and the approach of the political field towards local governance and participatory planning are particularly relevant.

The state-wide coalition system based on two coalitions is replicated in the gram panchayats as well. Except in the case of CPI (M) and Indian Union Muslim
League (IUML) the internal elections of Congress, and various regional parties both within UDF and LDF were found to be irregular. Though the CPI (M) followed a formal democratic election system within the party, recent experiences of the party showed that factionalism has affected the democratic process within the party. The lack of democratic practices within local regional parties is noticeable in this context.

The absence of democratic practices within the political parties may have unfavourably impacted upon the democratic principles of political activists. The democratic process within political parties would be undermined by the adjustments for power and the factionalism brought about by particular individual or group interests.

The involvement of the UDF and LDF partners in the democratic decentralization process was different, according to their relations with the ruling party or coalition in the state. The CPI (M) was actively involved in the gram panchayats during the PPC when the LDF (Left parties’ coalition) was ruling in the state. The official instructions of the party to participate in the Left government programme, led to their involvement in Kudayathur and Venkitangu, while the panchayat’s association with the KSSP made a difference in Vallikkunnu. Vallikkunnu followed a more democratic system of party-panchayat coordination by frequently convening local meetings of the CPI (M) and panchayat leaders. This was limited to a group of people, namely a subcommittee in Venkitangu and Kudayathur. Though there was better coordination between CPI (M) and gram panchayats, the coordination between LDF partners and gram panchayats was too weak, except at the time of elections. This has created hurdles to convert the decentralization initiatives as a movement with the leadership of Left coalition partners as a whole. The CPI (M)’s involvement in gram panchayat activities and the coordination between the party and panchayat became weak in the KDP phase, even in Vallikkunnu where they were continuously the ruling party.

Though the Congress and other parties within the UDF were formally sharing the forums of PPC, they had a deep difference of opinion regarding the mobilization mode of the campaign for decentralization. They viewed the PPC as a party building programme of the CPI (M). Except for their initial involvement in Vallikkunnu, their participation in the local planning process in the other two gram panchayats was on
the whole very limited. There was virtually no coordination between the Congress party and panchayat and between UDF and the panchayat in the gram panchayats, whether they were in power or not. During the Congress rule they endorsed an official centred way of functioning, depending on the bureaucracy rather than through popular mobilization. This was found in both Venkitangu and Kudayathur. The less than enthusiastic approach of the Congress towards the mobilization mode of decentralization was also reflected at the micro level in practice.

The CPI (M) and the Left adopted a non-supportive approach towards the decentralization process after the PPC, once the Left coalition lost the state assembly elections. The changes of the Left government during the PPC, and the shift from PPC to KDP, and the bureaucratization of the process were the rationalization that they provided for their lack of support for the new system. However, this was not the only reason, and an internal crisis within the CPI (M) also contributed to their withdrawal. The party programme had given utmost importance to the panchayats in the democratization of the society (CPI (M), 2007). In practice CPI (M) activists in Kerala could not view it is a long term programme of the party, other than in supporting the Left initiated campaign of the PPC. They could not view decentralization as a tool for social transformation as envisioned by the party programme, and the vision of a leader such as E. M. Sankaran Namboodiripad.

After the passing away of Namboodiripad in 1998, who had been a strong advocate of decentralization, this programme was undermined within the party. The dominance of the reformists who has been arguing for decentralization within the party, then faced a paucity of symbolic capital to move ahead with their activities. The debates over the funding for decentralization experiments also challenged their legitimacy within the party. The internal crisis within CPI (M) and the traditionally unsupportive approach of Congress towards decentralization together made for a situation where there was no spokesman in support of grassroots democracy. In Bourdieu’s language the groups who were arguing for decentralization lost symbolic capital and consequently power in the highly divided political field of Kerala, which made further mobilization for decentralization difficult.

