Paniyans to aspire for the development space by moving out of the vicious cycle of the livelihood practices of past-rooted marginality.

Impact of the contemporary changes among the Paniyans will be further explicated in the next chapter.

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CHAPTER 4

DE-CENTERED STATE AND PARTICIPATORY LIVES

As described in the previous chapter, local communities have been increasingly exposed to new structures and agents of decentralization and participatory development since the later half of the 1990s. It has increased the number of organizational forms in the village and the spectrum of horizontal interactions among the individuals. Local Panchayath, Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) which are patronized mainly by community organizations like Church, SNDP etc as in the case of this village have started playing an important role in the creation of a new social space of development. Meanwhile the process creates a new local terrain of power relations with increased financial and administrative power to local leaders which is differentially negotiated by settler, Chetty and adivasi communities.

So the present chapter closely looks into the decadal experience of decentralization and participatory development in the village by exploring and differentiating the responses across the communities in order to see how the local people access the new opportunities in relation with their livelihood practices. In this attempt it tries to see the pattern of conflicts faced and strategies adopted by the people in getting access to various resources as the sources of power.
The chapter also specially focuses on the experiences of Paniyan in the overall context of decentralization and participatory development in the village. Active and exceptional responses of individual Paniyans to the process have been identified in order to understand the potential changes which could be brought in by the processes unleashed in the livelihoods of the community in the long run.

**Reciprocal Networks and the Politics of Patronage: Understanding Peoples’ Differential Use of Decentralisation**

Pulpalli shares many of the characteristics of the political culture of other villages in Kerala, inherited largely from a democratic tradition of post-independence period. However it has distinctiveness in relation to the geographic and demographic specificities of the area which also deeply influences the making of its local history. In the case of many other villages in Kerala, local politics has strong roots in various streams of social and political movements in the pre-independence period. In such villages collective action under local Panchayath in the post-independence period is an extension of this political tradition. Local Panchayath did not wield much administrative power in those villages, but played an active role in promoting common good through collective action based on a politics of agitation.

In the case of Pulppalli there were similarities and differences with this pattern of local politics of pre-decentralization era. In the case of the settlers in the village, they did not share a collective memory of a common political past. They reached here from different parts of southern Kerala mainly with an economic reason. They wanted to encroach upon the land and start cultivation of commercial crops. There was a break in their political lineage of assertive movements. But they had a major thrust upon collective action on the basis of which they followed individual pursuit of development. Though collective action like *sramadunam* (contributory effort) was a common feature in the region and state, in the case of this village it was clearly
linked to the individual interests of settler communities, rather than for common good in larger sense.

First generation leaders in the village who emerged from the settler communities had earned the respect of local people irrespective of their political affiliation for giving leadership to the collective action of people. There were enough evidences for their consistent negotiation with the bureaucratic state structures. They used their influences in the state power structures including party and government hierarchies. Local Panchayath was part and parcel of the collective action of people rather than an external governance structure. Contrarily, flow of political power was mainly in a vertical order as people trusted and obeyed their leaders at the local level within an enduring system of patronage. Pre-decentralization period in the village also presents a picture of more cohesive and integrated domain of local politics controlled by the Congress party, supported traditionally by the Christian settlers, as well as native Chettys.

In the short span of decentralisation period the village witnessed a lot of dramatic events including the conflicts and splits within the coalitions, formation of new pressure groups, changing of loyalty from parties and leaders etc., coincidental to the extreme economic changes. The process of decentralisation has to be viewed in relation to this specific political tradition and culture of the village.

As a political party influential among the settler and Chetty communities, the Congress party ruled the Panachayath most of the post-independence period. Opposition led by CPI(M) got opportunity to be in power wherever there was a split in the Congress coalition. There was a crack in the Congress party in the beginning of this decade followed by a state level rift. Rebel group got the support of the disenchanted masses of poor farmers in the wake of the economic fall which also resulted in the formation of an independent organization of farmers (FRF) in the regional level. This split and frustration led to the debacle of the Congress Party in the village which has been a stronghold of right wing coalition. It thus brought into power a coalition of the left wing parties, the rebel congress and the FRF.
But after two- three years, by the year 2008, those events have now completed a circle with the Congress Party regaining its lost glory in a short period. A political culture based on purely individual interests has a strong influence in the formation of factions and realignment of factions and coalitions in the village politics. Along with the decentralization, spirited involvement of people in the local politics has increased much with a large pool of resources at stake and the resultant competition for it. A new generation of political aspirants got exposed to this competition with a shift in the meaning of power from a symbolic nature in the case of first generation leaders to an absolute one in the sense of getting control of financial and administrative powers.

**Generational Reversal of Power**

Generational reversal of power at the helm of Panchayathh is an effect of decentralization in the village. Power shifted in absolute terms from the initial group of settler leaders who laid the foundation for the development infrastructure to a new generation of leaders who have the fortunes of possessing more political and financial powers under decentralization programme. Meanwhile, earlier leaders did not enjoy such powers, and instead they had to depend on state department structures and the power hierarchies within their parties to fulfill the local requirement.

Panchayath in the pre-decentralization period had not much power and resources under its possession. According to K.U. Mathai who served as the President of local Panchayath for 16 years since its inception in 1963, they had to suffer without much financial sources and help from the state department in the initial period so could not undertake any large developmental projects. In those days, the powers of Panchayath were confined to a few areas like the registration of birth, death and marriage, construction of pocket roads, collection of taxes from the shops etc. Public work was undertaken through the collective action under the leadership of Panchayath members. There were only six members in the Panchyath earlier. Mathai belonged to the Congress Party but is not very active now in politics.
Although the first election held in 1963 was not on party basis in the Panchayath, it became a stronghold of the Congress Party thanks to the traditional loyalty of the settlers. Congress Party ruled the Panchayath for a long period. Leaders belonging to settler communities, especially Christian community led the congress party in the village. In the initial days of struggle most of the poor migrant families supported the left wing communist parties for legitimising encroachments of land, but they shifted their loyalty to the Congress Party once they got the title and aspired for more development requirements in the village. Settler leaders belonging to the Congress Party could negotiate with the state power structures more successfully due to their proximity to the power centres in the organizational hierarchy of the party and influential leaders like Mathai. People like Mathai had good rapport with the state level leaders of the Congress Party. They also had a good say in the decisions taken with regard to the new development projects in the village. They could influence the governmental higher ups through their influence in the party hierarchies on various requirements of the local people. However, they had only limited access to direct administrative powers in the earlier regime of governance. Nevertheless, people considered them the representatives of various leaders at the state level who were influential and capable of taking important decisions. A vertical order of trust existed among these state or regional level leaders, their local representatives in the village and the people who supported them at the local level politics.

Decentralisation in the village also paved way for a new generation of political leaders belonging to settler communities. Mostly educated, relatively young generation leaders contested in the election after the implementation of decentralisation programme. They represented a dynamic face of the new generation of settler communities. Persons like Paulose emerged as new faces in lieu of the old generation politicians like Mathai Paulose, who was a private (parallel) college teacher, with strong support from a section of his party men, has a good understanding of the political processes and requirements of the people. He contested the election and became President of the Panchayath. Later, he became President of the local co-operative bank, the same positions. Mathai had wielded in his period. Paulose is distanced by a generation from Mathai in his aspirations and
capabilities. The latter considered himself a low profile person without aspiring to climb the higher ladders of power hierarchies beyond the village. As an educated and ambitious person, Paulose however, has been working very earnestly towards an fulfil his ambition to carve out a space for himself in the district level politics for the time being. Decentralisation of state power helped him to find a way to move upward through contesting in the district council and he became the district Panchayath member. He has been able to occupy many other positions in the various committees of district level government. He uses the opportunity to prove himself effectively and is now emerging as an important leader in the district.

There are a number of examples of new generation ambitious political leaders from the area who are self-confident and capable in order to compete for higher levels of politics. Decentralisation has provided ample space for the new generation leaders to increase their possibilities and presence at the realm of politics and their capabilities to manoeuvre this space in best possible ways. Since decentralisation, unlike older generation leaders, they are entrusted with handling huge resources and administrative responsibilities. They occupy substantive power in comparison to their predecessors who formally had held only symbolic power. Besides their de-facto power through financial and political command at their disposal, they also enjoy formal symbolic power like old generation leaders through their close contact with many state level political leaders.

However, not all the ward members elected to the village Panchayath but only a few emerge successfully as leaders of the village. These successful few become the faces of the village. Unlike the old generation leaders, Panchayath has now become a powerful instrument for these new generation leaders to cultivate their profile and influence among the people. Few such leaders are able to handle their responsibilities in a very skilful and ‘professional’ way.

There are two important outcomes of the decentralisation program which are also corresponding to the generational shift in terms of the nurturing of a political culture in relation to the livelihood practices in general. Greater command of power at their
disposal for the local leaders is capable of creating a new system of patronage among the people. Secondly, possession of substantial power and its symbolic expressions in the day to day functioning creates a competition even among the common leaders in the village, based on their capabilities to acquire and maintain it. It has increased the number of aspirants who strive for the posts within political parties and government. These two effects are interlinked through the creation of a reciprocal networks based on personal interests involved by the political leaders and people at large at the local level.

**Networks of reciprocity and the politics of patronage**

Increased horizontal reciprocity and interaction among the people which we discussed in the earlier chapter have been explained in relation with the decentralisation. It implies that decentralisation has increased and strengthened the networks of reciprocity among the local leaders and people based on personal interests.

These new generation leaders had the opportunity to take many administrative decisions directly linked to the livelihoods of people and their responsibility for implementing these decisions. Consequently, this has increased their power which in turn, gathers a network of clients around them.

There are many cases of ‘able’ or ‘successful’ leaders who are in a position to use both these reserves of power, state power and support base, as good resources for further enhancement of their political manoeuvrings. What is found more interesting here is that the ‘local’ becomes an arena of political action in tune with the state level politics and its theatrics. Local leaders try to emulate the models of their state level leaders. Panchayath is seen on par with the State Legislative Assembly. Accordingly these local leaders perceive their corresponding roles.

Another way in which they try to amass symbolic power is through confrontations with employees in various government departments in the village which have been
brought under the Panchayath following decentralisation. Most of the employees in these offices, including in Panchayats office, address the political representatives in the Panchayaths as ‘sir’, unless there is a deliberate effort on the part of these leaders to avoid such formalities. For the people who experience or perceive the state departments and officials as inimical to them in their dealings with the offices, the success of the ward representative in dealing with these officials and getting their things done in the respective offices is a yard stick for a leader’s power., the leaders rise in estimation. This also sometimes creates tensions among the employees and these political representatives. Most of the employees who are well educated and who got jobs after passing the examinations conducted by the Public Service Commission, the ward members, some of them poorly educated, are not equal to them. However, in many instances it is found that the Panchayath members and employees try to move along with an understanding, the employees trying not reveal publicly any disrespect they may feel towards the members.

Selection of beneficiaries for different schemes or programmes, especially for the poor, is a strong political tool for these successful representatives to gather or /and reinforce and expand the range of networks in the village. Poor people depend on their ward members expecting the later to include them in the beneficiary list and to ensure that they get selected so that some livelihood requirement may be met. Although there are set norms in selecting the beneficiaries, in practice there are other priorities. Active support extended to a particular candidate in the election is found to have become important criteria in the selection of beneficiaries. The affiliation to a particular party or proximity to a particular faction within the party or a particular leader may be determining factors in beneficiary selection.

The normally found practice in the village is that if there is a scheme which allows selection of beneficiaries, out of 10 eligible/applicant families or individuals, almost 7 will go to the families belonging to ruling party and the only the rest 3 will go to people or families belonging to opposition parties and this, who keep relatively better contact with the ward member. The latter are included due to a rationale that they are the potential supporters in future elections. Such a leader in his capacity as ward
member can influence the decision and include some of his own persons also in the list.

