Democracy and the Politics of Social Citizenship
in India

by

Anil Mathew Varughese

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Department of Political Science
University of Toronto

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DEMOCRACY AND THE POLITICS OF SOCIAL CITIZENSHIP

IN INDIA

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Abstract

Why do some pro-poor democracies in global South enact generous and universal social policies accompanied by empowering outcomes while others, similar in many ways, do not? If lower-class integration and programmatic commitment steers policy outcomes to be more egalitarian, what explains the variance in redistributive commitment within the cluster of radical democracies? These questions are examined in the context of two celebrated cases of pro-poor reform in the developing world: the Indian states of Kerala and West Bengal. Despite a host of similar background conditions (democratic framework, programmatic political parties, strong labor unions, and a high degree of subordinate-class integration), the cases display considerable variation in their redistributive commitment. Using the comparative-historical method, this dissertation seeks to explain the variance.

It argues that the welfare divergences of Kerala and West Bengal are a function of their divergent modes of lower-class integration. In Kerala, a \textit{radical-mobilizational} mode of
lower-class integration has organized the poorer sections of the working classes—landless laborers and informal sector workers—in autonomous class organizations. This has enabled them to vigorously assert their interests within the working-class movement and harness state power to advance their interests through a wide range of legislative protections and statutory entitlements. In contrast, a clientelist-corporatist mode of lower-class integration in West Bengal relies on dependent mobilization of the poorer sections, without effective self-representing class organizations and without the strategic capacity to pursue class action independent of middle-class collaborators. These distinct modes of lower-class integration engender qualitatively different state-poor relationships and, in turn, divergent visions of social citizenship. The origins of these distinct modes are then traced to their historical and peculiar patterns of class formation, class struggle, and class compromise.

This dissertation provides nuance to the welfare-state literature by proposing analytical differentiation within a subset of radical democracies and then by specifying the conditions under which lower-class power and state power can be harnessed to create more redistributive and empowering social outcomes in the global South. It also makes a contribution in linking agrarian labor movements to the nature of welfare regimes and more broadly to social citizenship.
Acknowledgements

Writing this dissertation has been a long and arduous journey and, and along the way, I have accumulated innumerable debts. I owe an extraordinary intellectual debt to my supervisor, Prof. Richard Sandbrook for his guidance and patience throughout the dissertation process and my entire graduate career. The ways in which his ideas have shaped this work will be obvious to those who are familiar with his scholarship. The involvement of my committee members, Joseph Wong and Paul Kingston, went beyond offering incisive comments on various drafts to preparing me for a career in teaching and research. Their contributions have greatly enriched the dissertation and my intellectual development. I am also grateful to Prof. Arthur Rubinoff for offering thoughtful suggestions for improvement. I am immensely thankful to my external examiner, Prof. Atul Kohli, for his rigorous reading and critical engagement. His endorsements of the key argument and ideas in the dissertation have significantly enhanced my confidence.

Outside the academic circle, my biggest debt is to Dr. Mary Jo Leddy who has been a friend and mentor for the last decade. She was involved in every stage of my doctoral studies, beginning with writing reference letters, to helping in finding a place to live, to offering a quiet place to write, to reading my chapters carefully. I am immensely thankful for her as well as the Romero House community for their warm friendship.

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Many individuals generously helped me during the field research. They provided key contacts, arranged housing and transportation, welcomed me into their homes and shared priceless wisdom with infinite patience and generosity. While I cannot name everyone here, I thank all of them for their kindness. For providing me with key contacts, resources, access to meetings and documents, I thank Dr. Dwaipayan Bhattacharya at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Kolkata, and Dr. K. N. Harilal at the Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum. Their insights and logistical help were vital to my field research. During field research, I benefited generously from the assistance of the staff and librarians at CSSS and CDS. Parthasarathi Banerji provided endless insight into all aspects of life and politics in West Bengal. Aktar Ali, Suman Ray and Partha Dutta in Bengal and Gipson Varghese in Kerala provided assistance with research and translation. Kausik Bhadra helped in the collection of statistical data.

