Capitalist Transformation and the Evolution of Civil Society in a South Indian Fishery

by

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Abstract

This thesis employs Karl Polanyi’s concept of the double-movement of capitalism to trace the trajectory of a social movement that arose in response to capitalist transformation in the fishery of Kanyakumari district, south India. Beginning in the 1980s, this counter-movement militantly asserted community control over marine resources, arguing that intensified production for new markets should be subordinated to the social imperatives of subsistence and equity. Two decades later, the ambition of “embedding” the market within the community had yielded instead to an adaptation to the market in the language of “professionalization,” self-help, and caste uplift.

Polanyi is useful for identifying the constituency for a counter-movement against the market, but tells us little about the social or political complexities of constructing such a movement. To locate the reasons for the decline of the counter-movement in Kanyakumari, I turn therefore to an empirical observation of the civil society within which the counter-movement arose. In doing this, I argue against Partha Chatterjee’s influential view that civil society as a conceptual category does not apply to “popular politics in most of the world,” and is not useful for tracing non-European, postcolonial, and subaltern modernities. By contrast, my case shows the presence of civil society – as a sphere of autonomous and routinized association and publicity – among subaltern groups in rural India. I argue that it is precisely by locating the counter-movement of
fishworkers within civil society that one can map the multiple negotiations that take place as subaltern classes are integrated into the market, and into liberal democracy, and explain the difficulties of extending and sustaining the counter-movement itself.
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As I was doing the rounds of families in Chinna Muttam village, a smallish group gathered in the space in front of the home where we were talking, and the usual discussion broke out. One person argued that there was no reason to talk to me, since researchers like me were always coming by and getting information and then going away with it, and there was never any gain for the informants from this. But another responded by saying “if we can help someone to get a degree by telling them about ourselves, then we should do so.” I am very grateful to him, and to the many others like him across the villages, whose sense of public service stretched to sharing their time and knowledge with me with infinite patience and generosity. This sense of solidarity and service is also the wellspring of the active public life I describe in this thesis, and it is perhaps only natural, but nonetheless a matter for gratitude, that I too should have benefited from it.

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Chapter 1
An Adequate Political Sociology For Our Times

In the mid-1990s the villagers of Kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu state in south India were engaged in a fierce struggle to limit and regulate trawling. The fishing community of this region had hitherto relied almost entirely on small, non-mechanized craft that utilized a variety of “passive” gear. In the 1950s, state-led fisheries modernization saw the introduction of trawling as a more efficient technology, but it had taken off only in the 1970s. As the number of trawlers steadily increased, opposition to them in the villages began to grow. The villagers argued that trawling was over-efficient and depleted the resource, and threatened the livelihood of the majority who fished on small, largely non-mechanized craft. They set these claims within the language of social justice, a moral economy, the community’s right to manage the resources, and ecological sustainability. During one of the most violent outbreaks of the struggle, the villagers of Kanyakumari put up a stone inscription declaring a village law that imposed strict regulation on trawling. This law, posted outside the village church, was to be observed by trawler operators in Kanyakumari and five contiguous villages.

The village-level struggles were led by the village committees or by ad hoc committees set up for the purpose, but they also drew for support on a number of existing associations in the village: the parish committees, the fishermen’s cooperatives, and youth and women’s groups. In addition, they articulated themselves to a national movement that developed and theorized these claims into a powerful critique of “growth-led” and “anti-people” development. This national movement took up a range of issues affecting coastal communities and the fish resources: pollution and dumping, beach tourism, intensive aquaculture, and working conditions for migrant women in shrimp processing plants. It made welfare demands for pensions, education allowances, and buses for the fish vending women. It initiated work on appropriate technology, and linked production issues to questions of food security. Key women activists developed a gendered approach to both the fishery and to organizing.
The Kanyakumari struggle took place in the context of dramatic transformation in the fishery over the decade of the 1990s. Even prior to the Indian government’s turn to economic liberalization, the Kanyakumari fishery had been increasingly drawn into international markets. With this had come greater pressure to increase production. More and more fishers began to acquire trawlers or motorized smaller craft, while others shifted to working as wage labourers on the trawlers. The end of the decade saw an increasing number of larger craft using non-family labour, a move toward “enclosure” of the fishery commons (in the sense that fewer and fewer vessels captured more and more of the resources), and the increased importance of distant (national and global) seafood markets. This also resulted in greater pressure on the resource base, threatening its sustainability.

Despite this, by the early years of the new century, while the stone inscription still occupied its prominent position in front of the village church, it was already a relic of an earlier time. The fierce politics of its conception had been abandoned. Many of the same families that had militantly fought the trawlers had now acquired them. The national movement continued to be active, taking on new issues such as the entry of foreign fishing vessels. But at the local level, the dominant organizational forms were the fishermen’s cooperatives that sought to improve the ability of small-scale fishers to compete in new markets, and the growing number of micro-credit associations for women.

Why did the counter-movement resisting “enclosure” in the villages subside, even as the trend toward enclosure appeared to grow ever stronger? The movement against the trawlers was a counter-movement seeking, in Polanyi’s terms, to “re-embed” economic forces within social values and relationships. The primary relationships it was invoking were those that constituted the commons – the right of the community to maintain access to the resources it depends on for its livelihood. It was an attempt to counter, with the language of community, the deepening role of markets and profit in privatizing or enclosing access to this resource. For Polanyi, capitalist transformation goes through a “double movement”: expanding markets seeking to free themselves from social regulation cause disruption to society; society seeks to protect itself through the
reassertion of regulation (Polanyi, 1957: 132). If the dynamics of this double movement are a central concern of the current era of neo-liberal globalization, what can we learn from the trajectory of a movement that posed its fiercest and most radical critique, of what it labeled “growth-led development,” toward the end of India’s period of autarkic development, and then dissipated, paradoxically, in the ensuing phase of economic globalization and the opening of global markets?

Scholars of Indian social movements (Herring, 2005; Baviskar, 2005, 1995) have tended to see the decline in social movements of the type described here not as a shift that has occurred over time, but rather as a disjuncture between the material interests and practices of rural producers (farmers, forest based producers, fishers) and a movement leadership that derives its language and vision from international environmental discourses. While the producers' interests have always been economic and "class-based," movement ideologues and leaders have framed these in the romanticized but powerful language of community-based, traditional ecologism and moral economy.

Perhaps the “counter-movement” subsided, then, because its main actors were benefiting from, rather than being displaced by, global markets? Or was it because the claims of the movement were not premised on an accurate reading of existing social relationships and values? This would suggest that we still know little about how the introduction of capitalist markets affects subaltern communities, and how they are likely to respond, and that we need to examine the Polanyian premise more closely. Ronaldo Munck has noted that Polanyi’s concept of "society" gives us little purchase on how different groups or sectors or classes are affected, the kinds of alliances that may be formed, and therefore which groups might be the agents of this resistance:

In an era when neoliberals and postmodernists alike query whether there is such a ‘thing’ as society, we simply cannot assume Polanyi's rather functional analysis of its response to the market mechanisms. Polanyi does tell us that ‘The “challenge” is to society as a whole; the “response” comes through groups, sections and classes,’ (Polanyi 2001: 160) but that is still quite under-specified in terms of a political sociology for a globalized complex era. Which ‘groups’ or ‘sections’ of society are likely to respond

1 I use the term as the Subaltern historians, drawing on Gramsci, do: "as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way" (Ranajit Guha, 1982: vii).
to the encroaching marketization and commodification of life? (Munck, 2007: xiii)²

Munck is suggesting that a fuller exploration of the Polanyian question requires a focus on the formation of collective actors and the nature of collective agency: how does opposition to the market become generalized into a counter-movement of society? But where should we look if we wish to examine this agency? What sociological phenomena should command our attention? To focus on the movement against trawling alone appears inadequate, for it does not permit a full sense of society and social action in the villages. As the survival of the cooperatives and microcredit associations indicated, it was not collective action as such that had declined, but rather, a particular form of such action. Villagers in the coastal villages of Kanyakumari continued to spend considerable time and energy in collective activities. The public settings of an earlier era - church and life-cycle functions, pious associations, unelected village councils, caste associations, and chit funds, had been supplemented in the nineteen fifties by government marketing cooperatives, the village units of political parties, including their women's and youth wings, film star fan clubs, and football clubs. From the early eighties on, these had been further added to by youth groups, Basic Christian Communities, elected parish councils, fishermen's marketing cooperatives, women's micro-credit societies, and fishermen's unions. As a collective phenomenon, they constituted an active "life in common," or public life, in the villages, a sphere of association and communication autonomous of the state that could well be characterized as ‘civil society.’

The concept of “civil society” has received a great deal of scholarly attention since the early 1990s.³ Within the context of democratic transitions from various forms of authoritarianism, whether communist or military, a non-state sphere of association, or civil society, has been valorized as ensuring accountability, participation, and human rights. In the liberal democracies of the north, civil society engaged the interest of those who perceived a crisis in the welfare state on the one hand, and a growth of civic apathy,

² Jessop (2001), Levien (2007), and Parry (2009) have also made the same argument with regard to Polanyi’s concept of “society.”
³ The writing on civil society is by now so voluminous that no comprehensive listing is possible. Works that attempt conceptual clarifications and critiques include: Calhoun, 1993; Cohen, 1995; Cohen and Arato, 1992; Fine and Rai, 1997; Foley, 1996; Hall, 1995; Hyden, 1997; Kaviraj and Khilnani, 2001; Keane, 1998 and 1988; Kumar, 1993; Pye, 1999; Rieff, 1999; Schuermann, 2000; Swift, 1999; Varty, 1997.
civil privatism, and amoral individualism on the other. The neo-liberal consensus of the past three decades has highlighted the “failure” of state-led development in the south and led planners and funding agencies to invest in "social capital" as the basis of economic productivity and good governance. Development theorists, finding themselves at an impasse in theorizing the meaning and definition of development, turned hopefully to public action and discourse to provide authentic visions and meanings of the concept. Populists and radicals, concerned with globalization and its weakening of nation-state sovereignties, likewise vested hope in the public action of a counter-movement from below.

Despite, or perhaps because of, this efflorescence of writing, civil society as a concept becomes fuzzier the closer one gets to it. Is civil society, in keeping with the classical, liberal understanding of its role, a sphere of resistance to the state, where the projects of the state are challenged or democratized? Or is it instead, as Gramscians and other Marxists would have it, a sphere through which the state and dominant classes extend their hegemony, and which acts to buffer them from resistance? Most theorists agree that civil society arises concomitantly with capitalism. If so, does civil society act to embed capitalism within society as a whole, or does it assist society in conforming to the requirements of the market? And in either mode of operation, does it act autonomously of, or in conjunction with, the state? Clearly, while civil society is potentially useful as a construct with which to flesh out Polanyi’s ‘society,’ it needs careful definition and delimitation.

The use of civil society as a construct is further complicated by scholarship that questions its relevance for mapping the particular contours of India’s postcolonial modernity. Even as funding agencies and development NGOs have adopted the concept wholesale in their practice, Indian political theorists (Chatterjee, 2008, 2004, 2001, 1998; Kaviraj, 2000).

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4 The term popularized by Robert Putnam (1995, 1993) to refer to “features of social organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam, 1995: 67). For Putnam, face-to-face associations are the best source of social capital. For a critique of the concept, see Fine (1999) and Foley and Edwards (1997).

5 Burawoy (2003: 198) suggests that, in fact, what Polanyi meant by “society” was active society, the cooperatives, trade unions, Chartist movement and incipient political parties of the mid-nineteenth century, or what we might call “civil society.”
1997) have remained sceptical about the possibility and usefulness of transplanting Eurocentric categories to describe alternative, postcolonial modernities.  

Partha Chatterjee (2004) has influentially argued that civil society as a conceptual category does not apply to “popular politics in most of the world.” Using the urban poor in an Indian metropolis as his case, he seeks to demonstrate that they do not act upon the state through the self-contained, legalistic, autonomous associations that characterize the civil society of the middle and elite classes. Rather, they act through what he calls “political society.” Because civil society is characterized by individuals freely entering into association with each other, and because Indian society has not been through the process of liberal-capitalist individuation as occurred in Europe, subaltern Indians act as members of pre-existing collectives. Even when subalterns make claims, they are on the basis of these identity-based groupings. Insofar as a third sphere of civil society exists, it is occupied only by the upper classes, and is not entirely separate from the state, but rather provides a means for the privileged to have access to it. Chatterjee thus divides society into a small group of elites “enjoying legally protected rights of freedom, equality and property” who constitute civil society; and a much larger group of people who are part of a heterogeneous population who “are governed and looked after, often by ignoring or violating civic norms.” This group negotiates its way to subsistence and constitutes political society (Chatterjee 2008: 91).

If Chatterjee is right, then the original Polanyian concern about the constituency for a counter-movement becomes even harder to explore. If we cannot use civil society as a form of shorthand to describe the public life of Kanyakumari villagers, how else might we characterize the latter? Through what conceptual framework might one understand the routinized associational life of the Kanyakumari villagers? Why is it not possible to describe the public life of rural, subaltern Indians as “civil society”? Writing on the public sphere of civil society assumes that it is predicated on urbanization and on literacy, on the presence of salons, meeting halls and clubs, on newspapers and pamphlets. How then does such a sphere emerge in rural, substantially illiterate India, and, if it does, what are  

6 There has been a great deal of debate between Indian theorists, with some arguing for the usefulness of the construct if carefully defined (Beteille, 1999; Mahajan 1999), and others questioning what it means for citizenship, and whether its increased invocation is a way of “letting the state off the hook” (D. Gupta, 1997; also 1999).
its forums and venues? Is it a category created by the neo-liberal state and NGOs, or does it have vernacular roots? Can we imagine a vernacular civil society, rooted in its own specific histories and places, and, if so, what might it look like? More broadly, what is the relationship between civil society, political economy and social transformation?

The scope for social agency to counter and moderate the deepening of capitalist relations is a central question of our times. Civil society is useful as a construct here because it allows for an exploration of the complexity and multiplicity of forms of agency, rather than focusing on a single one, such as a social movement. Yet the answers are not simple. Munck’s arguments about the need to locate Polanyi’s concerns within a more complex sociology, and Chatterjee’s doubts about the applicability of a construct like civil society to postcolonial India both speak to the need for closer attention to the nature of social transformation, the impact of capitalist globalization on particular sectors of society, and the kinds of public action it generates. These questions cannot be resolved in the abstract, through a purely theoretical or semantic solution, but require, instead, close examination of actually existing civil societies. The Kanyakumari villages are particularly appropriate, for here we can witness a market-induced challenge to social relations around productive property, the beginnings of a counter-movement against the potentially displacing effects of this challenge, and an active public life within which one can examine the difficulties of constructing this counter-movement.

Simply recognizing the need for an empirical approach does not answer the question of how to go about applying it to a particular case. I have chosen to give some emphasis to the concrete description of settings of political action, in order to make visible: i. The role of the state, political parties and other institutions like the Catholic Church in creating a vernacular civil society, and in generating the multiplicity of claims and discourses that inform the communicative aspect of this society; ii. The variety of associational forms into which villagers enter, each of which expresses a particular understanding of identity and interest, but also helps to shape this identity and interest; and iii. Civil society as the terrain where these identities and interests compete for hegemony, i.e. where they attempt to establish that a particular interest best represents the general interest of society. The theoretical underpinnings of my questions are elaborated below.
1 The Theoretical Framework

1.1 Polanyi and the “Double Movement” of Capitalism

Karl Polanyi’s *The Great Transformation* was written during World War II, at the end of a half-century which had seen an earlier world war, the global recession of the 1930s, and the rise of fascism in Europe. Polanyi sought to locate these upheavals in the civilization ushered in in the nineteenth century, the “fount and matrix” of which he identified as the “self-regulating market” (1957: 3). For Polanyi, “the idea of a self-adjusting market implied a stark utopia. Such an institution could not exist for any length of time without annihilating the human and natural substance of society; it would have physically destroyed man and transformed his surroundings into a wilderness. Inevitably, society took measures to protect itself…” (ibid). Thus, social history in the last two centuries was the result of a “double-movement” – the expansion of the markets which sought to “disembed” them from social regulation, and the counter-movement by society to re-regulate them and thus protect itself from annihilation.

In *The Great Transformation*, and in other work that drew on economic anthropology, Polanyi highlighted the extent to which the ‘self-regulating market’ that emerged in nineteenth century Europe was a novel phenomenon in human history: “All economic systems known to us up to the end of feudalism in Western Europe were organized either on the principles of reciprocity or redistribution, or householding, or some combination of the three” (Polanyi, 1957: 54-55). In these systems, material goods were valued insofar as they served subsistence needs and insofar as they safeguarded a person’s social standing, social claims, or social assets – there was no individual interest in safeguarding material goods outside of this social context (46). It was these social values that directed decisions around the economy, understood primarily as the provision of material needs; the economy was thus “embedded” within society and did not exist as a distinct sphere with its own motives, directive mechanisms and laws. With the ascendance of exchange

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7 A related insight is that from Mosse (1997; with M. Sivan, 2003), and Sivaramakrishnan (2000), who show how struggles around common property resources, such as irrigation tanks or forests, are also struggles in the public sphere, and how the management of these resources is often shaped by culturally specific notions of the public domain, public services, and public action. Mosse writes:

Overall, the point to reiterate is that common property resources management cannot (as is so often the case) be isolated from context and viewed as a distinctive type of economic activity....
in the market as the dominant system, the motive of gain became substituted for the motive of subsistence (41). Further, market economy was “an economy directed by market prices and nothing but market prices” (43). Thus began the “dis-embedding” of the economic from the social.

The real threat to society came when land, labour and money also began to be treated by this market as commodities:

But labor, land, and money are not commodities; the postulate that anything that is bought and sold must have been produced for sale is emphatically untrue in regard to them....Labor is only another name for a human activity which goes with life itself, which in its turn is not produced for sale but for entirely different reasons, nor can that activity be detached from the rest of life, be stored, or mobilized; land is only another name for nature, which is not produced by man; actual money, finally, is merely a token of purchasing power which, as a rule, is not produced at all, but comes into being through the mechanism of banking or state finance. None of them is produced for sale. The commodity description of labor, land, and money is entirely fictitious....Nevertheless, it is with the help of this fiction that the actual markets for labor, land and money are organized.

(Polanyi, 1957: 72)

To include these “fictitious commodities” in the market mechanism is to “subordinate the substance of society itself to the laws of the market” (71). This fiction cannot be maintained for long, for to allow the market mechanism to be the sole director of the fate of human beings and their natural environment would result in the demolition of society: “For the alleged commodity “labour power” cannot be shoved about, used indiscriminately, or even left unused, without affecting also the human individual who happens to be the bearer of this peculiar commodity” (73). Likewise, with the commodification of land, “nature would be reduced to its elements, neighborhoods and landscapes defiled, rivers polluted, military safety jeopardized, the power to produce food and raw materials destroyed” (73). Thus, the nineteenth century saw a double movement:

While responding to ecological necessity and the need for cooperative control, tank management arrangements in Tamil Nadu are also shaped and circumscribed by culturally specific notions of the public domain, public service, and public action. In Tamil villages (some at least) the "village public" (ūr potu) happens to be the domain of authority and rank and status, which makes the management of common property an eminently political action. This also makes tank management a heavily gendered action in that women (and their interests...) are largely excluded from this public domain and its decision making.” (Mosse, 1997: 486; italics in the original)
the extension of market organization in respect to genuine commodities was accompanied by its restriction in respect to fictitious ones.

The resurgence of the self-regulating market in the period of neoliberal globalization after the “embedded liberalism” (see Harvey, 2005: 11-12) of the post-war decades has led to a renewed interest in Polanyi’s work. Polanyi is particularly helpful in understanding struggles that take place as a response to changes induced by the market at the point of exchange, such as in the fishery described here, rather than to exploitation at the point of production. Whereas from a Marxist perspective, crudely put, capitalism generates class differentiation, and the displaced or proletarianized classes then become the primary agents of resistance, Polanyi is helpful in explaining a diversity of struggles, for he eschews the Marxist teleology in favour of a more general emphasis on “society.” For Polanyi, class struggles are one of the ways in which “society” resists the market. But as the depredations of the market threaten the “rich variety of values, norms, vocabularies, and identities of the lifeworld…[i]t is unsurprising that the representatives of other systems and social forces in the lifeworld will resist attempts at commodification from diverse perspectives” (Jessop, 2001: 221).

For Polanyi it was a fallacy to think that only economic interests would generate a response, for the movement of the market can:

affect individuals in innumerable ways as neighbors, professional persons, consumers, pedestrians, commuters, sportsmen, hikers, gardeners, patients, mothers, or lovers – and are accordingly capable of representation by almost any type of territorial or functional association such as churches, townships, fraternal lodges, clubs, trade unions, or, most commonly, political parties based on broad principles of adherence. (154)

“There is no magic in class interests which would secure to members of one class the support of members of other classes” (513). Rather, the particular protectionist interests of certain classes become seen as the general interest of society because other sectors of society are also affected by the same phenomenon, albeit in different ways. What is curiously absent from Polanyi’s analysis here, is the possibility of conflicting interests, or the operation of power and politics. This point is made powerfully by Michael Levien, who applies Polanyi to a study of the National Alliance of People’s Movements in India.
He argues that Polanyi is helpful in identifying a potential constituency of all those affected by liberalized markets, even if they do not belong to an identifiable class, but that in doing so he provides only a beginning:

Because he assumes that countermovements arise mechanically and spontaneously, Polanyi fails to provide a theory of how a countermovement is organized. He does not develop the implications of organizing a political project bringing together people affected in different ways by the market. Moreover, his functionalist and organicist conception of society limits his ability to grasp how social structures of power and domination impede the construction and success of a countermovement. For Polanyi’s theory of the countermovement to be useful, we must understand the implications and challenges of organizing extraordinarily diverse political coalitions against commodification in an agonistic, not organic, society (Levien, 2007: 120-121).

It is to compensate for this absence of a political analysis in Polanyi that Burawoy (2003) suggests the need to read him in conjunction in Gramsci, in order to understand how a particular interest becomes the general interest, or how hegemony and counter-hegemony are constructed in civil society. For, whereas Polanyi seems to see active society as acting in a kind of organic unity against the market, for Gramsci civil society is a zone of contestation, a space where the counter-hegemony of the subaltern classes has to be constructed against heavily stacked odds.

To fruitfully locate the dynamics of the counter-movement within civil society requires two further theoretical steps. The first is to define and delimit an approach to civil society from among the many that have accrued over the past two decades. The second is to engage seriously with Chatterjee’s concern about the appropriateness of the construct to describe Indian society.

1.2 Civil Society as a Terrain of Contestation

The use of a Gramscian notion of civil society requires that we define and distinguish it quite clearly from the usages that have become so widespread since the construct’s revival in the early 1990s. The first step is to define it in its sociological sense, rather than assigning it any normative value. This distinction will become clearer as I proceed. As a sociological concept, Bryant's (1994: 339) definition seems as good as any to work with:
The sociological variant of civil society refers to a space or arena between household and state, other than the market, which affords possibilities of concerted action and social self-organisation. The sociological variant of civil society also embraces Habermas's public sphere as developed by, for example, Nancy Fraser. In short, civil society refers to social relations and communications between citizens. These may sometimes be informed by the law and by state policy but even then are not dependent on them.

Within much of the recent literature, civil society is understood largely from within the liberal tradition, where a normative weight is attached to it as a force for democratization and a bulwark against the domination of the state. This is the understanding that made the concept fashionable in the 1990s in the context of the democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe, and the democratic openings in Latin America.

According to this liberal conception, civil society acts to limit the state firstly by decentralizing power: "Civil society is not so much a sphere outside political power; rather, it penetrates deeply into this power, fragments it and decentralises it" (Taylor, 1990: 117). And secondly, it does so by providing the schools of democracy where people learn to act collectively. Here they acquire the opportunity, knowledge, and habits that enable them to make decisions in matters affecting their lives, and to demand accountability from the state. This is the classic Tocquevillean conception, favoured also by theorists of "social capital," such as Putnam (Putnam, 1995 and 1993; see also Cohen and Rogers, 1995). From the liberal perspective, social actors within civil society, while multiple and plural in relation to each other, are unified in their relation and opposition to the state, and civil society and the state are entirely autonomous spheres.

In contrast to this late twentieth century conception of civil society as being concerned primarily with limiting the state, for theorists of civil society in an earlier era, the particularity of civil society within European history was its emergence concomitant with capitalism. This gave it a quite different significance vis-à-vis the state.

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8 This assumption is most strikingly illustrated by Taylor (1990: 98), when he identifies three senses in which civil society may be understood: “1. In a minimal sense, civil society exists where there are free associations, not under tutelage of state power. 2. In a stronger sense, civil society exists only where society as a whole can structure itself and coordinate its actions through such associations which are free of state tutelage. 3. As an alternative or supplement to the second sense, we can speak of civil society wherever the ensemble of associations can significantly determine or inflect the course of state policy.”
Hegel and Marx saw civil society as arising out of the separation of the economic and political under capitalism, and the legal-juridical and political forms that go with it. While social status was inscribed in the legal basis of the feudal state, the bourgeois constitutions were based on the principle of formal equality (Marx, 1978a; Goonewardena and Rankin, 2004). So, while social and economic inequality continued to prevail, they occupied a separate sphere than that of the state. Based on this understanding, Marxists such as Ellen Woods (1995: 241-2) have argued that the dispersal of power within civil society may only make it harder to identify and resist. For Woods, civil society is a way of locating the erstwhile coercive functions of the state in the private sphere, in private property, class exploitation, and market imperatives. Likewise, Cohen and Arato, working broadly within the Marxian tradition, cite Touraine to challenge the assumption that civil society, simply because it is distinct from the state, is a more democratic sphere:

The issue for contemporary social movements is not simply the defence or autonomy of civil society versus the state. Rather, it is which kind of civil society is to be defended. Otherwise, as liberal capitalism in England and the US show, this might simply mean the primacy of socio-economic over administrative elites. (Cohen and Arato, 1992: 516)

In contrast to the liberal conception where civil society buffers the individual from the state, in this conception, civil society acts to buffer the state, and the market, from popular opposition. The ideal of plurality and liberal freedoms serves to conceal the increasingly concentrated and sophisticated coercive powers of the state and market. In a Foucauldian variant of this, people's schooling within the associations of civil society has a "disciplinary" role, habituating them to the norms and practices of market democracy, and serving only to increase their “governmentality” (Burchell et al., 1991).  

Recent work has drawn on these Foucauldian insights to understand the implications of the increased downloading of the functions of the state to civil society under neo-liberalism (Larner, 2000), and in projects of development (Gupta and Sharma, 2006) and environmental conservation (Agrawal, 2005). For an insightful exploration of the relationship between the concepts of “hegemony” and “governmentality,” see Gunn, 2006.
Gramsci’s conception of civil society was somewhat more complex. On the one hand, like other Marxists, he saw civil society in liberal democracies as the sphere in which consent is generated for the project of the dominant classes, who also control the state. But precisely because the power of the ruling classes lay in their ability to exercise hegemony through the values and institutions of civil society, any real challenge to them would need to build a counter-hegemonic set of values and institutions. Thus civil society was best understood as an arena for the competing hegemonic projects of the state and the subaltern classes. Chandhoke (1995: 39) elaborates upon this when she writes: “Civil society cannot be understood unless we see it as the sphere through which the state seeks to control society, as well as the sphere where state power and that of the dominant classes can be contested.” It provides an entry point to the study of the state, its nature and dynamics, and equally a vantage point for the study of political practices and social movements which construct civil society as a zone of engagement (Chandhoke, 1995: 66).

While Polanyi sees society (in alliance with the state) as the space from which to counter the market, for Gramsci, the market is upheld by the state and capitalist classes, and the task of building a counter-movement requires creating a counter-hegemony within civil society. There is no interest common to “society as whole” since opposition to the market would necessitate a contradiction between those classes who benefit from it, and those who are displaced.

1.3 A Vernacular Civil Society?

While the Marxists, including Gramsci, reverse the normative value that liberals attach to civil society, they share with the liberals a historical-sociological understanding of its origins and make-up. As noted above, it was generally believed that, as an empirical phenomenon, civil society arose out of particular historical developments in Western Europe: the growth of a bourgeoisie, the Church-state split and the secularization of society, and social differentiation due to capitalist industrialization. In America, likewise, its social and political context was the egalitarian individualism of the yeoman farmer,

10 Gramsci’s position on the exact relationship of state and civil society is famously ambiguous, and has been the subject of several works of exegesis. See Anderson, 1976-7; Adamson, 1987-8; Bobbio, 1988; Buttigeg, 1995; Femia, 2001 and 1975; and Nielson, 1995.
and the adoption of a liberal constitution. Thus, the occupants of civil society were the bourgeoisie, or middle classes, or members of other classes displaced from their lands and communities and seeking new forms of membership. As an analytical category, it reflects the specific conditions of its origin. Cohen and Arato (1992: ix) note, "Modern civil society...is institutionalised and generalised through laws, and especially subjective rights, that stabilize social differentiation."

Habermas’s definition of the public sphere is based on this understanding of its participants as rational individuals freed from communal identities. For Habermas:

> the public sphere of civil society (was) an arena of deliberative exchange in which rational-critical arguments rather than mere inherited ideas or personal statuses could determine agreements and actions. It was an operationalization of civil society's capacity for self-organization, one that emphasized plurality and reason. (Calhoun, 1993: 273)

Chandhoke (1995:180) quotes Mamdani to make the point that “…civil society is anchored in a dichotomy central to modern sociology, that between community and society.... While communal relations are natural and primordial, societal relations are historically constructed.”\(^\text{(11)}\) The voluntary associations of civil society emerged to fill the gap created by the growing individuation of society. As de Tocqueville (1945) noted in his account of democracy in America, voluntary association became a necessity when individual autonomy became a fact and a value, and the claims of community were no longer strong enough to bring people together to achieve common ends. Social associations were the means by which an individual preoccupied with his (or her) own interest learnt to identify with the community (Chandhoke, 1995: 109-110). Thus, in some sense, the dis-embedding of individuals by capitalist displacement from their communities of birth, was the necessary condition for the emergence of a civil society based on voluntary and interest-based association.

\(^{11}\) This is a distinction fundamental to classical sociology: In Tönnies's *Gemeinschaft /Gesellschaft* dichotomy, the relations of community are *a priori*, while those of society are optional. For Weber, the communal relationship was based on subjective feeling, while the associative relationship was based on reason (Calhoun, 1980: 108). For Henry Maine, modern societies were defined by the move from status to contract (Agrawal, 1999: 94).
It is this particular history that has led theorists such as Kaviraj and Chatterjee to question the validity of using categories developed through the European experience to describe alternative, postcolonial modernities. They have argued that constructs such as civil society are historically and sociologically specific to Europe, and that their application elsewhere serves as an updated form of modernization theory, and a way to smuggle in an implicit teleology. Partha Chatterjee argues that, in much of the “third world,” people use the rules and procedures of civil society to claim rights as members of communities. For Chatterjee, the tensions between the reality of community, and the ideal of a self-determining individual, cannot be reconciled in civil society; civil society is the limited domain occupied by the middle classes who see themselves as autonomous, self-determining, rights-bearing subjects, whereas the large majority of India’s population seek representation as members of communities through a political society.

Whereas civil society in advanced liberal-capitalist societies may be seen in Gramscian terms as the terrain for a struggle between classes over the extent and forms of capitalist entrenchment, we do not see this in India. To quote Harriss-White and Gooptu (2001: 89): “If class struggle is first a struggle over class and second a struggle between classes, we can say that the overwhelming majority of the Indian work-force is still kept engaged in the first struggle while capital, even though stratified and fractured, is engaged in the second.” In India, the “struggles over class” – the struggles to form a cohesive working class out of a labour market largely sectored by caste and other forms of ascriptive identity, and interest-based alliances between class fractions, are still largely absent. Such “struggles over class” are the prerequisites to struggles between classes, and resistance to capitalist hegemony.

Two kinds of objections may be made to Chatterjee’s argument. The first is to his desire to see class and community as entirely distinct. In fact, as Indian writing on class has shown, the two might be related in complex ways. A distinction made by Lenin, between the “real” and the “formal” subsumption of labour, has been invoked by Gail Omvedt (1988, 1991b) and others concerned with changes in the Indian agrarian sector. “Real” subsumption occurs when the peasant loses his or her means of production and becomes part of the “free wage labour” or proletariat. “Formal” subsumption refers to a situation
where the peasant becomes subsumed into capitalist markets at the point of exchange or distribution, through reliance on these markets for inputs, including credit, and for selling their produce; the peasant then “self-exploits” herself or himself, family labour, and perhaps also the land (or the fish resource) in order to survive.

Omvedt (1994a, 1994b, 1991a) further develops this distinction by drawing, via feminist theorists like Maria Mies, on the work of Rosa Luxemburg, to argue that a significant trend in capital accumulation, even in this high-tech era, is the non-wage form of accumulation. This arises through products or commodities created under non-capitalist conditions, such as the reproduction of labour through women's domestic work, the harvesting of natural resources, and the products of peasant labour. Thus, non-economic processes of exploitation – violence/force, ideology, hegemony, community, culture, sexuality - are central to economic processes:

Whereas in capitalist production, strictly speaking, the working class stands forth as a "naked proletariat," defined simply by its economic characteristics, in the wider system of accumulation "nonclass" community, national, ethnic, gender, caste, etc. forms play crucial roles in defining exploited groups and making exploitation possible…. Thus, economic, social and cultural factors are interwoven in exploitation. (Omvedt, 1994a: 43)

For Omvedt the new social movements of the early 1980s, such as the fishworkers movement, were new because they were oppressed or exploited in new, or different, ways by the processes of modern capitalism. Economic, social, and cultural factors were interwoven in the forms of exploitation they faced; movement members invoked community as often as class; and they combined a feminist and ecological critique of orthodox development with an alternative vision of development. They saw the state, as much as the capitalist classes, as the agent of their oppression and exploitation, and so were as likely to address themselves to the one front as to the other. They were concerned not as much with wages, as with retaining surplus.

12 The movements Omvedt names – women’s, environmental, and caste – were new in a different way from those identified as “new” in the Northern context – chief of which are the peace and environmental movements; they shared with them a critique of modern industrialization, but were about oppression and exploitation and were not “post-industrial.” For other writing on these new movements in India, see Bakshi, 1996; S. Kothari, 1997; Routledge, 1993; Shah 1988.
Culture also enters the process of class formation in a related way. Prior to the 1980s the dominant Indian approaches to understanding working class formation and agency were derived from classical Marxism, with the Modes of Production (MOP) debates of the 1960s and 1970s representing their most developed expression (See Alavi, 1987; Patnaik, 1991). The term “mode of production”:

designates social relations of production and identifies the fundamental classes that are embedded in them, i.e., for each mode of production, a class of exploited producers and a corresponding class of exploiting non-producers... It is by an analysis of the modes of production and their contradictions that we can understand the patterns of class formation and class alignment, and the class struggles that ensue as a consequence. (Harriss, 1994, paraphrasing Alavi, 1982)

The inability of the MOP, and other orthodox approaches which saw agency as flowing directly from structure, to explain the nature of a variety of collective action, led to the rise of the Subaltern School of historians. In their view, class was only one feature of a more generalized subordination in Indian society, and "culture" in all its complexities played an important role. Thus David Hardiman (1981), for instance, challenged the conventional debate over the respective roles of the rich, poor, and middle peasants in the nationalist struggle, by arguing that political action was in fact crucially affected by the existence of a caste community and by kinship organization. Likewise Chakrabarty, drawing critically on E.P. Thompson's classic *Making of the English Working Class*, asked “what happens when a working class is born into a culture characterized by the persistence of pre-capitalist relations,” i.e., when its consciousness and collective action draws not on ideals such as the “free-born Englishman,” but on other, perhaps less egalitarian, worldviews (Chakrabarty, 1989: xiii). The role of culture and community in class-formation suggests that class and community may interact in complex ways, and that the demand for recognition may contain a demand for redistribution in some cases, or substitute for it in others. These relationships might define the nature and quality of Indian civil society; however, as I argue below, they do not exist outside of civil society but can emerge out of contestations and alliances that take place within it.

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13 This account is taken from Harriss (1994).
A second difficulty with Chatterjee’s argument about ascriptive identity as central to Indian public life, and as militating against a civil society, is that it rests on the doubtful assumption that community exists in some unchanging form in non-European societies, and that it is formed outside the public sphere of politics. While Chatterjee, or the nineteenth-century sociologists see ascriptive community as natural, undifferentiated, and “given”, much of the earlier Indian literature around the “modernization of tradition,” with reference to caste associations (Galanter, 1984; Rudolph and Rudolph, 1987) or the broader “invention of tradition” scholarship would challenge this. For instance, there have been critiques of the “unchanging village” (Breman, 1997), the notions of caste, race, ethnicity, language or religion as fixed entities (Cohn, 1990; essays in Robb, 1995; S. Guha, 1999; essays in Breckenridge and Van der Veer, 1993), or the notion of harmonious community management of resources outside of state influence (Chakravarty-Kaul, 1996; Sinha, Gururani and Greenberg, 1997; Mosse with Sivan, 2003).

Agrawal (1999) points to two senses in which the concept of community may be used. The first is as a complex of social relationships – what Agrawal calls "community as social-organisation" – whose features include "location in a particular place, territorial fixity, stable memberships, regular and face-to-face interactions among members over a range of issues" (Agrawal, 1999:101). The second is as a complex of ideas and sentiments – what Agrawal refers to as "community-as-shared understandings," which is based on a presumption of common ties and interests, and a shared belief about how to achieve those interests. Although, at the village level, community in its first sense of “community-as-social-organization” is easy to observe, it would be mistaken to assume

14 The sociological assumptions about Europe that Chatterjee seems to share with Habermas have themselves been questioned on a number of grounds. First, critical Habermasians have questioned his sociological assumptions about the public sphere in Europe. Theorists such as Eley (1992) and Fraser (1992, 1989) have shown how such a unified sphere of rational, detached and liberal debate never did exist in Europe. Further, Fraser suggests that the ideal of reasoning is itself exclusionary - some learn it better than others - men, white men, educated people. She points out that people communicate in different ways according to their class, gender, ethnicity, etc., and that all participants in the field may not have equal "linguistic capital" (cited in Emirbayer and Sheller, 1998: 737). Fraser, Eley, and others show how, both physically in terms of the arenas through which the public sphere is supposed to have emerged, and in terms of the languages and styles it uses, it has been a gendered, racialized, and class-defined sphere. They argue that it is necessary therefore to think of several publics, rather than a single unified one. Here it is worth noting that in general, the forms of communication in actually existing public spheres can be far from reasoned or detached, taking the form of rumour (Mbembe, 1992), quarrels, preaching, political oratory, and storytelling (Keane, 1998:184).
that this leads automatically to community in its second sense of shared understandings, or interests.

Rather, this second form of community is asserted and contested in the public sphere. As Calhoun (1980) notes, identities and interests do not come completely pre-formed into the public sphere; rather, it is through the process of struggling for recognition and representation in this sphere that social groups identify around certain issues, articulate their interests, and make their claims, against other social actors as much as against the state. Community might serve as a powerful legitimating concept within the public sphere, to counter displacement by market imperatives; or to insist upon a moral economy (Li, 1996); or to make claims against the state; or to bid for state schemes or benefits premised on community (N. Sundar, 2000: Agrawal, 2005). But ultimately, its usefulness, versus that of class, as a mobilizing ideology or basis of claims-making, will depend upon which one carries greater resonance within a given political sphere. In these cases, community may or may not exist in some pure, unchanged sense, but may instead be self-consciously (re)constructed and deployed for political ends, either progressive (as in Aboriginal scholar Taiaiake Alfred’s (2009: 104-113) conception of a “self-conscious traditionalism” as a means to decolonization) or less so, as in the construction of a Hindu “community” in India. The success of a claim may further depend on the receptiveness of the state to it. For instance, in his work on Sikh separatist politics, Dipankar Gupta (1991) made the argument that Indira Gandhi’s government was more receptive to claims around religious concessions and symbols than it was to claims around redistributing river water resources and finances, and that this is what turned a movement with secular, material grievances into one defined by religious identity.15

Thus, in distinction to Chatterjee, who questions the applicability of a common term to describe diverse contexts, it might be possible to argue that value of civil society as a sociological construct lies precisely in its ability to reveal to us how identities and interests are related, how they interact and combine within the public sphere, and how the nature of political structures in a given time and place might determine the decision to articulate claims in material or symbolic terms. This is what White et al (1996) propose

15 Kohli (2007: 1257) makes the same point: Indira Gandhi’s need to win electoral majorities while moving away from a politics of redistribution in the 1980s, led here to flirt with ethnic politics instead.
when they argue that, stripped of the insistence that only certain forms of association and communication be recognised as legitimate constituents of this realm, civil society can be a useful sociological category to explore the quality of public life in diverse non-European societies. They note that work on developing societies (such as China) has shown the need to distinguish between different types or sectors of civil society - between modern interest groups such as trade unions or professional associations and "traditional" organisations based on kinship, ethnicity, culture or religion; between those organisations with specifically political roles and those which are outside politics or only intermittently involved; between formal organisations and informal social networks based on patrimonial or clientelistic allegiances; between legal or open associations and secret or illegal associations such as the Freemasons or the Mafia; between organisations which accept the political status quo and those which seek to transform it by changing the political regime or redefining the political community (White et al, 1996: 5). Similarly, Woods (1992), drawing on Chazan's differentiation of associations in Africa between voluntary associations of an interest group type and ascriptive or primary associations, such as ethnic associations, traditional political units and kinship associations, argues that it is the manner in which these associations interact with each other and with the state that determines the substantive character and boundaries of civil society in Africa (Woods, 1992: 92-93; italics mine). 16

To summarize, the trajectory of a Polanyian counter-movement is best observed from within civil society understood as a space of association, communication and contestation between diverse interests and identities. The features of this civil society are defined by the particular regional political-economic and cultural context within which it emerges. The use of civil society as a sociological construct to study public life in specific contexts allows us to analyze the limits and possibilities of building a broad counter-movement across seemingly diverse and dispersed communities and identities not already self-organized as a class. I now go on to describe an empirical methodology that can help map the contours of a particular civil society.

16 This argument has also been made by J.C. Alexander, 1998; Byrant, 1994; Harbeson et al, 1994; and Pye, 1999.
2 A Methodology for an Adequate Political Sociology: Political Settings

Case studies, particularly if their approach is largely ethnographic, are not favoured in Political Science. They cannot be used in the same way as, for instance, a comparative approach, to prove or disprove hypotheses, or adequately answer larger questions. What they can do, however, is to help illuminate and throw into relief particular moments and processes that give us better purchase on the nature of the state, the political economy, and social transformation in a given period and place. In so doing, they perform the difficult but necessary task of bringing a local situation, with its people, events, and stories, into dialogue with more general theoretical understandings. They can help test and improve theories about social and political change by bringing them to bear on local realities, and by seeking to discover which of them can add to the self-understanding of people as they make their own histories. Furthermore, by bringing practice into the discussion, they help guard against the arid disconnection from lived experience that characterizes much abstract social theory.

The theoretical weight of this case study rests on its ability to provide a fine-grained account of the content of public action in the Kanyakumari villages, and it is here that the "political setting" approach is particularly appropriate. The approach combines the systematicity of more positivistic approaches to the study of public life, with the attention to detail and nuance characteristic of more interpretive approaches.

Barker's (1987) concept of "political setting" refers to a unit of political action that is spatio-temporally discrete, ecologically, socially, and culturally embedded, and empirically identifiable. A meeting in an office, or a demonstration on the street, are both examples of political settings.

By locating politics physically, the use of political settings allows one to examine the "microfoundations" of such abstractions as "the state" in a quite literal sense. Looking closely at settings where state officials and their clients interact, such as in government

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17 For details on this method, samples of the forms used, and case studies applying it, see Barker et al, 1999.
offices, or in public demonstrations of protest, provides a sense of the relationships through which images of the state are forged (A. Gupta, 1995: 378). It positions us methodologically to "disaggregate" the state, both in terms of levels, and in terms of its institutions and policies; to examine the mutual interaction of "state" and "society" (Migdal et al., 1994); and potentially, even to de-centre the location of sovereignty (Magnusson, 1996: 9).

This approach not only positions us to disaggregate the state, it also enables us to disaggregate social movements and other forms of association. By paying systematic attention to who participates (for instance, whether women participate actively, and whether the manner of their participation differs from that of men), it allows us to see how struggles around issues in the fishery are also struggles about power in the village, practices of gender, and the role of the Church. The political settings method is sensitive to the role of physical space in structuring public life. It pays attention, for instance, to how spaces such as the beachfront, or the alleys between houses, can become politicized, or occupied by different groups. By examining rituals and routines, such as the opening and closing prayers at meetings, it further allows one to see how public life fits into the larger life of the villages. And finally, a focus on political settings enables reflection on forms of politicization, and the links between the formal settings of liberal democracy and other forms of participation.

In its attention to the language and tone of public discourse, the method reminds us that "the politics appropriate to a particular occasion always has to be invented" (Magnusson, 1996: 91), and it makes us alive to the creative and performative functions of politics, and to practice (as distinct from institutions and discourses). Until recently, the teleological and prescriptive bent of writing on the "third world" had neglected these aspects of politics (Manor, 1990: 2-4).

To focus on practice, and on the local and specific, is not by any means to posit the "assertion of authenticity," of "being there," as a superior means to understanding. The political settings method does not treat "the local" as "an unproblematic and coherent

18 For studies of other movements that discuss the tensions between the various levels of the movement, or between the movement and villages drawn into it, see Basu (1992) on the Shetkari Sangathana in Maharashtra, and Baviskar (1995) on the Save Narmada Movement in Madhya Pradesh.
spatial unit" (A. Gupta, 1995: 317) or deny the ways in which the "trans-local" structures the local. Rather, it allows us some empirical means to grasp at these multiple mediations. This does not do away with, but rather complements, more conventional research methods and analytical approaches that illuminate the necessary history, context, and deep structure.

Research for this study was undertaken over a ten-month period in 1994-1995, and then again over a month in 2004. With the help of two research assistants, both of whom were active in public life in the district, I selected seven of the forty-two coastal villages to focus on. These villages met our chief criterion of selection: each had a number of active associations. In addition, they were fairly representative of the villages as a whole, making for a good balance of Paravar and Mukkuvar villages (see Section 4) and for a reasonable diversity of fishing practices (which determined such things as relations of production, patterns of migration, and income levels).

Using the political setting method, our first step was to draw up, through conversations with the parish priest and different categories of village people, an "inventory" of public (potu, more literally "common" or "general") settings in the village: all the occasions and locations where people met collectively for public purposes, whether official, political, social, or recreational. The benefit of the lack of specificity of this approach was that it generated a diverse and often unexpected list of settings designated as public: the church, meetings, offices, demonstrations, but also the beach front, the water tanks where people went to bathe, and the water taps where women queued for water. In this sense, it worked as a rapid appraisal of public life, which I supplemented by residing, for different periods, in two of the villages, and observation of their daily routines.

Of the impressive variety of associations which were active in the villages, I selected only five for close study, although I attended meetings and talked to members of several others. The associations I selected were those that responded more or less directly to the economic and political challenges faced by the villagers: the village or parish councils, the basic Christian communities, the women's microcredit societies, the fishermen's marketing cooperatives, and the fishworkers' unions. I chose to focus on these for a number of reasons: (i) They dealt with issues of power, whether economic or political,
rather than being merely social or recreational, like the youth groups, fan clubs, and pious associations. (ii) They were active during the period of my acquaintance with the villages, in that they met regularly, and kept written records, such as minutes, accounts and reports. By contrast, the caste associations, though once important, were by then low-profile, and the village party units did not meet regularly, or keep records. (iii) They were widespread through the villages, so that they had the largest total membership, and the broadest geographical presence.

I then used a second set of political settings forms to record the history and structure of the associations I studied. Finally, a third type of form was used to obtain a standardized record of meetings of the associations. This took note of such details as the physical setting of the meeting, procedural rules, and the nature and "tone" of participation and decision-making.

I also carried out a limited survey in which I recorded socio-economic data and associational memberships for 20 percent of the households in the village of CM. For other villages I relied on available socio-economic statistics, and on open-ended interviews and life-histories with selected informants such as the parish priest, knowledgeable diocesan clergy, founding figures, leaders, activists, members and staff of associations, and villagers recommended to me as local historians. Through them I attempted to construct an account of such things as the evolution of village life, major struggles and events in their history, people's motivations for joining the various associations and their experiences within them, what the effect of these associations and other forms of collective action had been on their lives and on the life of the village, and what value people attached to public life and to their roles as public actors.

Written sources included statistics and documents on fisheries modernization available with the Tamil Nadu Fisheries Department, records and documents of the Diocese of Kottar, and Part IV of police records, dating back to the 1950s, in five police stations (Kanyakumari, Suchindram, Ethamozhy, Colachel and Pudukadai) under whose jurisdictions several of the coastal villages fell. Part IV records are those that have to do with group cases or conflicts, rather than individual complaints or infractions of the law, and contain complaints, petitions, as well as reports by the police officers themselves on
the situation or its resolution. Although patchy, and, at best, able to provide only a partial picture, they provide a fascinating glimpse into the framing of conflicts by both villagers and the police, around the fishery, land, religious observances, perceived insults, village funds, misdemeanours of the parish priest, and other local issues.

3 Arguments and Significance

Capitalism in the Kanyakumari fishery was first and most dramatically encountered as a conflict over scale. Mechanized trawlers were introduced by a government modernization scheme in the nineteen fifties, at almost the same time as private merchants in Kerala began to find an export market for shrimp, a species that traditionally had no value in local markets. It was the opening of these markets that made the trawlers viable, and led to their proliferation. The trawlers were not large in comparison to craft in Northern fisheries like Canada’s. But they used powerful engines to traverse large areas, and aggressively chased and scooped up massive quantities of fish in ways that the largely “passive” gear (gill nets, hook and lines, and traps) of the traditional or artisanal fishers could not. They posed a challenge to the customary modes of territorial regulation by village authority, competed with the smaller craft for inshore space and catch, and caused frequent harm to their nets. The intensification of the conflict between these two scales – the large-scale and the small-scale – across India’s coasts, coalesced into a national counter-movement. In the early eighties this movement forced the state to enact legislation requiring mechanized craft to operate beyond a zone of three nautical miles from the shore. In practice, the state’s weak will, and its inability to enforce this regulation, left the task to the artisanal fishing communities themselves. Stand-offs of the kind described in Chapter Seven continued until the end of the nineties.

The vastly unequal share of the catch captured by the trawlers as compared to the artisanal craft represented a form of enclosure or privatization of the marine resources. The artisanal fishers sought to counter this and to assert social regulation over the operation of the trawlers in terms of what Mies and Bennholdt Thomsen (2000) have called a “subsistence perspective,” and what others, such as Linebaugh (2008) and McCarthy (2005), have referred to as “the perspective of the commons.” This asserts the
right of the community to regulate access to a shared resource; to resist forms of enclosure, or privatization, of this resource, and to oppose the enrichment of a few at the expense of the many (“the assertion of collective ownership and rights against relentless privatization and commodification”) (McCarthy, 2005: 11). Tied to these arguments about the relationship of community and the commons were other related claims, about the right to subsistence for poor people, and the small-scale as inherently more equitable and ecologically sustainable. The national counter-movement developed these arguments into a larger critique of the state’s “growth model” of development, in contrast to a people-focused approach that would favour equity and food security, and the long-term sustainability of the resource.

But, as noted at the start of this chapter, this movement to assert social control over the market had declined by the early years of this decade, even as the presence of the market had deepened. Explanations for this apparent paradox are complicated, and must be sought in the nature of the markets themselves, as well as in civil society. As markets for the fishery continued to expand, a new rationale for opposition began to emerge. The voracious appetite of export markets, and the opening of distant national markets through improvements in storage and transportation infrastructure, created a demand for fish and seafood that the trawlers alone could not fill. Thus, artisanal fishers too began supplying these markets almost from their very opening in the sixties. In the early seventies the diocesan social service society aimed its development efforts at “modernizing” artisanal craft. In the eighties these initiatives were matched by government motorization schemes that enabled artisanal fishers to increase their own productivity. But they also increased the fishers’ level of investment and corresponding indebtedness. Although still operating on a smaller scale in terms of craft, horsepower, and “efficiency” of gear, artisanal fishers were, like the trawlers, increasingly inserted into distant markets for their product, as well as for credit and other inputs. They continued to oppose the trawlers, but this was now a conflict informed also by new rationales of market share, profitability, and solvency, even if they continued to use the older language of subsistence. The artisanal fishers’ arguments against the threat to ecological sustainability posed by the trawlers also became more muted as their own extractive practices intensified.
In the early nineties a new threat led to a tenuous truce between the two sectors, as they joined in opposition to the government’s proposal to license foreign vessels to fish in India’s deep seas through joint ventures. Over the course of the past decade, the conflict between them further subsided as the continued demand from markets led artisanal fishers to increase their own investment in the fishery. The more successful artisanal fishers acquired larger craft, more powerful engines, and a variety of more intensive gear; many also opted to acquire trawlers. Increased investment in the sector, coupled with a finite resource concentrated in a finite area, led inevitably to the concentration of ownership. Artisanal fishers who were less successful in raising or repaying the capital necessary to this transition moved seasonally, or permanently, into working as labour on the trawlers. Here they found that they often made higher incomes as crew than they had as owners of less diversified artisanal craft. Work on the trawlers does not require a high degree of skill. Many of the younger men from fishing villages who have worked on trawlers all their lives do not possess the skills to operate *kattumarams* or a hook and line; because of this, as noted in Chapter 2, men from other backgrounds are beginning to enter the trawler fishery as crew. Polanyi (1957: 75) observed that the adoption of new, more specialized, and more expensive technology increases the risk of investment and requires that the continuance of production be assured, and that this marks a point of qualitative shift when the demands of industrial production tied to the market come to dominate. That decisive transformation does indeed seem to have taken place in the Kanyakumari fishery.

However, this transformation, while dramatic in terms of capital investment, technology and market orientation, has not yet been as dramatic in terms of labour. Relations of community persist to a large extent in the trawler sector: crew are recruited largely from the fishing villages, as members of fishing castes, and work as groups of friends or relatives on the trawlers; earnings are distributed in the form of shares rather than wages; and the labour process on board the craft is relatively egalitarian. As a consequence, the lines have become somewhat blurred between a “modern,” “large-scale,” mechanized sector within which community continues to operate, and a “small-scale,” “artisanal,” or “community-based” sector that is subsumed into input and output markets, uses large craft and powerful motors, and relies increasingly on technology rather than skills learned
from family and community. One might be able to infer from this that the progress of the “self-regulating market” is not quite as linear as Polanyi’s account would suggest.

A second inference that might be drawn at the level of the economy itself, is that the distinction between the social and economic may be no more sharply drawn in capitalist societies than in pre-capitalist ones. According to Polanyi, in pre-capitalist societies, the economic and the social are not separate spheres of human endeavour, and no purely economic motives can be identified. While it is true that distinctly economic motives of profitability and solvency, aided by government schemes and credit markets, now dictate decisions in the fishery, it is also the case that these are connected to a new set of social values around consumption – higher dowries, new consumer goods, travel and leisure. No doubt this is what Polanyi meant when he wrote that “there can be no market economy without a market society,” i.e., that “once the economic system is organized in separate institutions, based on specific motives and conferring a special status, society must be shaped in such a manner as to allow that system to function according to its own laws” (1957: 57). But the point of consequence here, and one that I will take up again in the discussion on civil society a little further down, is that the social values from which the counter-movement against the market is to be launched are themselves transformed and may no longer provide the basis for this movement.

The thinning of social values within which to re-embed the market does not necessarily mean the disappearance of an objective need to do so. The transition described above has had many costs, and the potential for conflict and displacement remains high. Despite the absolute rise in incomes, these are still relatively low-income communities. The vast majority of families carry large debts, incurred to increase their investment in the fishery, pay for a daughter’s dowry, or educate a son in a profession outside the fishery. For many, the costs of an extended illness in the family, or cheating by a visa agent or employer in the Gulf, can mean a setback into poverty. And at the base of their aspirations for continued upward mobility is a deep vulnerability: they are trapped in the inescapable contradiction of increasing investment in, and extraction of, an ultimately finite resource.
Further, the costs of the transformation are borne unequally, in ways that often re-inscribe traditional social inequalities. Women, no longer engaged in weaving nets and drying fish as in the family-based fishery, are required to play new roles in the capitalist fishery. Their traditional role in mobilizing credit for subsistence and productive purposes has been deepened as the need for capital has grown exponentially and as rising incomes have created new desires for consumption. Given the scarcity of paid employment, their dowries are now expected to meet these new consumption and investment needs. The longer absences of the men, who migrate to work either on trawlers in Kerala or on their artisanal craft further up the coasts, or for waged work in the Persian Gulf fishery, has increased women’s responsibility for managing the production and reproduction of social life and of community.

Further explanations for the decline of the counter-movement can be found within civil society. Here I proceed indirectly, beginning by responding to Chatterjee’s doubts about the very presence of such a sphere among subaltern Indians. My case establishes the presence of civil society – as a sphere of autonomous and routinized association and publicity – among subaltern groups in rural India. Villagers are indeed acted upon by a state in the name of development, and bargain with it through the mechanisms of political society (representative democracy, electoral politics), constituting voting blocs based on their collective caste, or religious, or linguistic identities; they also participate in state-generated institutions like the Panchayats which seek to reconcile the development-democracy tension. But further, they are engaged in a whole range of associations independent of the state, and not aimed at acting directly upon it; rather their objects here are as likely to be society and its hierarchies (the Church, gender, caste, status), and the economy. The associations are formally constituted and follow legal and procedural niceties. Members participate as individuals, rather than as members of identity-based collectives.

Thus, I argue that Chatterjee’s schema does not do justice to the complexity of associational life in rural India: it is neither sociologically accurate nor analytically helpful to demarcate two distinct spheres of political and civil society. To think of subalterns as acting only within a political society of contingent and politically negotiated
outcomes and practices of questionable legality, while more middle-class or bourgeois actors operate within a civil society defined by constitutional practices and liberal understandings of citizenship, is to fail to observe the deep-reaching impact of India’s liberal-democratic constitutional framework. Subaltern groups act within a sphere, marked and differentiated by class, undoubtedly, but where practices can be both routinized and legal, on the one hand, and contingent on political negotiations or of questionable legality, on the other.

But to argue that a civil society does exist in these subaltern villages is not to argue that it resembles exactly the civil society of the upper classes, or of the European ideal-type. Instead, I argue for a family of civil societies, each shaped and framed by its own political economic conditions and vernacular locations. The civil society described here has multiple roots.

Firstly, the transformation summarized here did not impose itself upon the Kanyakumari villagers behind their backs, as an abstract phenomenon. Rather, they resisted, moderated, and adapted to it, through their own individual and collective agency. The plurality of forms taken by this collective agency in its encounters with capitalism – the unions and village associations, the marketing and credit cooperatives, and the women’s microcredit groups – constitute one important strand of civil society.

Secondly, although capitalist markets may have called into being a large set of associations, the sources of, and resources for this associational life lay elsewhere. They lay in villagers’ own rotating credit associations and chit funds, in the village committees that regulated the fishery and other village affairs, and in the old caste associations that adjudicated caste affairs and negotiated new alliances and patrons. In these associations was contained the idea of the village community, low in status, but autonomous from the state, and able to assert a degree of sovereignty over the management of its own affairs, including the local economy.

In her ethnography of these same villages, Ajantha Subramanian (2009) traces an old tradition of rights that does not see them as necessarily distinct from patronage; this is the basis of a distinctive, provincial understanding of rights and democracy that continues to
influence the way subaltern actors negotiate, in the present, between Church, state, and political party. This is a powerful insight, and one that any close observer of the region cannot help but appreciate. But while the civil society described here might trace its genealogy to earlier institutions and practices, the immediate post-colonial period and the structures put in place by a liberal-democratic constitution have been enormously consequential to its formation. In Chapter Three, I describe how the post-colonial state was driven by the structural imperatives of the “passive revolution,” and by the ideological predilections of key leaders, to institute liberal democracy; establish institutions of development, such as the fishermen’s cooperatives, through the Community Development Programme; and attempt to give official recognition to village self-government associations in the form of the Panchayats. These Panchayats were represented as “traditional” forms of village self-government, although in practice the state sought to transform them by requiring that they be constituted through formal elections. The centrality of subaltern groups to political life and to state-building was reflected in these projects, and in the language of poverty alleviation, employment generation, social welfare, and participation that dominated electoral politics. The populist politics of the Dravidian parties in Tamil Nadu provided a new language within which lower castes, and the poor more generally, were incorporated, either through caste assertion or through patronage-seeking. Electoral politics also created structures of association in the villages, such as the party units, women’s and youth wings of political parties, and the fan clubs peculiar to the successful use of films and media by Dravidian politicians. And, with the turn to neo-liberal modes of governance in the past decade, as capitalism has deepened its global and national grip, the state has deployed the language of participation to justify downloading to civil society functions such as planning, service delivery, welfare provision, and income generation. While the state’s initiatives of development and democracy have stopped short of redistribution that would fundamentally alter the structural basis of poverty, they have nonetheless made a signal contribution in extending the idea of equality into social life and in enabling subaltern groups to question the “natural-ness” of the hierarchical social order.

The fourth major source of associational life in the villages is the Catholic Church, as described in Chapter Four. The Church straddles state and society and mediates between
them, creating a second layer of authority through a kind of relationship of subsidiarity with the state. Over the years, for complex reasons having to do locally with needing to maintain legitimacy with its followers, nationally with matching secular movements aimed at social reform, and internationally with internal and theological sources of contestation and reform, the Church has introduced a variety of associational forms in the villages. These range from pious associations and youth groups, to the Basic Christian Communities and the reformed parish councils. They have become spaces from within which the Church struggles to maintain its relevance, and from which parishioners seek to make claims upon the Church and state, while simultaneously asserting their autonomy from them. But they are also spaces within which villagers seek to reform the hierarchies of village life itself, such as the exclusion of women from political authority. And they are spaces where members learn the routines and technologies of modern governance, such as rules of order for the conduct of meetings, minutes and accounts, village censuses, and membership cards.

Thus, a rich and plural, vernacular civil society exists in these villages, one not dependent on the salons and coffee houses which birthed its European counterpart. Nor was it predicated upon a complete secularization of world views, or a widespread shift from ascriptive community to a society of individuals linked horizontally by class. However, those ascriptive communities that do exist, such as the village itself as represented in the village committee, rarely exist in primordial form. Rather, as I show in Chapters Five through Seven, over time they have been challenged, reformed, and reconstituted. The ideas informing associational life are diverse, intersecting, and often conflicting, and came from a multiplicity of local, regional, national, and international sources. They encourage caste assertion, as well as patronage-seeking. They embrace appropriate technology, Schumacherian “small is beautiful,” basismo, and Gandhian self-reliance, but also upward mobility, and the equation of large-scale mechanization with progress and modernity. Religion acts variously as an essential element of identity; as a matter of private faith that does not prevent voting for parties representing alternative religious identities; and as the basis for social critique and reform.
It is in the diverse and often conflicting associations and ideas that populate civil society that one might find further explanations for the decline of the counter-movement at the local scale. The first insight comes from paying attention to discourse and communication in civil society. The case illustrates how powerful keywords \(^{19}\) were appropriated by diverse actors to enact very different outcomes; it also illustrates how a given group of actors might retain a keyword for its social power, but gradually fill it with radically different meanings. Different sectors within the fishery formed associations to represent their conflicting interests – the artisanal fishers seeking through their associations to regulate trawling in the interests of equity and sustainability, the trawler associations aiming to loosen this attempt at regulation. Both used the language of community, the most powerful language in the villages. Part of its power, and the ability of diverse actors to use it, lies in its polysemy. Chapter 3 shows how, whereas the Indian state as well as political parties at the Centre and state level invoked the poor in their development and electoral discourses, and made populist statements around redistribution, the extent of this redistribution was limited, and the claims of community and subalternity were addressed instead through what Nancy Fraser (1995) has called the politics of “recognition” (of caste, religious or ethnic identity). But the state also pressed for development as modernization, and it was the combination of modernization and caste uplift that the trawlers invoked as their referent for community. Within the Church likewise, both meanings of development and community could be found, and were applied differently at different points, at one point to support the artisanal fishers, and more recently to support caste and community “improvement” and modernization as represented by the trawlers owners.

Kanyakumari villagers used community in conjunction with the commons in the attempt to embed markets within society. In this understanding of the commons, property, locality, work, and conservation formed part of an inseparable whole, along with a conception of sovereignty and fundamental rights. Elaborating on this conception of the commons as embodied in the earliest version of the *Magna Carta* Linebaugh (2008: 44-45) writes:

\(^{19}\) I use the term in Raymond Williams’ (1983) sense, as a word that becomes an important referent in a particular period, but contains different meanings, significations and social relationships for different groups of users.
First, common rights are embedded in a particular ecology with its local husbandry. For commoners, the expression “law of the land” from chapter 39 [of the Magna Carta] does not refer to the will of the sovereign. Commoners think first not of title deeds, but of human deeds: how will this land be tilled?...Second, commoning is embedded in a labor process; it inheres in a particular praxis of field, upland, forest, marsh, coast. Common rights are entered into by labor. Third, commoning is collective. Fourth, being independent of the state, commoning is independent also of the temporality of the law and state. Magna Carta does not list rights, it grants perpetuities.

It was this radical relationship between commons and community sovereignty that the artisanal fishers of Kanyakumari invoked in their counter-movement against the market. They called for the state to uphold these rights as prior and perpetual entitlements that inhere in us all, and cannot be alienated in the name of development, or improvement. These were rights to *particular* forms of subsistence, to particular histories and relationships to locality and ecology, and could not simply be substituted by displacement and “resettlement” in some rural wasteland or urban slum. These rights-claims were amplified on the national scale by the National Fishworkers’ Forum.

But as markets expanded, artisanal fishers in Kanyakumari were integrated into capitalist modernity not through displacement and proletarianization, but through often successful adaptations to expanding markets. These successful adaptations were in part made possible through forms of collective action within civil society, such as the cooperatives and the microcredit groups. This adaptation had the effect of transforming values and aspirations around consumption, so that the subsistence or commons perspective became less attractive. The national movement that continued to speak the language of the commons began to appear increasingly unrepresentative of this new set of desires. The upwardly aspiring fishers of Kanyakumari continue to use the language of community, but for them it represents caste and social location (place, religious identity). For them, the subsistence ethic of the commons would only serve to limit their economic aspirations and keep down the “community” (Dietrich and Nayak, 2006). Now not only trawler owners, but also artisanal fishers, use community in conjunction with identity, to argue for participation in markets as a means of social mobility and caste uplift.

The invocation of community provides a second explanation for the limitations of the counter-movement. This has to do with its inability to build broader alliances with other
similarly placed groups outside the villages. Alliances with agricultural and urban castes in the district or region around common campaigns have been few and far between. The national movement built on the understanding of community as commons to make broader links with other marginalized or displaced groups (through membership in the National Alliance of People’s Movements, for instance); it also used this to inform a language of class, as seen in the organizational names of the national union (National Fishworkers’ Forum) and its Kanyakumari unit (Tamil Nadu Fishworkers’ Union). As I describe in Chapter Seven, a proposal at the general body meeting in 1989 of what was then called the National Fishermen’s Forum, to change its name to the more-gender neutral “fishworker” was met with some resistance. The resistance was based less on opposition to the inclusion of women, than on the belief that it would open membership to those from non-fishing communities. Because fishing has traditionally been a caste-based occupation, the term “fisherman” in various vernaculars refers equally to the caste-community and to the occupation. Those who opposed the name change were seeking to limit membership, and access to the fishery, to traditional fishing communities. Unfortunately, it was not just richer entrepreneurial entrants they wished to exclude, but poorer castes seeking a livelihood in the sector as well. The change in name did not change the association with caste-based community for many members. This was even truer at the local level, as I have argued above. The definition of community as caste turned public action into a focus on caste uplift and mobility within the existing political economy, rather than into a critique of it. This is, of course, not inherent in caste-based mobilization, for elsewhere, as in the Dalit movements, there have emerged radical critiques and calls for total transformation of Indian society and political economy. Chapters 3 and 4 show the strong influence of Dravidian political parties and the Catholic Church in the district in determining this particular form of caste-based mobilization in Kanyakumari. But the phenomenon is a more general one across the country where, as Harriss-White and Gooptu (2001) show, the "struggles over class" – the struggles to form a cohesive working class out of a labour market largely structured by caste and other forms of ascriptive identity, or even to form interest-based alliances between class fractions, are still largely absent. In the absence of this broad-based alliance of the subaltern classes, the counter-hegemonic struggle against the dominant classes that Gramsci envisaged remains a long way off. While Polanyi may be right, and it may be
possible that diverse groups experiencing the depredations of the market in very different ways can come to recognize a common social interest in regulating it, this is hard to imagine in the absence of a common language with which to articulate this, as well as a great deal of mobilizational work to counter caste and place-based insularities.

A third explanation for the decline of the counter-movement is also related to the particular nature of Indian society. The active participation of women and youth in several of the associations was aimed not at challenging the state, or “embedding” the economy, but at claiming space and rights within the village community. Crucially, a significant element of participation in civil society is concerned with democratizing society, which is still patriarchal and caste- and status-ridden, as much as it is about democratizing the state or the economy. This is where we see the deep influence of the fundamental promise of democracy, a promise contained in India’s liberal-democratic constitution, and expressed institutionally in an independent judiciary and media, and multi-party elections. Civil society is a terrain for collective contestation not only between economy and society, but also for contestation within the lifeworld of society itself. Although people enter civil society with particular identities, and as members of communities, civil society is the space in which these identities and memberships are challenged and reconstituted. It is the space in which people seek to engage with and transform social structures, as much as they seek to engage with and transform the state or the economy.

The participation of women was especially striking in this regard. Though I had not gone out looking for contestation around gender, I found it everywhere. Every struggle in civil society seemed either to be around the participation of women, or to have been transformed by their participation. Men stayed away from the Basic Christian Communities (BCCs) described in Chapter Five once they began to be seen as spaces that empowered women. Since the men were the income earners, their absence disempowered the BCCs in making decisions about financial matters or even settling disputes, since often the disputes involved finances or property. The Kanyakumari village committee, which wanted to be able to confront trawler owners, militantly resisted being reconstituted as a parish council that would involve women. And yet it was the women
who occupied the highway for three days during the height of the stand-off against the
trawlers, who forced the District Collector to come there to address them, who spoke to
him as if he were a young boy, and who went to Madras to meet with their elected
representatives. Women were present in the most militant, and the most routine actions.
In almost every association, it was the women who took the minutes and kept the
accounts. This may be the kind of secretarial role that women have traditionally played,
but in a situation where large numbers of the men were still illiterate, the role had the
potential to be more powerful.

There is a tension between the invocation of society to regulate the market, and the often
oppressive character of the actual society being invoked. And in this tension, the dis-
embedding from social control put in place by the market may be welcomed as liberatory
rather than countered. This is the appeal of the microcredit groups for the women, for
they promise “empowerment” through increased participation in credit markets. And this
precisely is what leads the fishing castes, traditionally low in the caste hierarchy, to come
to embrace markets as a means to upward mobility.

A fourth explanation for the shift in the counter-movement comes from paying attention
to the range of economic associations in the villages, in addition to those concerned
specifically with seeking to re-embed the market. The deepening of market relations in
the fishery generated a variety of associations, some of which, such as the fishermen’s
cooperatives described in Chapter Six, worked to improve artisanal fishers’ ability to
participate in markets. The guarantee against risk of non-payment, provided by the social
form of the self-help groups, also described in the same chapter, enabled women to get
access to microcredit. In these cases, association may be seen as instrumental to market
participation. As noted earlier, the generalization of capitalism creates new needs and
desires, and new social values. The difficulty of “embedding” the market within social
values comes from the fact that these social values have themselves been transformed by
the operations of the market. I argue that the use of different claims in different periods
reflects not simply strategic choice, but a transformed social subjectivity. It may be that
fishers have begun to earn more from mechanizing and exporting their catch, but it might
also be the case that they apply a different calculus of costs and benefits. And this new
calculus is the outcome not only of participation in the market but also of participation in a host of associations of civil society, such as marketing cooperatives and microcredit societies. These associations adapt social relationships to the market, making it possible to argue that participation in civil society can itself be a means to this adaptation.

