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Is Left Front Victory a Long Term Consequence of People's Plan Campaign in Kerala, India?

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Abstract

Kerala celebrated 25 years of People's Plan Campaign (PPC) in 2021. The introduction of PPC was a major contribution of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), which has now metamorphosed as Left Democratic Front (LDF) in Kerala. Given the experience of LDF in promoting local democracy and decentralized planning, the introduction of PPC is hailed as a milestone in the realm of democratic decentralization. The PPC is widely regarded as a radical experiment in decentralization in India. However, studies show that Kerala's record is not up to the expectations of genuine enthusiasts of decentralization. There have also been criticisms that decentralization process is initiated from the above and is implemented with a centralized command. Though decentralization in true spirit downsizes the state and empowers grassroot level governance, in Kerala, it has empowered the state and disempowered the local governments. Decentralization initiatives through PPC has been used an instrument by LDF to obtain political patronage. Evidence from Kerala suggests that LDF has used PPC not only for social mobilization but also for political mobilization. In addition to that, by incorporating clientelist strategies, the LDF has formulated a new political mantra of 'hegemonic and non-hegemonic generative politics' into PPC to obtain patronage and thereby to capture state power. Clientelist strategies also leveraged the distribution of political patronage in favour of LDF. Under the guise of decentralization, devolution through PPC, the LDF has turned local governments into instruments

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of patronage and it has played a significant role in putting an end to the 44 year old trend of alternating power between Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) and Indian National Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF).

Highlights

- People's Plan Campaign (PPC) is considered as a Kerala Model in Decentralization.
- The introduction of PPC in Kerala in 1996 is a contribution of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) led by LDF.
- While decentralization downsizes the state and empowers local governments, the Kerala experience speaks otherwise.
- Local governments and its apparatuses have been turned into instruments of political patronage under PPC.
- The LDF has formulated a political mantra of 'hegemonic and non- hegemonic generative politics' by infusing clientelist strategies rooted in PPC to capture state power.

Keywords

decentralization, people's plan campaign, political patronage, Kerala model, clientelism, generative politics.

Introduction

Kerala, a state in India has always been an enigma and paradox in terms of its model of development as well as politics. Kerala has been celebrated as a unique development model by scholars across the world for its exemplary achievements in human development and poverty reduction despite relatively low GDP growth (Franke & Chasin, 1994; Kannan, 1995; Dreze and Sen, 1998; Ramachandran, 1998; Tharamangalam, 1998a; Tharamangalam, 1998b; George, 1999; Kannan, 2000; Dreze and Sen, 2002; Tornquist, 2002; Harris, 2003; Tharakan, 2004; Thomas, 2006; Heller, 2007; Tharamangalam, 2006a, Tharamangalam, 2006b, Gurukkal & Varier, 2018; Chathukulam & Tharamangalam, 2020; Isaac & Franke, 2021.). While the Kerala model of growth and development defied the conventional development economics, the political landscape and equations in Kerala have stumped political scientists, Western countries, Communist regimes and even Marxists across the world. On April 1, 1957, the democratic India got its first Communist government. The Communist Party of India (CPI)

¹ led by E M S Namboodiripad² became one of the first democratically elected governments coming to power in the world. While some argued that the victory was due to shift in communal balances (Fic, 1969) others attributed it to the loyal support that the Communist party enjoyed among the peasants and working class (Nossiter, 1982). Many wondered whether communism and democracy could co-exist together mainly because communists do not have a reputation of being full-fledged democrats. (Tornquist, 1991). What was more puzzling was the fact that Communism in Kerala did not begin with a revolution or storming of capital and instead, the birth of Communism in the state was rooted in mass movements that socially and politically mobilized³ and supported tenants, peasants, agrarian, and land reforms. In India and in Kerala, the Communist

Party embraced the multi-party democratic system and disowned the Marxist doctrine of ‘armed revolution’ for capturing power. The Communists also comprised on the fundamental concept of ‘class struggle’ in favour of class accommodation owing to the presence of upper caste and upper class party members among the top leadership of Communist party (Heller, 1995). Though there have been criticisms that the Communist Party of India did not play a decisive role in the freedom movement, the reality is that their role in the freedom struggle remained largely unrecognized (Ranadive, 1984) including that in Kerala. The anti-imperialist and anti-feudal struggles were very much part of the Communist Party in Kerala. The Communist movement in the state emerged from the struggle against capitalist and colonial forces during the freedom struggle. (Fic, 1969 Jeffrey, 1978, Isaac, 1986, Menon, 1992). The Communists in Kerala also fought against the social evils including untouchability and discrimination and exploitation on the grounds of caste system. After Independence, the Communist Party in Kerala continued to fight for the rights of poor tenants and landless labourers in the state. The first Communist government in Kerala even enacted and implemented tenancy reforms that in a way abolished the ‘predatory landlordism’ in the state. It has been widely accepted that the Land Reforms Act⁴ that played a pivotal role in shaping the socio-political life of Kerala over the years as the single largest contribution of Communists in Kerala⁵.

However it has to be noted that they later abandoned radical programs including land redistribution. Nevertheless, they did succeed in politically and socially mobilizing the working class and marginalized sections of the society into an ideological and political whole through their anti-feudal and anti-caste struggles. They also succeeded in aggressively unionizing workers in the informal sector (Heller, 1999). Though the first democratically elected communist government in Kerala was toppled by the Central government in Delhi due to *Vimochana Samaram*⁶

(Liberation Struggle) spearheaded by dominant political, religious and caste groups. However, within a very short span of time, the state of Kerala embraced a vibrant yet contentious democratic system governed alternatively in every five years⁷ by two coalitions: LDF and UDF. Regarding their electoral performance, the difference of vote shares between both fronts were relatively small. For instance, in 1982 assembly elections, UDF got 4,617,498 votes and LDF got 4,523,228, that is less than 100,000 votes separated them. In terms of seats won, UDF bagged 77 and LDF got 63 seats. This trend followed until 2001 assembly elections. In 2001, the UDF was able to increase the seat share and vote share as it won 99 seats and LDF only 41. But in 2006 assembly elections, LDF won 98 seats and UDF got just 42 seats. Though UDF won in 2011 assembly elections with 72 seats and formed the government, the electoral victory was in terms of a narrow margin majority. The UDF got a vote share of 45.80 per cent while LDF got 44.90 per cent. In 2016 assembly polls, LDF won 98 seats and UDF 42. In 2021, the LDF wrote a history of sorts by winning 99 seats and it was for the first time an alliance won the second consecutive term in the state since 1977 assembly elections. In the 2021 Kerala assembly elections, the LDF fought and won the elections based on the welfare initiatives and the measures undertaken to tackle the spread of Covid 19 pandemic. The LDF has always been synonymous with development and welfare-oriented governance has always been the USP of the LDF. However, a closer introspection will prove that these welfare programmes of the LDF are just a logical continuation and extension of various components of the 1996 PPC in Kerala. But none of the election analysis narratives have discussed how certain components in the PPC silently played a role in the spectacular victory of LDF in 2021. This paper looks into how LDF has turned the decentralization initiatives through PPC into instruments of political patronage and how the investment made by LDF in

decentralization and PPC in the last 25 years resulted in the spectacular victory of LDF 2021 assembly elections.

Peoples Plan Campaign and LDF

Apart from pro -peasant and pro – worker struggles, decentralization was a favourite topic for a section of the Communists. Thus, introducing the idea of PPC⁸ in 1996 was another major contribution of the LDF for the upliftment of the marginalized sections in the society⁹. The LDF launched the PPC for decentralized planning and devolution of funds. It was also the most extensive and efficient decentralization program undertaken in India (Chathukulam and John, 2002, Moolakkattu and Chathukulam, 2007, Oommen, 2007). The 1996 PPC initiated large-scale rural development and also facilitated the decentralization of powers. Poverty reduction¹⁰ in the state was a significant outcome of the PPC and the main reason for this to occur was the slew of welfare measures since 1996. It had a major impact on the quality of services rendered, especially in sectors like health, education, drinking water, sanitation, roads, energy, and housing. Over the years, political observers have noted that through the extensive involvement of LDF and CPI (M) in the PPC have helped them to tighten their grip on Kerala society and thus mobilize votes during elections. Their involvement PPC which rolled out a slew of socio-economic welfare measures have convinced the people to think that LDF means with development. It has helped the LDF and its major ally CPI (M) to woo and mobilize not only proletarians and peasants but also white-collar workers, middle class women, celebrities and ‘public intellectuals’¹¹. Under the umbrella of a slew of socio -economic programmes and measures that originated from the 1996 PPC, some 25 years ago, the LDF have endeared itself to Keralites by offering a balanced combination of growth and development along with a humanist touch. While it is generally believed that decentralization in

a way attempts to downsize the state, in the case of Kerala it has turned out as a vehicle to empower the state.