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The help and support of my family has been priceless. My parents always supported my endeavours even when they didn’t agree with my choices. I thank them for their unconditional love. My siblings, Asha and Ajith, have shaped my life in more ways than I can describe. My parents-in-law and brother-in-law, Joy, have motivated me persistently yet gently, almost every time I spoke to them. I am thankful to all of them.
Last but not least, to Chandrima, my *compagnon de route*, for putting up with my idiosyncratic ways of working, for taking on a bigger share of the parental responsibilities so that I could finish, for her exemplary work ethic, and above all, for not losing faith. She edited the whole thesis with a keen eye for precision, forcing me to clarify my ideas along with my writing. Without her love and support, this dissertation would not have seen the light of day. Our two boys, Ayush and Adarsh, showed up along the way and quite happily settled for playing with tupperware containers of various shapes and sizes, while we pored over pages. Without them, the last several years would have been too boring.
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Chapter 1
Setting up the Puzzle

1.1 Introduction

Two propositions from existing scholarship render the study of democracy and social citizenship in developing countries intriguing. First, there is a widely shared assumption that the consolidation of a democratic form of government will push policy-making to become more people-oriented and equitable, given that democratic systems, theoretically, put the control of public policy in the hands of the masses (classic exposition by Przeworski, et al. 1996). Second, the welfare state literature suggests that within democracies, where there is a better integration of subordinate classes into the political process by ideologically coherent, left-of-center political parties, policy outcomes will be more egalitarian (Esping-Andersen 1985; Rueschemeyer, et al. 1992). While both assertions have been largely borne out by evidence, variations within the democratic world, on both counts, open up new and fascinating possibilities for further research. For instance, if democracies are more prone to equity-enhancing policy reforms, why is there such great variance in redistributive commitments among democracies? Why do democracies in the global South respond differently to problems of poverty, deprivation, and exclusion? Similarly, if lower-class integration into left-of-center governing parties and pro-poor programmatic commitment steer policy outcomes in an egalitarian direction, what explains the variance in lower-class empowerment within apparently similar radical democracies? Why do some pro-poor democracies enact generous, universal social policies, accompanied by empowering outcomes, while others, similar in many ways, do not? In general, what factors influence the
This dissertation explores these questions by examining the politics of redistribution in two Indian states: Kerala and West Bengal. They share a democratic framework as well as a pro-poor orientation through programmatic political parties, strong labor unions, a high degree of subordinate-class integration, and largely similar levels of economic development, yet exhibit considerable divergence in their pro-poor redistributive commitment, measured in terms of pro-poor policy initiatives and empowering outcomes. I seek to understand what political factors impede or facilitate equity-enhancing social outcomes in these apparently similar welfare-democracies.

1.2 The Puzzle

The cases chosen for the study—Kerala and West Bengal—share a number of political attributes pronounced significant by previous research, and therefore allow us to control for them and seek out new explanatory factors. Both are states with organized, ideologically cohesive, and dominant left-of-center political parties. A largely identical Left-wing coalition, led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or the CPI(M), has ruled both states for considerable period of time—West Bengal since 1977 to 2011 uninterruptedly and Kerala since 1980 in regular intervals.¹ The public spheres in both

¹ Both states experienced CPI(M)-led or CPI(M)-dominant governments earlier (West Bengal in 1967 and 1969; Kerala in 1957 and 1967). However, it was since 1977 and 1980 respectively that stable left-wing political coalitions emerged in both states: the ‘Left Front’ (LF) in West Bengal and the ‘Left Democratic Front’ (LDF) in Kerala. The CPI(M) is the dominant coalition partner in both the LF and the LDF. These coalitions have largely
states are marked by a high propensity for left-of-center politics.

Similarly, both states have been internationally acclaimed as exemplary cases for popular
class-based mobilization and collective public action spearheaded by a secular, left-of-center
political party. Kerala is renowned for its unique developmental trajectory, called the ‘Kerala
model’ in development literature, signifying the possibility of poor societies achieving high
social and human development. West Bengal is also known as a path-breaker in a number of
pro-poor reforms, generally considered politically unfeasible in the developing world. These
include land reform program and revitalization of local government institutions. The cases
also share a history of mass-based pro-democracy movements that have dislodged traditional
authorities and mobilized constituencies normally excluded from policy-making arenas. In
the process, both have integrated the disadvantaged classes into the political process and
have empowered them far more than elsewhere in India. However, when compared against
each other, Kerala’s record is superior. It has empowered the poor more effectively with a
robust set of pro-poor policies and outcomes despite intermittent Left rule, while West
Bengal’s redistributive commitment has been lacklustre even with continuous Left rule.