Field observations showed that the activities of mass organizations whether of the Left parties or parties under the UDF were in decline. Most of the mass
organizations were acting as organizations linked to political parties rather than acting as autonomous organizations working for their constituents, such as farmers and agricultural laborers. The data indicated that the mass organizations in Vallikkunnu were different in functioning, and attempted to mobilize people for various local planning efforts. This stopped after the PPC phase. The political history of Malabar which includes Vallikkunu, is of mass mobilizations from below, where the class and mass organizations were extensively used. The history of Congress socialist party which was rooted in Malabar can be mentioned in this context. This shows that differences in the political history of a region are important in the generation of a social movement. These differences were reflected in the approach of the political parties in Vallikkunnu too.

A major claim of the PPC was the increased involvement of class and mass organizations in the participatory institutions (Isaac & Franke, 2000). Our evidence suggests that such a movement did not occur in practice. The political based mass organizations which grew out of grassroots struggles, later on turned out to be more demand oriented than production oriented. More than raising the demands of expanding their rights, the movements focussing on common interests were declining among mass organizations. The political party approach of mass organizations, rather than indicating the politics of issues that they were engaged in, has limited interventions at the local level. The women and youth organizations of CPI (M) were active in the decentralization activities particularly in Vallikkunnu during the PPC. But they could not continue the same involvement during the KDP phase. The mass organizations of the political parties working in different sectors such as farmers organizations, agriculture labourers’ organizations and women’s organizations could not develop collaborative efforts at the local level on the issues where they could cooperate and act together at the local level. This kind of solidarity could have brought many innovations in the respective local development sectors. Their converged action ensured results in Vallikkunnu in the phase of PPC, while they could not go ahead with such collaborative efforts after that. Since they were formed in an agitation mode, their interventions in local development issues declined. There was no serious effort from the political parties to make alterations in the institutional habitus of these organizations. It is very difficult to make a common understanding of issues among various groups working in the same field because of the highly divisive
interests and demands sustained among them. The absence of dialogue between these groups also made for obstacles in developing a common creative space. This crisis had created obstacles to collective local interventions for common goals such as the revitalisation of the local production system, generation of new employment opportunities at the local level, and improving service delivery through institutions under these local bodies.

Even after one and a half decades of democratic decentralization the major agenda in the local forums of political parties and mass organizations continued to be the decisions and suggestions from higher levels of their parties. Discussions in the local forums of political parties and mass organizations were needed to bring them in to the attention of gram panchayats. Information from our study shows that such an attempt had taken place only in Vallikkunnu, where the CPI (M) had the practice of conducting joint local committee meetings of the party to discuss local development issues. This practice also stopped after PPC. This suggests that the institutional habitus of the political parties continued to be unaltered even after their regular interface with local bodies and the local planning process. They could not develop a mechanism for discussing local planning and development issues in their party forums at the local level.

Political education programmes were needed within political parties to lead them in a direction different from traditional training. Since the concepts of participatory planning and local democracy were new to them, an orientation to the activists of political parties about the philosophy and practice of decentralization was essential. Our field data show that such an orientation to the political activists to make necessary alterations in the institutional habitus of the political parties has not happened.

Though the mass organizations of political parties have staged protests through processions and public meetings against gram panchayats in the issues of drinking water availability, corruption, etc., they did not use the democratic space such as gram sabhas to raise and debate such issues. They largely failed in exploring the possibilities of gram sabhas as a deliberative democratic forum. This also suggests that the institutional habitus of the political parties and mass organizations and the
political field have not developed a new political culture supporting grass roots democracy and local planning.

9.3.5 Civil Society-Religious fields and Participatory institutions

Kerala society is known for dense networks of civil society organizations. The present study has considered Libraries, Youth clubs, registered Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other organizations such as People’s science movement and Pensioners union under the purview of civil society. The associational density in terms of the number and activity of civil society organizations was higher in Vallikkunnu than in the other two gram panchayats. The different political history of this region and the initiatives taken by political parties and the gram panchayat to promote civil society also contributed to this difference. Our study shows that the political history and civic associations of a region are closely linked and also have a bearing on collective action. The responses from representatives of Libraries, and Youth clubs during the study indicates that civil society activism in these institutions was declining during the last two decades. A state-civil society synergy, which earlier existed between the state and libraries, was not visible in the case of associations, between panchayats and libraries. An intensive effort was needed to develop synergy between libraries and local bodies. Such an attempt was missing in these gram panchayats except the Central library coordination system and Women library network in Vallikkunnu. The experience of Vallikkunnu can be taken as an instance of collaborative activities between libraries and gram panchayats. The weakening of the library system and the absence of movements from gram panchayats focused on cultural aspects, acted as a hurdle in developing any synergy between them in the other two gram panchayats.