The first phase of PPC which started in 1996 was smoothly functioning till 2001 but due to various reasons it got derailed¹². It has been noted that decentralization in Kerala shows a clear hiatus between theory and practice especially when practice is taken as the reference point and contrasted with an ideal situation of devolution. Studies and research show that Kerala's record is not up to the expectations of genuine enthusiasts of decentralization. The Kerala experience also suggests the limitations of decentralization initiated from above and were implemented with centralized command (Chathukulam & John, 2003). In other words, it has been morphed into a decentralization suited to the principle of 'democratic centralism'. The LDF employed a 'hegemonic and non-hegemonic generative politics'¹³ (Williams, 2008). at the behest of PPC. EMS Namboodiripad has explained the concept of PPC as a dialectical position between the left deviation that 'nothing can be done' and right deviation of 'everything can be done', though he does not refer the 'hegemonic and non-hegemonic generative politics' (Namboodripad,1994)¹⁴. But at the same time CPI (M) the biggest ally in LDF also rejected the idea that "nothing can be done until a national revolution occurred, arguing instead that it was in and through the current conditions that a socialist democracy would be forged" and thus giving the perception that they follow a 'hegemonic and non-hegemonic generative politics'. Here, comes the significance of the 1996 PPC in Kerala and the second phase of PPC which began in 2016. If one closely looks at the electoral victory of LDF, one cannot completely reject the fact that the investment in decentralization has eventually yielded its result after 25 years. Since it is an adopted version of decentralization under the democratic centralism, the LDF

captured the local governments and its full gadgets for the vote bank politics (Srinivas, 1955) of welfare net wedded to a messianic populism¹⁵.

Decentralization Downsizes or Empowers the State?

In reality, decentralization downsizes the state and empowers the local governments¹⁶. But in the case of Kerala it is a state-controlled decentralization and therefore the state did not give the unlimited freedom for local governments in this regard. The decentralization process was engineered in Kerala in such a way that the state became the major beneficiary of the decentralization initiatives and it empowered the state and disempowered the local governments and faded their independent identity and thus captured the local governments and their apparatus¹⁷. The Kerala experience suggest that decentralization and social and political mobilization under the guise of PPC has been used by the LDF as an instrument for obtaining political patronage. Evidence from Kerala suggest that decentralization and PPC have contributed to more extensive distribution of political patronage in the state (Sadanandan, 2012). In addition to that, by employing clientelist strategies, the LDF has formulated a new political formula of 'hegemonic and non -hegemonic generative politics' to obtain patronage and thereby to capture state power. LDF has distributed patronage to enhance their political support and base at the behest of PPC. Clientelist strategies also leveraged the distribution of political patronage of LDF. Though decentralization in true spirit downsizes the state and empowers grassroot level governance, in Kerala, it has empowered the state and disempowered the local governments. Thus the LDF has turned local governments and its apparatus into

instruments of patronage and it has helped to put an end to the four-decade trend of alternating state power between the LDF and UDF.

Nevertheless, the 1996 PPC laid the formal foundations for a slew of socio-economic development and welfare projects as well as agencies and stakeholders in the state. The PPC showcased that democratic governance can be made possible through the larger and comprehensive participation of people in grassroots politics and decentralized planning. In 1996, LDF government earmarked around 30 per cent of the outlay of the Ninth Five Year Plan towards projects and programmes drawn up by the local governments. In 1997-98, the total resources thus devolved (grant-in-aid) amounted to Rs.10,250 million (US \$ 138.30 million) and in 1998-99 it was Rs.11,780 million (US \$ 158.95 million) (Heller, Thomas, 2005). In the case of devolution of financial powers in Kerala under PPC, nearly one third of the plan funds were given into the hands of local governments. Social mobilization for formulation and implementation of plans was a notable feature of the PPC (Oommen 2014, Isaac, & Franke, 2000 &2021). It opened the doors before the ordinary people to become a part of the planning process at the village level through Gram Sabha (Village Assembly) and it in a way empowered decision making at grassroots level. The PPC encouraged people to identify their own needs and problems and to formulate solutions to them through their participation in local development planning. Though the first attempts¹⁸ to decentralise power to local level democratic institutions began in 1957 in Kerala (Chathukulam, 1991), it was the 1996 PPC that made Kerala a forerunner in decentralization.

Action Research Labs for Decentralization: From Kalliasseri to Mararikulam.

The Kalliasseri Experiment was a predecessor of PPC in 1996. Kalliasseri, a Gram Panchayat in Kannur district of northern Kerala was converted into a methodological action research lab

for decentralized planning and it is from there it was scaled it up for the entire Kerala under the banner of PPC in the first phase. In the recent literature on ‘Kerala decentralization’, the case of Kalliasseri is hardly figured anywhere and all the initiatives including ‘Kalliasseri Development Society’ (KDS) has become defunct and it is the Mararikulam experiment that has brought much attention in connection with the PPC. The Mararikulam experiment is described as a logical continuation and extension of 1996 PPC. The Mararikulam experiment consists of an integrated set of projects designed to make substantial reductions in poverty in the eight villages and Aryad and Kanjikuzhy development blocks in Alappuzha, the central coastal region of Kerala over the years of 2001 to 2006. The PPC paved the way for a “democratic set up functioning at the local levels combined with high degrees of participation, mutual trust among individuals, optimism towards the future, and a willingness to deliberate, compromise, and work together” (Franke, 2002) and these features of PPC have been effectively extended into the Mararikulam experiment. The Mararikulam action research lab for decentralization was developed by T M Thomas Isaac¹⁹ when he represented the constituency from 2001 -2006. The Mararikulam experiment served as an action lab for developing additional inputs for strengthening the PPC post 1996 and these activities finally culminated into the second phase of PPC which began in 2016.

Kudumbashree and PPC

Kudumbashree was an outcome of the first phase of PPC. In 1997, a three member task force was constituted to examine the feasibility of establishing a mission for poverty eradication at state level in the context of 1996 PPC and it recommended setting up of a State Poverty Eradication Mission (SPEM)²⁰ with the primary aim to eradicate absolute poverty from Kerala. In 1997 -98 Kerala budget announced the formation of SPEM. On May 17, 1998, the then Prime

Minister of India, Atal Bihari Vajpayee officially inaugurated the SPEM. In 1999, SPEM started functioning under local self government department (LSGD), it came to be known as *Kudumbashree Mission*. Since then, it has been largely involved in the monitoring and implementation of a slew of welfare measures especially poverty eradication. Today Kudumbashree has turned not only into a grassroots network of self help groups (SHGs) but functions as a Community Based Organisation (CBO) that knows the pulse of the people living in villages in the state. With a member strength of 45 lakh members, *Kudumbashree* has evolved into a network that is closely connected to more than half of the families in the state and hence it is in a position to understand the felt needs of the community. It is this connect that members of *Kudumbashree* have with common people that prompted the government to entrust the agency with the implementation development schemes and programmes of the government and LDF government has taken maximum advantage of this grassroot network for social as well as political means and ends. In the last 20 years, *Kudumbashree* members have offered their expertise in various fields including micro-enterprises, collectives, agricultural services, rural development, palliative care and compassion initiatives and empowerment of women and marginalized sections of the society. When Covid 19 pandemic and lockdown was imposed in Kerala, the *Kudumbashree* members served as frontline workers and addressed the major challenges in terms of food security. The budget hotels of *Kudumbashree* and the community kitchens across the state played a crucial role in ensuring that no one went hungry in the midst of a deadly pandemic. The *Kudumbashree* members jointly worked with the local governments in setting up community kitchens across the state for providing food to guest workers (migrant workers are addressed as guest workers in the state), destitute and needy on time. The *Kudumbashree* members also came to the rescue when the state was experiencing a shortage in

hygiene products including sanitizers and masks as well as personal protective equipments. They were also actively involved in monitoring the health and well being of the elderly people and those placed under quarantine. From all these, it is evident that the *Kudumbashree* which was born out of 1996 PPC has evolved into a mechanism and reckoning force not only to empower women but also the state at large. *Kudumbashree* has played a crucial role in increasing the social and political mobility of women in public life. Women's empowerment and participation become a major focus of development action under the PPC in 1996 (Seema and Mukherjee, 2000) and *Kudumbashree* is the biggest example in this regard. It also offered Kerala's civil society a form of 'tutelage' (Baiocchi et al., 2008). It has brought about new forms of associationism amongst previously unorganised poorer women, but remains entirely state-facing, and hostage to local political dynamics (Williams et al., 2011).