A final insight that can help explain the decline of the counter-movement has to do with the political implications of civil society. Participants in civil society may see it as a space from which to assert autonomy from the state, as with the Kanyakumari village committee, thus creating a “crisis of governability” (Kohli, 1990). But subaltern groups are also being schooled as citizens through participation in civil society, and gaining familiarity with modern technologies of governance. Increasingly, they desire to act through them, rather than in more unruly or uncivil ways. As associational life becomes more formal and routinized, one sees a deepening and pervasive “governmentality,” Foucault’s term for the “the direction toward specific ends of conduct which has as its objects both individuals and populations and which combines techniques of domination and discipline with technologies of self-government” (Gupta and Sharma, 2006: 277). This allows us to see “how rule is consolidated and power is exercised in society through societal relations, institutions, and bodies that do not automatically fit under the rubric of “the state,” but which are not counterposed to it” (ibid).

This “governmentality” can have the effect of limiting creativity and imagination around new forms of assertion and claims-making. This was certainly the intent of the diocesan Coastal Peace and Development Commission described in Chapter Seven, which was established with the mandate of schooling artisanal fishers in more civilized forms of interest representation through bargaining, rather than through the confrontational modes they favoured. But the fishers’ confrontation was the outcome not only of a choice of modes, but of different understandings of rights and sovereignty over the resource. It is possible to imagine that a shift in the modes of participation might lead to a shift in the claims themselves, so that ideas of autonomy, and sovereignty over common resources and village affairs, gradually fade away as a more routinized and rule-bound civil society takes over.
To conclude, this thesis makes an original contribution in a number of areas. It uses an empirical case study to illustrate and extend the Polanyian problematic about the rise and decline of a counter-movement to re-embed markets in society. It explains the decline of the counter-movement in part by demonstrating the non-linear nature of the impact of markets on subaltern classes, whereby they may enable a degree of upward mobility and, as well, transform values and aspirations around lifestyle and consumption. Further, by locating the counter-movement within civil society, the thesis illuminates the political difficulties of sustaining such a counter-movement. A central contribution of the study lies in its use of civil society as a sociological-analytical construct to map subaltern agency and social transformation. In doing so, it makes a series of conceptual clarifications to the construct. By showing how civil society is not necessarily premised on social differentiation or individuation, but can arise from ascriptive communities, and how it is not premised on secularization, but is often sponsored by the Church, the case helps to map alternative modernities, and to avoid the simplistic transplanting of Eurocentric categories. Although the study makes no attempt to compare different localities, it demonstrates the power of its approach for comparative analysis by discovering changes in the form and content of civil society in one locality over time.

The study also contributes to theorizing in areas beyond those it directly addresses. Social movement theorists (Baviskar, 2005; Herring, 2005; Omvedt, 2005) and political ecologists (A. Subramanian, 2009; Sinha, Gururani and Greenberg, 1997; S. Guha, 1999) have argued that we cannot think of subaltern actors as being motivated by an essential consciousness determined by their structural location. In particular, this is a critique of some forms of ecological discourse that assume that “ecosystem people” (Gadgil and Guha, 1995; see also Shiva, 1991, 1989) tend naturally to act in ways that are conserving, or defensive, of the ecology that is vital to their survival. My case shows how material location and larger discourses intersect to shape the consciousness and action of subaltern people: they are both subaltern, and citizens of a larger public.\(^{20}\) While their associations

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\(^{20}\) Ajantha Subramanian makes a similar argument. In *Shorelines: Space and Rights in South India*, her ethnography of coastal Kanyakumari, she is concerned to “provincialize democracy,” showing it to derive from a long indigenous history of claims-making. Despite our obvious commonalities in focus and interpretation, there are key differences: in the more systematic empirical basis of my methodology; and in our conceptual frameworks. Subramanian’s preoccupations are with concepts of identity, “space,”
may have emerged around concerns specific to their structural location, such as the need to work out an equitable and sustainable system of resource tenure for the fishery, or to raise incomes to counter poverty and ensure social security, or to gain basic services, they have sought to publicize them using a language of rights and legal claims learned within a larger public sphere. Equally, their needs and understandings have been transformed by participation in this sphere, as well as in a market-based economy.

Another contribution is to work on the impact of economic liberalization in India. The writing on the impact of liberalization in India has tended to favour one or other pole of a binary: On the one hand, there are the beneficiaries, the “new middle classes” in the cities employed in information technology, the media, and transnational finance and manufacturing (Varma, 1999; Fernandes, 2006; Fernandes and Heller, 2006; Fuller and Narasimhan, 2007). Not just the nature of their work, but also their desires, consumption practices and subjectivities are shaped by their participation in the new global economy. On the other hand are those being displaced and dispossessed by the burgeoning economy’s insatiable demand for land and resources, such as the adivasi populations of central India (See N. Sundar, 2006, 2007). Within the poles of this binary, there has been little work on communities such as the one I describe. The fishers of Kanyakumari share a structural location with those displaced and dispossessed: lower caste status, participating not in the “new” sectors of the economy, but in the exploitation of a finite natural resource, and vulnerable to the same land grabs for tourism and other forms of “development.” Yet they have benefited, albeit unevenly and perhaps only momentarily, from participation in global markets, and their identities are increasingly shaped by the desires and aspirations of liberal-capitalist subjectivity. This study helps to nuance and complicate the binaries within which the social impact of liberalization in India has thus far been understood.

In the following section, I trace how the arguments summarized here are developed in the remaining chapters. As will become clear, each chapter also draws from and speaks to several literatures and bodies of theory other than those that are the central concerns of the thesis.

citizenship, and modernity, whereas mine have to do with associational life, publicity, social movements in place, and the dynamics of popular resistance.
4 Outline of Chapters

Chapter Two is the starting point for the study. It paints a picture of villages that are almost entirely dependent on fishing for their livelihood, and goes on to trace the development of the market in the Kanyakumari fishery. The extent of economic transformation is explored through a focus on changing ownership, labour relations, and work patterns (for example, through migration); rising incomes and changing patterns of consumption; changing access to the fish resources and the tightening relationship to national and global markets for fish and seafood, but also for credit and technology. The relative role of the state, markets, non-state actors like the Church and NGOs, and the fishers themselves in introducing, adapting to, or resisting these changes, is explored. The chapter engages with theorization around capitalist transformation in primary resource production, and concludes by arguing that the transformation witnessed in the fishery, while substantial, is not equally extensive across all aspects of the sector, and that market expansion is not a linear phenomenon.

It has been argued that politics in post-colonial India have been framed by the twin axes, or imperatives, of development and democracy. Chapter Three explores how these imperatives have structured the relationship between the state and subaltern groups. The chapter describes some of the programs and institutions by means of which the state has sought to act upon the population with the goal of development, focusing in particular on the Community Development Programme and the Panchayati Raj Institutions. Regional variations are important to understanding both development and democracy; thus a second focus is on the politics of Tamil Nadu, governed as it been for the last four decades by Dravidian parties with their distinct ideologies of non-Brahmin caste assertion, and regional nationalism based on linguistic identity. The final section explores the ways in which civil society actors in Kanyakumari understand their relationship to the state and political parties, and draw on them in their struggles. The chapter demonstrates how much of the associational and communicative content of civil society in Kanyakumari has been generated by the state, and allows us to examine the validity of Chatterjee’s civil-political society distinction. It further allows us to see how the state and
political parties have framed community, class, development and reform in ways that generally permit the structural basis of dominant class hegemony to go unchallenged, but occasionally also provide ideological resources for subaltern groups in their projects of counter-hegemony and counter-movement against the market.

The Catholic Church is the dominant social institution in the coastal villages of Kanyakumari. The size and prominence of the church in every village, especially when contrasted to the cramped housing of the villagers, illustrates its centrality as a structure of authority. It is to the role of the Catholic Church in the villages that I turn in Chapter Four. From its beginnings in the region five centuries ago, it has been allowed a degree of autonomy by the state; this has continued to be the case under the secular constitution of postcolonial India. The Church thus carries out several state functions, such as law and order, taxation, and civil law, and represents the villagers to the state. It has also been responsible for initiating much of the associational life in the villages. But the Church is not monolithic, and a variety of currents and influences flow through it: the Indian state, constitution, national political developments; developments of reform and reaction in the universal Church; oppositional social movements, and local caste and village politics. Nor is the relationship between the Church and its community entirely harmonious, with the authority of the Church being constantly called into question, and much of its own activities being about restoring or trying to maintain legitimacy. In particular, diocesan clergy drawn from the fishing villages play this dual role: as traditional intellectuals, transmitting the traditional values of the Church – moral order, uplift, and improvement, (the latter two being values it shares with the state); and as organic intellectuals, concerned with the “liberation” of their fellow subalterns. This dual role of the Church and its officials contributes to the polyvalence and contradictions of civil society, in particular around ideas of community, development and social reform.

Chapters Five, Six and Seven form the empirical core of the study. Each describes a particular set of associations, established for particular ends. While Chapter 7 examines the trajectory of the fishworkers’ movement that is a central concern of this thesis, Chapters 5 and 6 are important in establishing the range of processes that villagers are simultaneously engaged in, seeking to govern themselves and redefine the village
community, and to adapt society to the market. Within these arenas we see class and community constituted in complementary and conflicting ways, as villagers act to challenge social hierarchies, and simultaneously to adapt to, or counter, the market.

Chapter Five describes the associations for village self-governance – the Basic Christian Communities, Parish Councils, and youth groups. While almost all of these have been initiated by the Church, participants in them do not simply accept its authority. What we see instead is a struggle between the Church, the village community, traditional village leaders, and hitherto marginalized groups such as youth and women. What becomes clear is that individual, gender, and class interests are emerging to challenge collective identities, such as those of village, Church, and community. Participation in civil society is directed at transforming society itself. But here too there are several tensions. While old style village committees resist Church intervention, thus asserting the sovereignty and autonomy of the village community against the domination of the Church, women seek Church support to enable their participation. The will to self-governance is widespread through the villages, and what we see is the proliferation of sites for self-governance, such as in the youth groups. But as villagers become more skilled and confident in the practices and techniques of self-governance, there is also the possibility of an increased Foucauldian “governmentality,” a way of governing the self that is in accord with larger systems of power and dominance.

Chapter Six examines the associations of economic empowerment that are also the means of adapting to the market. Microcredit and self-help groups for women have become the most popular form of association for states, multilateral institutions, and NGOs. Here community is being harnessed to further capital accumulation. The fishermen’s cooperatives have similar aims, but a different history in the villages. A comparison between the two can tell us much about the relationship of economy and society, and the variety of meanings that “embedding” can have.

The social movement for community control over the fishery, described in Chapter Seven, drew on the other kinds of civil society associations described in Chapters 5 and 6. Its strength – its ability to mobilize and to raise funds – was to a large extent dependent on their support. Yet it went beyond them to enter into political society and negotiate
directly with the state. While some of the above associations have expanded to larger scales (such as the regional federation of the fishermen’s cooperatives), most of their activities are at the village level. The social movement was distinct in its ability rapidly to shift scales, and to draw villagers into national and international arenas. The chapter traces the rise and fall of the counter-movement at the local scale (in contrast to its relative success at the national scale), the variety of local associational forms it took, and the opposition it generated from trawler owners. It concludes by documenting how the collusion of state and Church, and the invocation of ideas of community uplift and civilized politics helped to de-mobilize the counter-movement, although in large part changes in the economy had already begun to weaken it.

5 Setting the Stage

I first went to Kanyakumari in 1989 as a volunteer with the “Kanyakumari March,” an environmental-awareness campaign organized by the National Fishworkers’ Forum. After the March, I stayed on for a year as an employee of the Forum, helping to initiate the Tamil Nadu Fishworkers’ Union (TFU) which took as one of its central platforms the counter-movement against trawling. In the years following, I continued to observe with interest the fate of the Forum and TFU, as representative of the new social movements that had arisen across the country to challenge the state’s growth-led and “anti-people” model of development. My time in the villages had also given me a great appreciation for the abundance of associational life to be seen there, and the enormous time, energy and creativity villagers put into it. The fishermen of Kanyakumari are among the most skilled in the country, and the highly productive fishery of the region has been rapidly drawn into the expanding global and national markets for fish and seafood of the latter half of the twentieth century. It seemed appropriate then, to return to Kanyakumari for a study of public action in the context of capitalist transformation.

5.1 Arriving in the Villages

Kanyakumari village is twenty kilometres from Nagercoil, the headquarters of Kanyakumari district. It is off to the east of the main highway that runs north-south to end at the Cape of Comorin (Kumari). The village’s population of close to ten thousand
belongs to the two fishing castes of the district – Mukkuvar and Paravar. Kanyakumari stretches barely two kilometres along the coast from northeast to southwest, and one kilometre between the sea to the east and the highway to the west. Small brick and cement houses with tiled roofs line the beach close to the sea. Early in the morning (depending on the season), one sees knots of men pushing off in their kattumarams to sea, and when the catch comes in, a much larger bustle as the catch is auctioned off. The beach is for the most part a male space, but now a few women are present, some to collect a few fish from their family boat to cook, and other, older women who bid for it and take it to inland markets to sell. Later, the space between the houses and the beach is packed with drying kattumarams so that one has to pick out a careful path between them, the drying nets, and the children playing outside the houses. In the afternoons and evenings, men sit in groups close to the beached craft, mending their nets or playing cards. Women also sit in groups closer to their homes, playing games, talking, combing their children's hair. Boys can often be seen playing among the boats; girls are more likely to be playing hopscotch near their homes. Given the warm climate and the cool sea breeze, people live outdoors as much as in, and the distinction between public and private is not sharply drawn. This becomes less true as one moves inland, to the west of the village. Families who have entered other occupations – merchants, teachers, white-collar workers of various kinds, and increasingly, trawler owners – live closer to the highway that runs to the west of the village, in larger, better furnished houses. Such families have more of an "interior life". The Catholic church of Our Lady of the Snows marks the centre of the village, the dividing line between the more prosperous and the less so. Along the beach are two other small shrines, where families in the area light candles and the women often go to pray in the evenings.

To get to another of the fishing villages, Mel Manakudy, one hurtles in a public transport bus along winding roads between young, green paddy fields, against the backdrop of the old blue-grey western ghats. As you approach the village the sea comes up ahead, the backwater appears to one’s left, the bus rounds a bend, and there in front of us is a large, pink church surrounded by small, red-tiled houses. At the bus stand in front of the church are painted a map of the village and the schedule of bus timings, both put up by a local youth group. There are also small flag posts flying the flags of the major parties - DMK,
ADMK, Congress (I), CPI(M) and Janata Dal. In other villages, one might see walls painted with party symbols such as the DMK’s rising sun or the ADMK’s twin leaf or, more rarely, the CPI (M)’s hammer and sickle. Meetings would be held in the church or community hall if there was one, on the beach, in the space between houses, or in the large clearing in front of the church, a place meant for such purposes. Many of the fishermen’s cooperatives had fair-sized offices – their meetings would be held in these.

5.2 Place and Identity

Located at the southern extreme of India, Kanyakumari is the smallest district\(^{21}\) in the state of Tamil Nadu, with a land area of 1,671.8 square kilometres and a population in 2001 of 1.7 million.\(^{22}\) The district borders on the state of Kerala, of which it was a part until the linguistic reorganization of states in 1956 attached its largely Tamil speaking population to Tamil Nadu. Thus Kanyakumari shares with Kerala, rather than with Tamil Nadu, certain characteristics, such as population density, and high literacy, especially for women (see table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2001 Census data</th>
<th>Coastal Kanyakumari</th>
<th>Kanyakumari</th>
<th>Kerala</th>
<th>Tamil Nadu</th>
<th>India</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population density</td>
<td>950/sq. km</td>
<td>819 /sq. km</td>
<td>478 /sq. km</td>
<td>324 /sq. km</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex ratio (females per thousand males)</td>
<td>946 (SIFFS)</td>
<td>1,013</td>
<td>1,058</td>
<td>986</td>
<td>933</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy (drawn from TN fisheries Dept survey; may not be quite accurate)</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>90.92%</td>
<td>73.47%</td>
<td>65.38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male literacy</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>94.20%</td>
<td>82.33%</td>
<td>75.96%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female literacy</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>87.86%</td>
<td>64.55%</td>
<td>54.28%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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\(^{21}\) A district is an administrative division below the level of the state or province.

Kanyakumari has virtually no large industry, relying instead on agriculture, the fishery, and primary commodity production and processing (rubber, coir), and other artisanal production such as rope making, pottery, toddy tapping, etc. In the northeast are the highlands of the western ghats, where forests and plantations provide some timber, coffee, tea, rubber, coconut, areca nut, and spices. In between the highlands and the lowlands (coastal plain) is a region of undulating valleys and westbound streams. To its south is the coastal plain whose paddy fields, capable of two crops a year, have earned the region the title of the “granary of Travancore.” In this region are also grown cashew, coconut, bananas, and tapioca.  

There is also a small tourism industry. The temple of the virgin goddess Kanyakumari at the confluence of the three waters of the Bay of Bengal, Indian Ocean, and Arabian Sea is an ancient Hindu pilgrimage point; it is land’s end for secular nationalist travellers, and close enough for tourists at Kovalam beach in Kerala’s capital, Thiruvananthapuram, to make a day trip to catch the spectacular sunset.

At the southernmost edge of the district, including at the Cape itself, are the coastal villages, where fishing is the predominant source of livelihood. Forty-two villages lie in close proximity to each other along the district’s sixty-eight kilometre-long coastline. The total population of these villages in 2002 was 138,569 making for a population density even higher than that of the rest of the district. John Kurien (2000) has noted that the fishing villages in Kerala prove an aberration to the “Kerala model” of high literacy and social development; as Table 1 shows, this is equally the case in Kanyakumari. In these villages, issues of drinking water, sanitation, and decent housing remain unresolved, as do those of health care, social security, education, and occupational mobility. Fisheries anthropologists have long noted that everywhere, fishing

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23 Kanyakumari district website, http://www.kanyakumari.tn.nic.in
24 The villages correspond neither to the Indian census’s smallest territorial category of “hamlet,” nor to the next level of “revenue village.” Being entirely Catholic, they draw their social, day-to-day identification from their parishes. Many of them are larger than hamlets, but may combine with one other coastal or inland village to make up a revenue village. It is at the level of the revenue village that the Panchayat, or local government institution, is elected (see Chapter 3).
25 SIFFS: Census of KK District Fishing Fleets, 2004. The Fisheries Department census, carried out in 2000, puts the figure at 137,940. This difference might indicate a growth in population, or some difference in the units surveyed.
26 See, for instance, Smith 1980.
communities are marginal and not involved in making decisions that affect them; this has to do to some extent with their inability to diversify into other sectors, and thus, their occupation of a very small niche in society. The fishing communities of Kanyakumari have been no exception.

Despite their traditional economic marginality, however, these fishing communities have a strong, and proud, sense of their own identity. This is due to a number of factors, beginning with their long lineage in the region and profession. Of the Paravas, one of the two fishing castes of the district, British fisheries scientist, James Hornell, wrote:

From Tuticorin southward to Manapad is the homeland of the Paravas, a shore-dwelling people who make the best sailors to be found within the bounds of the Madras Presidency; they are the traditional divers and boatmen of the Pescaria coast, the men whose ancestors worked the pearl fisheries for the Pandiyan kings, for the Portuguese Crown, and for the Dutch EIC, and who today contribute the finest and largest pearling boats to both the Ceylon and Tinnevelly pearl fisheries. So, while their sea-skill in handling sailing craft in the main has been learnt in the hard school of experience, natural aptitude for the work is in their blood, innate and transmitted from a line of boat-sailing forefathers who have pursued the same calling through fully 2,000 years. (Madras Fishery Investigations, 1908, in Madras Fisheries Bulletin No. 4, p.50)

This identity with place and profession is deepened by the Tamil concept of tinai (landscape). Villagers identify themselves as kadalkarai makkal or neythal makkal (people of the coastal landscape). Scholars have noted the “power of place” in Tamil culture. What they allude to is not a simple influence of geography or landscape on culture, but rather how culture itself inscribes meanings into landscape, and influences the significance accorded to landscape and setting.

The fishing castes of the district, Mukkuvar and Paravar, are both categorized as “Other Backward Castes” in the Indian Constitution, for purposes of affirmative action. Despite this, anthropologist Kalpana Ram argues that these fishing castes have managed, through the fact that they are not occupationally dependent on higher castes and live in independent villages, to avoid ritual submission on a day-to-day basis, and the

27 Tamil classical poetry of the Sangam era (100 BE to 250 CE) suggests a "world of correspondences between times, places, things born in them, and human experiences..."(Ramanujan, 1985: 241). On the importance of place in Tamil culture, see also Valentine Daniel, 1984.
psychological damage that goes with it. Maritime anthropologists have noted that fishers across the world are fiercely independent, resistant to authority, and proud of their skill and courage in undertaking such difficult work. This may explain too why these communities do not experience caste subordination as viscerally as lower castes in mixed-caste agricultural villages might. However, individuals seeking entry into white-collar professions are becoming sharply aware of the limitations of lack of education and other forms of cultural capital, and have become active in movements for increased affirmative action.

A sense of distinct identity, and one not simply reducible to rank in the Hindu caste hierarchy, may also be attributed to the fact that the villages were converted to Catholicism in the sixteenth century.\textsuperscript{28} The Catholic faith and membership in the religious community are central aspects of the identity of the villagers.

But tightness of identity and strong identification with history and place does not mean that the villages are part of some sleepy “\textit{mofussil}.” The closeness of the villages to the district headquarters of Nagercoil, a busy town of some two hundred thousand in 2001, as well as to Thiruvananthapuram, the capital of Kerala; the constant flow of tourists to the Cape; the presence of an international institution – the Catholic Church; the fishermen’s own mobility, both across the country and to the countries of the Persian Gulf: all these have meant that this is not some isolated, rural district. As well, of course, there is the influence of films, television, and now, the Internet. Nor have the villages suffered academic neglect. In addition to several of the diocesan clergy who have written dissertations on various aspects of life in these communities, there are anthropological works such as those by Kalpana Ram and Ajantha Subramanian, all of which provide a rich set of resources for this study.

5.3 Stratification, Difference, and Conflict

Despite the relatively low levels of accumulation in traditional fishing societies, which prevented a permanent class differentiation at the point of production (see Chapter 2), there did exist a historic divide in most of these villages between those who fished

\textsuperscript{28} This is not to suggest that caste is absent in the Catholic Church, but merely that conversion allowed for some kinds of openings. (See Chapter 4 for more on caste and Church.)
(kadalodi), and those who gave credit for craft and gear, or marketed the fish, or engaged in other activities such as teaching, or white-collar work (the menakkadan). These latter, being more educated, gained privileged access to the Catholic priests from the early days of conversion, and one of the lines of tension in the villages has always been between the Church and priest assisted by these groups, and the working fishermen, the tithe on whose earnings actually paid for the Church. Here it is worth mentioning, if only briefly, that in every village there existed a handful of families of “service” castes – barbers and washermen – who were considered even lower than the fishers.

A second hierarchy is, of course, that of gender. While a tradition of matrilocality, and the fact of long male absences from the villages meant a certain degree of autonomy for women, women were not traditionally part of the village or parish committee, i.e. they did not have any public role. Their changing role, because of greater education and because of the efforts of reformist Church, state, and NGO programs, is, as with the first form of stratification, one of the greatest transformations taking place in the fishing villages.

Other differences exist as well, that are not constituted on the basis of hierarchy. The two fishing castes of the district, Mukkuvar and Paravar, have equally long histories – the Mukkuvars are preponderant in the villages on the upper west coast, stretching into Kerala, while the Paravar villages lie in the lower west coast and up the east coast into Tirunelveli district. Most villages consist entirely of one caste or the other, but in the few where they co-exist, caste can be a basis of competition and factionalism. However, not all factions are tied to caste. Village society is decidedly fractious. In saying this I do not wish to echo earlier scholarship based on “the occidental belief that India is a fractious society” (Hardiman, 1982: 222). Rather, I wish to note that a variety of fluid factions

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29 The notion that factions constitute a characteristic or defining feature of Indian society has a hoary past both among colonial administrators and more recently among the structural-functionalist and behaviourist schools of historians, anthropologists, and political scientists, who studied India in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. See P.R. Brass, 1984. But even here there is disagreement between those who see them: (i) as fixed and enduring, along lines of kinship, around a powerful leader or family, and non-ideological; (ii) as fixed groups within a village but capable of uniting against the outside world; (iii) as a larger patron-client network, a vertical political alliance linking village, district, and province, and displacing horizontal mobilization along lines of caste or class; or (iv) more fluid, and the outcome of the modern electoral process with its need to mobilize majorities. Baviskar (1995) chooses to sidestep the debate on factions and refers to this kind of politics as the politics of honour, often over women or family “self-respect.” This kind of politics is more absorbing and compelling for
(around families, relation to the Church along the old kadalodi-menakkadan lines described at the start of this section, Mukkuvar-Paravar differences) rose and fell, and often led to violence and the breakdown of normal life in the villages.

5.4 An Abundance of Association

The abundance of associational forms in the villages can be traced chronologically, as new associations built on or layered themselves over earlier ones. Appendix 2, which lists all the associations in Kodimunai village, provides an example of the number and kind of associations found in the villages. Both Church and state have encouraged popular participation, albeit in carefully circumscribed ways, and for purposes that will have become clear in Chapters 3 and 4. The state has exercised its welfare function through a series of “participatory” initiatives, beginning with the Community Development Programme and fishermen’s cooperatives of the 1950s; through the Integrated Rural Development Programme which gave small loans for income generating projects in the later 1970s; to the village self-governments or Panchayats following the 1993 Panchayati Raj amendment to the Constitution. In the 1990s, the district administration adopted the Arrivoli Iyakkam (Total Literacy Movement) first initiated by the Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishad (Kerala Science Forum), taken up by several district administrations in Kerala, and then popularized by the Tamil Nadu Science Forum and likewise supported by various district administrations in Tamil Nadu. Through this movement villagers met regularly for adult literacy classes with a local motivator.

Apart from the sodalities (religious guilds or confraternities) and pious associations that are almost as old as the Church itself, there is the parish council which too has a hoary past, deriving as it does from the caste and village councils that long preceded it. But the content of the parish councils has changed, and in addition, certain clergy have initiated the founding of the basic Christian communities, modeled on such groups in Latin America. There are also youth groups, Students’ Christian Movement (SCM) groups, and

the villagers than other kinds, serving as it does to affirm collective identity, and is thus essential to social reproduction.
groups for schoolchildren. The diocesan social service society initiated self-help and support groups for women and widows.

The 1950s saw the establishment of caste associations, which transcended village boundaries, aimed at reform of the castes and seeking affirmative action by the state. These are no longer very active, but there are other organizations that seek to speak for the coastal villages as a whole. One of these is the Coastal People’s Organization, which, during the 1990s, took up issues such as the demand for a coastal constituency for the Tamil Nadu legislature.

The villagers themselves have long associated in chit funds (rotating savings and credit associations common across the country), youth groups, and football clubs, and, in the villages close to the Kerala border, in the library movement, which originated there, to create village reading rooms. Villagers are also active in the film star fan clubs unique to Tamil Nadu. Given the role of film stars in politics, these fan clubs become sources of political support during election campaigns. In addition, most major political parties (Congress, CPM, ADMK, DMK, Janata Dal, MDMK) have village level units, including units of their women’s and youth wings.

The struggles around control of the fishery, with which I began this chapter, were led by village or parish committees, or ad hoc committees set up for the purpose. But more formal organizations were also established to deal with these issues, as described in Chapter Seven. Kanyakumari district is densely populated with NGOs, sponsored by the Catholic and Protestant Churches, and by secular organizations and foundations. These have set up social service associations over the decades. Since the 1990s, a major thrust of these NGOs has been microcredit, and the creation of self-help and income generation groups, almost entirely for women.

Several of the newer associations described above are aimed at civilizing, uplift, or improvement, through, for instance, opposing alcoholism, factionalism, and feuding; supporting income generation and economic development; promoting improved service provision; democratizing the Church; fostering village self-government and political participation. They are self-consciously modern, with an avowed commitment to
procedures such as elections and written records, and to the equal participation of hitherto excluded groups such as women, lower status families, and youth. Despite this self-conscious modernity, however, not all these associations can be said to be the outcome of autonomous action. As subaltern people - poor, dependent as fisher people upon a fragile primary resource, and low caste - associational life is not always a matter of voluntary participation for Kanyakumari villagers. Rather, it is enjoined upon them as a condition of their class. They are exhorted, often required, by state, Church, and NGOs to form cooperatives and other forms of association for a variety of ends such as access to markets and credit, government benefits, and social services. As significantly, it is their membership in ascriptive or involuntary communities (defined by village, locality, occupation, caste, religion, and language) that is expected to provide the personal knowledge, norms of reciprocity, trust, and habits of interaction (i.e. the "social capital") necessary to the success of the associations or "intentional communities" they enter.

The wealth of associations in Kanyakumari makes it particularly apt for this study. But many of the associational forms, such as the village governments and the chit funds, can be found across the country. Others were initiated by the state, or draw on norms and values generated by India’s liberal-democratic constitution or by the populist politics of parties like the ADMK. The villages are, therefore, not so unique as to limit the generalizability of insights gained from them.
Chapter 2
A Great Transformation in the Fishery?

"We used to be in the forefront of the opposition to the trawlers. Now we all have our own trawlers." Dinakaran, Kanyakumari fisherman, 2004

“I am rather confused who the small-scale sector includes and what it represents. This is one of the challenges for us to redefine, with our fishworker friends, who we are going to support and for what in the coming years.” Nalini Nayak, long-time fisheries activist, 2006

The fishery in Kanyakumari (and nationally) has been significantly transformed over the past five decades. There has been an almost total shift to reliance on machine power as opposed to oars and sails, with the increase in both capital investment and productive capacity this represents, and the re-orientation of production to distant national and global markets. But, as can be seen in Nayak’s remarks above, even close observers of the transformation are left unclear as to its political economy. Can the fishery now be described as capitalist and, if so, what are the forms that capitalism takes in the fishery?

Twenty years ago Platteau (1989b) used the distinction between the real and the formal subsumption of labour in a survey of Third World fisheries to argue that the majority of small-scale production units, while retaining their family-based and apparently “traditional” nature, were already formally subsumed into capitalist logics and institutions. But while Platteau based his claims largely on the nature of capital and the institutions for credit and marketing, he did not take into account the distinct nature of the property regime in the marine fishery, this being state property, or community property, but rarely private property. This distinction first came to be of concern, not to theorists of capitalism, but to neo-classical economists interested in the productive husbanding of natural resources. An influential body of work based on Scott (1955) and especially on Hardin’s (1968) writing on the “tragedy of the commons,” blamed overfishing and the

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1 This remark was made at a workshop on the emerging concerns for fishing communities, timed to mark the twentieth anniversary of the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers, of which Nayak was a founder. See Koshy and Sharma (2006: 3).
2 Ram’s ethnography from the mid-eighties also takes as given this “articulation of Mukkuvar men and women into a global mode of production” (1982: 113), namely, capitalism.
decline of the resource base on the nature of the common property regime in the fishery, arguing that “what belongs to no-one is cared for by no-one and exploited by all.” An equally substantial body of scholarship, from anthropologists in particular, arose to challenge this claim, maintaining that the economists had made a category mistake by equating “common property” with “open access.” They demonstrated that much of the inshore fishery was, in fact, governed by a variety of community-based resource regimes or tenures that regulated access and extraction (Durrenberger and Palsson, 1987; McCay and Acheson, 1987; Cordell and McKean, 1992; Bavinck, 1996).

The nature of the resource, and the property regimes defining it, prevented alienation, privatization, or enclosure in the manner possible for land-based resources, even those held in common, such as village pasture lands. This makes it harder than with land to see how nature, the basic productive resource, might be turned into a (fictitious) commodity. One form of privatization, devised by neo-classical economists influenced by Hardin, has been the individual fishery quota\(^3\), which has been applied in some fisheries of the North, including some in Canada. This form of enclosure has not been widespread in the Global South, but two other developments might be seen to approximate “enclosure” here: the use of more sophisticated and efficient technology so that a few large units take up an increasing proportion of the catch; and the privatization of beaches for purposes of tourism, ports, factories and urban settlement, so that fishers using small beach-landing craft are forced out in favour of large mechanized craft operating from harbours. As we shall see later in the chapter, other factors having to do with credit and market reach might also have some of this effect of concentrating capital and limiting access to the resource.

Given that a substantial number of artisanal fishing communities still retain direct access to the resources, however, geographer Kevin St. Martin (2007) is concerned to challenge the characterization of all fisheries as already capitalist. Contrary to those who argue for

\(^3\) The quota, usually in the form of an Individual Transferable Quota (ITQ), gives the individual fisher (or company) the right to harvest a fixed annual share of the total allowable catch (TAC) of a particular species. This quota can be sold. In places where it has been implemented, such as Iceland, there has been a tendency for companies to buy quotas from individual fishers, leading to a concentration of capital. Since the possession of a quota is what allows access to the catch, this constitutes a form of enclosure of the resource by quota-holding companies. See Duncan (1995); Eythorsson (1999); Mansfield (2004, 2007).
the “formal subsumption” of labour, capitalism, according to him, is best defined as “a particular class process of surplus production, appropriation and distribution rather than an overarching system of economy corresponding to the presence of markets, competition, or private property” (St. Martin, 2007: 533). Based on this definition, he argues that the New England fisheries he studies, and others likewise, constitute a sphere of “non-capitalism”; the share (rather than wage) system of compensation (where the day’s catch is divided according to some specified formula between the boat owner, the captain, and the crewmembers), the immobility of capital (so that declining returns from the fishery do not necessarily lead boat-owners to leave the industry, but rather, to cut corners and make sacrifices in order to continue to provide a livelihood for themselves and crew members who are usually friends and family), and common property (access to which depends on membership in the community) “suggest the presence of an alternative “livelihood” economy where surpluses generated from common resources are “shared” amongst fishermen within specific places” (St. Martin, 2007: 533). Further, this alternative economy shapes, and is maintained by, the non-capitalist subjectivities of its participants, whereby fishers value community, fairness, and independence (in opposition to the hierarchy of class). For St. Martin, to read these economies as already capitalist is to ignore their very real potential for resistance and alternatives. In Polanyian terms, what St. Martin is describing is an embedded economy, one where market incentives do not drive all productive decisions, and where resistance to the commodification of labour and of the natural resource is built into the social organization of the productive system itself.

Whereas for Platteau the social relations of the small-scale fishery make it functional to capitalism and are therefore retained within a capitalist system, for St. Martin they constitute a barrier to the full-fledged penetration of capitalism. This tension, between viewing the fishery as already deeply inserted into capitalist structures, on the one hand, and representing, by its very relations of production, an alternative form of economy, on the other, is productive in thinking about the nature of the transformation in Kanyakumari. Which is a more accurate perspective from which to understand change in the fishery? What has this meant for fishing families in terms of livelihood, incomes, economic security, and vestedness in, and control over, the fishery? If technology and the production processes have changed, how has this affected ownership and labour
relations? Has this given rise to new and antagonistic forms of relationships within the communities? Is there clear evidence of the commodification of sea rights, labour and money? If so, have the communities adapted their production practices to these, or have they sought instead to decommodify them?

This chapter seeks to answer these questions by drawing on “hard” statistical data, but also on community members’ accounts of change. An overview of the evolving political economy of the fishery is essential in order to contextualize the collective action that is the focus of this study, for it allows us to see both the concerns around livelihood and displacement that motivate this action, and the structures and relationships that might provide a basis for it.

In what follows, I begin (Section 1) by describing the ideal-type elements of the “artisanal” fishery as it existed until the late 1970s, even though the process of modernization or “development” had begun by the 1950s. This attempt to present an “ideal type” inevitably carries the dangers of historical inaccuracy: two key developments from the late 1950s – the introduction of mechanized trawlers, and the opening of international markets for shrimp – are mentioned only in passing in this section and then elaborated upon in the next. Section 2 is devoted to tracing modernization, paying particular attention to the relative role of state, private sector actors, civil society, and community resistance and adaptation. Section 3 then outlines the features of the globalized fishery of the turn of the century, setting the stage for the discussion in Section 4 of the questions outlined above.

A note on terminology may be necessary here. The terms “artisanal,” “traditional,” “small-scale” and “community-based,” are often used interchangeably to describe the kind of fishery of the Kanyakumari villages, and particularly its pre-1980s variant. “Artisanal” refers to the craft-like nature of production that relies more on specialized skills and experiential knowledge than on formal training and complex technological systems; the producer has control over the entire labour process, thus obviating any managerial function. “Artisanal” certainly applied to much of the Kanyakumari fishery until the turn of this century. And despite an increased reliance on technology even on
small craft, it may still be a good way of distinguishing the extent of skill required and
the collective nature of the labour process from the less skill-dependent mechanized
fishery, where a captain has a greater (though still small when compared to a factory
setting) role in overseeing the work of crew members. The term “traditional” refers to the
fact that these communities have been fishing for generations, are identified as fishing
castes, and their skills and knowledge have been handed down through the generations.
But because “traditional” has a way of suggesting the absence of any change prior to the
present, and because often, what we consider traditional may in fact be of very recent
provenance, or what “appears” traditional may in fact be embedded in larger structures
that are entirely changed, I use it sparingly. “Community-based” refers to the
participation of the entire community in different aspects of the fishery. Children
participated in fishing from a young age and learned the skills of their parents. Women
played a significant part in post-harvest (processing and marketing) activities, and in
drawing on social networks for credit towards capital investments. Community
institutions existed for the management of the fishery, restricting access to non-
community members, ensuring relatively equitable access to community members, and
mediating conflicts. Thus the phrase “community-based” is probably quite apt in general.
But since it begs the question I am concerned to explore here, about the changing role of
the community in the economy, I prefer not to use it.

The language of scale is relative – even the large-scale is small when compared to the
inshore fishery in countries of the North. It may, however, be the least fraught when used
in the Indian context, to speak about a fishery like Kanyakumari’s. In the pages that
follow, I use the terms that are favoured by the Indian literature on the subject – “small-
scale” and “artisanal” - to describe this fishery, and the term “mechanized fishery” to
describe the sector that emerged from the 1950s on, with very different technology and
markets. The *kattumaram* and the *vallam* are the craft that represent the artisanal fishery;
the motorized craft (*kattumarams* or *vallams*, often made with new materials, and fitted
with an outboard motor or OBM) represent the technological upgrading of this same
fishery but are still considered artisanal; and the mechanized gillnetter and trawler
represent the “mechanized,” or what Kurien (1978: 1560) has called “modern,” sector.
1 The Artisanal Fishery: The Description of an Ideal-type

1.1 The Forces and Means of Production

Along the sixty-eight kilometres of Kanyakumari district’s coastline runs a narrow and steep continental shelf. With some variation, surf conditions tend frequently to be rough. In general, tropical fisheries are characterized by great variety of species in relatively small numbers, unlike temperate waters, where we see a greater concentration of fewer species. This combination of rough surf conditions and the availability of a large number of species in small quantities has favoured the evolution of small-scale and diversified fishing operations (Vivekanandan, 2002: 2).

Varieties of the following species are caught in this region: pelagic or surface travelling species such as seer fish (neimeen/seela), anchovy/white-bait (netholi), sardine (chaalai), ribbon fish (saavaalai), tuna (surai/churai), mackerel (ayilai), and even sharks (sura); demersal or bottom-dwelling species such as cat fish, pomfret (vaval), rock cod (kalavai) and other perches, crustaceans such as prawn (muddakuraal), lobster (kalluraal) and crab, and cephalopods such as cuttle fish (kanavai), squid (olakanavai); and mid-water species such as horse-mackarel (paarai) and silver bellies. Most villages catch several of these species but in different proportions, depending on the area of sea fished and gear used (Chacko and George, 1958).

The most common craft in the period until the present was the kattumaram (Tamil for “tied logs,” and the model for the Western leisure craft, the catamaran), a simple, double-hulled boat made by tying logs together. Although most fisheries modernizers from the colonial period on took the kattumaram as evidence of a rudimentary or primitive fishery[^4], the more acute among them, such as James Hornell (see section 2.1), had some respect for them. They realized that the reason for the continued popularity of this craft

[^4]: Kurien and Mathew (1982) suggest that many of the artifacts considered indigenous to the fishery of this region are, in fact, the product of diverse outside influences adapted to local conditions: the kattumaram is supposedly of Polynesian origin, and the vallam bears Arab influences; the boat-seine is considered to be of Spanish origin, and the shore-seine to have been introduced by the Portuguese.
had less to do with a lack of innovation than with its lightness and appropriateness for local surf and landing conditions, the ease with which it could be launched and landed from the beach, even in relatively rough weather, and its being virtually unsinkable. The craft can be operated with oars, sails, or outboard motors (OBMs), and supports a wide variety of gear, from nets of all sorts, to long lines. The other popular craft was the vallam, or plank canoe. A variety of gear are also used, with some villages specializing in one or two types of gear, and others using a wider range over the course of the year. Reports list over fifteen types of gill nets for different species, as well as the use of hook and line (SIFFS, 1989). Boat seines (thattumadi – a kind of bag net pulled by two kattumarams), and shore seines (karamadi – which employed a large number of men but generally caught lower value fish), were also widely used.

1.2 Ownership, Labour, Incomes

The small-scale and diversified nature of the fishery meant that each fishing family could potentially afford to own their own craft and a net or two. If a family owned a variety of nets (and more than one size of kattumaram) they could work for more seasons through the year; if, on the other hand, they owned only one net, they might work on someone else’s craft for the other seasons. Villages that specialized in hook and line fishing were also able to fish through more of the year than those that relied on nets. The line between owner and coolie or worker was not always rigidly drawn; shared ownership of craft and nets, or the seasonal sharing or trading of net pieces was not uncommon. Ownership of craft and gear was also relatively fluid and open-ended due to the high risk of loss or damage to equipment that made for rapid depreciation and downward mobility. Ram argues that while inequalities did exist between households, these did not lead to the perpetuation of rigid categories akin to classes "[O]wners and producers are not opposed to one another in structurally antagonistic relationships" (Ram, 1992: 12). Of the 286 fishing families in the village she studied in the early 1980s, 13 percent owned large craft/gear on which they hired other workers, 20.6 percent were self-employed and earned enough for subsistence, 36 percent were coolies or workers, and 30.4 percent were part owner and part worker, depending on the season. The labour process was also such as to make hierarchy difficult. The owner usually worked on the boat, and the swift and
cooperative decision making required him to pitch in with everyone else.

In all cases, the income from the day’s catch was distributed through a share system, between the owner of the craft and gear and the other workers. But the exact return to capital and labour was specific to each type of craft and gear. Shares on a kattumaram were divided equally between the crew (which usually included the owner), with one (or sometimes half, depending on the village) additional share going to the owner for the craft. The craft owner could sometimes be expected to forego this extra share in times of scarcity. On the other hand, the shore seine, which employed up to thirty men, was often owned by one family. One third of the share of the earnings on the shore seine went to the owner, with the rest divided between the workers. This made the shore seine owners among the richest families in the village.

The chief productive resource, the fishery, was not privately owned; rather, access to this was regulated by membership in the community. Fishermen had access to the sea as members of a village. When they migrated seasonally to another village to fish, they had to get the permission of that village. It was the village committee (consisting of men nominated from the most “powerful” families in the village) that settled disputes between villages, or between fishermen in the same village; collected a tax from merchants buying fish in the village, or fishermen from other villages who may have landed on the village beach; and levied a periodic tithe for church and village needs. In the absence of any state regulation of the fishery, the village committee set the terms around permissible gear and fishing holidays, and settled conflicts.

The access to natural capital through membership in the community, the elusiveness of the natural capital being harvested, and thus the importance of skill and cooperation in harvesting it, coupled with a system of sharing risk and therefore also profitability, meant that the possession of physical capital alone was inadequate to ensure wealth. Since kinship was the basis of relations of work, the accumulation of wealth depended to a large extent on the pooling of labour and income among able-bodied males in a household. The number of able-bodied men in the family able to work together was often a crucial factor in the family’s wealth. Fishermen interviewed pointed to some of the other factors, including skill and attitude to work, on which wealth depended. For
instance, the highest-earning member of the 2900 members of the Kanyakumari district fishermen’s cooperatives federation worked for 232 days in 1994. He owned a variety of different gear and was described as brave and very skilled and went out even when it was rough, which is when there were a lot of fish. 5

Wealth differences did exist in the villages: the richest families were those that owned the shore seines or karamadi, and those that had successfully managed to parlay large family size into ownership of a variety of craft and gear that allowed them to work through the year. The karamadi owners, as well as families engaged in professions outside the fishery, often acted as moneylenders to the fishers, which put them into a structurally antagonistic relationship with the fishers; as we shall see in Chapter 4, this economic power was also translated into socio-political power through the alignment of these families with the Church.

A 1967 survey of Muttom village (Clark Robert, 1967) provides a good socio-economic picture of a fairly typical fishing village. Table 2.1 shows the occupational categories for the working population (36 percent of the total). Of this working population, 82% were employed in the fishery. Table 2.1 categorizes the village households according to income.

Table 2.1. Occupational classifications, Muttom Village, 1966-67

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Fishing</td>
<td>957</td>
<td>957</td>
<td>1914</td>
<td>58.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Net Making</td>
<td>383</td>
<td>383</td>
<td>766</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Fish Merchandizing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Merchant</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Head loader</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Cycle loader</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Broker</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Commerce and Small Business</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Shopkeeper</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Tailor</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Barber</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Public and Government Service</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Teachers</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Other government servants</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Unskilled and coolie labour</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Other Occupations</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1117</td>
<td>530</td>
<td>1647</td>
<td>100.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5 Interview with members of Vavathurai sangam, Kanyakumari village, May 1995.
Table 2.2. Classification by household incomes, Muttom village, 1966-67

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Fisher Households</th>
<th>Other Households</th>
<th>Total Households</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Middle Class and above</td>
<td>3 (0.5%)</td>
<td>18 (8.9%)</td>
<td>21 (2.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfying Human Needs</td>
<td>60 (9%)</td>
<td>29 (14.4%)</td>
<td>89 (10.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginal</td>
<td>361 (54.1%)</td>
<td>60 (29.7%)</td>
<td>421 (48.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty</td>
<td>221 (33.2%)</td>
<td>58 (28.7%)</td>
<td>279 (32.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extreme Poverty</td>
<td>21 (3.2%)</td>
<td>37 (18.3%)</td>
<td>58 (6.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total of each type of household</td>
<td>666 (100%)</td>
<td>202 (100%)</td>
<td>868 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of total households</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The middle-class households were those of government employees, larger merchants, clergy, and the most successful of the larger (with more men) fishing families. Such a household was described as having all it needed in the way of food, health, clothing, housing, education, and recreation. Debt was commensurate with income. Children had the opportunity for higher education. The house would be solid, and furnished comfortably. There would be items of conspicuous consumption such as a radio, watches, and jewellery.

Households described as “satisfying human needs” were those of teachers, merchants, and the better organized fishermen. They would have decent meals and some opportunity for high school education for kids, and would be similar to middle-class homes but not as comfortable.

Households described as “marginal” were those engaged in seasonal work, such as fishing with a limited variety of gear. These exhibited a fluctuating ability to satisfy the full range of human needs, sometimes meeting only the basic physical needs of food, clothing, and shelter.

Households living in “poverty” belonged to the less successful fishers, healthy coolies, and small merchants. Their main concern would be food, the house would be in poor condition, education for children would be a hardship, the marriage of girls would pose an especial challenge, and they would be heavily indebted.
Households living in “extreme poverty” were those where the head of household was frequently a widowed woman or older person – widowed net makers, headloaders, or weak coolies. These households lived on the border of starvation, in a borrowed or temporary dwelling, were constantly in want, and unable to provide education for their children.

1.3 Migration

As shown above, the seasonal nature of the fishery meant that the ability of fishing households to diversify or tide over the low season was an important determinant of their economic well-being. Those households that owned or had shares in a variety of gear were able to fish for more months of the year. Others managed by means of seasonal migrations by the fishermen, moving with their craft to fish in seas that were less rough during the monsoon (June-August), or more productive during the lean season (December – March). Fishermen on the lower west coast migrated to fish with relatives in the villages of Thirunelveli and Tuticorin districts on the east coast during the monsoon season. In the villages closer to the Kerala border, men have long migrated with their craft up the Kerala coast and even further north during the lean months from October to January, and sometimes even until May. Not all the fishermen of the village would do this, but close to a third might.

Seasonal migration was not without its problems – some villages required migrant fishers to pay a tax on their catch. Elsewhere, the merchants or cooperatives would not pay them the same rates they paid local fishers. In some cases, conflict between the local villagers and the migrants, even those who had been there for several years, would lead to the migrants’ expulsion.

Another kind of migration, of men going to Kerala (or in Ram’s account [1992: 114] to Rameswaram further up the east coast in Tamil Nadu) to work on trawlers, began in the 1960s. This is discussed in greater detail in Section 3.

1.4 Credit

The seasonal and even daily fluctuation in income made access to credit necessary for
helping to meet regular subsistence needs, as well as for capital investment or large expenditures like weddings. According to Clark Robert’s (1967: 40-42) Muttom Report, 80 percent of the households were in debt. The report calculated that the average annual household debt was about half its average annual income. Though loans were taken most frequently to buy food, in terms of total amounts borrowed, some 34 percent was for marriage and dowry purposes, followed by craft and gear, food, house construction, and health expenses.

In fisher households, 64 percent of these loans were from moneylenders, who could charge as much as 60 percent per annum with gold jewellery as collateral/security, or 72 percent per annum with nets as security. Other sources were relatives (15 percent), the cooperative society (14 percent), and merchants (3 percent). Ram’s fieldwork suggests that the term “moneylender” was used to describe all who lent sizable sums on interest, and included relatives and other sources organized through women’s social networks (see Section 2.6 below). Equally, while the arrangements between fishermen and merchants constituted a form of credit, as described below, they were not necessarily seen as such, but rather as “advances,” which might explain why only 3 percent of loans are described as coming from merchants.

The relationship between merchants and fishermen took the form of what Platteau and Abraham (1987: 471) call “quasi-credit contracts,” whereby fish merchants, acting in a situation of competition for the catch, guaranteed themselves access to the catch of those to whom they had given interest-free advances. A merchant or middleman advanced loans to craft owners with the understanding that their daily catches would be sold exclusively to him, with some fixed amount of the proceeds being held back by him as interest payment and sales commission. The commissions and interest were due as long as the debts had not been entirely cleared. Further, the fisherman was forced to accept the price offered by the merchant, not because there was no competition from other buyers, but because of the “market interlinkage” between credit and marketing relations (Platteau and Abraham, 1987: 480-481).

On the basis of their research in a Kerala village, Platteau and Abraham estimated that the yearly interest collected by the merchants or the middlemen was below the dominant rate
charged on the local, informal credit market. They suggested that the differential could be construed as the premium the middlemen were ready to pay to insure against the risk of insufficient access to fish landings, but they conceded that they had been unable to estimate the amount of "disguised" interest that accrued to merchants through malpractices such as setting lower-than-market prices for the catch. Nonetheless, they argued that, thanks to potential competition among middlemen for access to the fishermen's catches, the fishermen were never at the complete mercy of their creditors as they could just shift the debt to another merchant. There were benefits for the fishermen too in this arrangement, for it was a risk-sharing arrangement, whereby the commission or interest was waived when the catch was poor or nil, and there was no possibility of unpaid interest charges accruing to the extent that the debtor was "bonded" to the creditor. Also, the merchant or middleman had an interest in ensuring the well-being and continued viability of the fisherman, so that he was willing to supply him with consumption credit if necessary, although this was, of course, never interest-free. They concluded that "to analyze such arrangements exclusively in terms of allocative efficiency is insufficient but it would be equally unsatisfactory to analyse them purely in terms of exploitation" (Platteau and Abraham, 1987: 483-4).

Alexander (1982), writing of similar arrangements in Sri Lankan fishing villages, is critical of "functionalist" accounts that stress the reciprocal relationship of moneylender and fishermen. His case material suggested that the relationship was often maintained by physical violence or its threat on the part of the merchant/moneylender. Producer prices were low and not tied to the final retail price of the fish, and the fishermen had a constant struggle to prevent them from falling further. Middlemen did not provide credit, delayed payment as long as possible, and reneged on payments whenever they could (Alexander, 1982: 264). Villagers' accounts tend to reinforce this interpretation; several recounted how merchants would find ways of avoiding full repayment in order to extend the relationship. For Kurien (1980: 7), as well as Acheson (1981) in his survey of artisanal fisheries worldwide, the fact that any surplus as existed was appropriated by the merchants, coupled with the lack of diversification and the uneven distribution of ownership of assets, explained in large part the poverty of the fishing villages.
1.5 Markets

Poor transportation and the absence of refrigeration facilities made access to distant markets for fresh fish difficult. Chacko and George (1958) note that 90 percent of the catch was cured, and 10 percent sold fresh to nearby villages by cycle vendors. Some 80 percent of the cured (dried) fish was exported to Ceylon, Burma, and British India. Thus, the artisanal fishery was already supplying to export markets, and Travancore gazetteers acknowledge the value of this export for the kingdom’s revenues, even if the fishermen themselves saw little of the profit.

Clark Robert’s Muttom Report of 1967 (27-29) describes the relative role and market reach of export companies, cycle loaders, and headloaders. The catch was landed at shore in the mornings; a broker would auction the catch from several craft, getting a 3 percent commission for his efforts. The bigger merchants worked singly or in groups of two or three, transporting the fish inland by truck or cycle; larger merchants would collect fish from several coastal villages, pack them in trucks with ice, and take them to markets in Trivandrum or Tirunelveli (each about 70 km from Kanyakumari). The two private export companies in Muttom had an undisputed claim to lobster and prawns, offering prices that were well beyond the ability of the other merchants. The cycle and head loaders supplied markets within 15 miles of Muttom. Women walked for up to 8 miles to sit in a market or go door to door, and returned at night; the men on their cycles were able to get to the markets more quickly, sometimes making even two trips.

1.6 Women’s Work

The discussion of credit and marketing brings us to the role of women in the artisanal fishery. Women do not go out to sea, and the beach is a male space. In fact, as in many other parts of the world, all sorts of taboos are associated with taking women to the sea. This division of space also represented a division of labour whereby the men’s work was

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6 Lakhs of rupees worth of dried prawns are being exported to Rangoon annually (Velu Pillai, 1940: 397). The value of prawns harvested annually from our waters comes to 20 lakh rupees; these prawns find good markets abroad (ibid.: 435) Salt-fish is exported to British India and Ceylon, worth Rs 3,92,745 in 1903-04 (Nagam Aiya, 1989, vol. 2: 202).

7 Emtheus recalled how his father would not go fishing if a widow or a woman carrying an empty net crossed his path) Ram (1989, 1992) elaborates on this for Kanyakumari villages. For fishing communities in other parts of the world, see Thompson (1985: 5).
seen as done when they returned from sea with the catch and handed over their earnings to the women, after saving a certain amount for betel nut or alcohol. The women took care of almost everything else. As Ram (1992: 122, 145-146) notes, men’s work was discontinuous. They would stop when they returned from sea, or in poor weather, or the off season, whereas women’s work was not only continuous, but also integrated into their social world.\(^8\) In his survey of women’s work in fishing communities, Paul Thompson (1985) notes that, in addition to their productive and reproductive work, women take on a further role because of the absence of men for long stretches.

Within the household as a productive unit, women wove nets (for the family, but also for others in exchange for payment in cash or kind; see Table 1 above), and dried and salted the fish. Many older women worked as fish vendors, buying fish on the beach and taking it to nearby markets. This was physically demanding work, as the women bought the fish early in the morning on the beach and then, because it was considered too smelly to be taken on public buses, walked with it on their heads to inland markets or sold it house to house in nearby villages. The sheer physical effort combined with the low status accorded the “fishwife” meant that only women old enough to be released from the norms of femininity, or belonging to very poor or female-headed households, took up this work (Ram, 1989: 141-142).

A substantial part of the women’s work lay in their organization of credit. Small loans were sought from relatives or neighbours to tide over a subsistence crisis, but the women also sought credit for acquiring craft and gear. Since these were large expenses, the credit would be sought from a number of different sources through kinship, marriage, and other social networks; some women would act as intermediaries to facilitate these loans so that the network could be extended to other villages. It was also the task of the women to manage consumption, with all its implications for status. Being responsible for the domestic economy, which required them to travel inland to the markets, hospitals, and government offices, they were often more familiar with the world inland than were the men.

\(^8\) Ram (1992) develops these themes in fine detail in a chapter devoted to women’s credit networks.
In my survey of selected households in Chinna Muttam village, I got detailed accounts from the women of how much they spent on what, how much they borrowed from whom, what they pawned, whom they lent how much, how they borrowed from A to repay B, how much they still owed, and so on. These were accounts of income and expenditure, but also of relationships and networks, and of human ingenuity, specifically female ingenuity, in making the most of every paisa, and of pain: pain at failure to provide adequately, pain at their own wistful longings, rarely fulfilled, for a bit of beauty or some small labour saving device, pain at relationships soured by unpaid debts, pain at uncertainty as to future sources of income. These accounts were kept in their head, rather than in any notebook, for these were also the stories of their lives.

2 Modernization

Modernization in the sense of technological innovation has always taken place in the fishing villages, as noted at the outset of this chapter with reference to the wide-ranging influences on the design of local craft, such as the kattumaram. Modernization as a self-conscious and multifaceted project of development or “improvement” pursued by diverse actors with shared understandings, but in which the state plays a leading role, dates back to the colonial period (Cowen and Shenton, 1996). But this too took on new proportions under the post-colonial state. The last fifty years have thus been unique in the scale and pace of change.

2.1 State Intervention pre-1947

State intervention in the fishery in the pre-colonial period seems to have been confined to the collection of taxes. Chapter 4 describes in more detail the process by which the right to collect the tax on the fishery was granted to the Portuguese by the Travancore king, and used to support the church in each village.

The Madras Presidency (which included the present day state of Tamil Nadu) was among

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10 There is evidence from the earliest times of taxes from the fishery: it is listed as one of the grants made to the temple of the Goddess at Kanyakumari by Rajendra Chola in the eleventh century (Nagam Aiya, 1989, vol. 1: 191).
those where a fisheries bureau was established, in large part due to the efforts made by its first director, Sir Frederick Nicholson. Other colonial administrators had been urging the importance of the fisheries as a source of food since the late 1870s in the context of the famines that had increasingly been plaguing the country under colonial rule. Nicholson made this potential contribution to food supply the justification for demanding a separate bureau of fisheries within the Department of Agriculture. (Madras Fisheries Bureau, 1915:1) The fisheries would be developed with the goal of increasing food supply, manure supply, and small industry, but not for revenue purposes.

Nicholson addressed himself with some vigour to understanding the problems of the Madras fisheries and outlined a comprehensive approach to increasing the supply of fish for food that included: improved methods of curing and canning so that such vast quantities of fish would not be sold off as fish manure to Ceylon and Japan; changing domestic tastes so that more Indians would be willing to eat fish – this too relied on improved methods of curing, since the local methods of salting were deemed too unappetizing for the tastes of Europeans and the “better class of Indians”; and improving catches through experiments in trawling and deep sea fishing, as well as some attempts at introducing new technology. Part of the perceived problem was the low level of development of fishing technologies and of the fishing people more generally. In order to address the latter, possibilities of training in places like Europe and Japan were explored (and deemed unlikely to succeed because the fisher youth were “too boorish and uneducated” to profit from it). Programmes for cooperatives, temperance drives, and basic education were all put into place (Madras Fisheries Bureau, 1915).

At first Nicholson was convinced that only a capitalist and industrial fishery where methods of capture, processing, transportation, and sale had all been modernized, would meet the goals of the department (Madras Fisheries Bureau, 1915: 36). He was certain that this change would scarcely affect the existing fishermen, except in the most positive way, since no such industry existed thus far. But within a few years, he seems to have changed his mind. There seems to have been a growing appreciation of kattumarams as the craft best suited to local climate and topographical conditions, confirmed further by the findings of trawling expeditions carried out in 1908 that the best catch was inshore
and the fishermen had good reason not to go further out. He also notes that “primitive”
craft and gear and curing methods, and crude business organization were not ill suited to
past economic conditions, for in the absence of good roads and transport, larger catches
of fish would not have found ready markets. By the time of his 1909 presentation at
Lahore, he had come to believe that

no great development of capturing methods is desirable or
permissible…the appearance of steamers and other powerful vessels
would be prejudicial not only to the vested fishing interests of a large
fishing population, but probably to the supply of fish; restrictive
regulations should certainly precede such up-to-date attempts at
development. (Madras Fisheries Bureau, 1915: 209)

Thus, with regard to the inshore fishery, Nicholson came around to arguing that a more
gradual method was to be favoured, with the aim being to foster “the independent yet co-
operative owner of the fishing smack and the petty factory rather than the capitalist-cum-
labourer” (Madras Fisheries Bureau, 1915: 224).

The inshore fishery was to be left alone, and only the deep sea was to be explored and
exploited by new enterprise. But since private enterprise was diffident of doing this, and
the artisanal fishermen lacked the capital and enterprise, the government needed to take
this initiative. Under his successor, James Hornell, who was more appreciative of the
talents of the artisanal fishermen,¹¹ this too was abandoned. Reeves et al argue that “the
story of experimental trawling highlights the capacity of the colonial state to identify a
potential area for productive investment, on the one hand, and its inability to pursue this
idea to its logical conclusion owing to a lack of money, on the other” (Reeves et al,1996:
15). For trawling to become profitable as an industry, it would require an entire
infrastructure to be developed around it, for no private entrepreneur could hope to make
profits given the state of the markets and the lack of storage, transportation, and
communication infrastructure. Development of the fisheries would require the state to
create this infrastructure. But this was an investment the colonial state was unwilling to

¹¹ In his preface to SIFFS’ 2002 reissue of Hornell’s unparalleled compendium of 1920, The Origins and
Ethnological Significance of Indian Boat Designs, V. Vivekanandan talks of Hornell’s multifaceted
contribution to marine biology, fisheries technology, and anthropology, based on the “extraordinary grasp”
oficials such as Hornell and Nicholson had of the link between man and nature and the role of technology
in fisheries.”
Thus, Reeves et al (1996: 34) conclude that colonial fisheries policy and administration made very little impact on the existing industry and left little by way of legacy. This might not be entirely accurate, for works by administrators such as Day, Nicholson, and Hornell did mark the first attempt to study and document comprehensively all aspects of the fishery and related trade. Colonial efforts also left a legacy of bureaucratic forms and procedures that were inherited by the post-colonial fisheries department. These included, for instance, the Madras Fisheries Bureau’s full program of activities, ranging from research and experimentation (trawling expeditions, curing and canning, fish stocking, etc); the administration of curing yards, oil and guano factories, and inland fish farms; the management of the Crown monopoly of the Pearl and Chank Fisheries; socio-economic work (education, cooperative societies); propaganda (carried out in the villages around new methods of curing, etc); legislation; and publications.

The fishery policies of the Princely State of Travancore (of which Kanyakumari was part) seem largely to have mirrored those of British India. Forced to impose its own tax on salt, it too initially set up fish-curing yards where salt was supplied cheaply (Velu Pillai, 1940: 42-4, 392). Legislation regulating the inland fisheries was passed in 1897, modelled on the colonial Indian Fisheries Act of 1897. A Fisheries Department was established in 1913-14 and two fisheries inspectors appointed and sent to Madras for training under Nicholson (Velu Pillai, 1940: 390). Fishermen were sent elsewhere to train in the use of sardine nets, and fishermen from Calicut and other places in Malabar (higher up the west coast) were brought to demonstrate the long-line (with which the Travancore fishermen were apparently unfamiliar) to the fishermen from Neendakara and nearby villages. The first fishery school was started in 1917-18, providing reading, writing, and vocational education such as weaving, account keeping, and curing: “it was found to be the means to remove many of the evils prevalent among the fishermen and to initiate them into the habits of thrift and economy” (Velu Pillai, 1940: 396). A Cooperative Society Regulation was passed in 1913-14, based on the Cooperative Societies Act II of 1912 of British

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12 Velu Pillai (1940: 393) notes that fishermen from Quilon and south Travancore continued for many years to invite master fishermen from the Malabar region to demonstrate the technique.
India, with the object of promotion of thrift and self-help among agriculturalists, artisans, and persons of limited means, including fishermen.\(^\text{13}\) Overall, these interventions had minimal impact on the nature and structure of the regional fishery, although Kurien (1985: A-71) argues that the post-1947 state of Travancore-Cochin developed through this process a more gradualist perspective on development, and one that gave greater respect to the accumulated skills of fishermen, than did Indian planners.

### 2.2 Postcolonial Developments

#### 2.2.1 State-led Modernization

The post-colonial state has invested considerably in the fishery, and with far greater impact than the colonial regime. But the rapidity of change witnessed since the 1950s is also the outcome of new markets, private sector initiatives made viable by the general improvement in the infrastructure of transportation and preservation, and, importantly, the efforts of Church and non-governmental organizations engaged in development. The goals of planned development have been to increase production for domestic food supply and export, generate employment, and improve the living conditions of the fishing communities, seen as poor and “backward (Kurien, 1992: 224; 1985: A-72; Subba Rao, 1988).

Economic planning began in the early 1950s with a vision of community development that included institutional reform in the form of cooperatives aimed at undermining the power of the merchants. Rather quickly, however, the imperatives of economic development and food production led to a shift, by the end of the first Five Year Plan, to the productivist, technocratic bias which underlay, for instance, the Green Revolution in agriculture. The attitudes of post-colonial policy-makers toward the artisanal sector were, if anything, rather less informed and more dismissive than those of their colonial predecessors.\(^\text{14}\) For instance, while Nicholson had reflected on the nature of the class

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\(^{13}\) Kurien (1985: A-71) cites a 1935 Travancore Cooperative Enquiry Report that notes that by 1933 there were 95 fishermen’s cooperatives across the kingdom covering a third of the active fishermen, although most of them were performing quite poorly. It is not clear that any of them were in the villages that are now part of Kanyakumari district.

\(^{14}\) This is reflected in the now frequently quoted statement by the National Planning Commission that the existing fishery was “largely of a primitive character, carried on by ignorant, unorganized and ill-equipped
system required for modernization to flourish, and on the ways in which this would displace the artisanal sector, planners in the immediate post-independence period assumed that Community Development, which retained the village organization as its basis, would enable a harmonious transition to modernization (Subramanian, 2000: 30-35).

The inshore fishery was assigned to state (provincial) jurisdiction. Directions were set and funds allotted by the national Five Year Plans, but each state devised its own Plans, with somewhat differing priorities. From the end of the First Five Year Plan in 1951-56, the primary means to modernization and increased productivity was the introduction of mechanized craft, for which the largest outlays in the fisheries sector were made.  

Mechanized boats were initially almost all built in government building yards, and supplied through a loan and subsidy scheme funded by the central government to fishermen who were members of the government fisheries cooperative societies. Other schemes, such as the subsidized issue of nylon nets, and the development of fishing harbours, freezing and processing facilities, and improved transportation, were also put into place to support the mechanized craft, while propaganda work was carried out in the villages to popularize these craft. The Fisheries Department also provided a variety of welfare and relief schemes through these societies over the years. Primary among these were the housing schemes, and later the lean-season and accident insurance schemes.

Foreign aid played a small but significant role in this early period of modernization. In 1952, the Government of India signed agreements with the FAO and the Government of Norway for the development of the fisheries. Kurien notes that these were the first aid schemes of this kind in the new “development” order of the 1950s, with the UN and bilateral agencies becoming involved in the “transfer of expertise and technology” (Kurien, 1985: 1-72-73; see also Bailey et al., 1986). The first of the Indo-Norwegian fishermen. Their techniques are rudimentary, their tackle elementary, their capital equipment slight and inefficient” (Shah, 1948, cited in Kurien, 1985: A-72).

Of the total allotted to fisheries, the percentage allotted by the Central Government to mechanization went from 16.5% in the Second Plan, to 27% in the Third Plan, to 40% in the three Annual Plans of 1966-69. In Tamil Nadu, these percentages were 10, 29, and 38, respectively, with actual expenditure on mechanization exceeding outlay being 11%, 46%, and 54% in each of these periods (Planning Commission of India, 1971: 170).
Projects was started in 1953 in three villages in Travancore (Kerala); in later phases, a project was also established in Tamil Nadu (at Mandapam in Ramewaram district). The design and supply of mechanized boats, along with a fishermen training centre, an ice-plant cum cold storage, a fish meal plant, and freezing plants, were all part of this project (Programme Evaluation Organization, 1971: 168).

FAO experts also addressed themselves to the task of recommending which of the traditional craft were suitable for motorization, as a prelude to the introduction of mechanized fishing on a large scale (Madras Fisheries Department, 1953-54, 1954-55, 1955-56, 1957-58). This proved more difficult than anticipated. Meanwhile, one of them, Paul Zeiner, designed a larger craft modelled on a Danish vessel. This was name the Pablo after him. When trials by fishermen of the Pablo suggested enthusiasm for it, funds left over from the First Five Year Plan were sanctioned to construct twenty such boats and sell them to groups of fishermen, with a 25 percent subsidy, and the rest to be recovered over seven years. Over the course of the Second Plan, some hundred more such boats were to be commissioned. Initially twenty-four to twenty-five feet long, the next set were to be closer to twenty-eight to thirty, in the anticipation that “once the mechanisation fever sets in…the fishermen are bound to feel the necessity to have bigger boats for increasing the unit-effort and thereby the catches” (Madras Fisheries Department, 1956: 45).

The other expert, Illugason, addressed himself to improvements of fishing gear. He recommended the use of nylon (to replace cotton), purse seine, and trawl nets. His successful demonstrations of the nylon net also led the department to subsidize their supply on a similar subsidy-cum-hire/purchase scheme, to those who bought the mechanized boats. In subsequent years, FAO experts also addressed themselves to harbours, marketing, and other improvements (Madras Fisheries Department, 1956).

A shorter-lived contribution seems to have been that of the Indo-American Technical Co-operation Assistance Programme, under which the Fisheries Department received engines, craft, a variety of gear, and machinery for an ice-plant and insulated containers, between 1952 and 1955 (Madras Fisheries Department, 1956).
With the opening up of US markets for frozen lobster and prawn in the early 1950s, and the Japanese market, which by 1967 had overtaken the US as the largest market for these products, the Government began to provide subsidies for the acquisition of mechanized craft in order to take advantage of this export drive. From an export turnover of just under 500 tonnes of frozen prawn at the end of the 1950s, Indian prawn exports went up to 23181 tonnes in 1971; the price per tonne went up from under Rs 5000 to Rs 13,000 over this same period (Kurien, 1985: A-75).

The goals of planned development to increase production for export and domestic food supply, generate employment, and improve the living conditions of the fishing communities, were not without their contradictions. Increased export may be at the cost of increased domestic consumption. Increased production does not require investment in the fishing communities, but may instead go to interests that compete directly with them. Finally, capitalization of the sector, under the assumption that there is a limitless resource base that will sustain production for both domestic subsistence and export, may undermine itself by contributing to the erosion of that base. These contradictions were reflected in the opposition by fishing communities to many of these policies, and forced the state to withdraw them or enact corrective measures.