People in the village, especially the poor, who depend on the Panchayath more than other segments of population, have generally accepted it as part of the new rules of the game. According to this, if the families or individuals in the opposition party or coalition do not get any benefits from the Panchayath, they are accused of not voting for the candidate who is now in power, and that they can try their luck the next time. But in the case of those who supported the member in the election but could not make any benefits from the Panchayath through that member, they may retaliate and withdraw their support the next time. Normally nobody likes to make the ward member an enemy not just because of his/her power, but also due to the fact this local leader is a part of a larger macro power structure at the higher party levels influential with state governance structures also. Those who are convinced that they are not going to make any benefit from the current rule in the Panchayath come out vehemently against the members and the Panchayath and try to remove them from holding such power in the coming election. Thus, individual interests become the benchmark in a person’s decision to support or oppose the members and Panchayath and the members too try to ensure that they or party would stay in power.

Meanwhile, closeness to a leader in one's own party may be determined by factors like family, community, friendship circle, work group etc. Those who feel such avenues, access and closeness, potential or real, to a particular candidate work overnight for his or her success in the elections. Those who mobilise resources for the success of a candidate naturally would expect in return appropriate benefits for the loyalty shown in the election.

This is the way individuals, especially the poor who are more involved in the local politics in the village and the people’s representatives in the Panchayath are now engaging in their reciprocal networks. This kind of reciprocity between the members and people is more horizontal in nature as it serves mutual interests and may be mediated by other relations or networks. The study village, except for the marginal adivasis like Paniyann most of the other communities are found having a social base
of such horizontal networks of reciprocity. These networks are found on the line of caste, community, occupation, politics, and even spiritual groups. Election to the local Panchayath has become a process of translating the social base of networks into also political base of negotiations of power. For the individuals, their capability in affiliating themselves with multiple networks gives them an edge over others in creating a political base in negotiating with the members and political parties and groups. Within them a successful leader is one who maintains contacts with these networks, replenishing good will and tries to get control over individual choice-making through such simple networks.

Election to the Panchayaths thus becomes a process of competition among the networks to get dominance at the local level structures and processes. Those who are actively involved in these networks belong to the categories of poor farmers and workers. Rich farmers are found giving only indirect support. Members in such families are found aligned to different groups within the party as well as different political parties. Those who are having formal employment, like salaried government employment, are not found very active in the election process.

Those members who emerge as leaders of the village are successful in manipulating these things and fulfilling the demands of their supporters to the maximum. They create these networks of reciprocity involving multiple networks both vertically and horizontally. In the case of our village, these members, mainly male, are rated as ‘efficient’ and successful with high levels of aspirations, though many of them have also been alleged to be part of the decentralised and local-level reproduction of corruption and nepotism.

Mohanan, 42 years, is an emerging leader in the village. He became a ward member in two consecutive terms in the decentralisation period. Belonging to the Ezhava community which is not a powerful force in the village power structure he has to struggle hard to emerge as the leader of the party confronting the powerful ‘Christian group’ in village. In his first term he contested the election with the Congress Party ticket. By the next term he had become a member of a splinter group of Congress
which contested the election with the support of the opposition front led by CPI (M) in the village. Defeating the official Congress candidate, he was again elected to the village Panchayath.

Congress party had a bad time in the village following the price crash. Party was accused for the liberalisation policies it pursued at the Centre, which was seen as the reason for the economic distress. A non-political farmers’ movement like Farmers’ Relief Forum became very active among the farmers who had traditionally supported the Congress Party. FRF decided to contest in the next elections including to the Panachayath and could give a severe jolt to the Congress Party in the village as well as in the region. Splinter group represented by Mohanan joined hands with FRF and the opposition coalition and hence they came into power under the CPI (M) led left democratic front. He used this opportunity to his advantage and to beat his opponents within the party which was competing to represent the new generation leadership in the village. Not only did he win twice but also got the opportunity to hold key positions in the Panchayathh for two consecutive terms.

But after two years he again came back to the Congress fold part of the state level re-union of the splinted group into the party. Through such strategic decisions, he emerged as one of the powerful leaders with a good support base. Born in a small scale farmers’ family and with a short stint of experience in student politics he entered in the local politics by contesting in the election into local Panchayathh for which he quit the small job he held in a private organisation. Basic strategy of Mohanan to create a support base at the local level was to establish links with different social networks in the village. He used his caste identity and was able to build a base in the community organisation—SNDP-- in the village. There were also dissidents within the organisation, but he could efficiently overcome it with the support of the youth in the organisation.

He also became active in the programs of Amrithanandamayi Mutt which is a spiritual organization. Amritananadamayi, considered a god woman by large number of devotees across India and abroad including many powerful politicians, has wide global networks and source of funding and within the village the
organisation engages in various activities in education, health and micro-financing. They have good influence among a section of people in the village. During the period of economic distress a lot of local people found solace in this group and their spiritual activities. Mohanan is also an important face among the organisers of many activities of Mutt in the village. He is also a firm follower of Amritanandamayi. He is also very much part of the activities of the main local Hindu temple which belonged to an upper caste Hindu family earlier, but is now controlled by a people’s committee.

Besides these organisational connections as the source of support base, Mohanan took part strongly in the factional politics within the Congress. To get an upper hand over other section of leaders he became active in another faction and got close connection with a state level leader of the Congress Party. Gradually he became a de-facto representative of that leader in the region. This image increased his symbolic power among the local people.

As a member in the Panchayath he could bring in many new projects like roads, water tanks, school, houses etc., in the ward. Distribution of individual benefits has been an important component of decentralisation programme. In the case of this village it has become critical in defining the trajectory of decentralisation programme. Although initially there was a good participation in the gramasabha meetings, gradually it came down substantially, due to the lack of transparency in undertaking projects and distributing individual benefits under the beneficiary selection in different schemes.

Although gramasabha (village council) is the supreme body of decision making in the village, people started to view it as a farce. Ideally gramasabha has to provide a space for collective decision on developmental priorities of the village and should decide who are the needy individuals and families for getting the social and economic benefits from the state. In the case of this village it did not happen. Initial enthusiasm for participating in the gramasabha had definitely some material outcomes in the form of construction and expansion of a number of new pocket
roads and the construction of a new irrigation project. But, these projects undertaken by the people’s committees turned to be sources of corruption and gave rise to allegations. The newly constructed small irrigation project became a failure due to the poor quality in construction. People’s committee came under the allegation of misusing the project fund. Actually some of the close aides of Mohanan were made functionaries of this committee and they in turn helped him to get the support of party workers in the factional feud within the party. Besides an economic down-turn in the village created greater demand for money among the people.

Joseph, President of the People’ Committee in the construction project of the small irrigation dam was is a small farmer and a trustworthy worker in Mohanan’s faction within the party. He has good influence in some of the neighbourhoods in the village. Economic condition of the village had affected Joseph also. He started constructing a concrete house during the period of economic buoyancy and sent his daughter away for a self-financing professional course. It imposed a huge financial burden on him following the unanticipated economic fall. He became active in Farmers’ Relief Forum which physically resisted any move for revenue recovery action from the banks. Workers in opposite faction alleged that he mismanaged the fund along with some other workers. Whatever may have been the truth of the allegation, quality of the work done was very inferior as the dam developed cracks immediately after completion. However there was no further action in this as discussion was mainly on repairing the dam.

Under the last tenure of Mohanan, as is a common phenomenon in many other wards, in this Panchayathh also participation of people in the gramasabha became very poor in terms of quality. Number of male participants came down very drastically. By this time activities for Self-Help Groups for women had become widespread in the village and many beneficiary programs were undertaken through SHGs under the Panchayath. This increased the number of female participation considerably in the gramasabha. Reluctant husbands, normally the ‘head of the family’, sent their wives to gramasabha hoping for some benefits. There was also a
compulsion from Panchayath on SHG members to attend the gramasabhas if they wanted to avail any benefits.

Satheesh, a teashop owner in one of the village neighbourhoods where normally the gramasabha was usually held, stopped attending gramasabhas after two years. His father was a local leader of CPI (M) in that neighbourhood and he was also a sympathiser of the party. His family wanted financial assistance for constructing a house under Panchayathh housing scheme for his brother. He said that they were sure that Mohanan would not grant the assistance as they were known opponents. But he attended the meeting and participated in the discussion in the initial years.

“After a period we understood that attending the meeting is a joke as none of the decisions was implemented as per the discussions we had at the meeting. Discussion used to go one way and implementation another. Moreover, it became just a forum for distributing mere benefits which were decided beforehand by the member and his cronies. If you ask them why they do not consider us, then the simple answer is that we did not vote for them. Only fools would attend these meetings. That is why you can hardly see any men in the meeting. Now it has become a forum for women as they believe whatever those fellows say in the meetings”.

Satheesh had commented.

But the situation changed since. Satheesh’s family got a house under the scheme with the help of Mohanan. Satheesh became very close to him and changed his opinion about Mohanan. He now considers Mohanan as very helpful as his family could avail considerable help through the networks of Mohanan for the treatment of Satheesh’s mother who had to undergo major treatment in a far away metro hospital. Most interestingly, Satheesh’s father subsequently changed his politics from CPI (M) to Congress, once Mohanan returned to Congress. Now his family is very close to Congress and supports Mohanan for the help he has given his family in the hours of crisis.
Dominance of personal interests in selecting the beneficiaries to various schemes is very rampant in village. Ward member and some of the fellow workers, sometimes SHG functionaries who are also appointed on political lines, sit together, discuss and decide on the list of beneficiaries which will be passed in the *gramasabha* meetings without much protest. Sometimes the same beneficiaries, most probably close aides of the member, will be selected for a second time in the same schemes like construction of latrines. It is alleged that the amount allotted for the second time is to be shared between the member and the beneficiary. The beneficiary reciprocates by mobilising people for the political programmes to exhibit and enhance the influence of the leader.

According to Mohanan, ability of the leaders is measured by the crowd they can pull for a programme in the district or taluk headquarters attended by the state level leaders. Those who are attending the programme, taking a break from their day’s work need to be helped. Usually they rent one or two buses for the programme and fill them with people they have mobilised from the village and bring them to the meeting spot. Often they are provided a *biriyani* (locally made Arabian dish which is very popular in North Kerala districts) and sometimes money, for losing their daily wage. As he said, “*Politics is very expensive*.”

Keeping the beneficiaries as trustworthy clients for long is a very difficult job. There will be more and more demands which may be difficult to meet. People have also the options to move their loyalty between factions, leaders, and parties. So there is a widespread strategy to keep giving promises and fulfil some of them. Normally leaders like Mohanan are capable of maintaining a strong base of networks through the constant interactions and occasional assistance to those who require it. Increasing involvement in the activities of Amritananadamayi Mutt, SNDP, local temple committee, etc., are certain means to engage with the people and concretise the networks. It is not the ideology of the party that binds the relationships, but affinity with the ideology of these groups and the organisational positions within the groups that are advantageous to him in maintaining such networks. He makes sure of his
presence in all the activities of these organisations, like annual festival of the temple, charitable activities of the Mutt like distribution of benefits for poor, health camps, affairs of Ezhava community organised by SNDP etc.

He provides many facilities for these organisations in his capacity as a powerful leader from the area and a responsible person in the local Panchayathh. Organisations like SNDP and Mutt have wider organisational networks. He can use this vertical order of networks through these organisations and the people in political hierarchies to provide any help for the people in his own village as it was in the case of Satheesh’s family.

Appropriation of political power through such creation of social base has been translated into an economic base also in the case of Mohanan. In his second term in the Panchayath he entered into a small-scale hotel business in the town. He started it in a building complex a short distance away from the town centre. Reason for starting it there was related to a decision of the Panchayath to construct a new bus stand near this place. He said that it was his shrewdness that led to a decision to build the new bus stand in the proposed area and he brought some real estate people from outside the district to buy land here and construct a building. He said that he started this business in partnership with a relative. Many people in the village now consider him a new rich. But to him, this is a part of the game and this is the way people grow; politics was an uncertain field and he would not go under once he became financially influential in the village even if politically lost.