The expectations of those who designed the PPC, in relation to the nurturing of civil culture enhancing grass roots democracy, did not fully materialize. The active involvement of Youth clubs, a major civil society network in Kerala, was also missing except for the experience of Vallikkunnu during the PPC. Vallikkunnu GP had organized a panchayat level body to coordinate the activities of youth clubs and other cultural associations in the panchayat. They also organized several cultural events under the banner of the organization called Association of Clubs for Cultural Action (CACA). It became possible in Vallikkunnu because of the gram panchayat’s
deliberate attempt to support Youth clubs and to develop a coordination system among them.

The institutional habitus of Youth clubs in Kerala has been associated largely with arts, sports activities, and welfare oriented activities. Interventions in the area of democracy were new to them. Direct interventions were needed from both Grampanchayats and Youth clubs to make alterations in their institutional habitus to favour local democracy. Public education was also required in this dimension, which was missing during both the PPC and KDP phases. Putnam (1993) viewed associations as a necessary prerequisite for efficient local governments. Our study indicated that associations that were not oriented towards local democracy and planning could not make any contribution in strengthening it. The institutional habitus of both libraries and youth clubs were not mature enough to undertake measures to strengthen grass roots democracy.

The political approach of NGOs and their approach towards local governance are important. The political party approach of gram panchayats also impeded collaborative efforts of these institutions. Bourdieu is very sceptical about actions that are free of any specific interests (Sisianen, 2000). Voluntary organizations that engage in social activities have their own specific objectives, which may conflict with the objectives of public institutions. The possibility of synergy between voluntary organizations and the state has been celebrated. But the possibility of conflict is also high in the presence of peculiar interests. Contestations based on ideological differences can also make conflicts between gram panchayats and voluntary organizations, which are difficult to overcome. The relations between Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishath and Vallikkunnu gram panchayat is a good instance. Though KSSP had carried out many collaborative activities with the panchayat during the first four years of the PPC, their relations worsened after confrontations in certain environmental issues in the coastal area of the Panchayat. The reformist interventions of KSSP activists could not alter the dogmatic approach of CPI (M) leaders, which forced them to withdraw from further activities related to the panchayat. Rather than the mere presence of civil society organizations, their political ideology and approach to local governments, and politics of local governments are important in developing synergy between local governments and voluntary organizations. This indicates that
just the presence of civil society organizations is not a sufficient condition for better local governance.

The conflicts between civil society organizations and political leadership arose during the times of converged action, as in the conflict between the KSSP and Vallikkunnu gram panchayat. Democratic practices have to be developed to transcend the differences of opinion and to find a common platform for action. Such democratic deliberations did not take place in the studied cases.

Civil society organizations neither supporting the panchayats nor working on their own grounds, including people’s science movement, could not undertake public education programmes to orient the people towards democratic decentralization. KSSP had a key role in the mass conscientization and organisation of the Total Literacy Campaign held in the 1990s. A similar mass initiative in terms of citizen’s education programme was missing from KSSP during the PPC and KDP phases. The claims of the proponents of PPC about the multiplication of associational life in Kerala after PPC have not been demonstrated in practice. Though new people’s organizations have emerged during the PPC phase, most of them had a short life rather than a sustained existence. The experience of our study indicated that civil society in Kerala did not accept democratic decentralization as its major concern.