Kudumbashree as a tool for leveraging political patronage and mobilization for LDF

Interestingly, *Kudumbashree*, though envisioned as apolitical, it is by and large a political entity and a political asset for LDF as long as it continues to be part and parcel of PPC legacy. The *Kudumbashree* can be termed as 'Made in Kerala' model but it is the brain child of LDF and since its inception it enjoyed the support of left-oriented organisations and the argument that *Kudumbashree* is not affiliated to any political party does not hold any ground. That is why even when UDF was ruling the state, *Kudumbashree* could not shed its image as a pro-left agency. The hegemony of LDF in PPC and its by-products including *Kudumbashree* has helped the CPI (M) in mobilizing and wooing people from all walks of life and helped in the distribution of political patronage.

Political mobilization and patronage within *Kudumbashree* got further strengthened when political parties, mainly LDF started to field *Kudumbashree* members in local government

elections (Devika, 2016). As women in *Kudumbashree* are closely connected to the community they live in, they remain highly popular in those circles which can in a way translate into votes. A total of 7071 members of various *Kudumbashree* units in the state won the local government elections held in 2020.²¹ That is 32.30 per cent of the 21,854 members, who were elected to panchayats, municipalities and corporations. In 2015 local government elections, 7,367 *Kudumbashree* members won elections. In 2010 local elections, 4000 *Kudumbashree* members got elected while in 2005 only 848 members got elected. The members of Kudumbashree contesting in local government elections has in a way helped the LDF to capture the local governments and cement its influence at the grassroots level. The local governments are now being converted into the functional arms of the LDF government. People in a way now see the local governments as mere implementation agency which carries out the diktats, initiatives, and welfare measures of the state government.

As a result, the mechanism has been arranged in such a way that be it any scheme or programme, even if it is launched by UDF, the credit by and large goes to the LDF and *Kudumbashree* has a great role in it. For instance, BUDS school is an initiative of *Kudumbashree* for children with special needs. Though the initiative is closely linked to the people- centered development approaches rooted in PPC, it was the UDF that launched it way back in 2004²². It all began when a survey conducted by *Kudumbashree* in Venganoor Gram Panchayat²³ revealed that within the jurisdiction of the Panchayat, there were around 72 children suffering from physical and mental disabilities living in utter despair owing to poverty. This led to the setting up of a rehabilitation centre in the Venganoor Gram Panchayat and this led to the BUDS initiative. Following the success of BUDS in Venganoor Panchayat, a total of 71 Panchayats in Kerala along with the assistance and support of *Kudumbashree* established BUDS across the state. It

has to be noted that *Kudumbashree*, which has earned the tag of a pro-left agency *was* the rallying point behind the BUDS and hence it helped the LDF to open a pathway for political patronage and mobilization. The success of BUDS proved that projects, implemented on the basis of the felt real needs of the community and LDF has been successful in tapping into this potential via BUDS and *Kudumbashree*. As a result, the UDF which eventually came up with BUDS initiative did not receive any credit for it.

Similarly, care and compassion initiatives like palliative care have also been turned into instruments of political patronage and mobilization by the LDF. Government of Kerala has a Pain and Palliative Care policy that focuses on community based homecare initiatives under the guidance of Local Self Government Department (LSGD). As a result, Gram Panchayats have also been entrusted with the task of running palliative care centres and initiatives. In 2018, the LDF government launched the *Arogyakeralam Palliative care project*. Then palliative care is also a component in *Vyomithram*²⁴ project, which was also launched by the LDF. In 2018, Kannur, a district in North Kerala, and a strong fortress of CPI (M), became the first palliative-friendly district in the state. It has been reported that the CPI (M) way back in 2015 decided to concentrate in palliate care initiatives. As a result, a palliative care movement was formed in Kannur under the banner '*Initiative for Rehabilitation and Palliative Care*' (IRPC). The IRPC has a 21-member governing body and a five-member advisory committee with the Party District Secretary of CPI (M) as the chairman to give leadership and coordinate the activities of the IRPC. Though there is nothing wrong in politicians engaging in philanthropic and charitable activities, given the political history and support enjoyed by CPI (M) in Kannur, the initiatives like IRPC has helped in capturing political patronage in favour of LDF.

Then under *Sparsham* project²⁵, Kadambur Gram Panchayat Kadambur Gram Panchayat in Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan's²⁶ constituency Dharmadam (The Hindu, January 16, 2019) has also set an example of initiating efficient palliative care.

Much before the launch of *Vyomitram* and *Sparsham* schemes, the panchayats in Kerala²⁷ have been running palliative care centres. Over the years, it has been noticed that there has been sort of migration from less developed Panchayats to more developed Panchayats, especially due to the presence of BUDS school and palliative care centres. Such migration of people has led to the emergence of “vote with their feet”²⁸ (Tibeout, 1956) syndrome in Kerala and LDF has been the biggest beneficiary in this regard. In 2019, the LDF launched *Agathirahita Keralam* (Destitute Free Kerala), which is a comprehensive expansion of the *Asraya - Destitute Identification Rehabilitation Project* launched in 2003 while UDF was in power. Schemes like these have been very helpful for LDF to obtain political patronage.

Meanwhile, if one looks at from the point of ‘broad basing concept’ (Nadkarni 1997, Nadkarni, 2020) agencies like *Kudumbashree* has helped women from ‘marginalised social groups to enter into the social, political and economic mainstream and progressively derive the same advantages from society as the groups already part of it. There have been reports that *Kudumbashree* was used for advancing narrowed political mileage. Since its inception, *Kudumbashree* have faced attacks from political parties alleging that it was a pro-left agency of LDF and demanded depoliticization of the *Kudumbashree*. In 2001, when UDF came to power, a section of leaders came up with ‘*Kudumbasangamam*’ as an alternative to *Kudumbashree*. In 2011, when UDF once again came to power they came up with *Janshree*, a sustainable development mission for people and even turned into an arm of the Congress. *Janashree* soon started staking claim for an equal space as that of *Kudumbashree*. However,

the efforts to dismantle *Kudumbashree* was met with resistance. The women wing of CPI (M) under the platform of Kudumbashree Protection Forum organised an indefinite sit-in in front of state secretariat by mobilising 1500 women every day in October 2011. Finally, the move to dismantle *Kudumbashree* failed.

LDF capturing Central Schemes including MGNREGS using Kudumbashree and Trade unions

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) is a social security scheme launched by the Government of India in 2005. In Kerala, it was launched on a pilot basis in two districts, Palakkad and Wayanad, in 2006 (Chathukulam and Gireeshan, 2007, Gulzar et al, 2017). In 2008, it was scaled up to all 14 districts in the state. The MGNREGS is implemented by the Gram Panchayats and as the implementing agency, 100 per cent of works in terms of cost are implemented through Panchayats. They are also entrusted with the task of registration of households under the scheme, issuing of job cards, allocation of work and organizing Gram Sabhas for preparation of labour budget and social auditing. In Kerala, Gram Panchayats and *Kudumbashree* work closely together in the implementation of the MGNREGS. The convergence of MGNREGS and *Kudumbashree* under the umbrella of the Local Self Government is a rational one as they complement each other's effort in poverty alleviation (Chathukulam and Thottunkel, 2010). The role of *Kudumbashree* is not limited to creating awareness about rights and entitlements under MGNREGS. The Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs)²⁹, Area Development Societies (ADS)³⁰, and Community Development Society (CDS)³¹ – the three tiers of *Kudumbashree community* network have a crucial role in the implementation of the MGNREGS. For instance, ADSs at ward levels are entrusted with the task to mobilize labourers for registration under the scheme, preparation of annual plan for the scheme and to ensure provision of amenities at work sites under the scheme. Then, Mates in

MGNREGS is selected from members of ADS. They also mobilize women in their community to demand employment and articulate their demands through NHG-ADS-CDS forums. On an average per year the expenditure incurred under MGNREGS per Gram Panchayat amounts to R.4.15 crores (US \$ 559959.50) and out of it Rs.3.15 crores (US \$ 425029.50) are distributed as wages. In 2020-21, a total of 2000 persons per Panchayat are employed under MGNREGS and out of this 1700 are women³². While a majority of centre -sponsored- welfare programmes are implemented with the joint co-operation of states and local governments, it has often been used as an instrument for obtaining political patronage at local level as in the case of LDF in Kerala. The active participation of *Kudumbashree*, which is dubbed as a pro-left agency also tricked people at the grassroot level to believe LDF has a bigger role in MGNREGS.

