CHAPTER- 4

PARTICIPATORY INSTITUTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES

Institutions provide a means of orientation to a large number of actors. They enable the actors to coordinate their activities by means of orientation to a common sign post (Lachman, 1970). Institutions have a prominent role in society, which orient the action of different sets of actors towards a common goal. Participatory democratic theories of Rousseau, James and John Stuart Mill and G.D.H. Cole explained that participatory institutions will ensure direct participation of citizens in decision making. They also suggested that it will foster collective decision making over individual and group interests. They indicated that participation has an educative role in making the people friendlier to democratic practices (Pateman, 1999). Participatory institutions introduced in Kerala as part of the decentralization process, particularly through the People’s Planning Campaign (PPC) had the objective of leading people towards a common goal of participatory planning and development. It also upheld various objectives to overcome Kerala’s development crisis. The micro level institutions established in Kerala aimed to nurture a new democratic culture of participatory democracy and local planning (Isaac & Franke, 2000).

An institutional system is never fully accepted, or accepted to a same degree by all those participating in it (Eisenstadt, 1968). The reproduction of social order happens through the practices of the people. Practices are different patterns and approaches that people follow in their day-to-day life (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The institutions that have novel objectives in its origin will be reproduced through the practices of individuals and groups through their living process. The People’s Planning Campaign had introduced several participatory institutions towards evolving a new methodology for participatory planning and to ensure mass participation in the democratic process. It was expected that people will widely participate in the functioning of these institutions and that will subsequently lead to the strengthening of the democratic process at the grass roots. For this purpose neighbourhood groups (NHG) of 25-50 households, neighbourhood groups of women, Task Forces for planning, technical expert groups for plan appraisal etc., were introduced. The
Constitutional entity of gram sabha (GS) has been innovatively redesigned as a forum for participatory planning (Kerala State planning Board, 1999). Notwithstanding the change from PPC to Kerala Development programme (KDP) in 2001, the planning process and funding to the Local Self Governments have continued in the KDP phase as well.

The next two chapters of the thesis will focus on the dynamics of the participatory institutions in selected panchayats during the phase of PPC and KDP. This chapter gives more emphasis to the democratic aspects of the institutions while the following chapters focus on the undercurrents of the participatory institutions: and particularly focusing on planning. The beginning of this chapter will focus on the dynamics of gram sabhas, in comparison with its responsibilities. Gram sabhas, neighbourhood groups, and PanchayatDevelopment Committee (PDC) are the other people’s forums formed to support the democratic process in Kerala (Isaac & Franke, 2000). The last section of this chapter will focus on the various democratic forums that were formed and worked in the selected panchayats during the PPC and KDP.

4.1 Gram sabhas and the democratic process

According to the Kerala Panchayat Raj Act, gram sabha(GS) is the assembly of all persons included in the voters list of a constituency (Kerala Panchayat Raj Act, 1994). The Act states that the grampanchayat (GP) should give due consideration to the directions of the gram sabha as a basic unit of federal democratic system and the sole institution of direct democracy under the Constitution. The Act suggests eighteen duties to the GS that includes: propose the development programmes that the panchayat has to take up, prepare beneficiary lists for the various programmes decided by both the GS and GP, conduct social auditing of the activities of the GP, co-operate with GP in rendering voluntary services, help in public health activities etc. The PPC considered the gram sabha as a basic unit of planning. It was used as a forum to identify local development needs, prioritising them and to locate the resources for meeting such needs (Kerala State Planning Board, 1999). For this purpose a participatory method was suggested for conducting the GS. In 1997, the Government of Kerala appointed a committee under the leadership of Sathya Brith Sen to submit recommendations to strengthen local planning and the democratic process. One of the major terms of references of the committee was to submit
recommendations to strengthen gram sabhas (Parameswaran, 1999). The Sen Committee had suggested several measures to strengthen the gram sabhas, and most of them have been included in the Panchayat Raj Amendment Act 1999.

Though the 73rd Constitutional Amendment has given a prominent space to GS in its provisions, each state had to frame its own legislation to implement the content of the Amendment. Most of the states, including Kerala, had given an essentially ornamental position to the GS, rather than making it a real democratic forum (Parameswaran, 1999). The Sen Committee report and the KPR Amendment Act 1999 paved the way to overcome the lacuna that existed in the Kerala Panchayat Raj Act 1994. This has made the GS a more powerful body with enhanced responsibilities in planning and democracy. This Act has provided more duties and responsibilities to the gram sabhas. According to the KPR Amendment Act 1999, the GS has the power to form subcommittees to strengthen its functioning, and has to perform roles such as to examine whether the gram sabha resolutions are implemented properly, and to enquire into the reasons for not implementing resolutions, to report on the activities of officials related to the particular ward for the past three months. The interval between two gram sabhas was six months in the 1994 Act, but the frequency of gram sabhas was later increased by reducing the time between gram sabhas to three months in the 1999 Amendment Act.

Along with the statutory powers and responsibilities, the local planning methodology adopted in the state with the advent of PPC made the gram sabhas into a more meaningful forum. In the beginning of every financial year the GS discussed the annual plans of the panchayat for the forthcoming year. The GS also became a forum to discuss the five year plan of the GP and to provide suggestions for its improvement (KSPB, 1999). In order to serve this purpose the gram sabha conducted subject wise group discussions and submitted its views in front of the plenary sessions of the GS. The groups suggested were agriculture and allied sectors, social welfare, education and culture, health-sanitation and drinking water supply, infrastructure development, development of women and children, scheduled caste (SC) and scheduled tribe (ST) development. Each group has to discuss the implemented plans of the previous year and provide suggestions on the plans for the coming year. This method provided an opportunity to the people to examine the outcome and
expenditure of the implemented projects in detail and to provide suggestions for the coming plans, according to the needs of the local community. This planning procedure continued uninterruptedly even after the PPC had changed to KDP.

With this background we can inquire into how the gram sabhas have been performing during the PPC and KDP phases in the selected panchayats. More emphasis would be given to the democratic and planning aspects of gram sabhas in the following discussion. The process adopted by the GPs to mobilize the people to the gram sabhas, preparing to conduct gram sabhas, nature of attendance in GS, the cross section of the attendance, nature of group discussions and general discussions, issues addressed in discussions, and the follow up of the gram sabha resolutions would be the prominent indicators used to analyse the functioning of gram sabha in these panchayats.

4.1.1 Mobilizing public in to Gram sabhas.

The Kerala Panchayat Raj Amendment Act 1999 made it necessary that the notice for the holding of Gram sabha should reach each household at least seven days before the meeting (KPR Amendment Act, 1999). The Act suggested that a ward level organizing committee can also function towards the better organizing of the gram sabha. The training materials on gram sabha also explained the procedure of gram sabha registration, preparation of minutes, closing of minutes etc., (Mohan, 2005). Very detailed provisions have been made in the KPR Amendment Act on GS, in order to make it into a very productive forum.

The experiences of the panchayatsshow that the process of mobilizing people to the GS had been a serious activity in the initial stage of the People’s Planning Campaign. The three panchayats followed different strategies in this regard. A general observation among the three panchayats in the initial phase of the PPC is the presence of ward and panchayat level organizing committees for gram sabhas. GPs had used these organizing committees to mobilize the people. Kudayathur and Vallikunnu GPs organized neighbourhood groups (NHGs) and panchayat level development committees for coordinating the NHGs. Venkitangu GP organized ward level committees (WDC) for organizing gram sabhas and a person had been selected as a ward convener. The Kudayathur GP created women NHGs all over the
panchayat for every 10-15 households. Valukkunna GP formed general NHGs that included males and females from every fifty households in the locality. Vallikunnu GP had formed NHGs even before the People’s Planning Campaign, immediately after the 1995 panchayat elections. This will be discussed at greater length later in the chapter. The important point to be noted is the presence of ward and panchayat level organizing committees in the panchayats to organize gram sabhas. People’s Planning Campaign guidelines also suggested that panchayats should set up panchayat and ward level organizing committees to organize the first gram sabhas of PPC, conducted in September 1996 (KSPB, 1999). This instruction had been followed by the panchayats, and such organizational systems were sustained even after the first gram sabha.

The key resource person (KRP) [KRP is the faculty who got state level training] of the Kudayathur Panchayat recollected, “We had formed organizational committees in every ward. Representatives of all political parties had been included in such committees. It was really like a festival. We organized processions to announce the advent of the first gram sabhas”. It is clear from the statement that the first GS was conducted with a lot of preparatory process to organize activities in the early stage of the PPC. The respondents from Venkitangupanchayat also agreed that they formed the ward level committees, conducted processions and undertook a preparatory process to organize the gram sabhas. The NHGs, ward level development committees and panchayat development committees (PDCs) served the purpose of organizing committees for the gram sabha at Vallikkunnu. The KRP from Vallikkunnu stated, “The first gram sabha was a big event. We had informed people through NHGs. We had even carried out group wise registrations through NHGs”.