Native communities, the social base of networks and decentralisation

Domination of settler communities in the field of local politics has become complete by the time of the implementation of decentralisation programme. There is no other member from any of the native communities having representations in the local Panchayathh, except a member from Kuruma community, that too thanks to the constitutional reservation. There is no single Chetty member on the front row of new generation leaders though the community had its own leaders earlier and some of them who closely associated with the Congress Party. At present there are hardly any
leaders within the community to politically compete with the other aspirants from settler communities.

Although Chetty community failed to produce any important local leaders, adivasi Kuruman community shows a slightly different trend. Given the facilities of constitutional reservation to local Panchayath, state and central constituencies and their historically advantageous position among *adivasis* there are some instances for showing their visibility in the local politics. There is a small section of leaders from this community who control mainly the organisations associated with tribal development and tribal co-operatives. Although most of them belong to the Congress party, they are not equally competent with the settler leaders in order to formulate strategies to get access to local power structures. Though *adivasis* like Paniyans are completely out of the picture in the competition for political power, there are feeble attempts from the community on individual levels to make themselves visible in the local field of power relations, discussed later.

Relatively, better access to various social organisations in modern forms as cluster of social networks across different socio-economic categories of population at the local level, is found to have played an important role for settler communities like Christians and Ezhavas in creating strong social bases for further negotiating the field of local power relations. Instead, it seems that the breaking up of old livelihood system based on wet land cultivation and social organisations had disintegrated their common base of social interactions. Besides, their initial lag in making sense of the modern forms of social organisations and the adaptive strategies may have contributed to their lesser access to various types of social organisations.

The table that follows (table4.1) gives a rough comparison of the communities in terms of their access to various social organisations which indicates the intensity of social base of networks among the individuals belonging to different communities in the village. We can see the poor status of *adivasi* communities like Paniyann and Kattunayiakkan with minimum number of members in these organisations.

Dominant communities—Christians and Ezhavas—have members in maximum numbers of social organisations. Although in the Table, participating in religious
organisation is shown as nil for the Christians, it only means that there is no organisation for them like SNDP in the case of Ezhavas. Most of the Christians in the village are very much attached to the respective parish churches. Justifying their dominant position in the old system, among the native communities, Chettys have relatively more membership in more numbers of organisations compared to other native groups

Table 4.1. Percentage of persons aged above 15 years participating in social organisation according to social categories (in %)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>communities</th>
<th>SHGs</th>
<th>Political organisation</th>
<th>Trade unions</th>
<th>Farmers' organisation</th>
<th>Religious organisation</th>
<th>Credit co-op</th>
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<td>Kattunayakas</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Nair and Vinod (2007)

Reflecting on the intensity of changes related to decentralisation and participatory development in recent period, it may be observed that all communities in the village have members in Self-Help Groups. These SHGs are controlled either by the Panchayathh or an NGO. This is the only category of social organisation with
people belonging to all communities having access, signifying the potential of decentralisation for participatory development among the communities in the village. However, this trend is not uniform among all communities as the distribution of members in the SHGs is highly varied especially between settlers and native communities. Around 70% of the SHG members belong to settler communities. Settler leaders draw their strength mainly from the internal cohesion of their respective communities and relatively better access to different types of modern organisations

Most of the ordinary members of the settler communities are also capable of using these internal and external networks according to the situation. For instance, among the Christians, networks through the church have an important role in tracing livelihoods for the girls in some of the local families in the far away states in the country. At least three families were found in some of the neighbourhoods who send daughters to states like Punjab, Rajasthan and Andra Pradesh for working as teachers in primary and pre-primary schools. Meanwhile, close linkage with SHGs under Panchayath and various NGOs makes significant impact in their day to day livelihoods for other families in the village.

There is a strong discontent among the members of Chetty community in the village on the domination of settler leaders in their everyday lives especially after decentralisation which placed a lot of resources at the latter’s disposal. They are also equally frustrated over their inability to negotiate the external networks of power and to keep the internal organisation of the community as a useful resource in successfully dealing with the external power structures. Often such frustrations manifest in the form of public outrage in the grama sabha meetings.

Such an incident happened in one of the latest grama sabha meetings which found relatively better participation of native communities because of the implementation of National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme\textsuperscript{17}. Unlike previous grama sabhas

\textsuperscript{17} NREG scheme was started in 2007 as a flagship programme of Congress led first UPA government at centre. Local Panchayath is the nodal agency to implement the programme in the village.
this particular *gramasabha* had good attendance of Paniyans and Chettys. Chetty male members from a nearby settlement in the forest attended the meeting en-mass. Around 30 Paniyans, mainly women, participated in the meeting for the first time in the history of the *gramasabha*.

Events that took place later on in the *gramasabha* meeting proved that participation of Chetty and Paniyan community members was with a purpose. Demand of the Chetty community members in the *gramasabha* was to reconstruct a road through the forest to their settlement in good condition. Though they had raised the same demand many times before in the *gramasabha*, Panchayathh did not show any interest in the work. This refusal on the part of the Panchayathh had already created strong protest among the community members. It was in this context that they found NREG scheme a good opportunity for getting this work done. So in the present *gramasabha* they wanted to include the project under NREG scheme.

Narayanan Chetty who also belongs to the same settlement in the forest, had another personal reason for attending that meeting. Under the ongoing NREG scheme, the major work undertaken by Panchayathh was the construction of forest trench around the village boundary. There was some problem in digging the trench on the rocky portion of the forest which marked the boundary of his wn homestead. Because of the lack of sufficient depth for the trench in that portion, elephants started entering his field in the night. There was a small valley in a corner of his land with sufficient water source. A water source in a corner of his land was what attracted the elephants. Narayanan Chetty made complaints many times to Panchayath authorities, including Mohanan, with whom he had long-standing personal contact. Most of the Chetty inhabitants in the village were followers of the Congress Party and they all had voted Mohanan into power. Father of Narayanan Chetty was a leader of the Congress Party in the village who subscribed to the prestigious nationalist daily *Mathrubhumi* during the days of India’s freedom movement.

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Gramasabha meetings are entitled to take decisions on the nature and period of work. It ensures 100 working days for each family who demands. So in recent years there is a slight increase in the number of participants in the *gramasabha* meetings, especially those who belong to native communities.
When the issues were raised in the *gramasabha* (village council) meeting Mohanan was not ready to give any assurance that the road would be included under the Panchayathh scheme. Raising his issue, Narayanan Chetty complained that Mohanan was showing a lukewarm attitude to his repeated demands to solve the issue of elephants’ intrusion. Later, Narayanan Chetty admitted that he was deliberately provoking the member. This intervention irked Mohanan.

He was further provoked by a comment from Narayanan Chetty that he would personally meet the District Forest Officer in this case who was very close to Narayanan Chetty. Suddenly, Mohanan picked up a mobile phone from his pocket and told Narayanan Chetty to call the DFO whose contact number was apparently stored in the phone. All the Chetty members in the meeting were agitated over this action which was seen as Mohanan showing off his power.

Besides, Mohanan had addressed Narayan Chetty as ‘Chettyar’, which was seen as derogatory when used in that context. Normally he addressed Narayanan Chetty as Narayanan *ettan*, a kin term for elder brother, showing respect for his age. Repeated reference as *Chettyar* in a distant and derogatory manner therefore, deeply hurt the sentiments of all the Chetty community members who had assembled in the meeting. Narayanan Chetty had a reputed standing in his community in the village.

Suddenly the situation turned ugly with a Chetty member, who was under the influence of alcohol, started abusing Mohanan and describing the wrong doings of settlers in the village. Mohanan also started abusing the community members collectively from the dais. Voices were raised in such loud pitch that nobody could hear anything except some occasional abusive words. Mohanan completely forgot his responsible position in the Panchayathh as ward member. He was provoked to the extent of physically threatening the person who initiated the verbal attack on him.

An uneasy division formed between settler participants and Chetty community members in the meeting. Though Paniyans also had some problems with the ward member, they did not come out openly against him supporting Chettys. The meeting was called off by the member and he immediately left the scene angrily along with
other members and party workers. Majority of the participants, who were mainly women SHG members, became mute spectators in the meeting.

This was one of the rare situations in any of the gramasabha meetings in the village when native community members expressed their anger and discontent publicly. This incident brought to surface the underlying tensions in the native communities in negotiating the local power structures. There was a strong feeling among the Chetty community of being ignored by the settler politicians as a result of continuous neglect of their demands. This discontent increased since decentralisation as local politicians started exhibiting more power, real and symbolic, which was not there earlier.

Narayanan Chetty later explained that what happened in the gramasabha meeting was the result of the neglect shown by the local leaders including Mohanan. He admitted that they came to gramasabha on a collective understanding. They believed that they were neglected because as around 30 families in the neighbourhood belonged to Chetty and adivasi communities. Under decentralisation all other roads, those to settler neighbourhoods, have been repaired and well-maintained. He remarked:

“I know Mohanan from his childhood days. His family came to us for help when they first came to this area. I have had good relation with him and his family. I told him three-four times about our problem. He does not appreciate the seriousness of the issue. They know we are Congressmen traditionally and we won’t do anything harmful to them. There is a feeling among them that as we are Chetty, anything can be done towards us. Earlier we too had leaders in the party, but all were sidelined.”

But to Mohanan, it was a misunderstanding on the part of some of the Chetty members in that neighbourhood. He says some of them have personal grudges against him And that those people had used the opportunity. Moreover, they have an inferiority complex, he says. They also wanted to show their strength by expressing their solidarity in the meeting and get their things done. He asserted that he would
not budge an inch with all the threatening, but hoped that they would come back for a solution as they did not have a place to go.

There are efforts from community in the region to make their social organisation more cohesive through a formal organisation like the SNDP so that they will be in a more advantageous position to negotiate the political field at large. They have recently strengthened the activities of Waynad Chetty Service Society with a small office based in Sultan Bathery town and trying to bring the whole community under its banner by collecting a fixed membership fee from all. Currently Naryanan Chetty is an executive member of the organisation, representing the Chettys of the village. Strengthening the internal cohesion of the community is a priority for the organisation at present.

Besides, there is a new trend, especially among the young Chetty community members to find new networks based on religious identity. Some of the Chetty families in the village have already become activists of BJP, a right wing Hindu political party. BJP is not an influential party in the village in terms of votes and political power. But they are increasing their power nowadays through the strong networks of sakhas (physical and mental training units run by RSS)\(^\text{18}\). Children’s procession on the birth day of Lord Krishna popularly known as sreekrishna jayanthi has become an occasion for BJP to show their strength with the active participation of many Chetty families in the village. In one of the neighbourhoods, a Chetty family organised a group of Paniyan youth, some of them good singers, in the nearby ‘colony’ for singing bhajans (devotional songs) and parading them in the procession in the village town. Active participation of many Chetty families in this annual procession, not only in the village town but in the bigger towns in the region also, is becoming a symbolic means to counter the dominance of settlers. These networks are capable of providing an alternative political space for their contention and assertion of their self esteem.

\(^{18}\text{RSS (Rastriya Swayam Sevak) is a cultural organisation with many other frontal socio-political units. BJP is a political outfit of RSS. RSS activists are also very active in spiritual organisations like Amritanandamayi Mutt in the village.}\)
‘Kudumba yogam’ (family meeting in a neighbourhood), a Self-Help Group formation under Amritanandamayi Mutt in the village, is also found to be very popular among many Chetty families in the village. There are SHGs under SNDP and Church. Chetty families prefer to join the SHGs under Mutt, apart from membership in Panchayathh SHGs. Women in some of the Chetty neighbourhoods meet weekly and undertake activities under the support of the Mutt.