Trade unionism among MGNREGS workers.

For enhancing political patronage, mobilization of MGNREGS workers on trade union lines have been developed as a practice by major political parties in the state. In Kerala, MGNREGS trade unions have been formed in all 14 districts. It was the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC)³³ in Kerala, the first to launch trade union activities among the labourers employed under MGNREGS in the country even before the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), a functional arm of CPI (M) and All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) of the CPI. thought about it.(New Indian Express, March 8, 2010). Trade unions were formed to demand higher wages and more guaranteed days of work every year. A total of seven district units of Grameena Thozhilurapu Tozhilali Congress (Rural Employment Guarantee Workers Congress) have been registered with Registrar of Trade Unions However, a large chunk of MGNREGS workers became members of the 'NREGS Workers Union' which is affiliated to the CPI(M). It has been reported that nearly 60 per cent MGNREGS workers are members in the union³⁴.

The workers were of the opinion that delay in payments was one of the reasons for workers to choose unions and they preferred CPI (M) backed unions considering the Party's strong connect with working class and the role played by *Kudumbashree*. This has in a way worked in favour of LDF government to obtain political patronage and a platform for social and political mobilization.

Revival of PPC in 2016

There has been criticism that drawback in the first phase of PPC was the delay in implementation and non completion of projects in time bound manner (Jaffar, 2014 and Sharma, 2003). It has also been noted that the first phase of PPC was all about planning and not in terms of implementation. The initial phase of PPC continued until 2001 but LDF lost power and UDF formed the government. UDF renamed it as Kerala Development Programme (KDP) and as result the structure and functions of PPC remained in different forms. Under KDP, there was a move to institutionalise the PPC. Instead of campaign mode, the UDF regime with the help of bureaucratic intervention resulted in institutionalization of the planning process at panchayat level and participatory element went missing. (Jafar 2013 & 2014, & Rajesh, 2020) Till 2016, PPC remained as a passive procedure, it was like it existed but could not make much voice (Chathukulam and John, 2002 & 2003).

Meanwhile, the decentralization experience under PPC in Kerala did use local governments and its associated networks including *Kudumbashree* for strengthening the provisions of basic amenities including housing, drinking water supply, sanitation, road connectivity as well as mobilization of people and resources at grassroot level for micro level planning and development. (Bandyopadhyay, 1997; Issac and Harilal, 1997; Issac, 2001; Heller, 2001; Tharakan & Rawal, 2001; Chathukulam & John, 2002; Mohankumar, 2003; Sharma,

2003; Heller, Harilal & Chaudhuri,2007; Narayana,2007; Oommen 2007; Isaac& Franke,2021). These aspects were followed up in the Mararikulam experiment and in 2016, when LDF was voted back to power, it decided to revive PPC and thus the second phase of PPC began. It led to the launch of *Nava Kerala Karma Padhathi*, an umbrella programme under which four missions - (i) Aardram, (ii) Education Rejuvenation, (iii) Haritha Keralam and (iv) LIFE (Livelihood Inclusion and Financial Empowerment). Aardram focuses on revamping the healthcare system into a people friendly one, Education Rejuvenation attempts to modernise schools and to develop quality content for students, LIFE Mission for providing housing for the homeless and Haritha Keralam for waste management, organic farming, and water resources management.

If the first phase of PPC focused on planning, the second phase focused on execution. The subjects under these four missions fall in the domain of local governments. The four missions in a way facilitated the integration between various departments and agencies and provided the technical support to the local governments. The Government stressed on the participation of people and voluntary works in all activities carried out under these missions. To understand the role of PPC in contributing towards the electoral victory of LDF in 2021, it is important to analyse the performance of these four missions.

1. Aardram Mission

In 2016, the LDF government launched the Aardram Mission, as part of reviving the second phase of PPC in the state. One of the main objectives of the Mission was to revamp the public health system and to provide more patient-friendly out-patient services. Transforming primary health centres (PHCs) into family health centres (FHCs) in a phased manner was one among the primary objectives to make health care more accessible and affordable. PHCs and FHCs are

health care service delivery institutions of local governments. It was implemented in a phased manner from 2017-18 to 2019-20. In the first phase 170 PHCs were converted into FHCs while in the second phase 503 PHCs were transformed into FHCs. In the third phase, 212 PHCs were transformed into FHCs. Following the conversion of PHCs into FHCs, the service and working time of hospitals improved and increased.³⁵ All these FHCs work till the evening with evening OPs. All of them are equipped with laboratory facilities, pre-check counselling, non-communicable disease clinics, yoga, and wellness centres. These FHCs were of great help during Covid 19 and it had played a crucial role in bringing down the death rate in the state even when the caseload was increasing. Infrastructure worth over Rs.3,000 crores (US \$ 404.79 million) was set up in Government hospitals through the Aardram Mission, which aims at delivering patient-friendly quality healthcare services at the grassroot level. Mission covers various sectors in the healthcare delivery system of Kerala: Government Medical College Hospitals, District Hospitals, Taluk Hospitals, Primary Health Centres as well as Ayurveda and Homeopathy Hospitals. Mission Aardram aimed at creating "people friendly" health delivery system in the state. It was modelled on a need based approach that focuses on treating every patient with dignity. Specialty and super-specialty facilities were instituted at taluk and district-level hospitals under the Mission. The LDF government has invested substantially in public health systems, particularly through the Aardram Mission, which have been spearheading to further improve the facilities and services in government hospitals and health centres helped the government to handle the Covid 19 crisis. More than 5289 posts were added in government hospitals. As a result, the percentage of persons using government facilities went up from 34 per cent in the 71st round of National Sample Survey to 48 per cent in the 75th round. Even during the Nipah outbreak in 2018, (Sadanandan, 2020) Kerala took effective prevention measures and the

enhanced infrastructure, facilities and selfless service rendered by doctors and nurses and paramedical staff and all these were made possible through the efforts taken under Aardram Mission. Local governments, actively involved in public health in Kerala, made possible through the PPC played an active role in controlling the epidemic and in cushioning the impact on the poor and Aardram Mission has contributed towards this cause. Kerala Model of healthcare have by now won recognition across the globe. The foundation of this renowned model was laid mainly in 1957 by the first elected communist Government in Kerala led by E M S Namboodiripad. In 1996 on the sidelines of PPC, the management of primary and secondary public health facilities in Kerala were transferred to local governments with the objective of improving infrastructure and services offered. It in a way helped local governments and health care facilities operating at grassroot level to identify and respond to local health issues as quickly as possible (Chathukulam, 2016). Aardram Mission activities further strengthened the primary and secondary health institutions. Since its experience with the Nipah outbreak and two floods in 2018 and 2019, Kerala has strengthened its health crisis preparedness, with mechanisms for integrated surveillance, diagnosis, contact tracing, prevention, and treatment. This investment into the public sector delivery through Aardram have greatly helped Kerala successfully combat the COVID-19 outbreak.

Social mobilization which was a major component of PPC had a key role in handling the above-mentioned disasters. The same social mobilization was also key to the response of Kerala to Covid 19. The pandemic encompassed the social mobilization from health sectors to various other sectors too. It has been said that there was a “strong social contract between the people and the state, based on awareness of the population, high social capital, and trust in government”

(Sadanandan, 2020). The social mobilization thus obtained was turned into a political patronage by the LDF.

Social and Political Mobilization of ASHA Workers under LDF

Apart from doctors, nurses, and paramedical staff, it was the Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs)³⁶ who played a significant role in the response to the 2018 Nipah outbreak and the Covid 19 pandemic. ASHAs are trained female community health activists in a community. They are entrusted with giving awareness among people at grassroot level on health matters and thereby mobilizing community towards local health planning and ensuring accountability of existing health services. ASHAs act as an interface between the community and public health system. Due to the decentralized healthcare system in Kerala, ASHAs have a much bigger role when it comes to monitoring of non-communicable diseases, reduction of substance abuse and administering of palliative care in the state. ASHAs also keep a health record of the people in their community especially that of senior citizens, people with comorbidities, pregnant women, and children³⁷. Given their experience in handling the health matters of the community, more than 28,000 ASHAs served as frontline warriors to combat Covid 19 in Kerala. They were entrusted with Covid 19 data collection of every household in their community and developed a rapid trace-test and isolate strategy during the pandemic outbreak in the state.