The other point is the changes that occurred in the organizational situation in gram sabhas. The ward development committees were in the forefront of the organizational process of GS in Vallikkunnu till the third year of KDP. Later on, these responsibilities had been shifted to the women NHGs, Literacy activists and Anganwadi workers. The President of the GP during 2005-2010, who was also a ward convener in the PPC phase commented, “Kudumbashree\textsuperscript{1} has a good network to the grass roots. We can assign any job to them”. The Community Development Society (CDS) (panchayat level committee of Kudumbashree) chairperson of
Kudumbashree agreed that they are forced to undertake the activities suggested by the panchayat, though they were not willing in the beginning. Here, the Kudumsharee Area Development Society (ADS) chairperson was working as a co-coordinator of the gram sabha. The Vice President of the GP during the KDP phase reflected, “Women NHGs have never been interacting with men of other households, and interacted only within their own members. The general NHGs were a better system for disseminating GS notice which was representing all families in a locality”. Once the organizational committees or ward development committees were relieved of the responsibility of organizing gram sabhas, they were replaced by the women NHGs who were compelled to undertake activities assigned by the panchayat. This made the organizational process a ritual rather than an inclusive democratic exercise by ensuring the participation of all social groups.

The same experience was replicated in the case of Kudayathur and Venkitangu. After the formation of women NHGs in 1998, organizing gram sabhas became their responsibility in Kudayathur, while it was assigned to Anganwadi workers in Venkitangu till the emergence of the Kudumbashree system in 2003. The ward level organizing committees were functioning in Venkitangu panchayat during the PPC phase, but it became inactive after PPC. The former Panchayat President of Venkitangu during the PPC phase commented, “Ward level committees were functioning well during my time. Their responsibilities had been shifted to Anganwadi workers and Kudumbasharee members in later stages”. The responses showed that organizing committees both in Venkitangu and Kudayathur stopped with the PPC phase, while it was sustained in Vallikkunnu to the middle of KDP, and they could not maintain the momentum during the later KDP phase.

The ward level committees were functioning well in the three panchayats during the PPC phase, and panchayat development committees were functioning in Kudayathur and Vallikkunnu. These committees became inactive both in Kudayathur and Venkitangu after the PPC, while they became stagnant in Vallikkunnu from the middle of KDP. The responsibility for organizing gram sabhas were placed on either Kudumbashree members, or semi-official staff of the panchayats such as Anganwadi workers, Literacy activists, National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) volunteers etc. Area development society chairpersons had been
assigned the role of gram sabhacoordinator in Vallikkunnu after 2004, while Anganwadi workers have a prominent role in Venkitangu.

The withdrawal of the organizing committees at the ward level in organizing gram sabhas made it non inclusive in nature. Organizing committees at the ward level had the participation of various political parties and civil society organizations. The state–civil society synergy has been highlighted as one of the objectives of PPC (Isaac & Franke, 2000; Heller, 2001). The vanishing of people’s organizations took place in the panchayats after the PPC acted as a hurdle to the state—civil society synergy in organizing public forums such as gram sabhas. Organizing committees of the GS had a democratic nature, since they were elected through democratic elections or consensus between various groups. The organizing committees were also committed to being a large group and they were, therefore, effective in disseminating information about the GS and in organizing it. They were able to reach all sections because of their wider representation. The Kudumbashree and paid officials were not representative in nature, and cannot reach and influence all sections of the community. This shift made the organizing process of GS non inclusive in nature. The withdrawal of the civil society and political activists may have contributed to the withdrawal of the middle class who share the same habitus of those activists. This may have weakened the capacity of gram sabhas as a public sphere² which includes citizens with varied backgrounds. The panchayats have become more interested in organizing gram sabhas by using their dominance and power over Kudumbashree and Anganawadi workers, rather than organizing it in a more participatory and inclusive way. The voluntary activism with people’s participation was replaced by the forced involvement of low paid or unpaid semi-officials or individuals. This has challenged the concept of mass participation and volunteerism.

A study of PPC observed that it has led to increased associationalism in Kerala (Heller, Harilal & Chowdhary, 2004). The experience of our study showed that the associations that emerged during the PPC period were not sustained after the initial enthusiasm. Instead of the people’s movement coming out of volunteerism it has given way to a new kind of forced involvement by using the paid and non-paid semi officials who are under the control of the GPs.
4.1.1.2 Strategies for inviting public to the gram sabhas

We have already discussed the provisions in the KPR Act to inform the people about the GS. Mobilizing the public to the gram sabhas was given more emphasizing from the inception of the PPC. Various measures had been suggested for publicizing gram sabhas. Processions were to be organized in each ward under the banner of the ward level organizing committees. Along with this, a small squad of people comprising various individuals from different walks of life were to visit the houses in their locality to directly encourage people to attend gram sabhas. This kind of intensive preparations were suggested in the first gram sabha, and also that the same process had to be repeated except for the processions, in all other gram sabhas. The Planning Board itself had circulated printed posters all over the state, for providing the space for writing the time and venue of each specific gram sabha (Isaac & Franke, 2000).

Team wise squad work and house visits were the strategy adopted by the GPs to educate and mobilize people to the GS. GPs adopted the method of pasting printed posters in public places, notice boards and institutions. Kudayathur and Venkitangu GPs had fixed public news boards in the main corners of the panchayats. Kudayathur GP had been circulating GS notices in the public institutions in the GP area. Vallikkunnu GP had been conducting NHG meetings before the GS, and was directly circulating the GS notices and statements of the projects to the people. They also used NHGs as a forum for public education.

The diversity in the mobilization process later on has given way to monotonous methods. Rather than the role of organizing GS, NHGs in Vallikkunnu were turned into instruments for distributing notices. The general body meetings of NHGs ceased after PPC. The three representatives of NHGs who were assigned the role of distributing GS notices in their area, was also shifted to Kudumbashree NHGs after their emergence during the KDP phase. The poster campaign and other ways to invite people also eventually stopped. The responsibility of mobilizing people to the GS was solely vested with Anganwadi workers in Venkitangu, and to Kudumbashree workers in Kudayathur and Vallikkunnu.

The other important manner of mobilizing people to the gram sabhas was the interactions of the panchayat members with political parties, clubs, civil society, and
religious leaders. In Vallikkunnu during the PPC they had the practice of conducting meetings of various groups before the gram sabhas, but they could not maintain the practice in the KDP phase. They had also been requesting various groups to participate in gram sabhas, along with a letter including the date and venue of GS in the grampanchayat. The President of Vallikkunnu GP during the PPC phase recollected, “We had been preparing a letter and were giving it to all kinds of leaders representing various groups, for their active participation in gram sabhas, but we could not continue it after PPC. Since then, the team work was missing.” In Kudayathur, they had the practice of approaching religious leaders to make a public call to their disciples to attend gram sabhas. Representatives of both the Muslim and Christian communities agreed that normally their priests have been making public calls to the people to attend gram sabhas in their talks after prayers in the church or mosque. One individual from the tribal area of Kudayathur indicated, “Normally our priest makes the announcement of gram sabha in the Church after the prayer”. The ward member from the tribal area agreed that the participation of people was high in that area because of such efforts. In Venkitangu and Vallikkunnu, the panchayats had no practice of interacting with the various religious leaders, but in Kudayathur they did.

Considerable preparation was needed to conduct gram sabhas. The people who come to the GS have to be assigned a place in different groups according to their interests. A registration process was suggested for this by recording the details of participants. In Vallikkunnu they assigned this duty to the NHGs, to find out suitable people for each group, so that discussions would be productive. In the other two panchayats, they had been performing this work in the gram sabha venue itself, by arranging different registration counters based on different subjects to discuss. This practice in Vallikkunnu eventually stopped after the early stages of the PPC, and it was replaced by registration at different counters at the gram sabha venue. The minutes of a gram sabha at the ending stage of the PPC showed that the practice of registration at counters before the gram sabha stopped in the panchayatseven before the close of the PPC. Instead of prior registration participants were requested to attend the groups after the plenary session through casual announcement. A panchayat member of Kudayathur during the KDP phase opined, “The scientific registration system was replaced by an anarchic procedure. People were confused
about the plenary session, and which session they can choose. The gram sabha became a mere gathering of people”. The responses from Venkitangu and Vallikkunnu also reinforced this view. The former convener of the agricultural subcommittee, who was also an activist of Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishath commented, “We followed a good system of registration till the watershed development gram sabha in 2000. Later on the systematic group wise registration system had been changed. This was the result of overall changes that occurred in the organizational process of gram sabhas after the PPC”.

The team work behind the process of mobilizing people faded both in Kudayathur and Venkitangu in the last stage of the PPC itself when the organizing committees became weak. This tendency was seen in Vallikkunnu with the emergence of Kudumbashree. After the strengthening of Kudumbashree the functioning of the general NHGs reached a dormant stage. Except for Vallikkunnu the panchayats could not hold discussions with the various political parties, civil society organizations and religious groups to ensure their participation in the gram sabha. The inclusion of priests of religious institutions in Kudayathur helped to enhance public participation in the tribal areas of the GP.