By the 1970s, opposition to the trawlers introduced under the mechanization scheme had begun to flare in several states across India’s coastline. This led to the emergence of a national coalition to oppose trawling, and a call for the regulation of trawlers by zone and by season. The national Marine Fishing Regulations of 1978 (and revised in 1982) requiring all states to regulate their marine fishery may be seen as a response to this nationally organized resistance. Kerala passed a Marine Fishing Regulation Act in 1980, and Tamil Nadu in 1983. Although the Act empowers the state to impose: regulations on the number of fishing vessels operating in an area, limitations or restrictions on the catching of certain species, gear regulations around mesh size and types of gear, and hours of operation, the chief rule notified under the Act had to do with zoning. A three kilometre from the shore zone was reserved for non-mechanized craft, with mechanized craft being required to fish beyond this zone. Regulations imposed under the Act were to take into account primarily: (a) the need to protect the different interests of those engaged
in fishing, particularly those using traditional craft; (b) the need to conserve fish and “regulate fishing on a scientific basis”; and (c) the need to maintain law and order in the sea. Enforcement of the rules remains a challenge, given the limited patrolling and policing capacities of the state’s Department of Fisheries (Bavinck, 1997).

The continued dominance of an export orientation led the Government of India to introduce a new Deep Sea Fishing Policy in 1991 that proposed the licensing of foreign vessels, under joint ventures between Indian and foreign companies, to fish entirely for export in India’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). This was prompted by a balance of payments deficit, and by a clause in the 1982 Law of the Sea that allows a country to open its EEZ for exploitation by other states if unable to fully exploit it by itself. The storm of opposition this policy raised amongst domestic fishing interests, both community-based and commercial, led to the eventual withdrawal of this policy (see Chapter 7) (Kurien, 1995a, 1995b; NFF, 1995).

The local outcome of the state’s project of modernization, and the responses it generated, is examined in the setting of Kanyakumari district.

2.3 Fisheries Modernization in Kanyakumari District

2.3.a Mechanization

Some Pablo boats (gillnetters) were distributed in Kanyakumari in the First Plan period itself, to members of the Colachel village fisheries cooperative society. The then Fisheries Minister of Tamil Nadu, Lourdammal Simon, was from Colachel, where her husband was the President of the Cooperative Society. Although Colachel may have been chosen for this reason, as A. Subramanian (2000: 37-40) suggests, it was also the only place in the district where a natural harbour permitted their operation (Thomson, 1989). They were bought largely by karamadi (shore seine) owners and other richer fishermen. Only a year after their introduction, the high volume of their catches compared to those of the kattumarams attracted the opposition of fishermen from the neighbouring village of Pudur. The kattumaram fishermen were supported by some Colachel merchants, who feared a fall in prices because of this abundant harvest, and as

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16 See Chapter 3 for more on the politics behind this; see also A. Subramanian (2000: 37-40).
well, feared that “with state support and access to a new technology, poorer fishers who were committed through indebtedness to sell their catch to them would now use their link to a new authority to disobey middleman dictates” (A. Subramanian, 2000: 66).

This opposition, combined with the lack of a proper harbour and their need therefore to rely on kattumarams to bring the catch to shore, led most of Colachel’s gillnetter owners to shift their operations to the Kerala harbours of Quilon and Cochin, and to Veerapandiapattnam on the east coast. Within a few years, their operations had proved unprofitable, given the still low price of fish, and most of these owners either gave up on their craft because they could not afford the maintenance costs, or sold them to Kerala fishermen (A. Subramanian, 2000: 66-67).

By the late sixties, following the “pink gold” rush in Kerala (see below), the wealthier families in Colachel began to acquire bottom trawlers. Trawlers allowed for the year-round fishing of prawn, by extracting them from the ocean bed, unlike the gillnetters, which could only fish them in the monsoon season when they became a mid-water species. Subsequently, limited government support made possible the purchase of some one hundred and thirty trawlers, but difficulties in repaying the loans drove the smaller producers to bankruptcy, and ownership becoming increasingly concentrated in a few families (Ram, 1992: 133; Programme Evaluation Organisation, 1971: 187). Lacking adequate processing and marketing facilities in Colachel, and faced with the opposition of the local kattumaram fishermen, the trawler owners gradually began to fish in Kerala where the government was investing heavily in infrastructure (Kurien, 1985: A-77). Very few trawlers were acquired elsewhere in the district, until the construction at the end of the eighties of the harbour at Chinna Muttam on the east coast.

2.3.b Pink gold.

In 1953, a private entrepreneur in Kerala began the export of small amounts of frozen lobster and prawn to the USA; this export took off almost immediately. Having lost access to fishing rights in Mexican waters in 1962, Japan also soon became a market for prawn exports (and in 1967 overtook the USA as the largest market). As noted above, the Government began to provide subsidies for the acquisition of mechanized craft in order to take advantage of this export drive (Kurien, 1985: A-74-76).
The introduction of mechanized craft and attendant facilities in the Neendakara area of south Kerala by the Indo-Norwegian Project in 1953, coupled with the opening of this new market, led very rapidly to the emergence of what Kurien (1985) refers to as the “modern sector” – larger mechanized craft (trawlers) operating from harbours with processing and freezing facilities. The growth in the number of trawlers seeking to meet the increasingly profitable international demand for prawn introduced an entirely new element into the fishery of the region.

The Colachel trawlers became part of this fishery, but this was only one of the ways that the fishing villages were drawn into producing for these new markets. A second way was when merchants and middlemen in the fishing villages began to offer fishers using artisanal craft a good price for shrimp (and lobster), which had hitherto been fished only in limited quantities, to be sold in dried form to Ceylon, but not to be eaten domestically (in fact, in times of bumper catch, shrimp were converted into fertilizer for coconut trees!). By 1956 or so there were freezing plants catering to this trade in three Kanyakumari villages, almost all of which were being supplied by artisanal fishermen.17

A third way in which Kanyakumari fishers were drawn into producing for these markets was through migration to work on the mechanized boats in Kerala.

2.3. c Growing tensions

The improvement in transportation, processing, and preservation due to government investment in the fisheries and infrastructure more broadly, led also to the ability to supply fresh (iced) fish to distant national markets. As noted in Section I, while the sector had been producing dried fish for global markets since at least the nineteenth century, this fish was sold at very low rates by the fishing families that caught and dried the fish, with little of the ultimate value of this export finding its way back to them.18 This changed with the opening of new domestic markets for fresh fish, the burgeoning demand for

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17 Kurien notes that between 1961 and 1969, some 70% of the catch of 237 tonnes of prawns in Kerala was landed by artisanal fishermen (1985: A-77).

18 In a 1908 letter, Nicholson notes that while the price in Japanese ports for a ton of dried sardines from India was about Rs 110, the fishermen who caught and dried it received an average of about Rs 20-22 for it; the broker who bought it from the fishermen and sold it to the contractor received a rupee or so per ton, and the contractor then sold it to the European exporting firm for about Rs 30. The Rs 70 difference between this price and that at which it was sold in the Japanese market went into the hands of the exporting firm and agents on both sides of the trade (Madras Fisheries Bureau, 1915: 142).
shrimp in foreign markets, and the willingness of export company agents coming into the villages to pay good prices for it. But this also made fishers increasingly aware of certain structural barriers that prevented them from benefiting fully from the new markets; first, the greater productivity and output of the trawlers with which they were competing; second, the realization that much of the value that should have flowed to the fishermen was siphoned off by the middlemen to whom they were tied in credit-cum-marketing contracts; and third, competition for space and catch (since the prawn was largely found inshore), and damage to nets by the trawlers. While the state seemed impervious to the effects of its interventions, non-governmental organizations aligning themselves with the artisanal sector initiated and facilitated a series of responses aimed at modifying and countering these effects. Specifically, these were: the motorization of artisanal craft, the establishment of cooperatives aimed at removing the merchant-middlemen, and the movement to regulate trawling.

2.3.d The motorization of artisanal craft

The diocesan clergy had largely been in favour of the mechanization programme of the 1950s, seeing it as an avenue to economic advancement and improvement of the community (Subramanian, 2000: 39). The founder of the diocesan social service society (KSSS), Fr James Tombeur, who favoured a more organic approach to development (see Chapter 4) established an Indo-Belgian development project in 1963 to explore the motorisation of traditional craft. A hundred outboard engines were imported from Belgium, but the project (which also had some FAO support) soon became mired in issues of aid dependency, and differing expectations between the fishermen and the project officials (Pelzer, 1971). The project was replaced in 1973 by the KSSS Fisheries Development Project under which a Boat Building Centre was set up in Muttom village, and experiments with plywood and fibreglass craft carried out under the leadership of the Belgian priest and engineer Pierre Gillet (Gillet, 1985; Tombeur, 1990; Vivekanandan, 2002). A. Subramanian (2000:136) has felicitously termed this commitment to appropriate technology as part of a broader approach to “liberation,” “liberation technology.” What is remarkable about these experiments, as recounted by some of the key protagonists referred to above, is the continued interaction with the ultimate users – the fishermen, serious consideration of their feedback, and concern for cost factors, all of
which distinguish this effort at modernization from the government’s schemes.

A successful collaboration with the British Intermediate Technology Development Group (ITDG), beginning in 1981, led to the eventual design, with some trial and error and much careful evaluation of feedback from fishermen, of plywood kattumaram and vallam substitutes that retained the essential design features of the traditional craft and so required little by way of learning and adaptation from the fishermen. The plywood craft found a growing market. The South Indian Federation of Fishermen’s Societies (SIFFS), a federation of the men’s cooperatives (see below) took up the running of the Muttom boatyard, and set up others to meet this demand. Private boat-building yards also began to copy and sell these new designs, so that they proliferated rapidly.

The number of motorised kattumarams and vallams began to grow by the mid-1980s, when the Tamil Nadu government introduced a scheme for the motorization of traditional craft in the Sixth Plan (1980-85). Motorization opened up newer, more distant fishing grounds, especially for those fishers who had the skills and desire to innovate with new gear for hitherto untapped species, and led to dramatic increases in catch (Vivekanandan, 2002: 20-21). However, motorization and the adoption of more sophisticated gear also required higher initial investments and recurring high costs for fuel and engine maintenance. Studies in Kerala (Kurien, 1985: A-79-80; Meynen, 1989; Nayak, 1993; PCO & SIFFS, 1991; Pelzer, 1971) show that motorization increased indebtedness. This necessitated larger catches to allow owners to break even, thus increasing the pressure on the resource, and heightening the tension between different categories of users relying on it.

2.3.e The creation of fishermen’s cooperatives

Fishermen had in the past been more interested in innovation in gear than in craft, since their traditional craft served them well. Two factors worked to change this and create a demand, by the early 1980s, for innovations in craft. The first was a need for new materials because of the over-logging and depletion of the alpecia wood from which the kattumaram had traditionally been made, the difficulty of finding other woods with the same qualities of lightness and durability, and likewise the difficulty of finding enough mature mango trees from which the vallams were dug out. The second was the depletion of catch in inshore waters (up to three kilometres from shore) because of the operation of the trawlers, thus forcing fishermen to want to motorize in order to go further; since motorization was harder with the traditional craft, alternatives became necessary.

SIFFS continued to set the standards in terms of quality and price: Vivekanandan (2002) shows that over half of the plywood artisanal craft in the region had been produced by SIFFS’ boatyards.
The Department of Fisheries set up cooperative societies in the 1950s under the Community Development programme to provide credit as a way of undermining the merchant/middleman. With the adoption of the mechanization programme, the loans and subsidies were channelled only for mechanization (and the purchase of imported nylon nets for mechanized craft), and at the end of the 1980s for the motorization of traditional craft. The credit available through these schemes was insufficient to meet the ongoing capital costs of an active fisherman, and there were no other sources of official credit available.

Following an experiment in the neighbouring district of Trivandrum, KSSS priests began at the end of the 1970s to attempt to form marketing and savings-cum-credit cooperatives for fishermen in order to break their dependence on, and exploitation by, middlemen. The story of the formation of these cooperatives and their role as civil society organizations, is taken up at length in Chapter 6. Here my interest is in noting that they did begin to shift the locus of accumulation away from the non-productive intermediaries into the hands of the producers. Only owners of craft could become members of these new cooperatives, however, so that a large number of men in the villages did not benefit from the savings-cum-credit scheme. Nonetheless, as workers earning on a share basis, they too benefited from the higher prices the cooperatives were able to set.

2.3.1 The attempt to regulate trawling

Resistance to trawlers in the waters around Colachel began soon after their introduction in the late 1960s. When Colachel’s trawlers first started operating in the district, twenty-four villages got together to register a court case against them. A.M. Simon, the husband of the Tamil Nadu Fisheries Minister Lourdammal Simon, was able to use his influence in the Congress party to have the case dismissed. In 1970, the villages then orchestrated a violent attack on the property of some of the prominent trawler owners in Colachel. A. Subramanian (2000: 68-69) argues that this was the first sign of a sectoral consciousness among the fishermen, since the conflict in the 1950s between the gillnet owners in Colachel and the kattumaram fishermen of Pudur was largely understood as a conflict between two villages.

This violent opposition forced the trawlers to move to the Kerala coast, after which
Kanyakumari witnessed long periods of relative calm. Relative peace was also won through the passing of Marine Fishing Regulation Acts in both Kerala (1980) and Tamil Nadu (1983), under which a zone of three nautical miles from the shore was reserved for artisanal craft.

In Kerala, the artisanal fishers, now unionized under the powerful *Kerala Swatantra Malsya Thozhilali Federation*, pressed militantly through the 1980s for a monsoon ban on trawling (this being the season when the shrimp come close to shore to spawn) (Kurien, 1992). The imposition of a monsoon ban in Kerala brought Colachel (and many Kerala) trawlers back to Kanyakumari waters (where the ban did not hold) in the monsoon. The construction of a harbour at Chinna Muttam on the east coast of the district at the end of the eighties, saw the number of trawlers in Chinna Muttam and the adjoining village of Kanyakumari grow from three in 1987 to close to a hundred in 1995. The rule enacted under the Tamil Nadu Marine Fishing Regulation Act (TNMFRA) requiring trawlers to fish beyond three miles from shore was upheld only in its violation, since the inshore zone was richest in prawn. Thus, by the early 1990s, opposition to the trawlers began to peak again. But this time, the most militant elements in this opposition were the fishermen who owned motorized *vallams* or *kattumarams*, for their greater vestedness in the fishery made them even more dependent on a good catch than the non-motorized fishers who were less indebted. The forms that this opposition took will be described in Chapter 7.

**2.3.g Fishermen as agents of modernization: Innovation, adaptation, resistance**

While mechanization, motorization, and new kinds of craft were introduced largely by the government or non-governmental organizations, their adoption depended upon the willingness of the fishermen themselves to innovate. Further innovations, especially regarding gear and related harvesting practices, were introduced by the fishermen themselves. Beginning with the almost complete shift to nylon nets from the 1960s onwards, fishermen also took to new kinds of nets like the trammel or “disco” net. Because of its efficiency, the trammel could be used for a variety of species, and became the most popular kind of net across all villages. Fishermen experimented with smaller
mesh sizes, new kinds of bait like shimmering nylon, and the use of the long-line with multiple hooks. But innovation has never been universally welcomed, and the fear of overfishing has frequently been cited as a reason for resistance. This is illustrated by the career of the long-line within the district.

The long-line was introduced to this south-west coastal region by fishermen from Malabar in the early decades of the twentieth century as part of the Travancore government’s fisheries modernization plan. It is unclear, though, in which villages it was taken up (Velu Pillai, 1940: 393). Records dating to 1966 from the Ethamozhy Police Station contain petitions to the District Collector and Minister of Fisheries, as well as Police Inspectors’ reports about a conflict between the two neighbouring villages of Enayam Puthenthurai (EP) and Enayam, over the use of the long-line, with petitioners from EP making the argument that the long lines adopted by Enayam fishermen attracted all the fish and left little for the nets and single hooks. In their petition, Enayam villagers countered by claiming that their use of long lines was an “age-old” practice that EP villagers resisted because they were not able to catch as much with their single hooks. While the final police report from that period stated that the “offending parties” had agreed to stop using the long lines, we know little of what changed in subsequent decades, because both villages now use this gear. Similar language and dispute settlement processes were seen in a much later dispute, in 1990, between the same two villages, over the use of long lines versus lobster nets; here the solution seems to have come in the form of seasonal and spatial demarcation for the two types of gear.

Further along the coast, Mariadasan, a master fisherman from Mel Manakudy (MM), recounted in an interview how, when long-lines were first introduced in Kanyakumari village in the late 1970s and started showing huge catches, the village imposed a ban on them on the grounds that they would take all the fish. In MM, where they were introduced following Kanyakumari, at first there was a ban on using them during the lobster net and rayfish net seasons, but this was later lifted and they were allowed throughout the year. Soon the majority of fishers had adopted the long-line, and the higher earnings they were experiencing in the village were due not only to outboard motors and improved vallams, but also to the new type of gear.
The following account provided in 1995 by two fishermen from the village of Pallam Puthenthurai demonstrates how choices of craft, gear, and motorization, and patterns of labour and migration, are determined by a complex set of factors related to both local ecology, and to cultural attitudes peculiar to each village:

Prawns are not caught in these waters as there are too many rocks to use a net. So, only hook and line is used. This is the only village in this clump that uses only hook and line – even the neighbouring villages use nets. But they make good money with the fish. They use *thoonديل* (hooks) here with colourful bait such as shiny thread. They learnt this from Enayam Puthenthurai which is the innovator in using nylex baits and such like. But they use a maximum of five or so hooks on a line, not 1000-2000 as in Mel Manakudy. Here that would be considered too much work. That is also the reason why people do not like to use nets here – among other reasons, repairing them would take too long. But by contrast, they fish regularly here. They don't give up if they haven't caught much for three or four days, as net fishers often do. Hook and line fishing is low cost, unlike net fishing, so whatever they catch is profit, and there is not much work involved in going out every day.

Outboard motors are not used here because of the rough sea - it is possible to use them only from October to December when the sea is calm, so it is not worth acquiring them. In *aani, aadi, aavana* (the monsoon months) they don't go out at all, it's too rough. But since this is the prawn season, many of them migrate up the east coast to fish with relatives in Ovari and Peritalai (villages in the neighbouring district).

Only some 40-48 kattumarams operate here now. Before the foreign rush (to work in the Gulf states) began some eight years ago there used to be a 100 or so. Most of those who work in the Gulf do fishing.

Some 200 men are in other occupations. Men prefer to do other work besides fishing, the moment they have a little education. Many of them work on ships and deep sea fishing vessels from Vizhag and other large harbours. The fishermen of this village are not interested in buying boats - it isn't worth the Rs 6-7 lakhs it costs. They would rather lend out the money on interest. There is a tradition of education in the village. The fish comes in only in the afternoon here, by which times the boys are in school. In other villages it comes in the mornings and the boys go to the shore, not to school.

In another example of the influence of village-specific attitudes on labour patterns, I learned the meaning of a word I had heard in Enayam Puthenthurai but not elsewhere. In most villages, young men with high school education or higher had not learnt how to fish,
or did not have much practice with it. As well, they felt qualified for other jobs, and considered the fishery an inferior option. Given the paucity of these other jobs, in every village there were a few of these educated but unemployed young men, some lounging about, others getting involved in parish activities. In EP, these men were referred to derogatorily as mēlcōṟu (literally, top rice), meaning that when the rice was ready, they were always around and got the first helpings from the top of the pot, unlike the men out fishing who often returned late. My informant seemed to think that the use of terms such was productive, and that EP was known for the number of educated young men who fished; I was intrigued, but lacked any independent basis on which to corroborate her claim!

2.3.h The modernization of women’s work

Although women were involved in net making, drying and curing, and marketing, no attention was paid to them as workers, nor was state-led modernization of these areas undertaken with a view to improving their income or working conditions. In many cases, it was non-governmental and social movement actors who took up their case. For instance, it was only toward the end of the 1990s, after pressure from the local unit of the National Fishworkers’ Forum and based on the example of Kerala, that women vendors were deemed eligible for the lean season benefit from the government cooperative society.

Net making

When nylon was introduced for net making, women continued to weave the nets. In the 1960s, Sr Lieve and others of the KSSS organized a net-making centre at Kovalam. Women gathered here to make nets, and kept the earnings from the sales (rather than bartering them, or making them only for the family). However, in the early seventies, an entrepreneur set up a net-making factory in Colachel. The nuns and the KSSS put their support behind the girls of the Centre – rallies and protests against the net factory were organized. But to no avail - the fishermen found the machine-made nets finer and more durable, and women were rapidly and almost completely displaced from net making.
Fish vending

Organization of the fish-vending women into a cooperative NGO, Shantidan, helped build their savings and access to credit. Public action and lobbying by Shantidan and the fishworkers’ union led the public transport corporation to allow women vendors to travel on public buses at appointed times. However, as Ram’s 1992 work demonstrates, “culture” and “community” operate more strongly for women than they do for men to temper and complicate the impact of such efforts at modernization. This can be seen in the story of Theresamma, a Mukkuva fish vendor from an inland village, rendered here at some length because it so vividly illustrates this point:

Pudukadai is an inland village and its market is the biggest one in the area. 45 women and 11 men in the village are engaged in fish vending. The village has instituted certain laws to regulate who can sell fish in the market. One of these laws, which began to be implemented more rigorously in the last six years or so, was that fish could not be brought by bus for sale in the market.

This law came into full force after the Tamil Nadu Fishworkers’ Union agitated for and got new routes allotted specifically for fish vendors to take fish from the beach to the markets. Before this, in any case, a lot of coastal women and ourselves used to walk, as we were often pushed off the bus, and also because they were not conveniently timed or routed. The village law was ostensibly designed to keep out the fish vending women from the coast who would otherwise arrive well before any of the vendors from Pudukadai. But the real motive was to prevent us from reaching the market with fish before the male cycle vendors. We women head load vendors were supposed to take a bus from the beach up to certain fixed points 4 kms from here. We had to get down at these points and walk the rest of the distance. If anyone saw us getting down even 100 metres past the fixed point, we would be reported and have to pay a fine of Rs 101. Always, by the time we reached the market, the cycle vendors would have sold their fish and our fish would go for a lower price.

So we started hiring cycle vendors from our village. They would load the fish in the beach and bring it to the market here. We had to pay the man Rs 5 in the morning, Rs 5 for lunch, and then a fixed amount at the end of the day. Thus we would have to pay Rs 40-45 per day regardless of whether

21 The Tamil Nadu Department of Fisheries census of 2000 shows an almost complete disappearance of this occupation for women; SIFFS figures from 2003 show a concentration of women in the villages bordering Kerala still engaged in weaving at home (possibly shore seines) and some others working in the factory.
we made any profit or not. Sometimes the male vendors would bribe the
cycle loader with alcohol or a bit of money not to show up at the beach, so
that we couldn't bring our load in time and compete.

We women went to the parish committee a number of times to ask them to
end this unjust law, but they only abused us. Finally, in desperation, in
1992, eighteen of us brought fish by bus right to the market. This was the
end of the law - after that they couldn't force us to walk. But four of us
who were seen as the leaders and who had been caught at various times in
the past trying to get down beyond the four km. limit, were given huge
fines of Rs 2000 each. In addition, we were told that we would be
excommunicated from the village church and could receive no rites there,
nor have anyone from our family buried in the parish cemetery. Every
family in the parish pays Rs 5 per month to the church - for the last 3 years
we four women have not been asked to pay. There were two incidents
where the committee refused to let our relatives be buried in the village
cemetery. In one case, we heard that the son of the deceased woman
related to Lilyamma paid the fine so that she could be buried, but nobody
asked Lilyamma to pay, and if they had asked her, she would have
refused.

After we broke the law we faced a lot of harassment from the village and
we did not know how long we could continue. I was even hit by one of my
opponents in the village. The Bishop appointed a peace committee to look
into the matter but they did not succeed in persuading the village
committee to withdraw the fine and accept us back into the parish. The
Bishop assured us that in any case we were entitled to all rites from the
church.

Before we broke the village law, we could do only one trip a day because
we had to walk. Also the law itself allowed us to do only one trip a day.
Many of us now go by tempo (pick-up truck) to distant places like
Tuticorin or Kanyakumari – ten or fifteen of us share one tempo.

Transport is no longer a problem, but other working conditions remain
difficult. There is no shade or shelter at the market, no water facilities.
There is a toilet but it is filthy and impossible to use. We now get less fish
than even five years ago - what we bought for Rs 100 five years ago, we
can't get for even Rs 500 now. But because the price of fish has gone up,
our earnings have not been affected. In fact, they have improved greatly
since we broke the village law because we can buy fish from distant
markets, make two trips a day, and don't have to pay Rs 45 daily to the
cycle vendor.

Now we live well. There is no want at all - we cook more rice than we can
eat. We have all given good dowries for our daughters and have lots of
saris for ourselves. Now no young unmarried man or woman sells fish,
and very few men of any age do. Every year there are fewer people
 carrying fish. All of us have tried to give our children education and train
 them for other jobs. All of us have done this for the same reason - we want
 to spare our children the suffering we went through. We continue because
 it's the only work we know. But our daughters don't know how to do this
 work. They are educated and think it below their dignity.22

**Fish processing**

The rapid growth of the shrimp export trade created a demand for women to work in shrimp
processing. At first, this was done by the export companies themselves, on their premises,
but later sub-contracted, in order to cut costs, to peeling shed operators. Much of this work
was done in Kerala, by women recruited locally. Peeling sheds were also set up in parts of
Kanyakumari district, and provided a seasonal source of employment for a few hundred
women. By the early eighties, as shrimp processors and exporters from Kerala began
procurement in other states, a market emerged for women from Kerala to work in peeling
plants in states as distant as Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, and West Bengal. These women were
recruited through agents or contractors with contacts in the villages. Some Kanyakumari
women also began to be recruited through these channels.

Conditions at these distant processing plants were sub-standard in general.23 The women
worked for up to twelve hours a day, at work that was hard on the hands and back. The
wage averaged Rs 600-1000 a month in the mid nineties, but a significant portion of this
was retained by the company to pay for their food, accommodation, and travel back.
Unionization, in the few cases where the women were able to attempt it, was strongly
resisted by the management, and there were several cases of fraudulent holding-back of
wages, mistreatment, and sexual harassment.

Almost all the women interviewed in reports on this migration (Labour File, 1998; ICSF,
1996; Saradamoni, 1995; Baud, 1992) had worked in several different plants in different

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22 Interview with Theresammal for *The Public Hearing on Women’s Struggle for Survival in the Fisheries*,
(See ICSF, 1995).

23 Conditions in the peeling sheds don’t seem to have improved significantly. A 2002 study of the Kerala
fishing industry by Simon and Vivekanandan notes that the women in the sheds, whose work is mostly
seasonal, are paid by quantity peeled; the best worker can make at most Rs 100 on a good day. Construction
workers in contrast make a fixed daily wage of Rs 175, and agricultural workers Rs 150 (Simon and
states. Terrible conditions at one would cause them to return home, but poverty would push them to try again elsewhere. They all had in common that they came from very poor families, with other sources of income being only intermittent; the women’s income contributed to large expenditures, such as on house repair, or medical expenses, or a dowry for a sister. And yet, unlike male migration, the women’s migration was never seen as “normal,” with most families feeling sad and ashamed that they had to send their daughters away to help support the family, and the women themselves reporting a great deal more of emotional work (Saradamoni, 1995) than the men who migrated seasonally. It must be noted, however, that for some women who worked in the better-run plants, their jobs represented freedom from the poverty and social constraints of their homes and villages.

Consumption and reproduction

If women’s work in the fishery received little attention, even less was paid to their work in managing subsistence and the reproduction of labour and the community. Processes related to modernization often led them to stretch their survival strategies even further, in order to assist the men in their family to take advantage of new opportunities. This can be seen in the following account by Sahaya Mary of Chinna Muttam village.

I am married to AA, and we have five children. AA used to drink heavily, often spending the entire day's earnings. His mother used to vend fish and we would feed the family with her earnings plus the odd loan. His elder sister’s husband had been working abroad for seven or eight years, so people suggested that he try the same. He finally got one visa offer and asked me to raise the money to send him abroad. I raised the money by borrowing from my three brothers, from a neighbour, and from AA’s own savings.

AA left to work in the Middle East and didn't write for six months or send money. Then he wrote saying that the owner was bad and didn't pay. Then in the seventh month he sent Rs 10,000. I gave Rs 2000 to my sister-in-law for her expenses in sending him. Then I paid Rs 3000 as interest on a loan. I paid Rs 1000 towards my savings group loan of Rs 2000. Then I kept Rs 1000 for household expenses.

We used to live in a thatch hut, but then I got Rs 4000 as a grant from a savings group to build a proper house. But I couldn’t raise the remainder. Then a benevolent lady came and saw my state and gave me asbestos sheets for the roof and some other things. The village then said that the woman was doing this to try and convert me to another religion and they stopped the
woman from coming to the village. Finally I managed to make my house *pucca* for Rs 7500.

My husband's employer played a very dirty trick on him and left him high and dry with no money. He had to borrow to pay for his air fare back and came back less than a year after he left with a debt of Rs 20,000. He has now bought some nets but borrows a *kattumaram* to fish in.

3 The “Modernized” Fishery of the Present

Systematic comparative data on the extent of transformation are hard to marshal, given the lack of consistent statistics and variations in headings/classifications between sources, and over time in the same sources, as seen in Table 3 below. However, while the data may be inexact, the trends they reveal are corroborated by fishers and informed observers. As noted in the previous sections, there are of course village-level variations in these trends.

3.1 Mechanization and Motorization

The modernization initiatives described above have had, overall, their desired effects. As table 3 shows, mechanized and motorized craft have increased in number, while the number of non-motorized *kattumarams* has declined.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Mechanized boats</th>
<th>Motorized artisanal craft</th>
<th>Non-motorized artisanal craft</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1986 (TN DoF)</td>
<td>641</td>
<td>1180</td>
<td>19,125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991 (SIFFS)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1096</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000 (TN DoF)</td>
<td>1383</td>
<td>4138</td>
<td>5228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003 (SIFFS)</td>
<td>1379</td>
<td>2914</td>
<td>4886</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Given that the average small trawler (mechanized boat) employs up to seven to eight men, a motorized *vallam* four to five men, and a *kattumaram* anywhere from one to four

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My main sources for statistical data are the *Government of Tamil Nadu Department of Fisheries* (TNDoF, 2000, 1986, 1978) and the *South Indian Federation of Fishermen’s Societies* (SIFFS, 2003, 1992) censuses, but there are many discrepancies between their data.
men, this shift is even more dramatic when seen in terms of numbers working in the different sectors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year/ Craft</th>
<th>Mechanized</th>
<th>Motorized</th>
<th>Non-motorized kattumarams / vallams</th>
<th>Shore seine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1978 (TN DoF)</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>-- 25</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003 (SIFFS)</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3.2 Ownership and Labour

The decline in the total number of craft of all kinds from 20946 in 1986, to 10749 in 2000, would suggest a concentration of ownership, even if some of the mechanized and motorized craft have shared ownership. As will be seen below, the high cost of the mechanized vessels acts against the fluidity of ownership seen in the period when kattumarams dominated.

The share system of dividing the returns persists, although the ratio has changed somewhat. On the motorized artisanal craft, 50-65 percent of the returns may still be made available to be divided between crew members, with the remainder going to the owner of the craft. On the mechanized craft (trawlers), crew members receive a fixed daily bata (a kind of dearness allowance), which is considered part of the daily expenses of operating the boat (along with fuel and food on board); 35 percent of the value of the net earnings is further divided between the 7-10 crew members, with 65 percent going to the owner of the vessel. Unlike owners of artisanal craft, whether motorized or not, this owner may not be a crew member as well – there is a significant proportion of absentee owners in this sector, including export companies and individuals from outside the fishing community.

### 3.3 New Markets

Some 80 percent of the catch used to be dried, or salted and dried (cured), with fresh fish

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25 Given that the Tamil Nadu government motorization scheme began only in 1986 and the use of motors became widespread in Kerala only in the early 1980s, it is likely that the number of motorized craft in 1978 would have been negligible.
sold mainly to markets accessible by foot in a day. Now the proportion has been reversed, with 80 percent of the catch being sold fresh (or frozen), to distant national and international markets, and less than 20 percent, of mostly the lower-value fish such as anchovy, being dried. Even though much of the dried fish was exported, and earned good revenues for the final exporters and the state, little of this value made its way to the fishers. Higher prices and a reduction in the number of middlemen, especially for the mechanized fishers, have meant that fishers are seeing more of a return from these new markets.

As noted in Section 2, India’s seafood exports have increased exponentially since the early 1950s, standing at 602,835 metric tonnes in 2008-09, at a value of US $1,908 million. The EU is the single largest market, followed by China, Japan, the USA, and other countries. While frozen fish (of a range of species) accounts for 40 percent of this export, frozen shrimp accounts for some 21 percent (MPEDA, 2010). The increased purchasing power of new markets, such as China, coupled with the declining catches in many oceans and an increased appreciation for fish as “healthy” animal protein in Northern markets, has created a voracious demand for seafood exports, making fish and seafood one of the most heavily traded food and feed commodities in the world. The Indian Ocean fishery, as one of few not yet deemed under-exploited, is therefore at its most lucrative (FAO, 2006).

Artisanal fishermen in Kanyakumari district catch several of the export species, such as prawn and cuttlefish (SIFFS, 1992-93). However, national markets are still a major destination for catch in this sector (unlike in the mechanized sector, which produces primarily for export). The market value of fish has gone up in national markets as well, with the rapid growth of refrigeration and transportation infrastructure across the country, and the increased purchasing power of India’s middle classes. Table 5 shows the proportion of SIFFS members’ earnings from export species, such as prawn, cuttlefish, lobster, and some fish, versus species auctioned on the beach for national (local and distant) markets:
Table 2.5. Proportion of earnings from export vs domestic markets, SIFFS members

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Export species</th>
<th>Domestically marketed species</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1993-94</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995-96</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996-97</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998-99</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999-00</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-01</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001-02</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003-04</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.4 Increased Earnings and Changed Consumption Patterns

Some sense of the increase in earnings may be had from the sales data recorded by the fishermen’s cooperative sangams. In 1991-92, 2,370 members earned Rs 46.9 million; in 2003-2004, 2,134 members earned Rs 193 million, an increase over the decade from an average of Rs 19,783 per member per year to Rs 90,435 per member per year, a four-fold increase. While the change in real income is not quite as dramatic, people’s accounts do generally indicate an improvement. As an older man interviewed in Chinna Muttam noted:

In 1965 1 kg shrimp was worth 25 or 50 paise/6-10 annas, while rice cost Rs 1/kg. Now (1995) shrimp of the first size earns Rs 300/kg and rice costs Rs 13-14/kg. So earnings have gone up. Before 1960 or so, two kattumarams full of fish would earn maybe Rs 300, now the same fish would fetch Rs 15,000. The amount of fish caught has gone down, but there has been progress due to growth in export markets. People used to be very poor, with no food for lunch. Now there is no family that doesn't have at least two meals a day.

The majority of informants in the villages studied shared this view. Others were more cautious, however, noting that things had improved for the village but become harder for those who worked on kattumarams – there was less catch for them to share. Fish prices may have gone up but so had other prices, and there were still some very poor families who did not eat two good meals a day except in the good season. However, a respondent from one of these poor families in Chinna Muttam said that the coming of the trawlers had eased things

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26 Approximate figures, calculated from SIFFS, “Details of Members and Landings,” in Annual Reports, various years.
somewhat - her husband could earn at least Rs 40 a day as *bata*, plus a bit of fish for curry. Before, when he worked on his own *kattumaram*, there would be days when the catch was worth only Rs 50, of which Rs 10 would go to the net (if borrowed), Rs 8 for other expenses, and the remaining Rs 30 would have to be divided between the three crew members.

Improved earnings are also reflected in the increased spending on white goods such as fans, televisions and refrigerators, cell phones, gold jewellery, solid furniture, the upgrading of houses, better clothes, and leisure activities such as restaurants and trips. But as aspirations have risen, and as several of these have become symbols of status, earnings from the fishery have often not sufficed. In the absence of other sources of income, especially for the women, the pressure has increased for them to bring larger dowries – already by the mid-1990s, a *kattumaram* fisherman could demand Rs 200,000 (2 lakhs) in dowry; up from an average of a few thousand rupees in the seventies. It was not uncommon in Chinna Muttam in 1995 to see a small tempo (pick-up truck) pull up when the bride moved into her marital home, carrying wardrobes and other solid wood furniture, a television, a mixer-grinder and various utensils. Given that dowry is considered an essential expenditure, this indicates the growing burden of consumption expenditure that fishing families now face.

### 3.5 Increased Input Costs

The price of fibre glass and plywood models of *vallams* produced by the SIFFS boatyards is a good indication of the inflation over the past decade or so: A fully decked GK26 cost Rs 45,000 in 1992 and Rs 80,000 in 2001; a 28 foot plywood Pozhiyoor model cost Rs 37,750 in 1992 and Rs 75,700 in 2001. (Vivekanandan, 2002: 23, 45) There has also been a great deal of inflation in the cost of fuel, adding substantially to the operating costs of motorized and mechanized craft.

### 3.6 Credit and Indebtedness

The promise of constantly expanding markets and rising incomes has attracted many *kattumaram* fishermen to acquire trawlers or, at the very least, outboard motors and improved artisanal craft. Government loans and subsidies have helped some fishermen with acquiring their first trawlers or motors, but have been insufficient to cater to the
growing demand, or to meet costs associated with replacement or repair. Some bank credit has become available through the *sangams* (against members' savings held there) for motorized craft owners, and directly for the more established trawler owners, given the higher income they are able to show and the greater assets they are able to offer as collateral. But a large part of the credit still comes from moneylenders and from the credit networks drawn upon by the women.

The level of indebtedness among new trawler owners is high. As noted in Section 2.3.c, fishers who have undertaken motorization of their artisanal craft also face increased indebtedness, but because their investments are substantially smaller than those made by trawler owners, their risk of loss is also reduced.

The account by J, a *kattumaram* fisherman in Chinna Muttam who had recently acquired a trawler in 1995, illustrates the enormous risk taken by fishermen who decide to invest in a trawler without a substantial capital base from which to start:

> I bought a second-hand trawler along with a partner with whom I split the cost of Rs 900,000. To raise money for the boat I sold my *kattumaram* and OBM, and borrowed from a man in Kanyakumari village who I repay at the rate of 5 percent of my daily earnings. The machine was already giving trouble when I bought it and will cost Rs 70,000 to repair. Since I have sold my *kattumaram* I am now idle till the machine can be fixed. I will have to borrow to fix the engine, as well for my daily subsistence needs; the interest rate this time is likely to be 10 percent. This has been a poor season for trawling, and I have had practically no earnings in the months since I bought the boat.

The promised returns from a trawler may take many years to materialize and translate into improved standards of living and greater long-term security. The potential for upward mobility has created new aspirations, but they are rarely met without pain and hardship. CM of Chinna Muttam village talked of her husband, who was away on his second-hand, 39 foot trawler, and how sad he was that he had had to take their son out of school to go fishing with him. Her husband had been taken fishing at exactly that age by his own father. Thinking how his son was repeating the pattern of his life, and how he hadn't been able to change it for him, broke his heart.
3.7 Migration

Aside from increased credit, other strategies have also been adopted or intensified in order to capitalize on the apparent profitability of the fishery. There has been an increase in migration that is not linked to seasonal factors. A SIFFS 1991 census of artisanal fishing craft in Kerala notes that until the early eighties or so, a few thousand *kattumarams* from Kanyakumari would migrate to central and northern Kerala during the lean season in Kanyakumari (November-February); with motorization, most of the migration is with motorized plywood or plank *vallams*. “Motorisation gave these migrant units greater mobility and higher returns” (SIFFS, 1991: 116). These fishers were more daring and skilful than the local fishermen in the areas they migrated to, using hook and line and going deeper out to sea in search of species not caught by the locals. The periods for which the men migrated had also lengthened. Thus, the survey notes that whereas pre-motorization migration was primarily a means of survival, post-motorization migration had become a highly profitable activity. But to this one might add that the extent of investment in craft had also made it a necessity, albeit for a better standard of living rather than sheer subsistence.

The increase in mechanization in Kerala has also increased the number of those who migrate there to work on trawlers. Simon and Vivekanandan (2002: 28) note that one of the reasons why crew members from Tamil Nadu are preferred to local Kerala crew by trawler owners in Kerala, who are increasingly from outside the fishing communities themselves, is that they are not as militant and aware of their labour rights as the Kerala fishermen. But they also suggest (2002: 40) that another reason for recruiting from Kanyakumari is that Kerala fishermen no longer consider working as crew on a trawler to be a well-paying job.

Thus, seasonal, or all-year migration has become a norm for a majority (65 percent) of Kanyakumari’s fishermen, as the figures in Table 6 show, with men who migrate to work on mechanized trawlers making up the largest number, followed by those who migrate seasonally with their own motorized craft; men who work on non-motorized artisanal craft are least likely to migrate.
Table 2.6. Migration (from SIFFS 2003)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Monsoon migration</th>
<th>Other migration</th>
<th>Non-migration</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All fishermen</td>
<td>2913</td>
<td>20,462</td>
<td>12,835</td>
<td>36,210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migration as a percentage of all fishermen</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanized fishermen</td>
<td>373</td>
<td>13,767</td>
<td>2,562</td>
<td>16,702</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migration as a percentage of all mechanized fishermen</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motorized fishermen</td>
<td>2,043</td>
<td>5,171</td>
<td>2,260</td>
<td>9,474</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migration as a percentage of all motorized fishermen</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-motorized fishermen</td>
<td>497</td>
<td>1,524</td>
<td>4,836</td>
<td>6,857</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migration as a percentage of all non-motorized fishermen</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As noted in Section 1, migration was not without its tensions even in an earlier period. Some 150 families who had migrated with their *kattumarams* to Ovari village in Thirunelveli district were expelled by the village committee in June 1995. In all these cases, the man of the family belonged to a village outside Ovari, such as Pallam Puthenthurai and Manakudy, but had settled in Ovari. The expulsion order, outlined on stone tablets erected outside each of the four churches in the village, stated that men who had come there after 1970 could no longer fish on their own craft, but men who came to work as coolies on craft belonging to Ovari men would be welcome. In approximately 120 of these families, the men had married women from Ovari, while in the rest, the migration was somewhat more recent and the entire family had come from elsewhere.27

Similar conflicts were reported that year in the Kerala village of Vizhinjam, between local fishermen and migrants from Kanyakumari. Colachel trawlers fishing in Kerala were expelled in a conflict that broke out in mid 1995. In the ensuing tension, crew from Kanyakumari were also barred from working on trawlers in Kerala. While the latter were called back in a few days, because of the extensive dependency of the Kerala trawling industry on them, the trawlers were forced to stay away for longer. Shark fishermen migrating to other states further up the west coast have also encountered opposition there, requiring SIFFS to intervene with the authorities to allow them to operate

27 My account of this is based on interviews with Sisters Conrad and Gleva, Servite nuns; migrant fishermen from KK district; and Soosai Maria, a Parava leader from the Ovari area. No one was very clear about the rationale for this – apparently the expulsions followed those in the neighbouring villages of Manapad and Periapalayam, some of which were of Ovari men. The nuns seemed to think they were occasioned by jealousy, because some of these “outsiders” had done rather well for themselves, but this does not explain the timing.
Migration to the countries of the Persian Gulf, dating back to the early 1980s, mostly to work on fishing vessels there, is another significant form. Sahaya Mary’s story in Section 2 points to the costs and risks involved in this migration. Yet, every one of the seven villages I studied had, by the mid-1990s, a sizable number of men (100 to 200, depending on the size of the village) in the Gulf. For the families of men who manage successfully to spend a few years abroad, this is an avenue to significant upward mobility, and is the basis of a great deal of the more conspicuous consumption in the villages.28

3.8 Increasing Pressure on the Resource

The need for increased production has led to a variety of other strategies as well. Because trawlers are expensive to operate, they rely almost entirely on catching shrimp and other export species to stay viable. The size of trawlers has grown, from 32-40 feet to up to 60 feet in the late 1990s. This allows them to go further, and stay out for anywhere between 7 and 20 days at a stretch. They have also adopted new technologies such as GPS and echo-sounders which allow them to find the fish more efficiently. There has also been an increase in the size and horsepower of motorized craft, allowing these craft to travel further and make trips of up to a week at sea (Vivekanandan, 2002: 33-36). All types of artisanal craft have also sought to make their gear more efficient, reducing mesh sizes and experimenting with new types of nets and bait.

The cumulative effect of all of these technological innovations has been to increase the pressure on the resource, especially the inshore resource where the most valuable species, such as shrimp, are found. While catch figures across the country continued to rise over the 1980s and 1990s, and even up to the present (although not in a secular fashion), declines have been registered since the mid-1990s in certain highly developed fisheries like Kerala’s. A recent study (Bhathal and Pauly, 2008) suggests that to the extent that there has been an increase in catch, this is due to a spatial (offshore) expansion, and to the

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28 This migration is, of course, much more extensive in Kerala and has had significant consequences for its political economy. See Isaac (1997).
intensification of extraction. Using the marine trophic index\textsuperscript{29} as a measure, it suggests that this increase has now reached its natural limits, and that Indian fisheries are not on a sustainable trajectory. Fishermen’s reports of declining catches in the inshore area also support this conclusion.

3.9 Property and Regulation

Given the increased dependency on a resource that is not infinite, the ability to harvest it sustainably becomes crucial. One way of ensuring sustainability has been to institute some form of property rights over the resource: the individual transferable quotas (ITQs) to harvest a specific resource, described at the start of the chapter; or, more commonly considered, if not instituted, across the Global South, community rights in the form of Territorial Use Rights in Fisheries (TURFs). These TURFs have been defined as demarcating a set of fixed rights: the right to limit or control access to the territory; the right to determine the amount and kind of use within the territory; the right to extract benefits from the use of the resources within the territory and, finally, a right to future returns from the use of the territory. In the case of a community owned TURF, the tenure may be in perpetuity (Christy, 1982).\textsuperscript{30}

The ability of a community to exercise these rights depends on a more generalized recognition of these rights in the form of state legislation, or in the recognition by other potential users that the community is the authoritative structure responsible for upholding these rights. Prior to the mechanization and motorization that expanded the territorial reach of craft, the dependence on winds and human effort for propulsion ensured a natural boundary for fishermen from each village. But undergirding this was the customary understanding of the village as having jurisdiction over the stretch of sea contiguous to the village’s land boundary and, further, of the village committee as the authority vested with the right to enforce this jurisdiction. For instance, the committee

\textsuperscript{29} The Marine Trophic Index is an indicator of fishing impact on aquatic ecosystems. It quantifies a process known as “fishing down marine food webs” whereby fisheries, upon depletion of the large, high trophic level species they initially target, shift to small, low trophic level species (Bhathal and Pauly, 2008: 26).

\textsuperscript{30} As Christy (1982) points out, elements considered essential to the definition of property in land, such as the right to transfer or convey ownership of the land and the right to lease the land, are missing from this conception of use rights in the fishery.
might exclude fishermen from outside the village, or tax them if they landed fish on the village beach, or restrict the kinds of gear used in village waters.

The arrival of the trawlers with their ability to speedily transcend village boundaries, and their tendency to stray close to shore to harvest shrimp, violated this customary understanding. The resultant conflict led the state to legislate in the form of the various Marine Fishing Regulation Acts. Under these Acts, trawlers were excluded from a three nautical mile zone from the shore. But the regulatory authority here was the state. No formal recognition was given to the village authority. The state’s lack of ability (because of the high costs of policing infrastructure) or lack of desire to enforce its own legislation led to tensions between the regulatory authorities of state and village, as we shall see in Chapter 7. In practice, this has meant that effective regulation depends on the ability of villagers to enforce the regulation through their own authority, or to mobilize state intervention. The outcome is, as Bavinck describes it, “a spatially splintered state” with the co-existence of plural legal and regulatory measures along its coast, and regulation dependent upon the ability of villagers to organize collectively (Bavinck, 2003; see also Bavinck 2001a, 2001b, 1998).

3.10 Lack of Diversification

In part because of the greater returns from the fishery, but also because of limited options elsewhere, the villagers remain heavily invested in the fishery, as demonstrated by the levels of investment and debt, as well as by the failure to diversify significantly. The extent of diversification is especially low for men: the fishery is now an increasingly lucrative source of employment, and the use of machines and motors, a variety of gear, and technology like echo-sounders, has reduced the physical toil and uncertainty of income of traditional fishing.
Table 2.7. Proportion of population in fishing and allied activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total population (TN DoF)</th>
<th>Number engaged in fishing (TN DoF)</th>
<th>Engaged in fishing related activities (TN DoF)</th>
<th>Total employed (SIFFS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>89,648</td>
<td>21,860 (24%)</td>
<td>9,665 (11%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>114,897</td>
<td>24,323 (21%)</td>
<td>5,129 (4%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>137,940</td>
<td>35,603 (26%)</td>
<td>2,923 (2%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>138,569</td>
<td>36,210 (26%)</td>
<td>8,894 (6%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.8. Male employment by sector

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year/ Occupation</th>
<th>1986 (TN DoF)</th>
<th>2000 (TN DoF)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adult males</td>
<td>32,915</td>
<td>46,243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total employed</td>
<td>27,655</td>
<td>40,168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of adult males employed</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of adult males employed in fishing</td>
<td>24,323 (74%)</td>
<td>35,603 (77%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult males employed in fishing as a percentage of employed adult males</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult males employed in Fishing related activities as a percentage of employed adult males</td>
<td>213 (0.64%)</td>
<td>660 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult males employed in other occupations as a percentage of employed adult males</td>
<td>3,119 (9%)</td>
<td>3,905 (8%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The situation is somewhat more complicated for the women. With increased production by trawlers operating from designated harbours and selling to export companies, some fish-vending women report difficulty in buying enough fish from their village beaches, although others, such as Theresammal who is quoted in Section 2.2.2, report an improvement in earnings. Regardless, few young women consider fish vending an option, and there are few other alternatives, work in local or distant processing plants being one of them. A small, but growing number of girls in the villages are being kept in school longer and encouraged to train for white collar jobs, such as teaching, accounting, secretarial work, or the religious orders, but few still find employment in these sectors. As the figures in table 2.9 indicate, with their displacement from net making, employment levels for women have gone down from 19 percent of all women in 1986 to 9 percent in 2000. Given that demands for consumption, around dowry, for instance, have

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31 Since these figures are not differentiated by gender, and since the proportion of those engaged in fishing, which is purely a male activity, is relatively constant, what they suggest is a drop in the number of women engaged in net making between 1978 and 2000, according to TNDof figures.
gone up exponentially over the same period, this has created a great desperation among women for jobs.

**Table 2.9. Female employment by sector**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year/Occupation</th>
<th>1986 (TN DoF)</th>
<th>2000 (TN DoF)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adult females</td>
<td>31,321</td>
<td>42,579</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total employed</td>
<td>5,834 (19%)</td>
<td>3,692 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fresh and dried fish trade</td>
<td>1,302</td>
<td>1,670</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net making</td>
<td>3,398</td>
<td>352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In fishing-related activities</td>
<td></td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In other occupations</td>
<td>1,134</td>
<td>1,429</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**4 Discussion**

The transformation in the Kanyakumari fishery took place in a number of stages. The first stage may be understood in terms of scale. Mechanized trawlers were introduced by a government modernization scheme in the nineteen fifties, at almost the same time as private merchants in Kerala began to find an export market for shrimp, a species that traditionally had no value in local markets. It was the opening of these markets that made the trawlers viable, and led to their proliferation. The trawlers were not large in comparison to craft in Northern fisheries like Canada’s. But they used powerful engines to traverse large areas, and aggressively chased and scooped up massive quantities of fish in ways that the largely “passive” gear (gill nets, hook and lines, and traps) of the traditional or artisanal fishers could not. They posed a challenge to the customary modes of territorial regulation by village authority, competed with the smaller craft for inshore space and catch, and caused frequent harm to their nets. The vastly unequal share of the catch captured by the trawlers as compared to the artisanal craft represented a form of enclosure or privatization of the marine resources. The small-scale fishers opposed them on grounds of their threat to subsistence and equity and to the sustainability of the resource. The intensification of the conflict between these two scales – the large-scale and the small-scale – across India’s coasts, coalesced into a national counter-movement. In the early eighties this counter-movement forced the state to enact legislation requiring mechanized craft to operate beyond a zone of three nautical miles from the shore.
The voracious appetite of export markets, and the opening of distant national markets through improvements in storage and transportation infrastructure, created a demand for fish and seafood that the trawlers alone could not fill. Thus, artisanal fishers too began supplying these markets almost from their very opening in the sixties. In the early seventies the diocesan social service society aimed its development efforts at “modernizing” artisanal craft. In the eighties these initiatives were matched by government motorization schemes that enabled artisanal fishers to increase their own productivity. The substantial, though by no means total, motorization of artisanal craft increased the fishers’ level of investment and corresponding indebtedness. As their investment increased, their vulnerability grew, and this intensified their opposition to the trawlers. But this opposition to the trawlers was now informed also by new rationales of market share, profitability, and solvency, even if they continued to use the older language of subsistence. The state’s inability to enforce the zoning regulation left the task to the artisanal fishing communities themselves, and the motorized artisanal craft owners took this task zealously upon themselves. Violent stand-offs between the large-scale mechanized and small-scale artisanal sector reached their peak in the mid-nineties.

A decade ago, the transformation entered a new stage. The continued demand from markets led artisanal fishers to increase their own investment in the fishery. The more successful artisanal fishers acquired larger craft, more powerful engines, and a variety of more intensive gear. Many also opted to acquire trawlers. Increased investment in the sector, coupled with a finite resource concentrated in a finite area, led inevitably to the concentration of ownership.

Artisanal fishers who were less successful in raising or repaying the capital necessary to this transition moved seasonally, or permanently, into working as labour on the trawlers. Here they found that they often made higher incomes as crew than they had as owners of less diversified artisanal craft. Work on the trawlers does not require a high degree of skill. Many of the younger men from fishing villages who have worked on trawlers all their lives do not possess the skills to operate kattumarams or a hook and line. Because of this de-skilling, there is also some evidence that men from other backgrounds are beginning to enter the trawler fishery as crew (Simon and Vivekanandan, 2002: 57).
The picture we have is of a population that is still almost completely dependent on the fishery for a living. This is due partly to the lack of ability to diversify, with few other opportunities for employment in the region, but in greater part to the fact that the opening of global markets, as well as distant national ones, and the continued rise in the price of fish and seafood, has sustained fishing as a viable occupation. Thus, the livelihood of the fishers is almost entirely dependent on production for markets.

Almost half of the men work on mechanized craft (and many families in the villages have invested in them), but many do so seasonally, and artisanal craft (albeit many made with new, modern materials) continue to be used. However, even of the artisanal craft, a large number use outboard motors for propulsion, thus travelling far longer distances than was customary. There is also a high rate of adoption of technologies like cell phones, GPS, echo-sounders, and more “efficient” (finer mesh) gear. In terms of size, horsepower, and “efficiency of gear” there is now less of a striking difference between the trawlers and the various kinds of artisanal craft fitted with outboard motors.

This greater reliance on capital-intensive technologies points to another form of incorporation into markets, in this case markets for inputs and credit. The costs of inputs, such as fuel and motors, are highly dependent on international factors, which force constant innovations in technology. For instance, the price of OBMs went up with the devaluation of the early 1990s; plywood costs too went up, leading to the increased popularity of FRP craft (these are more durable even if they cost more, and the SIFFS yard at Muttom yard has shifted entirely to production of FRP *kattumaram* and *vallam* models) (Vivekanandan, 2002: 37).

Polanyi (1957: 75) observed that the adoption of new, more specialized, and more expensive technology increases the risk of investment and requires that the continuance of production be assured, and that this marks a point of qualitative shift when the demands of industrial production tied to the market come to dominate. That decisive shift does indeed seem to have taken place in the Kanyakumari fishery, when the need to make returns on investment in technological advancements requires ever further technological advancement. The exact nature of the shift becomes clear when one recalls that almost
seventy percent of the catch in the traditional fishery was dried and exported (see Section 1.5), which is to say that the fishers of Kanyakumari always participated in markets. But the dried fish earned very little for the fishers themselves, with much of the value they earned being appropriated by intermediaries in the export chain, and the fishers receiving just enough to allow them to buy staples for subsistence. Markets had little impact on the nature of the production process itself. It is this that has changed.

This new form of participation in markets has accentuated existing wealth differentials in the villages. Some of the richer families in the villages were able early on to parlay their wealth into acquiring trawlers, and in many cases have diversified considerably since then. Artisanal fishers who have motorized or acquired trawlers (often second-hand) more recently, have often pieced together funds from a variety of sources and are highly indebted and vulnerable to any downturns in the fishery. However, despite the fact that the far more shaky basis of their own investment suggests that they will never join the ranks of the wealthiest trawler owners, they are clearly no longer structurally opposed to them. The contradiction has also been moderated by the sheer number of villagers who now work as labour on the trawlers, and are therefore dependent on the continued viability of the trawl fishery.

Further, just as it was the government’s mechanization policy that led to the differentiation between trawlers and artisanal craft, its latest attempts to capitalize on the market have created grounds for the mechanized and artisanal sectors to come together. The proposed Deep Sea Fishing policy of 1991 invited foreign capacity to harvest deep sea resources for export, rather than looking to enhance the capacity of the domestic fishing sector. Here trawler owners and artisanal fishers found themselves united against the threat of foreign competition, and forced to recognize a new and greater antagonism than that between them. This development makes it additionally difficult to talk of distinct classes of trawler owners as opposed to artisanal fishers, although some distinction equivalent to that between middle peasants and poor peasants may be possible.

The social impact of the insertion into markets and the commodification of the resource
base that this process represents has been further blunted by the fact that fishers were in many cases agents of this change, and by the continued strength of relationships of community. The process whereby this almost complete insertion into capitalist markets has occurred has been gradual, and its agents have been numerous. These include both NGOs and community organizers seeking to defend the traditional fishers, such as the KSSS and Boat Building Centre, as well as the fishers themselves through their active search for new technologies and fishing grounds. The shark fishers of Thoothoor and neighbouring villages are a good illustration of the artisanal fishermen’s ability to use skill and experience to innovate – in the last fifteen years or so, some four hundred craft from these villages have travelled up the west coast to fish in offshore waters using hook and line to capture shark, a species that local fishers do not have the skill to catch (Vincent Jain, 2002).

Likewise, local skills, customs, and topography have continued to play a role in determining the nature and extent of technological change. Thus, OBMS are not used in some places like Kovalam, or hook and line fishing continues to be the method used in others, or some villages see very little migration because their beach is protected in the monsoon, etc. The village-level variations in mechanization, motorization, and migration indicate the continuing importance of physical place, and of community tied to place, in determining the nature of participation in the market. Despite the fact that the new propulsion technology has broken the relationship of the village to its inshore waters, the primary resource remains immovable, and villagers are still able to assert community rights over access from the shore, as well as over catch landed on their shore.

Further, while many trawler-owning families from the first village to acquire mechanized craft, Colachel, moved out of the village and into the district headquarters town of Nagercoil, other families who have entered the market relatively recently, such as in the village of Kanyakumari, are still residents of the village and subject to its rules. Their attempt to challenge these rules, and the attempt of the community to assert them, is part of the struggle to embed the fishery, described in Chapter 7.

Migration, likewise, has not broken village ties. Fishermen migrate in groups based on
village and family relationships. Jobs on the trawlers in Kerala (and for women migrating to work in processing plants) are arranged through these relationships (this has of course been the traditional pattern of industrial labour recruitment in India since the late nineteenth century). When a temporary EU ban on seafood imports on health and safety grounds led to the suspension of operations in the mechanized sector, the men thrown out of work returned to their villages and were absorbed into the local fishery as best as possible (Simon and Vivekanandan, 2002). Further, the men are hired on to the trawlers under the assumption that they bring fishing skills as members of traditional fishing communities, although, as noted above, there is some evidence that this may be changing as it becomes obvious that work aboard the trawlers draws on very few of these inherited skills.

The share system of dividing earnings persists on the mechanized craft, although the ratio has changed in favour of the owners, who keep 65 percent, while 35 percent is divided between the workers, who also receive their daily allowance. The persistence of the share system is not necessarily the outcome solely of community traditions of sharing and egalitarianism, for it has been seen as a risk-sharing as much as a profit-sharing mechanism, and thus of benefit to an investor in a fluctuating industry. Kurien suggests that the persistence of the share system in an otherwise industrial fishery may also have to do with the strength of the organized labour lobby in Kerala. Regardless of the underlying reasons for its persistence, the share system of dividing earnings; the fact that the trawler fishery crew are recruited largely from the fishing villages and work as groups of friends or relatives on the trawlers; and the relatively egalitarian labour process on board the trawlers mean that the workers do not by and large experience their condition as exploitative. While the intensification of work discipline and the fact that for most men this is now an all-year job rather than a seasonal one, and a low-skilled job open to entrants from all backgrounds rather than a highly skilled one, suggests a transition away from artisanal modes of fishing towards more recognizably industrial forms, it is nevertheless the case that labour has not yet undergone a process of commodification in the fishery.

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32 Interview with Raj, Gerald, and two other trawler crew members, Kodimunai, June 1995.
What we have in terms of the transformation is a rather mixed picture. The natural resource has been largely privatized and commodified in that it is no longer seen as an indivisible asset of the community, and its exploitation is driven by considerations of profitability, with little concern for its sustainability. It would be wrong, however, to characterize this enclosure as complete, since the community does continue to control access to the three mile zone of sea adjoining the village. And labour is clearly not yet commodified. The contradiction around scale has also become blurred, between a “modern,” “large-scale,” mechanized sector within which community continues to operate, and a “small-scale,” “artisanal,” or “community-based” sector that is subsumed into input and output markets, uses large craft and powerful motors, and relies increasingly on technology rather than skills learned from family and community. All of this would suggest that the progress of the “self-regulating market” is not quite as linear as Polanyi’s account would suggest.

Nevertheless, the commodification of the resource base contains contradictions of its own, with the potential to destroy society. The acquisition of higher capacity craft, motors, and gear has made possible the expansion of the area fished and the intensification of extraction, and thus increased catches to a point where evidence suggests it may no longer be sustainable. Despite the absolute rise in incomes, these are still relatively low-income communities. The vast majority of families carry large debts, incurred to increase their investment in the fishery, pay for a daughter’s dowry, or educate a son in a profession outside the fishery. For many, the costs of an extended illness in the family, or cheating by a visa agent or employer in the Gulf, can mean a setback into poverty. And at the base of their aspirations for continued upward mobility is a deep vulnerability: they are trapped in the inescapable contradiction of increasing investment in, and extraction of, an ultimately finite resource.

Further, the costs of the transformation are borne unequally, in ways that often re-inscribe traditional social inequalities. Women, no longer engaged in weaving nets and drying fish as in the family-based fishery, are required to play new roles in the capitalist fishery. Their traditional role in mobilizing credit for subsistence and productive purposes has been deepened as the need for capital has grown exponentially and as rising incomes
have created new desires for consumption. Given the scarcity of paid employment, their dowries are now expected to meet these new consumption and investment needs. The longer absences of the men, who migrate to work either on trawlers in Kerala or on their artisanal craft further up the coasts, or for waged work in the Persian Gulf fishery, has increased women’s responsibility for managing the production and reproduction of social life and of community.

The vulnerability to resource collapse, and the precarious and uneven nature of the gains made, suggest that the potential for conflict and displacement remains high. But the processes leading to transformation are still incomplete, with indeterminate outcomes, and involve ongoing struggles to shape them in particular ways. I take these struggles up in Chapters 6 and 7.
Chapter 3
The Structures of Political Life

“In the first instance, the history of independent India can be seen, most narrowly but also most sharply, as the history of a state…. Rather more expansively, the period of Indian history since 1947 might be seen as the adventure of a political idea: democracy.” (Khilnani, 1997: 3-4)

“[D]emocracy in the post-Nehru era has gradually conveyed to the Indian electorate the pervading, elusive but crucial modern idea of the plasticity of the social world, and democracy and development both as frameworks of collective intentions to shape it in preferred forms.” (Kaviraj, 1995: 127)

On land bought from Kanyakumari village, but a little distance from the houses, is the office of the Assistant Director (AD) of Fisheries for the east coast of the district, in charge of carrying out fisheries surveys, registering craft, and implementing the various schemes of the fisheries department. All active fishermen in the village are members of the government cooperative society through which the various schemes are disbursed. Elections to the society were discontinued in the early eighties, and a government appointed Special Officer oversees their functioning.1 Across the highway, within a few minutes’ walk from the village, is the police station for the area.

The Collector (the highest administrative authority for the district), the District Superintendent of Police, and the Assistant Director of Fisheries for the district, all have their offices in Nagercoil. Tamil Nadu's extensive road system and regular bus service make these offices quite accessible for the fishing villages, although the journey for the most distant village could take close to two hours. Almost every time I paid an extended visit to one of these offices, including the police station, I would encounter fishermen and sometimes women, alone or in groups, coming to inquire about a scheme, make a complaint, or deliver a petition. In Kanyakumari village, children would be sent with the monthly insurance premium to the AD’s office.

1 Rajagopal (1988).
The Collector had recently announced that he would hear representations from the fishing villages on the first Monday of every month; on those mornings there could be seen a crowd of people, often accompanied by their parish priest, waiting in the grounds of his office. His office is on a main road leading into the town. Across the road is a bus stop, a tea stall which does a brisk business, and two typing and photocopying shops that are equally busy with petitions and other documents people need to present to the authorities. Between the tea stall and the shops is a thatch shed which seems to have become a permanent structure. It accommodates whichever group is carrying out a dharna (demonstration) or uṇṇavirutam (fast) outside the Collectorate on a given day. Protest is thus given its due place, across the road from power.

In the description above, the state is represented in the district through the local offices of government, and one sees villagers engaging with it through routine acts, such as the payment of a monthly premium, through the somewhat less frequent acts of petitioning or complaint, and through the more dramatic acts of protest. But as the picture suggests, the latter kinds of engagements, while less frequent and more charged, are not entirely out of the ordinary, and do not generally constitute ruptures of the relationship between the state and the people it governs. Because of the political geography of the district, these offices appear neither physically nor socially distant from the villagers. The state is present, visible in people’s daily lives and embedded in their routines.

But the villagers do not conclude from this that the state is entirely transparent and accessible to them, and that there are no structures beyond those visible to them. They are never certain of the fate of their petitions and protests. They know they may face counter-petitions by opposing groups. And they are aware that the specific class nature of their demands as poor and working people is not in accord with the direction of national policy. National policy-makers operate in settings quite distant from those that villagers can easily access, such as in the Ministry of Commerce located in the imposing colonial-era North Block in New Delhi.

The postcolonial Indian state, through its twin imperatives of development and democracy, has been fundamental in structuring the political life of the subaltern classes;
it is not possible to study civil society and social movements outside this context. The chapter demonstrates how much of the associational and communicative content of civil society in Kanyakumari has been generated by the state, and allows us to examine the validity of Chatterjee’s civil-political society distinction. It further allows us to see how the state and political parties have framed community, class, development and reform in ways that generally permit the structural basis of dominant class hegemony to go unchallenged, but occasionally also provide ideological resources for subaltern groups in their projects of counter-hegemony and counter-movement against the market.

The chapter proceeds at three levels, beginning with an account of the political economy of the Indian state and its twin axes of development and democracy, moving on to the regional politics of Tamil Nadu, and then to understandings of state and party politics among civil society actors in Kanyakumari.

1 Theorizing the Indian State

Theorists, even those of a Marxist orientation (Bardhan, 1984; Chibber, 2003) argue that the Indian state cannot be understood in some Millibandian sense as “an instrument” of the ruling classes. In part, this is a recognition of the inheritance of a colonial “apparatus” of rule, the “overdeveloped” state of Alavi’s (1972) account. However, unlike the colonial state, the post-independence state has greater legitimacy, derived from its claims to be the outcome of the anti-colonial movement. As well, the twentieth-century state was endowed with a set of technical and administrative instruments quite distinct from that possessed by, say, the European state of the mercantilist era (Chibber, 2004: 15). This gives it a certain degree of weight over society, and leads most theorists to conceive of it along Weberian lines as an organization (rather than as an idea, or set of shadowy “deep structures”) (Harriss, 2006: 198-199).

The other part of the reason for this “relative autonomy” is that the “ruling classes” are not unified or homogenous, but rather, exist in some conflict with each other. Rather than a ruling class, then, there exists a “ruling coalition,” necessary because none of its
constituent groups had enough power, authority, or influence in Indian society to impose its sole dominance (Bardhan, 1984; Kaviraj, 1995:122).

This approach can be seen, with some variations, in the work of the Rudolphs (1987), or in Chibber’s (2003) account of the failure of India’s “developmentalist state” to effect the kind of growth that Korea’s did. This was also the approach taken by Kohli (1987) when he argued that the tightly organized political party had the ability to “insulate” the state from social forces, and especially from the demands of elites. The most direct and influential statement of this approach is Bardhan’s 1984 work on the political economy of development in India.

Writing in 1984, Bardhan sought to understand India's slow rate of economic growth. Surely, unlike redistribution, it would be in the interests of the rich to achieve greater growth. Why then had they been unable to manage its achievement? Bardhan placed the burden of the failure to achieve significant growth on the high expenditures required by the political pressures on the state. While the state elites possessed a great deal of autonomy at Independence, and:

...while the state elite from its commanding heights formulated goals and pointed policy directions, neither at the behest of nor on behalf of the proprietary classes, it could not ignore the serious constraints on the framework of policy actions and certainly on their effective implementation posed by the articulated interests of those classes....The insulation of the state elites, and their freedom from constraints, reduced as they lost the special legitimacy derived from their participation in the freedom movement....As a consequence, the autonomy of the Indian state is reflected more often in its regulatory (and hence patronage-dispensing) than developmental role. (Bardhan, 1984: 38-39)

Bardhan went on to outline the composition of the proprietary classes. The most powerful financially were the industrial bourgeoisie. They gained substantially under the ISI policies adopted at Independence which provided the necessary infrastructure and protection for the development of an indigenous private sector. The second constituent of the proprietary classes, and numerically the most significant, were the rich farmers. They, too, have benefited substantially from price support for farm products, and generous input subsidies. Under the federal division of powers, agriculture is the domain of the state governments and,
since the power of the rich farmers is far greater over state governments than over the Centre, there has been hardly any taxation of agricultural income. The third component of the proprietary classes was the educated professionals, military and civilian, particularly those who "owned" the state. This segment, too, had benefited from the interventionist, and therefore expansionist, policies of the Indian state.