Much like *Kudumbashree* members, ASHA workers too share a good rapport and bond with people at the grassroot level and this potential of the ASHAs were captured by the LDF through social mobilization at the behest of PPC and later through political mobilization. The tenets of

PPC have made the LDF to politically capture the potential of ASHA in engaging and mobilising communities and they have been successful in employing this as a 'hegemonic generative politics' to mobilize the masses at grassroots level. Due to their connect with the masses and popularity they enjoy; ASHA workers are even fielded as candidates in local government elections and there have been many instances where they even got elected to Gram Panchayats. At the same time in some cases the elected persons serve as ASHA and hold elected positions in local governments. However, this in a way backfired as ASHA were excluded from the right to dual income for both roles, while public school teachers and anganwadi workers who simultaneously hold positions in local governments were paid for both roles. UDF refused to make changes in favour of ASHA and LDF too was initially hesitant but in 2019, following demands and protests by ASHA workers union, the LDF changed the rules and agreed to pay ASHA for both roles. One can assume that clearly political motive and interests ahead of local governments and assembly elections were behind this decision. Then the poor wages and lack of fixed salary and absence of paid leave have been affecting ASHA workers in Kerala. Much like ASHA workers in the rest of the country, their counterparts in Kerala have long been demanding to treat them as regularized workforce. The LDF government as part of the second phase of PPC in 2016 solved this issue to an extent by providing task based incentives under Aardram Mission. Under the Mission, each ASHA worker receive Rs.500 (US \$ 6.75) per tasks. They receive these task based incentives for every immunisation for accompanying pregnant women to government hospitals for delivery, distribution of oral rehydration sachets. Such assistance to ASHAs has helped in developing a political patronage in favour of LDF.

Then in the case of Anganwadi³⁸ and ASHAs, who are the frontline workers at grassroots level have been converted into pro-left agencies and even the election manifestos ahead of the local

government polls promised a hike in the salary of these grassroots networks. Over and above the basic salary, workers are provided provident fund, maternity leave and other benefits and salary hikes for Anganwadi workers are a regular feature in LDF election manifestos. In Kerala, anganwadi workers get benefits such as pension, free medical care, and allowances for house-building, festivals, and serious disease. Observers think that since anganwadi workers are popular due to their connect with the rural masses, political parties especially LDF often field these anganwadi workers as candidates in local government elections. There have been instances where anganwadi workers were elected to panchayats and in some cases served as Gram Panchayat presidents. The tenets of PPC have made the LDF to politically capture the potential of ASHA and anganwadi workers in engaging and mobilising communities and they have been successful in employing this as another 'hegemonic generative politics' to mobilize the masses at grassroots level.

The 1996, PPC paved the way for such a political consolidation in favour of LDF. Be it Anganwadi worker, ASHA, the way they have been socially empowered over the years through PPC has helped them to gain a foothold in the society and during the present pandemic crisis they served as frontline warriors stand as a testimony for this. Meanwhile there have been criticism that although women's participation has increased both in absolute terms and as a share of the total participants, this has not been translated into influence in plan-related decision-making (Chathukulam and John, 2000, Nair, 2011, Nair and Moolakkattu, 2014) and this has paved the way for the concept of Panchayat Feminism³⁹ and it has been established that a "non-challenging "panchayat feminism" has emerged in Kerala at the Gram Panchayat level. Its features include reservation of one third of seats⁴⁰ mandatory allocation of ten percent of funds, creation of large number of SHGs, focus on women in anti-poverty programmes, creation of

Jagratha Samithis (Women's Vigilance Councils) and enhancement of the number of women in the Gram Sabha meetings. The focus of this type of 'panchayat feminism' is more on livelihood related issues without crossing the precincts of women's received domestic role, and hence there have been very little efforts to address strategic gender needs” (Chathukulam and John, 2000).

2. LIFE Mission

Life Mission promises a safe and secure house, especially for the homeless. It was one of the main highlights of the second phase of PPC. The mission had envisaged total housing for all the homeless in the state and did not only involve providing them with a roof over their heads, but a complete rehabilitation package. As of February 1, 2021, as many as 2,51,684 houses were built under the mission. The current unit cost of the house is Rs. 4 lakh (US \$ 5397.20) and it was only in Rs. 2 lakhs (US \$ 2698.60) in 2015-16. The government also has plans to construct additional 1.5 lakh new houses this year as the state moves closer to a goal of a zero-homeless Kerala.

The Life Mission is being implemented in three phases across the state. The first phase focused on completing houses that had been left unfinished under various schemes between 2000-01 and 2015-16. A total of 52,613 houses were completed out of 54,173 as of February 1, 2021. The second phase focused on building houses for families that own land. Out of the 92,213 families that had applied for government assistance, 87,819 houses have already been built. The third phase of the mission focused on building houses for landless families with the government expected to find land and build apartments.

3. Haritha Kerala Mission

The Haritha Kerala Mission is closely related to managing natural resources such as water and forests as well as solid waste management which were core components of the 1996 PPC. One of the inspirations behind this was the water harvesting units developed at Olavanna Gram Panchayat⁴¹ during the 1996–2001 PPC. It is seen that polluted, dried up, disused, silted up watercourses have been restored and revived under the Haritha Kerala mission. Since its inception, 390 km long rivers and 34289 km long streams have been revived. Their maintenance, protection, and distribution have been entrusted to various people's forum. The activities and the performance of the agencies and departments in the spectrum of hygiene, waste management, agriculture and water resources have also been coordinated with the local governing entities who extend the work to larger areas.

4. Public Education Rejuvenation Mission

The Public Education Rejuvenation Mission is a follow up of the 'People's Education Model' (*Janakeeya Vidyabhyasa Mathruka*), which was very much part of the PPC of 1996. It aimed at redefining the existing classroom learning process through various programmes brought together parents, politicians, and the public on a single platform for developing public educational institutions across the state. Regaining the public trust in government and state-aided schools was one of the major objectives and thereby providing free education to the entire student community in Kerala.

The Kerala Infrastructure and Technology for Education (KITE)⁴² was assigned the task with funding from the Kerala Infrastructure Investment Fund Board (KIIFB)⁴³. As part of the mission, a total of 42,000 classrooms for classes 8 to 12 have been equipped with laptops⁴⁴, projectors, screens and networked with school studios. Comprehensive educational reforms including upgrading 1,000 government schools to international standards was another target of

the scheme. The reforms aimed to focus on improving infrastructural facilities, but also on teaching and learning, aligning them to present-day needs by introducing Information and Communication Technology (ICT)-enabled learning and smart classrooms. The Mission has transformed the public schools into hi-tech schools, attracting more than five lakh students.

From all this one can understand the fact that, these four missions as part of the second phase of PPC and the foundations laid by the 1996 PPC have helped consolidated the public opinion and political patronage in favour of the LDF and eventually paved the way for the massive victory in 2021 assembly elections. All the four missions applied a combination of ‘hegemonic and non-hegemonic generative politics’ which weakened autonomy of local governments and also succeeded in constructing a pathway for the process of capturing the local governments by the LDF.

Clientelist Approach and PPC

The politics of developing countries are often described as “clientelist” (Wantchekon 2003, & Tornquist, 2009). Clientelist politics or in other words patron-client relations between political leaders who act as patrons and individuals and subjects as clients has become a political tool to woo the electorate. In such a scenario, public resources, and incentives as well as welfare measures are allocated to clients in exchange for political support. The LDF government in Kerala has skilfully used this ‘clientelism’ as the strategy to woo the voters since the days of 1996 PPC. The poverty reduction component in PPC paved the way for the birth of clientelist approach and LDF became master strategist for this approach. Clientelism is no longer just a fancy word for saying that people exchange votes for political favours and populist measures and today it has been converted into a political machinery to consolidate power and the LDF realized this potential and took full advantage of it. In the midst of the calamities and pandemics,

the LDF government had no other go but to offer full support to its people and thus it had to roll out welfare and populist measures in the form of food kits and hike in pensions. Though these are outcomes of a political clientelist approach, the public did not view it as political clientelism or patronage strategy but were convinced that though there may be political motives behind all these measures, it had only benefitted all sections of the society in the time of crisis. This political patronage worked in favour of the LDF this time and the main reason, though not publicly discussed is the 1996 PPC.

Food Kits and Pension

The thrust on welfare measures, including the distribution of essential grocery items or popularly known as kits⁴⁵ during the pandemic and increasing the welfare pensions have been a huge success and these pro- people measures have convinced the people to give a second chance to LDF. People preferred LDF mainly because of the material assistance provided by the government to people during the crisis; over one lakh families received free rations and over a dozen essential commodities since the lockdown was announced. On April 10, 2020, the government began distribution of the food kits and on the first day itself government managed to distribute 47,000 food kits in the state. The kits have earned the government much goodwill. Distribution of ration kits have been a huge help throughout the pandemic time especially during the lockdown.