4.1.2 Attendance and participation in gram sabhas

We have discussed the preparatory process of the GS and the changes that took place in informing the public, and in organizing gram sabhas. Attendance and participation in the gram sabhas were the issues that were focused on during the field work. Since developing a participatory methodology for local planning and mass participation was the basic objective of the decentralization process in Kerala, the attendance and participation of various groups in the gram sabha is quite important. Quite often, participation is a term that is wrongly used to refer to plain attendance. We would like to operationally differentiate them as two concepts. By attendance we mean the physical presence of the voters, or different groups of voters in the gram sabhas. We use the term participation in a more expanded sense than mere attendance. Rousseau described participation as actually being a part of the decision making process (Pateman, 1999). Participation indicates the involvement of the voters in the deliberations that take place within the gram sabhas. It could be extended into their involvement in verifying the reports and accounts of grampanchayats,
contributing towards future planning, evaluating the functions of the public service delivery system, and monitoring the follow up actions taken by the grampanchayats on GS recommendations.

The People’s Planning Campaign introduced various special component plans for the empowerment of marginalized sections in the community, such as women, SCs and STs. Thus, it is also important to discuss how those groups have been involved in the deliberations of the gram sabhas. I have conducted home visits in a ward of Kudayathur grampanchayat that had a higher concentration of ST habitations, a colony of Venkitangu gram Panchayat that had a higher concentration of scheduled caste people, and an area of Vallikkunnu GP with higher concentration of fishermen, in order to get their feedback on the gram sabhas and the activities of the panchayats. Focus group discussions were also conducted among six women neighbourhood groups in the three panchayats. This provided information on the attendance and participation of various groups in the gram sabhas. Thus, along with the informant interviews with elected representatives, resource persons, representatives of political parties and civil society activists, these insights have been helpful to narrate the case of different groups.

4.1.2.1 Attendance in gram sabhas

The attendance of Gram sabhas is crucial in any discussion about the functioning and performance of GS as an institution. The Kerala Panchayat Raj Amendment Act 1999 stated that the minimum attendance of agram sabha should be ten per cent of the total voters in the concerned ward. It also states that if the GS does not have this minimum quorum in the meeting, it should be dissolved and convened again. The minimum quorum of such a second meeting is fifty in number (KPR Amendment Act, 1999). This could be adopted as the minimum criterion while we discuss the attendance of the gram sabhas. Since the PPC adopted subject-wise group discussions in gram sabhas, the volume of people and the presence of various categories of people are also important. The attendance of various groups in gram sabhas is a precondition for effective deliberative process. We have already mentioned that various subject-wise groups such as women and child development, SC development and ST development were to gather as sub groups in gram sabhas.
We can now examine the changes in the patterns of attendance of the gram sabhas in the selected panchayats during different stages of the PPC and KDP. Table 4.1 gives a broad picture of the attendance of gram sabhas in Vallikkunnu, Kudayathur and Venkitangu gram panchayats.

**Table 4.1**

**Pattern of attendance in gram sabhas**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the GP</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>PPC</th>
<th>KDP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kudayathur</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>105</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venkitangu</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>125</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vallikkunnu</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>190</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Compiled from the minutes of gram sabhas of the grampanchayats listed above)

The average attendance of the gram sabhas, during different periods is provided in the table. The figures show a gradual decline in the gram sabha attendance in these panchayats over time. One relevant factor is that even in the initial years of the PPC, the gram sabha attendance was not high in Venkitangu and Kudayathur. At the same time, the attendance in Vallikkunnu was higher when compared to the others. It is reported that GS attendance in some wards of Vallikkunnu was nearly 900 in the PPC phase. The Development standing committee chairperson of the GP during the last fifteen years recollected, “I still remember that there were nearly 900 people in my first gram sabha. The hall was absolutely crowded”. The attendance during the first two years of the PPC phase had not noticeably declined, while it showed a noticeable declining trend in the last two years of PPC, though attendance was still substantial.
The attendance had declined considerably in the gram sabhas of this panchayat during the later years of the KDP (2003-2006).

In the case of Kudayathur and Venkitangu gram panchayats, attendance had been relatively lower irrespective of whether it was during the PPC or the KDP. In both the panchayats, as in Vallikunnu, they were able to maintain almost the initial year’s attendance in the next two years of PPC even though there was a slight decline. The attendance came down considerably during the KDP, and they were not even able to have the required quorum.

The responses about the present attendance level showed that both Venktangu and Kudayathur gram panchayats were not able to maintain even the minimum quorum of the gram sabhas. The same situation was observed in some wards of Vallikunnu as well. In order to indicate the minimum attendance in the minutes, ward members were entering fake signatures in the minutes book either by themselves or by other people. They had openly admitted doing this. One panchayat member from Kudayathur stated, “Normally we did not close the minutes in the gram sabha itself. We did that later by adding the required signatures for a minimum quorum, and the necessary decisions in the minutes”. A member from Vallikunnu, stated, “If we were not able to get the minimum quorum, we asked the people who attended the gram sabha to fill in the signature of their family members in the minutes, and have been making up the required quorum”. Thus, even the signatures seen in the minutes book may be fake, which had been filled in either by the ward members themselves or by people who did not attend the GS. It really challenged the rules of the GS that required that the minutes should be closed in the gram sabha premises itself, by putting the signature of the chairperson under the resolutions (KPR Amendment Act, 1999). This malpractice also provided space for gram panchayat members to include their own desires as GS recommendations and to ignore the actual recommendations of the gram sabhas. This observation contrasts with the claim of the proponents of PPC, that the institutions such as GS would serve the purpose of increasing the mobilization of people to participate in the local planning process (Isaac & Franke, 2000). A recent study comparing Kerala and Karnataka also observed that gram sabhas in Kerala hardly met the required quorum (Inbanathan, 2009).
The other pertinent factor includes the changes that occurred in the categories of people who were attending gram sabha during the PPC and KDP. In the PPC phase the proportion of women compared to men was low in gram sabhas of these three panchayats. This changed from about the middle of KDP where women outnumbered men in gram sabha attendance in all the three panchayats. The emergence of Kudumbashree was reportedly the main factor responsible for the increased attendance of women, while several reasons have been attributed to the declining attendance of men. In the earlier section of this chapter we discussed a fact that the dissemination of GS information and organization of gramsabhas had become the responsibility of Kudumbashrees in the panchayats, from the middle of the KDP. An Area development society (ADS) member of a Kudumbashree in Kuduyathur said, “Since most of the Kudumbashree members are from BPL families they expected that they will get some benefits by attending the GS. Though we were not getting any personal benefits, the assistance to the NHGs have been provided by the panchayat. Moreover, because the responsibility of inviting the public to the GS was vested with us, we were naturally forced to attend the gram sabhas”.

Expectations of personal and group benefits are the stimulating factor behind the attendance of the Kudumbashree members in the gram sabhas. Along with this the compulsion from the gram panchayat authorities also forced them to attend GS. One of the Community Development Society (CDS) members in Vallikunnu stated, “Quite often panchayat members blame us for the low attendance in gram sabhas. Thus, we were collectively attending the gram sabhas to avoid such situations”. Engineered participation would not lead to any kind of effective deliberative process (Chathukulam & John, 2007). The women’s participation in the form of collective attendance from NHGs was more forced than voluntary, which might not have produced qualitative outcomes in terms of their participation in the deliberations of the GS.

4.1.2.2. Factorsthat influenced gram sabha attendance

The attendance of middle class and upper middle class groups in gram sabhas is reported to be very low in number. The respondents from the panchayats indicated that middle class people were attending the gram sabhas early in the PPC, though even then their number was not high. But their numbers declined substantially in the later
stages. There are different explanations for the withdrawal of middle and upper middle class groups and men in general from the Gram sabhas. We have already discussed the changes occurred in the public information system and organization process of Gram sabhas over time. These changes virtually led to the exclusion of the middle class people who were earlier engaged in the process of inviting people to the gram sabhas and organizing them. Along with this, in the KDP, the Resource persons (RPs) who were working at the local and panchayat level have been excluded. The role of Key resource persons (KRPs), District resource persons (DRPs) and Local resource persons(LRPs) has been neglected in the KDP phase. These people were earlier working as the facilitators of gram sabhas and were making them active. The withdrawal of these people immediately created a vacuum in the voluntary efforts involved in the organizing of gram sabhas. The KRP in Kudayathur during the PPC period stated, “The voluntary team had been acting as a backbone of the whole process. After the PPC we were left out from the process. We were not clear about our role. This has forced us to withdraw from the entire process”. The former DRP of PPC from Venkitangu commented, “The approach of the panchayat changed in the second phase (KDP). They took a position that they can manage the things with officials, by avoiding the voluntary resource persons. We were forced to step down from the process”. We have already mentioned that since the middle of the KDP the entire process was shifted to Kudumbashree in Vallikkunnu, from the democratically elected people, and the general neighbourhood groups.

The other important factor observed is the emphasis given to the beneficiary oriented programmes rather than the holistic development of the panchayat. Once the Above Poverty Line (APL) and the Below Poverty Line (BPL) distinction was brought in, and the emphasis was on the BPL related individual beneficial programmes, a perception developed that gram sabhas were for the BPL people. The agriculture officer from Kudayathur who was also there during the PPC recollected, “There was no APL/BPL distinction in the early gram sabhas. Many officials had been attending the gram sabhas. I personally noted many government servants and teachers who had been attending the gram sabhas. This tempo was sustained for 3-4 years, then the APL/BPL distinction appeared, and greater emphasis was given to individual beneficiary oriented programmes, rather than the development of the locality”. Those who had already benefitted from the panchayat were not interested in
attending gram sabhas, because they would not immediately get other benefits again. A panchayat representative during the KDP phase in Kudayathur commented, “Those who had already got the benefit decided not to come again, and those who were not going to get individual benefits thought, ‘why should we attend’. It became the forum of beneficiaries”. The popular notion of the gram sabha had turned to become a forum for beneficiaries, from the last phase of the PPC itself.