Madhavan Chetty’s family in Karaymabathi kunnu neighbourhood is active in organising the activities of Mutt. He is a farmer with four acres of land. One of his sons is working as a driver under Mutt. His three sons live in separate houses in the same neighbourhoods and his two brothers are also in the same neighbourhood. Women members in these families assemble in any of the house once a week, mostly on Mondays like most of the other SHGs, sing bhajans in the group prayer and discuss the activities. They get active support from the Mutt.

Madhavan Chetty’s father was an important leader of Congress Party in the village in olden days and he had been a Director Board member of the local Co-operative Bank under the party. Now his three sons are sympathisers of BJP. Though Krishnan Chetty, who is still a Congress sympathiser having connection with some of the regional leaders of the party, tried to get a job for one of his sons as a driver in the state health department, it did not succeed. This son is a taxi driver in the village and is very critical of Congress Party leaders and the developmental activities of the Panchayath. He is very critical of Mohanan also. Although his father and grandfather were workers of Congress Party, he says that he did not expect any help from the local leaders and Panchayath.

Certain networks related to their collective identity based on their traditional practices related to old livelihood system are slowly becoming resources for the community in some contexts. There are initiatives by the environmental groups in the region to respect the tradition of wet land cultivation of paddy undertaken by Chetty farmers. Most of the Chetty farmers in the area are doing cultivation organically and their agriculatural practices have been identified as environment-friendly.
There was a district level programme in Muthanga in Wayanad, attended by the national level environmentalists to honour Chetty elders who continue organic farming without getting influenced by modern practices introduced by settler communities in the area. All the speakers applauded Chetty elders for their native ecological wisdom. This is part of a larger understanding of environmental sustainability in the agricultural practices of various native communities. Most of the Chetty families, especially those who have been referred to in this study, practice organic farming in wet land cultivation. Most of the Chetty farmers in the village are found contrasting themselves with the settler farmers in terms of their rich tradition of these agrarian practices. However, these new realisations and applications are yet to provide an advantageous position for the community in negotiating the political space of decentralisation.

“Ayalkkoottam” or Self Help Group movement; Re-invention of collective action

Although the formation of ayalkkoottam (Neighbourhood group) was part of the decentralisation programme in the state, in the village the name has already come to be synonymous with the Self-Help Group (SHG) movement under state and non-state actors. In principle, ayalkkoottam has a broader meaning than Self Help Groups. It was conceived as an open space for the families in a neighbourhood as a basis of collective action for common good under the decentralisation programme. However, at present people use it to refer to all the SHGs under the state agency for poverty alleviation viz., Kudumbasree and many large NGOs engaged in micro-credit activities. Within their group meetings they refer to NGO-controlled SHG as sangom (collective). Despite people understanding that there is a difference between ayalkkottam and sangom in terms of the difference in sponsoring agencies, practically it has no relevance in their life.

The term ayalkkottam though gender-neutral, has a gender connotation by practice. In the everyday context it has been understood as a neighbourhood space for collective action by women. Although there are many SHGs for men under organisations like INFAM they do not call them ayalkkoottam. Instead they would specify that they are going for INFAM meeting. For men in the village
ayalakkoottam is a sarcastic reference and a source of sarcastic comments. Though in private at the level of households most of the men encourage their women to participate in the ayalkkoottam meetings, in public they make sarcastic comments on ayalkkoottam with a gender bias. For a question on the effectiveness of the ayalkkoottam most of the men in the village gave negative opinions and they see only conflicts among the women in SHGs.

In one sense, such male responses reflect the impact of SHG movement on the women in the village. Coincident with the economic distress that began in the late '90s, launching of self help movement under local Panchyath and various NGOs suddenly became a big hit as a number of SHGs got newly activated in the village. According to a statistics on ayalkkoottams in the village till 2004, apart from other SHGs sponsored by big and small NGOs in the region, it was in 2001 that most of the ayalkkotams were formed (Table4.2) The number came down sharply in the following years. After 2004, some of the groups ceased to exist, but as new ones got started, the total number of ayalkkoottams did not change much in effect.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>No. of ayalkoottams</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table4. 2. New SHGs started under Panchayathh over the years

Source survey (2006)

Broadly there are two categories of SHGs in the village. One category is directly under state level government agency, Kundumbasree, and the other category is under NGOs. Structurally, Kundumbasree ayalkkoottams are embedded within the Panchayathh organisation. In the Panchyat office building, there is an exclusive space set up for ayalkkoottam. There are three levels for the Kundumbasree: NHGs
headed by an IAS officer and assisted by various field level functionaries, organises *ayalkoottam* or Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs) at the grass root level, Area Development Societies (ADS) at the ward level, which is a federation of various kudumbasree units, and Community Development Societies (CDS), which are clusters of ADSs at the Panchayathh level. CDSs are registered under the Societies Act with powers to borrow on behalf of its members and re-lend among them.

In the study village there are around 25 *ayalkoottam* and the Secretary and President of these *ayalkoottam* form a ward level body (ADS). As they are represented in ADS and ADS is represented at the higher body, CDS at the Panchayathh level and the local Panchayathhh is instrumental in providing benefits and organising the activities, the wider power play of Panchayathh and its elected representatives creep into these organisations and influence the female functionaries.

On the other hand, the NGO SHGs are accountable only to the respective NGOs. Wayanad is a region with a number of NGOs claiming to be working for the upliftment of the poor especially *adivasi* communities. Sreyas Social Service Centre, Wayand Social Service Society, Hilda Trust, Wayanad Sarva Seva Mandal, and Amrithanandamayi Mutt are some of the important NGOs functioning in Wayanad. In the study village, SNDP, the community organisation of Ezhava, has been very active through the SHGs and introducing micro credit schemes. Mutt and SNDP SHGs function more or less along caste or religious lines. In the weekly meetings members perform rituals like lighting the sacred lamp and offering prayers.

Sreyas and Wayanad Social Service Society are functioning under the direct control of Church. Local office of Sreyas, which is the popular one in the village and region, are attached to the church in the locality. In Pulpalli, the area office is attached to the local Church and local priest is the director and in charge of all the units under the area office. Organisation of this NGO is divided into three levels, viz., corporate centre, based at Bathery diocese, area (*mekhala office*) offices, and units. The priest in the Pullppalli parish attends various *ayalkkoottam* meetings on demand and for requirements like annual reporting, celebrations etc.
Compared to the NGO *ayalkoottams*, Kudumbasree *ayalkoottams* have been functioning now directly under the influence of local politics. Power strife within the *ayalkoottam* organisation can reflect the tensions, conflicts and corruption in the larger politics of the Panchyat. Election to various organisational levels of local Kudumbasree has resulted in politically spirited conflicts among the women who are supported by powerful male politicians in the village. Especially in this village factional politics within Congress party is an important determining factor in the selection of representatives to ADS, CDS etc. Conflicts and reconciliation have become almost integral to the functioning of SHGs. Contrary to this, NGO *ayalkoottams* function with enough professionalism.

As a result of the over politicisation of *ayalkoottam*, there are instances of corrupt practices creeping into the functioning of ADS, CDS and *ayalkoottam*. These practices are closely linked to the political culture at large in the village. A number of young women in this area have been actively involved with the local political activities through their participation in the SHGs. They are reciprocated with more favours and responsible positions within the SHG organisation. Occasionally, some of them also get into corrupt practices in the process. One such active member, who had responsibility in Panchayathh level committee of *Kudumbasree*, was accused of distributing some application forms for price, which were supposed to have been given free of cost for the beneficiary selection. In major fraud, case that occurred during the field work period, the Panchayathh ADS chairperson and Secretary were accused of forging fake receipts for distributing gas cylinders in the *ayalkottams* under a Kudumbasree scheme. These women in the positions concerned were democratically elected candidates and representatives of political groups and their leaders. They were asked to return the amount after an enquiry by Panchyat committee as they wanted to settle the issue without giving much publicity.

NGOs like Sreyas, controlled by Church, have strong organisational hierarchy with efficient bureaucratic support. Most of the staff are handpicked by the local Priest or responsible officials in the corporate office from the local area on the basis of their
efficiency, sincerity and commitment. Office staff in the regional and corporate offices has sufficient educational qualifications. Some of them are also with good understanding of ground level problems. However their local staff is in constant touch with the ayalkoottams in various neighbourhoods. Although, most of their staff members belong to Christian community, ayalkoottam members and their local co-ordinators are from different religious backgrounds.

These ayalkottams run by NGOs are not accountable to the people. Members do not have any right to criticise their actions. Within the corporate set up in which they operate, they are only internally accountable and subjected to internal auditing. According to a local coordinator of a popular corporate NGO, Sherly, 45, who was earlier with another grass-root level organisation, they are functioning with an intention of making profits. Top management diverts these profits mostly to other ventures and activities. Ordinary members are completely unaware of these things. Meanwhile staff, except a few on the higher level, are not paid properly but are constantly overburdened with work.

“Earlier I was with a small organisation which functioned according to the no loss – no profit policy. There was no much pressure. Here they always want to achieve more and more results. We know that we can never satisfy our head at the centre. As a widow and mother or three girls I find whatever amount they give me a relief”.

Other staff members from the village who are working in the area and regional offices are not ready to share their experiences. Most of them feel that any job is a blessing in the time of distress and their job in this particular organisation symbolically provides a good status in the village.

Pattern of ayalkoottam meeting and activities they undertake are not much different across the Kudumbasree and NGO based SHGs. In their weekly meeting, held at a selected household of any of the members in alternate order, they start the session with prayer and introductory speeches by President and Secretary. Then they discuss the important issue of the weeks selected from the newspaper by one of the members who has been assigned to do it in that particular week. Then they move on to
financial issues. They take decision on the allotment of loans and then each of the members makes their weekly payments. Other economic activities like collective farming or small scale business etc are done among the members within the group. Snacks, often homemade, are distributed in the meeting. This is a more or less ritualistic and established pattern of an *ayalkoottam* meeting in both the categories.

There may be conflicts over delayed payment or in deciding the beneficiaries. Rarely these conflicts reach direct confrontation between members on issues like mismanagement of funds, corruption, mistrust etc. There were such cases reported from the Kudumbasree *ayalkoottams* in the village which appeared even in the newspapers. Male members in the households have important roles in creating such conflicts and confrontations. Though SHGs have emerged as a common space of interaction for women in the village, individual decisions by the members are in most of the cases taken at the level of households under the direction of their husbands or collective decision of the respective households. External economic and political interests are creeping into the *ayalkoottam* mainly through the households.

At present there is maximum network coverage of SHGs in the village under Panchayathh and NGOs. Most of the communities are now having the opportunity to access various NGOs in the village. As already noted, penetration of NGOs through SGHs and decentralisation have increased the horizontal level of interactions among various communities in the village.

*Table 4.3. Percentage participation of women population in the whole SHGs to total women population aged above 15 years*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>communities</th>
<th>SHGs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Settler Christianity</td>
<td>67.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Settler Hindu Ezhava</td>
<td>72.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Among the settler communities around 70% of the women members are having membership in any of the SHGs. Among the native communities, except Kuruman, all other communities have low participation of women in the SHG activities (Table 4.3). Lower participation among the Chettys compared that of the Kuruma community is mainly due to community-specific reason. In the normal situation Chetty community do not normally allow their women to go for outside work. This is mainly due to a continuity with the practice in the traditional livelihood system where Chetty women confined themselves mainly to the domestic works without directly involving in any economic activities. According to the data, number of adivasi women participating in the SHGs is very less. Though there are exclusive SHGs in the Paniyan settlements in the village they have been not yet proved viable in the functioning due to various reasons which will be discussed in the next section.