In Kerala, social welfare schemes play a pivotal role in overall growth. Five years ago, the old age and widow pension were in the range of Rs 650 (US \$ 8.77) per month⁴⁶. It was enhanced to Rs 1,600 (21.59 US \$) in recent years and the LDF government ensured its regular disbursement. The election manifesto of LDF had promised to increase the amount to Rs 2,500⁴⁷ (US \$ 33.73). This too has paid huge electoral dividends. As per the official data, the number

of beneficiaries of different welfare schemes in the state was only 34 lakhs during the former UDF government. Now under LDF regime it has gone up to 59.95 lakh.

These welfare measures in a way helped the LDF to override the impact of scams including gold smuggling and the damage it had to endure due to the investigation by central agencies including National Investigation Agency (NIA), Customs and Enforcement Directorate (ED). The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) probe into the LIFE mission, a flagship scheme of the LDF government, the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) report on Kerala on KIIFB for having an “unconstitutional” borrowing model, deep sea fishing controversy also were a severe blow to the LDF government in the run up to the elections. But the poll results show that narrative build against the LDF government in the wake of gold smuggling and other allegations did not matter to the citizens or even if it mattered, the goodwill from welfare schemes especially kits and pension overrode those issues. The emphatic victory in the assembly elections in 2021, under the shadow of an onslaught of corruption charges and gold smuggling and other scandals which had in a way eclipsed the government’s record in office just not mattered and the UDF and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) failed to recognize the truth that the politically literate people in the state were very much aware of the political motives behind these allegations⁴⁸. The investigation by central agencies with the blessings of the central government to carry out and settle political and personal scores to capture power also did not go down well with the Keralites. With CM’s former principal secretary⁴⁹ arrested and additional private secretary interrogated in the case, the LDF initially appeared to be on a sticky wicket. But, with NIA, ED and Customs failing to crack the case even after seven months, it accorded LDF the opportunity to reinforce its accusation that the BJP- NDA government at the Centre was misusing agencies to tarnish its image. Malayali’s saw probe by multiple agencies under

the direct control of the Central government as a political witch-hunt and vendetta and found it as an insult to their collective intelligence and above all the way in the manner in which UDF and BJP were taking advantage of it even in the midst of a deadly pandemic annoyed the people to no extent. The Malayali sub nationality pride' found a saviour in LDF against the opportunistic UDF and BJP and the voters taught them a lesson through the ballot⁵⁰

Promoting and projecting social welfare schemes and programmes as a panacea for the absolute poverty was one of the concurrent themes in the 1996 PPC and programmes like food kits and welfare pensions are a logical extension and continuation of the People's Plan. So in a way the investment LDF made in democratic decentralization through PPC matured over the years and today it have helped the LDF to secure a spectacular victory in the 2021 assembly polls. In other words, be it *Kudumbashree* or the slew of welfare measures in the wake of pandemic and floods, all of these are a logical continuation and extension of 1996 PPC for democratic decentralization. For instance, poverty alleviation was one of the key components of the PPC and through free food kit distribution and hike in social welfare pensions all of these aimed at not only addressing hunger but also to reduce the afflictions of the poor and marginalized sections of the society. All these are the by – products of the valuable experiments that undertook within the Mararikulam experiment.

While many discussions and debates around the historic win of CPI (M) led LDF revolves around the 'Brand Pinarayi'⁵¹ and his welfare measures, a close introspection will prove that it is the logical continuation and extension of various components of the 1996 PPC that helped both Pinarayi and LDF in cementing the victory. Surely the investment LDF made in the democratic decentralization has bared its fruit eventually after 25 years. In other words, the

political patience⁵² of 25 years has eventually yielded its result and it is only a pure coincidence that the LDF was able to reap the benefits.

Brand Pinarayi

The credit for such a massive victory goes to the CM Pinarayi Vijayan and his leadership style especially his success as a crisis manager- be it in the time of Ockhi cyclone in 2017, two successive floods, Nipah outbreak and the Covid 19 pandemic. The state was afflicted by one crisis after the other after Pinarayi came to power in 2016. In a way, these crises helped Pinarayi shed his image as a party strongman and rebrand himself as a decisive administrator. During the floods and after the onslaught of the Covid19 pandemic, his daily press briefings endeared him to the citizens even as his critics and rivals dismissed them as an orchestrated public relations stunt. People do have different opinions of his leadership style⁵³ but these crises have made him loose the rough image he had in 2016 to that of a caring leader in 2021 to a great extent. Pinarayi is no longer just a Comrade, he is the ‘Captain’ with a strong administrative acumen which helped the LDF to sail through the unprecedented floods and the ongoing pandemic. While some viewed that conferring the epithet ‘Captain’ to Pinarayi would backfire⁵⁴ especially in a cadre-based party where the general rule is ‘party is above any individual’ such personality cult endorsements have no place⁵⁵. But the electoral victory proved that Pinarayi is not only a ‘Comrade’ but also a ‘Captain’ with strong crisis management skills. Meanwhile, political observers fear that with all the power centering on one leader – the ‘Brand Pinarayi’ would metamorphosis Pinarayi Vijayan into a cult personality with ‘Stalinist and dictatorial characteristics’ (terms used by his political opponents) needs to be seen⁵⁶. However, such apprehensions have not much life as anyone who knows the in and out of CPI (M) and its

politics knows that it is welfare and development initiatives rooted in PPC that helped Pinarayi to mould into Brand Pinarayi.

Conclusion

The foundations laid by first phase of PPC in 1996 and the second phase in 2016 have a significant role in the spectacular victory of LDF in the 2021 assembly elections in Kerala. The investment that LDF made in decentralization through PPC has eventually yielded the full result after 25 years. The decentralization experience in Kerala was operated within a controlled framework in which the state government became the major beneficiary while grassroots agencies including local governments turned into implementing agencies as per the whims and fancies of those in the power at the state level. Through PPC, the LDF, under the guise of social engineering tried to politically mobilize the various facets and apparatus of local governments. Even components of PPC like *Kudumbashree*, has been politically mobilized and captured by the LDF. Earlier, the adversarial politics embedded with class struggles made the LDF dearer to the masses and sustained electoral dominance by adopting ‘hegemonic’ position. Today political engineering with humanist touch under the guise of democratic decentralization helped LDF to capture not only the institutions but also the conscience of the people. Thus the PPC had in a way been used as a tool for political mobilization and by adding welfare measures as well as philanthropic and humanist approach into it, the present LDF regime has eventually converted it as a political strategy and has now been transformed into a sort of ‘vote-bank politics’ by giving a perception that they follow a ‘hegemonic and ‘non - hegemonic generative politics.

It is the very political mobilization of various agencies and institutions at grassroot level in the name of welfare politics helped the LDF government to contain the Nipah outbreak, the great floods of 2018 and 2019 and partially the Covid 19 pandemic. The effective crisis engineering showcased during each crisis are directly and indirectly rooted in PPC. Be it distribution of free food kits or hike in welfare and service pensions, all these socio- economic welfare measures offered by the LDF government are the off springs of the PPC in Kerala. The pertinent question is whether the People’s Planning experience in Kerala can be considered as an alternative democratic paradigm between a dialectical position of ‘nothing can be done’ and ‘everything can be done’ as hypothesised by EMS Namboodiripad and a ‘hegemonic and non -hegemonic generative politics’ by Williams.

¹ The Malabar Congress party where the Communists had an upper hand led to the formation of the Communist movement through legendary figures like P Krishna Pillai, AK Gopalan and EMS.

² Elamkulam Manakkal Sankaran Namboodiripad, popularly EMS, was an Indian communist politician and theorist, who served as the first Chief Minister of Kerala in 1957–59 and then again in 1967–69. He was the main architecture and the Chairperson of the High Level Guidance Council of the PPC .

³ Social mobilization with caste reform movements and peasant uprisings in the 1920s and 1940s crystallized into a lower class movement under the organizational umbrella of the Communist Party which captured power in 1957.

⁴ The Kerala Land Reform Act, 1963, came into force only in 1970 after it was incorporated in the Ninth Schedule in order to escape legal challenges in the courts.

⁵ The Communists hailed as so-called champions of land reforms of 50s have turned into the foes of reforms. Moreover, they have begun to undo whatever ‘progressive’ aspects were left behind by offering thousands of acres of lands to Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and by refusing to takeover thousands of acres of lands lying with big corporate houses.

⁶ Liberation Struggle also known as *Vimochana Samaram* (1958–59) was a Communist backlash against the first elected state government in Kerala, India, which was led by E. M. S of the Communist Party of India. Organised

opposition to the state government was spearheaded by the Catholic Church in Kerala, the Nair Service Society, and Indian National Congress.