A Venkitangu panchayat member during the KDP phase made another observation “Initially there were lots of things for the middle class to demand, such as the building of roads, fixing of street lights and water taps. These things had been addressed by the panchayat in the PPC period itself. After the realisation of such middle class needs, they started to think that there was no need to attend the gram sabha”. This point seems quite relevant. If we examine the expenditure statements of the panchayats we can recognise that substantial amounts were spent for the roads, street lights and drinking water supply schemes. These are beneficial to all classes, including the middle and upper middle class groups and poor people as well (Kudayathur GP, 2002, 2007; Venkitangu GP, 2002, 2007; Vallikkunnu GP, 2002, 2007). The data from the development reports of the panchayats also show that many changes have taken place in the infrastructure facilities of the panchayats in the period of both PPC and KDP. New roads of 12.637 kilo metres (KM) have been laid in Venkitangu during the 9th plan, while it was 36.26 KM in Vallikkunnu, and 4.5 KM in Kudayathur. Fourteen drinking water supply schemes were implemented in Vallikkunnu, while it was eight in Venkitangu, and two in Kudayathur during the PPC and KDP phases. The Vallikkunnu gram panchayat had implemented a big water supply scheme covering 1500 households. The percentage of expenditure for infrastructure sectors by the GPs is also quite significant. The Vallikkunnu GP spent 26.03 percent, while Kudayathur spent 19.75% and Venkitangu spent 17.22% of the total expenditure of the tenth plan (2002-2007) in the infrastructure sector (Information Kerala Mission, 2007).

It is evident that the middle class argument about the lack of benefits to them within the activities of panchayats cannot be easily accepted. The middle and upper middle class groups who own the land were benefited through better road connectivity after PPC. Responses showed that land price even in the interior areas of the GPs had
multiplied because of good road connectivity, which is a result of PPC. The apathy of
the middle class toward the public forum and the activities that had given more
emphasis to the poor could be the reasons for their withdrawal from the gram sabhas.
The apathy of the middle class towards gram sabha attendance has been observed as a
symptom of the weakening of public institutions and public action in the state,
particularly any movement that favours the poor (Tharakan, 2008; KSSP, 2006). The
responses from the focus group discussions in the general Kudumbashree group of the
gram panchayats also revealed that middle and upper middle class groups lacked any
enthusiasm to involve themselves in these participatory institutions. The APL
families in the neighbourhood groups of the panchayatssuggested that only a few of
them were attending the GS, as a part of the NHG team. More than their own
attendance, they said that APL families were not concerned with either gram sabhas
or the Kudumbashree units. Staying away from gram sabhas was emerging as a class
strategy of the middle and upper middle class groups to establish their status as elites
who do not need the charity of the Government.

Pierre Bourdieu had explained that groups that acquired higher cultural and
economic capital than others would adopt their own strategies to distinguish
themselves from others (Rao, 2004). The middle class in the grampanchayats wanted
to share public space only with the people who possessed cultural capital equal to
theirs. The middle class people who had been the backbone of the movements for the
rights of the poor in Kerala started to withdraw their solidarity and involvement in
pro-poor movements. They recognised that a new kind of cultural capital was
emerging out of their involvement in the forums of the middle class, and is more
valuable than the cultural capital that they can acquire by sharing public space such as
gram sabhas with the poor. Modern citizenship theories have argued that class
differences will be irrelevant through the rights based practices of citizenship
(Barbalet, 2001). However, the experiences of the GPs showed that the approaches of
the middle class and upper middle class groups have been to clearly distinguish their
class status from the status of lower class and caste groups. It was argued that
participatory citizenship will lead to the emergence of egalitarian relationship between
the dominant and the dominated (Tandon & Mohanty, 2006). In practice what we
found was the dominant middle and upper middle class groups negated such a
possibility through their withdrawal from a public forum like GS. This has reduced the chance of an egalitarian negotiation between the dominant and the dominated.

4.1.2.3 Responses from the political field and civil society and lack of citizens’ education programmes

The approach of the political parties, mass organizations and civil society organizations towards the gram sabha is also a contributing factor in its functioning. These will be examined in detail in the chapters on political field and civil societies. No particular action had been taken by the political parties and mass organizations to convince their members about the relevance of the GS. Since GS was a new institution in the society during the time of PPC, the political field had the responsibility to orient their activists about its nature and relevance in nurturing local democracy. Such an attempt was lacking from them. Civil society organizations in the three panchayats, except for KSSP in Vallikkunnu had not taken any initiative to make the people aware of the relevance and utility of GS. In the initial phase of PPC the KSSP conducted a state wide campaign in the form of street plays and corner meetings to make the people aware of local planning, but they could not continue these efforts as a long term activity (KSSP, 2008). In Kerala, the political parties, mass organizations, and civil society are strong enough to influence various categories of people. The state has a political structure where most individuals are affiliated either to one of the political parties or their mass organizations. This has created a situation where the political field has a strong influence in designing the habitus of the individual. The traditional political habitus of the individuals was created out of macro level political practices. An innovative kind of intervention was necessary to change their habitus. This kind of attempt, however, has not taken place in the panchayats.

It is also relevant to note that any kind of continued mass education, or citizens’ education programme was missing in these panchayats. An exception was found in Vallikkunnu, where the citizens education programme had been undertaken through the neighbourhoods. Respondents indicated that they had been convening the meetings of NHGs before the gram sabhas during the phase of PPC. The trained Resource persons explained the relevance of gram sabhas, methods of beneficiary selections, procedures of gram sabhas and, the nature of discussions within gram
sabhas through short lectures of 30-45 minutes. These respondents from Vallikkunnu also indicated that they had been adopting the same practice for mobilizing people to various voluntary works undertaken by the panchayat. A former Key resource person from Vallikkunnu during the PPC stated, “We were regularly conducting Ayalkoottrom meetings (NHG) before the GS. We had also been explaining the concept of PPC in detail in such meetings. We took it as an opportunity for citizens’ education”. The NHG meetings became rare from the closing stages of PPC itself, which were then convened only for electing new committees.

The PPC had given more emphasis to the training of elected representatives, resource persons and officials, to bring them into a new track of participatory planning and democracy at various levels (Isaac & Franke, 2000). But it neglected to train the people in the new concept. In order to imbibe a new concept people at large had to go through a practical educative process. Such a practical training to equip the people was missing both in PPC and KDP. General neighbourhood groups could have been used as such an instrument but this system was not sustained after the PPC. The general NHG has evolved in only about twenty per cent of the panchayats in Kerala (Isaac & Franke, 2000). The presence of NHGs made an impact in the attendance of people in panchayat activities, including gram sabhas in Vallikkunnu, while it was lacking in the other two panchayats.

The educative role of participation has been highlighted by various participatory democratic theories (Narayan, 1976; Pateman, 1999). They assumed that people themselves learn democracy by participating in democratic forums. M.N. Roy described local republics as schools of democracy (Roy, 1989). The Kerala state planning board which led the campaign virtually ignored the need for citizens’ education. The Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishath undertook a massive citizens’ education programme. They organized six camps to inculcate the ideas of participatory planning and democracy among the PPC activists (KSSP, 1999). They had submitted a proposal to the State Planning Board (KSPB) to undertake a citizen education programme as part of the PPC, but the KSPB had not shown much interest in it (Parameswaran, 2001). This kind of apathy from various corners to educate the public acted as a hurdle in spreading the values of participatory democracy.
4.1.2.4 Attendance of Farmers, Scheduled Tribes, and Scheduled Caste people

One of the observations during the field work was the high level of gram sabha attendance of scheduled castes and farmers in the three panchayats. The tribal attendance in Kudayathur and fishermen’s presence in Vallikkunnu was also high. The response of the informants and the household visits in a tribal habitation of Koovapilly at Kudayathur indicated that tribal attendance in gram sabhas was higher in the Panhayat, compared to other groups. The attendance in the Oorukoottams was also more than average in the panchayat. Sixteen out of thirty two households I met responded that they were regularly attending Gram sabhas and Oorukottom.

The former panchayat President during PPC who also belongs to the ST community commented, “The attendance of our people in GS and Oorukottom was very high during PPC. It has declined after PPC. Still, the ST attendance in GS is higher than other groups.” Many of the respondents indicated that STs also started to withdraw, after they got several benefits from the GP, such as houses, latrines, and assistance for repairing houses during both PPC and KDP phases. The Development standing committee chairman of the GP said that they were convening Oorukottoms in the panchayat where the tribal population was high.

In the case of attendance of Scheduled Caste groups in all the panchayats, the informants indicated that it was higher compared to the general population in gram sabhas. A panchayat member from Kudayathur who is also representing the SC community stated, “Most of the SC families here live in colonies. They were regularly attending gram sabhas. Lots of improvements have taken place in their basic infrastructure facilities during the last fifteen years”.