While the three proprietary classes all belonged roughly to the top quintile of the population, they had conflicting interests, the assertion of which often had detrimental effects for the economy as a whole. Thus, the refusal of the rich farmers to pay tax hurt national revenues; similarly, the bureaucrats' zealous assertion of their licence-dispensing powers often led to costly delays in establishing industrial capacity, particularly on the part of smaller, less powerful, businessmen. Bardhan argued that when the diverse proprietary classes pulled in different directions, and when none of them was strong enough to dominate the process of resource allocation, a predictable outcome was the proliferation of subsidies and grants to placate all of them, with the consequent reduction in surplus available for public capital formation. Development was further stymied by the need to placate the popular classes:

> While from time to time a significant number of crumbs have to be thrown at these clamouring groups banging at the gates just outside the periphery of the dominant coalition, equally expensive is the process of manning and securing those gates, and of controlling the crowds if they ever look threatening: the cost of the police and paramilitary expenditure has risen enormously, particularly over the last two decades...Thus keeping all the heterogeneous elements of the dominant coalition happy, guarding the fortress, and alternatively coaxing and coercing the intermediate groups banging at the gates all contribute to the mounting non-development expenditure in the budget.... (Bardhan, 1984: 67)

In related vein, Kaviraj (1988) drew on Gramsci’s concept of a “passive revolution” (developed in his “Notes on Italian History”) to explain a situation where, because of the weakness and lack of cultural roots of the newly emerging modernizing bourgeoisie, it had to rely on the state on the one hand to effect transformation, and on the more rooted agrarian elites on the other, for power. In the context of British colonialism, the emerging modernizing bourgeoisie formed the leadership of the nationalist movement but relied for its power on the mobilization of the peasant “masses” – this Kaviraj describes as Gandhi’s
specific role in the nationalist movement. But as a consequence of this mobilization, and also because of the specific understanding of political modernity shared by key nationalist leaders such as Nehru, development in the post-colonial era was from the start not simply concerned with capitalist accumulation, but had in some form also to address the subaltern classes. Parliamentary democracy, likewise, was essential to the conditions of the passive revolution, where the major proprietary classes vied with each other to establish dominance. As a form of deriving power or legitimation, state elites and dominant classes were dependent on it. But the adoption of parliamentary democracy flowed also from the ideological preferences of Nehru, Ambedkar, and others. Chatterjee summarizes Kaviraj’s conception, to which he also largely subscribes, thus:

The characteristic features of the passive revolution in India were the relative autonomy of the state as a whole from the bourgeoisie and the landed elites; the supervision of the state by an elected political leadership, a permanent bureaucracy and an independent judiciary; the negotiation of class interests through a multi-party electoral system; a protectionist regime discouraging the entry of foreign capital and promoting import substitution; the leading role of the state sector in heavy industry, infrastructure….; state control over the private manufacturing sector through a regime of licensing; and the relatively greater influence of industrial capitalists over the central government and that of the landed elites on the state governments. (Chatterjee, 2008: 56)

Insofar as the passive revolution had a political and hegemonic basis that rested on a consensus around Nehruvian ideals, this was already beginning to be challenged by a range of forces emerging from the 1960s on that came to a head in the period of Indira Gandhi. These included regional movements that challenged the national dominance of the Congress (as in Tamil Nadu below); the Naxalite (Maoist) uprising in Bengal in 1967, and the JP movement of the 1970s involving landless groups and popular sectors. Kohli (2007a) argues that the decisive shift away from the pillars of the Nehruvian passive revolution occurred as a consequence of policies initiated under Indira Gandhi in the 1980s, specifically “the abandonment of left-leaning, anti-capitalist rhetoric and policies, prioritising of economic growth, and a slow but steady embrace of Indian capital as the main ruling ally” (Kohli, 2007A: 1252). The distributional and political problems created by this shift were disguised through the continued use of the language of garibi hatao (poverty alleviation), but increasingly through the utilization of identity politics and ethnic nationalism. The
consequences of these policies were seen by the mid-1980s in the rise of active secessionist movements in Punjab and Kashmir, social movements of hitherto marginalized sectors against the state’s model of development, the rise of highly successful national caste-based parties, and the rise of a Hindu nationalist movement that sought to explicitly to redefine a key pillar of the passive revolution – secularism.  

The combination of Indira Gandhi’s pro-business reforms with the the pro-market reforms of the early 1990s led to the explicit jettisoning of the second pillar of the passive revolution – the protectionist, mixed economy described as “socialism.” As a consequence of the market reforms of the 1990s and the entry of a variety of new corporate contenders, the relative power of class forces has shifted, with the industrial bourgeoisie emerging dominant, tying in with its corporate capital in agriculture (Chatterjee, 2008). The autonomy of the bureaucratic-managerial classes vis-à-vis the bourgeoisie has been reduced, as the state has been delegitimized as corrupt, inefficient, and populist, and the rising middle classes (from which the bureaucratic-managerial classes are drawn) have become convinced of the professionalism and greater commitment to growth and efficiency of the corporate sector, and willing to subordinate the state to it. If in the early period of the passive revolution the industrial bourgeoisie and agrarian elites vied with each other through the electoral process, with the agrarian bourgeoisie often emerging dominant because of its superior ability to deliver electoral majorities, in the present period the corporate elite does not need to rely on the electoral process to establish its dominance, preferring to work through the media, the judiciary and independent regulatory bodies. Chatterjee argues that this does not mean the end of the need to derive legitimation from the masses; thus state policy is directed to counter the worst effects of liberalization and market reform, such as the inevitable large-scale displacement caused by projects of primitive accumulation, and we see this in programmes such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme and that providing Social Security for the Informal Sector (Hirway, 2006).

But both development and democracy in India must be understood beyond their legitimating function, for each is also a potentially powerful idea, and each has generated

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2 For a single work that charts these shifts right up to the present (and does not draw on the language of “passive revolution”), see Ramachandra Guha (2007).
3 See Kohli 2007ba and 2007b for the distinction between the two.
institutions and spaces for the emergence of popular agency that refuses to conform to any prepared script. For Kaviraj himself (1998, 1995), as for Khilnani (1997) and Guha (2007) among others, a key element of the “idea of India” was the idea of democracy and the essential indeterminacy of politics engendered by the exercise of this idea. It is democratic institutions that have enabled the unraveling of the Nehruvian consensus described above.

Electoral democracy has relied upon the politicization of identities, such as caste, language and religious affiliation, and on the mobilization of these identities rather than class interests (Kaviraj, 2000, 1997). The major electoral shifts away from the Congress were to parties representing regional identity, Hindu majoritarianism, and backward caste assertion. So, on the one hand, promises of development and poverty alleviation have been major planks of all electoral platforms from the earliest period, and on the other, mobilized groups of the poor represent their claims in terms of caste, ethnic or regional politics rather than through a national politics of class. (This of course also reflects how class and identities, especially caste, overlap and are integrated to a large extent in society and lived experience.)

The extensive writing on development in the last decades suggests that, like democracy, it too might have functions and effects other than those comprehended through an accumulation/legitimation (hegemony) frame. Theorists working in the Foucauldian tradition suggest that we see it as a set of ideas (disciplines) and practices, with effects such as the creation of “governmentalities” (Gupta and Sharma, 2006; Agrawal, 2005). What this suggests then is the possibility of autonomous effects that might reproduce or challenge class power, as well as other forms of power. Other theorists have asked that we disaggregate the state, and recognize that development is about the role of administrative agencies and personnel at all levels, often those at the lowest levels of the state, who might have their own local, class, or caste interests, often in conflict with those of the state’s elites, and thus generating a local political space quite distinct from the national (Corbridge et al., 2005; A. Gupta, 1995; N. Sundar, 2001, 2000).

It is from these latter perspectives that attention has been paid to some of the state’s more recent attempts to “deepen” democracy and involve citizens and civil society in
development, such as the 1992 constitutional amendment giving more power to the Panchayats (village government bodies), and the attempts to harness civil society and social movements in development initiatives, as seen in programs such as the Total Literacy Campaigns and Joint Forest Management.

Under the 73rd Amendment of the Indian Constitution in 1992, new provisions for Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs) were enacted that were mandatory on the states, this being a state subject. Provisions of this amendment included: regular elections, reservation of one third of the seats for women, reservation for SCs and STs, constitution of a finance commission, powers to raise resources (Mathew, 1994: 40). The PRIs themselves were not new. The debates in the years leading up to independence, between the Gandhian ideal of village self-government, and Ambedkar’s denunciation of the village as a “den of iniquity” and upper caste domination, were resolved in favour of the Ambedkarite vision, and the village was not formally or institutionally incorporated into the levels of government. Instead, a highly centralized programme called "Community Development" was initiated in 1952 (see Mathew, 1994: 8; Sinha, 2008). However, it soon began to be felt that this programme relied too heavily on the official machinery and did not involve people at the community level in planning and implementation. The Balwantrai Mehta study team, set up to review its working in order to enlist people's participation and make it more effective, recommended in 1957 that Panchayats (village governments) be made statutory institutions. By 1959 all the states had passed Panchayat Acts putting in place elected bodies at the block or village level with specific developmental functions. These were aimed at breaking the dominance of the traditional leadership and involving village-level people in the planning and implementation of development schemes. However, the Panchayats faced difficulties from the start: district officials resented the power of the elected non-officials, traditional leaders in the villages themselves tried to undermine these new institutions, and the majority of villagers remained uninvolved. This resulted in a decline in the institutions over the sixties and seventies, and in many states elections to these institutions were indefinitely postponed.

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4 This ideal was drawn from historical and mythological references to the presence of self-sufficient and self-governing villages from ancient times, a vision also adopted and made conventional wisdom by the writing of colonial administrators such as Charles Metcalfe who described them as “village republics” (Vasavadia, Mishra, and Bates, 1999: 153).
Criticisms of the top-down, growth-focused model of development from movements such as Jayprakash Narayan’s, backed by academics and development practitioners, led to the recommendations by another committee in 1977 – the Ashok Mehta Committee – to devolve more power to the Panchayats. Mathew (1994:17) notes:

The vital difference between the first and second generation of panchayats is the shift in emphasis from development per se to local government in its full meaning. Whereas the Panchayat Acts of the 1950s made development central to the panchayat system, the attempt in West Bengal, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and later on Jammu and Kashmir, was to make panchayats into genuine political institutions and thus the focal point of self-government with all its ramifications, a microcosm of the state itself. (italics mine).

Aside from creating microcosms of the state at the lowest level, there has been a turn to involve civil society and non-governmental organizations in governance. For instance, the Tenth Five Year Plan (2002-2007) of the Government of Tamil Nadu has a section on the “Involvement of NGOs and Community” under which it discusses Community or People’s Participation, and the role of Voluntary Organizations:

Community participation is an integral part of area development planning. The involvement of the people in the planning process becomes necessary so that the plan is more responsive to the local needs, reflects more accurately the local perceptions and produces a sense of ownership and responsibility. Such community participation is of particular relevance for mobilizing community resources in which participation is viewed as a facilitatory or a desired plan output, to sort any differences in the planning and implementation stages, to speed up the process of implementation, and to complement and supplement the efforts of the government in the development process.5

To summarize then, the Indian state has traditionally maintained a degree of autonomy from the dominant classes, and a relatively high degree of legitimacy6, at least until the present period. Development and democracy have both worked to bolster this legitimacy, and thus to extend the hegemony of the dominant classes, including the state elites. But both arenas may also be read as spaces for complex outcomes – development as governmentality and discourses of rule that cannot simply be read off class interests, on the one hand, and the

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6 This is a generalization, and may need to be qualified for places under army occupation, such as Kashmir or the North-East region, and for people displaced by development projects, among others.
extreme porosity of the border between state and society at the lowest level of the state, on
the other. Likewise, democracy makes possible new identities and coalitions. In
combination, they account for the fluidity and open-endedness of politics, albeit structurally
tilted toward dominant class interests, and for a sense of agency for subaltern classes which
is not a form of false consciousness.

Thus far I have outlined a theoretical approach to thinking about the state and classes in
India. But two further tasks remain – first, to understand how these vary in the regional
context of Tamil Nadu, and second, to understand what structures and opportunities both
development and democracy have created in the coastal villages of Kanyakumari.

2 Politics in Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu was among the very first states in the country to see a regionalization of party
competition, based on the distinctive language, caste structure and religious practices of the
region (N.Subramanian, 1999: 30). Tamil Nadu has been ruled by parties emerging out of
the Dravidian movement (explained below): the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and
the Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (ADMK) since 1967, except during the period of
the Emergency when it was governed directly from the Centre, as it was again in 1991.
Several good accounts and analyses exist of the Dravidian movement (Pandian, 2007; N.
Subramanian, 1999; Geetha and Rajadurai, 1991; Washbrook, 1989; Barnett, 1976); it is not
my purpose either to reproduce these histories or enter the debates about exactly how
progressive the movement has been in its origins and outcomes. What I wish to do instead is
to outline in what ways the Dravidian movement and the parties emerging from it have
declared regional identity and difference from the nation; the relationship of caste and class
forces to these political parties, and how these parties have mobilized caste and class
identities in ways that continue to shape and direct present forms of mobilization; the
implications for poor, subaltern people of being governed by these parties, broadly defined
as populist, and, finally, the pluralist and fluid organizational forms the movement has taken,
and the ways in which it has created an active civil society.
The DMK and AIADMK have roots in the non-Brahmin movement of the 1910s and 1920s and in the more "radical" Dravidian or anti-Aryan movement led by E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker (EVR) or Periyar in the 1930s. “Dravidianism” was the argument that the Tamils were Dravidian peoples, the original inhabitants of the land before the “invasion” of the Aryans who came to dominate the North, and who also became the dominant groups in the South in the form of the Brahmins. Dravidianism as a movement was concerned with the cultural, even “racial” distinctness of the southern peoples, the oppression by the Brahmins of the non-Brahmin castes who made up the majority in the South; and with revolt against both of these as well as against the Brahminical religion and the Brahminical / Vedic order that enshrined the caste system. Thus, it was anti-“Indian,” anti-Brahmin, anti-religious, and anti-caste.

Dravidian politics, according to Washbrook (1989: 217-230), can best be seen as a reaction to the "modernisation" of Tamil society, the deleterious material implications of which became clear during the Depression of the 1930s. EVR's audience was largely urban artisanal groups whose trades were depressed, and immigrants from the intermediate caste groups of the countryside who were squeezed out of the countryside by the Depression. His economic message was one of a restoration of the "share" economy and community systems of production. The Brahmins and Vellalas (forward castes), who had made it into the new arena of education and government employment, were the particular target of his criticism of privilege, and he began to urge that such opportunities be more evenly distributed on the basis of need, especially to the backward castes.

EVR's argument was the exact opposite of that of the Congress, which insisted that jobs be distributed on the basis of competitive merit. The Congress in Tamil Nadu was led by the elites produced by colonial modernisation — educated professionals, wealthy mirasidars and businessmen — and its policies were designed to serve the interests of these groups. During the late 1930s the Congress began to win support among most elites, including the

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7 Much of this historical account is drawn from Washbrook (1989).
8 There is some debate about the historical claims that form the basis of this movement, with historians such as Washbrook (1989) and Vaitheespara (1996) pointing to the role of colonial missionaries in constructing this as a racial dichotomy, and to the “modernity” of the particular colonial interpretation of the Brahminical order on the basis of which caste became institutionalized, and Pandian (2007) suggesting a more complex role for the colonial moment in generating these identities.
non-Brahmin elites, as it was seen as the vehicle for economic development and progress. Although Tamil Nadu had little experience of the freedom struggle, the Madras electorates of 1937 and 1946, which consisted of the wealthiest 10-15 percent of the society and were predominantly non-Brahmin, gave the Congress its largest majorities in India. While the Congress remained in power after 1947 and through the 1950s and 1960s on the basis of this elite support and its powers of patronage, it was never able to extend its base beyond these elites. Encouraged by EVR, the petit bourgeoisie of the towns regularly organized riots and agitations against Congress measures of which they disapproved, such as the Hindi and backward caste legislation.

This alienation was harnessed successfully by C. Annadurai, the founder of the DMK, who broke away from EVR in 1949, finding EVR's positions insufficiently grounded in the economic realities of the day. Annadurai also pragmatically shifted the emphasis of the Dravidian movement from a racial to a cultural conception of nationalism, portraying Tamils as Indians with special cultural and historical differences. The DMK began to enjoy increasing electoral success, first in municipal elections and urban constituencies, but later spreading to the countryside, picking up many of the newer voters. The rise of the DMK corresponded to the rise in electoral participation.⁹

The DMK's steady move to a more moderate position vis-à-vis the centre and the elites saw Karunanidhi, who had inherited its leadership from Anna, presiding over the absorption of the Congress elites into the party for the 1971 election. This consolidated the DMK hegemony: the party won 184 out of 234 seats. However, this also caused problems as the party now began to be seen as nothing more than Congress elitism in disguise. EVR took to the streets again and won back the erstwhile, but now disenchanted, DMK supporters, at which point Karunanidhi responded with coercion and corruption in order to retain his support. M.G. Ramachandran (MGR) then stood forth to claim Anna's mantle and formed a breakaway party called the Anna-DMK. His election victory in 1977 was greeted by many as a return to greater egalitarianism, although the course of events showed this hope to be

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⁹ In 1957, when the participation was 49.3%, the DMK won 13 seats; in 1962, when the rate was 70.6%, it won 50; and in 1967, when it was 76.6%, the DMK won 136 seats and was able to form the government. The support for the Congress did not change dramatically, falling only from 45.3% to 41.4% between 1957 and 1967 (Washbrook, 1989: 253).
rather misplaced. MGR remained in power until his death in 1987, which provided an opportunity for the return of Karunanidhi’s DMK in 1989. The DMK and ADMK have alternated in power since then, with the latter led by MGR’s protégé, J. Jayalalitha.

After thirteen years of unfulfilled promises by the MGR government, the DMK in 1989 had come to represent the intertwined causes of Tamil nationalism and social justice. Notwithstanding the contradictions of its ideology and policies, then, its defeat in 1991 was seen as the decisive end of Dravidian politics in the state. Jayalalitha, a Brahmin herself, made no bones about appointing Brahmins to key positions, and her victory was trumpeted in Brahmin-run newspapers. Her coming to power in alliance with the Congress(I) formally marked the end of Tamil nationalist politics (Mannivannan, 1992; Geetha and Rajadurai, 1991). Though the DMK has returned to power since, and is currently the party in government in Tamil Nadu, it is no longer seen to represent the radical or assertive Dravidianism of its past; this mantle has now been claimed by two breakaway parties – the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK) and the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK).

2.1 Populist Politics

Dravidianism in governmental power has been described as populism – an appeal to a plebeian community that invokes not class, but other markers of community, such as ethnicity, race, religion, or caste, and caters to this community through a variety of symbolic gestures and through public policies of largesse, rather than structural redistribution.

John Harriss has argued that the rise of populist politics can be explained by Tamil Nadu’s political economy, where "no single class exerts economic or political dominance, and neither is there a state organization which is powerful in relation to society. In a context of parliamentary electoral politics the maintenance of power had come to depend on a precarious trading of concessions to different social groups…." (Harriss, 1994: 179).

Class was rarely the basis of mobilisation in twentieth century Tamil Nadu, mainly because the agricultural society is based upon small-scale production units and an extremely wide
distribution of rights in land - the colonial re-organization of landholdings for revenue purposes under the *ryotwari* system did not create large landlords as in some other parts of the colony; there is, of course, a great deal of variation across the region, with more inequality of holdings in the productive river valley zones. The development of capitalism in agriculture led only to an intensification and perpetuation of the self-exploitation of family labour, rather than to the classical pattern of differentiation (Washbrook, 1989).

The emergence of small property owners, rather than an alienated proletariat, was also a feature of the towns. The major employers were small workshops, artisanal units such as handloom weaving, the petty commercial and informal trading sectors, government, and educational institutions. Thus, in the city, too, there had been no growth of a binary opposition between capital and labour, but rather a proliferation of a petit bourgeoisie. Since much of the "labour" possessed small property, or was employed on a casual, and hence precarious, basis in poor conditions, the possibilities of unionisation were for the most part slight (Washbrook, 1989: 220).

Thus, in the 1940s and 1950s, while the Congress drew on already organized interests of the professional classes, and built an appeal around large-scale industrialization and pan-Indian nationalism, and while the Communists appealed to the property-less, specifically landless labourers, Dravidian populism addressed the intermediate and lower strata who had thus far had limited access to the state (N. Subramanian, 1999: 47-48). The appeal to these strata was made in terms of a distinct identity defined by language (Tamil), as well as caste (non-Brahman). In Tamil Nadu, no one caste was preponderant enough over more than one colonial district to be the basis a region-wide movement, unlike the powerful pan-state anti-caste movements organized by the Nair and Ezhava castes in the late nineteenth century in what is now Kerala (K.C. Alexander, 1989). This is where the banner of non-Brahmin, as a coalition of a range of middle and lower castes, proved useful. This category carried some resonance, since the Brahmins, while numerically small and not always the wealthiest, controlled social and political power in the region through membership in the bureaucracy (Pandian, 1996), but it did not include for the

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10 N. Subramanian (1999: 47-48) uses this term to describe the overlap between class and status group or caste.
most part the lowest castes, the untouchables, whom Periyar renamed the Adi-Dravidar (earliest Dravidians) (N. Subramanian, 1999; Washbrook, 1989).

The ideological basis of the movement was its anti-Forward caste appeal, its Dravidian chauvinism and anti-Aryanism, expressed in a rejection of Hindi as the country's official language, and its espousal of a pan-Tamil, Dravidian, communitarian identity. N. Subramanian argues that ethnicity was really a means to a populist politics rather than an end in itself; this was demonstrated by the kinds of accommodations the movement made to allow it to stay in power. For instance, soon after coming to power in 1967 the DMK softened its anti-centre rhetoric and even turned pro-centre. School books were rewritten to show the long and glorious participation of Tamils in the freedom struggle. Thus, as Washbrook (1989: 230) notes, "a sub-nationalist movement originally created for separatist ends, began to see itself as having 'liberated' the very nation from which it had wanted to separate." Likewise, the rise to power of MGR, a Malayalam speaking Brahmin from Kerala, seemed to pose no particular problem for a movement based on a Tamil language and anti-Brahmin ideology.

A public sphere may be said to have emerged out of the Dravidian movement – marked by language, print and later visual media, and a host of associations, public meetings and so on (N. Subramanian, 1999). Periyar founded his own periodical, Kudi Arasu, and he and other stalwarts of the Dravidian movement wrote prolifically. They were also powerful orators at public meetings and rallies who worked to make the Tamil spoken by the non-Brahman strata the standard Tamil. The opposition to Hindi as the national language in the 1960s was based on the ground that Tamil was a far more ancient language with a rich literature and literary tradition. The DMK leader Karunanidhi is a highly respected poet and orator, and put these talents to use in writing scripts for films that promoted the Dravidian vision. But this respect for the symbolic was most skillfully deployed by MGR, who began by playing the lead in several of the films scripted by Karunanidhi, but who then, after he broke away from the DMK to form the ADMK, rallied a massive popular base for himself. His screen

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11 Tamil nationalist politics, in India and in Sri Lanka, has glorified the Tamil language, not simply as a marker of the distinct identity of the Tamils, like any language might mark its speakers as a distinct community, but for its antiquity, beauty and wealth of literature. Thus, a great leader is also one who is able to use the language to its fullest, to draw on its ancient poetry, symbolism and richness of idiom. See S. Ramaswamy (1997: particularly 62-77), and also Pandian (1996).
image, where he invariably played a working man attempting to combat everyday oppression, was carried over into his political image, where he was represented, through speeches, processions and carefully orchestrated acts of largesse, as a "friend of the poor." Even as the poverty in the state increased through the decade of the 1980s, MGR's popularity soared, and this image remained untarnished (Pandian, 1992).

The other part of this public sphere consisted of the caste associations, and a variety of other associations that emerged out of the Dravidian movement. N. Subramanian has argued that the organizational pluralism of the Dravidian movement laid the grounds for a more generalized social pluralism. EVR and Annadurai built up a strong cadre organisation, drawn mostly from the ranks of the rural and urban petit bourgeoisie. The DMK under Karunanidhi continued to retain this organisational structure. Although the DK and the DMK were organizationally strong, with a well-developed cadre base which observed party discipline, the parties were open to sub-groups mobilising autonomously. Thus, for instance, small farmers or landless labourers were mobilized to vote for the party but were not restrained from joining more militant unions that might be affiliated to the Communist Party, for instance. The pitfalls of this organizational pluralism became visible under the ADMK, which dispensed with a tight, cadre-based structure in favour of personalistic relations between the leader, MGR, and his “fans,” self-organized into fan clubs across the state (Dickey, 1993a, 1993b).

The populism of the Dravidian parties is best seen in the nature of their public policies. Washbrook observes that, while the concept of equality is key to the Dravidian political ideology, it is equality understood not as the abolition of privilege but as its sharing. Thus, measures for social justice included not land reform or progressive taxation as much as reservation for backward castes, which, far from dissolving caste, served to entrench it in new ways. Despite the rhetoric of attacking privilege, the wealthy have had to make little contribution to the state coffers; for instance, the land reforms of the 1950s were carried out under the aegis of the Congress government; very little on those lines has occurred since. Even though Tamil Nadu has made impressive gains in rural electrification and literacy and is one of the most industrialized states in the country, the causes for this do not seem to lie in any structural reform by the parties in power, The DMK's, and particularly the ADMK's,
method of dealing with poverty has been in the form of “largesse” – welfare and ameliorative measures that serve to reinforce the image of the leader as “generous.”

If, since 1967, Tamil Nadu has been slow to reform its structure of economic relations, it has been quick to develop ameliorative and welfare policies to offset the effects of this structure. MGR's "Midday Meals Scheme" offers one free meal a day to all children. Over 70 percent of appointments in the government bureaucracy are made on the basis of quotas for Backward Classes and Scheduled Tribes. The same is true of admissions and scholarships for education at universities and colleges. In 1981, the government wrote off millions of rupees owed in unpaid electricity bills by tens of thousands of farmers. In 1981, it took over the bankrupt Buckingham and Carnatic Mills in Madras city in order to avoid destitution for the million and a half workers and their dependents. Yet these entitlements for the poor are manifest only in the form of largesse; the poor are not encouraged to claim them as rights, as was made clear time and time again when the police were turned on striking workers or on the protesting Adi Dravida labourers of Thanjavur. Despite the anti-Forward caste slogans, the position of the Adi Dravidas has worsened under DMK/AIADMK rule; they have suffered increased social exclusion. Nothing has been done about the condition of the landless Adi Dravida labourers in Thanjavur, except to repress them brutally when they dare to organize. There has been a watering down of the anti-Brahmin thrust since 1967, and of untouchability as an issue. Washbrook continues his harsh criticism by arguing that, even as the state’s economy declined over the 1980s, and extent of poverty increased, the popularity of the AIADMK under MGR soared, and MGR himself was seen as "a friend of the poor" (Washbrook, 1989: 216-218).

N. Subramanian seeks to nuance Washbrook’s condemnation of populism somewhat. He distinguishes between what he calls the “assertive populism” of the DMK, and the “paternalistic populism” of the ADMK. In his words,

…assertive populism urges excluded groups towards militant action to enter imperfectly inclusive public spheres. It creates entitlements to education, jobs, loans, subsidized producer goods, and sometimes small pieces of property...Groups with some social capability, albeit modest, are best able to compete for these entitlements and are the key supporters.... The assertive populist outlook regards the activist’s self-willed activity as the basis of the
movement and the social changes it introduces. This is conducive to organizational pluralism and militates against patrimonialism. (Washbrook, 1999: 74-75)

Paternalist populism, in contrast,

…promises that a benevolent leader, party, or state will enforce community norms. It takes these norms to require that the poor and powerless be provided subsidized wage goods and protection from repressive elites. This may be achieved through systematic subsidies or particular donations, repeated with some frequency…. In contrast with assertive populism, it encourages supporters to assume an attitude of reverence and gratitude towards the leader, party and state, depicted in the manner of a traditional patron writ large, rather than to engage in independent militant initiatives. So it strikes less directly at the heart of social deference than assertive populism does, although it promotes a popular sense of entitlement to the goods distributed…. Paternalist populism appeals most to the lower strata and women, who are often unable to assert their demand independently, and to compete for the more substantial benefits assertive populism provides. (N. Subramanian, 1999: 75)

Thus, while the DMK emphasized greater opportunities for the intermediate castes, the ADMK’s appeals focused on protection for the powerless. The DMK was rooted primarily among the intermediate castes with small properties. By contrast, the ADMK received its greatest support from the Scheduled Castes, those with little property, and women. The policy most closely associated with the DMK is the provision of quotas for education and government jobs for the intermediate castes, while that most closely associated with the ADMK is the free lunches in public schools. The DMK built stronger party institutions which were autonomous of the leader, than did the ADMK (N. Subramanian, 1999: 76). In practice, each party was most successful when it incorporated elements of the other kind of populism; following thirteen years of paternalistic populism, the DMK’s attempts at strong policy-making when it returned to power in 1989, such as the smashing of the liquor barons, were abandoned under the urgency of establishing popular support, and it reverted to several of the populist gestures of its predecessor (Manivannan, 1992).

While for Washbrook, the “flexibility” of Dravidian ideology meant that its achievements, such as they were, were largely symbolic and failed in any way to redistribute wealth, reduce poverty or mitigate discrimination against the scheduled castes, for N.Subramanian
(1999: 37), this very fluidity had certain beneficial political outcomes: the containment of social conflict, so that an ethnic-based movement never developed the kind of chauvinistic/fascist edge that Sinhala nationalism in Sri Lanka or Hindu nationalism in India did; the enrichment of civic life; and the introduction of policies and modes of distribution of patronage which gave emergent groups greater representation. The mobilization around language and caste may have had the effect of weakening appeals to class identity, but it also minimized the appeal of other forms of community, such as those arising from religion (N. Subramanian, 1999; Anandhi, 1995). The Hindu nationalist movement managed to make some headway in the state only in the late 1990s, and the BJP has never won many seats in the state, despite census figures showing that Hindus make up some 89 percent of the population of the state. Other scholars of the movement too are inclined, for the reasons N. Subramanian cites, to view the movement until the rise of the ADMK as “progressive.”

3 State and parties in Kanyakumari

In what way have these features – a state that has sought to engage subaltern classes through development and democracy; the different spaces and arenas within which people engage with “the state”; populism as a form of political appeal that makes poverty and poor people central to its discourse, but uses a language of caste and community rather than one of class; and the social pluralism generated by the organizational pluralism of the dominant parties in the state – shaped the agency of fishers as members of the subaltern, or lower stratum? In this section I explore some of these questions in the context of Kanyakumari.

12 Observers of Tamil Nadu differ in how they characterize the different periods and their significance – Manivannan (1992) and N. Subramanian (1999) to some extent see Dravidian politics come to an end in 1972, with the rise of populist politics; for N. Subramanian, both the DMK and the ADMK were populist, but differed in the nature of the populism they espoused, with the DMK more “assertive” in its populism and the ADMK more “paternalistic.” For Washbrook (1989), the turn taken by the ADMK was inherent in the contradictions of Dravidianism itself; for Geetha and Rajadurai (1991), Anandhi (1995), the Dravidian era ended with the defeat of the DMK in 1991, and it is after this that there was a decisive turn back to the domination of Brahmins, and to Brahminical tropes in the politics and media in Tamil Nadu.
The areas that made up modern Kerala, of which Kanyakumari was a part historically, witnessed movements for democratization that spanned two centuries, in the form of anti-caste struggles led by lower caste people, the anti-feudal and anti-imperial struggles of the tenants of Malabar (the northern region of the state), various community reform movements, and a strong indigenous tradition of knowledge and its diffusion. The rapid spread of literacy meant that by the 1940s, most villages of any size had a reading room. The communist movement in Kerala had begun in the 1920s as part of the wider struggle for freedom and the unification of Kerala. Communist party workers or sympathizers looked after many of these readings rooms, and by the 1950s it was the proud boast of the Malayalis (speakers of Malayalam, the language of Kerala) that even the poorest peasant had read a daily paper by lunch time. Within Travancore itself, there seems to have been a sense that Nanjalnad, the rice producing region of Kanyakumari district, had a history of resistance to authority. Nagam Aiya, a Travancore gazetteer, writes of the resistance mounted by the farmers of Nanjalnad to excessive taxes in the early 1700s and concludes: “To this day the people of Nanjanad [Nanjilnad] are as a class distinguished from the other Travancoreans by a bold address and plain speaking to the authorities - an instinct inherited from long ages of suffering and resistance to misgovernement” (Nagam Aiya, 1989, vol. 1: 324). The fishing castes, however, had by and large not been drawn into these movements; nor did the Communist party pay much attention to these castes that were considered marginal, petty commodity producers.

The Tamil language agitations that swept the district in the 1950s led eventually to the attachment of this Tamil-speaking district to Tamil Nadu when state boundaries were reorganized on a linguistic basis in 1956. The Congress led these agitations. The Catholic Church did its bit in these elections, and subsequent ones, calling on its flock not to vote for parties that were against religion, like the Communists, and later the DMK (see Chapter 4). Despite this early start, the fishing castes of Kanyakumari, like the vast majority of intermediate and lower strata in the state, joined the shift to the DMK in the 1960s, and then

13 On the relation between Nanjalnad farmers and the Travancore state, see also Pandian (1990).
to the ADMK in 1977. Fishing communities across the state responded to MGR's populist appeal, making them ADMK strongholds.  

Because there is a tendency to understand populism, and “paternalistic” populism in particular, as a form of manipulation and false consciousness (Washbrook, 1989; Pandian, 1992), it is worth paying some attention to how party politics plays out in the villages. Villagers’ relationship to political parties seemed to be based on a mixture of shared ideals and ideologies, loyalties, and opportunities presented; policy platforms were often seen as mere rhetoric and thus not always taken seriously. The party system was always about more and less than electoral politics – more, in the sense that it was also about affirming self-identity, and values such as “self-respect,” and less, in the sense that it was often about local rivalries and manoeuvres rather than about political outcomes at the state or national level.

More than one ADMK supporter I confronted with the evidence of its failure to deliver on welfare promises, or promote real development, responded by talking about the importance of loyalty as a sign of one’s own character. Francis, secretary of the ADMK unit in Kovalam village, agreed that ADMK politicians were like all others – they came for the votes and then disappeared. But he stayed on in the party out of loyalty – one can’t change one’s vēṭṭi (male lower garment) now. “Is one in a party for one’s rice? (cōṭṭukā irukkōm?),” he asked rhetorically.

Villagers also were clear about the bargaining power their votes gave them. Women who belonged to the women’s wing of the ADMK were outspoken and articulate leaders of the kattumaram fishers’ struggle in Kanyakumari village (see Chapter 7). A group of them were deputed by the village to meet with ADMK ministers in the state capital, Chennai, to get them to intercede on their behalf in the struggle. The women declared: “Kanyakumari has always been an ADMK kōṭṭai (fortress)” and they were going to remind the ministers of

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14 Among roles such as peasant, rickshaw puller and taxi driver, MGR made at least two films that appealed to fishers – Meenava Nanban (Fishermen’s Friend) and Padakotti (Boatman) where he plays the sole literate fisherman in the village, whose ability to read saves the village from the usurious designs of the local fish merchant (Pandian 1992).
that, and warn them of the electoral consequences of not acting on their behalf.\textsuperscript{15} Thus, as A. Subramanian (2009) has argued, the politics of patronage and the politics of assertion are not always opposed, and patrons are often pushed to make concessions they were not prepared for.

Nevertheless, class differences did distinguish ADMK and DMK supporters along the lines N. Subramanian has outlined (see previous section). While the \textit{kattumaram} fishers saw their ADMK MP as an ally, the trawler owners in the district felt that the ADMK had neglected them. The Secretary of their Association is quoted as saying: "Colachel has a majority of \textit{kattamaram} owners, which means that the ADMK sides with them in order to gain votes. The government has so far given only small donations and midday meals – it has no policies for the community as a whole. The government will not let us get on with the job of development, let alone help us with it" (Ram, 1992: 133). Trawler owners whom A. Subramanian interviewed in the late 1990s reiterated this view – by then, the rise to power of the BJP nationally, and its growing presence in the district, led them to make a surprising turn to the BJP, despite its Hindu nationalist ideology and their own Catholic backgrounds (A. Subramanian, 2009: 228-234).

But party affiliations were also about other, non class-cleavages. In Chinna Muttam village, two dominant factions had emerged – one consisting of Paravar families, almost all of whom were ADMK supporters, and the other of Mukkuvar families, almost all of whom were DMK supporters (these are not permanent caste-party cleavages across the district, they just happened to take these lines in this village). Thus the factional fight was also a caste fight, as well as one between parties. My host in Chinna Muttam, Joseph, was a Paravar, but had made a “love-marriage” with a Mukkuvar woman, so that now he was seen as being in their camp. But Joseph talked proudly of this match, citing it as an example of the “self-respect” marriages promoted by Periyar.\textsuperscript{16} The men in the ADMK faction were largely illiterate; they had seized control of the village committee and run it without any system or accountability. Joseph on the other hand, was not a fisherman. He

\textsuperscript{15} Interview with Edwige and Pushpal, Kanyakumari village, May 1995.
\textsuperscript{16} These marriages were supposed to be based on reason, mutual respect and attraction, not on caste or family, and were carried out in the presence of leaders of the Dravidian movement, not priests; they were about opposition to caste, religious authority, and the subordination of women. See V.Geetha (1998).
had trained as a technician and worked in industries in Bangalore and elsewhere. He and his group were literate, “modern,” and keen to reform the village administration. Party affiliation thus became the “symbol” of these differences, between modernity and reason on the one hand, and illiteracy and backwardness on the other. The articulation of political parties to factional differences did not always bear all these other valences – in many cases, factions turned to political parties regardless of ideology simply for resources and support, and parties supported them in order to gain voters.

The shifting party positions in the state over time were also reflected in the villages as a kind of generation divide, with Congress members tending to be the oldest, DMK members middle-aged, and the ADMK members somewhat younger. A small, but significant number of youth were attracted to the youth wing of the CPI (M), the Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI), which had party units in several of the villages. Often these youth were branded as being atheist, and in villages like Kurumbanai, ADMK related youth had made this claim the basis of their factional attack on the DYFI youth. The DMK / ADMK dominance of the district has been challenged in recent times, with members being elected to the Tamil Nadu legislature from the CPI (M) and Janata Parties, the BJP, the Indian National Congress as well as the Tamil Nadu state Congress (TMC) and the MDMK; the picture in the national elections is equally interesting – the district elected an MP from the BJP in 1999, from the CPI (M) in 2001, and the DMK in 2006.

As with youth, the two most active women’s wings seemed to belong to the ADMK and to the CPI (M), with several villages having small but loyal and active units of the Jananayaka Mathar Sangam (the All Indian Democratic Women’s Association, the women’s wing of the CPI (M)), which had first gained a presence in the eastern villages when an ICM nun, Sr Delphine, who subsequently left the order and went on to become a lawyer, had organized women under the JMS’s leadership to fight their displacement by the net-making factory (see Chapter 2). Thus the film-star fan clubs (see Dickey, 1993a) which were the basis for mobilization by MGR and other actor-politicians (Rajnikant being another example) were only one, and usually the most fluid and hard to find, of the various associations spawned by party politics in the villages.
Regardless of the party they chose to vote for, villagers expressed pride in having the vote and the ability to use it as they saw fit. Several of my interviewees in Chinna Muttam refused to tell me which party they voted for, even as they were quite willing to share with me the fine details of their family finances or relationships. When asked whether they felt pressure to vote for the parties their husbands supported, more than one woman responded by saying that if such pressure was exerted, they would just keep quiet, and would even accept the ride to the polling booth offered by whichever party their family had agreed to support, but once they were in the booth, they knew they could make their own choice and they did.

In addition to the spaces created by electoral democracy, there are those created by the development initiatives of the state. There is a whole gamut of these, of which I touch briefly upon two: the Panchayats, and the Total Literacy Campaign (Arrivoli Iyakkam).

Under the Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act, 1994 (Vijaya Natha Rad, 1996), Tamil Nadu has adopted a three-tier system: Village Panchayats at the level of the revenue village or villages, or part of a revenue village; Panchayat Union Councils at the intermediate level; and District Panchayats at the district level. The functions of the village Panchayats seem entirely to do with the provision and maintenance of public facilities, such as sewage and sanitation, transport and drinking water. There are also discretionary functions that cover all aspects of village development, including health, recreation and libraries. Certain fiscal powers were given to the Panchayats, such as the right to administer all unreserved forests in the village, and collect house taxes, vehicle taxes and a duty on the transfer of property. Further funds were to be made available to the village Panchayat through the devolution of taxes collected by the panchayat unions and district Panchayat. The Panchayats were to be supervised by a Special Officer appointed by the Government, and could be dissolved by the government if they were deemed to be in default of duty or abuse of power. This has been criticized, as have the other features that suggest financial dependency on higher tiers of government, as limiting the Panchayats’ autonomy and role as genuine participatory institutions. Further, elections to the Panchayats continue to be fought on party lines, although trends in the civic elections may vary from those in state or national elections.
At the time of my field work in 1994-95, this Act had not been put into effect and elections to the Panchayats had not been held; when I returned in 2004, the Panchayats had become fairly well-established, and were the source of funds for such things as street lights and drinking water supply. The fishing village, which has a distinct social identity as a parish, is in administrative terms considered a hamlet; more than one fishing village, or a group of hamlets that includes some inland ones, make up a revenue village, which is the level at which the village panchayat is established. In Mel Manakudy I met Christinammal, a woman from the village who had been elected President of the Manakudy Panchayat (which includes other villages besides her own). She talked with pride about the improvements she had been able to bring to the village, such as clean drinking water and street lights. Unlike in the past, elections to the Panchayats did not seem wholly captured by the political parties. While they did not serve as popular village bodies, in the sense of attending to the whole gamut of village concerns (see Chapter 5 on this distinction), they nonetheless suggested a local structure to which to address developmental needs, and one that was bound by its elected structure to be accountable to people.

The move by the Indian state to “download” some of its functions to social movements and non-governmental organizations, or conversely, to harness their energy and broad base to reach people more effectively, can be seen in the example of the Total Literacy Movement. The idea of the mass literacy campaign emerged from experiments in district level total literacy, focusing especially on adult literacy, spearheaded by the Kerala Shastriya Sahitya Parishad (the Kerala Forum for Science Literature), a “people’s science” movement affiliated to the CPI (M), and supported by the CPI(M) government in Kerala. Other states sought to replicate this model when possible. In selected districts of Tamil Nadu, the movement was taken up by the Tamil Nadu Science Forum, also loosely affiliated to the CPI (M), named the Arivoli Iyakkam (Light of Knowledge Movement), and funded and supported by the Tamil Nadu government. Kanyakumari was one of the districts selected. Arivoli Iyakkam activists were given space within the
compound of the Collector’s office to set up their headquarters, and the campaign ran for over a year (1994-95), with classes held in small groups across the district.\footnote{The movement has been credited with achieving a high level of adult literacy, although later studies have raised questions about the sustainability of the gains, given the limited opportunities available for landless labour and other very poor groups to use the skills (Karlekar, 2004); Cody’s (2009) sensitive ethnography of the pedagogical approach and its actual enactment among adult rural inhabitants explores the effects of the movement in generating a new enlightenment subjectivity among participants.}

Although the campaign was not equally visible in all the coastal villages, in Chinna Muttam, a number of the women went regularly to their Arivoli classes. JC, an Arivoli teacher in the village, talked about how the meetings fit in with all the others she attended, and in what ways she was expected to spread learning to other village women. She was the secretary of the village unit of the Grama Pengal Munnetra Sangam, a women’s microcredit organization described in Chapter 6. She was also the Treasurer of the village unit of the Family Planning Association of India and would help women go to the right doctor to be sterilized. The Family Planning Association unit had sixty-five members in the village and they took up other issues as well, such as getting rid of the liquor brewers from the village. Her weekly routine included going to Arivoli class on Saturday morning, to the Arivoli planning meeting in the afternoon, and then to the \textit{anbiam} (Basic Christian Community) meeting in the evening. On Sundays, after mass she would go the Christian Living Communities (a pious association) meeting. During week days she went to other offices and meetings. On coming home she would talk about what was discussed at the meetings loudly so that a group of four-five women would gather to listen and benefit. As an Arivoli teacher, she received a daily newspaper which she was supposed to read aloud to others. Because theirs was an important Mukkuvar family in the village, people came to her for help in solving problems and settling disputes. She would help people write memos, get their ration card, and such like. She had been on radio a couple of times, once regarding family planning and another time regarding electricity and water problems in the village.

4 Conclusion

What we see above is a state that does not stand above the Kanyakumari villagers, but is deeply imbricated with their everyday lives, both in the form of political parties that
people turn to for a variety of reasons, and through a host of other institutions and initiatives. Contrary to Chatterjee’s suggestion that subaltern groups do not engage with the state through routinized, legalistic and plural associations, the chapter showed that several of the associations in the villages – the government cooperatives, the party units, and their youth and women’s wings, and the film star fan clubs - have been initiated by the state or political parties. Several of the party units or their youth wings met regularly, and in some cases kept membership lists and minutes. Villagers differentiated between themselves as supporters of one or other party, not only in order to make claims upon elected leaders, but as a sign of their own values and preferences. Thus people identified with one or other party because it represented reason over passion, or religiosity over atheism, or because it was seen as the party of the youth or the old-timers, or because it supported their faction in the village. Increasingly, the state is also drawing on the voluntarist and self-associational quality of civil society in campaigns like the Total Literacy Movement, or in the microcredit groups described in Chapter 6. Chatterjee’s argument that subaltern Indians do not participate in civil society does not seem to hold, even from the summary overview provided in this chapter.

Because of the coalitional nature of dominant class power in India and the need for this coalition to gain legitimacy through electoral majorities, and in part influenced by the ideological preferences of founding leaders, the postcolonial Indian state has been concerned to address the popular classes through its institutions and policies from the very beginning. The modes by which it has done so have evolved as result of the assertiveness and new claims on the part of the popular classes generated by these very institutions and policies, balanced against the continued need for dominant class accumulation. In cases where lower class demands seriously threaten accumulation strategies, direct repression of these demands is a real possibility, as is seen increasingly with the heightened corporate demand for land and natural resources pitching communities dependent on them against the armed forces of the state and corporate sector (see Arundhati Roy, 2009). But these modes, and the particular balance they represent have also varied regionally, depending on state-level class and cultural formations, and the particular kinds of commitments, whether real or rhetorical, that they have necessitated.
The need to address the popular sectors and their concerns is not equivalent to a situation where those classes have “power” either through the state or within the economy; this allows for a wide range of responses to their concerns, ranging from the rhetorical to the ameliorative, and only rarely, the redistributive. This is especially possible because these sectors rarely mobilize around common redistributive demands, engaging instead in a politics of recognition of particular identity-based demands, as the politics of Tamil Nadu show. Nevertheless, as Harriss (1994) has argued, the "developmentalist" interventions of the Indian state, specifically in Tamil Nadu, such as cheap formal credit, land reform legislation, welfare interventions such as the mid-day meal scheme for children, improved conditions for landless labour and poor farmers, helped to improve the terms on which rural labour could bargain, and thus intervened within the structure of relations of production itself. As seen in Chapter 2, the developmental interventions of the state worked largely to provide credit and technology for the better placed layers of rural society to take advantage of the market, and did little for those less well-placed. But the “pro-poor” and developmentalist language of the state until it formally abandoned “socialism” in the nineties encouraged villagers to turn to it as an ally in their struggle to re-embed the market, calling on it to enact formal regulation around trawling. Likewise, villagers called upon their ADMK representatives to assist them in their struggle against the trawlers, both as a quid-pro-quo for votes, but also because they had some faith in the party’s rhetoric of sympathy for the poor and lower castes. As Chatterjee has argued (see section 1), despite the decisive ascendance of the industrial bourgeoisie as the dominant class in the recent period, the legacy of the passive revolution ensures that some ameliorative policies continue to be put in place to temper the worst effects of the liberalized market. How long this attempt at amelioration will last, and what point the language of populism will cease to be hegemonic, is a question for the years to come.
Chapter 4
The Catholic Church in Kanyakumari – A Manifold Presence

"The eagerness to search for ways and means to better the conditions of the fisherfolk gushes out of me as I am one who had experienced the stings of poverty from my birth."
(Jeremias, 1989: i)

The Catholic Church is an institution of singular importance in the coastal villages of Kanyakumari. There is, however, no single way of understanding its role. It is a key element of the identity of the Mukkuvar and Paravar villagers, the basis of their faith, and an intimate part of their everyday lives and struggles. But, as Ram has argued, it also functions as a “quasi-state” in the villages. From the time of the Church’s entry here five centuries ago, every state of the day has accommodated it, allowed it to take on administrative and judicial functions, and to represent the villagers. A substantial part of the associational life of the villages has been initiated by the Church. The Church’s role is further complicated by the fact that it operates at multiple scales beyond the local: not only as part of a powerful international institution, but at the national scale as one that represents a small minority.¹

Catholic faith and identity are deeply rooted and thoroughly indigenized; nevertheless, as an international institution, the Church must constantly struggle between introducing new ideas and directives from the World Church (for instance, around theological purity and liturgical practice), and the need to “enculturate” and remain indigenous, especially in the context of rising Hindu nationalism.

Charting the course this struggle has taken over the centuries – between the secular and the spiritual, the international and the national, the institutional and the popular – is necessary to a complex understanding of the Church’s present role. The first part of this chapter is devoted to a brief history of the Church in the region, its key structures, influences, and turning points; the aim here is to identify some of the central features of its relationship with its congregants, as well as with the secular powers of the day. Much of the task of mediation, between the international and the indigenous, between the secular imperatives of the state and the religious concerns of the Church, between the institution and the

¹ Approximately 2% of all Indians are Christians, and this includes Protestants. In absolute numbers this is not a small number – some twenty million people.
parishioners, is carried out by individual clergymen, many of whom come from the fishing villages. In the second part of this chapter, I draw on Gramsci’s schema (1971: 5-14) to reflect more closely on the clergymen’s role as agents of transformation, both as organic intellectuals representing their class, and as traditional intellectuals who articulate the ideology of the Church and state. In the final section I seek to draw some conclusions about the role of the Church as straddling the space between state and civil society, and thus in shaping ideas and institutions of participation and development in the villages.

1 The Catholic Church in Kanyakumari

1.1 Origins and Early History

A relationship of accommodation and collaboration for mutual benefit was established between Church personnel and the state from the time of the Catholic Church’s very beginnings in the region. The conversions of the Paravars and Mukkuvars to Catholicism were among the first carried out by the Portuguese, whose traders, soldiers, and missionaries began to come to India after the opening of the sea route via the Cape of Good Hope in 1498. This was a period of enormous political flux in the southern peninsula, with recurring battles for sovereignty and shifting alliances between the Kingdoms of Venad (later Travancore), the Pandyas, the Nayak of Madurai, his various deputies, as in Tirunelveli, and the Zamorin of Calicut. All contending parties sought the support of the newest entrants upon the scene, the Portuguese. The lucrative nature of the pearl fishery had resulted in various rulers trying to incorporate the Paravar fishers into their patronage networks and it was to escape such an attempt, this time by the Muslim forces allied with the Zamorin of Calicut (Bayly, 1989: 323-325; Schurhammer, 1973-1982: 259), that the

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2 For this section, I rely extensively on Bayly’s (1989) account of the conversions and the early history of the Church that locates it in its southern Indian context. Thekkedath (1982) is a good general history of Christianity in India. Villavarayan (1956) and Narchison et al. (1983) are diocesan histories published by the Diocese of Kottar, both are commendable in their devotion to fact. A critical discussion of the Church in the Mukkuvar villages is offered by Ram (1992), and by A.Subramanian (2009).

3 Christianity in India predates these conversions. The first Christians trace their origins to the Syrians who arrived with St Thomas the Apostle who, legend has it, came to India, died there, and is buried at Mylapore (part of Madras) on the east coast. By the time of the arrival of the Portuguese, these St Thomas or Syrian Christians formed thriving merchant communities, with a great deal of political clout in the kingdoms of Travancore and Quilon. See Bayly (1989: Chapters 7 and 8) for a history.
Paravars turned to the Portuguese for protection. This was promised on the condition that they embrace Christianity. This points also to a rivalry between the Catholic and Islamic powers: Thekkedath (1982: 163) suggests that one of the reasons for the speedy nature of the mass conversions, with little to no prior preparation, was because of the quick advance that Islam was then making in the region. Some twenty thousand Paravars were baptized in 1536 following the conversion of their leaders a few months earlier (Narchison et al., 1983: 11). Bayly (1989: 328) notes: "The great ceremonies of mass baptism...were really declarations of tactical alliance rather than religious conversions as the term is usually understood."  

The Mukkuvars were baptised in 1544 by Francis Xavier. In 1537 the Raja of Venad (later part of Travancore) had promised to allow the conversion of the fishermen of his kingdom in exchange for horses. But it was in 1544 when the Portuguese decided to assist the rulers of the kingdoms of Travancore and Quilon against the Pandyas, that the Venad King had it announced in the Mukkuvar fishing villages that the people should obey Xavier as they would obey the Raja himself, and that all those who wished to become Christians could freely do so. "Xavier did not hesitate to project himself as part of the expanding secular power of the Portuguese" (Narchison et al., 1983: 12). He set off through the villages, from Puvar to Pallam, and baptized some ten thousand Mukkuvars (Schurhammer, 1973-82: 468-469). A. Subramanian (2009: 41-42) notes that, with this decision, “the Mukkuvars were transferred from royal to Church patronage.”

Relations with the Raja of Travancore, who controlled the Mukkuvar villages on the west coast, were largely cordial. Both he and the Maharaja of Quilon contributed to the setting up of churches and to their annual maintenance, by making over harbour dues, and the tax on the sale of shark fins to the Portuguese, for the construction and maintenance of churches.  

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4 The Paravar and Mukkuvar communities of the sixteenth century seem to have been worshippers of a Mother Goddess, with each village having a little temple to her, often at its boundary. The temples of these blood-drinking and flesh-eating goddesses were cared for not by the high caste Brahmins, but by pujaris, or even by the villagers themselves. While most of the Mukkuvars and Paravars practised forms of worship such as these, which we would now describe as falling within a Hindu tradition, small pockets of them, as in Tengapattanam on the southeast coast, were Muslim (Schurhammer, 1973-1982: 468).

5 An inscription dated 15th Chitrai (669 ME – mid-sixteenth century) on a granite pillar at Kumari Muttam records the assignment by the sovereign of the harbour dues of Kumari-muttam and Covalam to the Roman Catholic church at Kumari-muttam, at the request of the congregation attached to that church (Nagam Aiya, 1989, vol. 1: 196-197).
In return, the Portuguese offered Mukkuvar support to the Travancore King. In 1759 the Mukkuvas fought the Dutch at Colachel on behalf of Travancore, and in 1805, when the Nair troops, including the famed Nair Battalion guarding the Raja of Travancore’s palace, rebelled against him, he called in the Mukkuvar men to defend him (Agur, 1990: 83).

Conversion to Christianity brought the communities the protection of the Portuguese, but also drew them into the latter's conflicts, such as the rivalry with the Muslims, and, in the seventeenth century, with the Dutch, who were virulently anti-Catholic (see Thekkedath, 1982: 181-184). The politics and schisms of the Catholic Church also affected it in India, as in the split in the seventeenth century between the Padroado (the right given to the Portuguese to evangelize) and the Propaganda Fide (set up by the Holy See following growing tensions with the Portuguese) (S.V. Fernando, 1984), and in the subsequent suppression of the Society of Jesus, which was the order to which Francis Xavier belonged, and which in the early years ran a number of the Indian parishes.

Despite the tactical nature of the conversions, a "new and distinctive tradition of worship" (Bayly, 1989: 328) and a new religious identity did eventually emerge, albeit slowly. When Francis Xavier landed on the Fishery Coast in 1542 and made his way through the so-called Christian villages of the Paravars (who had been converted a few years earlier), he realized that they knew nothing at all about their new religion, and that their way of life did not differ in any way from that of neighbouring Hindu communities (Thekkedath, 1982: 155). The Mukkuvars too had received no preparation before their baptism, which by Xavier's own account could scarcely have given them more than a few phrases to mouth (Letters and Instructions, 117-118). Through Francis Xavier's efforts these groups began to acquire elements of a recognizably Christian religious culture, but it was only by the end of the sixteenth century that Jesuits like Fr Criminali and Fr Henry Henriques, with their deep knowledge of Tamil, and zealous ministry, were able to introduce a more profound appreciation of the faith (Thekkedath, 1982: 164-5). Since much of the new faith was acquired through rote learning of prayers and rituals, however, it is unlikely that despite these earnest efforts, conversion would have replaced the people's "existing conception of

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the supernatural" (Bayly, 1989: 328). In 1576, for example, a Jesuit priest was beaten up in a Mukkuvar village because he ordered the demolition of a little temple, which some "bad" Christians had set up in front of the church in order to obtain the favour of the “devil” for their fishing (Thekkedath, 1982: 190).

Even decades after the faith deepened and the new institutions took root, the tactical nature of the affiliation and its fluidity remained. Conversion marked off the Christian castes and gave them a new status, but it did not remove them from a landscape ordered by caste, and punctuated by both syncretism and conflict. The syncretism was best seen in the forms taken by the new religious symbols and images, and in the retention of practices from the period prior to conversion. Bayly (1989: 330) writes that a key element of the distinctive practice of worship became the cult of St Francis Xavier, whom the Jesuits encouraged the Paravars to revere as a supernaturally endowed tutelary figure, exorcist, and healer. But the legends around Xavier took on the characteristic features of Sufi *tazkiras* (saints' biographies), as well as accounts of the region’s warrior cults, and he came to acquire the qualities of a guru and of a Muslim holy man. Even as the Xavier cult enhanced the Paravars’ sense of caste identity, it confirmed many of the religious and cultural traditions which the Paravars held in common with the Tamil Hindus and Muslims. Other pre-Christian traditions endured: the retention by the Paravars of their own specialist service communities, such as hereditary barbers, washermen, and shark charmers; rituals such as the pulling of a decorated chariot for the feast days of the church, as in a temple festival; caste histories and oral traditions which relate the Paravars and their rituals to the great Hindu temples of southern Tamil Nadu, in particular, Tiruchendur and Kanyakumari; and the assumption by the upwardly mobile members of the caste of symbols and practices of high caste status, such as cloistering for women (Bayly, 1989: 330-358).

Earlier conflicts and hierarchies also persisted despite conversion. There were major incidents in 1589 of violence between the inland Sanars (now Nadars) and the Paravars, over symbols of status, and between the Mukkuvars and the Nadars in 1572 and 1604 (Thekkedath, 1982: 172). About these, Thekkedath concludes that: "Even though several churches were burned and at least one temple destroyed during the course of these fights, it can be safely affirmed that these conflicts were due to caste rivalries rather than religious
differences" (271). The question of caste hierarchies was a contentious one for the Church from the very beginning. Influential arguments were made by priests such as the Robert de Nobili, who took the position that the maintenance of caste separation (expressed through practices such as having different churches for different castes, or serving them mass at different times) was necessary for the survival and spread of the Church in the region and had no religious implications. This received papal assent in the early 1600s, while later Popes overturned it as a religious sacrilege. In practice, separate churches were constructed for the inland Nadars and the coastal Mukkuvars and Paravars, or in some churches a wall was erected to separate seating areas for the higher and lower castes (see Roche, 1984; A.Subramanian, 2009: 49-50).

Within the new tradition of worship, with its fusion between the group's caste institutions and their identity as Roman Catholics, faith and identity came to be further interrelated with discipline and governance. The Roman Church had been allowed by the Raja of Travancore to arbitrate in civil and criminal matters for the Catholic communities. Xavier and subsequent missionaries used the village leaders as a kind of moral policing agency to guard against and punish drunkenness, adultery, idolatry, and other transgressions. Their powers were confirmed by the Portuguese colonial authorities, who built the village leaders up as a "comprador" elite in order to cream off the profits of the pearl trade. The Portuguese used the local leaders’ authority to recruit and discipline Paravar divers, and have them perform all the other specialized tasks which were required to keep the fishing running efficiently (Bayly, 1989).

The missionaries also introduced new structures of administration and discipline. In every village there was a judge and a policeman appointed by the priests. In addition, there was a judge for the whole coast, to whom appeals could be made. The priests themselves were always available for more serious cases. Lay involvement in running the parish and in ministry had been solicited from the outset, to make up for the shortage of priests; the first pious association, the Confraternity of Charity, was set up some twenty years after the Paravar conversions (Thekkedath, 1982: 167-173).
Structures of revenue collection were also put into place. The parishes were entirely self-sustaining. Although the kings of Travancore and Quilon contributed to the erection of churches in their territory, and for a while to their maintenance, and the Portuguese Governor during Xavier's time paid an annual sum to support the missionaries (Schurhammer, 1973-1982: 462-3; Xavier, 1992: 124, footnote 11), the lay officers were maintained, the bulk of the churches constructed, and, in some periods, the priests supported, through taxes on the fishery in each village. A variety of levies were imposed, to the extent that the Portuguese priests were commonly referred to as *kuthagaikkara samigal* (levy-priests) (Sivasubramanian, 1996: 261). Of this, the British fisheries scientist Francis Day observed that the Portuguese clergy let no produce be taken to the market “until the clergy were first served what they required” (quoted in Reeves, 1991:11).

The new religious identity worked not only to create cohesion in the caste and enable it to manoeuvre more efficiently for status vis-à-vis other castes and the rulers, but also to bargain with the Church hierarchy itself. By the 1830s the Jesuits found that the Paravars' internal ranking scheme was now wholly constituted through Church ritual, and that caste notables could decide what sacraments each family was permitted (Bayly, 1989: 360-361). In the Jesuits' campaign to regain control over these decisions, they drew on the support of disaffected *mejaikarar* (white-collar) families, and even *kamarakarrar* (fishing) families who had grown rich on trade but did not have ceremonial status in the village. But the leading families were able likewise to retaliate by exploiting the schisms within the Church, threatening to shift to new affiliations, or even threatening to leave the fold. In other cases, the less powerful villagers also organized against the hierarchy, including the parish priest, using allegations of financial or moral corruption (usually in the form of sexual misdemeanours or profligacy) to call on the Bishop to replace their priest, threatening conversion if he failed to do so. A. Subramanian (2009) gives the example of such an event in the village of Pallam, where the parishioners wrote to the archbishop asking that the parish priest be removed because of sexual misconduct, but notes that: “[e]ven when they issued threats of conversion, which they did frequently, they did so as subordinates and in

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7 Such as between the Padroado and the Propaganda Fide in the seventeenth century, or, for instance when, in 1887, Paravars and Mukkuvars, among other groups, began to attach themselves to the Independent Catholic Church of Ceylon, Goa, and India, which had been set up by two renegade Catholic clerics from Goa (Bayly, 1989: 316-18).
the language of filial piety, addressing clerical authorities as “Our Holy Father,” “Your Excellency” and “Our Benefactor” (47). A. Subramanian’s argument here is important: The quest for alternative patrons or appeals to higher echelons of religious authority was nonetheless a way of asserting demands for justice and equality. And further: “[F]isher responses to excesses of clerical power reflect a sense of village sovereignty as irreducible to Church jurisdiction and an understanding of spiritual power as distinct from the precise authority of the Catholic clergy” (52).

The arrival in 1806 of the Protestant London Missionary Society (LMS) to South Travancore introduced a new element into the region. For the coastal villagers, it was another potential patron to which to turn in order to negotiate greater rights for themselves. There were some initial conversions, most of which did not endure, and other threats of conversion made in protest against unsustainable taxation, or other excesses, by the Church. A. Subramanian (2009) notes that part of the limited reach of the Society into the coastal villages was because of the zealous defence of the latter by the Church itself, but also because the LMS missionaries themselves were more interested in converting the inland low castes, perceiving their “twin goals of conversion and destabilizing native rule as better achieved in the inland” (53). LMS missionaries cast themselves as the protectors and liberators of the low caste Hindus, and represented energetically on their behalf with the Travancore ruler. The British representative in Travancore aided their efforts. The annoyance this caused the Travancore rulers can be seen in Agur’s (1990 [1903]) account of their activities, in which he castigates them as “political missionaries” (70).

1.2 The Establishment of the Diocese of Kottar

The parishes of present-day Kanyakumari district were part of the diocese of Quilon until 1930, when Papal decree erected the new diocese of Kottar from the southern and Tamil-speaking part of the diocese, and entrusted it to the indigenous diocesan clergy (Villavarayan, 1956: 34). Many of these clergy were drawn from the Mukkuvar castes, since the Church had offered one of the few avenues for social mobility in the villages. The new diocese moved rapidly to reform some of the most hated elements of Church governance in
the villages, but also to purify and strengthen a more doctrinal Catholicism against the forms of popular devotion that were a key element of religious practice in the region.  

One of the earliest areas to attract reform was the system of revenue generation for the coastal parishes, which was quite different from the one established in the inland parishes, and was the cause of numerous conflicts. This system, known as the kuthagai system, had been put in place from the time of the founding of the parishes, but was formalized only at the end of the nineteenth century. One-fifth to one-half of the catch of fish of one day in the week was collected for the Church throughout the year. The collection of fish was auctioned out to a contractor. The contractor paid an agreed sum of money to the parish in three or four instalments, and collected the fish through his agents. In addition there was the income from the sale of shark fins (for export to China), the right to which had been granted to the Church by the Maharajah of Travancore, and a sales tax collected from fish merchants who bought fish for sale outside the village.

These sources of revenue added up to a rich income for the parish. Despite the large income, extravagant expenditure and frequent corruption on the part of the group controlling the finances left many parishes riddled with debt. The fact that the parish priest was signatory to the contract led to frequent accusations of corruption on his part or that of the Church. As well, since the contractor was frequently an outsider and non-Catholic, any conflict around the money developed into tripartite litigations, both in the ecclesiastical, and frequently, civil courts. Finally, those who refused contributions were "visited with ecclesiastical censures," such as the denial of Sacraments, which were increasingly resented (Villavarayan, 1956: 52).  

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8 Shriners to St Antony, St Michael the Archangel, and St Sebastian were very popular throughout the Diocese, and even non-Catholics would flock to them to make vows and ask for cures and assistance. "Possession" by these saints, or cures of mental affliction by them, flourished. In a pastoral letter in 1956 the Bishop denounced these practices (and others such as soothsaying, devil-dance, etc) and called for a serious reform. There was some success at halting "superstitious" practices, although they have never been entirely abandoned (Narchison et al., 1983: 112-113). Ram’s (1992) ethnography pays considerable attention to these popular devotions, especially as they operate as a kind of subculture among the women.

9 The Paravar village of Idinthakarai in the neighbouring diocese of Tuticorin witnessed a sustained campaign against the kuthagai in 1967, partly because shark fins were beginning to fetch a high price in the market. The fishing families called for the repeal of the various levies, and also called on the non-fishing families of the village, the menakkedar, to contribute to village revenues. The village split into the pro-Church (and pro-levy) faction consisting mostly of the non-fishing families, and the anti-levy faction.
Several rounds of reform, in the 1930s, in 1944, and 1954, were required to eliminate the most egregious elements of the system. New sources of revenue were introduced, such as encouraging the faithful to offer masses, chiefly on the occasion of marriages and deaths, and raising the taxes for these sacred functions (Narchison et al., 1993: 53). Measures were imposed to make spending, especially on parish celebrations, more prudent and accountable. The contract system was now used only for extraordinary revenues. Instead, weekly contributions of fish were to be made directly to the parish, in a system known as sanhayam, which too was later made extraordinary, to be levied only with the unanimous consent of the parishioners, and subject to no ecclesiastical sanctions. The sale of shark fins and the sales tax imposed on merchants were also to be considered extraordinary means of income. A new annual budget of expenses was to be prepared for each parish, the parishioners being obliged to contribute towards this only. The normal method of contribution was to be a tax per capita, paid in cash, not kind. Besides this, the other normal sources were to be the offerings of the faithful, the proceeds from Church properties, and the earnings of the Church from functions such as marriages and burials.

1.3 Indian Independence and the Adoption of Secularism

A key principle of the constitution of the new Republic of India was “secularism.” In general, this has been interpreted as “an equal respect for all religions,” rather than a distancing from religion altogether. This meant that the state continued to allow the Church to be seen as the representative of the villagers for most civil and administrative matters.

Wilfred (1981) writes that in this early post-independence period, the Indian Church as represented by the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India (CBCI – now called the CCBI, or Conference of Catholic Bishops of India), was anxious to protect its members from accusations of being “pro-British” and to defend their rights based on the provisions of the Constitution for minority communities against the "hostile forces of secularism and Hindu

Several leading families of the anti-levy faction were excommunicated by the Bishop and denied Church rites. About half of these families, some eight hundred people, eventually decided to convert to Hinduism. The event forced the Church to reinstate the other families into the Church, and eventually to remove all compulsory levies (Sivasubramanian, 1996).

10 The term itself was formally incorporated into the Preamble only through a Constitutional Amendment in 1976, through which the term “socialist” was also added. Thus, the Preamble now states that the Union of India is a “sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic.”

fanaticism (of which there were some major cases in the 1950s)” (829). It therefore took on social work, especially in the fields of education and health, and cooperated with the Government in all its welfare schemes aimed at uplift and social welfare. In fact, until the nineteen-seventies, the Church was best known for its elite educational institutions catering mainly to the upper classes.

In Kottar a more genuine spirit of reform informed the beginning of "development" work in the 1950s. This was in large part due to the influence of the Belgian priest, Fr James Tombeur, who belonged to the Society of the Auxiliaries of the Missions (SAM) (Tombeur, 1990: 3). He arrived at Kottar in 1950, and lived and worked there until his death in 2002. Although individual and local efforts at charity had always been made, as in the setting up of orphanages, schools for poor students, and dispensaries, by various religious orders (usually nuns rather than priests), the first organized attempt at "development" was made by Fr James when he set up the cooperative for palmyra tappers in 1953. This led to the formation of the Kottar Social Service Society (KSSS) in 1963, which over the decades took up activities in a number of spheres, such as a community health development project; cottage industries; the manufacture of sugar, fibre and brush, and tiles, and, as seen in Chapter 2, cooperatives for fishermen and farmers; a boat building centre; and a nylon net making centre. Tombeur writes that “from the start KSSS was people oriented and low priority was given to relief and to institutions like schools, convents and so on. The inspiration was taken from the Gandhian type of development: village centred, cottage and village industries, providing employment to all and trying to be self-supporting” (Tombeur, 1990: 41).

In this period, two principles – opposition to secularization (understood in its sense of the desacralization of the world), and opposition to communism – were the basis of the Church's involvement in politics across the world. During the second general elections in 1957, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India issued a statement, which was read in all churches, asking Catholic electors to do their civic duty and not support candidates who were against religion, morality, the rights of the individual and the sanctity of family life. The entire diocese of Kottar was mobilized to participate "responsibly" in the elections. The Bishop sent out a circular requesting the faithful to elect candidates who would fight against
attempts to curtail the freedom of religion as expressed in the educational rights of private institutions,\(^{11}\) and against attempts to propagate birth control. In the following elections too, Catholics were asked by the Tamil Bishops not to vote for the communists or the DMK, as both were opposed to religion\(^{12}\) (Narchison et al., 1983: 94-95). In a Pastoral Letter dated 12-2-1961, Bishop Agniswamy referred to the atheistic tenets of DMK ideologies and exhorted the faithful to keep away from them. In general, the Church in Tamil Nadu was, for the first decades after Independence, explicitly in favour of the Congress (Narchison et al., 1983: 115-116).

### 1.4 Vatican II

The election of Pope John XXIII in 1958, and the holding of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council in 1962, marked a major change in the procedures and structures of the Catholic Church, as well as in its understanding of its role in the political community. Historically, the guiding doctrine for the Church in its relation to the state had been the “two swords” or “two powers” theory, according to which all power derived from God, but was vested in two entities – sacred power in the Church, and temporal power in the State. Society, Church, and state were organically interlinked and could never be completely separated, since they were derived from the same source. The Vatican II documents express an acceptance of religious, social, and political pluralism, a constitutional state, and the principle of freedom of the Church in society (Hehir 1993: 22).

Vatican II also initiated an organizational shift in the Catholic polity, opening up, as it did, discussion around the scope of authority within the Church apparatus (Lehmann, 1996: 49). Della Cava (1992: 172) notes that the three chief, and most controversial, tenets of this shift were: (1) collegiality, or the principle of the effective governance of the Church by the

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\(^{11}\) Secularization and nationalization have been feared and opposed particularly in the field of education. The abolition of all private primary schools as part of a gradual plan to nationalize all schools by the Travancore Government in 1945; attempts to intervene in management decisions by the Congress Government of Kerala in the early 1950s, which were seen as the “thin edge of the wedge of nationalisation” (Villavarayan, 1956: 60); a Bill aimed at bringing all private schools under government control passed by the Left Front Government of Kerala in 1957; and the attempt to standardize the administration of all private schools by the DMK Government of Tamil Nadu in 1973: all met with the same concerted, and largely successful, opposition from the Catholic Church (Villavarayan, 1956: 54-61; Narchison et al., 1983: 102-103, 165).