⁷ A four decade old trend which was broken in the 2021 assembly elections when LDF was voted to power for a second consecutive term. When the entire country voted against the Congress in the post-Emergency election of March 1977, the people of Kerala, stood by the Congress. The result was that the Congress and its partners bagged all the 20 parliamentary seats. The 1977 Assembly election also produced similar result. The Congress-led front under the leadership of K Karunakaran bagged 111 of the total 140 Assembly seats. It was in 1977, the only time an incumbent government in Kerala won the people's mandate to remain in power. In 1977, the Congress front government was led by CPI's Achutha Menon. Though the front returned to power in the polls held after Emergency, it was Karunakaran who headed the government. A serious comparative analysis of the results of the post emergency elections of March 1977(both parliamentary and assembly) in Kerala and the 2021 assembly elections is desired. In post emergency elections of March 1977, the voting behaviour of the people from Kerala was entirely different from rest of the country. The voting behaviour of the people from Kerala had not been properly analysed and convincing political explanations were not available. In both the periods, the people of Kerala could assess only the performance of the 'governments' and not the 'governance'. The larger issue of 'governance' was never a serious agenda of the majority of the people from Kerala while exercising their franchise. During the post emergency elections, only the performance of the 'government' by Achutha Menon (1969-1977), the first term was from November 1, 1969, to August 1, 1970, and second from October 4, 1970 to March 23, 1977) was assessed and voted for the incumbency government with 20 Parliamentary seats out of 20 and 103 Assembly seats out of 140. The same trend was repeated during the 2021 Assembly elections and the performance of 'government' by Pinarayi was assessed and based on it, the incumbency government was re-elected. Our argument is that in both the periods the performance of 'governance' was not seriously taken into consideration. Of course, the concept and operational issues of 'government' and 'governance' can be considered highly problematic (Christian, 2018). An average voter from Kerala might have failed to distinguish between the government and governance. Since the focus of the study is different no further attempt is made here in that direction.

⁸ The People's Plan Campaign launched in Kerala was one of the first decisions by the then LDF government. It was decided that around 30 % of the plan budget of the state would be earmarked for expenditure by the local governments at the village, block, and district levels, as decided by them. It was also decided to cover the urban

local governments (municipalities and corporations). People's needs were to be assessed through meetings of the Gram Sabha / Ward Sabhas with the village panchayats/ municipalities and corporations making it into a plan, coordinated and vetted at the block level and approved at the district level by a district planning committee (DPC) constituted to assist the panchayats. This was the 'People's Campaign for Ninth Plan', popularly known as 'People's Planning' (*Janakeeya Aasoothranam*).

⁹ Before launching the PPC there was serious discussion on a document prepared by Isaac and Sreedharan and placed it on the CPI(M) platform for a theoretical debate which argues for a specific development policy situation in Kerala. The search for a participatory democratic organizational framework for the development of production and service sectors were also there in the agenda (Isaac and Sreedharan,1992).

¹⁰ The physical achievements of the first two years of decentralised planning are however impressive. In the first two years from 1997 to 1999, 98,494 houses were built, 240,307 sanitary latrines were constructed, 50,162 wells dug, 17,489 public taps provided and 16,563 ponds cleaned. A total of 2,800,179 individual beneficiaries received support from the plan for seedlings and fertilisers. And the 8,000 km of roads that were built far surpassed past achievements (See Isaac, 2001).

¹¹ It is alleged that majority of the celebrities from cultural industry and other public spheres became supporters of the LDF by receiving different species of state and parastate patronages.

¹² Despite the successful implementation of PPC, the LDF failed in the 2001 assembly elections. The fiscal crisis of the state government overshadowed the achievements of the PPC. The failure in 2001 assembly elections led to various arguments and counter-arguments on the nature of PPC which became a central theme of debate in the inner party strife within the CPI (M). Many even in the LDF believed that the PPC was a political failure in the sense that it failed to change the correlation of popular forces in the state, Also see, Issac& Franke, 2021).

¹³ Though Williams places the politics of CPI (M) in a counter-hegemonic generative framework, the authors strongly argues that CPI (M) uses a combination of hegemonic and non-hegemonic generative politics in Kerala. Hence we adapted the term 'non-hegemonic' instead of counter-hegemonic.

¹⁴ EMS made a Marxist interpretation of PPC in the context of a controversy within the CPI (M) regarding its ideological position during the formulation and designing prior to the official launch of PPC in 1996.

¹⁵ Messianic popularism is used by Heller to characterize the politics of pandemic responses of Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonro and Narendra Modi. Also see Heller (2021).

¹⁶ Bennett says the relative emphasis on government or market forces provides the background of decentralization (Bennett ,1990).

¹⁷ Rajasekhar et al., argue that the concept of elite capture and its impacts on decentralized governance are not new (Rajasekhar et al,2018). There are discussions on capture of local governments by elites, vested interested groups (Bardhan and Mookherjee,2000) and bureaucrats (Harilal,2013). Babu's thesis on state capture of urban local governments in Karnataka is another type of capture and his narrative is from Bengaluru Corporation which is locally known as BBMP (Babu,2016).

¹⁸ The sustained engagement of civil society organisations like Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP), also known as the people's science movement, played a crucial role in popularizing the debate on decentralisation. The wide-spread network in the state took the lead in the preparatory works and promoted people's participation through 'seminars and camps, working as resource persons, drawing up projects and development reports, organising training programmes and the publication of a large number of books, manuals, and guidelines' (Kannan, 2000; Rajesh, 2020).

¹⁹ T M Thomas Isaac is a retired Professor from Centre for Development Studies (CDS), Kerala and an economist, who served as the Minister for Finance for the state of Kerala from 2006 to 2011 and 2016 to 2021. He is also a central committee member of the CPI (M). During his tenure as a member of the Kerala State Planning Board, he was one of the key architectures of the PPC.

²⁰ SPEM was registered under the Travancore-Cochin Literary, Scientific and Charitable Societies Act of 1955.

²¹ Malayala Manorama, December 20,2020. The same inputs were furnished by Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA), Kerala, India.

²² It was launched by the UDF government on August 16, 2004, and it was inaugurated by the then Chief Minister A K Antony.

²³ Venganoor is an agricultural village, located 15 kms from the Thiruvanthapuram, State Capital. Venganoor, known all over the world as the birth place of Ayyankali, a social revolutionary and champion of the cause of the oppressed, has ever remained and under developed village.

²⁴ Kerala Social Security Mission is implementing the *Vayomithram* project which provides health care and support to elderly above the age of 65 years residing at Corporation/Municipal Areas in the State. The *Vayomithram* project mainly provides free medicines through mobile clinics, palliative care, and help desk to the old age. The project implemented as a joint initiative to LSGD in the area. (Municipality/Corporation).

²⁵ The *Sparsham* project envisages offering palliative services to people with serious illnesses in the constituency under the respective local government. The project was started in October 2019.

²⁶ Pinarayi Vijayan is an Indian politician who is the current Chief Minister of Kerala. A member of the Politburo of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), he is the longest-serving secretary of the Kerala State Committee of the CPI(M) (1998 to 2015). He also served in the government of Kerala as Minister of Electric Power and Co-operatives from 1996 to 1998. Vijayan won a seat in the May 2016 Kerala Legislative Assembly election as the CPI(M) candidate for Dharmadam constituency and was selected as the leader of the Left Democratic Front (LDF) and became the 12th Chief Minister of Kerala. He is the first chief minister from Kerala to be re-elected after completing a full term (five years) in office.

²⁷For example, a palliative care programme was started in Marangattupally Gram Panchayat, Kottayam, Kerala in December 2009 under the auspices of National Rural Health Mission.

²⁸ Legal scholar Ilya Somin has described foot voting as "a tool for enhancing political freedom: the ability of the people to choose the political regime under which they wish to live. During the fieldwork conducted by authors in the pre-pandemic era in the districts in North Kerala, there were evidence to cite such migrations to better served Panchayats in search of affordable service delivery in the domain of BUDS schools, palliative care and other similar services.

²⁹ The NHG functions as a sub-set of the Gram Sabha (i.e., a village assembly of voters at the ward level).

³⁰ The ADS at the ward level coordinates with the Gram Sabha and the elected ward member

³¹ At the local government level, the Executive Committee of the CDS also comprises of representatives from the elected Gram Panchayat (GP) council.

³² Government of India, MIS, MGNREGS, Department of Rural Development.

³³ INTUC is a trade union ideologically aligned with the Congress party.