The analysis of the religious field in the study areas indicates a general factor, i.e. the multiplication in the number and organizational activities of caste and religious organizations during the last two decades. They established their presence in the earlier unreached areas, and in new locations during this period. This was particularly visible in the case of Hindu caste organizations in the Malabar region, where they had earlier been very weak. The institutionalization of religion which was visible among Christians and Muslims in the 20th century was strengthened among Hindus as well during the last two decades. The grassroots level organizations of castes and community groups have multiplied in the study areas during this period. This tendency is possibly an obstacle to the expansion of the secular public sphere, which could promote broader democratic values. The institutionalization of religion has made the caste and religious habitus of the individuals much stronger than earlier.
The expansion of the units of caste and religious organizations may be the first stage of institutionalization of religion. These organizations act as a tool for the institutionalization process. Establishing sub groups within the units of each organization, covering various groups of the population such as women, children, youth and aged, has been applied as the next stage of institutionalization. Institutionalization of religion was also reflected in the field in terms of effecting uniform religious customs and practices, particularly related to the rituals in the various stages of life such as birth, marriage and death. Caste and religious organizations such as the Nair Service Society, and Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam, acted as institutions that encouraged the spread of such practices among each caste group, and to nurture the caste habitus of individuals. These attempts spread even to the Malabar region where these rituals were not practiced earlier.

The ways in which the mushrooming of such organizations affect the functioning of public institutions is an important factor that was examined. The caste and community organizations were not supportive of public institutions. The middle class people who were leading such organizations either adopted a position that the panchayats would not provide any benefit to their community or caste, or they held the view that the institutions under the panchayats such as gram sabhas and Self help groups can be used as a bargaining system to bring benefits to their own community. The caste organizations formed their own Self help groups by taking members from the general SHGs of Kudumbashree. This was a challenge to the public SHG system, particularly in Vallikkunnu and Kudayathur. The parallel organizations formed by the caste and religious groups weakened the functioning of secular public institutions which encompass the participation of all kinds of people, irrespective of caste and religious background.

The gram panchayats also could not explore the possibilities of using caste and community organizations as a tool for the mobilizing of people towards the public institutions. Except for some initiatives in Kudayathur such initiatives were largely missing. The discouraging attitude of caste and religious organizations towards public institutions also affected the participation of certain social groups in local participatory institutions. The attempts of caste and religious organization were focused on the strengthening of the caste and religious habitus of individuals and
groups in different ways. Establishing their organizational branches in all areas, widely forming subgroups that covered different categories of people, and the implementation of uniform religious rituals and practices were the main ways they followed to strengthen the religious and caste habitus of individuals and groups. They also used the institutions such as SHGs to strengthen the caste and religious habitus of the individuals. Our field observations indicated that religious lectures and prayers were compulsory during the meetings of SHGs working under SNDP and NSS. Religious and caste restrictions were imposed over the women SHG members of such organizations, through which they imposed moral control among members. These approaches were strengthened the caste and religious habitus of the individuals and groups. The functioning of the parallel bodies controlled by the caste and religious groups may have restricted the involvement of their members in panchayats.

A pertinent factor observed during the study are the differences between Vallikkunnu gram panchayat and the other two gram panchayats in many aspects. It was also reflected in the functioning of participatory institutions such as gram sabhas and Task forces. The interface between political parties, civil society organizations and their collaborative actions made the difference in Vallikkunnu during the PPC phase, which had resulted in the comparatively better performance of the panchayat. This kind of synergy was missing in the other two panchayats, that may have affected their capacity to mobilize people to participate in their activities. The synergy between the political field and civil society was reduced in Vallikkunnu, after the PPC

The findings of the study indicate that the synergy between political field and civil society can be an indicator in the performance of the participatory institutions and the local planning system. Rather than the isolated efforts of the political field or civil society their collaborative actions can make a difference in local development. This kind of synergy is an essential component of any popular project of democratic decentralization, which was missing in Kerala after the initial momentum of People’s Planning Campaign. Observations from our study also suggest that the political, religious and field of voluntary action in Kerala were not mature enough to imbibe the concept of participatory planning and democracy. This was reflected in their disinterested attitude towards participatory institutions, which in turn affected
the performance of the participatory institutions. Though institutions have several objectives at their origin, the institutional design itself will be reproduced through the practices of the people. The approach and attitude of various social fields are decisive factors in formulating the practices of the people related to the institutions.