Settlers are predominant in the Kudumbasree ayalkoottam. Though SHG movement under the decentralization program became very popular and effective in the village in terms of the participation of women and organization of economic activities, participation of native communities, especially marginal adivasis, is still far below the expectation.

According to the profile of ayalkoottam in the village, 43% of Hindu Ezhavas are members and percentage of Christians comes to around 33. Total percentage of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Native communities</th>
<th>Membership (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>72.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chetty</td>
<td>45.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mullu Kuruma</td>
<td>70.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paniyans</td>
<td>23.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kattunaykas</td>
<td>18.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Nair and Vinod (2007)
settlement participation in the *ayalkoottam* comes to around 78. Among the native communities 11% of Chetty women are members of Kudumbasree *ayalkoottam*. Percentage of participation of Paniyan, Kuruma and Nayaka communities comes to 6, 11 and 3 respectively (Table 4.4).

But *ayalkoottam* has proved to be very effective for the women and their households belonging to the poor sections of settler population. Around 75% of the women in these SHGs are having land only below 50 cents. 6% of them have land between one and two acres. Those who are having land more than two acres come to only 4% of the total.

Large number of *ayalkottam* members belong to the categories of agricultural workers and marginal farmers. 81% of the total members belong to these categories. The good response that SHG movement could create in the village should be seen in the context of economic distress. In the event of a fall in actual income from agricultural products male heads in most of the families became passive without any idea of future course of action.

*Table 4.4 Participation of women in the Kudumbasree ayalkoottam according to communities*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>communities</th>
<th>SHGs (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Settler communities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christians</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu Ezhavas</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chetty</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It was in this context that SHG movement gave new openings for many families in the village. Around 90% of the members are married women and many of them started directly involving in the economic activities for the first time in their life. Many of them also started working as wage laborers in their neighborhoods through *koodipani* system. Non agricultural workers come to only about 6% of total members and the percentage of housewives comes to around 11.

**Tables 4.5 Profile of the Kudumbasree ayalkoottam members in the village**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Distribution (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mullu Kuruma</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paniyans</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kattunaykas</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Survey (2006)*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment Type</th>
<th>Distribution (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural labour</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self employment in agriculture</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonagricultural labour</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housewives</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not reported</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education levels</th>
<th>Distribution (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Literate</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper primary</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher secondary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Land holding (in cents)</th>
<th>Distribution (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-10</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-20</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Among the members in *ayalkootam* differential access to resources like land and education has ramifications in the functioning of the group. Around 50% of the members in the *ayalkootam* are having only primary education and 14% of the members are mere literates. There are 15% of women having education upto secondary or higher secondary levels. 37% of the women in the groups have upper primary level education (Table 4.5). In many SHGs it is found that women with low levels of education and no land and permanent labour become more silent. Often
women in this category face problem in paying their weekly installments in the micro credit scheme which would often invite the wrath of others. Lack of education also sometimes becomes an impediment for such women in opening up even in the women exclusive meetings. For this category of women, participation in the meeting is a ritual, though outcome of this participation is significant in their livelihoods.

Reinvention of the collective action under the leadership of women is an important effect of Self Help Group movement in the village. The collective action which they used in various forms in the construction of development infrastructure during the period of settlement formation was mainly under the leadership of men. SHG movement introduced under the local Panchayath system and the globally funded NGOs opened up a horizontal space for collective action for the women in the village. It coincided with an extreme distress period in their economic life. Collective actions they undertook include koodipani (exchange of labour), panku krishi (share cropping), production of various consumer items on the basis of their collective labour and small ventures like hotels, provisional stores, etc. Major difference between the new forms of collective action under the SHG movement compared to the old ones is the increased importance of individual interests and the role of decision making at the level of households now.

Commonly accepted result of SHG movement in the village is the enhancement of women’s capabilities in order to negotiate various power structures from Panchayath to households. Increased role in the decision making process especially related to economic activities, either in consultation with male members or in the decisions taken by male members, mainly husbands, is an important outcome of the movement. This is really a deviant practice from the previous period of economic buoyancy or even in the period of normalcy when most of the critical economic decisions were taken unilaterally by men. There are umpteen numbers of cases demonstrating the increased capability of women who came forward in order to open up and express their opinions and take initiatives in collective activities.
For male heads of the households, their women counterparts are found more effective through the collective platform like ayalkoottam in negotiating the local governance structure dominated mainly by the male politicians and bureaucrats.

There are many examples of women belonging to a backward community like Ezhava acquiring capabilities to undertake the responsibilities of the households economy and formulate strategies to shape the livelihoods of their households in the wake of decentralization and SHG movement through active negotiations. The story of Omana, 47 years old, is worth mention. Widowed, she had been a domestic help for nearly 20 years until she returned from Bangalore to the village in 2000. From then onwards she has been fully involved in the SHG movement in the village. She took active role in organizing different economic activities like share cropping, small ventures like production of packed food items, etc. She, along with her sister-in-law, borrowed goats through ayalkoottam. Another personal gain she made through membership in the SHG is a house allotted to her under a Panchyat scheme, although their family does not belong to the Below Poverty Line (BPL) population for whom this particular housing scheme was implemented. She developed strategies for negotiating the bureaucratic and political power structure at the local level after working in SHGs for six years. In this, she had the influence of Mohanan in his capacity as ward member, eventhough her family does not belong to Mohanan’s party, but to an opposition group. There was nobody in the neighborhood or SHGs to complain about this, mainly because of the ability she showed in organizing ayalkoottam activities in the locality. In the short span of time she developed the necessary skills to negotiate and convince the group members and others in agreeing to her plans to secure her livelihoods. Her life story illustrates the success of a woman belonging to a backward community in tackling and negotiating the asymmetrical field of power relations after a series of livelihood struggles.

She belongs to a migrant Ezhava family with nominal occupation of land. She is the second among five siblings and she is staying in a joint family that includes her father, mother, younger brother and his family and her own son. Her elder brother
and younger sister are married and staying separately with their own families. Her father was an agricultural labourer who is now more or less bed ridden. Her mother has been doing the job of housemaid from the days of her childhood. They occupy about one acre of land on which they do mixed cultivation. Initially they had occupied another area with smaller extent of land in another part of the village through encroachment.

Her father could not give any of the children education beyond primary level. She stopped at fourth standard.

“I got scabies on my head and my hair was cropped. I had to stop my education in the fourth standard. From then onwards I helped my parents in different works. We did different types of cultivation, like tapioca, grass, some kind of millets etc. …By the time I was seventeen years old my parents decided to get me married to a person who migrated alone from the south recently. He was a good worker and capable of doing all kinds of work. He did not demand anything as dowry. So my parents were happy. But no one knew anything about his whereabouts. I later understood that he belonged to a Scheduled Caste …Though he was caring, he used to drink heavily in the evenings after a day’s hard work. After four years he decided to migrate along with me to the hilly terrains of Karnataka state where we could get land at cheap prices. By this time we had a baby boy. So we three moved to that forest area. We worked hard to clear the forest and started some cultivation. There was nobody to help us with anything. … suddenly one day he became ill, vomiting and all. We had no facility to get immediate treatment. He died after a while. I had no idea what went wrong with him. We got some help from the local church for cremating his body and inform my relatives. My father and brother came after two days to bring us back home. We left that place leaving that soil and reached my home here…. I was completely clueless about our future. My son was six years at that time. For many days I did not come out of the room. .. Finally my mother found a job for me in the house of a priest in Bathery town. She literally sold me and my son to the priest. She got some amount for an year. Actually my life started again from that home. The priest’s wife, whom I
called chechi, gave me directions on what to do. She taught me all works in the kitchen including making important dishes. Priest offered to get my son educated in a church-managed school and he was admitted in the school hostel under the guardianship of the priest… though I was not paid much and whatever I got was passed on to my mother, the help for getting my son educated that came from this family was the most important thing in my life.”

After about four years in that house, she was sent to Bangalore in Karnataka along with the priest’s daughter who got married. She was assigned to look after the new born babies in that family. Hence she stayed in the city for about 12 years along with the family of the priest’s daughter. Her son continued his education in the Church school under the priest’s supervision. In Bangalore she could save her monthly salary as her son’s educational expenses and her own expenses were taken care of.

By 2000, she stopped working in the far away town in the neighboring state and returned to her home and became part of her joint family along with her son. By this time he had completed post-graduation and joined for teachers’ training course. But the situation at her home was very pathetic. The house was in a dilapidated condition with high chance of crumbling down. Father had become almost bedridden due to various illnesses. Mother continued working in many houses in the village on part-time basis. Her younger brother was whiling away his time with his drinking habit. She had bought an auto-rickshaw for him from her savings, but he spent everything for drinking and in playing cards. He married an orphan girl who used to do the job of a domestic help from her childhood days in Kozhikod. They have two small children. When she reached the village the entire responsibility came on her shoulders. So she decided to work for a known family in the village on a part time basis. Here she looked after an old woman whose children were away.

Soon she became active in the SHG in her neighbourhood. She could easily develop rapport with neighboring women through the ayalkoottam activities and became their leader, thanks to her ability to strategise and the relationships acquired through past experiences. She could get many benefits to individual households besides the share
of their collective activities. She pushed her sister-in-law to become a member and made her active in the ayalkoottam. They availed benefits from the schemes like distribution of goats, construction of new houses for poor etc. Besides these material benefits, she learned the ways to get things done in the system in a short span of time through her exposure to the people active in the local politics.

Though her family is sympathetic to CPI (M) it is her strategic intervention that could get her family included in the list of beneficiaries. Her brother and son were reluctant to approach the ward member, Mohanan for getting this done. She used the network of community through the SHG in which she is a member. This particular ayalkoottam consists of members in her neighbourhood who are mainly relatives and members of her own community. Most of them are Congress supporters, especially supporters of Mohanan as a leader from their community. So ayalkoottam stood behind her in getting approval from Mohanan for her application for a house. Most interestingly she got this house in the name of her son as the land was registered in his name. Meanwhile he got a temporary job in a government institution with a recommendation from her employer’s family in the village. He got this employment producing a caste certificate which states that he belongs to his father’s community and a scheduled caste. To get a house from the Panchayath in the name of her son, she however, used her own Ezhava identity.

They do not want to construct the house according to the standard plan approved by the Panchayathh. A foundation has been laid for the house with the help of an architect which is for a house double the size prescribed in the Panchayathh plan. But, till getting the last installment of the total allotment of Rs. one lakh, she plans to construct only a partial structure which will, she hopes, satisfy government norms and then Panchyath officials will not be able to make any formal objections. But she knows well that for completing the construction of the house as per her design, they require more money for which she is prepared to go to work even in a far off place. She also wants to get her son married once the house construction is completed.

Omana represents those women who have emerged in the process of SHG movement and decentralization in the village. As a widow and a female head of the
household she bears the responsibility of important decisions, though taken in consultation with her son and brother, and negotiates the external power structures.

Nature of women’s participation in *ayalkoottam* activities is also varied according to the dynamics within their households. However, participation in the *ayalkoottam* has given opportunity for women to a large extent, to interact with the power centres outside the households and thereby develop a greater capability in negotiating with the power centers within the households. In the case of Omana too, she has carved out for herself an advantageous position within her household that includes three adult male members among others, through constant and successful negotiation with these outside power centers.

Though all the women who participate in the SHGs are not in the same category of women who enjoy authority within the household, like Omana, most of them are familiar with the similar kinds of strategies adopted in the *ayalkoottam* to tap benefits for their respective households. These strategies are often extended to the levels of *gramsabha* and Panchayathh. Strategies at the level of households are on the other hand resulted from their negotiations with the extended levels of *gramsabha* and *Panchayathh* also.

**Paniyans in the domain of decentralization and participatory development**

In this section we look into the impact decentralisation and participatory development brought into the lives of *adivasis* in the village. Decentralisation is expected to play an empowering role for the communities hitherto excluded from the development process.