The SC coordinator of Vallikkunnu also agreed with this statement. Venkitangu is the panchayat with a larger number of SC households. There were 902 SC families in Venkitangu out of 6000 households (Venkitangu GP, 2007). The panchayat President during the PPC phase commented, “Most of the SC families were agricultural labourers. Now they have turned to the construction sector. The majority of them have been attending gram sabhas”. Though the general attendance has declined, SC attendance in gram sabhas was higher compared to other groups. The average attendance of SCs in gram sabhas of Venkitangu in 1997-98 was 57 while it was 41 in 2000-2001 (Venkitangu GP, 2001:44). It was more than thirty per cent of the total attendance in the GS.
Eighteen families out of the twenty eight I visited in the two SC colonies in Venkitangu, reported that they were regularly attending the GS. Twenty three SC families among them are BPL families. Twenty two families out of twenty eight had got various benefits from the panchayat during the past fourteen years, which includes assistance for housing, latrine construction and electrification of houses. This process had continued during both PPC and KDP periods. The plan documents of GPs (Kudayathur GP, 2002; Vallikkunnu GP, 2002; Venkitangu GP, 2002) showed that the special component plan for SCs largely focused on individual beneficiary schemes. This may be a contributing factor for their higher attendance in gram sabhas.

It is also relevant that this trend is similar in the three panchayats irrespective of all other differences. Persisting poverty and backwardness is the main reason for the higher attendance of SCs in gram sabhas.

The attendance of fishermen families in gram sabhas was also found to be higher compared to other groups in the population. Twenty one out of thirty one families that I visited in a coastal ward of Vallikkinnu were regularly attending gram sabhas. The noticeable fact is that twenty of them are BPL families. Here as well, twenty out of thirty one families have received Government assistance in the last 15 years. Nine of them received assistance for housing from Matsyafed, a state government agency for the welfare of the fishermen community. Though the attendance of women in GSs is generally high, the women from Muslim fishermen families stated that they usually did not attend gram sabhas. They said the men of their families have been attending the gram sabhas. This suggests that the habitus of the religious and belief systems still restrict their exposure to the public space. They explained that their husbands did not want them to attend gram sabhas, where men were also present. But they did not have any hesitation to send women to women’s neighbourhood groups where there were only women present. When I conducted a focus group discussion in a women’s NHG in another coastal ward, I noted that women were able to break this restriction through their continuous involvement in women NHG activities. Continuous interactions with public institutions and public space can also bring about changes in the traditional habitus acquired by the people, which may facilitate their emancipation to the open world. This corroborates the observation of Bourdieu that the habitus of individuals or groups are not a static one,
which could be changed through negotiations within the field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Participation of farmers in gram sabhas is another important point for discussion. The agriculture officers in Kudayathur and Venkitangu indicated that a few farmers were regularly attending gram sabhas. The Agriculture officer in Kudayathur who had also been in the PPC phase stated, “Some farmers showed genuine interest in agricultural activities and discussions while attending gram sabhas. The majority of them were coming for benefits like seeds, fertilizers and pump sets”. In the case of Venkitangu, the farmer’s attendance was high in coal land areas, where agricultural activity is focused on paddy production. Though the majority of them were targeting individual benefits by attending gram sabhas, a small group was attending GS with genuine interest in agricultural activities. One general observation of all the three panchayats is the comparatively good attendance of farmers in gram sabhas.

The experiences from the three GPs showed that the lower income groups, lower middle class, people of the lower castes and vulnerable people like farmers have been regularly attending gram sabhas in the GPs. At the same time the middle class, higher income group and the better educated groups were not interested in attending the gram sabhas and participating in the democratic process.

4.1.3. Participation and Discussions in GramSabhas

We have already mentioned that the concept of participation cannot be reduced to mere attendance. In the context of gram sabhas in Kerala, we would have to take the following indicators while discussing the participation of various groups and the overall effectiveness of the gram sabhas. The nature of group discussions and the changes over time could be one factor for analysis. The interventions and questions from the participants arising out of their consciousness for rights could be another point to discuss. The interventions of various groups such as women, SCs, STs, fishermen and farmers, particularly on the matters related to them, and on general issues need to be discussed in this context. The follow up actions and reporting on earlier GS recommendations would also be taken as an indicator of the overall effectiveness of the gram sabhas.
Gram sabhas have been used to identify local needs, and available resources to address such needs. The People’s Planning Campaign developed a systematic form of plenary sessions for formal procedures, and to explain the objectives of the gram sabha, followed by group discussions in different subjects. The reports of the group discussions (GD) had to be presented in the concluding plenary sessions of the GSs. One GS every year was kept exclusively for planning. The GPs had to present the annual accounts of the projects for the past one year and their evaluation report in this GS. They were also to present the panchayat’s suggestions for the next year plan. Each group of the GS was to evaluate the accounts and performance of the past year’s projects, in the respective area. They can also discuss the provisions for the next year, and can record their opinions and suggestions. Each group is entitled to comment on other projects even if they did not come under the purview of their group. One GS in a year was exclusively for beneficiary selection, and to discuss the implementation of approved projects of the GP. Group discussions were conducted for the rigorous screening of the beneficiary lists in various schemes. Suggestions for better implementation of the projects were also expected from such GS sessions (Kerala State Planning Board, 1997). Along with this, several statutory responsibilities and power have been assigned to the GS, such as evaluation of the performance of public institutions in the GS area, discussion of development issues of the panchayat and the respective wards, evaluation of the performance of the officials in the GP, and discussions on local health and environment issues (KPR Amendment Act, 1999).

We now consider the nature of the discussions that took place in the gram sabhas of the selected panchayats. The responses from interviewees of the three panchayats provided a general picture that discussions in gram sabhas were productive, and such discussions took place until the initial phase of the KDP. The quality of GS discussions declined after the initial years of the Kerala Development Programme. The published draft of plan documents comprising reports and suggestions for the year had been supplied to the gram sabha participants in the PPC, which was a helpful material to generate discussions. In the guidelines for gram sabhas, an instruction that was given stated that this material should be provided to the people in advance, along with the gram sabha notice (KSPB, 1997). This practice was not followed by Venkitangu and Kudayathur even in the PPC phase, while in Vallikkunnu the draft plan document had been circulated among the people in
advance along with the GS notice. This responsibility has been undertaken by the NHGs in the Vallikkunnu GP. The President of Vallikkunnu during the PPC stated, “We had been providing printed plan documents to the people along with the GS notice, and in advance. This was possible because of the NHGs”. This document had been circulating among participants only at the GS premises in Venkitangu and Kudayathur. The standing committee chairman of Venkitangu during the PPC said, “We had been circulating printed reports and accounts to all participants in the initial stage. Later on, it was confined to the people who demanded it”. The Resource person from Kudayathur who was active in the PPC and KDP phases commented, “Initially, they had been providing the published materials to all participants. Later on it was reduced to one copy for each group.” The earlier practice had changed in Vallikkinnu after the PPC. They were circulating limited copies of the printed material only within the group. This has worked as an impediment to the right to information of the people, which has also restricted the scope for generating discussions. This kind of printed information to the people could have enhanced the educative role of participation. Reduction in the distribution of such information by the panchayats automatically restricted the chances of enhancing public education in participatory democracy.

4.1.3.1 Changes that occurred in group discussions

The rigor of the group discussions deteriorated in the panchayats over a period of time. The responses from Kudayathur showed that they had avoided group discussions in the GS at the ending of the PPC itself. The standing committee Chairman during the PPC phase commented, “Things went on well for the initial three years. After that, group discussions were avoided, and it was reduced to general discussions in the GS”. The President of the GP during 2005-10 also admitted that group discussions had been taking place only in the gram sabhas of 2-3 wards in the panchayat. The responses from Venkitangu showed that they had been regularly following the instructions about group discussions till the third year of the KDP. The Secretary of the GP who served the panchayat both in the PPC and KDP phase recollected, “We followed all government guidelines. Group discussions in the GS were taking place, and we were trying to consolidate the suggestions emanating out of such discussions. This process eventually became diluted”. The Vice president of the
GP in the 2005-10 period who was also a member during the PPC phase commented. “The rigor of the group discussions was reduced after the initial phase of KDP. Groups had been merging together because of the lack of attendance. Group discussions became a ritual for writing minutes”. Merging of the groups became a practice here, and more focus was given to fulfil official requirements rather than conducting active discussions. The group discussions in Vallikkunnu too became a ritual after the first two years of the KDP. The former KRP of the panchayat commented, “Group discussions are still there for name’s sake. Only 6-7 people will be there in some groups, the quality of discussions deteriorated since the second year of the KDP”.

A general observation about the GS group discussions is that the groups of infrastructure development and social welfare, which include assistance for housing, house repairing etc., and agriculture, had lively discussions. The discussions were mostly focused on individual benefits or benefits for particular areas such as road and water supply. The standing committee Chair person from Venkitangu during the KDP stated, “Issues such as roads, water supply and electrification were serious matters for discussions in gram sabhas. People were interested in participating in such discussions, and enquired about matters that provided more individual benefits”. The comments from Vallikkunnu were different. The convener of the panchayat development committee during the PPC phase commented, “We had the practice of selecting people for each group from the NHGs. That provided scope for bringing interested people into each group of the GS. Since NHGs were able to recognise every individual, it was easy for them to identify and register suitable people for each group”. The registration from NHGs made the gram sabha groups in Vallikkunnu more active than in the other two panchayats. This practice was sustained only till the second year of KDP, and they too began to consider group discussions as a ritual in the later stages. Gram sabha groups in Vallikkunnu also focused more on individual beneficiary schemes than on common development programmes since the mid years of the KDP.