³⁴ One of the authors interviewed Mr. S Rajendran, the State Secretary of the 'NREGS Workers Union' on June 12, 2021. It is reported that no concrete discussion has been taken whether it should be affiliated to Kerala State Karshaka Thzhilali Union (KSKTU) or CITU. KSKTU is one of the oldest organizations of the agriculture workers in Kerala which is organizationally under the CPI(M). Also see, George, 1992.

³⁵ The authors interacted with health workers at the various FHCs functioning in the state on January 7, 8 and 9, 2021. Even before the onset of pandemic, during the visits to FHCs, the authors were impressed with the upgraded facilities in FHCs across the state.

³⁶ ASHA was one of the key components of the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) .

³⁷ The authors had conducted two focus group discussions (FGDs) among the ASHA on April 27 and 28, 2021. Covid Protocol was observed during the FGDs.

³⁸ Anganwadis provide supplementary nutrition, pre-school education, health and nutrition guidance, immunisation, health check-ups and referral services to 88 million beneficiaries--children below the age of six, and pregnant and lactating women. The centres operate under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) programme, launched in 1975 to combat malnutrition.

³⁹ The concept of Panchayat Feminism in Kerala has been developed by Chathukulam and John, two decentralisation activists based at Kottayam, Kerala, India. The reference to gender issues in the decentralized planning in Kerala has not led to a reprioritization needs from that perspective or effect a spread effect of these ideas on the political parties and the society in general.

⁴⁰ At present, the reservation of women for membership and positions are fixed at 50 per cent.

⁴¹ A major achievement in providing drinking water has been through scaling up the 'Olavana model' and the Panchayat is located near the city of Kozhikode.

⁴² Kerala Infrastructure and Technology for Education (KITE), formerly IT@School Project, was formed in 2001-02 to fuel ICT enabled education in the schools in the State. IT@School was formed in 2001, as a Project under General Education Department, to inculcate IT activities in Higher School sections in the State.

⁴³ KIIFB is a statutory body constituted by the 'Kerala Infrastructure Investment Fund Act, 1999' (Act 4 of 2000). Kerala Infrastructure Investment Fund Board (KIIFB). The aim is to mobilize funds for infrastructure development from outside the state revenue.

⁴⁴ The authors of this paper visited five government schools each in 14 districts on a random basis before the outbreak of Covid 19. All 16,030 public schools in the state are now equipped with 1,19,055 laptops, 69,944 multimedia projectors, 23,098 projector screens, 4,545 LED TVs, 4,578 DSLR cameras, 4,720 Full HD webcams and 4,611 multi-function printers along with high-speed, broadband internet connectivity to 12,678 schools.

⁴⁵ The food kit distribution started by the LDF Government when Covid outbreak began in March 2020 has been continuing as the second wave of the virus wreaks havoc. The kits, containing essential groceries that a family would require for a month, were made available to all ration cardholders. From rice, pulses, oil to masalas and soaps, the food kit with 17 items were well received in many parts of the state. The food kit with 17 essentials contains: 1 kg sugar; 250 g tea powder; 1 kg salt; 1 kg green gram; 1 kg bengal gram; 250 g dal; half litre coconut oil; 1 litre sunflower oil; 2 kg whole-wheat flour; 1 kg rava; 1 kg black gram; 100 g chilly powder; 100 g coriander powder; 100 g turmeric powder; 100 g fenugreek; 100 g mustard; and soap (two nos).

⁴⁶ The comment from the Human Development Report, Kerala, 2005 may give a clear status of the pension schemes until the commencement of LDF Government (2016-21). “The problem of poverty, especially income poverty, has been partly tackled by income transfer to specific vulnerable groups. And one of the long-standing schemes is the provision of old age pension to the poor. However, this scheme requires considerable strengthening. The monthly pension (Rs.110 of which Rs.75 is provided by the Central government under the National Social Assistance Programme) is too meagre and works out to less than 30 per cent of the per capita income required to cross the poverty line. Much of the social security content of the old age pension for the poor is robbed of its worth when such pensions are distributed once in six or eight months as is the case in Kerala. Given the fact these poor people have no voice or representation there is no one to champion their cause. The State has a duty to ensure that the monthly pensions and similar transfer payments to the poor are paid on a regular basis without running into arrears.” See page no.162, paragraph 2.5, Human Development Report, Kerala, 2005.

⁴⁷ LDF Manifesto, 2021.

⁴⁸ The authors of this paper interacted with people (the total number is 130) from all walks of life on October 7, 8, 9, 10, 2020 and majority (61%) were of the opinion that despite the seriousness of the case, the real motive of BJP or the Congress is purely political and not ensuring justice.

⁴⁹ The seizure of gold allegedly smuggled through diplomatic channel in Thiruvananthapuram airport had put the government in a fix in early 2020, largely due to the alleged involvement of senior bureaucrat M. Shivashankar, the then Principal Secretary to the Chief Minister. In addition to that, a slew of charges were raised by the Opposition, ranging from backdoor appointments to a now-annulled pact with EMCC, a U.S. firm pertaining to fishing in the deep seas. But the CPI (M) has sidestepped the allegations and focused on development initiatives and welfare measures, which, it believes, made it stand in a good stead this time.

⁵⁰ The Malayali sub nationality pride was very clearly manifested when the authors held discussions with a cross section of the voters from all walks of life (interviewed 300 persons) on February 11, 12, 13 and 14, 2021. Along with other factors, ‘the Bengali sub nationality pride’ also had benefited Mamatha Banerjee Government in West Bengal to retain state power in 2021 assembly elections.

⁵¹ While considering the importance of ‘Brand Pinarayi’, we have included a separate sub section on it.

⁵² While discussing the overall performance of PPC between the first author and Patrick Heller the ‘politics of patience’ was introduced by Heller in 2014 at New Delhi.

⁵³ One of the authors of this paper interviewed activist and writer C R Neelakandan on May 5, 2021. Neelakandan said that the way CM Pinarayi handled the crisis that have been plaguing the state one after the other after he came to power has convinced the people that he is the saviour whom they can rely on be it in the time of floods or in the time of pandemic. Many including middle class women had reported that they used to change and rearrange their daily routine of activities in such a way to listen to the daily press briefing of the CM Pinarayi. The main intension behind this was to get a fresh information and narrative on the statistics of Covid 19. These findings were made after a series of interviews and focus group discussions conducted among the middle-class women during the pre - election period (January 28 ,29 and 30,2021).

⁵⁴ This came in for sharp criticism within the party and soon the CPI(M) leadership cried a halt to it.

⁵⁵ The People’s Democracy, the mouth piece of CPI(M) also could realize the implications and therefore it restrains the party members and sympathisers by the editorial on May 09, 2021. It says, “There is an effort by certain sections of the media and some political commentators to reduce this historic victory solely to the personality and role of Pinarayi Vijayan. According to them, it is the emergence of a “supreme leader” or “strong man” that was the main reason for the electoral success of the LDF. They claimed that one man dominates the government and Party”.

⁵⁶ The ‘Stalin cult’ is very prevalent among a section of the CPI(M) members and supporters. There are many empirical evidence to argue that ‘Stalinistic traits are still alive in Kerala’ and it has to be discussed in the context of contemporary Marxian literature and left movement all over the world. Recently, the Students Federation of India (SFI), the student’s wing of the CPI (M) placed a poster of Stalin in campus of the medical college, Thiruvananthapuram, the capital of Kerala, and paid floral tributes immediately after the victory of the college union elections in favour of SFI.

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Centre for Rural Management



The Centre for Rural Management is an autonomous multifaceted research organisation located at Perumpaikadu village, Kottayam, Kerala. Established in 1990 under the Charitable Societies Act, the Centre has been concentrating on research, project evaluation, training, consultancy and social action. The Centre has been assigned projects by Ford Foundation, Institute of Development Studies (Sussex, U.K), Department of Planning (Lakshadweep Administration), Government of Kerala, Ministry of Rural Development, Ministry of Panchayati Raj (Govt. of India), Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, CEVA, India Eco Development Project-Periyar Tiger Reserve, CapDeCK, and Arghyam among others. The Centre has published a number of manuscripts. The Director of the Centre, Dr. Jos Chathukulam, is a researcher and national level consultant in Panchayati Raj and Local Level Planning. A Board of Directors representing both academic and activist streams manages the Centre. Dr. S S Sreekumar, Retd. Professor, Gov. College, Andamans & Nicobar Islands is the Chairman. CRM works jointly with other think tanks and civil society groups as well as universities, research institutions and Panchayats. The Centre for Rural Management has established an e-group which is known as Decentralization Watch decwatch@googlegroups.com

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