\(^{12}\) Anti-communism was, of course, a position of the Church internationally. As elsewhere in the Catholic world, a number of public meetings were held in the Diocese, in response to the 1956 invasion of Hungary by Soviet troops and the persecution of Catholics by the government of Poland, at which communist ideology and its anti-religious stance were denounced (Narchison et al., 1983: 116).
Bishops together, nationally, regionally, and internationally, rather than by the Papacy in conjunction with the Roman curia; (2) an ongoing, open-ended, Church-wide theological debate over the Pope’s teaching and doctrine in general; and (3) diversity in liturgy, pastoral practice, and ecclesial organization. This shift represented the recognition of the Church as a multinational, multicultural body, and the possibility of greater autonomy of national and even sub-national governing bodies.

The result of Vatican II at the national and local level was greater lay participation, both in parochial administration and in the liturgy (called for in the Council’s document *Gaudium et Spes*). This was to be facilitated by new structures of administration, such as the parish committees, and new pastoral strategies, such as in the Basic Ecclesiastical Communities (to be discussed in Chapter 5). In addition, there was new theological reflection, best known in the Liberation Theology of Latin America, but also elsewhere, as in the Contextual Theology of South Africa (Lehmann, 1996: 49). This theology was far more theological and biblical than is generally assumed. While there was openness to Marxism and other radical ideologies, leading liberation theologians such as Boff and Gutierrez insisted that their impulse was theological, and resisted being labelled as Marxists.

Following from Pope John XXIII’s remarkable encyclical on social justice, *Mater et Magistra*, issued in 1961, the idea of social ministry, based on the understanding that the work of the Church is the defence of the person, now became central. Social ministry was to be performed, not through direct political involvement, as in the standing of clergy or religious for office, but through social activism. Subsequent Episcopal conferences, in which the liberation theologians played a leading role, such as that of the Latin American bishops at Medellin in 1968, called upon religious to make an “option for the poor,” and talked of the need to move from “development” to “liberation” (Littwin, 1989).

The ideas of Vatican II interacted with indigenous movements and currents of social reform emerging across Latin America and the decolonizing nations of Asia and Africa. Writing of Brazil, Lehman (1996) has developed the concept of *basismo* as a way of understanding this confluence of religious and social currents. *Basismo* in Brazil derived from the interaction of the ideas of Liberation Theology and the influential social current of belief that the people,
the "grassroots," have a distinctive culture and outlook on life and society. Further, basismo held that political and religious salvation necessarily involve listening to the people and gaining empathy, even a mystical communion, with their culture. In Brazil, this idea of "the people" had been powerful from the 1930s in art, literature, politics, and even religion; the belief in "the people" was also linked to the quest for the indigenous and the authentic.

*Basismo* existed also in the form of certain philosophies of development, such as appropriate technology, "putting the last first," and popular participation. Lehmann argues that basismo is not a mass movement, but a movement which gradually creates a popular intelligentsia of educated and articulate activists, used to interacting with NGOs, foreign visitors, etc., and that their ideology is consonant with that of the international network of defenders of human rights and participatory development (Lehmann, 1996: 13-14).

An Indian theology of liberation emerged from theologians such as George Soares-Prabhu, M.M. Thomas, and Sebastian Kappen (Kappen, 1986: 305). As in Latin America, these new ideas did not arise in isolation from their social context, but were cross-pollinated by Gandhian tropes of indigenous development; in the early 1970s by the ideas of Naxalbari and the JP movement, both of which challenged, albeit in different ways, the class bias of the Indian development model; and by the emergence of a voluntary sector (Shah, 1988).

But Indian liberation theology was unique in one sense: it was forced to grapple from the outset with India’s multi-religious society. As Kappen (1986) noted, "[I]t is as one inserted in...ecumenical communities that the Indian Christian does theology" (307). Within this context, the true community of Christ, if it is to offer the promise of transforming social structures, must be larger than the Christian community. Kappen (1986: 310-311) writes:

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13 Lehmann prefers *basismo* to *populismo* because of the latter's specific political connotations in the Latin American context, and because of its pejorative meanings in English. "*Basismo* in connection with Catholicism emphasises the cultural and analytical delineation of the movement, avoiding even the appearance of political labelling, as would be the case with the words "progressive" or "radical," for example...” To speak of "progressive" Catholicism...is to give the impression of a political fiction, of a Catholicism modified only in response to extra-religious, principally political, pressures and concerns which is not what its protagonists intend, while liberation theology, though obviously relevant and influential among *basistas*, would, if used on its own, give the equally misleading impression of a purely doctrinal movement. The usage ‘*basista* Catholicism’, in contrast, couples two cultural categories, leaving open rather than closing off their political consequences and the political intentions of their bearers” (Lehmann 1996: 5-6). *Basistas* emphasise the way in which *basismo* is rooted in local popular cultures, but Lehmann seeks to demonstrate its relationship with other tendencies and movements worldwide.
In fact the stirrings of a new theology can be found only among theologians and such Christian groups who have broken loose, at least mentally if not also physically, from the ghettos of church institutions and have cast anchor in the secular world. The true community of Christ is then envisaged as based not on discipleship or on any set of doctrines, rituals and laws, but solely on doing the will of God, which for Jesus meant loving one’s neighbour in deed.

In the period following Vatican II there was a great spurt in the number of development projects for which the Indian Church acted as the channel for money from foreign Church organizations. More thought was also given to the liberatory role the Church should play in the concrete situations of poverty and misery of the people. It was argued that works of social justice and against oppression i.e., for liberation, were part of the meaning of evangelization (Wilfred, 1981: 844). Numerous seminars, consultations, and study programs were conducted at national, regional, and diocesan levels, and "integral development" became the new goal. The following section from the final statement of the International Theological Conference on Evangelization and Dialogue, held in Nagpur in 1971, illustrates dramatically the new thinking and language of this period:

The Church must thirst for social justice and throw all her forces in the struggle for liberation. The country is in need of a new and vast Liberation Movement that will set an end to a process of development in which the gap between the minority growing richer and the mass of the poor not getting a fair deal, is increasing year by year. (Wilfred, 1981: 844, italics as in original)

In the Diocese of Kottar the work of Fr James Tombeur prefigured many of the themes of enculturation and lay participation emphasized by Vatican II. The churches he helped build in the small, remote inland communities in which he served as Parish Priest in the 1950s were the first (and still the only) churches in the Dravidian style (rather than the standard pseudo-Gothic), and on occasion he served mass facing the congregation (Tombeur, 1990: 16). Following Vatican II, these innovations began to be taken up across the Diocese. Changes began to be seen in a variety of forms: liturgical renewal; emphasis on the Bible and on catechism;

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14 Fr James was deeply influenced by Fr Vincent Lebbe, a Belgian missionary in China in the early twentieth century. About him he writes: “Before the word ‘enculturation’ was coined, Lebbe wanted the church to live it” (Tombeur, 1990: 78). Further, for Lebbe, enculturation was about adopting the culture not of the elites but of the popular classes, and about aligning with them against colonial power and racism. Lebbe was eventually sent back to Europe because he took the side of the Chinese against the colonizers.
enculturation, through the mass now being said in Tamil, and other local elements of worship added to the liturgy; lay participation – in the mass, as in the celebrant facing the congregation, and in ministry, such as through pious associations; new structures for pastoral administration, as well as for social awakening and involvement, such as the cooperatives set up by the KSSS; and the taking up of more critical positions on social justice. That even developmental works such as those undertaken by the KSSS might not be radical enough was a possibility voiced by Narchison et al as they looked ahead to the future of the Diocese in their conclusion to their history of it:

With regard to the social practice of the Church in Kottar we may also have to pose a deeper question. The developmental works of KSSS, commendable though in themselves, are they not still becoming unwittingly agents of alienation? Do they not deflect the Church from raising fundamental questions about the condition of the society and the structures of the injustice at work? The strength of the developmental work can well become the weakness of the Church in Kottar, in the sense that they can make the Church insensitive to the real causes of poverty and underdevelopment and blunt the Christian conscience of its social responsibility. They can make us forget that as Church (sic) we are called upon to be catalysts and agents of change in society. This responsibility of every Christian cannot be simply delegated to a developmental organization. (Narchison et al., 1983: 229-230)

The spirit of Vatican II remained strong in Kottar even after it seems to have waned elsewhere (see next section), as witnessed by the Pastoral Letter issued by Bishop M. Arokiaswamy in April 1986, the text of which was prepared by Fr C. Amirtha Raj, a diocesan priest affiliated to the CPI (M), and which also bore the imprint of Fr Leon Dharmaraj, who succeeded Fr Arokiaswamy as Bishop (Jeremias, 1989). It calls for a renewal of the Church in keeping with changing times and with the light of Jesus's gospel. It traces the problems of the people to the unjust socio-economic structures of feudalism and capitalism and argues that only through conscientization about these structures will the poor work for social change. Religions, while they can play a liberatory role if used for analysis, can be equally, and usually are, used to divert the attention of people from their concerns, and to legitimize and perpetuate unjust structures. The Pastoral Letter describes various flawed Church models and pastoral approaches adopted in the past, such as the "traditional" approach, the "charismatic-prayer" approach, the "dependence" approach, the "social
service” approach, and the "extremist” approach (Jeremias, 1989: 203). In preference to all these, it recommends a new approach, the "Radical Church" model, which is guided by the gospel vision and aims to bring about radical changes in all spheres:

The Radical Church is involved deeply in all sectors of the society. It finds God's presence and action in the signs of the times and in people's longing for liberation, manifest in society.... In this praxis, social involvement as well as prayer and liturgy complement and guide each other. To fulfil its mission of creating a new society, the Church does not hesitate to collaborate with like-minded progressive movements, organizations and political parties in a responsible way....One of the attributes of the Radical Church is to bear witness in life and action to the Kingdom through Basic Christian Communities. (Jeremias, 1989: 203)

The action plan for Kottar diocese laid out on the basis of this radical Church approach is truly remarkable (Jeremias, 1989: 204-205, and all citations below). It calls upon the Kottar Church to take a stand against any violations of human rights, and in support of the various people's movements of workers and the marginalized active in the district, arguing that "(w)e too, if we transcend the limits of our parish, diocese and religion and collaborate with these movements, may accelerate the spread and realization of the values of God's kingdom." The Church must rally round the progressive parties and trade unions which aim at social change: "[I]t would prove relevant to conduct a dialogue on philosophical grounds as to how the Marxist ideology and movements have much in common with the Christian religion, in so far as human liberation is concerned." Strategies that involve violence are not condemned out of hand. Rather it is recognized that structures that oppress people are violent in themselves: "In the efforts to change these oppressive structures the use of violence, when all other means are exhausted, is for self-protection and to ensure the welfare of all. This cannot be dismissed as wrong neither on biblical nor on theological grounds." The action plan calls for priests and lay people to work together as equals, for parish councils to be set up, and for the youth to be involved. Political awareness and involvement is seen as a Christian duty, the priests being responsible for fostering it among the laity. Efforts are to be made to involve women in liturgy, parish councils, and other diocesan and parochial organizations and movements, and to encourage women's movements that have social change as their goal.
1.5 The 1990s: The Retreat from Vatican II and the Rise of Hindu Nationalist Politics and Protestant Evangelism

The election of John Paul II as Pope in 1978 saw a retreat from the principles of Vatican II, concurrent with a strengthening of the papacy and the Roman Curia. This strengthening was both an end in itself, and a means to a recovery of order, stability, and unity throughout the Church after the dissent and diversity encouraged by Vatican II. Della Cava (1992: 174) argues that the retreat was linked also to the declining popularity of the Church in this period, with fewer men applying to the priesthood, fewer people attending Church or contributing to it financially, and fewer obeying its edicts, around sexuality and reproduction, for instance. The lay movements that were encouraged to expand – such as Opus Dei or the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement – were those that espoused more conservative and hierarchical social values (Della Cava, 1992: 176-196; Lehmann, 1996: 40). Boff and Gutierrez, theologians who had coined the term “theology of liberation,” were both hauled up by the Vatican, and their theology denounced for what was judged an exclusively political and reductionist reading of the Bible. (Littwin, 1989: 275)

Wilfred's (1981) chronicle of the CBCI's history records a retreat in the Indian Church that predated the election of the new Pope. The final period in his account, 1974-1981, was characterized by a retreat from positions already established, a caution about questions of social justice, a greater emphasis on spirituality, and a re-separation of the notions of development and evangelization. The CBCI maintained silence, and even tacit support for the Emergency (1975-77), perhaps necessary and inevitable for a minority institution; it spoke out only against the compulsory sterilizations carried out by state agencies in this period. Despite the overall retreat from more radical positions, the commissions established in this period, such as the Labour Commission, and the Committee for Social Welfare, continued to carry out important work. For instance, in the mid- 1990s, the Bishop of Kottar, as President of the CBCI Labour Commission, issued a statement in support of the national struggle of the fishworkers against the Government's deep-sea fishing policy.

Within Kottar diocese, despite the startling radicalism of the “radical Church” approach outlined in the Bishop’s pastoral letter, “liberationists” had at no point been the majority of
the clergy. Rather, their influence appears to have been out of all proportion to their numbers. This was in part because of the leadership provided by Bishop Arokiaswamy (whose Pastoral Letter I cite above), and his successor, Bishop Leon Dharmaraj. The latter, in the early years of his tenure, gave support for such initiatives as the unionization of the fishworkers, against opposition from a large group of his own clergy. Several of the diocesan clergy I interviewed were defensive about the criticism of the Church hierarchy and structures, stirred up by the “awareness-raising” and “conscientization” work done by their more radical colleagues. A young priest of the Diocese recalled how, when he was at the seminary at Trichy, the faculty was dominated by "liberationists.” So students wanting good marks knew to write liberationist answers, but only a few of them went on to demonstrate liberationist commitments upon graduating to priesthood. However, insofar as a clear shift away from liberationist positions may be observed by the end of the nineteen-nineties, the impetus for this was not the outcome of internal contestation, but came instead from the need to respond to external threats: the rise of Hindu nationalism as a significant political force, and the growing popularity of Protestant Evangelical Churches, even among the Catholic masses.

On the spread of the Pentecostal and evangelical Churches in India, there is as yet little documentation. But during the time I spent in the villages it became clear that the new Churches were winning adherents from among the Catholics, although the numbers did not seem to be as yet, and perhaps might never be, significant. Lehmann attempted to understand their attraction in Latin America, where they have made enormous inroads and are, as a consequence, politically powerful. He found some clues in the contrast between the "diet of agonized self-questioning, of seminars and consciousness-raising combined with mini-projects" that basismo offers, and the "tangible happiness that will follow from a fulminating conversion experience" offered by the Pentecostals (Lehmann, 1996: 5). For those influenced by basismo, or liberation ideology, salvation is tied to social and structural change; for the evangelicals, to personal conversion. In Kanyakumari, the practices of the Pentecostal Churches, such as "sharing" life histories and "bearing witness" to the moment of revelation, were scorned by the more "progressive" Catholic villagers and activists. Others, including clergy, saw these practices as providing the catharsis and psychological healing that post-Conciliar Catholicism, with its emphasis on social change, had turned
away from, and thus, as an ironic consequence of the Second Vatican Council. One response has been the charismatic movement within the Catholic Church encouraged under Pope John Paul II. Charismatic prayer meetings resemble those of the evangelical movement, with elements such as catchy music, prophetic preaching, and collective cathartic participation.

The growing political strength of Hindu nationalism posed a problem of another kind, in this case for the Catholic community as much as for the Church as an institution. Relations between the Catholic fishing communities and their Hindu and Muslim neighbours had not been markedly conflictual. Of the sixty-six incidents of conflict involving the Catholic fishing villages recorded since 1956 in the five police stations whose records I accessed, and that cover over half the fishing villages, only twenty-one were between the Christian fishing communities and Hindu or Muslim communities. Of these, only three may be called "communal," in the sense that by their very nature they invoked the different communities: two were over religious symbols such as the desire of one community to carry out a temple procession through the living quarters of the other; the third was over competition in Panchayat elections, where the problem seems to have stemmed from the fact that a number of the Christians voted for the Muslim candidate rather than their own. All the others arose from the same causes – drunken disorderliness, harassment of women, disagreements over business, trespassing and minor theft, party rivalries – as were listed for conflicts between the Christian fishing villages and between factions within villages, and developed similarly, starting usually as disagreements or provocations by individuals, and then snowballing.

As much of the writing on communal conflict in India suggests, the need for electoral majorities frequently lies at the root of political parties attaching themselves to, and inflaming, local level conflicts between different communities (see, for instance, Chiriyankandath, 1993). To some extent, this has also led to the hardening of the fluid and frequently syncretic identities and practices described in part 1.1. of this chapter.¹¹

¹¹ My research assistant, Mary Therese, reminisced how prior to the Mondaikadu conflagration in 1982, everyone from her village of Kodimunai and the other villages around Colachel would dress up and go in large groups to the Bhagwati Amman festival at Mondaikadu. People would take offerings and pray to be healed because the goddess was supposed to have healing powers. Post-1982, the Mukkuvars were far more cautious, and very few went to the festival by the mid-1990s. At the church feast in the village of Kanyakumari in 1995, on the other hand, I saw groups of visitors from neighbouring non-Christian villages arrive bearing baskets of
hardening has also resulted from the rise of Hindu nationalism from the early 1980s, reflected in two watershed events in the district: the construction of the Vivekananda Rock Memorial, and the incident at Mondaikadu in 1982. The distinguishing element in these was the presence of the institutional forces of Hindu chauvinism, affiliated to the national movement.

Moves to build a statue of Vivekananda on the rock a little distance from the Kumariamman temple at the Cape and the fishing village of Kanyakumari, began to be made in 1962 by the Vivekananda Committee. This was based on their claim that Vivekananda had meditated on the rock before leaving to give his famous address to the World Congress of Religions in Chicago in 1893. The Catholic fishers of Kanyakumari contested the Committee's right to the rock with the counter-claim that Xavier had meditated there four hundred years ago. Over the following years, a tablet about Vivekananda and a Cross were alternately placed and removed as each community contested the other's claims. The Vivekananda Rock Memorial Committee formed the nucleus for the various Hindu nationalist organizations that entered the district; before the VRMC emerged, the Haindava Seva Sangam of the old Travancore state was the only Hindu cultural and religious organization operating in the area (Mathew, 1983: 415). With government permission, in 1977 the Vivekananda Rock Memorial was set up. It attracts hundreds of tourists a day (because Kanyakumari is both a pilgrimage and a tourist spot). The ferry to the Rock led to another dispute that lasted eight years, for the fishermen claimed that the dredging it required threatened their homes and displaced their fishing operations. Mathew argues that had Vivekananda been projected as a nationalist figure, which indeed he was, enlightened Christian leadership would have been happy to support the Centre. It was his appropriation as a religious symbol that alienated them and cast doubts upon the “secular” credentials of the state.

The Mondaikadu Bhagwati Amman temple's "Masi Kodai" festival in 1982 was the start of the largest conflagration in the district. A rumour spread on the first day of the festival that Hindu women returning from their ritual bath in the sea had been molested by fishermen...
assembled in the nearby Roman Catholic Church of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. This set off retaliatory violence. Soon a full-fledged riot was underway across the coastal belt. Churches, temples, hospitals, crèches, and convents were destroyed. The worst-hit coastal villages were Pallam, where 680 huts of fishing people were set on fire, Kovalam, Rajakamangalam, and Pillaiithope. All transport and supply of essential goods to the coastal villages were cut off. Hundreds were hurt and thousands arrested (Mathew, 1983: 417).

Although an Inquiry was conducted into the Mondaikadu incident, and certain recommendations and some attempts at inter-communal harmony made, the 1990s saw the BJP come to power nationally, and the growth of a greater sense of fear and besiegement among minority communities across the country. In Kanyakumari district there were further small incidents, such as the destruction of a church at Manalikuzhivilai in 1995 (Kottar Newsletter, 1994–1995).

The rise of Hindu chauvinism presented an institutional threat, and hardened identities to a great extent, but did not do away entirely with syncretic practices, such as when Hindus from neighbouring villages came to the chariot-pulling at the end of the saint’s festival in KK. Nor did it preclude entirely the use of the threat of conversion to bargain with the Church. In fact, a case of group conversion to Hinduism did occur in a Catholic fishing village in the neighbouring district of Tirunelveli in 1987.\textsuperscript{16} In the mid-1990s, when expressing frustration with the local priest or the Diocese more generally, more than one fisherman voiced to me in private a threat to convert. There is, however, no evidence that they intended to follow through with it. In the late 1990s, a groups of trawler owners sought out and voted for the BJP as a way of voicing their displeasure with the diocesan leadership, which they felt was favouring the small-scale fishermen (A.Subramanian, 2009: 228-234).

By the turn of the century, as a result of the conjuncture between a number of imperatives – among them the need to defend against threats from Hindu nationalism and to demonstrate

\textsuperscript{16} Fishing Chimes, December 1987, “22 Fishermen Families Return to Hindu Fold”: “22 Roman Catholic families (90 people) of Koothankuli embraced Hinduism in a ceremony in the village. Their return to the Hindu fold was solemnised by a Swamiji of Vellimalai in Kanyakumari district and another Swamiji of Peeur Mutt. A press release by the VHP said that 113 fishermen had converted to Hinduism at Koothankuli. It also said that after the ‘homecoming’ of Christian fishermen at Idinthakarai in 1967, this was the second major conversion in the area. Police bandobast was provided.”
patriotism; gradual conformity with the international Church in its now two-decades-old retreat from Vatican II; and the changed understanding of “development” after India’s market reforms of the early 1990s – the Diocese had reverted to older priorities. These included establishing elite educational and medical institutions, such as engineering and medical schools, and technical colleges; development work, which now consisted increasingly in self-help groups (microcredit) for women; and various kinds of “training” programs around health, hygiene, or computer literacy. A telling symbol of this shift was in the conversion of the Thirumalai Ashram, originally established by Fr James Tombeur and Sr Lieve to serve as a place of reflection and action for a range of social movements and activists, into an engineering college residence. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that, despite this shift in real terms, “power from below” and “breaking the yokes of injustice” remain two of the four basic pillars of the Diocese’s stated vision and self-identity.

2 The Clergy

The Church governs over the fishing villages, but it is also intimately of the villages. The parish priests embody this dual relationship, for they are functionaries of the Church, and also, frequently, themselves come from the coastal villages. They have a further role within these rural communities, serving as their “intellectuals.” Focusing more narrowly on the priests allows us to gain a fuller sense of the complexity of the Church’s role in this region.

The diocesan clergy are drawn from the district's Catholic castes: Nadar, Paravar, and Mukkuvar. The coastal parishes number about 42 out of a total of 150 parishes in the Diocese; there are approximately 275 diocesan priests. The numerical balance between those belonging to the Nadar and the fishing castes seems to shift; during the period of my research I had a sense that there was numerical dominance by the Nadars, while A. Subramanian writes of a period of Mukkuvar dominance in the early twentieth century. A deep, if rarely stated, rivalry persists between them. There is a commonplace in the region that Nadar priests appointed to coastal parishes have a harder time and face more criticism

17 Several “activist” clergy and lay people interviewed in 2004 expressed frustration and disillusionment with this turn.
than those belonging to the fishing castes. But, from the earliest times, Mukkuvar and Paravar priests have evoked their share of such challenge and criticism. Writing about the priest from a peasant village in Italy, Gramsci observed that since the priest had a higher standard of living than the average peasant, he represented an aspiration – and everyone wanted at least one priest or intellectual in the family. But this attitude could sometimes be contradictory: the peasant may respect the priest's social position, but also affect contempt for it, which means "his admiration is mingled with instinctive elements of envy and impassioned anger" (Grasmei, 1971: 14).

Virtually every priest of every persuasion had his critics in the village. Rude jokes about their soft hands and clean-shaven faces (in a region where manliness presumes a moustache), and rumours (rarely substantiated) of financial corruption, or intimacy with women, were in constant circulation. The youth wanted dynamic priests with new ideas. Old-timers spoke with disdain about the younger priests with their casual manners, quick to shed their cassocks and look like everyone else, present in the village only for the bare necessities of their office and then off on their motorcycles to commissions and activities outside the village (the suggestion being that they were up to no good once they were out of sight). They recalled with nostalgia the ideal priest of an earlier time, distinguished by his pious demeanour and by the brown cassock he always wore, who read the Bible or prayed with the people in his spare time, and rarely left the village. Yet, as seen in the previous section, factions involving the priest, and accusations against him, were as common in that earlier time, especially in the days when he also managed the parish funds.

The priest in the coastal parish is called upon to fulfil a variety of functions, unlike in an inland one, for parishioners in the latter are more comfortable dealing directly with the civil administration (Narchison et al., 1983: 138). In the fishing village, the priest is leader, judge, problem solver, liaison with government, protector, and sole representative of the village, preacher, counsellor, and guide (Ram, 1992: 40). Village land is generally the property of

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20 I was told by priests endeavouring reform in the villages, or by others speaking about them, that they had been successful only because they were of the fishing caste and that, if they had been Nadars, people would have said things like: “These Shanars (the old caste name for the Nadars, now considered derogatory) — who are they to tell us what to do?” This is not true in every case, of course, and some of the most enthusiastically received reformist priests I met were Nadars.
the Church, so that villagers do not in most cases have legal title to the land, and the priest is in effect also their landlord.

The work of the priest is not only concrete and practical, but also, as famously observed by Gramsci (1971: 5-16), “intellectual,” that of generating both social and political hegemony. 21 There are, increasingly, other intellectuals in the villages – social workers, political activists, and NGO staff, but the priests are still the best educated as a group, and, by virtue of their historic pre-eminence and institutional base, the most authoritative. Many local women join religious orders, but, since they are not necessarily located in the Diocese, they do not have the same influence. The importance of the priests as intellectuals in the villages cannot be minimized, for as Gramsci (1971: 14-15) notes:

One can understand nothing of the collective life of the peasantry and of the germs and ferments of development that exist within it, if one does not take into consideration...(their) effective subordination to the intellectuals. Every organic development of the peasant masses, up to a certain point, is linked to and depends upon movements among the intellectuals.

How do we understand the political role these intellectuals play? From where do they derive the concerns and aspirations they transmit? Gramsci (1971) distinguishes between two types of intellectuals, organic intellectuals and traditional intellectuals. Organic intellectuals are those who arise as a part of every social group or class to give it "homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields" (5). Traditional intellectuals are those who have always performed the role of intellectuals in society, such as administrators and other state functionaries, scholars and scientists, theorists and philosophers; by virtue of their uninterrupted historical continuity as a group and their special qualifications, they consider themselves autonomous of every social class. In the coastal villages of KK these traditional intellectuals include those of the state and those belonging to the various NGOs, but centrally, as in Gramsci's Italy, the ecclesiastics.

21 For more on Gramscian conceptions of culture, common sense, and hegemony, especially among the peasantry, see Femia (1975); James Scott (1977); Davidson (1984); Arnold (1984); Deshpande (2004: 1-24); and of course, the Subaltern Studies writings, especially Ranajit Guha (1989).
Gramsci (1971) writes that "(t)he category of ecclesiastics can be considered the category of intellectuals organically bound to the landed aristocracy," and further that, unlike other social groups, a person of peasant origin who becomes an "intellectual" (priest, lawyer, etc.) generally thereby ceases to be organically linked to his class of origin, and functions as a traditional intellectual. However, this argument cannot be directly transposed to the Indian situation. Here the Church is a minority institution and not organically linked to the state, either constitutionally or through its affiliation with the dominant classes, such as the landed aristocracy; to a large extent it represents instead the lower castes.\(^\text{22}\) Despite these differences, Ram holds that the clergy of Kottar Diocese function as traditional intellectuals, sharing the discourse of state intellectuals and serving to mediate the relationship of the state to the community. "How is it" she asks, "that we can encounter a situation where priests and secular intellectuals alike share a commonly understood vocabulary of reform, rationalism, development and cultural nationalism?" (Ram, 1995: 293). She argues that it is through the framework of development that this convergence occurs: the clergy and secular state intellectuals share a common project in their schemes of village reform. Both coalesce at certain junctures around the notion of material development, and the development of consciousness, social awareness, and such matters as bodily regimes.

Ram traces the convergence between the traditional intellectuals of the Church and the state intellectuals through two specific areas: (1) the discourse of reform and emancipation, which is seen here as a specific contribution by Christian missionaries to the state intellectuals’ reform projects of modernization; and (2) the discourse of a specifically cultural sub-nationalism as this has taken shape in Tamil Nadu. This sub-nationalism invokes the historically prior contribution of Christian missionaries to Tamils’ pride in their civilization, particularly in relation to literary continuities with the ancient past. Through their discourse on bodily regimes and sexuality, for instance, these minority intellectuals integrate their own identity and that of their reform agenda into the general project of forging a Tamil identity (Ram, 1995: 299).

\(^{22}\) This is not uniformly true across the country – the earliest Christians, those who belong to the Syrian and Malankara churches in Kerala, are large landowners and historically close to the Travancore and Quilon kingdoms; Portuguese missionizing in Goa in the same period as in the southern region I describe also yielded a Brahmin and upper-caste catch.
There is much to Ram’s argument. As I have demonstrated through the previous section, the social projects of the Kottar Church have paralleled those of the state, and of secular intellectuals. Lehmann’s discussion of basismo also contains this same recognition that certain common ideological tropes can be seen to underlie both religious and secular attempts at transformation. However, just as basismo represented a new respect for the subaltern, and thus a challenge to the more authoritarian and elitist traditions of Church and state in Latin America, so different currents within the Kottar Church must be seen as existing in some tension and contradiction with each other, and with the state. As shown in Chapter 2, the idea of modernization informed both state fisheries policy and the interventions of the KSSS. But while the former resulted in large-scale mechanization accessible only to a handful of the villagers at the outset, and while the government cooperatives made little dent into the power of the merchants, interventions by the KSSS in the form of appropriate technology and cooperativization reached more widely into the villages.

In distinction from Ram, therefore, I argue that the reformist clergy are in fact drawn to act both as intellectuals of their class, articulating the consciousness of that class, and of the Church and state. In the ideas and aspirations the clergy hold and transmit, and in the variety of pastoral approaches they favour, they mirror the different stages of, and influences in, the universal Church’s recent development, its location within the Indian political community, and its local social and cultural embeddedness. This is illustrated by the nature of the discussion at the CAP meeting described below, as much as by these opening words to Fr Jeromias's thesis in pastoral theology: “The eagerness to search for ways and means to better the conditions of the fisherfolk gushes out of me as I am one who had experienced the stings of poverty from my birth.” It can be seen in the resistance to liberationist ideas by a large number of the priests mentioned in the previous sections, and in the wide range of ideological positions held by the clergy of Kottar Diocese, particularly among those working in the fishing communities. These include: (1) an exclusive focus on the spiritual aspects of the religion; usually this is accompanied by the encouragement of works of charity and non-political activities such as youth groups and prayer meetings, family development, and personal “improvement” (e.g., temperance); (2) an emphasis on development understood as projects such as schools, better housing, cooperatives, and community health programs; (3)
an emphasis on political and cultural activism ("social analysis” and political critique) informed by a liberationist theology; and iv.) explicit support (with or without an attempt at theological justification) for the Communist Party of Indian (Marxist).

These strands are not always mutually exclusive, and all the priests involve themselves in development works within the village, and other "traditional" parochial responsibilities. There is nonetheless a tension between the first category of priests, concerned to separate religion from politics, and the other three. There are also differences between the "development"-oriented priests, and those affiliated to the CPM, over questions such as foreign funding and the role of NGOs. The priests I interviewed in connection with various social movements or associations, or with parochial reform, took one or other of the last three positions, but chiefly that influenced by Vatican II and liberation theology.

What distinguished this last group is that they were intellectuals in the commonplace (non-Gramscian) sense of the term, being highly educated and frequently engaged in research and writing. Several of them had post-graduate degrees, such as a Master’s Degree in Media, or Public Administration, or a Ph.D. in Cultural Anthropology, and most had held important appointments in the Diocese or elsewhere. The diocesan clergy all begin their education in a local minor seminary, where they are formed in matters intellectual and spiritual, and also in music, public speaking, acting, and so on, before being sent elsewhere to a major seminary for theological studies. There is also a growing tendency for them to be sent to college between minor and major seminary, or to pursue higher studies, often in secular subjects, in some form (Narchison et al., 1983: 211). But of this group of priests, almost all have further studied subjects they believe will assist them in their role as intellectuals and leaders, such as group dynamics and management, public administration, law, media and communication, computers, and counselling.

These priests have also been particularly concerned with the fishing communities. In Kottar, the coastal parishes are considered difficult and in need of development. They are the "periphery" or the "South" or "third world" of the Diocese, feared and avoided by priests.
who want a comfortable tenure, attractive to the more "radical" priests. Working in the coastal parishes, these priests have introduced reforms to break existing power structures, encourage lay leadership, reduce violent conflict, and systematize parochial administration, and have evolved new strategies to achieve them. Frs J and D worked through the sodalities and through intensive and painstaking interaction with individual fishermen to initiate fishermen’s cooperatives that would end the power of the merchants (see Chapter 6); Fr E refused to act as mediator with the administration over complaints, but began, again through painstaking house-to-house visits, to set up participatory administrative structures in his parish that eventually turned into the diocesan Basic Christian Communities program (see Chapter 5); Fr S undertook a three day fast in the Church as a way of ending the factional fighting in his parish, rather than adding it to the police's already long list of cases from the village. Fr J visited each of the seven hundred houses in his village with a form, asking for details of occupation and family, and then issued family cards containing information such as date of birth, baptism, and marriage, education, occupation and ownership, and membership in associations. He computerized all parish records of birth and baptism so that they were accessible alphabetically. Previously they were grouped in books by year, but people would often not remember which year they were born in. He was making moves to get individual pattas (titles to land) issued to each family because they would enable them to get loans and because “everywhere else people own the land on which they live, and it is instrumental in giving them a sense of self, of pride, and raising their culture.” Fr J saw himself as playing the anti-hero, willing even to earn a reputation for not helping solve village problems, in order that people would learn to take the initiative themselves. When I interviewed him in early 1995, he was directing a play for Lent on the political context of Jesus’s life and why he was killed.

In the mid-1990s, some twenty of these priests had formed a group called the “Coastal Analysis Programme.” The aim of this group, which operated quite formally, with membership fees and monthly meetings, was to study and strategize around the social, cultural, economic, and political problems in the villages, and how to address them. As the

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23 One of the respondents to Fr Jeremias’ survey of the diocesan priests stated: “I am happy to be a parish priest in a coastal village because I feel there is more scope to do meaningful ministry here than the interior but at the same time ministry in a coastal parish is more challenging and needs more planning and patience” (Jeremias, 1989: 217).
group grew, they decided to think of themselves as an enabling and study group within the Diocese, providing input, direction, and analysis to other organizations, building up a library and documentation centre on coastal issues and carrying out reflection on coastal ministry. They also began to have meetings around particular issues such as: the Indian Government's deep sea fishing (DSF) policy, violence in the villages, educational backwardness, and the problems of inland fishers. The programs CAP undertook included organizing and supporting the strikes against the Deep Sea Fishing policy, setting up infrastructure to work for peace and progress in the coast, studies on the impacts of sea erosion, land procurements for housing for fishermen, and designing participatory structures for the fishing villages.

The agenda for a meeting I attended included an extensive discussion of how to work out a program of culture for the villages. In earlier meetings it had been agreed that culture was an important area to study because certain of the villagers’ cultural habits prevented their liberation. This was to be discussed more but kept being put off in favour of more immediate issues such as violence in the villages, anti-DSF agitations, and career guidance. Meanwhile, as parish priests they were trying to discourage the traditional music sessions and dramas put on during the feast days, which always seemed to lead to excitement and violence, and to replace them with new progressive programming. The following excerpt from the discussion on the cultural program is illustrative of the range of concerns and richness of knowledge of these priests, acting as both traditional and organic intellectuals:

J: "In my parish 54 percent have not studied beyond Class 5. So we need to find a medium of communication that does not require high literacy. People read or listen very little to news. The men participate very little in training programs as they are away much of the day. The priest's sermon is an important medium, but tends to be short. Very little information about benefits offered by the Government or the Fisheries office is broadcast. So, very few new ideas enter the villages and people want to continue doing as the old leaders did."

M: "Arrivoli Iyakkam or AI (The Total Literacy Movement) has done kalai jathas (cultural processions). We need to discuss and evaluate their impact."

J: "We need to target men. Any program will have to be when they are free and present. The AI kalai jatha would come at fixed times and leave the village in an hour or so. So they didn't get wide attendance."
U: "AI's themes were the Dunkel Draft, Panchayati Raj and such like, none of which was of immediate interest or appeal to the fishing communities."

J: "The cultural program should not so much show problems as highlight possible solutions, new ideas about things. I myself have arranged to have a short video film about DSF shown over cable TV."

A and W: "Street theatre will have more impact than a stage program."

M: "Stage plays are an old form of communication, now we talk of more participatory forms of communication."

D: "Take the concrete example of a street play done by teenagers during a recent peace march. There might be problems if adults speak on certain matters, such as party politics, for instance, but if kids or youth do it, it goes over fine, and gets laughs while making the point."

W: "Drawing a large crowd is not always the ideal. Often a small group is more easily touched."

W: "Cultural reinvigoration is a solution to violence. The coast used to have so many asans. Participation in cultural activities creates discipline, rigour. So we need to bring these asans back, create active cultural groups in the villages."

J mentioned a new book that recorded the folk songs of the coastal villages, and commented on how all those songs had disappeared as have the thaalam pota songs (sing-along songs), oppari paadangal (funeral dirges).

D hands around a thesis entitled Meenavar Samudya uda Amba Paadangal (Folk songs of the fishing community).

S: "I remember as a child seeing groups coming along the beach from the next village doing lazium [an indigenous dance form], stick dances, etc."

J: "One of the games we played as children was to list all the types under any fish. Or you would be given all the features of a particular fish, and be asked to name it."

When questioned about possible explanations for the disappearance of these forms, such things are suggested as: the arrival of the roads and of buses replacing the beach route and travel by foot; radios and tape recorders reducing the need to make one's own music; new fishing technologies displacing older, more labour-intensive ones like the beach seine, and the hauling-in songs that went with it; TV, modernization, and consumerist influences.

W suggests that the cultural crisis be discussed further, its causes analyzed in more depth, and more lasting solutions found. He also suggests a workshop out of which would emerge themes for street plays, and even the forms themselves. Names of resource persons from the community are suggested.
Although the group disbanded after a few years, its members’ interest in research and documentation, cultural revival and new media continued to find expression, and to become institutionalized in such diocesan commissions as the Nanjil Natham Communication Centre, and Kalari, concerned with new media and revival of traditional cultural forms.

3 Conclusion

The evolution of the Church has mirrored developments at the various scales into which it enters: the universal Church, the Indian political community, and the local social and cultural community within which it is embedded. Both for its faithful, and for others, it embodies a variety of meanings including faith, identity, and governance. It has had to steer a careful course between these multiple scales and diverse meanings. It has had to accommodate to the state and carry out governance functions in order to strengthen itself as an institution, while seeking to retain an always restive congregation. It has had to cultivate and maintain a distinct identity, characterized by a unique tradition of worship, while resisting attempts to cast it as alien and non-indigenous. It has had to fulfil both the spiritual and the secular needs of its followers. And it has had to resist the secularization of society, in the sense of a withdrawal of religion from the public sphere, while welcoming state secularism in the sense of constitutional protections for all religions.

As I have shown, the Church has, over the centuries, assumed many of the functions of a state, always negotiating, however, with the juridical state of the day (Travancore, the Portuguese, the British, the independent Indian state) for greater authority over its members. The Church has imposed taxes, settled conflicts and meted out justice; it has also represented its members to other states.

Like every state, the Church has had to contend with challenges to its legitimacy, such as those contained in accusations of corruption, or relationships with women on the part of the priests. Ram has identified two ways in which the Church has responded to these challenges. Besides the use of coercive means, which like any state, it has available to it in the form of ecclesiastical sanctions, it has encouraged "an indigenous and popular Catholicism, with a base in voluntary religious organisations and in mass cults surrounding the Virgin Mary and
the saints" (Ram, 1992: 37). Its second response has been to "invoke the example of the Church as the special representative of the Mukkuvar community, as a neutral arbiter above all individual interests, acting in a paternal spirit to ensure the majority's welfare" (Ram, 1992: 37). When new entrants, such as political parties and NGOs, have provided competition for this latter role, the response of the Church has been to try to co-opt them: police, government officials, activists of the total literacy movement, NGOs – all approach the villagers through the priest. But the success of this co-optation is never guaranteed, as we shall see in subsequent chapters.

The difficulties of maintaining legitimacy are linked in part to the nature of the religious identity of the coastal Catholics. This was always a somewhat fluid construct, incorporating tropes and symbols from existing religious traditions, and retaining social features such as caste. Conversion, real or threatened, has over the centuries been used as a bargaining tool with the institution. Following Vatican II, there was increased interest by progressive theologians and clergy in using "Indian concepts and traditions of worship." While the rise of Hindu nationalism in the last two decades has had the effect of hardening identities, Church and secular intellectuals have continued to share values of development, reform, and uplift. Nor were Catholic trawler owners deterred from voting for the Hindu nationalist BJP to indicate displeasure with what they saw as diocesan policies favouring the small-scale fishers. Thus the alliances between the state, the institutional Church, and its members, continue to be tactical and frequently shifting.

As part of its faith, and as part of its effort to retain control over its members, the Church has resisted secularization in the sense of the withdrawal of religion from the public sphere and the reduction of religion to a private matter. But secularism as defined by the Indian constitution is in any case not about the withdrawal of religiosity from the public sphere, but about constitutional protection for all religions. State officials have interpreted this to mean a representative role for the institutional Church in all matters representing Indian Catholics (or, in Kanyakumari, all matters referring to the fishing villages). In this sense, it has been
welcomed by the Catholic Church, for it has served to reinforce the sense of a natural and uncontested unity between the institution and its members.

A stronger challenge to this understanding of secularism as mutual accommodation was posed by Vatican II. On the one hand, the move to decentralize Church decision-making to the national and regional levels, the emphasis on pluralism between Church and state, and the enculturation and diversity of practices of worship, allowed the Catholic Church to “integrate” more explicitly within Indian society. On the other hand, priests inspired by Vatican II’s emphasis on social justice, and the theological turn to liberation, sought to interpret their religion politically. In doing so they confronted more explicitly the hierarchies of the state and the arrangements of mutual accommodation that underlay its “subcontracting” of authority to the Church. But by reinterpreting the faith to make it speak to urgent social realities, they also sought to reaffirm its value and relevance for the vast numbers of the faithful.

The changing political orientation of the Church and its clergy over the years, as well as the fluid and often tactical nature of the identity of its members demonstrates the difficulties of taking for granting, as Chatterjee does, that Indian society is characterized by the presence of unchanging ascriptive communities. Here community based on religious identity has been demonstrated to be fluid, capable of containing a variety of interests, and hence of generating a variety of interest-based alliances. Further, the changed content, interests and alliances are negotiated in the public sphere of civil society, or in relation to the state and political parties, and not simply within the private lifeworld of family and social life.

This fluidity also points to the difficulties of working with Polanyi’s concept of society, for even within the sphere of faith-based identity, it is hard to identify a single or unified set of values. At different points in its history, the Church or its officials have embraced the market, or attempted to restrain it. As an institution of civil society, the Church represents

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24 Not all attempts at equal treatment have been welcomed, however. In 1994, Jayalalitha, ADMK Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu and former film star, issued a series of pictures of herself depicting various Hindu goddesses. In keeping with the requirement of Indian secularism to treat all religions equally, she then had herself portrayed as the Virgin Mary. This had Catholics across the state up in arms, and demonstrations were held in various cities. In Kanyakumari too, there was outrage, but no particular action taken, although a newly formed youth group in one of the villages, when discussing what activity to carry out to announce their founding, toyed with the idea of organizing a protest march.
the polyvalence of the sphere. On the one hand, it carries out several of the functions of the state, both those that are directly administrative and those that have the function of generating hegemony for its values of development, democracy as institutionalized participation, and secularism. At the same time, struggles within the Church challenge these hegemonic understandings. Against development as modernization, they pose development as social justice; against democracy as institutionalized participation, they encourage more radical and open-ended conceptions of democracy; and against secularism as equal respect for all religious institutions and practices, they seek to infuse and transform the public sphere through a critical and political reading of Christ’s message. As the subsequent chapters show, members can espouse either pole of these binaries for radically different political and economic ends, and still claim to be acting in the name of the community.
Chapter 5
Associating for Self-Governance

Having laid out the economic, political, and institutional context within which to examine popular agency in coastal Kanyakumari, I now turn, in this and the following two chapters, to examining the forms this agency has taken, drawing substantially on my primary research findings.

In this chapter, I train my lens on the variety of institutions and associations for village self-governance that have emerged below the level of the official Panchayat of the larger revenue village (see Chapter 3). The transformations in the universal Church introduced by Vatican II were reflected in efforts to democratize structures of village government. They sought also to effect social reform by, for instance, involving youth and women in parochial affairs. These efforts were parallel, and similar in thrust and inspiration, to the Indian state’s promotion of greater participation through Panchayat institutions. They also mirrored the initiatives of the growing number of NGOs and social movements of the 1980s. The present chapter begins with an account of village government prior to the 1980s. It then moves on to describe some of the new structures of self-governance introduced by the Church, and in some cases by villagers themselves, such as the Basic Christian Communities, the parish committees, pious associations, and youth groups.

What becomes visible from a close-up view of these new organizations is the spread and deepening, across the layers of village society, of a will to self-governance. The deepening of this will leads to multi-dimensional struggles. On the one hand, one can see the contested nature of authority between the village as sovereign, versus forms of authority constituted by the reformist Church and state (seen sometimes as distinct, and at other times as working in tandem). On the other hand, there is an ongoing struggle to challenge the nature and source of village or community authority itself, insofar as it had been vested in the men from the old families that had traditionally aligned themselves with the Church to govern the village. One can draw no easy conclusion about whether this proliferation of the will to self-governance is the basis of a “crisis of governability” (Kohli) or of an increased “governmentality” (Foucault); this chapter will highlight the importance of looking closely at emerging civil society spaces within which these
questions are thrown into relief. Similarly, with regard to the ability of communities to subordinate the demands of the market and the capitalist economy to community values, this chapter highlights the contestations around the content of these values, and around the community itself as a sovereign space from which to assert them.

1 An Enduring Form of Village Government

Villagers’ accounts suggest that until the 1970s, and even later in some villages, the village committees were constituted as in past centuries. In most villages the old leaders were men who were relatively well off, had family backing, and were considered knowledgeable. They were largely from families that had status, which tended to be non-fishing families, or “big” families, in the sense that they had a large number of male members. In Pallam Puthenthurai, for instance, the village committee consisted of some eight men from the big families, all of which did not traditionally go fishing (menakkadan), their members being merchants, moneylenders, or involved in other land-based professions. Each had their own koshti (faction or following) consisting of their extended family or vamsham. A man in his late sixties from Kovalam recalled that, when he was a boy, Kovalam used to be famous for its village administration. Only married men, usually elders from good families, could be part of it. Youth played a very subordinate role. In general, the village committee would

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1 The criteria for the selection of the village council or leadership seem to have remained constant over a vast span of time in this region, and across much of the subcontinent. Historians note that, during the Chola period (900-1300) in South India, for instance, the primary village assembly consisted of all the heads of families in the village. Meetings of this village assembly were called by the beating of a drum. (In Tamil country these men were called perumakkal (big /great men). This assembly guided the administration carried on by the headman and accountant through an informal council of village elders, who represented the opinion of the village public. The executive committees in the agraharam (Brahmin) villages in Tamil Country were usually constituted by drawing lots; in other places names were discussed informally by the leading residents, and those considered acceptable were formally proposed in the village assembly where they were usually accepted. The headman's post was hereditary, and the government had the right to nominate another son of the family, if he died, or his succession was not approved. Other officials like the accountant were also appointed, though in Tamil country he seems to have been appointed by the village assembly. (See also Altekar, 1977: 226, footnote 6.)

2 That similar qualifications have been considered important across the country is suggested by Oscar Lewis’s study of a village near Delhi, where Jat villagers identified the following qualifications for their leaders, in order of importance: wealth, family reputation, age and genealogical position, personality traits such as humility, hospitality, trustworthiness, and speaking ability, state of retirement or free time to pursue the interests of the group, education, connections and influence with outsiders, and numerical strength of the family and lineage (this gave them backing, and also allowed them to take time off from farm work without the family being dependent solely on them for an income). It was also important that the leader
have some ten to fourteen such pradhanis (leaders). Some villagers recalled that these men were chosen by lot from among those nominated at the village meeting; others recalled that three or four men would nominate each other at the village meeting, and together they would nominate the rest. One of them at a time would be the leader. If one died, he would be replaced by someone from his family. The priest worked with the pradhanis and supported them, and they, in turn, obeyed the priest and did not question his authority or integrity.

The rules of membership were thus clear: very few active fishermen, no youth, and no women were members. Women would not even attend the old village assemblies, nor would any of the men who were incapable of shouting or had no power or family backing. It was a gathering of the Uuchaalis (men whose power was based on their physical prowess and the manpower they could command). Whoever shouted the loudest and had the most backing carried the meeting. If a youth or an inconsequential member of the village was present and dared to speak, somebody would turn on him and say: "nī eppaṭi oru kāriyāṁāṭa āḷ māṭiri pēcurē?!" (How dare you speak as a "real person"?!) ³

The traditional headmen were known as arayans, pradhanis, or kariasthans among the Mukkuvars, and pattangati, talaivanmar, jati talaivan, and talavan among the Paravars. They had a great deal of power, based on mythological-supernatural as much as material considerations, and were often ascribed with the magic ability to cause a plentiful or poor catch of fish (Narchison et al., 1983: 138). Prior to the arrival of the Portuguese missionaries, these headmen acted as the liaison between the villagers and the ruler they were subject to, collecting revenue for them, for instance, and in turn being accorded a title and certain privileges. Their other functions included settlement of disputes, both internal and with other villages or castes, upholding the caste code, public welfare, and ritual functions, such as conducting the temple festival. Aside from the village council, there existed both for the Paravars and the Mukkuvars a caste council that cut across villages. They deliberated, legislated, judged, and maintained the caste code (Roche, 1984).

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³ Interviews with Fr Edwin, Mary Therese, and others in Kodimunai.
As seen in Chapter 4, it was these caste and village headmen who, out of the need to form tactical alliances, led their villages into the Catholic fold. The Portuguese missionaries introduced new administrative structures that, far from displacing the caste elites, incorporated them. The same families continued to govern, and leaders were picked in the same way, but were further empowered by their relationship with the Church, which also began to set new rules. Under the Portuguese missionaries the headmen’s tasks now included “ministry,” the upholding of the Catholic codes, and assisting the priest in the moral policing of villagers, as well as in extracting revenues from the fishery.

By the mid-twentieth century, the fact that the monies were raised through the labour of the fishermen, while the headmen managing it were themselves rarely fishers, combined with the practice of imposing ecclesiastical censures such as the denial of Sacraments on those who refused contributions, came to be increasingly resented (Villavarayan, 1956: 52). Financial reforms carried out by the Diocese in order to address this resentment removed many of the obligatory levies, with revenues to be raised largely through offerings of the faithful, the proceeds from church properties, and the earnings of the Church from functions such as marriages and burials. However, extraordinary expenditures, such as the annual church feast, the construction or repair of a church, or other public works in the village, were still financed by a levy on the fishery. While these reforms did bring some improvement, it remained the case that active fishermen continued to contribute to the bulk of village revenues, while non-fishers continued to manage them. The absence of a system of accountability, due to a failure to reform the village committee itself, allowed for accusations of corruption against the headmen, and even against the Parish Priest, to surface periodically, as villagers recount and police records testify.

2 An Opening for Reform

As described in Chapter 4, Vatican II called for new structures of pastoral administration, with greater lay involvement, as well as more involvement of women. The underlying vision was the building of a society which was close-knit like a family, and rooted in faith, belief, and love, in order for Christian life to flourish. This flowed from a new conception
of God’s Kingdom as one that must be created on earth, before it can be attained in heaven. Lay involvement through pious associations had always been solicited by the Church, through activities such as maintaining the church, visiting the sick and dying, and so on; the first pious association, the Confraternity of Charity, was started in the Paravar villages only twenty years after the conversions (Thekkedath, 1982: 167-173). But Vatican II aimed to widen this involvement and expand its ambit. New pious associations, which took acts of charity and village welfare as their purpose, began to be established in the 1970s, as well as groups like the “Young Christian Students,” which aimed at inculcating leadership skills in its young members and orienting them toward good works in the community.

In December 1973 the Diocese also published rules for a parish council to replace the village committee. This restructuring was based on an organic conception of the Church's body whereby the dioceses are the limbs of the body, which is the universal church, and the parishes are the cells in this body. The growth of these cells is the growth of the Diocese and of the Universal church. The parish councils were seen as necessary to unite parishioners to act together to achieve this growth. Further, since lay people were the majority of God's people, their participation in the work of the Church was essential; the parish council was one of the means for them to do this work.

Wilfred (in Narchison et al., 1983) writes that the parish councils instituted in the 1970s did not take root due to a variety of factors: some priests viewed them as an interference in their role, and some parish councils did indeed attempt to control the priests; the councils became "an arena of village politics" (179), with members lacking the necessary desire for the common good getting themselves elected through their influence, money, or family prestige; the presence of women in the Council was opposed on the grounds that women should confine themselves to domestic matters; and traditional village leaders felt their supremacy threatened and did their best to undermine the new councils.

By the mid-eighties, the coming together of a number of factors helped provide the momentum for a second and more sustained attempt at reform. In many villages the old leadership was dying out. In Kodimunai, for instance, by 1978-79 or so, many of pradhanis had died – only two of the twelve were alive then – and no one had emerged to
replace them. Internal factionalism and conflict was a consequence of the breakdown of the old structures of authority. The lack of good leadership was experienced most acutely during the communal riots of March 1982, when the villagers felt themselves directionless, and unable to defend themselves adequately against the RSS mobs.

It was around this time that a new cohort of diocesan priests, inspired by the ideals of Vatican II and liberation theology, emerged, many from the fishing villages themselves. With this came the beginning of sustained efforts to reform village governance. The first of these was an experiment with establishing basic Christian communities, modeled on the Brazilian CEB, that one priest began in his coastal parish. His struggle to establish these is the first of several stories told here, to illustrate the often conflictual manner in which an actually existing civil society emerges.

3 The Basic Christian Communities

The Basic Christian Communities (Communidades Eclesiales de Base, or CEBs) emerged in Brazil, and then in other parts of Latin America, out of the Vatican II-inspired movement to increase lay participation in the liturgy and ministry, as well as the new understanding that a critical reflection on faith could serve as a means to social critique and "conscientization" (see Lehman, 1990: 128-129).\(^4\) They were introduced to Kottar Diocese by a diocesan priest, Fr Edwin. I draw on interviews with him and some of the villagers from Kodimunai, where he first experimented with the BCCs, for the account below.

3.1 Theory and Analysis

Fr Edwin is a Mukkuvar, and had grown up in a fishing village. He had been involved with youth movements at the beginning of his active life. In his early years as a priest he initiated a number of diocesan activities such as youth movements, group dynamics and

\(^4\) Lehmann (1990: 128) clarifies that the term “basic” does not quite convey its Portuguese or Spanish sense, which is “grassroots.”

\(^5\) Lehmann (1990: 128-129) notes that the idea of a grassroots lay community gained interest initially because it was seen as both innovative and respectable, and thus allowed different factions, with different interests, to come together. However, by the mid-seventies, as some of these communities began to voice bitter critique of the institutional church, they became clearly identified with one faction, and strongly condemned by those closer to the institutional hierarchy.
leadership programmes, media awareness workshops, and, in the late 1960s and 1970s, groups like the Young Christian Students (YCS) and Young Christian Workers (YCW). In these early years he also had a Marxist orientation and did a lot of reading on Marxism.

When Fr Edwin read about the BCC programme in Latin America in *Impact*, a magazine published in Manila, he was drawn to the idea. Fr Edwin envisaged the communities fighting for justice and equality. Shortly after this, while studying communications in Manila, he came to the realization that communication was more effective when done in small groups. He had begun to reflect on group dynamics through his earlier involvements and had come to the gradual awareness that organized groups can do a lot. He began to write on the idea of groups for change. Unless these groups or communities had decision-making power, they could not go far. But if people had to make the decisions, they had to be given the structures, the fora, to come together and take responsibility. As a manager, he also knew that the more you delegate and make people participate, the more they grow. It becomes for them a process of maturation. So he envisaged putting in place a social process that would involve getting villagers to do things, while he served merely as the animator.

In 1977, on his return from Manila, Fr Edwin was appointed Parish Priest of Kodimunai, a Mukkuvar village on the lower west coast of the district. He was somewhat apprehensive, but began there by analyzing the structure of power and authority in the village. In the years before he came, the village was known as Kedimunai (rotten village). There were constant factional fights, police and court cases, and almost every year, a murder. If one faction in the village supported a plan, the other would oppose it.

Fr Edwin observed that the village was grouped around certain ring leaders - *Uuchaalis*, those with muscle power, and able to fight. Each group had one or two *Uuchaalis*. People would support them, perhaps because they provided security. Because the village was fractured in this way, it was dependent on an outsider to act as mediator. This outsider was usually the Parish Priest, who was asked to manage everything. However, though given all the power, he would not be allowed to use it as he wanted, but would be pressured and intimidated by the various groups. The coastal villages had no structure of authority to represent themselves to the outside world. Everything was referred to the
priests and Bishop. There was also no forum for the people to develop and articulate their own stand. But to be a people requires being able to take a stand, based on abiding policies and principles.

On further reflection he concluded that coastal society might best be understood as semi-tribal in nature. People tended to cluster together and there was much sharing and mutual involvement, because to a large extent there was common ownership. It was like one large clan. No one had a *patta* (title) to the land they lived on. They owned craft and gear but did not buy labour; rather, a share system operated where the owner got only one extra share. So there was a mutual investment in each other, a shared risk, a sharing of each other’s lot. Fluidity in earnings meant that there were no permanent hierarchies based on wealth and there was a high degree of egalitarianism. But this strong egalitarianism had never been channelled into constructive activities.

3.2 Putting it into Practice: The Early Years

Once in Kodimunai, the first challenge for Fr Edwin was to break the factions, and create structures that cut across existing clusters and divisions. This is where the model of the Latin American CEBs came in handy.

The formative years were 1977-79. Fr Edwin arranged many formation programs, on spiritual and socio-economic themes, as well as on topics such as leadership, organization, how to run societies, group dynamics, the problems of fishermen, and relationships. In the two years they had some two hundred days of formation programs for various groups. What emerged was a lot of leadership potential.

Once, after a big prayer convention, people were in the mood to sing. So he suggested they meet outside their houses to pray and sing. Forty such groups met and this went on for a few months, until the weather got cooler and people preferred to be indoors. After a few months he had the idea of formalizing them into *samuhams* (communities) of thirty houses each.

The next step was to form a representative structure at the village level. Five people were elected from each community, and they formed the general body of representatives of the village. One of these from each community was elected to the executive committee.
first time, the village leadership was in the hands of the laity, and instead of the Parish Priest, a layperson was the President. This was then registered as a society - the *Mūḷ Vaḷarcci Sangam* (Total /Integral Development Society) or MVS. The Parish Priest was not even a member. But because the people wanted him to maintain some control of finances, he was made the third signatory on cheques. The accounts and smaller money were with the committee members, and spending decisions were made according to a fixed policy on authorization. The MVS also set up various committees such as an education committee, and one that provided small loans for all manner of needs, from house-building to short-term subsistence crises.

Once this was established, Fr Edwin refused to take responsibility for going to the police station or meeting the authorities regarding electricity, or water supply, or other such complaints. When he first went to Kodimunai some three hundred people were involved in various cases. He brought this down to zero. Conflicts were settled instead in a village court he instituted – a *neeti maṉṟam* – formed with representatives from all the *samuhams*. Henceforth you had to make complaints in writing and pay a court fee.

It was possible to change things but it needed full-time reinforcement, reassurance, and fighting the anti-propaganda. People had a lot of trust in him. He was always there, eating in their houses, countering the malicious talk. But reaction was constant. For instance, one day when Fr Edwin was saying mass, someone started sharpening his knife against the wall of the church. The women shouted and formed a circle around Fr Edwin to protect him. He was prepared to leave the parish at any time. He would tell the people clearly that he didn't care if he was a success or failure there; it was not an ego issue for him. Even if someone abused him, he would go and eat *kazhangu* (tapioca, the starch staple of most fishing families at that time) at their house the next day, to make the point that collective issues, not personal differences, were what separated them.

Counselling and listening to people was a very important part of his work as Parish Priest, because when people work together they invariably get hurt. So he spent a lot of time on inner healing so as to make forgiveness and team-work possible. In 1970-71, in Nagercoil, he had organized one of the first courses in group dynamics in the country, including
counselling. He had also attended other counselling courses, and read a lot on the subject. He knew that you could not build a community without counselling – it would break. As well, without some reference to the transcendent and the absolute – the God dimension – it was difficult to keep communities going. A community also needs rituals and celebrations.

3.3 Challenges and Opposition

In Kodimunai it was not wealth that dominated, as much as the good fighters. When the samuhams were being implemented the powerful in the village threatened that even in thirty years they would not come into being. But Fr Edwin managed to establish them in three years, accommodating the powerful cliques by making sure that some of their members were among those elected from each samuham. But of course there were still some who were unhappy because this curtailed their arbitrary exercise of power. The strong men of the village would physically drag Fr Edwin out of the village. But once they let go of his hands, he would return. Fr Edwin appointed one of them President of the MVS committee (in effect, of the village) to keep the peace. But this wasn't enough, this man wanted to dictate terms, to dominate. So Fr Edwin said to him: "I don't mind leaving the village. But the Bishop sent me here. So if you can get 51 percent of the village to sign that they want me to go, I will." But, of course, they couldn't.

This resistance reared its head during the communal tension of 1982. The fledgling communities could not handle the immense fear, swirling rumours, and the real possibility of a life and death situation. Village defence arrangements had to be organized to handle the emergency. But the old factions took a hand, including collecting funds. Only one ur kootam (village assembly, where the strong men dominated and women were not allowed) had been held since Fr Edwin had begun his experiment; during this time the assemblies were held again. These were temporary measures, but still a setback for the communities.

But the greatest opposition was to the participation of women in these new structures. Until then in no coastal village did women participate in village decision-making bodies. For Fr Edwin, the participation of women was an integral element of the new structures, and he made great effort to ensure their participation. He began by taking the Belgian priest Fr Gillet (see Chapter 2) to the communities for Bible classes. Fr Gillet would draw on the
New Testament to highlight how, two thousand years ago, Jesus dealt with women as equals. The people were asked to reflect on how Jesus would deal with issues were he present today. The priests would suggest that since the men migrate seasonally they may not be the best decision-makers for the village. Gradually most of the *samuhams* agreed to let women participate. Some women representatives were elected, and eventually every *samuham* sent some women. The women came regularly to *samuham* meetings and in large numbers. They even began to dominate the proceedings.

When the men were away for work, the meetings were dominated by women, but when the men returned, the women withdrew and sent the men instead. Women saw village needs and interests very differently from the men. One feast time the men were present and mooted the idea of inviting a music troupe from Madras, which would have raised the cost of the feast by several thousand rupees. Others, especially the women, objected. The men were very determined and aggressive. Then Fr Edwin suggested that it be put to referendum in each of the *samuhams*. The majority – all but two – voted against the idea.

But if women were to learn to participate effectively, and gain leadership skills, they would also have to be given training. Women’s travel outside the village, or their presence in the priest’s home, for seminars or classes, all became occasions for challenge and attack, with aspersion being cast on the women concerned, and on the priests involved. As long as Fr Edwin was Parish Priest he explained the need for women's participation, and refuted adverse propaganda. But it wasn’t only within the village that they faced such opposition: the power cliques in neighbouring parishes such as Colachel also began to feel threatened, and put out a lot of misinformation regarding women’s participation. When the men of Kodimunai would return home after a season away, the men of neighbouring villages would tease them, saying that theirs was "a village run by women."

### 3.4 Institutionalization

The experiment in Kodimunai sowed a number of seeds for the future, even if it did not itself endure much past the end of Fr Edwin’s tenure as Parish Priest. Several of the young men and women who became active in the BCC process in Kodimunai went on work in
non-governmental organizations and action groups in the district and elsewhere, with some going further to work in national and even international media. A young woman who had been a child at the time of the samuhams talked about how every family would get a circular with the accounts, plans, and minutes of previous discussions. So even a small child became aware of what was going on, unlike in the time of the old village committees. Children were encouraged to speak, as were quiet people. No one tried to capture the leadership, nor was money necessary to having your petition heard.

Attempts to institutionalize the BCCs, within Kodimunai and across the Diocese, saw a mixed response in the early years, both from sections of the villagers themselves, as described above, and from members of the diocesan hierarchy. Within Kodimunai itself, Parish Priests following Edwin varied in their support for training and formation, and their willingness to take on challenges from obstreperous villagers; by the mid-1990s, Kodimunai was hostage to factional conflict and breakdown again, and the samuhams had been rendered largely impotent. In the neighbouring, and dominant village of Colachel, Fr Servatius, a priest sympathetic to the project, attempted to replicate it. The wealthier men, including the trawler owners, resisted, but the majority agreed. But the men would be away for long periods to work elsewhere, and so it was impossible to keep the samuhams going, and to elect a parish council from them. Finally, a fight in the village saw the end of the BCCs, and a parish committee was formed from representatives of the different streets, rather than from the basic communities of thirty households.

Bishop Arockiaswamy, who was Bishop when the experiment began, gave Fr Edwin a free hand. He was allowed to experiment with conducting mass in the community instead of in the church, which was considered very radical. The Bishop supported the application for funding for various MVS projects and even worked on the proposal himself. He was also supportive of trying to popularize the BCC structure in other villages, but argued that this would best be done not by involving the Bishop's house directly, but by letting it spread as a people's movement. When Fr Edwin left the Diocese to take up a post in Delhi, the Bishop did not support expansion of the BCC movement to other villages because there seemed to be no one else able to do the work and spread the idea.
Bishop Arockiaswamy’s successor, Bishop Leon Dharmaraj, became persuaded of the value of the BCCs after returning from a conference on management in Singapore. A new diocesan constitution for parish councils, adopted in 1984, made the BCCs the basic unit from which representatives were to be elected to the parish council. But instead of following the Kodimunai pattern of having a lay person as the President, the constitution made the Parish Priest President. Thus the BCCs were officially adopted by the diocese, but their most radical element - institutional autonomy from the Church – was tempered.

The vision of the BCCs has now become “mainstreamed” into the very self-definition of the Kottar diocese, as reflected in its website:

> Participation, for us, is a Kingdom dimension. In the Kingdom where God's will is to reign here on earth as in heaven everybody shares in governing, everybody is taken into confidence, everybody searches together and everybody involves. For us, to be a non-participant is to be a non-person, someone not taken seriously, not counted.

> We envision a church where everybody is given scope for participation and we keep creating structures and attitudes that would facilitate it. Our Basic Christian communities, especially, are geared to this.

> The entire diocese is organized into Basic Christian Communities of about 30 families each, leading to a total of 2,847 Basic Christian Communities.

> Representatives from the Basic Communities, along with others from institutions and associations, form the Parish Pastoral Councils. 95 percent of the parishes have Parish Pastoral Councils, whose representatives form Vicariate Pastoral Councils and the diocesan pastoral council.

Institutionalization as a Commission of the Diocese, with a senior clergyman as head, and resources for training, newsletters, and so on, does not guarantee the diocese-wide adoption of the communities, or their effectiveness if they are implemented. In principle, the BCCs (called anbiam or samuhams), which consist of groups of thirty households in physical proximity to each other, meet once a week, to pray, reflect on both religious and secular matters, and carry out other business such as settling disputes between families, or

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6 [http://www.kottardiocese.org/participation.asp](http://www.kottardiocese.org/participation.asp), accessed 12 April 2010. Meanwhile, Fr Edwin has turned his energies beyond the Catholic villages, to create children’s parliaments and basic communities or neighbourhood parliaments – non-denominational units modelled on the BCCs, but aimed at inter-ecumenical dialogue and participation.
identifying infrastructure needs. However, their actual scope varies from village to village, depending in part on the interest of the individual Parish Priest and the powers he is willing to cede to them: in some villages they discuss village finances, which give them a great deal of power, in others they function almost solely as prayer groups. Anbiams have not functioned when people have not wanted them or when there has been local opposition to them. In other words, the Diocese has been unsuccessful in making them mandatory. In many villages, the better-off fishermen believe that finances are best discussed in their fishermen’s cooperatives, or in the parish council or village committee, rather than in open spaces like the anbiams. In the absence of any control over finances, the anbiams come to be seen as irrelevant to village governance, especially by the better-off villagers, and the men; the anbiams are then largely attended by women and children. Below I describe two anbiam meetings.

3.5 Two BCC Meetings

3.5.1 Kovalam

In Kovalam, Mary Therese, my research assistant, and I went to the meeting of anbiam 13, considered one of the best anbiams. It met outdoors in the space between houses in one part of the village. The people sat on the ground in a crowded circle.

The President was a fisherman, the Treasurer a younger fisherman, the Secretary a woman. About thirty-five to forty people were present, some fifteen of them women, twelve men, and the rest children of both sexes. This large number of men was unusual, and may have had to do with our presence, announced beforehand. A number of the females present were "youth" – between 16 and 22 years of age. There were no males from that age group present. Kovalam was one of the villages where the anbiams discussed a range of village issues, but not village finances.

The meeting began with a prayer and a hymn. It lasted an hour and a half, and ended with a hymn. The main items on the agenda were the reading of the information and discussion sheet sent to all anbiams by the diocesan coordinating committee, and the filling out of questionnaires sent by the diocese.
The discussion sheet started with an account of how women in Nellore district of Andhra Pradesh, after they had been part of the literacy movement, began to question and want to change other aspects of their lives. They launched a massive anti-alcohol movement, and got rid of all the illicit liquor shops in the district, so that the whole district was declared alcohol-free. Then they started saving all the money that the men had so far been spending on drinking, and very soon, through these small savings, they had amassed a huge fund of many crores (ten million), which they put to various uses. The discussion paper then asked what people thought of the story. Was a small savings scheme possible in their anbiam? Was it a good idea? In those anbiam that already had such a scheme, how were they working? People at the meeting felt that such a scheme would be a good idea. But they did not know how it was working in anbiam that already had them. The tone of the discussion was desultory. By the end, it did not seem that there was any decision to actually start such a scheme.

News on anbiam activities in other villages made up the rest of the newsletter. The list was long and most people seemed uninterested. The meeting then turned to filling out the two questionnaires regarding the availability of and need for family welfare services (e.g. marriage counselling), and health and hygiene facilities in the village.

Everyone, including the children, participated in filling out the questionnaires, long as they were. The children were quite outspoken, and, in response to questions such as whether parents discussed things with their children, were even quite critical of their parents. Women, especially the younger women, were also very involved. They often knew more about things in the village, for example whether there were toilets in the school, or whether there had been any health awareness sessions held in the village, than the men did, and were not afraid to declare the men's statements wrong.

3.5.2 Enayam Puthenthurai

In Enayam Puthenthurai, in early January 1995, I attended the meeting of the 22nd anbiam. Scheduled for 7.30 a.m. on a Monday morning, it started at 8:00, and was conducted by the Mother Superior and one of the sisters of the Grey Nuns who run the school in the village. They (and I) sat on chairs or stools, the rest on the sand. The anbiam was located in a small
cluster of huts built on poramboke (common) land, right next to the school. It was started in December, 1993, at the same time as all the others anbiams in this village.

Twenty women, and various children, were present. The meeting started with a prayer. Next, the Secretary read minutes of the last meeting, held over a month earlier. Then the accounts were to be read, but the Treasurer hadn't completed them, so she asked to read a passage from the Bible instead. (This would have been read in any case.) So a passage about a rich man and his sins, and Lazar and his sores (from Luke), was read, and everyone was asked to discuss it. There was some disconnected commentary on it from a couple of the women and the Mother Superior. A few people made the pious point that the text should be interpreted not merely to criticize the evil rich, as everyone had been doing so far, but to improve ourselves. The Mother Superior observed that one should not wait to be asked, but should help the poor and those in need. Often those in need are not the poorest, and are too proud to ask, so one should sense their need and give.