The concepts of deliberative and discursive democracies explain that the participants would get enough opportunities to participate in decision making through deliberative processes in democratic forums (Warren, 1995). PPC was also perceived
as an attempt to nurture the deliberative democratic process (Isaac & Franke, 2000). It was also presumed that group discussions in Kerala’s gram sabhas would be helpful to nurture such a process. The experience of the study shows that after the initial enthusiasm, the group discussions turned into rituals except in Vallikkunnu.

4.1.3.2 Participation of farmers in discussions

Farmer’s participation in gram sabha group discussions was lively in all the three panchayats. They were found to be more active in Venkitangu because of the higher involvement of Padasekhara Samitis and paddy farmers. Venkitangu has 750 acres of coal land which produces paddy on a large scale. The involvement of paddy farmers in the gram sabhas was high due to this land. Agriculture officers who were working in Venkitangu for more than eight years stated “Padasekhara samitis are very strong here. They have been making group based bargains for their benefit. They have been attending gram sabhas too”. The interesting factor is that their demands are mostly centred on earmarking money subsidies for fertilizers and seeds. Discussions on long term development of the agricultural sector was lacking here as well. The agriculture officer from Kudayathur who had also worked in the PPC phase mentioned, “The agricultural group in gram sabhas was active from the beginning. Some farmers were coming with genuine interest to develop the agricultural sector. Their number however, has declined. After 4-5 years since the PPC most of the discussions were focused on subsidies for compost, fertilizer, seeds etc”. An agriculture Task Force member from Vallikkunnu stated that much discussion had taken place in the agricultural groups of GSs in the initial stage. He stated that the attendance even now is high in the agricultural group, though the amount of deliberation on agricultural issues has reduced. Farmers who were regularly attending gram sabhas are those depending mainly on agriculture for their livelihood. Most of the people who owned land have already replaced their primary source of income from agriculture to other sectors. The vulnerability of being a farmer is the stimulating factor behind their regular participation in gram sabhas, which makes for a higher possibility to include them in a safety net through various financial assistance from panchayats. Their habitus of being vulnerable farmers who seek assistance from the government was motivating them to attend the gram sabhas.
4.1.3.3 Participation of marginalized groups in discussions

We have discussed the fact that attendance of women, SCs, STs, and fishermen was higher in the gram sabhas when compared to other groups. However, their attendance would not have any significance unless it is translated into participation in gram sabha deliberations. Rights based deliberations of these groups in the gram sabhas are important in this context. A persistent question we could raise is whether they had been able to generate rights based deliberations in the gram sabha. This could be reflected in their interventions to enquire about the special funds earmarked for them, and their efforts to raise their own development concerns, or in raising general questions in the gram sabhas.

Though the attendance of NHG women and fishermen is relatively high, this has not been translated into their participation in the deliberations of gram sabhas. Women’s attendance had outnumbered men from the middle of the KDP onwards. Women started to attend GS as groups, representing NHGs. Responses showed that this kind of collective attendance did not get reflected in their participation. Responses from informants representing women emphasized that women largely kept silent in the gram sabhas. This observation has been reinforced by comments of NHG members in focus group discussions. A woman panchayat member of Venkitangu during the KDP commented, “Lots of changes have taken place to women after joining the NHGs. They started to come out of their homes and collectively attended gram sabhas and other meetings. Notwithstanding this, they are still reluctant to actively engage in forums such as gram sabhas, where males are also present”. In a focus group discussion of NHGs in Venkitangu they admitted the same. They also stated that they had no practice of participation in gram sabhas, and were not sure what could be discussed and demanded in the GS as a collective force. The chairperson of the Community development society (CDS) of Kudayathur said, “Generally women have been attending gram sabhas, and sometimes they asked for personal benefits. Other than that they did not involve themselves in discussions on the Women’s component plan, its expenditure or other general issues”. A former CDS chairperson stated, “Though the attendance of men is low in gram sabhas nowadays, they still dominate the GS in terms of articulating opinions while women are mostly silent”. Women from a NHG in Kudayathur commented during a focus group
discussion that they were not even aware of the Women’s Component Plan. They indicated that though they are largely silent, sometimes they make demands for housing and water supply schemes. The former panchayat President of Vallikkunnu during the PPC responded, “Normally women were silent in the GS. Generally, males have been dominating GS discussions. Women spoke in the GS only when they were encouraged to talk by others”. In a FGD in Vallikkunnu, women pointed out that usually they did not get any opportunity to talk in the GS. They admitted that they had no practice of asking about the Women’s Component Plan even in women’s groups of gram sabhas.

The responses have shown that the gathering of women in larger numbers in gram sabhas has not been translated into effective participation in discussions. They are unable to break the male dominance in gram sabhas though they outnumbered men. They considered themselves as subordinate subjects who have to keep quiet in the public forum. They could not break the subordinate habitus structured out of the patriarchal family structure and the culture of silence in front of males. This has acted as an impediment to rights based deliberations in the gram sabhas and other public forums, though women have become active in their own forums (all women) such as federation meetings of NHGs. At gram sabhas, however, the study shows that they could not break out of the subordinate habitus created through a historical process.

A similar condition is seen in the case of scheduled caste members. Though their numerical attendance in gram sabhas was relatively high in the three panchayats, they could not convert the opportunity of higher attendance into of participation in discussions. The former District resource person (DRP) of Venkitangu during the PPC, who is also a representative of the SC community, pointed out, “They have been listening to the accounts and reports while they are present in the gram sabhas. Responses and questions were very rare on such occasions. They have the perception that they were getting some benefits from the Government. They were not capable of considering it as an issue of rights rather than a donation from the Government”. Though the caste organization of SCs is strong in Venkitangu, their secretary stated that they had no practice of discussing the panchayat plan for SCs and the utilization of that fund. My house visits in the SC colony in Venkitangu also corroborated this observation. Only two families out of twenty eight reported that they were asking
questions about the expenditure of SC fund in the GS. Twelve out of twenty eight said that they were not even aware of the special component plan for SCs.

The same was the case in Kudayathur and Vallikunnu. The SC coordinator of Kudayathur panchayat mentioned, “SC families have been regularly attending gram sabhas because most of them are poor. They have been attending gram sabhas and have been talking about individual requirements such as assistance for housing, latrine etc. Other than these, they have not been raising questions on SC funds and other general development projects”. The responses from Vallikunnu made it clear that the lack of education acted as an impediment in their effective interventions in the gram sabhas. The SC coordinator in Vallikunnu pointed out, “Their level of knowledge and education is very low, which acted as an obstacle to understanding the things about funds and other technical matters. Educated people from SCs were not interested in attending the GS”. Not even a minority of the educated and middle class among SCs are willing to attend gram sabhas. Though the number of SCs in the middle class group was low, they were not interested in sharing the habitus of the lower class people among them. They were more particular about their middle class life and keeping away from economically lower class groups of their own castes, which could be observed as a part of building a new identity for themselves. The traditional issue of cultural capital in terms of educational attainment, and the attempts by educated and middle class groups to build a middle class identity by staying away from the public institutions, together acted as a hurdle to the rights based interventions of SCs in public institutions such as gram sabhas.

In the case of fishermen in Vallikkunnu, they were raising individual demands quite aggressively in the gram sabhas, while they were not interested in the discussions on general projects. They were also not discussing the matter of fund utilization and the impact of the implemented projects. During the Focus group discussion in a NHG at a fishermen’s area in Vallikkunnu, the members commented that they do not even know how to read and write. This response came out while I asked about their interventions in gram sabha discussions and their capacity to respond to the printed reports. The responses from the house visits in the fishermen area of Vallikkunnu convinced me that their level of awareness about the planning process of the GP was quite low. Eighteen out of thirty one families I visited were not
aware of the process of formulating panchayat plans. They only know that the benefits were coming through the panchayat. Eleven out of thirty one persons I talked to responded that they were not literate enough to read the printed material of the panchayat while attending the GS. Their real life situation restricted their interventions to the personal benefits that they can acquire by attending the GS. Here too, we found that the middle class minority in the fisherman community was not interested in attending the GS. The fishermen community was not able to break the traditional habitus which constructed their backwardness in the public space, even after fifteen years of having a public space such as gram sabhas. Their traditional backwardness in education has also acted as an obstacle to their active interventions in the gram sabhas.

Participatory citizenship is about the altering of relations between the state and the vulnerable. It is an extended status of both citizenship and participation from the vantage point of the excluded people (Tandon & Mohanthy, 2006). It is also related to their agency, articulation and mobilization in their attempts to change the existing relationship and turn their overwhelming exclusionary experience into an inclusive one. From the experience of the study we can say that their participatory involvement helped them to expand their rights on social goods and services such as assistance for housing, latrines etc. But this has not made any structural change in their subordinate habitus. This participation does not address the structural issues of unequal ownership of livelihood resources such as land, and access to education, which were the historical hurdles to their mobility. Their participatory involvement helped the lower class, caste and poorer groups to modify their economic status but has not led to any structural changes in their social status. There have not been any changes in their negotiation capacity with the state for extending their rights for better education and health, and access to more resources.