There is a realisation that *adivasis* like Paniyans have been excluded from the processes of decentralisation and participatory development and through it from the development space in the village mainly due to the existing asymmetry in the power relations. Even in the initial stage of the implementation of decentralisation programme, the state conceived of exclusive *adivasi* councils, *oorukoottam* (village councils) under the *gramsabha*. There are also provisions to form exclusive *ayalkoottams* for *adivsi* households.

**Oorukoottam**
Participation of *adivasis* in the *gramasabha* meetings was virtually nil in the village till recent times. Though decrease in participation is a common trend among different segments of population over the years, there was hardly any participation of Paniyans from the beginning itself. *Oorukoottam* was specially created for *adivasis* understanding their reluctance in attending the general *gramasabha* dominated by non-tribal populations and taking note of their specific livelihood issues.

*Oorukoottam* brought the local Panchayathh, tribal extension office and *adivasis* together for discussing and implementing various welfare programs for solving their livelihood issues. The responsibility to convene the `*Oorukoottam*` is with the local Tribal Extension Officer who does this in consultation with the local ward member. This meeting is supposed to discuss the problems and requirements of the households under its jurisdiction. Attendance of ward member and the extension officer is mandatory in the meeting.

Though Oorukoottam, a special *Gramasabha* exclusively for marginal people, was formed to ensure that their voices and demands are heard, many among them in the village are not still not very much aware of the importance and mode of functioning of an *Oorukoottam*. In many occasions it is convened according to the convenience of ward member and officials. There may not be a straight forward answer for the success or failures of *Oorukoottam* at this point of time. It has evoked mixed responses among the *adivasis* in the village. Many Paniyans in the village allege that there is a domination of Kuruman community over other communities in capturing the political space opened up by the process.

Decentralisation of state power among the *adivasis* through the *Oorukoottam* is associated with a major administrative step, that is the creation of semi-official positions of *tribal promoters* as the intermediary people between state department and *adivasi* communities / settlements. Tribal promoters are appointed from the *adivasis* on a temporary basis and attached to local tribal extension office in the village under the supervision of tribal extension officer (TEO). They are appointed from a list prepared by the tribal extension officer in consultation with the local
Panchayathh members. In principle educated and young committed people are to be included in the list prepared by TEO. A promoter may be responsible for one or two administrative wards in the village to inform the *adivasis* about the place and dates of *Oorukoottam*, the distribution of free rice under public distribution system, arranging treatment for those who are suffering form chronic diseases, imparting information regarding beneficiary schemes etc. Presently there are about 12 persons from different parts of the village and communities who are working as tribal promoters. However, many Paniyanns in the village are not aware of such meetings and they complain that they were often uninformed about the meetings. This is mainly due to the conflicting interests among the people with regard to the functioning of tribal promoters. These conflicting interests are partially due to the unfriendly relationship among different communities and households. Paniyann households observe a Kuruman promoter often with suspicion. Even a promoter belonging to one’s own community need not be having a good relation with other households or members in the same colony. Intra personal or household level distrust is also a major obstacle in the functioning of participatory bodies, especially with matters related to monetary benefits. Local tradition among the *adivasis* of maintaining certain social distances between communities plays a role in creating this mistrust. Proximity is minimal among the various *adivi* communities. Even now, there is hardly any occasion for them to intermingle and inter-dine.

All the successive promoters appointed in the village belonged to Kuruma community. Preparing the list of promotes now has become a political affair. Those who rule the state has now a major say in deciding the list. Given the advantageous position within the political parties, Kuruma community gets prominence (table 4.6). Lack of leadership within the community is a major disadvantage for Paniyans in getting their name included in the list. Due to this, they lack the political networking and the power to bargain.

*Table 4.6 Distribution of promoters among different communities in 2006-07*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>No of promoters</th>
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Satheesh from Thazhekaapp neighbourhood is an exceptional aspirant for the post of promoter among Paniyan community. He is 20 years old and with an ailing mother. He failed higher secondary (in Plus two class) exam and is working as an agricultural labourer. He is very helpful in the settlement and maintains good connection with tribal extension office and its officer. He is among the few young Paniyan in the village who passed secondary school. For a short period he has worked for an NGO also. According to TEO he is one of the most suitable candidates for the post of a tribal promoter among the Paniyans. Though TEO, Krishnan, who is now retired, belongs to Kuruma community he likes Satheesh for his sincerity and efficiency in work. He advised Satheesh to apply for the post of promoter. He attended an interview in the head office of tribal development in the district head quarters. Satheesh was quite confident as the TEO was familiar with him and he kept all the local politicians in good humour.

But his confidence did not help him to get in the list. The names were included according to the recommendations made by Adivasi Kshema Samithi (AKS) an adivasi outfit supported by ruling CPI(M). AKS formed in 2000 as a response to adivasi land movement led by CK Janu, a vibrant woman adivasi leader from the region. However AKS is now influential among adivasis and patronising most of the state-led development actions as they are in power. As a rule of the game it is now AKS’ turn to have the informal authority in preparing the list of tribal promoters.
Interestingly, AKS has a woman leader, Seetha Balan, in the district level from Paniyan community. Her husband is also an active member of AKS and with a government job. Seetha and Balan are belonging to an area which had a history of workers’ struggles under the Communist Party against upper caste Nair landlordism, which is far away from the study village. Father of Seetha was a communist party worker and Balan is also very active in the party activities from childhood days. However, going by the internal dynamics of AKS they don’t have much power to take individual decisions. Most of the decisions are taken strictly on the basis of the directives from the Party. In our village AKS doesn’t have any Paniyan leader, though they have many followers in the community.

Satheesh approached me as he is aware that as a researcher I have contact with some of the adivasi leaders of AKS at the district level to know about the position of the list. He did it also because I was making frequent queries about the status of the list whenever I meet him. I decided to call a leader and describe his story. After listening to the case patiently I was told that it would have been better if called them at least one month earlier before finalising the list. This was no answer for me. I expressed my helplessness to Satheesh.

Satheesh had a plan for attempting the post of promoter. He would get some amount (around Rupees thousand and five hundred) as remuneration for this part-time job. The rest of the time he would be able to study and pass the exam, he hoped. He wanted to try for a government job in long run for which he would be able to do enough preparation using the time and money from this job. He was aware that most of the Kuruma doing like this are making their way to government jobs. After losing this hope he has no other option, but to go for wage labour along with his friends in the settlement. But he keeps his optimism alive and wants to get what he aspires for—a government job.

Case of Sasi, 28 years old, a former tribal promoter from another ward of the village Panchayath, illustrates how the adivasi discontent within the democratic institutions ends up in further marginalising their position within the local arena of politics. He is also a person better educated among the local Paniyan, possessing a higher
secondary level certificate. He got inspiration in social work through his participation in a state-sponsored Bharat darshan programme (all India tour programme sponsored by the Central Government for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe students) when he was in high school. Later he also got an opportunity to attend a workshop for personality development conducted by KIRTADS in Kozhikode, a state-level research and training institute under the government department for SC and ST communities. Sasi associated with NGO activities in the village for some time.

The lone teacher among the Paniyans in the village and perhaps in the region too, is his elder brother. His father and mother were permanent workers (sthiram panikkar) with a rich Ezhava farmer. It was under his father’s inspiration that they got education. Both of them got educated in the first school in the village where they got encouragement from some of the teachers too. Though Sasi is younger, he got married earlier and has two children. He has a younger sister too. They all are now living under the same roof. His brother is trying to buy some land and construct a house independently and only then he plans to get married. Sasi is now working as an agricultural labour along with his friends within the settlement.

What went wrong with Sasi in tribal extension office was a complaint he made to the higher-ups against a housing scheme implemented by TEO. He had alleged that there was corruption involved in the construction work. ITDP officer ordered an enquiry and officer from block level investigated the issue and gave a clean chit to the officer who faced allegation. He says,

“I was a fool for failing to understand that no officer would take action against his subordinate as they all need help from each other. I had a good chance to continue in the position of tribal promoter if I was in the good books of TEO. He deliberately avoided my name from the list the next time. I became a looser for raising my voice.”

19 Integrated Tribal Development Project is the district level government agency of state department for tribal development in order to coordinate different schemes under state and central government plans. Tribal Development Blocks and Tribal Extension Offices are lower levels of the hierarchy.
According to the officer belonging to Kuruma community who showed sympathy to Satheesh, but was opposed to Sasi, he was a permanent trouble maker and so he could not propose his name for another term.

What Sasi did next was to take the decision to contest in the forthcoming Panchayathh election as an independent candidate in the history of Panchayathh and Paniyan community. He was fully confident about his work he had done when he was a promoter and while working with the NGO. His inspiration to contest in the election was mainly from the *adivasi* land movement led by C.K.Janu from 2000 onwards. It was a historic struggle led by landless *adivasis* to get rights on land for a secure livelihood and overall development. Though his family was basically sympathisers of left parties especially CPI(M), he took the independent position to contest in the election. He was strongly persuaded from different sides, including party men, his family’s employer etc to withdraw from the contest. He refused to budge, but finally, he lost the election. He could not muster many votes even from his own settlement, which came to around one hundred only. The local tradition of voting practice among the Paniyans is infamous. All parties try to buy their votes by distributing arrack, money, dress, etc., on the eve of election. Many among the Paniyan believe that it is their legitimate right to get something in return for casting a vote. Even if they politically support a party and go for their demonstrations, it doesn’t ensure their votes. In the election time there is always a competition among the political parties for securing the Paniyan votes in the village. Sometimes this leads to confrontation. However, according to a general pattern of their voting they cast their votes for the candidates from whom they get more pre-poll gifts. No political party in the village trusts Paniyan votes, but all try to buy them.

Sasi’s candidature did not make any change in the voting behaviour of Paniyan in the village. He is somewhat regretful about his candidature now. He reminiscences:

“By repeating the mistake like the one I had done against TEO, we are now becoming the victims. Our ward member does not consider my family and those families who supported me in the election in any of the beneficiary
schemes. Even they don’t put electric bulbs on the common electric posts near our houses. They do not undertake the maintenance work of this short road which goes in front of our house.”

Sasi seems to be very hesitant to go for any more confrontation with political leaders and parties. His experiences have taught him that nothing could be done without their co-operation. Even his relatives and friends in the settlement did not lend support to him as he expected. He now thinks that he might again approach the leaders of AKS for membership.

“To save our community we should use all the facilities provided by the Parties, Panchayath, and others. This is how nattukar (settlers) developed”,

He concludes.

Though Oorukootam meetings have almost become a ritual in the village, introduction of ‘tribal promoters’ as intermediaries of their livelihood requirements and the state department have a positive impact among the Paniyan. Despite of the looming mistrust among themselves and the Paniyan discontent over the domination of Kuruma and political parties in selecting the promoters, the office of TEO in the village has been identified as a place which they can depend on any time. A few of the tribal promoters are available in the office most of the time during the working hours besides other official staff. Even the office staffs are belonging to Kuruma community. Two successive Tribal Extension Officers have been from the Kuruma community.

Number of adivasis including large number of women visiting the office for different purposes has increased considerably in recent years. In contrast, village Panchayath office, which is always busy with people from all strata, is a least attractive place for most of the adivasis. Office environment in Panchayath is still completely alien to Paniyans. They are reluctant to go inside an office and tell their needs. Instead, most of them, irrespective of male or female, would stand some distance far away from the entrance without asking anything. Normally officials call them inside according to their convenience. In the tribal extension office they have people from adivasi communities. They can freely talk their dialects to each other as dialects of all
adivasi communities in the village are mutually intelligible. Besides most of the Kuruma promoters and other staff members are found sensitive to Paniyans.