Women kept coming and going, carrying children; there were a lot of children. We were joined by one of the leaders of the group, Arul Mary “Teacher.” In response to my questions, I was told that, aside from prayer and discussion of a Biblical passage, the meetings would discuss how to conduct the church service, since each anbiam was responsible for a week's service. They were supposed to discuss common problems, but found that this led to unmanageable conflict, and so tended to avoid doing so.

Teacher asked why no men were present. The women said it was because they hadn’t called them; they were away in Kerala, or at sea here, and in any case could not attend if a meeting was held at 8:00 a.m. on a Monday. If it had been a Sunday they would have come. But most agreed that they did not call the men because there would be huge fights if they came and there were any disagreements. “But,” responded Teacher, “how can the anbiams take important decisions or send representations without men present?” One or two men were sitting inside the huts. Teacher and others called until they were forced to come out. Finally there were about four men present. When asked why more men did not come, they said they believed this was a women's meeting.
Just as the Sister and some other women were making sounds about ending the meeting, the President asked: “But shouldn't we discuss our problem?” The problem was that some thirty families had put up houses on vacant land. Most of the families were from the village, but found their parental home too crowded, or had had conflicts there. Many people had put up huts on this vacant land and then sold them to others who were now living in them. The ground where we were holding the meeting was supposed to accommodate three more huts, but there was not enough space. Besides, they needed to arrange the plots so that there was enough room for a vehicle to pass, so that sick or dead people could be transported. But this would mean some people having to rebuild, with even less space. So a huge debate ensued. Some were willing to go along with this, but one woman, whose house was right where any road should pass, was worried and unsure. Two of the men made arguments with which most of the women seemed pleased, so everyone agreed that the men should decide. This raised the issue of timing, since the men were leaving soon for Kerala. Teacher suggested that everyone should come to a decision, write it down, and all concerned should sign it, after which it should be submitted to the *anbiam* coordinating meeting to be held the following week. The women wanted the animators - Teacher, Mother, Sister, and the Parish Priest - to help them settle the matter. Teacher declared that they should first resolve what they wanted, state it on paper, and then get the Parish Priest, or someone else, to see that it was implemented. This seemed to be to most people's taste.

Another similar, but smaller, space-related problem was raised, and dealt with more easily. The meeting ended with a religious song. The PP was supposed to come by at 8.30 to look into the matter of the houses, but it was already 9:00 a.m., and he had not arrived. The meeting was concluded.

A little more than two months after this, the BCCs in this village stopped functioning. Two women I interviewed reported that the BCCs failed because some men objected to the fact that women, who knew too little, dominated the *anbiams*. But there was a further event that precipitated it: a girl had sung an anti-dowry song at one of the meetings, and some of the men present had scolded her for the radicalism and impracticality of its message. The Parish Priest had intervened in her defence, and her critics had taken umbrage at the manner of his
intervention. Subsequently, the men had organized to disband the *ambiams* throughout the village.

4 The Parish Councils

The conjunctures of the early 1980s – the decline of the traditional village leadership, its inability to inspire confidence during the communal crisis of 1982, and the rise of a new cohort of reformist-minded priests – led to renewed diocesan interest in the idea of a parish council. Inspired by the ideals of Vatican II, this would be the governing body for the village. As noted in Section 2, a set of rules establishing a parish council was first issued in 1973, but failed to take root. A new set of rules for such councils was accordingly issued in 1984, based on recommendations from Parish Priests and lay people, and parish councils were set up in over fifty parishes across the Diocese. These were further modified in 1990, and all parishes were required to set up or reconstitute their councils accordingly. The latest regulations, contained in what I shall refer to as the Constitution (of the Parish Pastoral Councils), made parish councils mandatory in each parish, as well as financial committees. The new rules laid down that no diocesan monies (for instance, donations from abroad for the construction of houses) would flow to parishes that did not have parish pastoral councils. Of course, the bulk of village monies continued to be raised from within the village itself, and the Diocese had no means to insist that these flow only through a parish council.

The main aims of the parish council as laid out in its Constitution are: to build a society which is close-knit like a family, and rooted in faith, belief and love; to ensure that Christian life flourishes; to implement the decisions of the Diocese; to coordinate all the actions of the parish, meet its immediate needs, and help find solutions to problems; to respect the independence of pious associations, but also to cooperate with them for their growth; and to organize festivals and other programmes in a planned and systematic way so as benefit the parish.

The Constitution lays down rules in such areas as membership, voting procedures, elections to the committee, executive elections, terms, and functions; the functions and terms of the
various committees such as the liturgy, family welfare, peace, and education committees, and in particular, the finance committee; ordinary and emergency meetings, minutes and records; and interpretation of, and amendments to, the constitution.

The reformist thrust of the parish councils is evident in the rules regarding membership. Membership in the council is to be representative of all categories of women and men in the parish. Both men and women may be members, as may all Catholics of any caste in the boundary of the parish. Members must be of Christian spirit, disciplined, honest, free of addiction to alcohol or drugs, active in social service, and regular in church and liturgical activities. Voters include all those eighteen or over who have lived longer than six months in the parish and plan to live there permanently. If necessary, minorities may have their own constituency, with the consent of the diocese. There are four categories of members of the parish council: ex-officio members such as the Parish Priest, and, if such offices exist, the assistant Parish Priest and catechist; elected members, elected from the various streets, wards or Basic Christian Communities of the parish; representatives of other associations such as the various pious associations, and the Youth movement, as well as other associations that have a diocese-wide presence and have been named by the Bishop, such as the men's cooperative *sangams*; and members nominated or appointed by the Parish Priest to make quorum and to ensure the adequate representation of women and minorities. The Parish Priest is ex-officio President of the Council. Other executive members are to be elected at the council meeting.

### 4.1 Functioning Parish Councils

Of the seven villages I studied, parish councils had been successfully established in three; in the remaining four they had been prevented from being set up, or opposition to the BCCs meant that they could not be set up as required through representation from the basic communities; or the Councils were set up, but struggled against opposition, and then collapsed.

It is possible to draw a composite picture of the parish council from the three functioning parish councils I observed. All three were of very recent provenance in 1995, were the first village government in each village to function according to rules and by-laws, and were the
first to be elected. The size of the council varied from village to village: In Mel Manakudy, there were 23 elected members, 1 from each ward and 3 nominees of the Parish Priest (one a woman representing the pious associations, one a male member of a Youth Group whom Fr J said he selected because he had a physical disability; and the third a man who worked in the Panchayat Office, and so had potentially useful government connections.) The Kovalam committee had 30 members besides the Parish Priest – 26 men and 4 women; each basic Christian community (anbiam) sent one representative, all of whom were male. Although women are active in the anbiams, no women were sent as representatives from them to the parish council. The women on the Council were representatives only of pious associations. The Parish Priest had nominated 3 people.

The meetings I attended shared a broadly similar format. Their rules required that they were conducted formally, according to rules of order. The meetings were held in the Parish Priest's office, the church, village meeting hall, or school. Often there would be present a "messenger," frequently the melingi (bellringer), who would wait outside, and be sent to summon a villager, or bring in a beverage for a visitor, or keep out curious onlookers. As President, the Parish Priest chaired the meeting. The council members sat on benches or chairs in a circle. The meetings began with a prayer. Minutes of the previous meeting, accounts, sub-committee reports, evaluation of progress on decisions taken at the last meeting, and the agenda for the day were the first items. The tone of the discussions was usually moderate, but people were clearly very involved. Disagreements were freely expressed and vigorously argued, but the Parish Priests as Chairs seemed skilled at ensuring a degree of decorum. Consensus was striven for, rather than a vote taken, to make decisions. Older women seemed comfortable in participating and speaking their minds, but the younger ones tended to be quieter. Young men did not seem similarly inhibited. The meetings lasted from two to three hours and end with a religious song or prayer. Further emergency meetings were called when necessary.

Matters dealt with by the Council arose from a variety of sources: its own past decisions and past actions taken, ongoing projects, and petitions given to the various committees by members of the village. A sample list of such matters, drawn from the three councils, includes:
1. Expenditures: In one instance, on court cases some boys of the village faced; in a second, on paying compensation to another village for nets and boats seized for operating in their waters; in a third village, the discussion was around the curia – 7 percent of all takings from the church feast to be submitted to the church to be used to repair the Parish Priest's house, or equip a new priest becoming Parish Priest for the first time, or for the cancer relief fund of the Diocese, through which anyone suffering from cancer was given Rs 1000.

2. Revenue: As from the church feast, the village-owned coconut grove, and the sale of land owned in another village.

3. Development and welfare projects: These included such things as the land to be bought for a hospital in MM, and the bridge to be built over the Manakudy backwater, (a special committee of the Council had been put in charge of the latter construction). In this regard, the Parish Priest reminded those wards that had yet to send memos to the Collector asking for work on the bridge to proceed, to do so within the week.

4. Fishing conflicts: Conflicts often arose over space between fishers from two adjoining villages. All Councils had a fishermen's welfare committee to deal with such disagreements. In many cases, fishing-related matters were dealt with by the fishermen's organizations such as the Vallam Union (see Chapter 7); the presumed inability of the parish council, including as it did women and non-fishers, to deal with major fishing issues, was the reason often cited for replacing it with an old-style village committee (as in the Kanyakumari case described later in this chapter).

5. Intra-village conflicts, usually factional: In Mel Manakudy, which had been torn apart by a factional fight, the Parish Priest announced that he, and the Parish Priests of two other similarly afflicted villages, had decided not to get involved in village problems which were essentially law and order problems like this one, but to take it to the police or relevant authorities. They had also decided not to sign any expense vouchers for money spent on these problems.

6. Relations with other organizations, in the village and outside: A range of matters was raised under this rubric. In Pallam Puthenthurai there was a discussion about whether the
The village should pay a travel allowance (TA) to those going to the Vallam Union meeting. Most of those present agreed that those going should not be paid TA. There was also a question as to whether non-fishers could represent the village at this meeting, since fishermen worked during the day. It was decided that retired fishermen, along with non-fishers, could go. A request from another fishworkers’ association in the district for a donation was similarly considered, with some grumbling, and it was finally decided to pass the request on to the village unit of the association on the grounds that it was a fishers’ issue, and not one for the village at large.

This question of the relation between fisher interests and those of the village at large, and between the fishermen’s associations and the parish council, also came up in Kovalam, where a number of fishermen had borrowed money over the years from the merchants. When they found that the sangams were giving a better price, they became sangam members and stopped selling to the merchants. The merchants complained to the sangams that the men still owed them money, while the men insisted that they had been repaying their loans over the years, and had by now paid back more than they had taken. The sangams had looked into the matter but had been unable to settle it, so it was sent to the parish council. The Council decided to call sangam representatives, and the concerned fishermen and merchants, to a special meeting the following Thursday to settle the matter. There was some discussion about this issue, some suggesting that it was a conflict over money between individuals and therefore outside the Council's purview, others wanting to define it as an issue related to work and so within the Council's purview, with the latter winning out.

7. Improving services: There was a kerosene problem at the ration shop in Pallam Puthenthurai. Everyone was being given a little less than their due, on the grounds that there was not enough to go around. Possible solutions were discussed, such as: not giving more than one share to families that had acquired more than one ration card (as collateral for loans given to other families); moving the shop to a central place in the village where it would be

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7 These refer to the Public Distribution System shops where food grains, oil, sugar, and certain other essential commodities are sold at a subsidized price. Each family's ration card allows them to purchase a fixed amount from this shop.
possible for people to keep an eye on what was going on; asking the government for a larger kerosene quota for the village, as more people were using kerosene stoves.

8. The village school: In Pallam Puthenthurai there was a discussion regarding employment in the village school. The Council ruled that those with children studying in schools outside the village were not eligible for jobs in the school. The Mother Superior of the Convent which runs the school, who was on the Council, said that while this could not be made a rule of the Convent, they could agree to it on grounds of the village's welfare. But then she raised the question of how this would affect those who were already employed in the school, or what could be done if someone, after getting a job in the school, sent their kids elsewhere. There was no conclusion.

There was also a discussion about the village boys who went to the High School in the village to the west. They had become very irreverent, had stopped going to catechism, and would sit around chatting during mass. This was seen as a peculiarity of Pallam Puthenthurai. In other villages, it was felt, high school boys continued to attend catechism in large numbers. It was decided that an effort should be made to bring them back to the straight and narrow, but methods of doing so were not discussed.

9. Alcohol sales: Just over a month ago, Kovalam had succeeded in moving all the illicit liquor shops to the outskirts of the village. Then one man was caught selling in the village, in a shed he claimed he had put up for his nets. The man had been summoned by the Council three times already (including during this meeting), but had not appeared. The younger men in the room (and village) were getting impatient, and said that if the Council could not deal with it, they would (by beating him up). The Council did not approve of this method as it would lead to fighting and factionalism in the village, so they had a long discussion on how to get him to come. Finally, one of the women came out forcefully with a plan that seemed to find favour with everyone: they would send the messenger to the man's house with a note summoning him to a special meeting of the Council at 5:00 p.m. that evening. The note would also warn him that if he did not come they would proceed to inform the entire village through the anbiams, where they would then decide how to deal with him.
10. The moral economy of the village: In Pallam Puthenthurai, one of the village barbers had come to the meeting and was waiting outside. S, one of the men at the meeting, had agreed to take up his case. This was the lean season, and many men had gone elsewhere to fish. When they fished from the village, the barber got a daily share of the catch, but now he was getting hardly anything and was in need. Last year, during the lean season, the village revenues had been divided up and each family got Rs 500, including the barbers' families. The other families repaid this later, but the barbers were told not to. This year he had requested a similar grant.

The discussion centred around how much he should be given, as well as the fact that if he was given something, the other barber and the melingi (bellringer, also paid by the fishers to ring the church bell, act as town crier, and run errands for the Council) would demand the same. Everyone agreed that this man deserved it more than the other barber because he went diligently from house to house, cutting boys' hair even in the absence of the men, whereas the other man would go off and do other work and return only when there was a good fishing season in the village. The Treasurer, a fairly well-off looking man and not a fisher, grumbled and said there was no money in the Council, and they were already in debt. But S, who was a fisherman, one other fisherman, and one or two of the women, were very vocal, and strongly in favour of helping the barber. One of the women said: "They are dependent on our village, and yet we tell them to remain hungry while we eat." S said how the barber made much less in this village than in others. In other villages, a lean season dole was always given, and those returning from abroad, and fishermen too, gave more generously than here. Finally, the Treasurer handed out Rs 200, and it was decided that the other two men should be given Rs 100 each, although the Treasurer grumbled that the bellringer would only drink it away.

11. Family cards: The Kovalam council had decided earlier to carry out a census of the village, and to issue each family with a card with details of the family, a prayer or two, and some details on the village itself. The idea of a family card like this seems to have been popularized by Fr J. Justus, Parish Priest of Mel Manakudy. In this meeting it was

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8 There are two to three barber families in every village, belonging to the barber caste, who have traditionally attended to the village, and are paid daily by each fisher in the form of a few fish.
agreed that Rs 10 would be a reasonable amount to pay for the card. As to who was to be considered a member of the village, it was agreed that any woman married into it would be, but a man from another village married or settled in Kovalam would have to have been there for five consecutive years to be considered a member.

4.2 Failed Parish Councils

In the remaining four villages I studied, the parish councils had not established themselves, and were facing opposition. An examination of the reasons for their failure, and the forms of governance that existed in their place, helps illuminate the complexities of “good governance” even at this most microscopic of levels. In Enayam Puthenturai, at first there had been a great deal of opposition to the idea of a parish council. Then somehow the Parish Priest had managed to persuade people to have one, and in December 1994, elections to it from each *anbiam* (basic community) were held. Diocesan representatives were present to oversee the election. But it was dissolved due to conflict soon after, and there was no parish council in the village when I moved there in early January of 1995. This situation continued with the dissolution of the BCCs in late February of that year. But by June or so, a new *pangu pairavi* (parish council) had been formed through nominations by various people and the Parish Priest (not through elections from the basic communities, as mandated by the constitution). There were some thirty-three members, including women. This was formed because a village without a parish council got no diocesan benefits, and it was unclear how long it would endure.

Another example of failure of either the BCCs or the parish councils to take hold was Kodimunai, described above. Here, factions based on the old dominant families had restored their dominance. Factional fights within the village, as well as the inability to negotiate civilly with neighbouring villages over fishing conflicts, had led in 1994-95 to constant violence and destruction. People had fled the village in fear, most temporarily, but those who could afford to, more permanently.

The case of Chinna Muttam illustrates the overlapping lines of authority and identity, including party affiliation (see Chapter 3), which are the basis of village factionalism and of opposition to a cross-factional form of electing village leaders. Here, in 1994, the BCCs had
been newly set up, and representatives to the first parish council were elected from each. Prior to this, there had been a village committee, nominated by a few strongmen, that had acquired a reputation for mismanagement of funds, lack of accountability, neglect of duties, and nepotism.

The parish council consisted of twenty people, one from each of the thirteen anbiam, one from each of the three pious associations (including Catechism teachers), one school teacher, and three nominees of the priest. In the interests of peace, it was decided to continue to honour the previous village committee: the ex-treasurer was made joint account holder with the new treasurer, and members of the old committees were included in all the new committees. However, at the first meeting of the parish council, when it was time to elect its officials, the Secretary of the old committee raised a problem. He wanted to have signing authority on cheques, and objected vociferously when he was told there were no grounds for this.

Soon after this election, where Joseph was elected Vice-President (the Parish Priest is ex-officio President), the troubles began. Joseph and Lawrence, the leader of the previous committee, were sworn enemies. Joseph claimed their hostility had arisen when he had questioned the activities of Lawrence’s group on the committee, but he gave other reasons as well: Lawrence and his group were Paravars, the numerically dominant caste in the village, but because Joseph (also a Paravar) had married a Mukkuvar woman, the Paravars put him in the Mukkuvar camp, and so this was a struggle for Paravar dominance; also, Lawrence and his group were ADMK members, while Joseph and his group were DMK members. While Joseph was literate and legalistic in his approach, the opposing camp believed in the right of might to settle disputes. The old committee sent around the town crier announcing that BCCs and the Parish Council should no longer meet, and threatening violence if they did. They actually surrounded Joseph’s house and tried to break the door down. Joseph went into hiding, making periodic trips to the police station. The Parish Priest refused to come to the village, saying that if the structures he had helped establish were not respected, it meant that he was not respected, and he would have nothing more to do with the village. So villagers now had to walk to the neighbouring village of Kanyakumari for mass. The problem had not been sorted out until I left, almost ten months later.
In Kanyakumari village the establishment of a parish council was resisted, not because of factional differences, or the belligerence of previously dominant families, but because they did not want women leaders. It was argued that women could not take the lead on highly contentious issues such as in the fishery; there was a sense that physical prowess and backing continued to be important in settling these. It was also feared that a parish council would mean that every decision would be subject to review by the church.

Thus, in Kanyakumari there existed a village committee consisting of three or four men nominated from each street, whose names were then read out in church. There were some thirty-three men on the committee. Yet, despite the fact that this committee was unelected and did not follow parish council rules, it was not the unreformed village committee of old days. Almost all the members were fishermen, rather than from the non-fishing families. Better accountability, especially in finances, was ensured through the keeping of formal records. The Parish Priest was made President and Treasurer, and although he did not attend all meetings, he checked the accounts every month and read them out in church.

The kinds of issues taken up by the committee, and the manner of their settlement, were also similar to those of the parish council. A meeting I attended in 1995 began at 7.30 p.m. in a poorly lit room that looked like a large storage godown with sacks at one end. A core group of some twelve members of the committee had been meeting nightly ever since the conflict between the kattumarams and the trawlers had intensified. Since they met every evening, it was very informal, without any song or prayer. I was told the meeting would continue until midnight or 1:00 a.m., since they were fishing at night in that period, and so would go straight to sea from the meeting. No minutes were kept.

Agenda items were focused on organizing around the conflict: the head of the district fishermen’s cooperative sangams was asked if they would contribute to the legal and travel costs; there was discussion about which committee members would go to Madras, the state capital, to lobby with the administration there, and how they would be compensated, and there was an inconclusive discussion about what the steps would be were the trawlers to break the agreement and go out again. But other regular village issues were also discussed, such as the raising of a terippu (10 percent of a day’s catch) the following week to pay for
church expenses. There was also conflict resolution, as in the following case: A man who had beaten up the son of the melingi (bellringer) was brought in and asked to explain himself. Two men at the meeting who had been witness to the whole altercation were asked why they had stood by watching and done nothing to stop it. Was it because the melingi’s son was poor and powerless in the village? Is that why the accused also felt free to beat him up? Would he have done the same to someone who had a "family" (three of four active fishermen) to support him? The lead speaker on this issue stated firmly that the melingi was a member of the village and had to be treated like one of them. The accused apologized to the committee and was asked to leave.

Despite not being organized according to parish council rules, the village committee had complete authority in the village and in its interactions with other villages, as demonstrated during the conflict with the trawlers (described in more detail in Chapter 7). The writ of the village was enshrined on a stone tablet outside the church, and the Parish Priests of Kanyakumari and the five neighbouring villages were all drawn in to act on behalf of the committees and councils of their villages on this issue.

Nor did the fact that there were no women on the village committee prevent their active participation in the struggle against the trawlers when it did break out. Women were the principal protagonists in a three-day long blockade of the main highway outside the village, carried out as part of this struggle, it being deemed too unsafe for the men to be so visible. Likewise, it was four women, from the women’s wing of the AIDMK in the village, who went to Madras to petition the AIDMK government. These women in particular saw themselves, and were seen by other villagers, both men and women, as leaders in their own right, and not in their capacity as relatives of powerful men (which they were not). And yet, even when posed with their example (and that of the ADMK Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Jayalalitha), village men argued that the village committee was best served by men.

5 Other Spaces for Self-Governance

What the Kanyakumari case illustrates, as do the hard-fought, if still unsuccessful, struggles to establish more representative structures in the other three villages, is the widespread
desire for self-governance. This can be seen in the meetings of other associations besides those tasked with village administration, such as youth groups, women’s groups, and even pious associations. It is also through participation in these other associations that youth and women gained the self-confidence and capacity for participation in village governance.

Village welfare was a concern of all these groups, and often resulted in activities that might well be described as political or governance-oriented. Members of pious associations such as the Catholic Seva Sangam talked about their work in the village, which over the years included such things as cleaning streets, wells, toilets, and the church. Youth groups, guided and encouraged by the Parish Priest, also took up such activities. In Kovalam, a group of some ten young fishermen called the Kovalam Neytal Nanbar Kuzhu (Friends of the Seashore Club), whose primary function was the collection of a fund of Rs 10 per week, per member, from which to give low-interest loans to members, also engaged in civic activities based on guidance from the priest, as well as other more social activities, like going to the movies or on a trip. In Kanyakumari, I spoke with members of the Punida Anthoniar Izhajjar Narpani Mandram, which had some ninety-two members, all from one street in the village. Members reported meeting every alternate Sunday, but said they focused on what activities to take up, and did not discuss at their meetings either political issues or village problems, since members all came from the same street. Yet planned activities included giving memos to the Township and District officials when they came to the village, regarding bad drains, burnt out street lights, and irregular power supply, and blocking electioneering vehicles as a sign of disgust with the undelivered promises of party people. I describe two such groups in some detail to illustrate the range of their public concerns and activities.

5.1 The New Life Youth Group

The Pudhu Vazhvu Izhajjar Iyakkam (New Life Youth Group) in Kovalam was started in 1992, with the aim of self improvement and helping their society, and had been meeting regularly since. I was present at their 147th meeting, in 1995. The animator and founder, Ignacius, was a forty year-old man with a B.A. who had been active with the Rotary Club for nine years, but then decided he wanted to do something to help his own village. The
group was unusual in having both men and women as members, and in ensuring gender parity on the Executive Committee.

The meeting was held on the terrace of the animator's house. Twenty-two people were present, twelve men and ten women. Most of them were in their twenties. Most were unmarried, although one or two of the men were older and married. Married women usually stopped attending, but would continue to support the group through donations. Some members were currently in the Gulf, and a few others had excused themselves from this particular meeting for various reasons.

The meeting was conducted formally: an opening song, the election of a Chair for the meeting, a welcome speech, the reading of the minutes of the last meeting, the taking of attendance, a talk by an assigned member, some planning and discussion about future work, the assignment of people to speak at the next meeting, the collection of savings, a thank you speech, and a closing song.

The young man assigned the task of speaking at the meeting had not been given a topic. So he extemporized on how society was going downhill, injustices were growing, all sorts of problems were being created, and fights were breaking out. Youth in particular were falling prey to all this. Their group too had recently faced a popularity test when someone had tried to provoke a fight with them. But they had resisted and decided to act differently, not to fight, but to try and transform him. They tried to change the hearts and minds of other youth, especially those more attached to films (considered a vice by some!), and other vices. When I asked how they would change others, the speaker responded that it would be step by step, it would not be easy, but would happen through a gradual creation of awareness. Others chipped in, saying similar things.

When I asked what changes the society had brought to their lives, I was told such things as: self-confidence and the ability to speak at meetings--even those previously very shy had become very brave; and the ability to go and speak to officers and speak in public--they were often asked to do the welcome and thank-you speeches at village meetings, and to take up public issues. Most members had basic education and were literate, and though not highly educated, had learned to speak well. Now all their spare time was spent in social
work, not in aimless lounging and socializing. Earlier they used to think that money was the only important thing, but through participation in the group they had realized the importance of social involvement and commitment. But money was important for public purposes, so they were very dynamic and innovative in devising new ways of increasing their fund. So far they had encountered no opposition to the fact that men and women worked together.

Every anniversary they went on a trip, but also marked it with some meaningful act. Last anniversary they had organized and entirely funded an inter-caste marriage. For Rs 500 a month they employed a sewing teacher to give classes to girls. They had adopted two children, a boy and a girl. They also helped to run a nursery for some 160 children, and four of the women present were teachers there.

At the meeting they discussed whether to give the local transport corporation a memo asking for improved bus services to the village. Ignacius advised five men and five women to go and see the Branch Manager with a memo, and then as a next step to go and see someone else like the Division Manager.

My research assistant, who was an accomplished youth leader from another of the villages, was asked to say a few words about how they could improve their group. He commented that he was used to working with groups that were involved in protests and agitations, but that this was one of the few groups he had come across where the youth were actively engaged in self-improvement and direct work for their community, and that therefore he had more to learn from them than to teach them.

5.2 The Manakudy Joint Youth Group

The final, and perhaps best example of youth involvement in village governance is from Mel Manakudy. Here three separate youth groups (all entirely male) met together to discuss how they could intervene to settle the factional conflict that had torn the village apart. The groups were: the Andrews group, with twenty-five members, almost all fishermen, although a handful also had diplomas or were polytechnic students; AICUF (All India Catholic University Federation, an association of Catholic university students), with five members, all of whom had belonged to the AICUF executive before it was disbanded at the diocesan
level; John Bosco, with twenty-five or so members, all ex-AICUF members. Both AICUF and John Bosco members were educated and most did not fish.

The meeting was held in the wedding hall belonging to the village. About twenty-five young men were present at the meeting (ten from John Bosco, eight from Andrews and five from AICUF, approximately). A President (Chair) for the meeting was nominated. This was the second meeting of the three groups. A brief recap was provided of the last meeting: it had been agreed that all the fights in the village were caused by teenage youth, and so it was the responsibility of the youth groups to stop it. The Andrews and AICUF groups had agreed to work together, but the John Bosco group had said it needed a week to think about it. The focus of this meeting was to hear the decision of the John Bosco group and then to work out an organizational structure and mechanisms for imposing discipline. The idea was to get members of all three groups to commit to refraining from getting drawn into the conflict.

The John Bosco group expressed their agreement to participate. This led to a discussion about whether a new committee should be formed for this joint group. It was agreed that this would consist of two leaders nominated or elected from each group. The groups huddled to make their nominations, and a committee of six was formed. Then the question arose of whether the President and Secretary should be elected, or how they should be chosen. A member stated that the President needed to be someone known to be neutral (to the factions), respected, active, and willing to stand up to criticism. The leaders of each group nominated a leader from another group, with much magnanimity and modesty; every nominee expressed reluctance to take it on, expressing a variety of reasons, from past failures, to family responsibilities, to not being the eldest and most respected of the group. Finally a leader of the AICUF group agreed to be President, and one from the Andrews group, Secretary.

The discussion moved on to the question of how discipline should be imposed on group members. It was suggested that each group should submit a list of its members, so that if anyone created a problem, it could be dealt with. Another suggested that all members should give written agreements not to fight or get involved in village fights. If the three youth groups decided together, they could prevent most fights. There then ensued a debate about what to do with a member who broke the discipline and participated in the conflict. On the
one hand, the suggestion was made that the group should be willing to report him to the police, and not back down on family or street lines; others favoured simply expelling the member from the group. This was critiqued as not being adequate, as it would only result in them losing members, and not solve any problems; the aim should be to bring more people under the group’s discipline, rather than lose them. But the police option had its problems too – there was the concern that if someone was arrested, his faction would round on other members of the group, their homes, and their families. One member stated that this was the inevitable consequence of getting involved in social work, but others were hesitant and thought it too risky. It was suggested that the errant member be forced to ask for pardon in the meeting. But the person could avoid this simply by not coming to the meeting.

The President suggested that the aims of the group, the list of members, and the fact that errant members would be taken to the police, should be widely publicized so that it created a warning. Some agreement was being arrived at that the errant should be called to the meeting, and, if he could explain and give good reason for his behaviour and apologize in writing, then he would be let off. If he refused to apologize, or relapsed, then he would be handed over to the police. A latecomer made the argument that if the errant member had no choice but to fight on behalf of his family, it would be unfair to hand him over to the police. Expulsion should be adequate. But others insisted that if reform was the goal, then the police, and not expulsion, was the only solution. Eventually, each one present was asked for his opinion. Most agreed about reporting him to the police, although some raised doubts. Finally, the Secretary declared that all those who agreed should sign a sheet saying so, and all those who did not should leave the group itself at this point. It was agreed that the Secretary would draft this statement and that each group would put it on to its own letterhead and get its members to sign it.

Following this decision, a member suggested that the newly formed group needed some kind of public event to announce its coming together, perhaps something like a protest against Chief Minister Jayalalitha posing as Mother Mary (see Chapter 4). Nothing much had been done about it in this district except for a small protest in Colachel. He suggested a bus blockade as the appropriate protest action, but some others saw this as going too far,
offered the alternative of a black flag demonstration. The decision was left to the next meeting to be held in two weeks.

Before the next meeting, however, the factional violence broke out again. The youth from the three groups did not keep to their decision. One or two from the Don Bosco groups and a couple from the Andrews group got involved in the conflict; though none from the AICUF group did. Nevertheless, some of the leaders from the three groups did come together and made efforts at mediation. Such attempts in earlier outbreaks of this feud had been made by the Parish Priest, the parish committee (which had failed miserably), and then a group of respected and independent elders, the "veḷḷai caṭṭai," who had largely been successful until now. This time around the youth were taking the leading role. They had been to see the Superintendent of Police, and were trying to arrange peace talks.

6 Conclusion: Community, Modernity, Democracy

The organizations described here emerged, not out of internal contestation and change within the villages themselves, but out of broader debates and changes at other levels, such as in the Universal Church and the Indian state. Yet, while the structures may be externally conceived, it is conditions at the village level that determine their reception, functioning, and very survival. As seen in Chapter 4, the historical compact between the regional kingdoms and the Catholic Church was inherited and upheld by the postcolonial Indian state. This is seen in the relative autonomy given to the Church to oversee law and order, development, and finance in the villages. There is much to be said for this arrangement, for the state lacks the ability to work through overlapping and networked structures based close to the lifeworld, such as the Basic Communities, pious associations, and youth groups. Nor is it willing to invest resources and personnel in the kind of close and sustained attention to formation seen here, in the efforts of Parish Priests such as Fr Edwin, for instance. Political parties have managed to make some inroads, linking up to factions, or creating their own youth and women’s wings, but they

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9 Literally, "white shirts." The term refers, in local parlance, to the village elders/wise men. It derives from the fact that men traditionally wore white cotton shirts on formal occasions, and the older men continued to do so, whereas in recent years the appeal of patterns, colours, and polyester has become widespread.
too lack the Church’s access to the lifeworld of the villages, and nor do they represent the villages in their entirety as the Church does.

Lehmann (1990: 131) has argued that, as bodies aimed at democratizing the church, the power and the promise of the CEBs in Brazil was greatest when they had no legal or religious status and remained informal bodies, that is, when they represented a real alternative to the Church hierarchy. This was not the case for long in Kottar, because the BCCs early on became an official Commission of the Diocese, with central rules and templates; they were further integrated into diocesan administration when they were made the basis of the Parish Council. On the other hand, there seems to be consensus among observers of the Latin American CEBs (Lehmann, 1996, 1990; Adriance, 1995; Levine and Mainwaring, 1989), that their longevity and success depended very much on the presence of supportive priests or nuns, and even on support from the local hierarchy, so that they were never completely autonomously generated and sustained spaces for lay participation. In this sense, the Kottar BCCs are no different. Given this, we may question the extent to which the BCCs had a radical impact on the nature of church authority in the villages. Lehmann’s (1996:76) argument might certainly apply here: “This paradox of an anti-hierarchical movement depending for its survival on the hierarchy itself,” had the double-edged effect of gaining much media attention for the CEBs, while blunting the possibility of genuine transformation of the Church. In contrast to Lehmann, however, Adriance (1995: 163) has argued, in the context of the Church’s reversal of its earlier support for the CEBs in the Brazilian Amazon that “[m]embers of the rural base communities are refusing to let the Church change its mind,” suggesting thereby that laity were not entirely dependent on the hierarchy for direction.

But more than the relationship of Church hierarchy and laity, it is on two other ways in which the associations described here are significant that I want to focus. In her ethnography of these villages, A. Subramanian (2009: 250-252) argues that villagers’ negotiations with the Church, other powers, and the modern state, reveal a long history of claims-making with its own vernacular forms, one of which is the seeking of alternative patrons. She resists the idea that rights and democracy might have a European or specifically modern provenance, and seeks instead to “provincialize” them. While I am
sympathetic to this aim, I see the establishment of liberal democratic institutions and processes under the postcolonial state as having enormous consequence for a new vocabulary of claims-making, as well as for new technologies of governance. The associations described here reflect the politics of the reformist Church, but also the deep influence of the ideas of social equality, and democracy as participation in governance, contained in India’s liberal-democratic constitution. This can be seen most strikingly in the insistence that all members of the community have equal claims to participate, and that leaders, even at the village level, should be elected. This is significant in two ways: in terms of challenges to community and customary authority to the extent that it is founded on social inequality, and in terms of the will to self-governance.

While almost all the associations described here have been initiated by the Church, participants in them do not simply accept its authority. What we see instead is a struggle between the Church, the village community, traditional village leaders, and hitherto marginalized groups such as youth and women. What becomes clear is that individual, gender, and class interests are emerging to challenge collective identities, such as those of village, Church, and community. Participation in civil society is directed at transforming society itself. But here too there are several tensions. For instance, while the old style village committees resist Church intervention, thus asserting the sovereignty and autonomy of the village community against the domination of the Church, women seek Church support to enable their participation.

The Parish Councils are an attempt to modernize, and democratize, an institution of village government that has a long history, in much the same way as the PRI legislation tried to do for the traditional Panchayats. But because the old committees and new councils in these villages lie below the level of the Panchayat, they have no institutional affiliation with the state, and are autonomous village bodies that set their own rules and raise their own finances. In the manner in which they function, it is clear that they see themselves as sovereign over their own affairs, and as deriving their authority from the village community and its traditions and moral economies. Though the old village committee was closely intertwined with the Church hierarchy, challenges to this hierarchy were not unknown (see Chapter 4). This was witnessed in the account above of
villages like Chinna Muttam or Enayam Puthenthurai that refused to establish Parish Councils according to the new rules, because they would give the Parish Priest or Bishop far too much oversight in village affairs, especially its finances. The Church may be seen as representing the community for the most part, but there is a clear sense that the village community remains distinct from the institutional Church, even as it continues to share the Christian faith and identity.

But the contours of this community, and who would represent it, are themselves fiercely contested. The establishment of a Parish Council was strenuously resisted in Kanyakumari on the grounds that it would require the election of women. Right from their beginnings in Kodimunai, the BCCs were resented because they encouraged women’s participation, and in villages where they had managed to survive despite opposition, men tended to stay away from them. This meant that few real decisions affecting the entire village could be taken in these spaces; the participation of women was often at the cost of real power. But for the women who participated in them, such as the women who gained political maturity through the Kodimunai experience, these served as spaces of political learning, of finding a voice and the courage to speak, of new skills in everything from budgeting, to petitioning for services. This was the case, likewise, for the young people who grew up participating in the anbiams, or were encouraged to form their own organizations, and given the guidance and formation to do so, such as the youth in the Kovalam group described above.

A second sphere of contestation is the relationship between community and economy, and this, of course, is central to the discussion of the counter-movement. Parish Councils would on occasion be faced with the question of whether the affairs of the fishermen were the affairs of the village, or of the fishermen’s organizations in the village. The answer was never clear, and was always much debated, as the community sought to clarify its identity vis-à-vis the fishery, from which the bulk of the village’s revenues still came. The fishermen called for village support and intervention when they needed it, but also wanted to maintain their independence, especially when it came to finances. When this question came up in Pallam Puthenthurai, the fishermen making the request were asked to go to their Vallam Union. On the other hand, in Kanyakumari village, part of the
reason for refusing to create a Parish Council was so that the village committee could consist entirely of fishermen (without having to accept women or representatives of pious associations and so forth) and could devote its entire energies to defending the artisanal fishermen when necessary. When the BCCs attempted to discuss finances, or raise monies for a home repair, or to support a bereaved family, the active fishermen, and especially the better-off ones, would rarely come to these meetings, and were opposed to having finances discussed at them. The sharpest point of this contestation was over the moral economy of the village, witnessed during the Council meeting in Pallam Puthenthurai, when the barbers and bellringer requested the customary lean-season dole, and some of the better-off fishers resented having to pay it, and finally negotiated having to pay a reduced amount.

It might be possible to conclude from the above, and especially from the disagreement about respecting the old moral economy, that, as insertion into markets deepened, the unity of the economic and the social spheres that had characterized the artisanal village no longer held. In one sense this had an equalizing and democratizing effect, as upwardly mobile fishermen no longer countenanced the control of the village committees by the non-fishing elite of the village (see Section 1). But in another sense its effect was quite the reverse, as the fishers’ market-induced values of personal advancement made them increasingly reluctant to support poorer villagers as was customary in the earlier moral economy.

The other element of significance that we can take from these associations has relevance for Chatterjee’s argument about the absence of a civil society among subaltern Indians. Chatterjee characterized the subaltern-state relationship as one where subaltern groups are simply acted upon by the state in the name of development, or make claims upon it in the name of democracy and rights, but in ways that are contingent on political negotiations carried out in personalistic relationships between politicians and electors, rather than through routine and rule-bound ways of interest-representation. Quite in contrast to this characterization, what we see here is a widening of the will to self-governance across all layers of society, and the routinization of the procedures and technologies of modern governance. This can be seen in the insistence that all members
of the community have equal claims to participate, and that leaders, even at the village level, should be elected. A self-conscious modernity may also be seen in the manner in which meetings are conducted, with rules of order, minutes, and formal agendas. Various technologies of (self-) governance are beginning to be adopted (albeit at the Parish Priest’s initiative), such as village censuses and the computerization of village records; the provision of a family card indicating membership in the village; and the assignment of individual land titles to land previously held in common, in order to allow villagers to apply for bank loans. This is seen in the work of the parish councils, but also of the BCCs.

For Lehmann, the deeper impact of the Brazilian CEBs was to serve as mediums of modernity. Despite the respect and even wonder at popular religion professed by the liberation theologians, the founding of the CEBs implied that the “unreflective impulses and rituals of popular religiosity will be channelled into a more goal-oriented, more organized, more settled routine…with trained lay leaders, and with an explicit spiritual and ideological programme” (Lehmann, 1990: 121). Further:

The promoters of the Church of the Poor are creating leadership roles by the hundreds and thousands, they are promoting complex organizations with division of tasks at the local level, building up little by little a rudimentary bureaucratic back-up, and although they resist the creation of large-scale formal organizations, they are fitting their activities and the organizations they promote into national and international networks which make even the remotest activists and participants aware of a movement which goes far beyond their own communities…. The crucial difference between this modernization and that which its promoters so dislike is that it is coming, slowly, from civil society, and not from the state…(Lehmann, 1990: 141)

This widening of the will to self-governance across all layers of society, and the routinization of the procedures and technologies of modern governance, would suggest a deepening governmentality, rather than a looming crisis of governability. But there is also some tension between this modernizing governmentality, on the one hand, and the re-inscription of village sovereignty, and a deepening sense of popular rights, on the other. Modernity in the ideally functioning parish council or BCC may include democracy; but the two can also diverge, as in the events described in Chapter 7. The Kanyakumari
villagers asserted rights over the fishery against the state, through the medium of their unreformed village committee. And subsequently, state and Church colluded through a Church-established body that sought to restore modernity as respect for procedure and civility, over the unruly claims of the villagers to govern their own resources.
Chapter 6
Transforming Poverty — Mobilizing Capital and Credit

“Women’s credit networks manipulate social relations to generate credit — whereas, to put the contrast in its most striking form, mercantile credit manipulates credit and interest rates in order to generate the kind of social relations most conducive to further profit for the merchant.” (Ram, 1992: 154)

I turn now to another prominent type of civil society association in Kanykumari – that focused on income generation and economic improvement. This has taken the form of producer cooperatives for men, and a variety of savings and credit associations for women. Though the state has a long, if not entirely successful, history of setting up organizations for this purpose, and several of the particular associations I describe were initiated by the diocesan social service society (the KSSS), NGOs have come to be the most significant players in the present period. Unlike the associations of self-governance, associations for economic improvement have taken quite different forms for men and for women, reflecting their distinct niches within the fishing economy. While the economic goal has been explicitly prioritized in the marketing and credit cooperatives for the fishermen, the savings and credit associations for women have been couched in the language of “empowerment,” “women’s liberation,” and “consciousness-raising,” with economic autonomy being seen as a means toward these larger goals.

The literatures on these two types of associations – producer cooperatives, on the one hand, and women’s microcredit associations, on the other – are also quite distinct. The enthusiasm in the nineteen-sixties and seventies for producer cooperatives as a possible development model (see Attwood and Baviskar, 1988) had declined in the face of the inability of these organizations to expand into a significant sector of the economy. Then, from the late eighties on, they failed to resist the onslaught of neoliberalism. But, in recent years, there has been some revival of interest in the cooperative model within debates around fair trade and the social economy (Reed and Mcmurry, 2009). Microcredit for women, on the other hand, became a globally celebrated model of development precisely in the halcyon years of neoliberalism. But it too has come under
sustained attack from critical scholars and development activists for generating capital at the expense of the poorest and drawing them deeper into market circuits (Rankin and Shakya, 2007; Ananya Roy, 2010).

Given the distinct natures of these two types of organizations and the literatures surrounding them, they are rarely, if ever, studied together. I do so because they both provide a context within which to think through the interactions between society and social relationships, on the one hand, and the economy and economic imperatives, on the other. My concern is not with the questions that tend to dominate empirical research on organizations of this sort, such as the extent of, or conditions for, their success in raising incomes and allowing a greater degree of economic “freedom,” although I do mention these aspects when evaluating each set of organizations. Rather, my concern is two-fold: with exploring their import for civil society, in terms of individual autonomy and the community, state and self-governance; and with understanding what kind of relationship members of these associations develop with the economy. Do they help them adapt better to markets, or do they protect them from the worst effects of markets, or both? Further, do the men’s cooperatives and the women’s microcredit groups have different implications in this regard, given that the women’s groups carry an explicit mandate around “empowerment”?

A core function of both the fishermen’s cooperatives and the women’s associations is the provision of credit, i.e. access to capital. Credit has always been a need in these villages, as shown in Chapter 2, because of the frequently low level and unpredictable nature of earnings from the fishery. Credit was necessary to tide over periodic subsistence crises, for bigger life-cycle expenditures like weddings, and for productive purposes. Given the centrality of the credit function, a variety of networks and institutions had evolved to provide it, such as the long-term relationship between merchants and middlemen and particular fishermen, and the women’s credit networks. Part of the purpose of this chapter is to explore how and why those existing relationships were transformed – either abolished or adapted – in the attempt to set up new institutions.
The chapter proceeds by describing: first, the background to and establishment of the men’s cooperative sangams, their activities, and their successes or limitations in terms of their own stated goals. It does the same next with a number of women’s microcredit organizations. The concluding section examines both types of organizations in terms of their implications for civil society, market adaptation and social protection.

1 The Fishermen’s Sangams

As described in Chapter 2, one source of credit was in the form of what Platteau and Abraham (1987: 471) have called “quasi-credit contracts” whereby a merchant or middleman advanced loans to craft owners with the understanding that their daily catches would be sold exclusively to him, with some fixed amount of the proceeds being held back by him as interest payment and sales commission. The commissions and interest were due as long as the debts had not been entirely cleared. Further, the fisherman was forced to accept the price offered by the merchant, not because there was no competition from other buyers, but because of the “market interlinkage” between credit and marketing relations (Platteau and Abraham, 1987: 480-481). There was some debate among scholars about exactly how exploitative this relationship was. Platteau and Abraham argued that it was a risk-sharing arrangement that was functional for both parties: for merchants it ensured sufficient access to catch, and for the fisherman it meant that the interest or commission was waived when there was a very low catch. While merchants did pay less than market prices for the catch, fishermen were never completely at their mercy and could shift their debt to another merchant, and there was no possibility of life-long or family “bondage” to the creditor. For other fisheries scholars, such as Alexander (1982), Acheson (1981), and Kurien (1980), the relationship was far from mutually beneficial – it was often maintained by physical violence or its threat on the part of the merchant; the price they paid for the catch was well below market prices; and they delayed paying this for as long as possible. Fishermen I interviewed described the different kinds of debts they might owe to the same merchant, as well as the variety of strategies the merchants

112 Vavathurai fishermen described the three types of kadans (debts) they would owe merchants: (1) iraal kadan, specifically for iraal (prawn); (2) labha kadan, whereby if a fisher took a loan of Rs 100 from a
employed, such as avoiding being repaid completely in order to extend the relationship, or failing to keep proper records of payments (which the fishers often relied on them to do).

Regardless of the exact manner in which the relationship was enforced, the vast gap between the value of the catch in the export markets, and the price the fishermen themselves were paid for it, had been noted as a cause for reform by Nicholson at the outset of his tenure as Director of the Madras Fisheries Bureau in the late 1800s. His counterparts in Travancore observed the same disparity (see Chapter 2). In the early twentieth century the first fishermen’s cooperatives seeking to break the power of the merchants and middlemen, by providing alternative sources of credit, were set up.

1.1 The Government Cooperative Societies

The first government cooperative society for fishermen in the Travancore region was registered in 1917. Cooperatives were given a new fillip under the Community Development Programme of the post-colonial Indian state. After the reorganization of states in 1956, Kanyakumari district had sixteen fishermen's cooperative societies with 2301 members. The three main objectives of the fisheries cooperatives were:

i.) to provide credit that would "relieve poor fishermen from the clutches of middlemen and allow them to reap maximum benefit from their landings";

merchant and then sold him fish worth that much, the merchant would only give him Rs 90; (3) support kadan, under which, if a fisher sold fish worth Rs 100, Rs 5 had to be given to the merchant.

The state of Travancore-Cochin passed the Cooperative Societies Regulation in 1089 M.E., following the Cooperative Societies Act II of 1912 of British India. The Regulation aimed at facilitating the formation of societies for the promotion of thrift and self-help among agriculturists, artisans, and persons of limited means (Velu Pillai, 1940: 673). The first cooperative society for fishermen was registered in 1917. In the beginning, societies were organized on a communal basis, so that there were separate societies for the different Hindu castes, as well as for the Christian fishermen. By 1933 there were 95 cooperatives with some 8,194 members in these communities (Kurien, 1980: 1). The performance of the cooperatives was disappointing, especially with regard to credit, as patterns of inheritance and income did not permit large savings, and thus large share capital, in the Central Cooperative Bank. Later, more societies with non-credit functions, such as marketing and rural uplift, were set up, although none of these was in a fishing community. The first women's thrift society in the region, although not in a fishing village, was also set up in the teens of the century.

114 These were in Ezhudesam, Mel Manakudy, Kadiapattnam, Kanyakumari, Pudukadai, Colachel, Kottilpadu, Midalam, Puthoor, Rajakamangalam, Kodimunai, Kovalam, Enayam (Administrative Report of the Department of Fisheries, Madras, 1956-57).


116 Minister for Fisheries, Tamil Nadu: Policy Note on the Fisheries, 1992-93 and 1993-94. The reports of the Fisheries Department list, from various years, the amounts spent on different schemes, and the contributions of
ii.) to serve as the main instrument through which the government might sponsor modernization and mechanization of the fishery, through credit for motors, mechanized craft, and supply of nylon nets, and facilities for preservation, storage and transport;

iii.) to provide welfare and social security through subsidizing the construction of houses, assistance for houses faced with sea erosion, and various schemes of insurance – for accident, death, and seasonal unemployment/low earnings, educational grants, and, in some cases, even fair price shops.¹¹⁷

With regard to the first objective, since the loans did not cover daily consumption needs or contingencies such as illness or weddings, fishermen still turned to merchants and moneylenders for assistance, and remained indebted to them. With regard to the second objective, a significant number of loans were given to enable acquisition of new craft, and the first mechanized "Pablo" boats and gillnetters were supplied through the cooperatives with a large subsidy element (25 percent subsidy, 75 percent loan). But the recovery level for these loans was low, and the societies faced losses. A review of the performance of the village cooperative societies, carried out by the Fisheries Department,¹¹⁸ ascribed their financial failure to the reluctance and inability of fishermen to pay back loans due to their individualism, factionalism, and spendthrift nature; their unwillingness to save during the good season and to surrender their catch to the cooperative societies; inadequate financing for purchase of craft and tackle; lack of training and education regarding the conduct of the societies, and members’ rights, duties, and responsibilities; and lack of proper and effective supervision.

The Review illustrates the distance between the fishermen and the government, and the latter’s over-reliance on psychological explanations such as the spendthrift nature of the fishermen.¹¹⁹ It failed to consider other possible explanations such as the high costs of the sources such as the National Cooperative Development Corporation (NCDC) and the Tamil Nadu Fisheries Development Corporation (TNFDC).

¹¹⁷ Bavinck (2000) has also suggested that there was a further, unstated, objective for the establishment of the cooperatives: the political objective of building constituencies and winning votes.

¹¹⁸ Government of Tamil Nadu, Department of Fisheries (1982), Review of Fisheries Plan Programmes.

¹¹⁹ It is worth noting here that it was not only government officials that held this attitude. The lack of a "savings mentality" (cēmippu maḍappāḷmai) was regularly offered up by priests, activists, social workers of all ideological stripes, and villagers themselves, to account for the poverty and backwardness of the fishing community – a kind of easy come, easy go approach to money that was ascribed partly to the unpredictable and uneven nature of daily earnings in the fishery, and contrasted to the frugal habits of
new equipment, and of inputs such as fuel, maintenance, and repair. Nor did it take into account the difficulties of making earnings commensurate with the new levels of indebtedness. The recognition of losses led to a slowing down and virtual halt of lending through the cooperatives, although the occasional new scheme is still introduced to subsidize the purchase of craft.

Other studies, even those carried out by other levels of government, were more acute in their diagnoses. In 1976 the Report of the National Commission on Agriculture, of the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation, suggested other reasons for the low recovery rates of the fisheries cooperatives: vested interests of influential members, poor management, inadequate assistance from government banks, inadequate mobilization of savings during the good season to preclude the need for consumption loans from the merchants, and an inadequate conception of the function of the cooperatives. As the Report stated, "for a cooperative society to be successful in the fishery, it must provide an integrated credit service to facilitate the conversion of credit into inputs and services as well as the realisation of a fair price for the produce" (National Commission on Agriculture, 1976: 161).

Based on recommendations such as the above, attempts at marketing were made. In 1979 the government-run Kanyakumari District Fishermen Cooperative Federation Limited took up the marketing of fish on a small scale. It operated a retail fish stall at Vadassery market, where fish was traditionally not sold. But competition from retailers in other markets in the town, who undersold fish in order to render the Federation uncompetitive, forced them to close down. Two further such attempts were made. In each case, opposition from the retailers, through both market methods and representations with the district administration, forced the Federation sales front to be closed down. After 1981 the government-run Federation made no further efforts to market fish.

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120 In fact, marketing had been considered important from the time of the establishment of the district federations. The 1968-69 Report of the Department of Fisheries notes the establishment of fish marketing unions across the state, with one at Nagercoil. This was aimed at assisting local fishermen in direct marketing, by transporting the catches to market and by supplying fishing requisites and fishing implements at fair prices. However, there is no evidence of these unions actually playing any significant marketing role.
Thus, the third objective, the welfare role of the government cooperatives, is the only one that remains in place, and it has become the most significant. Included are schemes for accident and life insurance, and for free housing. Under the latter, a few houses are sanctioned every now and then in different villages. The single most important scheme, and the chief reason why membership in the cooperatives continues to be attractive, is the one for lean season insurance. Under this, in 1995, each member would pay Rs 45 per month for the eight months from April to November. The state and central governments would each contribute matching amounts of Rs 360 per member (until 1992-93, only the state government would contribute, not the central government). Then for the four lean months from December to March, each member would be given Rs 270 per month. In the mid-1990s, women vendors, led by the Tamil Nadu Fishworkers’ Union (see Chapter 7), had begun agitating for inclusion in the lean season insurance scheme. This was sanctioned in 2003-04, and applications were being accepted in the thirty-two women’s societies.

This scheme is an important reason why men who belong to the villages and are members of the fishing castes, but are not engaged in fishing, also seek to register as members of the cooperative. In 1977 the Government of Tamil Nadu announced that no person who was not personally engaged in fishing as his profession was eligible to become a member of a fishing cooperative society, and the bylaws of the societies were amended accordingly. Many societies in Kanyakumari district were among those that did not carry out the amendments. Kanyakumari societies also resisted any inspection into their financial position during this period of review in the late 1970s. The Government in turn denied them concessions such as the possibility of obtaining financial assistance from any government agency or bank. Non-fishing men in the village continued to sign on and were planning to agitate against their proposed exclusion. Their argument was that the Government was trying to exclude educated men from the fishing castes from the organization, so that they would not ask difficult questions. Since the clerk who keeps records and collects the

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121 The initial response to seasonal unemployment seems to have been to give short-term loans for the period. The 1959-60 Report of the Fisheries Department notes that a total of Rs 10,230 was given on short-term loan to cooperative societies at Pozhikarai, Rajakamangalamthurai, Eraymanthurai, and Eraviputhenthurai, to enable them to give relief to their members due to failure of the fishing season.

122 These women’s societies had been set up in 1984, with the government paying the membership dues. Their main role seemed to be to provide some relief benefit at death or disability of the members.

monthly contributions is usually someone resident in the village, she or he is likely to be sympathetic to this position, as I found in the village of Kovalam.

Another key reason for the lack of success of the cooperatives may be their unrepresentative nature. The Reports through the years, even the very earliest ones, make no mention of the village-level cooperatives having elected bodies to oversee their functioning. Yet these cooperatives, like all the agricultural cooperatives, were conceived of as having elected executive bodies. Nevertheless, in cooperatives across Tamil Nadu\textsuperscript{124}, elections to the cooperatives were not held for over a decade, throughout the period of ADMK rule. Instead, the coops were run by government officials called “Special Officers.” (Rajagopal 1988) This was an ADMK government scheme to establish its political hold over the cooperatives, by preventing the risk of elections being held in cooperatives dominated by their political rivals. During the period of DMK rule from 1989 to 1991, the cooperatives were heavily politicized, but even so, elections were held. Elections were again not held during the subsequent period of ADMK government. They were then held again by the DMK in 1998, but alleged to have been rigged (Tribune, Sept 14, 1998). Subsequently, they were not held again under the ADMK (Governor's address to Legislative Assembly, 2002).

The lack of an elected body often led to corruption and inadequate information-sharing with members. In CM, I was present at the house of the Clerk of the Society when the Special Officer (SO) visited. Since there was no cooperative office, he made home visits to the Clerk's house. She was the wife of a man who had been Secretary of the previous village committee, and who belonged to a faction opposed to the new BCCs and Parish Council (see Chapter 5). A few members of their faction, a couple of them relatives, had been called in. When the SO asked why villagers were not availing themselves of the NCDC scheme offering joint loans to fishermen wishing to acquire new craft, the Clerk's husband said that he had asked a few people (all those he named were relatives), but that no one had been interested. It was clear that no one had attempted to disseminate the information widely, and that it had been done in an ad hoc way, among friends and relatives of the SO's chief contact in the village.

\textsuperscript{124} Tamil Nadu has some 30,000 cooperative societies, of which the village-level Primary Agricultural Societies (PACs) are the most common. They cover all the villages in the state and, besides credit, are important in distributing essential commodities.
Kurien (1980: 8) argues that the government cooperatives failed because they did not perform the basic role of a cooperative: “to act as a social and economic buffer to the fishermen at the first point of sale of their fish...[to] be an 'agent' – by, of, and for the fishermen.” They also failed because they were created from above, and were not organizations in which the members had a stake or a voice. They failed because: "[a] cooperative is at once a people's organisation and a business organisation.... If a cooperative fails as a people's organisation it will most certainly fail as a business organisation – there is no exception to this rule" (Kurien, 1980: 9).

By the 1960s, experiments had begun elsewhere that attempted to counter these shortcomings of the government cooperatives. In Marianad in Kerala, and in Negombo in Sri Lanka, cooperatives set up by non-governmental actors were functioning very successfully. These were the inspiration for Fr James Tombeur, founder of the Diocesan Kottar Social Service Society (see Chapter 5), as he began to address the poverty of the fishing villages (Tombeur, 1990: 56).

1.2 The KSSS Fishermen's Sangams – The Beginnings

In many ways, the first interventions of the KSSS in the fisheries sector mirrored those of the government. The Indo-Belgian project it initiated in Muttam in 1963-64 focused largely on technology transfer--motorizing the kattumarams and experimenting with new models of craft. But this led to little economic improvement, as the fishermen still managed to save little, and failed to repay their loans. Fr James writes that he then came to the realization, supported by the experiments he witnessed elsewhere, that the real solution lay in changing attitudes and social structures and in leading people to seek their own solutions (Tombeur, 1990: 52-55).

With the help of Fr Dionysius, who had been Parish Priest there since 1969, the first sangam (cooperative society) was started in Manakudy in late 1973. Fr Dionysius is from Kadiapattnam, a relatively prosperous fishing village. He recalls how his previous pastoral experience, in other villages more impoverished than his own, had led him to see how the fishermen's lives were a "cycle of poverty and plenty" depending on the season; their lack of a "savings mentality" made them vulnerable to the merchants. He began with a small experiment to demonstrate the benefit of saving, encouraging a group of young men to start
saving a percentage of the proceeds from their daily catch with him. He enlisted the assistance of Mariadasan, a young fisherman who had recently begun to show an interest in village affairs, to collect the daily amounts, often as low as Rs 1. The plan was to get a bank loan against these savings that would allow the men to pay off the merchants to whom they were indebted.

Following this, the concept of the sangam was explained to the fishermen by Fr Gillet (the Belgian priest who played a key role in the application of appropriate technology to improve artisanal craft (see also Chapter 2), Fr James, and a seminarian from Manakudy village, J. Lucas. The sangam was to have fishermen save a percentage of their daily earnings and then use these savings as collateral to get loans that would allow them to repay the merchants they were indebted to. It would also appoint a salesperson who would auction the members’ catches on the beach, to ensure that they got the best prices. A Fishermen Sangam Project was set up under the KSSS, and it began to arrange bank loans for the fishermen. The aims of the Project were: release from indebtedness to the merchants; access to new and cheaper forms of credit; and competitive prices for the catch.

After Manakudy, sangams were founded in Kurumbanai and Pillaiithope, and in Enayam, where Fr Dionysius became parish priest in 1974. In each case, the pattern described above was followed: discussion and motivation in small groups led by Lucas, backed by Fr James and the KSSS, and sustained and prompt responses to opposition. Another key ingredient in the early survival and success of the sangams was constant educational and motivational sessions that stressed not just the economic, but also the social and political benefits, of cooperatives. This is illustrated by Fr Dionysius’s experience in Enayam, where he worked through the men’s sodality, now called the Christian Life Communities, or CLC.

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126 Lucas was from Manakudy, and studying for the priesthood, a profession he finally decided not to enter. He remained active in the sangam movement and became Executive Director of the Federation of Sangams when it was formed in 1983, as well as of Shantidan (see Section 3.3), which he founded and ran until his untimely death in 1996. He was a dynamic and wily leader, his origins in a fishing village giving him the ability to relate to the fishermen with the salty idiom and toughness they respected, and able equally to hold his own when representing his members’ interests with Church and government officials, and funding agencies.
Fr Dionysius recalled that the men's sodality in Enayam was thirty-four years old, and it gathered on Sunday to recite the Little Office of Our Lady. Fr Dionysius attended and gradually began talking about his experience at Manakudy. He tried to get the sodalists to think more deeply about the meaning of their religious commitment. They were asked to reflect on their situation as fishermen, using devices such as role-play, where they played merchants, moneylenders, village leaders, and fishermen. Sodality life became more and more demanding, and many left. Of those who stayed from among the original forty-five members, nine declared themselves willing to form themselves into a fishermen's *sangam* in mid-1975. Again, Sr Lieve (see Section 2 below), Fr James, and Lucas were present, and with the nine men the *sangam* was founded one evening, by candlelight (power had gone out that night!), in the convent. Lucas came and spent four months full-time in the village, and continued to visit regularly after that. They all strongly believed in the need for social conscientization and formation for the fishermen. The Enayam founding members were very strong, partly due to their CLC formation. They would meet every week. They bought land for the office, rather than using Church land, because Fr Dionysius believed that it was important for a progressive group to be independent of village decisions. So the *sangam* in Enayam was independent of the village customary authority, unlike in villages like Kurumbanai, where it was built on church land, and other groups, such as the Young Christian Students (YCS) and the CPI (M)-affiliated Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI), demanded the use of it, and there were constant fights.

Not surprisingly, the merchants (in Manakudy, and later in every village where *sangams* were founded) made every attempt to sabotage the fledgling cooperatives. They mounted collective boycotts of the fish auction on the beach, tried to organize similar boycotts in the town markets, spread false rumours about the financial workings of the cooperatives, refused to collect the taxes necessary to build a new church, used violence or its threat against *sangam* activists, and made forceful representations to the Bishop. In Manakudy the village elders supported the merchants because they were fearful of losing tax revenues, and joined them in their representation to Bishop Arockiaswamy. But the Bishop stood firm, saying that "justice had to prevail in a Christian village."^{127} In later attempts at forming

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^{127} Interview with Fr Dionysus. See also Tombeur (1990: 56).
sangams, too, the collusion of merchants and village committees posed a major obstacle. The custom when founding a sangam was to obtain the agreement of the village committee. In Ramanthurai, where the merchants controlled the committee, this permission was not forthcoming. But the fishermen were inspired by the benefits they saw sangams bringing in neighbouring villages, and their determination eventually led to the establishment of the sangam. However, this success was not achieved without intensive struggle, and even violence. (KSSS Annual Report, 1984)

1.3 Institutionalization

By 1983 there were thirteen sangams. These were federated that year under the Kanyakumari District Fishermen Sangams Federation (KDFSF). In 1985 the Federation joined the Trivandrum and Quilon district federations to form the South Indian Federation of Fishermen's Societies (SIFFS).

Sangam members elect an Executive Committee from among them annually. The executive committee is in charge of following up on loans; making decisions about new schemes; selecting qualified candidates for a loan; deciding on prices tendered by companies; chasing merchants to pay money they owe; and settling conflicts and issues that may arise. The Sangam hires its own auctioneer(s) and accountants. Sangams in a number of villages have bought land and built their own offices, or bought existing buildings. The Federation sends Community Development Officers (CDOs) to oversee the sangams, especially their accounts.

Membership in the sangam is registered by craft, and only one craft per family can be registered. Thus only craft owners, and not crew, can be members. There have been occasional schemes, such as one noted in the KSSS 1987 Annual Report, where Catholic Relief Services aid was obtained to help fifteen coolie (crew) families in two villages acquire fishing equipment to be shared by a group of three families. But such schemes have been few and far between.

128 At the beginning, only unmarried men were enrolled, and even now, men must be below 45 years of age to join.
The primary aim of the *sangams* was to break the marketing-cum-credit link between the merchants and the fishermen. Towards this end, the *sangam* appoints one or two auctioneers who sell the members’ catch for them on the beach. There has been a constant attempt to broaden the reach of the marketing effort in order to do more than simply get better prices on the beach. But the effort to capture more of the value that the chain of long-distance and export marketing adds has not proved very successful, as the infrastructure for this is expensive. The *sangams* have also faced continued difficulties with merchants dealing in ice-fish, who have an elaborate and far-reaching network, and thus are able to control the entire market and keep the price for fish sold through the *sangam* low. At one point, the companies and the merchants colluded to keep down the procurement price of prawn and cuttlefish. In this instance, the *sangams’* reciprocal boycott, preventing the companies’ agents from entering the village at all, won the day. (KSSS Report, 1989-90) Marketing remains a challenge and a concern.

The *sangams* also provide savings and credit services. Apart from the 2 percent to 3 percent compulsory savings that work as the share capital of the *sangam*, members are encouraged to put aside a further 10 percent of their income as private savings, to be withdrawn as they require. Members thus have access to credit backed by the share capital and savings of the village *sangam*. They can also obtain loans from the district Federation, which tries to raise grants from NGOs, and from government banks.

The district federation (KDFSF), while being the apex body of the village-level *sangams* and overseeing their activities, also carries out its own activities, for which it seeks aid from funding agencies. *Sangams’* savings deposited with the Federation provide it with a revolving fund that may be used for credit to members, or to ease financial difficulties incurred in marketing, as well as for contributions to *sangam* infrastructure such as an office building or marketing sheds. The Federation also provides fishing equipment at a fair price; has workshops for the repair of outboard motors (OBMs); provides training in OBM use and maintenance; and pilots the introduction of new technology such as OBMs, ply vallams, ice boxes, artificial reefs, and the rack drying and marketing of anchovies. It has also instituted a
death and accident relief fund\textsuperscript{129} and educational grants for children of members.\textsuperscript{130} Another stated objective is adult education and training for \textit{sangam} members, and executive members, on topics such as the principles, role, and social relevance of cooperatives, the dangers of the Government's Blue Revolution vision for the sustainability of the fishery, good leadership, crisis management, and the Indian political situation. In 1989, for instance, there were fifty-six seminars on various subjects (KSSS 1989-90 Report, 16); by the mid-nineties, such workshops or discussions had become much rarer.

The regional federation, SIFFS, though it has grown upwards from the village base and remains organizationally linked to it, plays a crucial, autonomous role. It has a large staff of trained professionals and is supported by grants from external funding agencies. It works in the cooperatives' core areas of marketing, credit, and savings, as well as on appropriate technology, research and dissemination, organization, and advocacy. The SIFFS boat-building yards, such as the one at Muttam in Kanyakumari district, design and produce improved models of traditional craft like \textit{kattumarams} and \textit{vallams}, in plywood and fibreglass. It also imports and supplies outboard motors (OBMs), and provides maintenance and training. It has gone beyond physical production and upkeep, to do research and advocate around the problems with existing technologies: for example, it mounted campaigns with Yamaha Motors and Johnson Motors to get them to supply spare parts for their OBMs, with limited success; provided financial aid to fishermen who had acquired these engines and then had them break down; and conducted an inquiry into the supply of \textit{albizia}, the wood used for \textit{kattumarams}, in order to be able to ensure its availability and price. SIFFS has also carried out significant censuses, surveys, and other studies, and maintains an impressive documentation centre and website.

SIFFS' credit program has evolved with shifts in the credit policies of India's nationalized banks. A primary purpose for the formation of cooperatives, and their integration into ever-larger networks, was to counter the banks' bias against small rural producers with

\textsuperscript{129} When a member dies or is permanently disabled, the Federation collects Rs 5 from every member and adds to or subtracts from the amount collected to pay Rs 10,000 to the family.

\textsuperscript{130} The 1993-94 report of the KDFSF states that 40 percent of the profits of the Fish Marketing Unit was retained by the Federation towards the Education Fund through which scholarships were given to two high achieving students per \textit{sangam}, as well as towards buying books for the poorer students, the aim being to encourage education among the children of fishermen.
little collateral to offer. Once a cooperative joined a society or federation, the larger organization took over the negotiation of the loan with the banks. By the late 1980s, rapid motorization of fishing craft led to the need for much larger loans. Individual loan requirements shot up, from below Rs. 10,000, to over Rs. 25,000. Banks now required that loans be secured, and village-level sangams and the district federations responded by offering organizational assets as collateral. By the early 1990s increasing difficulties in obtaining bank loans, and the inability to give adequate collateral, forced the Federations to develop their own small revolving funds based on grants from donor agencies. In the mid-1990s, following liberalization, the new commercial banks were more conservative in sanctioning rural loans, and government banks launched instead a microcredit program, under which SIFFS obtained a loan from a government bank with which to launch its own credit program.

SIFFS has also entered into organizational work. Apart from assisting the formation of cooperative societies in new areas, it helped organize deep-sea-going shark fishers from the district's westernmost villages into the Association of Deep Sea Going Artisanal Fishermen (ADSGAF), in order to deal with some of the issues they faced when migrating. It also played a leading role in founding, and then supported the National Fishworkers’ Forum (NFF) in implementing, a highly successful campaign against the Government of India's 2001 ban on shark fishing. It undertook similar advocacy work as part of the campaign initiated by the NFF against joint ventures in deep-sea fishing (see Chapter 7). In the late 1990s it founded, along with other concerned groups, the Alliance for the Release of Innocent Fishermen (ARIF), to work for the release of Indian and Sri Lankan fishermen arrested by the other state's navies for straying across territorial borders when fishing. It has also tried to play a role in conflict resolution between the trawler and kattumaram fishermen in KK, albeit with limited success. As an active member of the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ISCF--see Chapter 7), it has helped organize, amongst other things, South-South exchanges between fishermen.
2 Evaluating the Sangams

As noted in the quotation from Kurien earlier in this section, cooperatives are both people's organizations and business organizations. While my interest in them is chiefly as people's organizations, they would clearly be of little interest to their own members were they not successful as business organizations. But, when viewed from both angles, it is not easy to arrive at criteria for evaluation. Should the *sangams* be judged on how well they have served to improve incomes for their members? Or should the main criterion be their contribution to the economic development of the village as a whole? Should it be their organizational efficiency, their ability to stay abreast of, and respond to, members' needs, and changes in markets and state policy? Or should it be their contribution to the continued viability of the artisanal fishery, through the provision of credit, technological innovation, and timely socio-economic research, as well as through support for other organizations and movements within this sector. Finally, the criteria will necessarily be different for the village *sangams*, and for the apex federation, SIFFS.

2.1 Gains for Members

The SIFFS 2003-2004 Annual Report showed a total of 2,134 members in 47 village *sangams* in Kanyakumari district. Only owners (and only one owner per craft) can be a member of a *sangam* but, given the division of earnings in the forms of shares rather than wages, increased incomes would impact crew members as well. The 1994 SIFFS Survey of Primary Society Members shows that there was an average of 3.4 crew members per *sangam* member; in 2003, this would have meant that some 7,255 men would have benefited directly from the *sangams'* sales. This is about half of the total of 16,331 motorized and non-motorized fishermen (i.e., not including either the small number who work on shore seines, or the large number who work in the mechanized sector, as owners or labour) recorded by SIFFS's 2003 census.