A factor observed in the Kudayathur grampanchayat is the higher involvement of tribals in the GS. Deliberative discussions were taking place among the tribal group, whether in the gram sabha or in their own group called Oorukkottam. Twenty three out of the thirty two households that I visited in Koovappilly, an area with a tribal concentration, were aware of the process of formulating a panchayat plan and the Tribal sub Plan (TSP). A former panchayat member from this area during the
KDP stated, “Due to the higher access to education here, people were aware of the planning process as well. They were actively engaged in the gram sabha discussions”. Malayarayas at Kudayathur gained access to education through the school established by the Christian Missionary Society (CMS). They established two primary schools in the tribal areas of Kudayathur named Koovapilly and Adoormala, in the latter half of the 19th century. Most of tribal families in Kudayathur also hold 1-2 acres of land on an average. The higher access to land and education brought changes into their lives. Better education and economic status made them capable to effectively intervene in public institutions and the public space (Kudayathur GP, 1996). The economic capital acquired through the ownership of land and the cultural capital acquired through education, together made changes in their disposition as tribals. Bourdieu’s observation about the relation between the volume and power of capital owned by different groups and their class position is relevant here (Bourdieu, 1989) It is noticeable that unlike other middle class groups, the middle class families among tribals were actively participating in gram sabhas and Oorukootomms. Though the intensity of participation has reduced, their participation is still on the higher side.

4.1.4 Discussions and follow up actions on gram sabha recommendations

Discussions on public development issues, on the functioning of Government institutions, on health and environmental issues, have to be undertaken by the gram sabhas (KPR amendment Act, 1999). Responses showed that such discussions were very rare in gram sabhas after the initial 2-3 years of the PPC. Issues of procurement of paddy and coconuts, encroachment of river basin, dumping of waste into the river by the people etc., had been raised in the gram sabhas of Venkitangu. The issues of mangrove forest protection, rehabilitation of people affected by the tsunami, upgradation of libraries as information centres were raised in the gram sabhas of Vallikunnu. Water scarcity in the tribal area, and the necessity of a public funeral place were two major issues raised in gram sabhas in Kudayathur. One GS in Kudayathur passed a resolution against the State Government decision to shut down the lower primary school in the tribal area of the panchayat. Another GS passed a resolution to construct a building for an Ayurveda hospital, which has been realised during the KDP phase.
While comparing the number of wards in each panchayat and the number of gram sabhas in the period of ten years (1996—2006), discussions on public issues was quite low. Though discussions on the performance of public institutions and officials were part of the functions of gram sabhas, such discussions rarely took place. There were several cases of wastage of money in different projects of the panchayats. The investments made for purchasing boats in Kudayathur, money spent for the cultivation of prawns and purchasing of sanitary latrine materials in Vallikunnu were only some instances. A substantial amount of money spent for various projects did not show a significant output. The small scale industries at Kudayathur, hollow bricks and paper works units for SCs and other small scale units in Vallikunnu, women’s canteen in Venkitangu etc., (Vallikkunnu GP, 2002,2007; Vemkitangu GP, 2002,2007; Kudayathur GP, 2002, 2007) are some examples of the wastage of money. This kind of wastage of money or failure of projects has never been discussed in the gram sabhas as an item on the agenda.

Political parties have been active in the three panchayats by raising different issues. However, though they have conducted a variety of protests such as dharnas and processions, they have never used the gram sabhas as a forum to discuss such issues in a democratic forum. This has shown their lack of confidence towards such forums of direct democracy.

Upholding community interests over the divisive individual and group interests has been considered as an advantage of substantive participatory democracy (Tornquist, 2007). Interrogative functions that facilitate the collective decisions over individual interests is also a unique feature of participatory democracy (Pateman, 1999). This kind of aggregation of interests over divisive individual or group interests has not happened to a noticeable extent in the studied panchayats.

The possibility of gram sabhas acting as a forum of social audit, which was included in the KPR Amendment Act 1999 has never been practiced either by the public or by civil society organizations and political parties. The transparency of the local planning and governance process has gradually declined, while there was no substantial move from any concerned group to sustain it. The former Key resource person (KRP) from Vallikkunnu during the PPC stated, “People were not willing to openly challenge the panchayat in cases of malpractices. They were simply listening
to the reading of the statements in the GS and went back. Attempts to retain the transparency of the whole process was missing over a period of time”. A rational discursive process is considered as a pre requisite for the sustenance of an effective public sphere (Warren, 1995). The withdrawal of the middle class from the GS, and lack of discussions on public issues in gram sabhas affected the discursive process within the gram sabha based on rationality, rather than emotion or personal demands.

In the case of followup actions, reporting of earlier GS recommendations, and submission of action taken reports on such recommendations rarely happened in the gram sabhas. This practice had been followed in the initial stage of the PPC, while it declined in the later stages. The standing committee chairperson of the Kudayathur grampanchayat who was in this position during the KDP phase commented, “In the early stages of the PPC we had the practice of reporting actions taken on the previous GS recommendations in the next GS. Later on, this practice vanished”. The former KRP from Vallikunnu mentioned, “In the initial gram sabhas, people were asking about the earlier GS recommendations. There were even instances when the panchayat President had to apologise for deviating from gram sabha recommendations. This practice was not sustained for a long time”. A former member from Venkitangu during the KDP phase commented, “There was no practice of reporting earlier GS recommendations in the next gram sabha. People very rarely asked about them”.

4.1.5 Exceptional experiences

Though the general trend of the gram sabhas has not provided an optimistic picture I found two interesting experiences from Venkitangu and Kudayathur. In one ward of Venkitangu they have the practice of organizing a day long gram sabha. It was a gathering of all family members in the ward including men, women, and children. They organized various stage performances by the family members in that gram sabha. They celebrated it like a festival. A former District resource person and a person who worked behind this process reflected, “We still have good participation in our gram sabha. We were working as a team to inform the people and convene the gram sabha. The ward member has a close contact with each household. We organize one day gatherings of family members once in a year like a festival, with different stage performances. It really helped us in creating a community feeling”. In
Kudayathur too, the President reported that they were able to keep good attendance in three wards, including wards that were represented by the President, Vice president and the Welfare standing committee chairperson. She stated, “We have a good team to organize our gram sabhas. Along with this, we keep direct contact with the families in the ward. There are many middle class people who regularly attend the GS in the Vice President’s ward”. They were able to maintain teamwork and link with middle class people to ensure their participation in the gram sabha. The other factor noted here is the direct contact of members with the families in the ward area. This was missing in the other wards, and in the case of ward members who were simply assigning their duties to Kudumbashree members and Anganwadi workers.

### 4.2 Participatory institutions other than gram sabha

This section of the chapter is intended to briefly examine participatory institutions other than gram sabhas, particularly those developed and practiced in Vallikkunnu, Venkitangu and Kudayathur gram panchayats. Neighbourhood groups (NHGs), Ward Development committees (WDCs), Panchayat Development Committees (PDCs), and subject wise sub-committees of panchayat development committees were the participatory institutions developed in Vallikkunnu. Women’s Neighbourhood groups, Ward development committees and Panchayat development committees were the institutions that emerged in Kudayathur. Ward level organization committees were the institutions developed in Venkitangu. Women’s Neighbourhood groups established under the Kudumbashree programme percolated to the Panchayats after 2002.

The participatory planning experiments in Vallikkunnu started even before the People’s Planning Campaign in Kerala. Immediately after the 1995 panchayat elections, under the leadership of the newly elected panchayat, they participated in a local planning experiment initiated by the Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parshath (KSSP), namely Panchayat Level Development Programmes (PLDP). This was possible due to the good relations between the KSSP activists and the panchayat President. They had organized an institutional structure in Vallikkunnu that was also practiced in other panchayats selected under the PLDP programme. The main intention of these institutions was to bring the participation of people from the grass roots into the local planning and democratic process (Parameswaran, 2005). Neighbourhood groups for
every 50 households were the basic structure of this institutional pyramid. All the adult family members of these 50 houses could participate in the NHG which was considered its general body. One convener along with one man and one woman representative were elected from the general body as official representatives of the NHGs. The representatives of the NHGs, along with the representatives of all political parties come together to form the general body of the Ward development committees. Here too, they elected one convener, one male and one female to be the representatives of ward committees. These three persons had been representing each ward in the Panchayat development committee. Along with the elected representatives of the panchayat, representatives of all political parties, and civil society organizations were included in the general body of the Panchayat development committee (PDC). It also had an executive elected from the general body and one convener, and the panchayat president was the chairperson of the PDC. This body was registered under the Charitable Societies Act.