**Construction/ Corruption boom**

Corruption in adivasi schemes is an age old phenomenon not only in the village, but also in the whole state. The village is one of the worst cases for the corrupt practices involved in adivasi projects. After the implementation of decentralisation programme local politicians also became party to this besides the contractors and officials. Increased role of Panchayath in the every day livelihoods of Paniyans is understood in relation with the authority of Panchayath in distributing different welfare schemes, mainly construction of new houses for the adivsi families. Major portion of annual plan fund has been directed to Panchayath for carrying out various projects. Major chunk of the fund is allocated for the construction of houses as there is a demand for it. Besides the village Panchayath, Block Panchyat and state department also allot fund for constructing houses for homeless adivasis.

In the ten years until 2007, local Panchayath has constructed 272 new houses for adivasis, besides 100 latrines. Panchayath had spent Rs. 1,18,88,969 for different projects in the same period with major portion of the fund allocation for house construction. In the 2007-08 tribal sub plan the amount allocated for house construction comes to around 35 percent of total sub-plan out lay( Table 4.7).

Construction of houses for adivasis, especially for Paniyans has become almost synonymous with corruption. This is mainly because of the lack of involvement of Paniyan in the construction process. These houses are constructed mainly by the contractors. They work almost in tandem with the ward members and Panchayathh officials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tribal sub plan ( projects)</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Total expenditure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Projects</td>
<td>Amount in Rs.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Houses</td>
<td>272</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latrine</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Goat</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Cow</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Diary development</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>House Wiring</td>
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</tr>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play ground, side wall</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Road tarring, maintenance</td>
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<td>New Roads</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irrigation canal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Panchayath document (2008)*

**Table 4.8 Tribal sub plan 2007-08**
so that they don’t spend the total amount passed for a project. Earlier there were many cases of Paniyan male members in the family who got the amount from Panchyat office spending a portion of it for liquor and leaving the rest to contractor. The houses made would be in very low quality, and nobody could use them. There are still many structural reminders of such cases in different settlements in the village. In some other cases contractor who gets the amount for construction disappeared with the money from the area for long periods.

To resist the widespread corruption in these projects, now-a-days amount is issued only in the name of a female member of the household. Panchayath issues only cheques in installments according to the progress of the work. But still contractor is in the picture and only he can complete the work. Contractor brings all the beneficiaries together to the Bank or treasury to withdraw the amount. As the amount
is issued only step by step according to the progress all the projects are with the same contractors. What is happening is compromise on the quality of the work. Contractors buy building materials including steal, wood, bricks, cement, sand etc., in bulk for cheap prices. They spend only half of the amount. Complaints are very common and frequent among Paniyans about the quality of construction.

Even though most of the families are aware of the lack of quality in the work they don’t find any alternative. If they take up the work individually they cannot manage the workers and procure the materials. Once they give their work to a contractor they don’t need to worry about any other things including verification visits of Panchayathh officials. Their lack of exposure to skilled non agricultural work, especially in construction sector is the major reason for their reluctance and inability in taking up the work individually. However, very rarely some people like has dared to take up the work, but struggle to complete it. The case of Velayudhan from Thazhekapp neighborhood is testimony to this.

Velayudhan was confident of completing the work of his house with the help of some of his friends. He has had some experience of working in the construction sector. He got the house through Oorukoottam allotted by state department through TEO. He was advised by TEO to give the work to a contractor, but Velayudhan said that he would do the work himself. Officer then did not object, but reminded him about the criteria of the Panchayathh about the plinth area. Velayudhan left some additional space attached to the original basement for constructing a latrine. This created the problem. Those who visited from the Panchyat complained to TEO about this additional space. Velayudhan was summoned to TEO and asked to give an explanation. He said that he has not made any expansion to the original basement plan of the Panchyat. What he did was to retain the space of an old latrine attached to the new basement. It had nothing to do with the new construction. TEO did not get convinced about his explanation and told him that he would visit the site. He was told to come and take the TEO to the work site. For this purpose alone Velayudhan visited the office four times. He had to wait for the officer for a long time in front of the office three times. Only the fourth time the TEO found time to accompany Velayudhan. After visiting the site, the officer advised Velayudhan to remove the
space of latrine or else he would not get the next installment on technical grounds. Though he overcame this first major obstacle by obeying the advice of the TEO, he had to continue his struggle to finish the work.

Case of Velayudhan is a rare example of a Paniyan in the village who decided to do the house construction on his own. But his experience shows the risks and difficulties in handling the official hurdles in completing the work. What he said about it was that there would be no problems if he had assigned the work to a contractor suggested by the officer. There are direct and indirect efforts consistently from the powerful nexus in the village to do everything possible to thwart any such individual or collective self reliance exhibited by the marginalized tribal people. If Paniyans don’t go through the nexus they will have to face a lot of unexpected problems in completing the work. Panchayath member and the officials have the opinion that if Paniyans are entrusted with the work, the money would reach only the liquor shops. Moreover, many among the Paniyans have a feeling that they are getting a free house even if contractors and others are grabbing a major share of the fund that should be used on their house.

There is a tradition of corruption well established in the village through the development schemes implemented by the state in the post independence period. Beneficiaries of these projects were mainly government officials and local contractors with rare exceptions. Now decentralization has extended the net of beneficiaries to local politicians and Panchayath officials. But it has also brought in partial accountability in these projects. Earlier when state departments were the sole authority in carrying out such schemes no body had any idea about the flow of money. Paniyan beneficiaries are now fully aware of the scale of corruption involved in these projects. They are helpless only because of the lack of their individual resources and capabilities to resist such corruption.

The tradition of corruption involved in the adivasi projects has been taken for granted by the general public in the village. Decentralization has increased the competition among the locally powerful to patronize these projects. Mohanan as a powerful member in the Panchayath made a claim that through his influence in the
Pachayath and politics he bargained and ensured maximum number of houses for the ‘poor’ Paniyans in his ward. This kind of enthusiasm on the part of members to provide shelter to adivasi is understood from the Paniyan experience mainly as attempts for garnering maximum commission from the deal.

People in the village often cite the example of a one time nominal contractor who has become very rich in the post-decentralization period and diversified his economic activities mainly through the nexus he has cultivated by undertaking different Panchayath projects including the construction of adivasi houses. Many instances in the village show that corrupt economy at the local level has been rooted deeply in the history of adivasi (mainly Paniyan) labour and livelihoods. This economy has a strong lineage to the manipulative strategies adopted widely by the settler farmers in the early days of migration to extract the Paniyann labour. This tradition has created a doxa of the inactiveness of Paniyann which automatically gives those who feel they are active and powerful a ‘right’ to exploitation.

**Paniyann and SHG movement**

In 2002 / 03 period after the burgeoning of ayalkootam in the village, Panchayathh took initiative to form five new SHGs exclusively for Scheduled Tribe (ST) women. Though initially ward member and CDS functionaries attended their meeting and gave some directives, all the five SHGs became almost dysfunctional in the course of time. Lack of leadership, lack of proper guidance from the Panchayathh or Kudumbasree authorities, lack of money to deposit in weekly savings etc., are the chief reasons attributed for the failure of ST SHGs. In 2008 Panchayathh again took initiatives to launch new SHGs for ST women. They formed around three new ayalkoottams exclusively for women.

But there are general ayalkoottam with nominal participation of Paniyan women in different neighborhoods. There are at least 10 ayalkoottams out of total 24 in the village with the members belonging to Paniyan community. There is only one SHG in the village having Paniyan women forming one third of the total members. The remainingnine SHGs have only nominal participation of Paniyan women(Table 4.9).
Table 4.9  Number of Paniyann members in general SHGs

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Total number of members</th>
<th>Number of Paniyan members</th>
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Survey: 2006

After the failure of initial SHGs exclusively formed for Paniyans in the village three new ayalkoottam have been formed in two neighborhoods under the responsibility of two Paniyan girls with secondary level school education. Ward member took special initiative in forming these new ones. CDS functionaries are directed to attend the weekly meetings to give them special support.

Theses three new SHGs have 15 to 20 members. Two ayalkoottam are functioning in Melekapp neighbourhood, and a third one is in Kolarattukunnu neighbourhood. All the members belonging to these three ayalkoottam share more or less the same characteristics. 90% of the members are married women and basically agricultural labourers with maximum education at the primary level. But there are also two girls in Melekkappu and Kolarattukunnu neighborhoods having secondary level education. All the ayalkoottam groups have own name and hence the two ayalkoottam in Melekkappu are named as Aathira and Pratheeksha given by ADS functionaries.

Aathria ayalkoottam has two non-Paniyan members, two girls from nearby Mundakuuttikunnu neighbourhood functioning as the Secretary and President of the group as all other members are not ready to take up the posts. Because of this reluctance of the Paniyan women in the settlement it was also ware member’s
suggestion to include two outsiders within the group. Gini and Bincy, the two non-Paniyan are teen aged girls from Christian families who are having higher secondary level education. Mothers of these girls are members of other Kudumbasree SHGs, though multiple memberships from a family are normally not allowed by rule.

Aathira ayalkoottam is the better functioning one compared to the other one. There are four aged women in the group in the age group of 60-65. Three of them are still doing wage labour. Bella, 65 years old illiterate woman, a widow, is the oldest of them all. She has with her now the family of her daughter who is with her husband and one child. Bella gets the money for her weekly installment towards the credit scheme from her monthly widow pension Rs. 130 disbursed by the state government. The amount does not reach her regularly, but two or three months together. Her son-in-law assists her to pay the amount when there is a delay in the pension. She has taken a loan for an amount Rs 1000 from the ayalkottam for his son-in-law’s visit to Sabarimala, a reputed Hindu pilgrimage centre in Kerala. This pilgrimage is somewhat expensive as the person has to travel a long distance with a lot of preparation. However this has recently become a widespread practice among the Paniyans in the village. Bella has repaid major portion of the loan. “There is a balance of Rs 305 plus its ‘palisa’ (interest). I know it all now”, she proudly explains. Using the word ‘palisa ‘is an important effect of SHG as far as an illiterate, old Paniyan woman like Bella is concerned.

Out of the total 15 members, except the two non-tribal girls, all are married. Six of them are working as wage labourers whenever they get work in and around the neighbourhood. Three other old women work occasionally and are often supported by their sons or sons-in-law in making the weekly payments. Four of them are not working as they have small children to look after. They continue in the group with the assistance of their husbands.

This ayalkoottam is more cohesive as there is no much reluctance from the members to meet weekly. Intervention of Gini and Bincy as functionaries of the group becomes helpful in coordinating the group and making sure of the attendance of all members in the meetings. Meanwhile the group Pratheeskha is having group leaders
from the same settlement. Ammini and Lakshmi are functioning as the Secretary and President of this ayalkoottam. Ammini has studied up to seventh standard and Lakshmi completed the eighth. Out of all 17 members none of the others have education beyond primary level. Some of them are illiterate also. Except for Lakshmi, all are married and agricultural workers. In the beginning there were a total of 20 members in the group.

The major problem this group is facing is the disharmony among the members. Ammini is a girl from another village who is married to a man from this settlement. Lakshmi belongs to the settlement. Between these two there are some tensions. On a meeting day we waited for Lakshmi for a long time. She did not come for the meeting but did not inform her inability to attend the meeting. Though she is not doing any work she goes to visit relatives and friends on Sundays. It became the reason for not attending the meetings. She never takes an effort to go and inform Ammini about her inability to attend the meeting. Inter-household tension is a major reason for this distance. Most of the other members are also frequent absentees in the meetings. So they fail to conduct meetings regularly.