Sales for all *sangams* in the district increased from Rs 468.86 lakh (468,86,000) for 2,370 members, or an average of Rs 19,783 per member, in 1991-92, to Rs 127.52 million (127,520,504) for 2341 members or Rs 54,472 per member in 2001-2002 (a 175 percent increase over 10 years) (SIFFS, Annual Reports, 1991-92 and 2001-02). These
figures may be attributable to inflation, the secular rise in prices for fish through this period, and the new global and national markets for fish and seafood. For members, the benefits come also from the links between the elimination of the middleman, the growth of their own savings, and the access to reasonably priced credit.

The benefits for members have been not only economic. Financial strength and participation in the struggle to cooperativize has led to the emergence of a whole breed of new leaders, men such as Mariadasan¹³¹ of Manakudy, and Motcham of Kovalam, who are now the “vellii cattai” of the villages, but unlike the earlier class of such men, who functioned effectively only at the local level, are equally articulate and confident in the outside world.

2.2 Transforming Village Structures

The growing authority of sangam leaders in the village also reflects a change in structures of authority. Village leaders of the past were often from the menakkadan/mejaikarar, or non-fishing, families of the village. Of course, this shift cannot be attributed solely to the sangams, but is also due to the processes discussed in Chapter 5.

There is some debate about whether the sangams have created a new “creamy layer” in the villages. Supporters have shown (as I have, above) that while the sangams do not give coolies membership, they too have benefited from their share in improved prices. Others argue that the sangams have an institutional bias towards economic viability that causes them to channel new schemes and funds to craft-owners who they know are likely to repay, rather than toward more risky aspirants, such as those who do not already possess their own craft, and that this bias perpetuates the existence of a class of non-owners.¹³²

¹³¹ Mariadasan, who as a young fisherman helped Fr Dionysius start the first sangam in Manakudy, went on to serve as the President of the Federation, of SIFFS, and of the Centre for Appropriate Technology in Nagercoil, and has travelled to Senegal as part of an ICSF project to teach fishermen there how to use the trammel net. He and Motcham now hold positions on the diocesan Coastal Peace and Development Committee.

¹³² In Manakudy, the government had wanted to assist the non-owners to acquire craft, but the sangam didn't want to take the risk involved, so they chose people who were known success stories, most of whom already owned craft. In a conversation with some sangam members, we were given a context for this conservatism. The Assistant Director of Fisheries in the district had at one point given loans and subsidies for craft/gear/motors, but without consulting the Federation. Then there arose a problem with repayment. Our informants said that if the Federation had been consulted it would have made sure that the men selected for
Not all craft owners have joined sangams\textsuperscript{133}, and a significant number continue to sell to merchants. But these craft owners have also stood to benefit from the fact that the merchants and middlemen can no longer engage in monopsonistic price-setting practices on the beach. Most merchants continue to act as agents for the bigger companies, and to buy dried fish that they often market directly to distant markets. Several also buy fish or shrimp from villages other than their own. Some merchants felt that the sangams had hurt their business. For instance, Sarkar in Kovalam said that although he still lent fishermen money to buy nets, they neither sold him their fish nor felt compelled to repay him promptly.\textsuperscript{134} Others, such as Damian in Pallam Puthenthurai, on the other hand, were still sold fish by some fishermen, if the prices offered by the sangam were not high enough. Damian had also managed to set up a small sangam of his own, where coolies were also admitted as members, and had thus successfully carved out a niche for himself. In general, however, one may fairly conclude that the domination of the merchants, both economically, and politically – through their collusion with the Parish Priest and their control of the village council – has been broken.\textsuperscript{135}

Likewise, sangams are almost the only organizations in the village that have no role for the Parish Priest. The sangams were founded as a KSSS project and were directed by a

\textsuperscript{133} A cynicism toward collective action seemed the chief reason. Most non-members I spoke to gave similar shrugs when asked their reasons for not joining, talking of themselves as people who did not already have craft. But the sangam members disagreed.

\textsuperscript{134} The following case was brought to a parish committee meeting in Kovalam. A number of fishermen had borrowed money over the years from the merchants. When they found that the sangam was giving a better price (especially on dry fish), they became sangam members and stopped selling to the merchants. The merchants had complained to the sangam that the men still owed them money. The men insisted that since they had been repaying their loans over the years, they had by now paid back more than they had taken. The sangams had looked into the matter, but had been unable to settle it, so it was sent to the parish committee.

\textsuperscript{135} Recent crises in the sangams may have led to an improvement in the merchants’ economic fortunes, though their political power may be harder to recover. Interviews with members in 2004 revealed that the problems (of corruption, members quitting, etc.) within the sangams (we heard this in Vavathurai, Rakshagar Theru, Kovalam, Manakudy, Enayam Puthenthurai) had resulted in merchants and auctioneers returning to the beach. In Vavathurai, they now took 3% commission compared to the 5% they took before the sangams, and compared to the 2% taken by the Sangam auctioneers.
priest appointed as Project Director. The Federation bylaws state that a member of the KSSS "may" be asked to be on the executive, but give no formal role to the KSSS or the Project Director. Relations with the KSSS turned sour over the years, with the Federation, under the Executive Directorship of Lucas, seeking to assert its autonomy from the Church, and the KDFSF ceasing to have any formal relationship with the KSSS. However, the accusations of corruption and high-handedness against Mariadasan (then President) and Lucas, which led to a shake up of the management and executive in 1993, also saw a move back towards giving the KSSS more supervisory power.

2.3 The Sangams as "People's" Organizations

In contrast to the government cooperatives, the sangams are organic institutions, and their survival depends on the strength and resourcefulness of their members. For instance, when the merchants finally decided they would buy fish from the sangam, but then delayed payment, the fishermen went to the merchant's warehouse and physically blocked the trucking of his stock of dried fish, thus forcing him to pay up. This was supported by the vigilance, and prompt intervention at various levels, of activists like Lucas and Fr Dionysius, and the willingness of the KSSS director and the Bishop to provide necessary institutional support at crucial moments. In contrast, similar opposition from merchants to attempts at marketing by the government cooperatives met with little sustained resistance from either society members or the officials in charge. Likewise, the government cooperatives have not been able to keep out non-active fishermen, either in policy or in fact. The sangams, on the other hand, have strict membership criteria, and the executive's personal acquaintance with village members prevents any cheating of this kind.

The sangams are powerful organizations in the villages, with at least one representative on the parish councils. Given their financial strength, they are often turned to for contributions to a local campaign or cause. They are the only associations in the villages that have their own office, and, until the end of the 1990s, when telecommunication became more widely available across India, they often had the only phone line in the village, other than the one in the parish house. As such, they often served as a hub of activity and discussion, as members passed through to pick up their earnings, or make a deposit, or an urgent phone call.
Breakaway factions, and the establishment of new sangams, or the shift by one or more members to a sangam run by some other organization such as SED, have been a feature of the cooperative movement in the villages from the start. This is sparked by conflicts over repayment, or accusations of corruption against executive members, and in some sangams, such as in Vavathurai, this has led to a dramatic decline in members, and the revival of sales to merchants. These accusations of corruption amongst the staff and executive have had a particularly devastating effect on the district Federation, causing a widespread loss of confidence, and a sense of malaise that was apparent in my conversations with sangam members in 2004. Nevertheless, SIFFS assistance, both financial and managerial, has been able to tide it over (SIFFS, 2004-05).

One of the reasons for the constant allegations of corruption is the amount of money involved. The sangams are not entirely self-sufficient. They turn to the Federation for funds to cover staffing and other infrastructure costs, as well as for loans to members. The Federation in turn, receives its funds from international donors, and from SIFFS, whose own revenues come from Indian and international institutional sources. While this reliance on outside funding is perhaps inevitable, it makes all the organizations vulnerable both to internal struggles over monies, and to the vagaries of policy shifts within funding agencies.

2.4 The Sangams as a Broader Political Force

The sangams and the district Federation have undertaken some advocacy and political work, such as a hunger strike in front of the Collector's office in 1987 to focus attention on the demands put forward by the national fishermen’s organizations, and participation in a state-wide campaign to demand the amendment of the government rule that that a search helicopter would be sent out only if at least five fishermen were missing. Village sangams have also participated in local agitations; for example, the Kurumbanai sangam participated in a dharna organized by the fishermen youth movement, asking for 20 percent reservation of jobs in the Indian Rare Earths plant at Manavalakurichi. However, as with the educational work, there is a general sense that the sangams should be cautious about which political issues they involve themselves with, especially after the experience of the Kanyakumari March (see Chapter 7). There have been fewer such involvements in recent years. At issue is the government certificate that enables them to receive aid from international donors. This
certificate is conditional on their non-involvement in anything that could potentially be
deemed “political.”

As mentioned above, SIFFS has played a more sustained advocacy role. It has focused
specifically on fisheries issues, held public education meetings, and lobbied officials. Its
appreciation of its own scope is pragmatic, perhaps, but also sophisticated, as evidenced in
its role in the campaign against the ban on shark fishing, where it did the initial groundwork
in terms of building the case and networking with other organizations, and then allowed the
NFF (best described as a “social movement union”) to take the lead in the public campaign.

2.5 Sustaining the Artisanal Fishery

The sangams, and especially SIFFS, are a highly successful model of what is possible
through sustained and systematic work. They have paid serious attention to local craft
and gear forms, and fishermen’s needs and aspirations, in an attempt to valorize the
artisanal fishery. They have enabled new technologies and access to credit that have
contributed to the viability of livelihoods in the artisanal fishery. In fact, SIFFS work in
areas such as data collection and documentation, exploration of new opportunities
(technologies, markets), advocacy and international networking, and training and safety
at sea, may be seen to have contributed to the “professionalization” of the fishermen, and
indeed, of the artisanal fishing industry as a whole.

The sangam structures have a vision of development as an organic process shaped by
members' needs, and not by disembodied policy. SIFFS keeps an active eye on shifts in
credit availability, export markets, new technologies, rising input costs, and all such
matters associated with successful participation in the market, and lobbies at the
appropriate levels to influence government policy.

Nonetheless, there are constraints, tensions, and contradictions endemic to SIFFS’ work
and vision, and to fisheries development more generally, that place limits on the
sustainability of the artisanal fishery. Improved returns from the artisanal fishery have not
been able to stanch the flow of men to work in the mechanized sector, as shown in
Chapter 2. This is reflected in the membership base of the sangams themselves:
membership has not grown, and has even declined somewhat as a proportion of all
fishermen in the village; just under 10 percent of all fishermen in the district were members of the KSFDF sangams in 1991, but by 2001, only 6 percent of all fishermen in the district were members.\textsuperscript{136} Although there are many reasons for this decline, including the presence of other cooperative societies as mentioned above, it is also due to the fact that fewer active fishermen in the villages are working on their own artisanal craft, and are working instead as coolies on the trawlers.

One serious constraint is the potentially finite nature of the resource base itself, unless it is well managed. This resource is under threat due to the continued expansion of the non-artisanal, capital-intensive, mechanized sector, which the cooperatives have not sought to halt, even though their own members are increasingly migrating there to work.\textsuperscript{137} The question of resource management is not one that the sangams or SIFFS have pressed, although there are signs that it is becoming a concern: the SIFFS 2002-3 Annual Report notes that, despite the growth of the fish marketing turnover of the entire network to an unprecedented high, there were serious declines in fish catches in some areas at the end of the year. It continues: "The economics of fishing continues to look precarious and the absence of an effective fisheries management regime threatens the long-term survival of fishing as a livelihood for large numbers" (SIFFS, 2002-2003: 1). It then reports that several seminars on fisheries management were held during the year.

But the extent to which these seminars called on artisanal fishers to reorient their own production strategies is not clear. This is a problem, because it is not only the mechanized sector that is putting pressure on the resources. In the absence of any regulations, artisanal fishermen using improved craft, motors, and more "efficient" gear, are themselves a threat. Efforts at self-limitation through appropriate technology, such as through the use of more fuel-efficient, if less convenient, inboard engines, have not been warmly received by members (Dietrich and Nayak, 2006: 403-406).

\textsuperscript{136} Calculated from the Tamil Nadu Department of Fisheries Census, 1986, the SIFFS Census, 2003, and the SIFFS Annual Reports, 1993 and 2002.
\textsuperscript{137} SIFFS census data for 2003 show that the single largest number of fishermen own or work on mechanized boats, including those working abroad on such boats (16,702 or 46 percent), followed by those working on motorized craft (\textit{kattumarams or vallams}) (9474 or 26 percent); and those on non-motorized craft (almost entirely \textit{kattumaram}) (6857 or 19 percent); and those who work on shore seines (3177 or 9 percent).
Another tension arises from the fact that the artisanal fishery was traditionally a community-based fishery. The *sangams* have focused on empowering and professionalizing their members, not on including new sections of the community, such as the non-craft-owners. Their most glaring omission in this regard has been that of women: the women vendors have lost out in the shift to the export market, and the economic contribution of other, non-wage-earning women has not been recognized. In the year 2000 the KDFSF started Self Help Groups for women in their members’ families, and SIFFS provides support to these and to other women’s organizations in their Kerala federations (SIFFS, 2002). The SIFFS website now lists as one the organization’s five objectives: “[a]lternative employment and strengthening of women’s livelihoods to diversify the economic base of the community and ensure its all round development.” But this is a belated, and rather minimal, recognition that does little to counter the view that women are not active members of the fishing economy, a view that the professionalization of the sector undertaken by SIFFS has helped to reinforce (Dietrich and Nayak, 2006: 398-400).

3 The Women's Micro-Credit Groups

Savings and credit societies for women were initiated earlier, on a smaller scale in terms of the credit available, and with far less opposition, than those for men. The lack of opposition was due, of course, to the fact that these new associations were not dependent on the destruction of earlier relationships of credit, but sought instead to build on them in new ways. Their aims from the start included access to credit, income generation, and, unlike the men’s cooperatives, “consciousness-raising” and “empowerment.”

3.1 The Net-Making Centre

The earliest attempts at economic associations for women were made by the diocesan social service society, the KSSS. Under the management of a group of ICM nuns, the KSSS set up a number of net making centres for women, on the grounds that: “in the coastal villages, while men are busy fishing, women and girls idle away their time in their houses gossiping and fighting” (KSSS Report, 1974: 20-21). Women had traditionally made nets at home: for
the men in their own families, for which they received no payment; and for men from other families, who would pay them a small amount for the net. The centres aimed at providing occupations and social status for women. Eleven such centres were established in 1971, and by 1974 there were thirteen such centres employing some twelve hundred young women.

The women’s wages were paid partly in cash, and partly in grain supplied by the American Food for Work programme. Each young woman was urged to open a personal bank account, and on the basis of these savings, the banks were persuaded to give the families credit for the purchase of fishing equipment. In 1974 the collective savings of the twelve hundred women stood at Rs 79,596, against which they received total credit worth Rs 49,950. The KSSS Report states that the moral pressure the young women exercised on their families ensured the regular repayment of loans.

By the mid-seventies, commercial net making machines had become available, and a private entrepreneur applied for a licence to set up a net making factory in the district. The women, led by ICM nuns like Delphin, mounted a campaign to protest this, but to no avail. By the end of the seventies, the net making centres had to be closed down for want of buyers.

3.2 The Community Health Development Programme (CHDP)

In 1971 the founders of the net making centres - ICM nun Sr. Lieve, and the KSSS – also set up, under the KSSS, a Community Health Development Programme (CHDP), which functioned in both the coastal and inland villages. Initially aimed at mother and child health, this was later broadened to community health, sanitation, social awareness, and savings. The savings scheme was considered a central component of any KSSS program in that period. *Mahalir mandrams* (women’s associations) were set up in each village, and were later registered independently and federated under the CHDP.

Under the CHDP savings scheme, as soon as a woman had a minimum of Rs 10 saved in her *mahalir mandram*, she was helped by the community organiser and health team to open a personal bank or post office account. By the end of 1984, 13,627 women had saved Rs 668,814 through this scheme. These savings were used for such purposes as: marriage expenses; construction of latrines and houses; children’s education; medical expenses;
purchase of a cow or goat, sewing machine or weaving loom; repayment of a loan; or opening a family savings account so as to get a loan for fishing equipment.

Since health was the primary goal of the CHDP, health camps were held frequently on subjects such as nutrition and communicable diseases, as were clinics for antenatal care and immunization, in addition to the regular visits to each village by the health team. As in the net making centres, adult education (which was understood not just as reading and writing, but in Paulo Freire’s sense of “conscientization,” i.e., reflection and judgement on social themes so as to awaken a social consciousness) (Lehmann, 1990: 99-100), information sharing on a variety of social themes, and training for the animators and leaders, were also key components of the programme. Beginning with themes such as home management and responsible parenting, CHDP seminars included topics ranging from the hazards of nuclear power, to the situation of women, the Indian economic and political system, Panchayati Raj institutions, the Sri Lanka problem, the green revolution, deforestation, and the struggle of the fishworkers. In 1989-90, there were some 4,655 village-level meetings, local afternoon seminars, and three-day-long district level seminars, with a total of some 79,810 participants (including repeat participants). In the seventies, members were offered classes in needlework, tailoring, and cooking; by 1993, the KSSS Report listed training in rubber tapping, herbal gardening, carpentry, and masonry, suggesting an attempt to move beyond skills traditionally considered female. In addition to training for women members and training for animators and community organizers, summer camps were held for children and youth.

The CHDP mahalir mandrams were also active in various campaigns, along with other organizations, advocating for buses for fish vendors and the right of fish vendors to ride in the public buses, for public services and facilities, against a rape in the district, or to celebrate International Women’s Day. In 1989, when I first went to the region as a volunteer to create awareness about the Kanyakumari March (see Chapter 7), we held several engaged and animated meetings with the mahalir mandrams around environmental issues to be highlighted by the March, and women from these mandrams were among those who came to the March in large numbers.
However, the program remained heavily dependent on outside funding for its success. With the drying up of these sources, there were enormous difficulties in maintaining the paid staff, and the CHDP had to undergo a drastic streamlining and search for the means for the organization to generate its own income. This had led to a decline of the *mahalir mandrams* in the villages during my fieldwork there in 1994-95.

3.3 Shantidan

Of the savings and credit associations in Kanyakumari, the most visible and dynamic is Shantidan. Shantidan was founded as an NGO in 1983 through the efforts, among others, of Lucas, one of the founders of the men’s *sangams*. The first village *sangam* was started by Susila, a social worker, in her home village of Eraymanthurai. Those invited to join were mainly widows, women with a large number of daughters (and therefore a large dowry obligation), and others in similar straits. From 3 *sangams*, 94 members, and a total savings of Rs 9,084 in 1983, Shantidan had grown to 52 *sangams*, 3,625 members, and a total savings of Rs 3.45 million in 1994. One of Shantidan’s chief aims, and one for which they received outside funding, was to raise the scale of women’s operations by making credit possible not just for subsistence, but for investment.

A key target group for Shantidan was the fish vending women, among the poorest and most marginalized of women in the villages, many of whom were heads of households, although Dunkley (1993) cites a 1990 survey that shows that only 56 percent of Shantidan members were fish vendors. My own findings in this regard were mixed: in Vavathurai, the *sangam* was founded in 1988 with 35 women, 17 of whom were fish vendors; the rest made shell craft for sale, or nets, or ran petty shops. For a while, only women who earned money in these ways were solicited to be members, but later other women were enrolled to increase the membership. By the mid-1990s it was observed that the women who did not do paid work actually managed to save more money than those who did. By 1995 there were some 100 members, only half of whom were income earners. In the Enayam Puthenthurai Shantidan *sangam*, of the 75 regular members in 1995, all but 15 vended fish. In the Kovalam unit in the same year, only 20 of the 80 members did so.
The general body for Shantidan at the district level consists of two delegates from each village *sangam*, plus animators and various volunteers. It meets three times a year to evaluate programs, deal with problems and conflicts that arise, and provide a forum for new ideas and information. A Management Committee of seven women appointed by and from the General Body, plus appropriate office-bearers of Shantidan, plans conferences or other district level functions, vets and sanctions loans (initially allocated by the *sangams*), reviews repayment rates, and generally oversees the project. The Project has a chief executive, or director, as well as paid staff such as an accountant, and other office staff, community workers, and animators, as well as volunteers.

The Community Workers cover a number of villages, assist with the social programs, deal with social problems, liaise with government authorities and link villages with government services. They usually have social work experience, or are graduates, and work full-time. Most *sangams* have their own animator who comes from the village. The functions of the animator include: general implementation of the credit programme, record keeping, organizing loans, monitoring and encouraging repayment, explaining the system to members, handling problems and grievances, organizing *sangam* meetings, arranging and supervising all aspects of the social program, encouraging improvements in health and living standards, generally seeing that the *sangam* is well run, assisting women to learn these tasks themselves, and endeavouring to raise the women’s social awareness. Officially their job is not full-time, though in practice it usually is. They are paid a modest wage. Shantidan also uses volunteers to work with the animators and community organizers to facilitate various social programs. They receive some training, are paid a small allowance, and receive some remuneration for travel costs.

Initially, the *sangam* had several basic rules for its members, including an obligation to save at least Rs 10 per week, and to attend weekly meetings. *Sangam* members along with the animator make decisions about who should be given memberships and loans, what should be done with defaulters, and so on. Savings money was deposited in a government bank, which enabled members to borrow as much as Rs 500, for up to 20 months, at 4 percent interest. At first, the funding agency, the Australian Community Aid Abroad, provided Rs 25,000 to the bank as collateral for the women’s loans. However, the banks did not seem to
be meeting the women’s needs. The Rs 500 upper limit on loans left most women still partly reliant on moneylenders. Some bank loans were actually charged an interest rate closer to 10 percent, bank procedures were stiff and complex, and staff often unsympathetic. Shantidan therefore decided to establish its own credit organization, and in 1987, CAA along with another funder, provided Rs 250,000 as working capital. Under this new scheme, a woman paid Rs 100 to join, and had to save Rs 150 before she could borrow. The amount of a loan is set relative to a member’s savings (Dunkley, 1993).

Between 1987 and 1990, loans were taken for fish vending (48 percent of all loans), and for other income-generation purposes, such as to set up a small shop, purchase a sewing machine, fish net making, tailoring, or buying cows. They were also taken in order to redeem interest on another loan, for house construction, wedding expenses, unexpected expenses, toilet construction, medical care, and children’s education. Loans were also taken toward the purchase of fishing nets or a kattumaram. During this period, the average on-time repayment rate was 97 percent (Dunkley, 1993: 18).

Although individual loans are to be repaid over twenty months, each sangam is given a three-year period to collect all outstanding loans. If any sangam has outstanding loans after that three-year period, it is not eligible for new loans from the district committee until it has repaid the outstanding loans. However, the organization recognizes that inability to pay is not simply a result of negligence; a person may die or be infirm, but the savings and loan fund has to cover the loss in some way. It has therefore introduced a loan insurance/life insurance scheme whereby every sangam member must pay Rs 30 per year. This money is pooled and used to repay a sangam if a member cannot pay. In the case of death, regardless of whether the member had any outstanding loan, it is also used to pay the member’s family the amount of Rs 2000, which is at least enough to ensure a decent funeral.

Like members of the other associations, Shantidan members have taken up social issues. They have participated in campaigns for services, for the right of fish vending women to use public transport, and against the sale of illicit alcohol in the villages. They have collaborated with other women’s organizations over issues such as rape or dowry demands, and have organized events for international women’s day. They were active in the
Kanyakumari march. Shantidan members and some local sangams were also active in the fishworkers’ campaign against trawlers, and against the government’s scheme to license foreign fleets for deep-sea fishing. Weekly meetings of the sangam often see a discussion of some such social issue or concern.

Education and general training are also considered an integral part of the association’s mandate. Educational sessions are organized for different groups such as mothers and unmarried women. School children are given tuition, and other educational and cultural activities are occasionally organized for them by the members of the young women’s associations of Shantidan, supervised by Shantidan volunteers. Animators and community organizers have been trained in community building, managing thrift and credit operations, post-harvest technologies of fish handling and fish processing, and some in first aid, AIDS, and Panchayati Raj (Shantidan, Annual Report 1993). All this is in keeping with Shantidan’s stated goal: to promote the self-reliant social development of women in the fishing community.

3.4 Grama Pengal Munnetra Sangam (GPMS) (Rural Women’s Savings Society)

In 1985, the KSSS started two other schemes aimed at poor women: the GPMS or Rural Women’s Savings Society, and the Widows Rehabilitation Programme (now called “Kaikal,” or Women’s Self-Confidence Programme). The GPMS focused initially on women in the coastal villages - petty traders, small shop owners, and later on housewives as well. This program became independent of KSSS by 1994, and was run by Fr Lawrence, who had founded it.

In the earlier years, the GPMS sangams experienced a number of problems. The initial surge of enthusiasm quickly dissipated. Members were slack about their savings, which soon dwindled, and there were cases of treasurers misappropriating the funds. The 1986 KSSS Report notes that the organization was increasingly less willing to recommend women for bank loans, as there was a disturbing tendency to avoid repayment and drop out of the association. Certain reforms were then put in place. Since the misappropriation of funds was found to happen more when the treasurers were unmarried women, it was decided to appoint
only married women to the position. A village-level animator was appointed to visit the women daily in their homes to collect their savings and to deposit them daily or bi-weekly in a local bank. This helped to improve the rate of savings compared to the earlier period, when the women were required to bring their savings to the animator and were often remiss. In 1989-90 a district level federation was formed that would act as a credit union for the rotation of funds.

By the end of 1987 there were 17 sangams with 876 members. In 1993, there were 22 sangams with 2,160 members. Like those of the other women’s sangams, GPMS members have participated in demands for services, and the project has obtained funding for housing and water-supply schemes. But animators are not as well trained in social issues as are those of the CHDP or Shantidan, and the main focus seems to be on the savings and loans, with some “training” component.

At a meeting of the GPMS unit in Chinna Muttam in October 1995, held in the verandah of the school, some eighteen women were present. They were of all ages, but almost all were married. The meeting began with a prayer. The Secretary then read the minutes of the last meeting. At the last meeting, an official of NOVIP, the agency that funded the program, had been present and had asked them what they felt were the benefits of membership. They seem to have reported two main ones: that they had acted to force the liquor brewers out of the village, and that some of them had taken advantage of the toilet scheme offered by the organization to acquire toilets. The Treasurer then read the previous month’s accounts.

Repayment of the credit union loan was discussed. It was decided that loans should not be given again to women who were lax about repaying. This led to a huge argument. One woman felt she was being targeted, even though no one had said her name. It had however been stated that ten loans were being held up because one woman was yet to repay her loan entirely. So they were all angry with her. People felt that only those who came regularly to meetings should even be considered for the loans.

There was some questioning and argument over the roles of the animator and the executive committee. At an earlier meeting, the animator had been accused of giving loans to whomever she favoured. She clarified this here, saying that all decisions were made at the
Executive Committee meeting. Then there was some debate over what should be left to the Executive meeting and what should be brought to the General Body meeting. It was agreed that defaulters needed to be hauled up by the General Body, as it was then less easy for them to default than if they had to face only the animator or a few Executive Committee members.

3.5 Kaikal (Many Hands) Women’s Self-Confidence Program

*Kaikal* is aimed at widows and other indigent women in women-headed households, and supported through funding from aid agencies like Andheri Hilfe and Cebemo Netherlands. The objectives of the organization, as listed on its website, are to organize widows and indigent women; enable them to gain self-confidence; promote women’s leadership; create access to small savings and credit facilities; tap government schemes; provide educational assistance to the children of members; and promote the remarriage of widows. *Kaikal* continues to be run as a KSSS programme, with a Diocese-appointed director, periodic meetings of the executive at the diocesan level, and bi-annual General Body Meetings. At village-level meetings, which were usually monthly, the Parish Priest was often invited to be present as the diocesan representative. As with GPMS, the savings scheme was the chief focus of the meeting I attended, although the Parish Priest or the animator did on occasion inject some social issue into the discussion. Members reported that an important outcome of the association, aside from the small amount of income security it provided, was the growth of solidarity and mutual aid, and mental relief from their earlier sense of desperation.

3.6 A Proliferation of Self-Help Groups

By the early 1990s, savings and credit had come to be seen as a sine qua non for women’s empowerment. Women began to expect savings and credit from any association they were invited to join. The Tamil Nadu Fishworkers’ Union (TFU) (see Chapter 7) had abjured such economistic schemes in favour of purely political methods like campaigns. Now, however, briefly and not very successfully, it ran a savings and credit scheme as a way of

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enlisting and retaining the support of its women members. (By the middle of this past decade, the only remaining activity of the TFU, under new leadership, was the running of self-help groups for women – but the account of how this happened is the stuff of Chapter 7.) Likewise, the KK Praxis Group, a leftist group that had for years focused solely on politicization and mobilization work, and would have in the past considered schemes of credit "petty bourgeois" or "reformist," had by the early nineties begun to institute their own savings and credit schemes among women, arguing that these were a means to politicization, and even necessary to the "empowerment" of women.

Not to be outdone, since the early 1990s the state has entered enthusiastically into the field, and in the last two decades lending to microfinance institutions (MFIs)\(^\text{139}\) has become a regular part of public sector bank activity.\(^\text{140}\) With the assistance of the International Fund for Agricultural Development, the Government of Tamil Nadu, through the Tamil Nadu Corporation for Development of Women Ltd. (TNCDW), launched a pilot project in five districts of Tamil Nadu in 1989-90.\(^\text{141}\) The prime objective of the project was to improve the social and economic position of women below the poverty line, through the formation of self-help groups of poor women in these districts, with the active assistance and supervision of NGOs. This was later expanded to other districts, and funding was sought from the Indian Bank (a public sector commercial bank) and the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD). The TNCDW website cites this as proof of the successful partnership between TNCDW, NGOs, and public sector banks.

In Kanyakumari district the program was taken up by existing NGOs like Shantidan and GPMS (and several others that operate in the inland villages), and by a host of new NGOs that have emerged specifically in the context of this new developmental thrust. One of the more extensive of these is the Mahalir Association for Literacy, Awareness and Rights (MALAR), which started out in 1995, and by 2003 was a federation of 1,410 Self-Help Groups, with 28,000 women members, covering virtually every village in

\(^{139}\) It is necessary to distinguish between microcredit, where the provision of credit is the chief economic activity, and microfinance, which might make available a number of other instruments such as risk insurance (see Ananya Roy, 2010). While microcredit is most accurate for the kinds of activities described here, the state and bank literature seems to prefer the open-endedness of “microfinance.”

\(^{140}\) See NABARD (2009) and Status of Microfinance in India, 2008-09, http://www.nabard.org/pdf/Status%20of%20Microfinance%20in%20India%202008-09_131109.pdf

\(^{141}\) http://www.tamilnadvomen.org/
Kanyakumari. MALAR was founded by activists of the Tamil Nadu Science Forum. They sought a way to sustain their literacy and empowerment work in the district when government funds for Arivoli Iyakkam, the Total Literacy Movement (described in Chapter 3), which they ran, were terminated in 1994. In addition to generating savings and credit, and doing literacy and social consciousness work, MALAR groups have initiated a range of micro-enterprises, in such diverse fields as vegetable and fish vending, poultry breeding, and the manufacturing of pottery, handloom goods, garments, soaps, jams and pickles, paper bags, and envelopes. Given the background of its founders, MALAR seeks to make the SHGs vehicles for broader change in the villages, but this is not the case for several of the other NGOs, for whom the mobilization of savings remains the chief goal.

4 Evaluating the Self-Help Groups

As with the men’s cooperative *sangams*, it may be possible to evaluate the women’s self-help groups under a number of different criteria.

4.1 Credit/Income for Members

Annual reports of the organizations, external evaluations, and interviews with members all concur in noting increased access to credit for members. Women did report having more disposable income. They were able to use this to buy small appliances in the home, or put toward some larger expense, or toward the endless round of gifts and trips related to the wide range of life-cycle events that were an essential part of their social world. However, evaluators of these schemes agree that assessing their impact on incomes is very difficult, as so many factors affect income. Certainly, the growth in savings may be one indication of the rise in incomes. With regard to credit, while a significant proportion of it is taken by fish vendors and other small traders to use as working capital, much of it is still taken for larger consumption and social purposes, rather than for productive investment. Women continue to draw upon informal sources of credit, such as moneylenders and chit

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142 Personal conversation with founder, Ms Shelin Mary. See also the Malar website at [http://sites.google.com/a/kkmalar.org/www/home](http://sites.google.com/a/kkmalar.org/www/home), and Infochange, 2003.
funds, often at very high rates of credit; there is no evidence that the availability of formal sources has driven down the rates of more informal ones. For instance, a funding agency evaluation of Shantidan reported that even after ten years of successful credit programs for women, many women fish traders still buy fish from auctioneers on credit, paying 5 percent interest per day. Many of these women are Shantidan members, and have access to cheaper credit, but the credit extended by the auctioneers is convenient, and Rs 5 interest on Rs 100 borrowed does not seem much if you repay it the same day. As well, despite all the much vaunted, high repayment rates of group lending schemes, bank managers remain wary of making large loans. The evaluation report concludes that the introduction of new sources of credit does not always lead to a fall in interest rates on existing sources. The new funds may meet new credit needs, so the overall demand may still be high; or the earlier informal sector may meet specific needs which the formal sources are unable to supply, and so the former may retain their high interest rates. Informal lending of the reciprocal credit variety, which women use for daily consumption purposes, also continues to be used because of its flexibility, freedom from interest, and availability for small needs.

The high repayment rate is also cited as evidence of the success of the programs. For instance, the TNCDW website claims a repayment rate of 85 percent, and speaks with pride of the “financial discipline inculcated through internal rotation of savings.” What this discipline means in the context of women’s lives and relationships is not clear. Attendance at meetings was the condition for access to these loans. Many of the women I interviewed were members of more than one Self Help Group, and this allowed them to use the loan from one to pay off the other. These sources then became part of the basket they continue to draw on to meet both subsistence and other needs. Rankin makes the same observation in her work on microfinance programs in Nepal, where she shows how high repayment rates are sustained by “loan swapping.” While this strategy increased the total indebtedness of women, it also pointed to “women’s skillful manipulation of a development technology to sustain debt financing of subsistence and social investment activities” (Rankin, 2008: 1968, cited in Ananya Roy, 2010: 108-109).
4.2 Skills Training and Employment Generation

Several of the projects, such as MALAR above, have been successful in creating micro-enterprises. But the more significant contribution of the projects might be in creating jobs for young, educated women, to work as animators and community organizers. It is these animators and organizers who also acquire the most skills, depending on which organization employs them. In Shantidan, for instance, as noted above, animators and community organizers were trained in community building, managing thrift and credit operations, and post-harvest technologies of fish handling and fish processing. Some also received training in first aid, AIDS, and Panchayati Raj.

4.3 “Empowerment”

These animators and community organizers were certainly “empowered” to a degree. Although their wages were by and large modest, economic empowerment came in the form of a regular paycheque. More importantly, they learned, from the multiple roles they were called to play within the organization, to take up leadership roles in the community. The functions of the Shantidan animator are diverse, as seen in Section 3.3. Animators are required to be functionally literate, energetic, resourceful, socially aware, capable of leadership, and able to withstand criticism, gossip, or even some ostracism. They are frequently called on to respond to all kinds of demands on their leadership abilities beyond their role as Shantidan animator, as I found in several of the villages where the Shantidan animator was often referred to as an important resource person.

What empowerment might mean for the members of SHGs is not as clear. The TNCDW website cites an evaluation report of its program that points out that the standing of SHG members in their families and neighbourhood, and the participation of women members in decision-making in their families and community, have improved significantly. Another Gender Impact Assessment study, done by IFAD Completion Evaluation Mission and cited there, indicates substantial improvement in women's access and control to resources, increased mobility, increased self-confidence, and an increased voice for women in household and community decision-making. Studies, from around the world, of the empowerment potential of microcredit differ widely in their assessments, in part because
of the difficulty of operationalizing a concept such as “empowerment,” and, consequently, or arriving at common measures (Holvoet, 2005: 77-78). In her study of microcredit programs in South India, Holvoet uses “decision-making agency” as a measure of empowerment. She concludes that there is evidence of a greater shift to male-female, joint decision-making, when the women have been recipients of microcredit through a “group intermediation” process, rather than having received it directly from the bank. The suggestion here is that the process of participation in a group, and the skills of public negotiation developed there, contributes more to empowerment than the fact of increased credit itself.

It is harder to evaluate these claims in the fishing villages of Kanyakumari. As noted in Chapter 2, the men usually handed over their earnings to the women, who were tasked with managing the household finances, as well as with making a whole range of household decisions around education and healthcare for children, social functions, and even the acquisition of craft and gear. Women travelled on their own, or with other women, to visit relatives in neighbouring villages, or to shrines in the region (see Ram, 1992), as well as to offices and institutions inland to look after such matters as the raising of credit, or health care for family members. While the frequency of travel outside the village did increase with the need to attend meetings, seminars, and “trainings,” this pattern had already started with the youth groups and Basic Christian Communities. Thus the battles around the increased mobility of women had already begun to be fought sometime earlier (see Chapter 5, on the beginnings of the BCCs in Kodimunai), and it would be inaccurate to credit the SHGs alone for the increased mobility of women. In fact, insofar as incomes are rising, the cultural aspirations attached to upward mobility can result in increased cloistering for women. As seen in Theresammal’s story in Chapter 2, while she had worked hard all her life as a fish vendor, travelling to beaches and markets across the district, her daughters did not see themselves doing that kind of work, and looked forward instead to a life of middle-class domesticity. Naila Kabeer reported a similar finding for Bangladesh (2000: 70-71). The extent to which the SHGs have been able to challenge the perverse re-inscription of cultural norms such as these, rather than conform to them through the ideals they encourage, is not clear. Ananya Roy’s (2010: 70) figure of the “Millennial Woman, the iconic figure of
millennial development,” whose “traditional gender roles of social reproduction” are being called on to “create a third shift of voluntary, unpaid labour,” opens up these questions.

5 Conclusion: Thinking Through “Embeddedness”

The fact that women’s economic activities are more strongly influenced by “culture” should not invalidate my rather unorthodox attempt to bring the men’s cooperatives, and the women’s microcredit associations, into the same discussion. We need to continue to “disaggregate” the community and make women’s experiences more visible to our understanding of social transformation. More specifically, this attempt is valuable because the two sets of organizations represent different paths in the adaptation of social relationships to the market. To refer to the lines from Ram in the epigraph for this chapter, while the “credit-cum-marketing interlinkage,” which was the basis of the fishermen’s relationship to the merchants-middlemen, had to be broken, and a new social form – the cooperative – had to be adopted in order for the men to participate more directly in the market, the basic form of relationship for the women remained the same, even as new networks and associations were created. In both cases, the economy was identified as a distinct and dominant sphere of life, and social relationships were drawn upon to enhance the ability to enter into, and benefit from, markets. In a less direct and intentional fashion, social values were also transformed in the process to make them more compatible with the market.

The re-orienting of social relationships is a process that Polanyi describes below and that Jessop (2001: 224) articulates as “the embedding of market relations in traditional societies; their disembedding to form a market economy; and the latter’s re-articulation with other forms of social relations to create a modern market society.”

Instead of economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economic system. The vital importance of the economic factor to the existence of society precludes any other result. For once the economic system is organized in separate institutions, based on specific motives and conferring a special status, society must be shaped in such a manner as to allow that system to function according to its own laws. This is
the meaning of the familiar assertion that a market economy can function only in a market society. (Polanyi, 1957: 57)

As Jessop (2001: 215) elaborates: “what Polanyi actually proposes is that society, in and through the agency of a wide range of social forces, seeks to constrain the destructive anarchy of the free market by subjecting it to various forms of extra-economic regulation that nonetheless support and sustain capital accumulation.” Thus, he argues, for Polanyi, cooperatives, friendly societies, self-help, and so on, may be seen as mechanisms for the embedding of interpersonal social relationships in market-oriented economic action, to help make it more stable and predictable.

The specific mechanism through which these societies were inserted into the market is credit (although the men’s cooperatives also did so through sales and markets for other inputs). As shown in Chapter 2, and in the previous sections of this chapter, the scale of indebtedness has gone up exponentially. Cooperatives stand guarantee for loans from banks, but rising credit needs have given a renewed role to large moneylenders. Nayak cites a cost-and-earnings study by SIFFs in the mid-1990s that indicated that 60 percent of fishermen’s earnings went to service capital investments (Nayak, 2002: 338).

This is the relationship that in Chapter 2 was referred to as the formal subsumption of labour. It is through their participation in mechanisms for inputs, including credit, that artisanal producers become committed to the market economy. Formal subsumption involves profits, or returns to capital, being realized in the spheres of inputs and outputs (credit and marketing) rather than in the production process itself (Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1988: 54-56). Women’s subsistence credit also supports this arrangement, because formal subsumption depends on the ability of the family to sustain and reproduce itself as a viable production unit.

Bennholdt-Thomsen’s idea of agricultural microcredit, as allowing “capital to invest profitably in poverty” (1988: 56), is taken up by Ananya Roy in her recent work on the global circuits of microfinance in the making of development, Poverty Capital. Under the neoliberal Washington Consensus around poverty, articulated and disseminated by the World Bank through its Consultative Group to Assist the Poor (CGAP), and endorsed by the
international development “community” at the 1997 Microcredit Summit in Washington, D.C., self-help groups of the kind described here have been identified as crucial vehicles for capital accumulation and development in the poorest parts of the world. The high repayment rates and the growing capital base of these programs have created enthusiasm for microfinance even in the world of high finance. Recent figures show that microfinance lending continued to generate healthy profits even during the recent financial crisis. Here is the sub-prime loan that has few risks, the magic bullet being the social pressure that ensures repayment (Ananya Roy, 2010: 213-221).

But Roy also seeks out a counter-narrative. This is to be found in the practices of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, before it became co-opted by the World Bank. In its origins, Roy argues, the Grameen Bank was about social protection - about providing basic social services and meeting basic needs - which for Polanyi was part of the counter-movement to the establishment of the self-regulating market (see Jessop, 2001: 221-222). She cites the argument made by one of her “double agents,” located in a Washington Consensus institution, yet critical of the way in which it had co-opted the Grameen model, that “[c]lass conflict rather than credit markets is the appropriate framework for understanding microfinance in Bangladesh” (Ananya Roy, 2010: 197). Rankin and Shakya (2007) make a similar argument for microfinance in Nepal – that it had roots in local and national policies that preceded the neoliberal revolution, and that even in the present period the contestations around microfinance, and the often contradictory outcomes it has for its participants, mean that neoliberalism is not a “done deal,” but rather a process that imposes itself unevenly across societies.

This is borne out by my case here, for the origins of the microcredit associations long precede the rise of neoliberalism, and were infused from the start with ideas about “liberation” and social reform. But the content and goal of microcredit has changed in the present. In the earlier understandings of cooperatives and savings and credit societies as a form of self-protection, the state was seen as having an important supporting role. In the current perspective, the self-reliant and sustainable self-help group is the ideal of microfinance. The Tamil Nadu Corporation for the Development of Women (TNCDW) website claims that the ultimate objective of the intervention is to leave behind self-
reliant and sustainable SHGs (i.e., SHGs able to raise enough funds for credit through careful husbanding of their own savings, rather than relying on outside funders), through a slow and phased withdrawal by NGOs and TNCDW. The ultimate goal is the withdrawal of the state from this process where the self-regulating society works harmoniously with the self-regulating market. In this scenario we have an active civil society amongst the poorest, autonomous from the state, but intimate, indeed embedded, with the market. The poor are to achieve development through self-help, not through making demands on the state. The wealthier classes, of course, have no such restrictions – they are well aware that their success depends upon the right kinds of policies and interventions of the state. Thus, as Ananya Roy (2010: 216) trenchantly puts it, “the rich have state-help, the poor have self-help.” The problem with this vision is that it is unlikely that a counter-movement of social protection against the market can be successful without some support from the state.

The organizations, especially the men’s sangams, have brought many benefits to their members. The breaking of the merchants’ hold on marketing has allowed the fishermen to receive a greater share of the rising value of fish and seafood on the market. Their collective bargaining power has also enabled them to participate in credit and input markets on better terms. SIFFS has played an important role as a professional organization, keeping members abreast of the latest developments in the market, providing them with training, and representing their interests with governments and business. Sangam members have acquired confidence in public participation and leadership skills. However, sangam members are also a kind of select group within each village. Their willingness to extend new schemes and benefits to non-craft owners, for instance, is limited. As seen in Chapter 5, many of them have begun to express impatience with the obligations of the village moral economy, which they see as an impediment to economic advancement. A liberal-capitalist subjectivity can be seen emerging that is in keeping with the needs of the market, and at odds with any attempt to re-embed it within social structures.

The nature of the transformation for women through the microcredit groups is more mixed. They too are acquiring some of the skills and confidence of participation in public life. But their role as managers of domestic credit and consumption has been re-inforced, rather than
substantially challenged, through this participation. The market-friendly values in their case take the form of new desires around consumption and lifestyle; this in turn has the consequence of putting even greater pressure on the household to function as an increasingly profitable economic unit, able to support a higher standard of living.

The associations described here have enabled their members to benefit from new opportunities for economic advancement created by the market. These gains are to be welcomed given the extreme poverty of the villagers and the low social status consequently accorded them. But there are also potential costs to this adaptation to the market, for the gains are unequally distributed among the village community, and the rising incomes are premised on the wilfully blinkered expectation of an infinitely expanding fishery. Despite the potential dangers of the market, however, the shift in social values away from a concern with subsistence and the moral economy, and toward profitability and improved lifestyles, and the shift in political values away from a reliance on the state for support, casts doubt on the Polanyian optimism about a countermovement against market fundamentalism.
Chapter 7
Counter-Movement and Civil Society — The Contested Place of the Commons

Why should the ultimate victory of a trend be taken as a proof of the ineffectiveness of the efforts to slow down its progress? And why should the purpose of these measures not be seen precisely in that which they achieved, i.e., in the slowing down of the rate of change? That which is ineffectual in stopping a line of development altogether is not, on that account, altogether ineffectual. The rate of change is often of no less importance than the direction of the change itself: but while the latter frequently does not depend upon our volition, it is the rate at which we allow change to take place which may well depend upon us (Polanyi, 1957: 36-37).

I come now to the counter-movement that was the initial spark for this study and continues to animate it. This movement is not a single organization, or even a single set of organizations, but works through multiple forms of association, including the forms described in the previous two chapters. This is why I have placed it last. It draws on these other associations for organizational resources, but it might also find itself competing with them for ideological space, around notions of self-help, for instance. While none of the associational forms described earlier was entirely indigenous in origin, and each was informed by ideas, and sometimes material resources, from places as distant as Latin America, Bangladesh, Belgium, and Washington D.C., one strand of the social movement to be described here was much more explicitly part of a national, and later international, movement. That in itself points to the difficulty of studying social movements, for they cannot be reduced to a set of organizations. Other associations and actions that made the same arguments as the nationally affiliated fishworkers’ union were independent organizationally, and asserted a more local conception of sovereignty. It is precisely by paying attention to the levels and scales of the movement’s activities, its diverse origins and influences, as well as the diverse associations that arose and subsided as part of it or in opposition to it, that we can understand both the nature of the counter-movement, and civil society as a space of plurality as well as contestation.

The segment of the counter-movement that defended community rights to the inshore fishery may be seen as the most explicit attempt to assert the dominance of social values over the operations of the market. But what the larger implication of these rights claims
are, from where they originate, and how limited or expansive they are in their scope, have all been debated. In the case of the Narmada movement, for instance, Baviskar has argued that “there is a difference between the people’s perception of what they are fighting for – which is basic subsistence denied by the state, and the claims made by intellectuals who postulate that indigenous resistance is a comprehensive critique of development” (Baviskar 1995: 237). She and other scholars, such as Herring (2005), Omvedt (2005) and Meynen (1989), argue that while producers’ interests are economic and “class-based,” movement ideologues and leaders have framed them in the essentialist and romanticized, but powerful, language of traditional, community-based ecologism and moral economy, a language that owes more to international environmental discourses than to the producers’ own world-view. I seek to historicize and de-polarize this debate by attending to the conflicting languages and claims made by producers who assert community rights, as well as by those who eschew the language of community for that of economic progress. I show how these ideas evolve out of local contestations, rather than through framing and mediation by outside actors. As the conflict proceeds, the real contest emerges over the multiple meanings of community: ecologism and moral economy contained in the idea of the commons, on the one hand, versus caste and religious identity devoid of a notion of a shared economy, on the other. Not all assertions of community, then, seek to embed the economy.

I proceed to chart the course of the counter-movement chronologically, keeping my gaze focused at events within the district, and noting the presence of national and international actors and discourses only as they entered into and shaped these local events.

1 Customs of the Commons

*It was the essence of the open field system of agriculture – at once its strength and its weakness – that its maintenance reposed upon a common custom and tradition, not upon documentary records capable of precise construction. Its boundaries were often rather a question of the degree of conviction with which ancient inhabitants could be induced to affirm them, than visible to the mere eye of sense. (R. H. Tawney, cited in Linebaugh, 2008: 50)*
The idea of a property or productive resource as a “commons” is tied to the idea of community, and it is this that distinguishes it from something that is “open-access” or open to all. A commons is a form of property that either belongs in law, or is managed in practice, by a community of users. Law and customary practice are, of course, not identical, and this can be a source of tension, as we will see, but nevertheless, it is a categorical mistake to assume that the “tragedy of the commons” (Hardin, 1968; Scott, 1955) lies in the fact that “what belongs to no-one is cared for by no-one and exploited by all.”

Customary community rights to the fishery in Kanyakumari contained all the features defined in the recent concept of Territorial Use Rights in Fisheries (TURFs). They demarcated a set of fixed rights: the right to limit or control access to the territory; the right to determine the amount and kind of use within the territory; the right to extract benefits from the use of the resources within the territory; and, finally, a right to future returns from the use of the territory (Christy, 1982). A customary resource management institution may be understood in terms of the rules that regulate access, the rationales underlying those rules, and the authority or authorities having the responsibility and legitimacy to uphold them.

In Kanyakumari, the village committee has been the customary authority responsible for rule-making and conflict resolution in the fishery. Customary rules hinge upon: "the recognition of privilege over circumscribed marine territories, and on the right to exercise control over fishing that takes place there" (Bavinck, 2003: 651). Village members have a right to fish in that territory, and non-village members need the permission of the village committee to fish off its beach (the section on migration in Chapter 2 describes how this permission could be denied on grounds of a poor catch or excessive competition). Non-villagers landing their catch on a village's beach pay a tax from their sales to the village. Village members were also taxed on their catch by the committee, although, as we have seen in previous chapters, the committee did not have ultimate sovereignty over this tax, having to cede a portion to the King in the old days, and to the Church once the King had transferred this right. This particular tax is now levied only for special purposes, after
reforms to the diocesan revenue system were carried out in latter half of the twentieth century (see Chapter 4).

Inter-village conflicts were settled in negotiations between the concerned village councils. Inter-village negotiations were also the basis of rules governing access to favoured fishing grounds that straddled village boundaries in the inshore, or could be equally accessed by fishermen from several villages in the mid-shore. Limited propulsion technology meant that the deep sea was rarely explored, and thus not an area requiring rule-making.

Within this territory (the sea contiguous with the village boundaries), the rules usually focused on "the types of fishing gear or use thereof, with certain practices being disallowed" (Bavinck, 2003: 651). Bavinck (1997) posits that the rationale underlying the regulation of fishing gear or practices had to do with their ability to do one or more of three kinds of harm: (1) harm to the fish stock; (2) harm to an important category of other gear users; and (3) harm to the community as a social entity. These regulations were, of course, not always upheld without conflict, and in some cases, the authority of the village was challenged and the matter taken to a higher body, such as the Bishop or the police. The invoking of all three types of harm to ban the use of a new fishing gear, and the inability of customary institutions to impose the ban, is illustrated in the conflict around the adoption of the long-line, described below through a series of reports in the Pudukadai police station records:

1.a. 28.1.66.

Before the Collector, Kanyakumari District, Nagercoil

We, the inhabitants, fisherfolk of Enayam Thurai, Keelkulam village, Viluvankode Taluk, beg to submit the following grievances before your honoured self and pray that necessary action be taken to redress our grievances.

Honoured Sir,

We the inhabitant fishermen of Enayamthurai depend entirely on fishing in the sea for our livelihood. We have got among ourselves some 200 kattumarams for fishing in the deep sea and those owning the same with the assistance of their relatives and neighbours paddle into the sea and catch fish using the fishing rod. We have specialised in collecting fish by using the fishing rod which is spread in such a way that the fish are lured to them on 25 odd baits ingeniously fastened to the rod to
be hauled in as one catch. This practice is in vogue from time immemorial. For this kind of fishing certain spots in the sea are very lucrative fishing pockets and we go in a lot to the set area and cast our fishing lines.

Now in some of the said spots, the fishing men of the neighbouring Puthenturai also come in lots and fish near our positions. These people, who also use the fishing rod, are not adept at lines carrying more than one bait, with the result their haul will be much less than our catch. This has made them jealous towards our people but there was nothing that they could do to improve their lot.

Finding no other way to improve their method of late, they decided to interfere with our fishing and are now trying to prevent us from using our mode of catching fish.

This Sunday (23.1.66), when we going in our boats for fishing, some 50 members of Puthenturai led by Messrs Alphonse s/o Vareedpillai, Vellayan s/o Natukottan, Soosai s/o Mikhail Adimai and Thomas s/o Vareedh, came in boats armed with choppers, swords and sticks and prevented us from casting our lines and threatened us with bodily injuries unless we stopped from fishing in our way. A few lines cast by some of our people were carried away by the attacking party by force in its entirety with all the equipments. Hearing that a bloody fight would issue if we fought for our articles and for our right to fish, we retreated in haste to the shore only to be met by another set of Puthenturai people armed to their teeth with deadly weapons awaiting our return with perfect calm. We brushed aside their challenge and timidly retreated to our homes. These people from Puthenturai are now patrolling our coast preventing us from going to the sea.

The people of Puthenturai outnumber us very much in number and if we exert our right a bloody duel will ensue with the inevitable defeat of our people at their hands. We cannot move out of our houses, much less go to sea for our livelihood and from Sunday onwards, not even a single boat has gone into the sea because of the Puthenturai people. With the result now almost every house in our thurai is now in the grip of hunger - anyone passing by can hear the anguished cries of our children and of the people of the locality.

Honoured Sir, if this dangerous trend is not checked at once, hunger may turn our people into daredevils and they will take to the sea to face any consequence which in turn will bring utter chaos and village fighting resulting in bloodshed. So, in the name of God, we pray that your kind self will immediately interfere and see that these ruffians from Puthenturai are made to keep to themselves without interfering in our quest to get our food and save us from starvation and the inevitable clash if nothing is done to set matters at right. We pray that the action may be taken immediately as even a minor spark from a starving man of our locality in his desperate moment may set fire to the inevitable clash.

Praying that our grievances will be redressed, we close this memorandum, again appealing to your kind self to lift our people from the doom that stares us.
1.b. 25.2.66 (from the Tamil)

The Inspector reports that he went to both villages, contacted Parish Priests, villagers, and Panchayat members. He writes: the petitioners have invented a special method - multiple baits. This affects those using single bait and karamadi [shore seine] also, both of who don't get fish. Both Enayam and Puthenthurai fishers used this new method. Both Parish Priests wrote to each other and Puthenthurai fishers stopped this, but the Enayam fishers continued.

This is a matter of fishing between two villages in which police interference is not proper. I have warned both parties not to commit breach of peace but to come to amicable settlement in front of AD [Assistant Director of Fisheries] etc.

1.c. From villagers of Puthenthurai, Ramanthurai and Thengapattanam

To Minister of Fisheries, Madras.

Registered. 27.4.66

[There had been a] Settlement between long liners and others where it was agreed that multiple hooks would not be used. But Enayam people re-started use of multiple hooks, thus breaking the settlement. This kind of fishing will deplete our fish and make us poor. Please take appropriate action.

cc. Collector, KK, DSP, Inspector, Kuzhithurai, AD Fisheries, etc.

1.d. 1.8.66

There were request petitions from the residents of Enayamthurai that they catch fish in the deep sea by using multiple baits tied to a string and this method, though age-long, is objected to by the people of Puthenthurai who are threatening the Enayam fishermen. This inquired into (sic) by Inspector and District Superintendent of Police. Inquiries revealed that both villages came to a common understanding to stop this kind of fishing. While the residents of Puthenthurai stopped this kind of fishing, the petitioners continued to use this method and a conflict was expected between the villages. During the petition inquiry, both parties were warned of breach of peace and directed to effect a final settlement within reasonable time in the presence of important people from both villages, priests and AD Fisheries. After the intervention of the AD, these parties agreed to stop this method. There is no trouble now.

1.1. Opposition to Mechanized Fishing/Trawling

The arrival of mechanized craft, with their ability to speedily transcend village boundaries, challenged the territorial jurisdiction of customary authority. The first mechanized boats in the district were the Pablo gillnetters, bought in the 1950s by some
of the wealthier families in Colachel. These quickly attracted opposition from villagers in the neighbouring village of Pudur, on grounds of “catching all the fish,” and resulted in the burning of a couple of them (Thomson, 1989; interviews with Kodimunai villagers). Trawlers, which combined the speed of the gillnetters with a far more “efficient” technology, encountered even greater resistance. Resistance to trawlers in the waters around Colachel began soon after their introduction in the late 1960s. When they first started operating in the district, twenty-four villages got together to register a court case against them. A.M. Simon, the husband of the Tamil Nadu Fisheries Minister, Lourdammal Simon, was able to use his influence in the Congress party to have the case dismissed. In 1970 the villages then orchestrated a violent attack on the property of some of the prominent trawler owners in Colachel. The conflict intensified as new markets intensified the demand for fish, and as the acquisition of motors and improved artisanal craft increased artisanal fishers’ financial stakes in the fishery. In the early 1980s the conflict grew even more heated, following the opening of a harbour at Chinna Muttam village in the eastern end of the district, from which trawlers could operate. Police records through the years show a steady stream of petitions in court, "peace talks" between the two parties, and in 1987 and 1989, the burning of trawlers. Examples from police records of conflict between trawlers and kattumarams reflect a rationale similar to that used for earlier conflicts over gear:

1.1.a 22.9.80 (from the Tamil) Petition from villagers to District Collector

From Enayam, Enayam Puthenturai, Ramanthurai, and Pattnam fisherfolk and Parish Priests

To District Collector, Kanyakumari.

Sir,

The fishing villages west of Colachel have for the last two months been suffering from lack of fish. These two months are usually months of good catch. But because mechanized boats fish within 100 m of shore, they catch all the fish there and damage nets and kattumarams and sometimes take away nets. This has caused havoc and taken away our right to fish. [italics mine] We are facing poverty even in a time of abundant catch.

143 From Pudukadai Police Station records.
We request the Government to intervene at once and prevent mechanized trawling in these places and punish violators. A 5 km zone should be reserved for kattumaram fishers. Please take steps to enforce this.

Thanking you.

cc. Chief Minister Tamil Nadu, Fisheries Minister, Commissioner Fisheries, Superintendent of Police, Deputy Superintendent of Police, Colachel, Assistant Director of Fisheries Nagercoil, etc.

1.1.b 16.8.84 Report by Inspector R.S. Ramachandran of the Kanyakumari Police Station

There are 7 trawling boats in Kanyakumari [village] owned by….There is a Government Order (GO) stating that any mechanized boat should go beyond 5 kms for fishing, but the boats are in the habit of violating this GO. Usually the kattumarams used to return to the shore after fishing at around 12 noon. These people always bring small quantity of fish and so are not able to compete with the trawl boats. So the kattumarams joined together and made a resolution 7.8.84 stating that the trawl boats should leave for fishing only after 5 a.m and must start selling their fish only after 5 p.m. so that the kattumarams could sell their fish with profit. But the boat owners refused to abide by this resolution and started selling fish at Leepuram seashore inhabited by Nadars on 8.8.84 morning at about 11 a.m. So the fishermen of Kanyakumari rang their church bell and collected about 500 men and started going towards Leepuram. On receipt of this information, myself and the Sub-Inspector rushed to the spot and prevented them from going towards Leepuram and persuaded them to go home. The sale of fish at Leepuram by trawl boat owners was also stopped.

On 8.8.84 evening at 6 p.m. a peace committee meet was held at Bharathi Guest House by the Revenue Divisional Officer of Nagercoil. Present also were the Assistant Director of Fisheries and the Superintendent of Police and members of both sides. Decisions:

1. Trawling boats must leave for fishing after 5 a.m. after getting a token from the Police Station.

2. They must sell the fishes after 4 p.m at Kanyakumari and after 2 p.m at Leepuram

Both parties accepted the decisions. The boat owners also submitted a petition.

\[144\] In Kanyakumari Police Station records.
1.1.c 10.6.92 (From the Tamil) Memo from the Idinthakarai village committee to the Kanyakumari village committee

For six months now boats from your village have been staying here and have been fishing in our waters, catching prawns worth lakhs. This destroys our fish and especially our nets worth lakhs. We have sent a number of requests to your village for compensation but have not received any so far. In future if trawlers are used for prawn in our waters, they will destroy our fish wealth. So we ask that the four month ban on trawling be observed.

In the first case above, villagers oppose the trawlers for destroying the nets of artisanal fishers, and for competing for their catch in inshore waters, resulting in poor catches and low earnings for them, and hunger for the village at large. The petitioners here argue that the trawlers were taking away their “right to fish,” a basic feature of the village moral economy.

In the second case, villagers saw the trawlers as undercutting the artisanal fishers in the market, by bringing back larger catches and reaching the markets earlier. By the time of this petition, 1984, the Tamil Nadu Marine Fisheries Regulation Act (TNMFRA) had also been adopted. This Act set space and time regulations for trawlers, and the villagers invoked these. In the final case, destruction of nets, but also loss of fish wealth, are cited as the grounds for complaint against the trawlers. However, the “loss of fish wealth” does not seem to refer to a secular decline in catches due to trawling, but rather, to a reduced share for the artisanal fishers. In all cases the same rationale of harms that underlay customary regulation of craft and gear was invoked as the grounds for opposition to trawling. However, local authorities, both Church and state, largely failed to see these as contestations over entitlements and rights established by custom, and treated them instead as law and order problems.

1.2 The Tamil Nadu Marine Fishing Regulation Act (TNMFRA) 1983

The passage of the TNMFRA in 1983 was significant in creating a legal basis for territorial regulation of technology, marking off a three mile zone where trawlers could not operate. Along with similar Acts in several other coastal states, it was an outcome of intense campaigning by the national movement described below. But despite the fact that

145 In Kanyakumari Police Station records.
the movement based its arguments on the traditional rights of artisanal fishers, the Acts contain no recognition of customary authority, or of customary rationales around property and harm, and the relevant government agencies are the enforcement authorities. The TNMFRA lists as its rationale for imposing a three nautical mile trawler free zone: (a) the need to protect the interests of different sections engaged in fishing, particularly those engaged in fishing using traditional fishing craft; (b) the need to conserve fish and to regulate fishing on a scientific basis; and (c) the need to maintain law and order in the sea. Of these, it is the law and order rationale that local authorities most commonly invoke, if and when they act to uphold the regulation.

2 Enter the National Movement

The national movement of fishworkers may be seen to have two sources: the protests against the trawlers, which began to intensify in a number of the states in the 1970s, and the systematic work by social activists, predominantly from Christian backgrounds and often with the support of church-related social action organizations, in the fishing communities of south Kerala. As the unrest and militancy from the other states began to spread to Kerala, these two strands came together nationally to found the National Forum for Cattamaram and Countryboat Fishermen’s Rights and Marine Wealth (changed in 1983 to the National Fishermen’s Forum – NFF), a representative body of thirteen major regional fishermen's unions. The Forum was registered as a trade union in 1985.

The campaign against trawling and other types of indiscriminate mechanized fishing was the spark and, for a long time, the burning issue for the movement. Opposition to trawling was framed in terms of social justice (the enrichment of the few at the expense of the many), sustainable development (depletion through overfishing), and food security (local

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146 Among the largest of these were the clash between the kattumaram fishers and trawler operators in Madras in 1976, the burning of trawlers and the death of some sixteen kattumaram fishermen there in 1978, and a long-chain hunger strike by the small-scale rampon fishermen of Goa in 1977. Details of the beginnings of the movement are drawn from Indian Social Institute and Delhi Forum, 1987; Kurien, 1992: 235-238; P.M. Mathew, 1984; Murickan, 1987; and Nayak, 1990.

147 This section is drawn substantially from my previous work. See A.Sundar (1999).
subsistence versus export). The first major campaign of the Forum was for a Marine Bill which would declare an exclusive fishing zone of twenty kilometres from the shore for non-mechanized craft, regulate the operation of trawlers, and specify a minimum mesh size. A ban on trawling during the monsoon, which is the spawning season, has also been a longstanding demand. The Central Government issued a Marine Bill in 1980, leaving it to the states to turn to law, and in the next few years a number of the states (including Tamil Nadu) passed Marine Fishing Regulation Acts creating trawler free zones, banning night trawling, and, in the state of Maharashtra, declaring a monsoon ban on purse seiners. Almost everywhere that the Acts were passed, mechanized craft operators, with varying degrees of success, challenged them in court.

Since then, the national movement has taken up a wide variety of issues affecting coastal communities and the fish resources: pollution and dumping; beach tourism; nuclear power; intensive aquaculture; work conditions for migrant women workers in shrimp processing plants; the deep-sea fishing policies of the Government; and the Government’s attempts at creating Coastal Zone Management areas that would effectively displace fishing communities, while entrenching tourism and other corporate enterprises. It has made welfare demands for pensions, education allowances, and buses for the fish vending women. In Kerala, governments unable to take a firm stand on trawling have been eager to make concessions around such demands instead. (Kurien, 1992; NFF, Annual Report, various years)

From the outset, the NFF has challenged what it calls “the growth model of development,” calling instead for a model that puts people at its centre. This can be seen in the open letter to the FAO’s “World Conference on Fisheries Management and Development” in 1984 sent by some of its representatives who helped organize a parallel international conference of fishworkers and their supporters:

You gather here, under the auspices of the FAO, to formulate and endorse policies which will affect the lives of millions of fishworkers. Much of this takes place without their participation. We meet to assert our rights to share the experiences of our life and struggles and to expound our perceptions of fisheries development and to build new links of solidarity and co-operation. The world over, and particularly in Third World Countries, fishworkers do not receive a fair share of
the wealth they create. They are victims of development and, in response, have begun to organize to demand their rights. (Cited in Sall, Belliveau and Nayak: 312)

These ideas were further developed in a paper presented by John Kurien, a leading intellectual of the movement, to a "reflective" general body meeting held by the NFF in 1986. His proposals, while much debated, indicate the breadth of the movement’s thinking, and its attempt to articulate new alternatives in fisheries development:

1. Change in the NFF's name from "Fishermen's Forum" to "Fishworkers' Forum" to take into account women's role in the traditional fishery.

2. A systematic consolidation of the principles of traditional science and technology and community controls, so as to create an alternative system of knowledge of the sea and its resources. This was to be done without entirely losing the benefits of modern science – thus, a "co-evolutionary development" of the two. Linked to this, the need to document community practices of fisheries management and increase fishworkers' participation in management.

3. "Aquarian reform" that gave control over access and management to the owner-operator (artisanal fisher).

4. Livelihood and food to be the central goals of fisheries development.

5. A move toward multiple energy use in fishing - sails, engines, solar energy, rather than the wholesale switch to fuel-dependent engines that was underway.

The vision includes recognition of the work of key women activists, such as Nalini Nayak, who have argued for a gendered approach both to the fishery and to organizing (Nayak, 1994 and 1990). Women's participation in the fishery is understood to include both the paid work of fish vending and processing, and the unpaid work of political organizing, raising of credit, and reproduction of labour and the webs of social life. Negotiations to increase women's presence in the organization are constant. At the 1989 general body meeting of the National Fishermen's Forum, animated discussions preceded the decision to change the name to the gender-neutral National Fishworkers' Forum;\textsuperscript{148} at

\textsuperscript{148} Interestingly, the resistance to the change was based less on opposition to the inclusion of women, than on the belief that this would open membership to those from non-fishing communities. Because fishing has traditionally been a caste-based occupation, the term "fisherman" in various vernaculars refers equally to the caste-community and to the occupation. Those who opposed the name change were seeking to limit membership, and access to the fishery, to traditional fishing communities. Unfortunately, it was not just richer entrepreneurial entrants they wished to exclude, but poorer castes seeking a livelihood in the sector.
the one in 1994, women members staged a walk-out to protest what they felt was a lack of action on organizational measures to increase women's participation. Elements of ecofeminism inform the attempt to articulate a vision of a nurture fishery – as opposed to the present capture fishery – that has seen expression in projects such as one aimed at the rejuvenation of the mangrove forests, which are breeding grounds for a variety of marine life.

The counter-movement's leadership was hard to classify in terms of class or ideology. It represented a rare and fortuitous coming together of committed progressive clergy and religious in Kerala, deeply influenced by a theology of liberation (P.M. Mathew, 1984; Visvanathan, 1994), social workers, members and fellow travelers of left parties, journalists, and scholars. That the movement had struck roots may be witnessed by the emergence by the nineties of a layer of skilled activists from within the communities and the organizations themselves.

The NFF functions as a federation: common national programs are worked out at the annual general body meetings, and office holders travel incessantly to build links and provide guidance and support, but member unions vary greatly in their ideology, structure, and day-to-day functioning. The national meetings are remarkable affairs, with heated discussions requiring translation into at least a few of the nine languages of the coastal states, Hindi, and English. Although the NFF is the trade union and political wing of the movement, the movement itself is much broader, and includes marketing cooperatives such as those federated under the South Indian Federation of Fishermen's Societies (K.G. Kumar, 1988), and NGOs involved in appropriate technology, fisheries research, and training in community work. The movement has also, from its inception, made alliances with other popular organizations, trade unions, and "people's movements" at the national level, and helped found the Alliance of Militant Trade Unions in 1987; the National Alliance of People's Movements in 1989; and the National Centre for Labour in 1995, to study and lobby for unorganized labour in the informal sector. Likewise, at the

as well. The name change does not translate perfectly – machuara in the Hindi name still conjures up a fisherman – but other unions have more consciously adopted "fishworker" (The Kerala Independent Fish Workers (Malsya Thozhilali) Federation; the Tamil Nadu Fish Workers (Meen Thozhilali) Union).
international scale, it was a founding member of the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers in 1985, and the World Forum of Fishworkers and Fish Harvesters in 1997.

Its political approaches have been diverse. The movement is skilled in the repertoire of militant oppositional actions that Gadgil and Guha (1994; See also Mitra, 1992:9) describe: pradarshan (collective show of strength), dharna (sit down strike), gherao (surrounding of a key authority figure), rasta roko (road blockade), jail bharo andolan (movement to fill the jails), bhoo× hartal (hunger fast). It has mounted successful legal challenges, and put up constructive proposals, such as a draft Marine Bill in the 1970s; a draft, eighth five year plan for the fisheries in 1990; an alternative deep sea fishing policy in 1994; and has participated in a host of government committees, such as the Murari Committee to review India’s deep sea fishing policy in the mid-1990s. Other methods include public education, as through the 1989 Kanyakumari March (a form with a legacy dating back to Gandhi’s Salt March in 1930) around the theme "Protect Water, Protect Life”; ecological restoration of mangroves and artificial reefs (Kurien and Vijayan, 1995b); experiments with appropriate technology, such as new designs of beach-landing plywood craft (Gillet, 1985); and economic development through the marketing cooperatives.