This system was functioning well in the PPC phase. NHGs had been used as a tool for citizens' education. They also had the role of informing people about gram sabhas, assigning people to attend various subject groups of the GS, distributing and collecting application forms for various beneficiary programmes, preparing the list of beneficiaries, and mobilizing the public to the various voluntary programmes organized by the panchayats. The convener of the PDC during the PPC commented, “We had the practice of convening NHG general body meetings before each gram sabha. They have also undertaken several voluntary works such as constructing roads, arranging volunteers for various surveys conducted by the panchayat, organizing health awareness classes, etc.” During the PPC phase all the road works had been undertaken by NHGs, through forming Beneficiary Committees. The former Key resource person from Vallikkunnu recollected, “We are very proud to say that we had done almost all the road works here by forming Beneficiary Committees during the PPC. No work had been allotted to contractors”. The Ward development committees undertook the responsibility of organizing gram sabhas with the help of NHGs. Subjectwise sub committees of the PPC were formed to include experts from various walks of life to contribute to the development of the panchayat.
The Panchayat development committee (PDC) in Vallikkunnu was very active during the entire PPC phase, till 2001. It started to fade after the first two years (2001-2003) of the KDP, though the PDC itself survived through the KDP phase as well. They could not undertake any more work by mobilizing the public. The general body meetings of NHGs were confined to the restructuring of NHG committees. After the development of Kudumbashree NHGs in the 2002-2003 period, the responsibilities of common NHGs had shifted to them, which led to the freezing of NHGs and ward level committees. The election to the PDC too was delayed for a long time in the latter part of the KDP (2003–2006). The grampanchayat members took an approach that they can organize gram sabhas through Kudumbashree NHGs rather than organizing it through the Panchayat development committees and common NHGs. The former panchayat President who initiated the PDC in 1995 commented, “During the KDP phase the gram panchayat members were not interested in continuing the function of PDC, WDC, and common NHGs. They took a long time to even conduct elections. Even if a new committee was selected for the PDC, the gram panchayat had a negative attitude towards it. They were interested in getting work done through Kudumbashree“. After the PPC phase the NHGs continued for 2-3 years, to become a forum for only distributing GS notices and application forms for beneficiary programmes. It had become an official forum from a democratic participatory institution.

Kudayathur panchayat constituted women NHGs in 1998 all across the panchayat, and they formed a Women’s development committee (WDC) at the panchayat level as an apex body of women NHGs. Along with this they formed a Panchayat development committee (PDC) to assist the panchayat in the organizational activities of PPC. This was not an elected body as in Vallikkunnu. They formed this committee by including representatives of all political parties, civil society organizations, resource persons of PPC and elected representatives of the panchayat. The panchayat President was the chairperson of this committee and the convener was a member of the PDC. The main function of the PDC was limited to assisting the panchayat in formulating plans and conducting gram sabhas. They also organized Ward development committees in each ward by following the same pattern. The convener of PDC said, “We formed ward level committees in the third year of the PPC. A Panchayat development committee was also formed as a system for
panchayat level coordination”. This system also changed after the change in the ruling party of the gram panchayat after the 2000 elections. This has become inactive during the term of the newly elected grampanchayat.

Venkitangu panchayat formed ward level organizing committees for the gram sabha in the PPC phase. These committees had been formed by including the representatives of all political parties. They used to elect a convener for coordinating the activities of the committee. The panchayat Vice president during PPC recollected, “We had a ward level committee here. We used to convene the meeting before every gram sabha and held discussions about the GS.” It had acted as a system for facilitating the entire functioning of gram sabhas. This system also stopped functioning after the PPC phase. Though the leading figures in the party and in the grampanchayat administration were the same, the collective effort at the ward level slowly vanished. They also did not have any panchayat level coordination system such as the Panchayat development committee as in the other two GPs.

Common NHGs were introduced in Kerala as a subgroup of the GS to ensure a more direct participation of the people in the grassroots democratic process. This was very relevant because of the larger number of households and the bigger geographical area of Kerala’s grampanchayats and gram sabhas (Parameswaran, 1999). It was described as the only forum that could have ensured substantive democratic process (Gurukkal, 2001). The study shows that after the initial enthusiasm the political leadership in the GPs was not interested in bringing the democratic process to the grass roots level⁶. They were more interested in promoting associations that could be used for instrumental volunteerism like women NHGs, which have been silently carrying out the orders given to them. They were not interested in promoting democratic associations such as GS and democratic deliberations at the grass roots level. Proponents of the PPC make claims about the increased associationism, and the sustenance of such democratic associations (Isaac & Franke, 2000) which have not proven valid here. None of the people’s organizations except women’s NHGs have sustained an active form in the gram panchayats after the PPC.
4.3 Summary

This chapter has discussed how far participatory institutions have contributed towards the strengthening of grassroots democratic practices in the GPs. The chapter focused on the gram sabhas and other people’s organizations such as Neighbourhood groups, Ward development committees and Panchayat development committees. The study has found that the process of getting the public to the GS and organizing gram sabhas was a collective effort during the PPC, while it has become a ritual in the later stages. The people’s organizing committees at various levels and NHGs that were acting as subgroups of the GS became inactive from the early part of the KDP. These systems were sustained in Vallikkunnu to the middle years of KDP. The responsibility to organize gram sabhas was later vested with the paid semi officials such as Anganwadi workers, literacy activists, health workers and Kudumbashree workers. People’s organizations and their interventions in organizing gram sabhas and mobilizing people gave way to a new kind of forced involvement with the semi officials. The people’s organizations other than GS such as general NHGs, WDCs, and PDCs were not encouraged and supported by the UDF government in the KDP phase.

Gram Sabha attendance in Vallikkunnu was comparatively good compared to the other two panchayats. The attendance in Kudayathur and Venkitangu had never been high even in the PPC phase. The attendance of middle, upper middle class and the educated groups declined even more than the other groups. Men out numbered women in the gram sabhas since the early years of the PPC, while women out numbered men since the mid years of KDP. The attendance of SCs, STs and fisher folk has been substantially higher than other groups throughout the PPC and KDP phases.

There were different reasons for the withdrawal of middle class people. The changes in the organizing process and mobilization of the public made GS more exclusive in nature. The role of middle class people in organizing gram sabhas was reduced. Most of the needs highlighted by the middle class such as roads, drinking water supply projects, electrification of roads etc., have been fulfilled by the GPs in the PPC period itself. Gram sabhas were perceived as forums which are more concerned with the needs of poorer groups, which led to the withdrawal of the middle class from gram sabhas. This has shown that they were trying to affirm a new middle
class status by staying away from the GS, defining the GS as a forum for the poor. The middle class groups who had provided leadership to different movements for the poor, has been shifting their focus from such movements, to the institutions and activities of middle and upper middle classes.

Though the number of women, fishermen, and SCs was high in the GS, this has not been translated into their participation in deliberations. The experiences showed that women could not break the subordinate habitus created out of the patriarchal family system, though they now had the opportunity to participate in democratic forums. In the case of SCs and fishermen, the historical lack of cultural and economic capital affected their deliberations in public institutions. The tribal participation in the discussions at Kudayathur was high. The higher volume of cultural and economic capital acquired by them through a historical process helped them to make rights based deliberations in democratic forums.

Discussion of public issues hardly took place in the GS. Though political parties have been organizing protests against gram panchayats, they were not interested in bringing such issues for deliberative discussions in the gram sabhas. The aggregation of common interests over the divisive individual and group interests was not possible in gram sabhas because of the lack of deliberative rational discussions. No substantial efforts were initiated from gram panchayats, political parties and civil society organizations in educating the people on participatory democracy, except in the initial movement of NHGs at Vallikkunnu. This also acted as an impediment to bringing attitudinal change among the people in support of grassroots democracy. One of the key objectives of the PPC was to bring in attitudinal changes among all actors related to Local self governments (Isaac & Franke, 2000). This was not seen in practice.

Various people’s organizations were formed as part of the PPC, such as general Neighbourhood groups, Ward development committees, Panchayat development committees and women’s Neighbourhood groups. None of them were sustained except for the women’s NHGs along with a semi official nature. The general NHGs at Vallikkunnu were an interesting experiment though they could not be sustained. The claim by the PPC’s proponents about the increased scope of associationism with PPC was not proven valid here.
Kudumbashree is the NHG network formed by state government in association with Local self government department and local bodies for poverty eradication. Community development society (CDS) is the Panchayat/local body level coordination committee of NHGs. Area development society (ADS) is the federation of NHGs at ward level, See, Oommen, M.A (2006): *Kudumbashree an Evaluation*.

Habermas defined public sphere as an arena in which individuals participate in discussions about matters of common concern, and in an atmosphere free of coercion, and dependencies (inequalities), See, Warren, A. Mark (1995): ‘The self in discursive democracy’.

Other studies also corroborate the observation that there was a declining trend in the attendance of GS in different stages of PPC and KDP. See Sharma, Rashmi (2007): ‘Kerala decentralization: The idea and practice’; K.N, Harilal, Shubham Chaudhary & Patrick Heller (2004): *Does decentralisation make a difference: A study of People’s planning campaign for decentralised planning in the Indian state of Kerala*.

Oorukoottom is the general assembly of tribal families in a locality.

Padasekhara samitis are the farmers associations based on each coal land area producing paddy. Coal lands are the areas lower than the general land level which has the purpose of storing water during rainy season, that is exclusively used for paddy production.

The NHGs had an important role in the participatory budgeting and democratic deliberation process in Porto Alegre initiated by the workers party led local body in Brazil. See, Heller, Patrick (2001): ‘Moving the State: The politics of democratic decentralisation in Kerala’.

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