Ammini fears to conduct the meeting without full quorum as she feels that she is not from the same settlement and most of the other members are from same settlement and elder to her. She fears that they may be offended if she makes any active intervention for their participation. Her family has an image of being a stable one with her husband having secondary level education and a sthiram pani (permanent work) and son being a regular student in the fifth standard in the town school. Her husband Balan,34 years, considers himself as more progressive than most of the other members in the settlement as his upbringing was in a village which witnessed aggressive social movement under the Communist Party. He was in his mother’s house in that village till he was 17 and reached this village after the death of his father who belonged to Melekappu neighbourhood. They have their own house here, received through Oorukootam. He got just seven cents of land from the share of his father to construct this house. He did additional works on it and made it beautiful. He constructed a latrine attached to his house and made a fence around the small area of house using different garden plants. His elder brother is staying in the nearby house
constructed under Panchayath scheme which is in a dilapidated condition. He is also under frequent treatment and his family, with two children under 15 years, depends on his wife for their livelihoods. She is also a member in Prathesskhsa *ayalkoottam*, but defaults payment and absents herself from the meetings. Ammini has a problem in taking a leadership role within the group where her elder co-sister is also a member.

There is also difference between these groups in terms of their ability in accessing the state resources allotted for *ayalkoottam* groups. Aathria ayalkoottam has accessed the revolving fund for *adivasis*, an amount of Rs 5000 through the initiatives of their non-ST functionaries Gini and Bincy. They have also benefited from the schemes like distribution of hen, goat etc. The other group did not avail any of these schemes provided by the Panchyat. Micro credit scheme is the only activity they undertake.

Major reason for this inability on the part of Pratheeksha *ayalkoottam* is the lack of information on procedure and activities of Kudumbasree organization. As the Secretary and President of the group, Ammini and Lakshmi are supposed to attend the monthly meetings of ward level organization of Kudumbasree, ADS. They said they were not informed about the meetings. Gini and Bincy are able to attend the meetings given their better access to source of information and networks belonging to settler population. They are able to submit the application forms on time and raise the demands in ADS meetings and hence, able to make available maximum benefits from both General and ST categories.

Those who are in the elected positions within ADS under the supervision of ward member are responsible to make sure that these groups are functioning properly. However, in the village they are found mostly preoccupied with their livelihood issues and get sparsely any time to spend for attending the problems within ST *ayalkoottams*. Sheeba, 26 years, with higher secondary education is the secretary of ADS in the ward. She is also responsible to look after the functioning of these two *ayalkoottams* in Melekaappu neighborhood. She belongs to a small farmer’s family with husband and two children. Husband’s father was a large scale farmer and their land was fragmented after partition. They do not have any means for livelihood other than land and cattle. They now own one and a half acres of land. She was compelled
to take up the position due to political pressure. They belong to a traditionally Congress family and her husband is an active worker supporting Mohanan and younger brother is in the opposite faction of Mohanan within the party, hence there is a tension within the family too. Sheeba and her husband work very hard to meet their ends. They are staying now in a temporary shed after shifting from their joint family household. For Sheeba, time is not enough for fulfilling the duties between *ayalkoottam* and household. She is supposed to monitor and verify the accounts of other *ayalkoottam* and report it to CDS meeting.

Similar pressure is typical to all women in the village who undertake the responsibilities of *ayalkoottam*. They take up this pressure as part of their livelihood struggles and strategies. In such a situation they face serious limitation in facilitating the functioning of Paniyans *ayalkoottam* in the local neighborhoods which do not directly bring any benefits to their living. Even Sheeba is not curious about the success of these SHGs. She would use a standard phrase in describing the situation of Paniyans that ‘*athunglau nannavathilla saare*…( sir, they wont get better in their life, sir..). Using the term “*athungalu*” to indicate Paniyan is slightly derogatory while they use *ayalkoottam pennungal* (neighbourhood women) to address the fellow members in the SHGs. Facilitative role of outside women as in the case of *Aathria ayalkottam* has been proved useful to bring the Paniyan women on track and create a savings behaviour even among the old and illiterate. However this is not being done as a service; but those girls are getting benefits from multiple membership with their mothers having memberships in other *ayalkoottams* and also getting access to the exclusive schemes for *adivasis*.

Profiles of those Paniyan women who have the membership in the general *ayalkoottam* are more or less with the similar background. All these women or their immediate relatives in the households have somewhat stable sources of livelihoods through *sthirampani* (‘permanent work’), share cropping, little patches of land, rearing of goats etc. Though their participation is only 6% of the total women members which is still marginal compared to their total population, these women
have been motivated by the concept of savings introduced into their culture through the intervention of *ayalkoottam*. They come simply to the *ayalkoottam* meetings for making a saving. Nobody has yet started participating in any production or income generating activities.

Maya and Santha from Karyampathi neighbourhood are members in the *ayalkoottam* from its beginning. Maya is married and living with her husband and two children. Her husband is a *sthirampanikkaran* and son a migrant labourer. Daughter is studying in secondary class. Maya and her husband have only primary level education. They undertake share cropping of paddy and ginger in the field of a nearby Chetty family. They belong to the few Paniyan families in the village that have relatively better and stable livelihoods based on multiple economic activities. Decision to join the *ayalkoottam* was taken collectively and she is punctual in participating in the meetings and making the weekly payments.

Santha belongs to the lone Paniyan family in the village who has occupied more than one acre of land. She is staying with her father, mother and two brothers. She is an agricultural labourer but not only working within the boundaries of their neighbourhood, but also beyond their village. She is a member of a group of contract workers from the settlement along with her brothers who get works in the neighbouring village Panchyath in the large plantations more or less on a regular basis. She has also secured better income based livelihood through *sthirampani* itself.

Even though Santha and Maya are valuable members and regular attendees in this *ayalkoottam* they are not very active in discussions and other interactions in the meeting. They have not yet completely assimilated with the group in terms of their wider economic activities and planning. They do not attach more meaning to this *ayalkoottam* than a saving purpose. This is mainly because they secure their livelihoods based on the kinship and friendship networks within the community and settlement. Moreover they are not at all accustomed to the highly formalised functioning of SHGs. They are found to be uncomfortable with the formal
procedures of the meeting. A formally structured meeting includes prayer, welcome and presidential speech, discussion on activities and documentation of accounts.

NGOs and Paniyanns

Even though NGOs in the region functions in the name of marginalised sections of people they have not yet succeeded in facilitating Paniyans, one of the most marginalised communities in the region, into the SHG movement. Many NGOs are functioning in the village with adivasis having nominal membership. They do not do anything concrete for facilitating new livelihood practices among these people. There is only one settlement in the village Panchyat, that too outside our study village, where a corporate NGO has started ayalkoottam exclusively for adivasis. This settlement was formed through the forced encroachment of a state owned coffee plantation by adivasi labourers in 2004 as an impact of the historic land movement and Muthanga firing. There are around 203 workers who were distributed land from one to two acres under the supervision of an adivasi committee.

This is the reason why this NGO selected this settlement for organising new SHGs and related social service activities like the establishment of a primary level informal school. They identified the Paniyan girl Seena with plus two level education who studied in a state-sponsored boarding school in Palakkad district and appointed her as the local coordinator. Before Seena took charge of the SHGs in the locality, Lucy, a settler woman belonging to a labour household staying nearby the settlement was in charge the groups. However, these three groups are not functioning properly due to “the lack of enthusiasm from the inmates.” But according to some of the insiders of NGO like Sherly it is very difficult to get the committed people who can really work to make a change. Most of the women who work at the grass root level are also people who struggle to meet their livelihoods. Besides this, in the overall designing of projects of a corporate NGO like this one, utmost importance is given to economic viability and suitable strategies to achieve it. The case of Seena is a classic one to illustrate the economic logic of their social action.

Father of Seena was earlier a permanent worker in the plantation. In this capacity he got 2 acres of land allotted by the adivasi committee in the settlement. Besides
Seena, he has two other children. Eldest one is a girl who is now studying for nursing in Bangalore. Sending their daughter to a distant city for doing a professional course is a completely new thing among the Paniyan community in the village. He had also sent Seena to Palakkad for her better education. Seena took science group at plus two level which unfortunately, she could not pass. The youngest one is a boy who stopped education at the 7th standard. He said that he wanted to share the economic burden of his father from the educational expenses of his sisters. So he worked in their own field and did occasional wage labour also.

For sending his daughter to Bangalore for nursing course Seena’s father had to meet a huge amount. His family had membership in one of the SHGs run by the NGO. Understanding the condition of this family corporate office directed to its regional office to provide a loan without interest and also without strict stipulation of the period of repayment. It is with this help that he could send her to Bangalore. They spent the money toward capitation fee, tuition fee, hostel fee, etc. Once she joined the course she realised the difficulty in continuing it in a completely alien environment.

Many of these nursing colleges in Bangalore are really notorious in their treatment of students which are often reported in the newspapers. Even many students in the village from settler families face difficulties in these colleges. Seena’s sister has a strong desire to come back from the college, but family is advising her to continue the education braving all difficulties. They informed the NGO about the difficulties she faces in that environment.

In the context of uncertainty on the part of the girl, the NGO became alert of the repayment of the loan they disbursed for her education. They were planning to get it reimbursed from her when she completes the course and gets a job, probably in their own organisation. It was in this occasion that Seena came back to the settlement after completing her course in Palakkad. NGO management decided to train this girl for co-ordinating their activities in the settlement. So they appointed her as their coordinator in the settlement. She is assisted by their staff from area level office in undertaking the activities. She would get a remuneration of around Rs.1500 for her
services. But according to an agreement signed by her this amount would not be passed into her hands, but accounted towards the credit of her father who took the loan through the SHG.

This is a very rare case of the direct NGO intervention that happened in Paniyan life in the village. We cannot cite any successful experiment undertaken by either small or big NGOs to change the lives of Paniyans in the village, though they have been playing an active role in creating an SHG band among the people in general in recent years.

There is a strong criticism from the left wing politicians against the mode of current functioning of NGOs in the village. For instance CPI (M) leader and ex-Panchayath President Jankan criticised them for not taking up any volunteer services for the betterment of communities like Paniyans. They are accused for looking for only the projects which bring monetary benefits to them and not focussing on the areas where they actually ought to make meaningful intervention. According to their political critics, NGOs should stop duplicating the works of Panchayath and competing with Panchayath by working parallel to it. There was a decision by Panchayath to exclude the families who are members in NGO SHGs from the network of Kudumbasree ayalkoottam which has been not successful much. The reason is mainly because of the pressure from below. Even if Panchayath takes a strong decision to omit the Kudumabasree members who are also members in NGO SHGs ward members would fear to implement it anticipating a debacle in the coming election.

**Conclusion**

In context of decentralisation in our study village both the Panchayathh and NGOs have not yet been successful in taking up a facilitative role in ensuring the participation of Paniyans in the process of enhancing their resources and capabilities. Till now, these two powerful agents of change in the local livelihoods have influence on them only as external forces. Some of the members within the community try to engage and respond to these changes purely on the basis of their internal livelihood dynamics, i.e. whether they are sthirampanikkar or not, do they own land or not, etc. For Paniyans, creation of a horizontal space of social interactions, also as a
development space, through the decentralisation of state and the increased participation of different communities in development process did not help them to get equal access to various resources, especially social networks outside the community. Visible and invisible barriers historically inherited and socially constructed and reproduced through various processes, even development interventions and functioning of organisations set up for them as well as the attitudes of leadership and functionaries in development stopped them from freely accessing these resources within highly asymmetrical fields of power relations.

Contrary to this most of the other communities have established and accessed a wide network of social relations in the context of decentralisation. A new generation of leaders from village has emerged in the process using their power to patronise various networks and using it as potential resources. Individuals have also attained the power through these networks which have been accelerated through the SHG movement, to serve their own interests and making political choices. Decentralisation and SHG movement have also started changing the conventional pattern of patron–client relationship within the political arena. Instead of maintaining a life term commitment to a leader, party, and faction within the party, people try to keep their options open to make choices. As a result vertical order of power relations in the old pattern are getting slowly changed to a horizontal one.

CHAPTER 5

RE-INVENTING PANIYANS:
LIVELIHOOD PRACTICES AT THE LOCAL AND THE GLOBAL

Introduction