These approaches indicate a relationship with the state that is never simply oppositional. Legal challenges, participation in Government-appointed committees, drafting of an alternative five year plan, all suggest a willingness to engage with the structures and processes of liberal democracy, even as they attempt to undercut the structural inequity at its base. The NFF’s campaign against the government’s 1991 deep-sea fishing policy, which would license foreign fleets to fish in India’s deep seas through joint ventures with Indian business, represented a high point of the movement’s development. It was able to straddle the local, national, and even international scales; to militantly oppose the state, while working with the state through committees; to form alliances with political parties across the political spectrum; and to gain the support of the large, organized-sector trade union federations for fishworkers, who were classified as belonging to the informal or “unorganized” sector. Most significantly, perhaps, it was able to enter into an alliance
with the trawler owners, even though opposition to trawlers had been the founding impetus for the movement.\textsuperscript{149}

\section*{2.1 The Kanyakumari March}

\textit{So many people, with banners from their states, all singing, shouting slogans in so many languages. I was reminded of a story about Jesus where he spoke at the seashore. He spoke in one language, but all those speaking different languages who had gathered to hear him understood him in their own language.} – Vallarmadan, young man from Kovalam village, 1989

The NFF first came to Kanyakumari in 1989, at the culmination of a month-long environmental awareness march down both coasts of India. Under the slogan "Protect Water, Protect Life," the March sought to make the link between the fisherpeople's dependence on water as a source of livelihood, and the wider ecological concern with water as a source of all life.\textsuperscript{149} Through this, the marchers made links between questions of work, livelihood, subsistence, and ecology, and between the organizations that worked on these various issues. The March was initiated

\ldots not only to highlight the intense problems in the fisheries sector and to make them public, but to provide an occasion for all related working class movements to voice their protests about the model of development that further jeopardises the lives of the artisanal workers. Modernisation should aim at maintaining the ecological balance, thus ensuring the regeneration of resources and safeguarding the employment of small-scale fishworkers. The struggles waged by the member unions of the Forum have only reinforced the conviction that what is at stake is not merely the economic interests of the fishing communities but the very sustenance and survival of life itself, water being an indispensable resource.

\textsuperscript{149} (NFF, 1989b: 3)

In its journey down both coasts, the March highlighted a range of issues, including: the depletion of fish resources by the use of over-efficient technology such as trawling; the

\textsuperscript{149} The central trade union federations, the National Centre for Labour (NCL), and the National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM), carried out support actions across the country. On August 10th, fishers and dockworkers began an indefinite blockade of the major harbours. Artisanal fishers and mechanized trawler operators, traditionally enemies, came together under the NFACJV to deal with an enemy larger than both. A major achievement for these workers in the "unorganized" sector was the collaboration gained from the central trade union federations in the organized sector. There was also strong international support from unions and other organizations. MPs across party and ideological lines raised questions in Parliament that were critical of the Government's policy. Right-wing BJP MPs from Gujarat and Maharashtra, and left-wing CPI(M) MPs from West Bengal and Kerala, both wrote asking for the policy to be reviewed. Some 102 MPs signed a petition to that effect. Various state governments, in particular the Government of the western state of Gujarat, expressed their opposition to the Central Government's policy.
industrial pollution of water; drinking water shortages because of the diversion of water for luxury uses; displacement of coastal communities by the missile testing range in Baliapal in Orissa; and the privatization of waters, such as the turnover of Chilika lake to the Tatas for prawn farming. All of these issues had their roots in the model of development India had embarked upon, that was proving destructive of both natural resources, and of communities dependent on them. (NFF, 1989a)

The issues for Kanyakumari were the depletion of fish resources by indiscriminate trawling; the growing drought in a once evergreen district because of the mismanagement of water resources; and the Soviet-built nuclear reactor planned for the coastal village of Koodankulam, in neighbouring Tirunelveli district.

I first went to Kanyakumari as a volunteer with the March, and was located there for the three months prior to its planned culmination on May 1st, Workers’ Day. We obtained support from the Bishop and clergy, and a multi-faith Advisory Committee was set up from among leading members of the district’s civil society, such as lawyers, doctors, academics, business people, and even the founder of a religious sect in the region. We also began to work with the various associations in the fishing villages - the women's groups of CHDP and Shantidan, the men’s cooperative sangams, and the Basic Christian Communities, to build support for the March. This was my first glimpse into the wealth of associational life in the villages.

On May 1st itself, the state-run, district bus company ran special buses from the various coastal villages to the Cape and close to fifteen thousand people, some three-quarters of them women, many carrying infants, arrived to watch cultural performances, speeches, exhibitions, and a ceremony to pledge the protection of the waters. As the procession to the water began, a provocation was set up, with stones being thrown from outside the procession. Eyewitness accounts, including those of journalists, say that the provocation came from outside the procession, and was not the result of two groups of fishermen fighting, as the police claimed. The police (many in plain clothes) fired directly on the procession, injuring eight; they also beat up March leaders who were trying to intervene to bring calm, as well as a couple of journalists, whose cameras they snatched. Police
permission to assemble and process was immediately withdrawn, so that the concluding rally could not be held. Thirty men were arrested, with no evidence to link them to the alleged scuffle during the procession. Activists and observers stated that the attack had been deliberately organized with a view to squashing the anti-nuclear plant movement in its infancy (Dietrich, 1989; NFF 1989b).

The March marked the NFF's evolution into a social-movement unionism (Waterman, 1993: 266-267) that offered a holistic alternative to the dominant model of state-led development. Within the popular consciousness, the NFF became identified as an environmental movement. However, when members evaluated the March at the next general body meeting, they resisted this identification. While they accepted the need to work actively to deepen artisanal fishworkers’ consciousness of ecological aspects of the fishery, there was strong consensus on the need to focus on fisheries issues, and the need for a stronger organizational base (NFF, 1989b: 29).

For the fishers of Kanyakumari district, the March had many meanings. It was one of the few occasions when all the organizations in the fishing villages worked together. It brought to many villagers an awareness of themselves as part of a larger community of working people. It also gave them a sense of participation in a moment of historical, and even transcendental, significance, as captured by Vallarmadan’s statement above. But for some, its tragic ending sowed the seeds of distrust toward the NFF’s militant brand of politics, which were distinct from the more cautious developmentalism that had hitherto characterized progressive politics in the district.

2.2 The Tamil Nadu Fishworkers’ Union

Kanyakumari became one of the grounds for the renewed organizational thrust of the NFF. The choice was already overdetermined by a number of factors: the possibility of building on the unity and momentum generated by the March; the need to support the legal and medical needs of those wounded and jailed at its denouement, and to counter the suspicions and fears it had generated; the growing militancy of opposition to trawling in the district; and the deep links, through a shared “liberationist” Church orientation, between key social actors in Kanyakumari district and the Kerala leadership of the NFF.
The organizing drive to set up a union of artisanal fishworkers (the Tamil Nadu Fishworkers’ Union, TFU) was not unlike that undertaken by the *sangam* organizers some fifteen years prior, except that whereas the *sangam* organizers had worked slowly, establishing only a few units in the first year, the NFF organizers (two paid staff, and two diocesan priests who had agreed to support the unionization effort) went rapidly through the villages, establishing several village units within the space of a few months. Members were craft owners, motorized and non-motorized, non-craft owning workers, and fish vending women.

The first challenge was always to enlist the support of the Parish Priest. Many of them questioned the need for a union, and especially one initiated by, and affiliated to, the NFF. They would refer to union involvement as "outside interference," arguing that unionization was not the way to solve the fishers' problems, and pointing to other initiatives being taken by themselves, or by the Diocese, to bring socio-economic development to the villages. After much discussion, most of them would reluctantly agree to let the group organize in the village. In the few cases where the priests refused to be persuaded, it was considered futile to attempt to organize, since a few words in the following Sundays' sermon would be all it would take to keep people from joining. Several of these priests had jointly voiced their concerns to the Bishop, who had nevertheless remained firm in his consent for the organization of the Union. In some cases, the priest was very supportive and called in men (and occasionally women) who were active in the village. The organizers met with them; they also spent the rest of the afternoon and evening talking about the issues to the different groups of men who sat mending their nets on the beach, primarily the issue of trawling, and the need to be part of a national organization to check this practice effectively. The men often had their own doubts – about the need to create yet another organization, about the likelihood that collective action would succeed. In villages where a number of the men worked seasonally on trawlers, they were reluctant to oppose trawling wholesale, and were persuaded only when it was made clear that the issue was regulation – by times, seasons, zones, rather than abolition, of the technology.
In these early organizing discussions and in the public meetings that followed, the activists framed the problem with trawling as being not just the destruction of the artisanal fishers' nets, and the competition for markets, but the threat that trawling posed to the long-term sustainability of the resource. They gave examples of the collapsing North Atlantic cod fishery or the Peruvian anchovy fishery. While artisanal fishers had thus far opposed monsoon trawling chiefly on the grounds that it was the time of bumper catches of shrimp, and therefore the only opportunity for artisanal fishers to earn enough for big expenses such as new craft and gear, or weddings, the activists explained that the monsoon was also the time when the fish spawned, so that trawling in inshore spawning grounds would prevent the regeneration of the resource. The Union's opposition to trawling was demonstrated in petitions and signature campaigns in the first year, and a relay hunger fast in the second year. In the early years of its operation, the union seems to have gained some recognition among villagers as the representative of artisanal fishers on this issue. The NFF's 1992 report mentions that the TFU was present at peace talks to settle a conflict between trawlers and artisanal craft in the Enayam Puthenthrurai, Ramanthurai, and Mulloorthurai area, along with district officials, representatives of the Bishop, and representatives of the Boat Union.

The Union as a whole, and in some cases the concerned village units, took up other local fishery issues, such as the demand for a fishing harbour for small craft, rather than the proposed commercial harbour at Colachel (2001); fish landing centres in a number of villages; sea erosion walls in some villages; as well as village welfare demands for drinking water and street lights, and against corruption in the ration (PDS) shops. It also pursued actions based on the NFF's broad-based vision of alternative development and social change. It continued to work, along with local farmers’ organizations and environmental groups, in the growing movement against the proposed nuclear power plant at Koodankulam. TFU representatives participated in NFF general meetings, and in its various campaigns. TFU members worked actively to raise funds for the World Forum of Fishworkers, in Delhi in 1997. They helped found a unit of the National Alliance of People's Movements in Kanyakumari in 1996-97, which organized meetings on the New Economic Policy, environmental problems, Enron, and the Koodankulam nuclear plant. At a meeting in the district that year, Medha Patkar of the Narmada Bachao Andolan.
(the powerful, internationally known movement to save villages from submergence by
dams across the Narmada river) was the chief guest. (NFF Annual Reports, various years)

As part of this larger vision, one of the TFU’s most sustained concerns has been with
what Nalini Nayak has called "the feminist perspective in the fisheries." This does not
suggest, of course, that the local organizers were self-consciously, or even not so self-
consciously, feminist in their orientation. Rather, it flowed from the issues and campaigns
the Union chose to highlight, and from the fact that the small staff of full-time organizers
was all women. The decision to hire women as paid organizers was itself not entirely a
conscious choice by the NFF. Most men who were not employed in fishing or related
jobs, and had an education, were in the market for work considered commensurate with
their education. Union work simply did not pay well enough. The only male hired in the
first year of unionizing did not find it financially viable to continue after a couple of
months (in the later years, two young male organizers were hired). Yet this was exactly
the kind of work that many of the women had the training for, through their prior
membership in Basic Christian Communities, the CHDP *mahalir mandrams*, or diocesan
youth groups.

The decision to enroll women as members, on the other hand, was a conscious one, in
keeping with NFF’s national policy. Women from fishing families, regardless of whether
they worked as fish vendors, or not, were considered eligible for membership. In
addition, the by-laws required that at least two members of the executive be women, and
thus, given that the male members were largely active fishermen and loath to give up
fishing days, there were occasions when the union came to be represented at NFF and
other meetings largely by women.

Some of the TFU’s most sustained campaigns were for women working in the fishery.
They fought for the right of fish vendors to travel on public buses, and for a lean season
benefit for women vendors. In Tamil Nadu (and several other states), the government had
long provided a small monthly benefit to fishermen for the three months of poor fishing,
through the government cooperative societies. It was argued that women vendors were
similarly affected by the low catch in these months, and should be similarly compensated.
This demand was won nationally in the early years of this decade. One of the TFU’s signal achievements was the unionization of inland fish vending women, and the improvement of their conditions, as described in Theresammal’s story in Chapter 2.

As part of the ICSF’s Women in Fisheries Program, TFU staff undertook to collect data on the activities of women in fisheries in a number of other districts in Tamil Nadu. They also worked to bring women to the NFF’s 1994 Public Hearing on Women in the Fisheries. Here, significant attention was paid to women who migrated, primarily from Kanyakumari district and a few districts in Kerala, to work in shrimp processing plants in other parts of the country (see Chapter 2). TFU members made contact with some of these women in Kanyakumari, and this was followed up by attempts by the NFF and TFU to intervene, first with the agents, and then to a limited extent in the factories. In 1996 the TFU organized, with the support of the Bishop, the Labour Commission, and the Women’s Commission of the Diocese, which was the first consultation on migrant women workers in the fish processing plants. Over two hundred women workers and forty NGO representatives attended; the Bishop chaired. Another similar information meeting for women, with Nalini Nayak talking about the Migrant Labour Act, was held in 1997, and the TFU continued to meet with women in factories in neighbouring districts, and in their home villages when they returned.

Despite this impressive résumé of activities and despite the fact that the NFF had won enormous visibility and recognition for fishworkers as political actors at the national level, the Union had difficulty sustaining its membership. In 1996, a local activist, T. Peter Dhas, took over as President of the Union. Though a number of units had already closed down by then, and the number of active members was small, Peter carried on with some vigour, overseeing the Union’s expansion (begun a few years earlier) into the two neighbouring districts of Tirunelveli and Tuticorin, and taking up a wide variety of issues. The range of topics reported as discussed in the ten Executive and seven General

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150 While the TFU had, in its early years, attracted a number of young, energetic, and even militant members, they did not in general have much political or organizational experience, and relied heavily on the NFF and affiliated diocesan priests for advice and direction. Peter Dhas, on the other hand, had founded an organization for inland fishworkers, had launched a magazine called Kumari Kadal (the Kanyakumari Sea), was involved in the Kanyakumari March, and was an active member of the Janata Dal party.
Body meetings of the Union that year, are truly impressive: deep sea fishing vessels; coastal zone regulations; shrimp aquaculture; industrial sand mining from the sea shore; old age pensions for fishworkers in inland and coastal areas; organization of women in processing plants; implementation of the Coastal Zone Regulation Act; ban on monsoon trawling; release of Kanyakumari fishworkers in Sri Lankan prisons; demand for a search boat and helicopter for fishermen lost at sea; cooperative societies for women; kerosene and diesel subsidies; the Koodankulam nuclear plant; the problems of inland fishworkers; the need for fish landing centres; opposition to the establishment of a five star hotel at one of the coastal villages (Kurumbanai); and leadership training. Other matters taken up over the years included: opposition to the Central Government’s Prevention of Terrorism Bill; the celebration, along with other women’s groups, of International Women’s Day; and protest against the Tamil Nadu Government’s Anti-Conversion Bill of 2002 (which was moved by the Hindu nationalist forces and targeted at proselytizing religions such as Christianity). But already in this period, the TFU was in disarray, as A. Subramanian notes. By the time of her fieldwork in 1997, “[m]eetings were difficult to sustain, villagers had to be coerced into attending, and there was a constant turnover in leadership” (2009: 213).

In part, this failure to gain enduring traction in the villages may have been due to the TFU’s diversification from the issue of trawling, to a broad range of issues. The NFF’s 1994-5 campaign against the deep-sea fishing policy is a case in point. TFU activists took the lead in bringing together a range of fisher associations, including trawler associations, as well as clergy (aided by Bishop Dharmaraj’s active support, as head of the Labour Commission of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India, for the campaign, both at the local level and nationally) and other local organizations, such as the Tamil Nadu Science Forum, Kanya Pengal Iyakkam (a women’s organization with units in several of the villages), and the KK Praxis Group, a small group of left activists engaged in conscientization work, among others. Here, the trawler owners and the artisanal fishers worked together, in an uneasy truce, against a threat to the oceans understood as a national resource. Although the movement’s defeat of the policy represented a rare victory against globalization, the joint prosecution of this campaign, through the TFU, by two otherwise opposed groups, did not end the local standoff between the trawler owners
and the artisanal fishers. The TFU was seen as unable to mount militant actions in this local struggle, partly due to the fact that many of its staff and activists were either women, or non-fishing men, and partly because as a registered trade union it tended to act in relatively legalistic ways. It was also seen to have “top-down” origins, having been initiated by the national organization, with the support of the Bishop and some diocesan priests, rather than by local fishermen themselves. Consequently, villagers turned to newer, more militant, and largely self-organized forms that refocused attention on trawling as the most pressing local concern. This was an intensification of the counter-movement, using a set of more immediate, and less theorized and routinized tactics than those adopted by the TFU.

3 Re-Asserting the Local

3.1 The Kanyakumari District Association for the Protection of Kattumaram and Vallam Fishing

By the early 1990s the support for motorization of artisanal craft in the Indian government's Seventh Five Year Plan (1985-1990), coupled with SIFFS’ work in manufacturing plywood and fibreglass vallams with OBMs, led to a rapid growth in motorized craft, especially motorized vallams. As they were now able to cover greater distances than the non-motorized craft, and were forced to maximize catch to cover higher input costs, it was fishermen on these craft who began to clash most frequently with the trawlers. The speed at which these motorized craft could travel also enabled a new form of confrontation: the capture of boats and crew at sea.

In 1991, one major and dramatic incident of this kind – the sinking of three trawler boats and the capture of their crew – involved groups of vallam fishermen from the contiguous villages of Enayam, Enayam Puthenthurai, Ramanturai, and Mulloorthurai. In the days of high tension that followed, as the Boat (Trawler) Owners Association and district authorities got involved in negotiating for the release of the men, vallam fishermen from

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151 For more on this apparent paradox, in which a local struggle proved more intractable than resistance to a policy of greater globalization, see A. Sundar (1999).
a number of other villages along the western coast congregated at meetings and began to express the need for an equivalent association to represent them. By 1992, village units of the Kanyakumari District Kattumaram Vallam Meen Pidi Pathukappu Sangam (Kanyakumari District Association for the Protection of Kattumaram and Vallam Fishing, or Vallam Union) had been formed, an office established in Nagercoil, and an executive elected. As its legal advisor, the Vallam Union appointed Advocate Jelestine, affiliated politically with the CPI (M). This confirmed CPI (M) support for the Union as worker-led, unlike the TFU, which was seen as largely clergy-dominated. But members of the association shared no particular party affiliation. In most villages (except the four or five dominated by trawler owners and workers) almost all the vallam fishermen became members, and about 20 percent of those working on kattumarams did. But membership was not formal, in the sense of paying dues. Rather, members contributed, and pressed their village committees to do so too, when required. The regulation of trawling was the sole purpose of the union, and the heightened emotions around this issue made it easy to mobilize support for actions.

The Vallam Union's demands were:

1. No trawling from June to August, inclusive.
2. No night trawling - trawlers should operate only between 6:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m.
3. Trawlers should operate only beyond the 25 fathoms depth zone.

These demands were put forth in a series of talks with the Trawler Association, in the presence of district officials. But the Trawler Association made every effort to whittle them down, and even when they agreed, implementation was hard to monitor. The fisheries officials lacked patrol boats, so the trawler association agreed to purchase one to monitor violations by their own members, but this boat went out only occasionally, and never seemed to find offenders when it did.

In 1993-94, as trawlers continued to operate in flagrant violation of agreed-upon regulations, fights continued to break out at sea. As Narchison, the President of the Union, recounted: "The problem was growing, there were no government solutions, the people again began discussing options like burning down a boat." Representations to the Fisheries Minister, and further meetings with the district officials and Trawler
Association representatives, failed to yield an agreement acceptable to the vallam fishermen. Finally, in August 1994, the Union leadership gave tacit consent to the capture of five trawlers, along with some sixty crew members. But as the police, district authorities, and the Trawler Association began manoeuvres for the release of the men and boats, the Vallam Union leadership found itself caught between their demands and the militancy of the Muttam villagers, who had carried out the capture and were holding the men. Eventually, although the release of the men was secured in exchange for fifteen days of non-fishing by the trawlers, no long-term solution was found.

Under the guidance of its legal adviser, Advocate Jelestine, and pressure from the Diocese and district officials to seek more legalistic routes to a lasting solution, the Vallam Union sought to advise village units against militant methods. This was not received kindly in the villages, as we will see below. Although the Vallam Union continues to have a presence in most villages, its units now focus on discussing work-related issues. A further reason for this is the surrender of the issue of regulation to a diocesan body, the Coastal Peace and Development Council, described in a subsequent section.

3.2 The Six-Villages Committee

In 1993 the Kanyakumari district administration declared a ban on monsoon trawling, but was unable to monitor its implementation, and trawlers were sighted in flagrant violation. Kanyakumari village conducted two road blockages, calling for the ban to be implemented, and at a peace meeting which followed, they won an agreement which they decided to uphold as law. The Kanyakumari village committee erected a stone near the entrance to the church, with the following inscription in Tamil:

Notice to the General Public of Kanyakumari Fishing Village

At a meeting at the District Revenue Officer's office, Nagercoil, on 20-8-1993, in the presence of the DRO, the Assistant Superintendent of Police, the Circle Officer, Tahsildar, Assistant Director Fisheries, Kanyakumari, the MLA, and Police Inspector, representatives of the kattumaram workers of the six villages affiliated with Kanyakumari village and representatives of the trawler owners of Kanyakumari village, having spoken together, have jointly and unanimously agreed on the following decisions:
1. Every year from 15 May (1st of the Tamil month of Vaikasi) till 31 August (15th of the Tamil month of Aavani), there should be no trawling;

2. On all other days of the year, trawlers must go out to fish at 6 am and return to harbour at 6 pm.

3. Trawl nets should be operated only beyond a 5 km zone from the shore.

4. If a trawler destroys the net of a kattumaram as it crosses its path, complete compensation for all damage should be paid by the owner of the trawler.

Signed:

Parish Priest, Kanyakumari village and the people of the six villages of
1. Kanyakumari
2. Mel Manakudy
3. Keezh Manakudy
4. Kovalam
5. Chinna Muttam
6. Arockiapuram

Villagers then felt that these rules were, quite literally, "written in stone," and they became the basis of all subsequent negotiations. The church was the obvious site for the stone, for it was the central social and political space of the village. As an imposing piece of architecture, whose white spires loom tall against the blue sea as the bus approaches the Cape, the church is also much visited by tourists; thus, the stone inscription placed there was also a declaration of the village's resolve to the wider public.

In the early months of 1995, more and more transgressions by trawlers began to be noted. They strayed inshore, returned well after 6:00 p.m. or stayed out for a number of days, destroyed nets, and then refused to pay adequate compensation. In February-March, talks began to be held between the two parties, in the presence of the DRO. On March 6th, the day before a new round of talks, there was an attack by trawler owners on three kattumaram fishers. Kattumaram fishers then refused to attend the talks the next day.

When the trawler owners returned, they found that the village crier had been sent around to make an announcement telling people not to go fishing that day. The trawler owners descended on the Parish Priest and questioned him as to why he had allowed this, going so far as to pull him by his cassock. The kattumaram fishers were enraged, and gathered in two contingents to attack. War broke out. Some houses belonging to trawler owners
were attacked and damaged. The police were called. Most people fled to the seashore, but some continued to stay and pelt stones. The police fired, and one man was injured. The police continued to maintain a post outside the village; they would never dare to go to the seashore, as the threat that they would be thrown into the sea is an old and oft-repeated one.

That night, some forty-five huts belonging to *kattumaram* fishers were burnt down. These huts were in the poorest section of the village. Many of those living here work as coolies, rather than owning their own craft, and many of the houses are of thatch. A village meeting was called at 4:00 a.m., and a thousand people gathered. In the days following, no one would sleep at nights. Groups would be patrolling the streets and every house had *chukku* (dried ginger), coffee, and betel nuts to offer patrollers. On March 26th another fifteen houses belonging to *kattumaram* workers were set on fire.

On April 1st some thirty-five men bathing in the tanks and ponds outside the village were rounded up for damaging the boat owners' houses. Many of those arrested were school boys or youth – there was no evidence to point to them, particularly, as the perpetrators of the crime, although some of them may have been involved. The villagers claim that this was the only way the police could hope to make any arrests – by swooping down on the men when they were outside the village. If they had come into the village with specific search warrants, they would never have been able to find the right men, and such an arbitrary round-up would have been impossible in a situation where they would have been outnumbered, and threatened with death at sea. Instantly, consultations began in the village, with the Parish Priest as key participant. It was decided, with his agreement, that the women should mount a protest, as it would not be safe for the men to do so. That very night the women took over the main highway that runs by the village to the Cape. They blocked the road with nets and *kattumarams*.

The committee of representatives from the six contiguous villages was set into action, and the Parish Priest of the neighbouring village of Kovalam became very involved. The Parish Priests of Kanyakumari and Kovalam rushed back and forth between the village
and the highway, to consult with the women, and then with others by phone.  The other six villages also went on strike and held up buses. The Vallam Union was called for advice and assistance, but the villagers found the union’s legalism and moderation unacceptable, and decided not to heed its counsel. The Legal Advisor of the Vallam Union likewise said to me in a later interview that the villagers were “rowdies” who thought of themselves as a petty government and failed to realize that their position had no legal status. Meanwhile, various officials – the DRO, the AD Fisheries – kept phoning the Parish Priest, who refused to influence the people. Their MLA (member of the state legislative assembly), who was from the ADMK, also advised them to hold firm, saying that they had no power but people's power, and the only way they could achieve anything was if they continued to display their strength. The local MP (Congress [I]) is also reported to have spoken on behalf of the kattumaram fishers.

Nearly a thousand women were present at the peak of the action. Those who did not participate were threatened with being denied access to the communal water taps. The women remained at their post for three days and nights, the young unmarried ones being sent home every night. Women suckled their children on the highway and took turns to go home for their needs. Prominent women of the village – organizers for various associations, and those who had been vocal on this issue in the past – led the slogan-shouting and singing.

Finally, on the third day, the District Collector arrived at the scene and addressed the women from his car. They asked him why he did not alight. He replied that he was scared of getting enmeshed in their nets. They shouted at him, addressing him familiarly (nii) instead of respectfully (niingaL), like a young boy (vaa Daa - po Daa). They asked him what he had done with the suitcase of money (the bribe) the trawler owners had paid him.

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152 When I praised the role of the priests to an activist from another village, she said that the Parish Priest of Kanyakumari had no choice; he would have been physically assaulted and forced to leave the village if he had not done what the people wanted.

153 This was not the first time the women of the village had taken on this role. A petition from 1987, lodged by the “women's wing of the Ur podu makkal (village public),” addressed to the Superintendent of Kanyakumari Police Station, states: “We 16,000 members of KK coastal village – our livelihoods are threatened by trawlers. They had agreed to the village law. But now boats are fishing within the 3 km zone. If the men question this, immediately they get a case filed against them. How can we poor people survive? So we women are asking you to take action to stop our tears.”
(One of the women told me later that they had heard about this from the trawler owners, who were boasting that they had paid the Collector many thousands of rupees. Since they were often related and lived close to each other, there were few secrets between the kattumaram fishers and the trawler owners.) The Collector told them to hurry up and move, as he was hot and tired from standing in the sun for so long (an hour). They were unmoved and scoffed at him for this - they had been sitting on that hot road for three days now. Finally, he agreed with the Parish Priest to have the men released.

After this, four representatives from the village – two men from the committee and two women – went to Madras to see the Fisheries Minister. Their MLA got them the appointment. They told the Minister: "Our kaḷveṭṭu (stone inscription) is the law in our village. We can't change it. If you change it, your law will remain in your office, it can't be implemented in our village." They warned him what a decision against them could mean in terms of political support for the party, as Kanyakumari had always been an ADMK kōṭṭai (fortress). In response, the Commissioner of the Department of Fisheries in Madras came to survey the situation and meet with the contending parties. His decision was to maintain the status quo, which was to uphold the night trawling and monsoon trawling bans, and a trawler-free zone.

Trawler owners filed a request for a stay in the High Court, on the grounds that by hiring as many as ten men on 140 trawlers, they were providing employment to over 1400 men who were otherwise unemployed. The kattumaram fishers hotly contested this, saying that all those employed on the trawlers also worked on kattumarams. The trawler workers supported their stand. The village committee issued a writ prohibiting any of them from working on the trawlers during the monsoon, to prove to the trawlers that they did not need their employment. One of the committee members said: "This is the season when the fish come closer to the shore to spawn. To let coolies (hired labour) work on the trawls at this time would be to let a hundred people murder in the place of one."

Later, on April 16th, the trawlers did go out for a day. The kattumaram fishers launched a massive attack on the trawler owners’ houses. They also issued a village writ saying that no one should buy the fish the trawlers brought back, or they would not be allowed
Church rites.\textsuperscript{154} One of the largest processing and marketing companies, which belongs to a man from the village, obeyed the writ because the man had aging parents who might have needed their last rites. The Chinna Muttam Trawler Union stood divided, with those who had themselves been \textit{kattumaram}, or mechanized gill net fishers, being willing to observe the monsoon ban, and the new entrants to the fishery resisting. The former group could take up other types of fishing during the period, and therefore faced less loss of income. One man was forced to sign his agreement with the village when his mother died and was refused burial by the village committee. By July, thirty-three trawler owners had signed agreements with the village.

The village committee met nightly throughout this period. Since they were fishing at night during that season, they would meet from 8:00 p.m. to midnight and then go out to sea. Twelve men were present at one of the meetings I attended in July. The President of one of the \textit{sangams} was called in and asked if the \textit{sangam} could contribute to the Committee's expenses. He said that he would have to consult with his executive. The \textit{sangams} in the village had already lent some RS 80,000 to the village for their expenses in the conflict. The Committee members planned to collect \textit{terippu} (tithe) the coming Saturday - 10 percent of the catch for the day would be collected from all \textit{kattumaram} and \textit{vallam} fishers in the village. This was to go towards regular village expenses such as the monthly electricity bill for the church. But this time, more than one \textit{terippu} a month might be required to pay for the costs of the conflict. Then there was a discussion about the need for someone to go to Madras to check whether the trawler owners had filed a writ in the High Court, and what its status was. This would mean a loss of four or five days’ income during a good fishing season. One of the men was selected to go, and it was agreed that his family would be paid Rs 100 a day, though it was recognized that this was not really fair compensation at a time when one could earn as much as Rs 1000 a day.

\textsuperscript{154} While the Church might not have been able to withhold the rites if pressed, the Parish Priest would have wished, for his own safety, not to make that clear.
4 Dis-Embedding Economy from Community: The Trawler Associations

How did the trawler owners respond to this variety of sustained campaigns against them? For them, the fishery was increasingly a commodity, to be exploited to its maximum for profit. The counter-arguments made by the artisanal fishers, such as trawling in the monsoon spawning season being a form of “murder,” smacked of nothing but irrationality. On the east coast, the Chinna Muttam Trawler Owners and Employees Union was set up in 1991, and had some 1,200 members in 1995. Colachel trawler owners set up the Kanyakumari District Mechanised Boat Operators Welfare Union in 1982, with 834 boats; membership was by boat, rather than by owner, which meant that crew could also be members. They met once a month, during the months they were in Colachel. This was difficult for most of the year, as they were spread out along the coast from Shaktikulangara to Kochi. In emergencies they meet in Kochi, and, in collaboration with the local boat union there, had formed the South Indian Boat Operators Welfare Society. When they met in Colachel in the mid-1990s, up to 4,000 people would attend the meetings, which would consequently have to be held outdoors. The meetings discussed government schemes that might benefit members, work-related problems, workers’ complaints, loans, and so on. The executive committee consisted of twenty men, all of whom were boat owners, and was elected every three years by the owners from amongst themselves. The President then was Advocate M. A. James, a well-known Congress (I) supporter, with an office in Nagercoil.

Even though the crew members were not entitled to serve on the executive, they tended to support its decisions in matters related to artisanal fishing, since many of the older men in Colachel had sold their own artisanal craft, and the younger ones had gone straight to work on the trawlers and lacked the skills to work on artisanal craft. In the early 1990s this distinguished trawler owners and crew in Chinna Muttam from those in the Colachel area – the former had moved into trawling more recently, and still possessed artisanal craft, or at least the skills to work on them, in the event of a blockade of the trawlers.

Jebamalai, a member of the Chinna Muttam Union, interviewed in 1995, said he had started as a kattumaram fisher in 1963, when he was twelve years old, and had bought a trawler in
1973. He spoke as a member of the community, to make the argument that the fishers had always been suspicious about new technology – when nylon nets had been introduced in the 1960s, the fishers had made the argument that they would destroy all the fish, but had then gradually moved over to the new nets completely. He saw the resistance to trawling as deriving from the same initial conservatism. There was no real basis for their resistance, he said; he saw no sign of declining catches, in fact they had gone up. He dismissed the argument about a potential collapse of the resource if fished indiscriminately, saying: "In the history of mankind there has been no incidence of overfishing, of depletion of resources. People getting more fish from the sea than the sea can offer has never happened before."

In contradiction to the artisanal fishers’ reports of declining catches over the years, trawler owners uniformly voiced the same insistence on the steady rise in catches. In part this was because they were able to exploit a greater radius than the artisanal craft. For trawler owners, the artisanal fishers’ arguments displayed scientific ignorance, irrationality, and a lack of modern thinking. The trawler owners blamed these limitations on the artisanal fishers’ illiteracy, and the influence of priests like Tom Kocherry, who were intent on misleading them in order to secure their own power and keep the caste backward. They claimed that the government also took the side of the artisanal fishers because they constituted the majority in the villages and were therefore a major vote bank, and so the politicians had to be sympathetic to them (see also Chapter 3). It was they, the trawler owners, who represented the possibility of modernization and upward mobility for the caste, as opposed to the artisanal fishers, whom they portrayed as spendthrift, illiterate, and given to alcoholism and factionalism.

Despite the tendency of the politicians to favour the artisanal fishers, the trawler owners saw themselves as the model citizens of the developmental state, helping to fulfil its modernization schemes, pursuing their profession in accordance with the laws and regulations,155 and helping the economy by borrowing large sums and attempting to repay them faithfully. A 1987 petition from a group of trawler owners in the Kanyakumari police station claimed that the kattumaram fishermen were obstructing them from fishing for

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155 There was, of course, more than a little dishonesty here, since one of the chief causes of conflict was the failure of the trawlers to stay out of the demarcated three mile zone, or observe the ban on night trawling.
reasons of “personal, political and village rivalry.” The trawler owners were asking for police protection to allow them to carry out their profession peacefully, and to safeguard their “legal and legitimate rights.” The petition states:

The petitioner and a few others have purchased mechanised boats through Bank loans and they have to pay monthly instalments. Their area of operation has been fixed by the AD of Fisheries at Nagercoil and the petitioner and other members of the association are strictly adhering to the Rules and Regulations as laid down in the Tamil Nadu Marine Fishing Regulation Act 1983 (Act no VIII of 1983)….. The season has just set in and the petitioner and other mechanised boat owners have to earn for their livelihood and to pay the dues to the Bank….By the illegal and illegitimate acts of the counter-petitioners (sixteen artisanal fishermen named on the petition) the very purpose of the Governments, both Central and State, is being defeated, since the fishing harbour may not be put into use, if the mechanised boats are sent away.

The campaign against deep-sea fishing brought the trawler fishermen into an uneasy truce with the artisanal sector. The trawler fishers were willing to accept the ecological arguments against large-scale industrial fishing in the deep sea by foreign fleets. For them, the campaign became a way of claiming the sea as national territory, and themselves as the national citizens best positioned to exploit and defend it. These new notions of modernity, progress, and citizenship led the trawler owners to make the interesting move described by A. Subramanian (2009: 228-234), when a group of Colachel boat owners sought out the Tamil Nadu state secretary of the Hindu Nationalist BJP and its sister organization, the Swadeshi Jagaran Manch (Movement for National Self-Reliance). As seen in Chapter 4, the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) had become resurgent in the district in the early 1980s, and had been making the argument that priests inspired by liberation theology were bringing in foreign ideas. So there was a natural affinity of sorts here. The trawler owners sought the support of the BJP and SJM in their struggle against the artisanal fishers, promising them votes in return. They blamed the Bishop’s support for the artisanal fishers for this pass. But both the BJP and the trawler owners bought peace for themselves by agreeing that votes, and not conversion, as in past events, would suffice.  

156 These included the Idinthakarai conversion in 1967, described in Chapter 4, when a group of Catholic fishermen converted in resistance to having to pay shark fin tax (Sivasubramanian, 1996), and the
The SJM had also opposed the government’s scheme of inviting joint ventures for deep-sea fishing. But it supported the spread of trawlers along India’s coasts. A. Subramanian (2009: 234) concludes:

The SJM’s articulated commitment to the capitalist development of domestic fisheries provided Colachel’s fishers with the assurance of support against both local environmentalism and global capitalism. Against the artisanal sector’s claim to common property, trawler owners and workers asserted their right to private property as a means to developing the national resource. Against the church’s local religious authority, they asserted their national citizenship.

5 Beyond the Counter-Movement: Community without the Commons

5.1 The Coastal Peace and Development Council (CPDC)

In November 1995 at the behest of the Assistant Director of Fisheries, the District Collector, and the Revenue Divisional Officer, the Kottar Diocese established a Coastal Peace and Development Council as a program of the KSSS. The government official felt that law and order would best be maintained through a return to the Church’s traditional mediating role in this regard. For the Diocese, this was an opportunity to restore its authority, given the challenges it faced from both trawler owners and artisanal fishers. The Council’s general body consisted of one representative from each coastal village, one representative from each of the three trade unions, one Parish Priest from each six-village zone, a priest appointed by the Bishop to be the Director of the Council, a Coordinator from the fishing community who was not an active fisherman, the Vicar General of the Diocese, and four other nominees of the Bishop. The Assistant Director of Fisheries was an invited guest, rather than an ex-officio member of the Council. The first Director was Fr Selvaraj, who was known to be sympathetic to the trawler sector. A. Subramanian (2000: 260-261) notes that artisanal fishers resisted this decision, but the Bishop felt it necessary to inspire confidence in the Council among the trawler fishers and bring them Koothankuli conversion in 1987, when a similar, but smaller, group conversion occurred, for reasons that remain unclear. Both took place in the neighbouring district of Tirunelveli.
to the table. The hierarchy of goals for the Council, as she notes, was peacekeeping first, and resource management second.

The Church's justification for the Council was that trawler and artisanal fishers did, after all, belong to the same community; they were "brothers," and so their disputes needed to be settled within the community as "family." As A. Subramanian observes, "The call for Christian community in the face of divisive influences was buttressed by shared caste status" (2000: 262). Subramanian further notes that, while the Church had similarly stressed the importance of maintaining community integrity and harmony during the 1950s and 1960s conflicts around mechanization, the explicit articulation of community with caste was new. "Now, clergy underscored the need for caste uplift and representation at a time when other low castes were benefiting from affirmative action and increased participation in the Indian public sphere. Both locally and nationally, they pointed out, Mukkuvars needed to make their mark on India and become a visible part of the national mainstream" (A. Subramanian, 2000: 263).

But the CPDC was soon put to the test, when conflict broke out again in September 1996. Seven trawlers were captured by the vallam fishermen and three of these boats were burned. Despite days of negotiation, no solution was found. Both the trawler and the artisanal groups expressed their frustration with the CPDC and sought other avenues to address their grievances instead. The vallam and kattumaram fishermen claimed that the Council had made it more difficult for them to get justice, for now, when they approached state officials, they were simply referred to the Council, of which they were now formally a part. They also resented what they felt was the differential treatment they received from state officials, who were willing to accept a representative from the Trawler Association in peace negotiations, but required a Parish Priest to be present to represent the artisanal fishers, rather than either of their own unions – the TFU or the Vallam Union. (The TFU's 1996 report notes that when it took a stand, along with the Vallam Union, not to sign any document put forward by the Diocesan peace committee against the monsoon ban, the Peace committee stopped inviting them for any further talks. And in 1997 they continued to agitate for a monsoon ban, even when the Vallam
Union and the Diocesan Committee for Peace and Development [CPD] agreed to allow trawlers to operate. (in NFF Annual Report, 1996: 40)

Finally, the CPDC also ran afoul of the *sangams*/KDFSF/SIFFS. As A. Subramanian relates:

In June 1997…[a] conflict within the village of Kovalam had led to the expulsion of the village's minority faction. When this minority approached the Council for justice, Fr Selvaraj called a meeting during which a decision was reached by all present to forbid Kovalam's remaining villagers from fishing for a week. This provoked an outraged response from the village council, whose members approached the Federation for help. After discussion with SIFFS…Kovalam villagers and the Federation board decided to wield secular law against their religious leadership and take the Council to court. "We needed to teach the church a lesson," explained Vincent, one of Kovalam's councilors, "so that priests realize that they can't stop us from fishing. Let them stay behind the pulpit where they belong!" (2000: 270)

This was evidence that Church authority would not be accepted without conflict, but I would argue, contra Subramanian, not necessarily evidence of a final repudiation of the Church’s authority in fishing matters.

As of 2004, the CPDC was going strong. It had instituted self-help groups for women, and for men; Fr Charles, the Director at that time, claimed that these were also avenues for seminars on participatory governance, leadership and planning, and had contributed enormously to the growth in women's self confidence and their awareness of government schemes; for the men likewise, the savings groups and associated seminars were necessary to their "integral development." Fr Charles also noted that with declining catches, and resource depletion, the future in the fishery was bleak, but made no connection between this and the intensification of extraction in response to market incentives. So the CPDC had started supporting students studying for professions in fields like engineering, nursing, the civil services, teaching and business administration.

What Church and state were attempting, through the medium of the CPDC, was a reassertion of community as caste and religious identity, but devoid of its basis in the commons. For the artisanal fishers, the territorial boundaries (three mile zone), their coastal location, their technologies, and their recognized authorities, were what defined
community, along with caste and religious identity, although this did not necessarily mean accepting the supremacy of the Church as institution. The trawler fishers rejected this definition of community, and sought it instead in the images of caste mobility, and citizenship of a modernizing nation. The Church and state sought to reconcile both viewpoints through an idea of community as caste and religious identity, with the Church playing a key role in modernizing the community. The trawler vision had won out, for lost here was the understanding of the commons as an integral basis of community.

But this shift was beginning to pervade even the non-trawling sections of the villages, as ideas of self-help and professionalization became dominant even among artisanal fishers (see Chapter 6). By 2002, the TFU’s annual report to the NFF also shows the entry of caste and community-based demands: the inclusion of the Bharathar (Paravar) community in the Most Backward Community (MBC) list (for affirmative action purposes); a separate Diocese for inland fishworkers; and a separate constituency for coastal people. When I met him in 2004, Peter Dhas said that trawling was no longer an issue since the forty-five day government ban on monsoon trawling was now being upheld. The decline in catches, while a fact, was not an issue they concerned themselves with anymore. The current priorities were getting fishing harbours, opposing the mining of titanium sands, establishing search facilities for missing fishermen, and improving conditions of women workers in processing plants. A new electoral constituency, consisting only of the coastal villages, was the main focus. These were Peter Dhas’s expressed concerns; the reality of the TFU was even narrower. By 2004, it was now almost entirely devoted to running self-help groups for women, with financial assistance from the Tamil Nadu Women’s Collective, and the Tamil Nadu Corporation for Development of Women Ltd. (see Chapter 6).
6 Conclusion: The Commons, Community, and Civil Society

In the preceding sections I have traced the evolution, within the context of collective organizing to regulate the fishery, of different understandings of the relationship between the resource base, technology, and community. I began with a description of the customary forms of regulation under which village authority set the terms for who could enter, and what kinds of practices could be carried out, within a given territory defined by the limited radius of available propulsion technology. Villages attempting to regulate trawling, which cut across the boundaries of many villages and used highly intensive technology employed the same mechanisms and claims as they had used to regulate earlier technological innovations, turning to the district authorities to intervene as they had in the past when village authority was unsuccessful in imposing its writ. From the 1970s on, opposition in many localities along India’s coasts had given rise to a national movement seeking to regulate trawling. This counter-movement’s first success was in gaining the establishment of a government Committee that recommended the regulation of marine fishing, and led to the various state-level Marine Fishing Regulation Acts, such as that of Tamil Nadu in 1983. The Act did not recognize village authority as having any role in regulation, but demarcated nonetheless a three mile from the shore zone for artisanal fishers, with the aim of protecting different categories of fishers, and especially the traditional fishers, allowing for a scientific conservation of marine resources, and maintaining law and order. District authorities lacked the infrastructure to enforce this regulation, and left it to the villagers to police it, intervening only when conflict broke out and threatened the peace.

More formal associations for the defense of the artisanal fishery were founded by the early 1990s. The National Fishworkers’ Forum founded the Tamil Nadu Fishworkers Union (TFU), registered as a district-level trade union. The TFU introduced a more fully theorized perspective around technology, the role of women in the fishery, ecology, and equity. It made the argument that the sustainability of the resource and the community were crucially interdependent, and located the threat to both in the state’s model of “growth-led” and “anti-people” development. By using the language of “fishworker,” it
sought to emphasize a class perspective. It participated in alliances, such as the National Alliance of People’s Movements and the National Centre for Labour, which would give Kanyakumari’s fishers a larger identity as part of the nation’s working classes, or marginalized sectors. But the TFU failed to take deep root in the district, partly due to its limited organizational resources, partly due to the fact that direction for it was seen as coming from outside the district, but also in large part due to the fact that its activities were seen to have deviated from the focus on trawling, which was the chief concern of the villagers. This widening of focus drew villagers into the national movement against joint ventures in deep-sea fishing, further strengthening a national identity for fishers, but in this case drawing trawler owners and artisanal fishers into any uneasy truce.

Other associations in the artisanal fishery emerged soon after, such as the Vallam Union, which repudiated the TFU’s emphasis on a wider (theoretical and spatial) perspective while using several of its arguments about sustainability to mount a militant opposition to trawling. But the most dramatic and militant actions against trawling were carried out by the village authorities themselves, reasserting the customary unity of commons and community.

The trawler owners had also formed associations of their own. Their arguments were also framed in the language of community. This was community as the fishing caste, and they argued that they best represented its means to upward mobility and full citizenship in a modern nation. While they too used the language of ecology to oppose foreign vessels in deep-sea fishing, this was aimed at asserting their right to the national sea, in contrast to the narrow localisms of the artisanal fishers.

While elected politicians from the district tended by and large to be sympathetic to the artisanal fishers, representing as they did significant vote banks, the district’s administrative authorities were faced with managing the conflicts as they turned violent and disrupted normal life in the district. They then turned to the institution they had customarily relied on to maintain order in the villages: the Church. Artisanal fishers challenged Church authorities by calling on it to take a strong stand on their behalf. At the same time, the alienation of the trawler owners, and their turn to the Hindu nationalist
BJP, threatened the Church. Given the need to balance the conflicting interests of these constituencies, the Bishop complied with the administration’s request to establish its own organization – The Coastal Peace and Development Council – to restore peace in the villages. It drew upon organic metaphors of the village as family, and, like the trawler owners, made the argument that caste uplift required civilized behaviour and a shared commitment to economic progress. Also like the trawler owners, it drew upon an ideal of community that was disembodied from the idea of the commons.

The Church’s attempt did not go unchallenged by artisanal fishers, as I have shown above. But it eventually triumphed, not because of the authority of the Church, but because of the deeper economic shifts documented in Chapter 2. As markets for fish and seafood have become more lucrative, more and more men have migrated to work on the trawlers. The advantages enjoyed by trawlers when it comes to marketing have also drawn artisanal fishers to invest in them. Artisanal fishers have also intensified their own practices – acquiring larger craft, more powerful engines, and more efficient gear. They, too, now use the language of community in terms of caste affirmation and upward mobility. The TFU gives its name to the campaign for a separate coastal constituency, and to run self-help groups for women funded by the Tamil Nadu Women’s Collective, an NGO. The Vallam Union continues to be active in the village, where its units serve as spaces to discuss work-related issues. The writ of the six village committee, symbolized in the stone inscription on the Church, no longer holds, since the committee broke down following a conflict between the Mukkuvar and Paravar families in Kanyakumari village. Thus, in the end, it is the workings of the market that have weakened the fundamental linkage between technology, resource, and community that was the basis of the idea of the commons, and have silenced the old arguments about equity and ecological sustainability, even as they have become more urgent than ever.

How does this evolution of events speak to the questions I raised at the outset of this chapter? Scholars such as Herring (2005) and Omvedt (2005), writing about the farmers’ movements against globalization, have cast them as essentialist, nativist, and drawing on romanticized versions of the traditional community (see also Sinha et al, 1997). Herring shows how the leadership of the farmers’ movement he studied was increasingly playing
to international audiences in making claims about equity and sustainability, even as farmers themselves were eagerly seeking out new, genetically modified seeds, and modern technologies. Meynen, writing in 1989, was already making these observations about the fishworkers’ movement in Kerala – that the essentialist framing of the movement by its leadership was out of touch with the pervasive reorienting of individual fishers’ survival strategies.

What my case demonstrates, in contrast to the above arguments, is the historical and political evolution of identities and interests. The petitions of the 1980s, and the statements of villages during the conflict in Kanaykumari in 1994, suggest a moral economy (Scott, 1976) or subsistence (Mies and Bennholdt Thomsen, 2000) or commons (Linebaugh, 2008; McCarthy, 2005; Benjamin and Turner, 1992) perspective, in which a central principle was the right to fish and a valuing of community as an end in itself, and in which the costs of upward mobility were seen as being too great in terms of the loss of relative equality, leisure, and fellowship. The trawler owners ascribed the opposition of the villagers to "relations of envy" (Ghosh, 1982) but those who had enriched themselves in other ways, through trade or through work in the Gulf, were rarely the objects of such violent, collective, and sustained envy. Rather, the basis of the opposition was contained in the rhetorical question, always posed in discussions with the kattumaram fishers: "Should ten people be allowed to get rich at the expense of a hundred?" When I suggested that the solution might be for all fishers to be assisted to acquire trawlers, I was told: "And will there be enough fish for that? The government encourages us to ‘develop,’ to buy trawlers. But can we all do so? Can everyone own a plane or even fly in one?" By the time Kanyakumari villagers articulated these ideas to me in 1994, it may be that the work the NFF had carried out in the district in the early 1990s had already had some influence in refining them. But I would argue that the passion with which they were articulated arose from what was seen as a violation of the customary understanding of the relationship between commons and community.

But this understanding began to be framed in other ways, by the trawler owners, and by the Church. More insidious and more pervasive were the artisanal fishers’ own successful encounters with the market, given the rising demand for their products in distant markets,
and their ability to translate these gains into upward mobility through membership in the marketing cooperatives and microcredit groups. This suggests that there can be numerous outcomes of the encounter between neoliberal globalization and subaltern producers. Displacement and dispossession are one possibility, and it is this that subalterns seek to avoid as they assert community control over the market. But the market can also come to represent mobility, and, coupled with the media, can generate new desires around consumption and lifestyle, leading to a gradual but pervasive reorienting of their own economic strategies and desires. While the market may not benefit all members equally, the language of community might work to win their consent, however reluctant or passive this might be.

The slipperiness of the idea of community and its usage in order to justify quite divergent interests, as well as subaltern villagers’ own desire for higher incomes, improved mobility and higher status have contributed to the retreat of the counter-movement. While the market provided the material possibility of upward mobility, it is through participation in diverse civil society associations where the ideological work of tying greater social equality (in terms of gender and caste) and community uplift to market participation was carried out. Another reason for the decline of the counter-movement can also be found in civil society. In the variety of contestations and associations around the fishery, claims and counter-claims about nature, science, democracy, and the nation, were made and remade, and these were addressed not only to the state but to the broader civil society. The trawler owners were more successful in gaining public support. A cross-section of the general public, including Communist Party activists, academics, and media, shared the ideology of modernization and the view of the artisanal fishers as "backward." Many saw the mechanization of the fishery as necessary and inevitable. The villagers of Kanyakumari argued that the press had been entirely in the trawler owners’ favour, and that they themselves had been unfairly portrayed as ignorant and unruly. As a result, the artisanal fishers were unable to draw on support from the wider public. The place, caste, and community-bound nature of many of the civil society associations observed here prevented broad based links with other sectors of rural "toilers" in the same district or region. The national counter-movement did manage to build these broader
links to a far greater extent, which is a large part of the explanation for its relative success.

A final lesson to be taken from the story of the counter-movement told here has to do with its approach to the state. This is particularly instructive as a contrast to the neoliberal vision of civil society autonomy from the state that informed the new generation of microcredit groups described in Chapter 6. The people of Kanyakumari related to the state in complex ways, questioning its legitimacy and sovereignty, yet utilizing its institutions. Village law had sovereignty over that of the state. As mentioned earlier, the group that went to see the Minister in Madras told him: "Our stone inscription is the law here. We can't change it. If you change it, your law will remain in your office, it can't be implemented in our village." Later I was also told: "The three month trawling ban is not in the Tamil Nadu Marine Fishing Regulation Act, but it is our village regulation and is for the well-being of our village." The village committee was able to issue writs and enforce them through denying the entitlements of membership in the village community, such as access to the water outlet, and Church rites. Meanwhile, the state's regulatory Acts were routinely flouted by its citizens, the trawler owners. The state's legitimacy, based on claims to acting democratically or fairly, was contested. In public speeches and in private conversations about the conflict, people would ask rhetorically: "Is this a democracy?" (itu jaṉāyakamā?), "Is this justice?" (itu niyāyamā). The Collector was openly accused of being corrupt and accepting bribes from the trawler owners. The police were reviled and not allowed into the village.

Yet both parties made constant visits to the police station to file complaints against each other. They regularly called for peace talks in the presence of district administrative officials, and filed writs against each other in the High Court. Well aware of the tensions between the dictates of state policy and the electoral vulnerabilities of elected representatives, villagers sought out their MPs and MLAs for assistance, and threatened them and other Ministers with withdrawal of electoral support. Although they acknowledged some truth in Sivakumar et al's (1979) suggestion that it was in the interests of the politicians to keep the problem alive and to favour mediation over legislation, villagers seemed unwilling to indict the party system, preferring to see in their
electoral strength a source of power for themselves. For them the problem lay not so much in the reluctance of the provincial government to legislate more comprehensively, as in the prevarication of the administrative authorities when enforcing legislation. The counter-movement, both in Kanyakumari and nationally, had learned that it was possible to work both ‘in and against the state’\textsuperscript{157} but that no movement to re-embed the market could be successful without the assistance of the state.

\textsuperscript{157} Wainwright (2003: 6) takes this phrase and concept from the London-Edinburgh Weekend Return Group’s 1980 book \textit{In and Against the State}. The italics are mine.
Chapter 8
Epilogue

Over the past several chapters, I undertook a close examination of the collective public life, or civil society, of the fishing villages of Kanyakumari in order to understand the rise and decline of a counter-movement of artisanal fishers against the commodification and enclosure of the fishery that has been the basis of their survival and community life for centuries. What became clear was that some of the causes for the decline of the counter-movement lay in the very nature of civil society itself, in the fact that it is a space of multiple and often contradictory discourses and associations. The subaltern populations of the villages are being integrated into capitalist modernity not only through displacement and proletarianization, but also through new ideas of the self versus the collective, and new forms of collective action vis-à-vis the state and the economy that are found within this civil society.

Part of the reason for the decline of the local counter-movement was its inability to theorize and articulate more strongly the understanding of community as commons upon which it was founded, so that the ideal of community was co-opted and filled with other meanings. Whereas in the idea of community as commons lay the possibility of building alliances with other groups in the region that were similarly affected by the workings of the market, the meaning of community as caste and religious identity made such a unity of interests difficult. This is not to suggest that the two meanings of community are entirely separate, or that the undifferentiated customary understanding of the term to include both commons and identity had at any previous point been more able to transcend the limitations of place and ascription to build larger alliances. It is merely to point to a greater potential within this conception. What the understanding of community as commons provides is a way of combining the general interest with its particular local expressions. It recognizes rights to particular forms of subsistence, particular labour processes, and particular histories and relationships to locality and ecology. It is a way of tying property, locality, work and conservation to a conception of sovereignty and fundamental rights.
This last point is another of the virtues of the commons perspective. As the market’s capacity to destroy nature has become evident, governments, corporations, and multilateral institutions are responding with policies of conservation. But conservation, when divorced from questions of community and the commons, can actively displace those most dependent for their livelihood on resource extraction. Around the world, this has been the struggle of fishing communities against Marine Protected Areas, and in India against the government’s proposed Coastal Zone Management legislation that would have disallowed fishing, but permitted beach tourism as ecologically sustainable. This was the concern that brought out thirty thousand fishermen and women to a rally in Nagercoil, in December 2009, to protest the Central Government’s proposed Marine Fisheries (Regulation and Management) Act. The Act was developed in response to a directive from the EU (now the largest market for seafood exports from India) that made it mandatory for all marine products exported to the EU to be certified as having been harvested sustainably (Business Line, 2009). What the fishers were protesting was that the management plans were to be based on the interests of conservation of fish resources, and law and order at sea, with no mention made of the livelihood and customary fishing rights of the fishworkers as a central interest of management (Thomas Kocherry, critique of draft bill, email dated 9 December, 2009).

While the capacity of the markets to destroy nature has seen some acknowledgement in the language of conservation and sustainability, their capacity to destroy society itself is willfully mis-recognized. This can be seen in the events that are currently dominating political life in India: the intensification of capitalist extraction in the resource-rich heartland of the country, and the militant resistance by the adivasis, or indigenous people, displaced and dispossessed in the process. This is but the most acute expression of a contradiction expressing itself across the country. The state’s response is exactly as it was with the conflicts around trawling, except exponentially more violent and repressive: it has sought to cast this as a “law and order” problem, rather than one arising from the violation of customary rights and the destruction of society itself by market forces. As the demand for primary accumulation – of sea resources, land, minerals and forests – becomes ever more acute, it is unlikely that either democracy or civil society will be able to contain the confrontation between the state, which acts to secure these resources for
capital, and subaltern groups, who are seen as getting in the way despite their centuries-
long stewardship of these very lands and resources.

These developments cry out for a powerful, concerted, oppositional social movement that
can shift and transcend scales and mobilize trans-locally across the insularities of space-
and identity-based communities, and theorize and articulate a commons perspective
within the polyvalent spaces of civil society against the increasingly hegemonic values of
neoliberal subjectivity. Despite the political challenges of constructing such a counter-
movement that this thesis has demonstrated, the task has never been more urgent.
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Appendices

Appendix 1
List of Interviews

A. Delphin, MSW from Stella Maris College Madras, Kovalam, 22.4.95
A. Vasthian, fisherman, Kovalam, 14.2.95
AD Nagercoil, 18.4.95
Advocate Celestine, Advisor, Vallam Union, 13.7.95
Alexander Pillai, old village leader, Pallam Puthenthurai, 15.6.95
Alexander, Vice-President, parish committee, Kovalam, 15.2.95
Alphonse, member of Parish Council, Enayam Puthenthurai, 11.7.95
Alphonse, old businessman, village leader, and Congress (I) member, Mel Manakudy, March 1995
Amritham aka Chunambu, ex-village leader, Enayam Puthenthurai, January 1995
Antony Raj, school teacher, Kovalam, 18.4.95
Antony, fisherman, Pallam Puthenthurai, 15.6.95
Arul Mary ‘Teacher’, Enayam Puthenthurai, January 1995
Azarias, village elder, Mel Manakudy, March 1995

Boat (Trawler) Union, Colachel, 7.7.95
Brother Stephen, assistant to Parish Priest, Kanyakumari, 15.5.95
Carlose, KSSS sangam member and TFU founder member, Mel Manakudy, March 1995
Chinna Muttam Trawler Owners and Employees Union, 20.4.95.
Christopher, BCC staff person, 1995 and 2004
Cyril, TFU and KDFSF sangam member, Pallam Puthenthurai, 5.3.95

Damian, merchant, Pallam Puthenthurai, 15.6.95
Dinakaran, son of Pushpam, Kanyakumari, February 2004
Dr V.C.V. Retnam, Professor Scott Christian College, October 1994
DYFI youth, Kovalam, 22.4.95.

Edward, prominent village woman, Enayam Puthenthurai, January 1995
Edwige, leader in anti-trawler struggle, Kanyakumari, May-June 1995
Edwin, CPI (M) member, fisherman, Kovalam, 11.4.95
Emmanuel, fisherman, Kovalam, February 1995.
Ephraim Raja (Kannakar), Congress member, parish committee member and anbiam leader, Kovalam, 18.4.95

FMT Raju, Executive Director, Boat Building Centre, Muttam, and Centre for Appropriate Technology, Nagercoil, February 2004
Fr A J Joseph, retired diocesan priest, 28.7.95
Fr Amal Raj Nevis, Parish Priest, Kanyakumari, 16.5.95
Fr Arulraj, diocesan priest, February 2004
Fr Charles, Director, Coastal Peace and Development Council, February 2004
Fr Dionysius, diocesan priest, founder KSSS sangams, 16.7.95
Fr Dominic, Parish Priest, Kovalam, April-May 1995
Fr Dominic, Parish Priest, Kovalam, April 1995
Fr M.J. Edwin, diocesan priest, founder BCCs, November 1994, 1.8.95.12, February 2004
Fr Jeyapathy, S.J., Deputy Director, Folklore Research and Resources Centre, St. Xavier’s College, Palayamkottai, 5.4.95
Fr Justus, Parish Priest, Mel Manakudy, 17.2.95 and February 2004
Fr Martin S.J., Parish Priest, Mel Manakudy, February 2004
Fr Servatius, diocesan priest, Nagercoil, 2.8.95
Fr Soosai Antony, author of thesis on the KDFSF, 12.2.95
Fr Tobias, Director, KSSS, 7.3.95
Fr Vincent Pereira, retired diocesan priest, Kovalam, 11.4.95.
Fr Vincent Rodrigo, retired diocesan priest, Pallam Puthenthrurai, 23.7.95
Francis, ADMK unit secretary, Kovalam, 19.4.95

George Michael and colleagues, fishermen, Kovalam, 14.2.1995.
George Michael, Panchayat president 1970-80, Kovalam, 18.4.95
George s/o Andreas, village committee member, Kanyakumari, 19.6.95
Gerald, trawler worker, Kodimunai, 17.6.95
Girls group, Pallam Puthenthrurai, 1.7.95
Grama Pengal Munnetra Sangam (micro-credit group) members, Chinna Muttam, December 1995

Harekrishna Debnath, NFF leader, in New Delhi, February 2004
Inspector of Fisheries, Nagercoil, February 2004
Inspector Rabinson, AD Colachel's office, 7.7.95, and 7.8.95
Ishtaq, Parish committee member and DMK member, Kovalam, 11.4.95.

Jeneta, past Secretary, JMS village unit, Kovalam, 11.4.95
Joseph, Merchant, Kovalam, 11.4.95
J. Mikhail, fisherman, Kovalam, 26.4.95
James Daniel, District Coordinator, Arivoli Iyakkam of Arrivoli. 16.11.95
Jancy, activist with MVS, TFU staff person 20.1.96, February 2004
Johnson, merchant, parish committee member, and MDMK office bearer, Mel Manakudy, March 1995
Joseph, Chinna Muttam, November-December 1994
Josephat, Secretary, Association of Deep Sea Going Fishermen, Thoothoor, 22.3.95
Jyothi, trawler owner’s wife, Kanyakumari, 15.5.95

Kanya Pengal Iyakkam (women’s group) members, Pallam Puthenthrurai, 12.3.95
Kanya Pengal Iyakkam members, Kodimunai, 17.6.95
Kattumaram fishermen from Kanyakumari district, Ovari, June 1995
KDFSF Sangam, Anthoniar Theru, Kanyakumari, 20.5.95
KDFSF Sangam, Vavathurai, Kanyakumari, 20.5.95
Kennedy, ex-TFU member and now boat owner, 15.5.95
KSSS Sangams A, B, C, D members, Enayam Puthenthurai, January 1995

Lucas, founder, KDFSF and Executive Director, Shantidan, August 1995

‘Madathakaran’, fisherman, Kodimunai, 13.6.95
Makkal Meen Virpanai Mayyam (affiliated to SED) members, Enayam Puthenthurai, January 1995
Mariadason, fisherman, ex-President KDFSF, leader, Mel Manakudy, 6.12.94, 4.7.95, February 2004
Martandam Inland Fishworkers’ meeting, 12.2.95
Mary Therese, activist with MVS, TFU staff person, Kodimunai, June 1995, February 2004
Mary, founder, Kanya Pengal Iyakkam, March 1995
Meenavar Munnetra Sangam members, Enayam Puthenthurai, January 1995
Michael, ex-village committee member, Chinna Muttam, 22.11.94
Michael Antony, parish committee member and member, Kudumba Nala Kuzhu, April 1995.
Michael Nayagam, Director, BCCs, November 1994
Motcham, President, KDFSF sangam, Kovalam, 14.2.95 and February 2004

Narchison, leader of Vallam Union, Enayam Puthenthurai, January and July 1995
Neytal Nanbar, friends’ club, Kovalam, 14.2.95
Oliverjoy, Coastal People’s Organization, Thoothoor, 19.4.95

P Pathinathan, sangam salesman, Enayam Puthenthurai, January 1995
Pani Mary, Shantidan community organizer, Kanyakumari, 7.5.95
Parish committee representatives, Kovalam, 17.5.95
Pascalis, village committee member, Kanyakumari, 8.5.95
Pascas, salesman, Meenavar Malamallarchi Sangam, Mel Manakudy, 18.2.95
Paulinal, fish vendor, Mel Manakudy, March 1995
Philomene, President of 16th anbian and anti-alcohol activist, Kanyakumari, May 1995
Prawn plant workers, Chinna Muttam, May 1995
Prema, women activist, Kodimunai, 17.6.95
Punida Antoniar Izhanjar Narpani Mandram (youth group), Kanyakumari, 15.5.95
Pushpam, leader in anti-trawler struggle, Kanyakumari, May-June 1995
Pushpam, leader, Kanyakumari village, 29.11.94

Rabinson, sangam A member, Enayam Puthenthurai, January 1995
Raj, trawler worker, Kodimunai, 17.6.95
Rex, Church accountant, Kanyakumari, 15.5.95

S. Antony Pillai, village leader, Enayam Puthenthurai, January 1995
S. Kennedy, Secretary, KDFSF, February 2004
S. Ligori, KDFSF Sangam executive committee member, Mel Manakudy, 17.2.95.
S. Rajagopal, District Collector, 24.3.95
Sahaya Rani, prawn processor, Mel Midalam, 14.5.95
Sahayam, younger brother of Raj, merchant, Mel Manakudy, 18.2.95
Santhidan unit, Kanyakumari, 20.5.95
Santhidan unit, Enayam Puthenthurai, January 1995
Santhidan unit, Kovalam, April 1995
Shantidan Village Animators, Nagercoil, 1.12.94
Santiago Royappan, trawler owner, Chinna Muttam, December 1995
Satish Babu, Executive Director, SIFFS, 22.3.95
Scholasticammal, women activist, Kodimunai, 17.6.95
Selin Mary, member, Tamil Nadu Science Forum and founder, MALAR, 1995 and February 2004
Soosai Maria, Paravar leader, Ovari, June 1995
Soris, non-fishing resident, Chinna Muttam, 28.11.94
Special Officer, Government Cooperative Society, Chinna Muttam, 22.11.94
Sr Conrad, Ovari, June 1995
Sr Gleva, Ovari, June 1995
SS David, member, KK Praxis Group, 5.12.94
Staff Person, Christy Marine Exports - Ice Plant, Chinna Muttam, December 1994
Staff Person, KK Fish Company, Chinna Muttam, December 1994
Stephen, Parish committee member and representative on 6 village association, Kovalam, May 1995
Survey and life-histories of 52 families, Chinna Muttam, November-December 1994

T. Peter Dhas, TFU, Nagercoil, February 2004
TFU staff, November 1994
Theresammal, fish vendor, Pudukadai, 14.5.95.
Thomas "Sarkar," prawn merchant, Kovalam, 11.4.95
Tobias, member, KSSS sangam, Kodimunai, June 1995
Tomai Paul, President KDFSF sangam, Chinna Muttam, November-December 1994, May 1995
Trawler workers, Kodimunai, 17.6.95

Vijayan, Assistant Manager, Boat Building Centre, Muttam, 16.2.95
V. Vivekanandan, Executive Director, SIFFS, Thiruvananthapuram, February 2004
Vallarmadan, Kovalam, April-May 1995

Widows Group, Mel Manakudy, March 1995
Widows Group, Pallam Puthenthurai, 12.3.95
Widows’ Group, Kovalam, April 1995
Woman moneylender, Periavillai, 30.11.94

Y. Fernandes, ex-Shantidan staff, June 1995 and February 2004
Youth Group, Enayam Puthenthurai, 12.7.95
Youth Group, Kanyakumari, 15.5.95
Appendix 2
Associations in Kodimunai village, 1995

**Village units of district level organizations**
Men’s cooperative sangam (affiliated to the Kanyakumari District Fishermen’s Sangams Federation and SIFFS)
Community Health Development Programme (women and health)
Shantidhan – separate groups for fish vending women, young women, married women, and children
Kanya Pengal - women’s organization
Grama Pengal Munnetra Sangam – women’s microcredit group
Tamil Nadu Fishworkers’ Union – no longer active

**Trades organizations**
Vallam Thozhilalar Union (Vallam Workers’ Union) – independent organization in village, not a unit of the district Vallam Union
Kuzhialargal sangam – association of men who dive for shells and shellfish in the lean season. Functions include internal regulation - each member is allowed to sell mussels only once a day, and if he dives twice the second lot must be used at home – and lobbying with parish.

**Youth groups, each with about 40 members**
Kadal Paravai (sea birds), units 1 and 2
Antoniar sangam
Xaveriar sangam
Lourdannai Kaja sangam
Kavi Kuzhu, units 1 and 2
Pulipadai sangam
Mini-Seabirds for small boys
Another group for educated youth

**Film star fan clubs**
MGR
Shivaji
Sharad Babu
Kamalahasan
Rajnikant

**Units of political parties**
Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI) – youth wing of CPI (M)
Congress (I)
ADMK
MDMK

**Pious associations**
Vincent de Paul - separate units for men and women
Christian Living Communities (CLC) - only women
Franciscans - 10 men and many women
Irudai sabhai - older women
Siruvali Iyakkam - separate units for men and women
Palar sabhai - children

20 *anbians* or BCCs of 30 households each. These were not functioning in 1995.

Government fishermen’s cooperative society
Appendix 3
Acronyms and Glossary

ACRONYMS

ADMK  Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam
BCC   Basic Christian Communities
CPDC  Coastal Peace and Development Council
CPI (M) Communist Party of India (Marxist)
DMK   Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam
ISCF  International Collective in Support of Fishworkers
KK    Kanyakumari
KDFSF Kanyakumari District Fishermen Sangams Federation
KSSS  Kottar Social Service Society
MDMK  Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam
NFF   National Fishworkers’ Forum
OBM   Out-Board Motor
PMK   Pattali Makkal Katchi
SHG   Self-Help Group
SIFFS South Indian Federation of Fishermen’s Societies
TFU   Tamil Nadu Fishworkers’ Union
TNMFRA Tamil Nadu Marine Fisheries Regulation Act 1983

GLOSSARY

Anbiam  Basic Christian Community, a unit of thirty households
Sangam  Association or group, used here largely to describe the fishermen’s cooperatives
Kattumaram Tamil for “tied logs,” a simple, double-hulled boat made by tying logs together; artisanal fishing craft
Vallam   Plank canoe, now made increasingly with plywood or fibreglass; artisanal fishing craft
Mechanized boat 32-60 foot craft with inboard engine using gillnets or trawl nets
Motorized craft Vallam or kattumaram fitted with out-board motor (OBM); still considered an artisanal craft
Trawler  Mechanized craft using trawl nets