An interesting puzzle emerges from the above discussion. Under what conditions is the
redistributive commitment of pro-poor regimes best stimulated and sustained to create an
empowering policy environment for the subordinate classes? If the proposed relationship
between political power and redistribution of resources is accurate, why have we not seen the
poor and marginalized massively redistribute resources in their favor where they have
captured political power? Specifically, why is Kerala showing more extensive commitment

endured for over three decades. The Left Front lost power in West Bengal in 2011, after 34
years of continuous rule.
to social spending and empowerment-enabling policy outcomes compared to West Bengal, under a similar left-of-center regime?

The puzzle is deepened by some advantageous features possessed by West Bengal which should theoretically give it an edge over Kerala in its redistributive, empowering outcomes. As mentioned before, West Bengal has experienced uninterrupted rule by a Left coalition for roughly three and a half decades while in Kerala it has been intermittent, with various Congress-led coalitions filling the interludes. The Left Front in West Bengal comprises of Left parties only while in Kerala, the Left Democratic Front also includes non-Left parties, not programmatically wedded to advancing the interests of the poor. Further, West Bengal has a bigger economy compared to Kerala, in terms of Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) and it has grown at a rate marginally higher than Kerala between 1980 and 2008 (Datt and Ravallion 1998; India 2002; Kohli 2012). These facts make the divergence between the cases even more intriguing.

1.3 Research Design

1.3.1 Case Selection

I use the ‘most similar systems’ design (Przeworski and Teune 1982). Such a design enhances analytical tightness by controlling for the common properties shared by the two cases and by eliminating them from the range of possible explanations. Numerous similarities of the cases under consideration provide us with considerable leverage in undertaking comparative research. The cases also share a host of other background conditions such as the level of economic development (both have been historically middle-
income states), colonial history, and rigid social hierarchies. Yet, they possess considerable diversity in their contemporary patterns of politics to allow some variance on the explanatory variables, facilitating inference and making a comparative study worthwhile.

Further, a comparison of states within the same national setting makes it possible to control for variables such as policy autonomy and institutional framework. Although Indian states are not political units with full policy autonomy, under the federal framework they are solely responsible for the enactment and implementation of social policies as well as for determining appropriate levels of social spending. Such a division of power makes states the ideal level of analysis for comparative social policy. The fact that Indian states are similarly constrained in their ability to pursue redistributive policies helps us narrow down further the range of potential explanatory factors.

1.3.2 Conceptualizing the Dependent Variable

The dependent variable (pro-poor redistributive commitment) is conceptualized as the cumulative effect of two factors: 1) pro-poor welfare spending, and 2) empowerment-enabling policy outcomes for the poor. The former is defined as the total actual expenditure on functions that affect the poor directly under ‘education,’ ‘health and family welfare,’ and ‘rural development’ sub-sectors in state budgets. These include elementary and secondary education, medical and public health, family welfare, and rural development. Empowerment-enabling policy outcomes are defined as achievements in the above policy areas that enhance the social welfare of the lower classes, measured individually or cumulatively (by the composite index on human development). Performance on the above measures during the
last three decades (1980-2010) is taken to be an aggregate gauge of pro-poor redistributive commitment.

Lack of systematic and comprehensive indicators make the measurement of social policy commitment a methodological challenge. As a result, the use of a two-fold index is warranted. Taken on their own, none of the indicators may be able to best capture pro-poor redistributive policy commitment. For example, spending levels targeted at the poor tell us nothing about how effective the implementation has been. Looking at policy outcomes alone may bias our findings because there is usually a time lag between a change in pro-poor commitment and its distributional impact.

The next task in solving the puzzle is to establish variance on the dependent variable. There is wide agreement on the fact that my cases vary considerably on the two indicators—pro-poor spending levels and policy outcomes—as testified by state-level budgetary data and the human development index. Kerala demonstrates higher levels of social spending and superior outcomes compared to Bengal.²

**Welfare Spending**

Welfare spending is measured by the total actual expenditure on ‘education,’ ‘health and family welfare,’ and ‘rural development’ sub-sectors in state budgets. These expenditures are primarily targeted to the poor by way of provision of primary and secondary education, basic public health care, and poverty alleviation. The level of spending on health and education has

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² Bengal and West Bengal are used synonymously. Reference to Bengal in the pre-independence period, however, points to the Bengal Presidency of British India, which included the territories of the current Indian states of West Bengal, Odisha, Bihar and the neighboring sovereign state of Bangladesh (East Bengal).
been significantly higher in Kerala in comparison not only to Bengal but also to the rest of India. On average, Kerala spends 36% more on education and 46% more on health compared to other Indian states. For instance, in 2008-09, Kerala spent 60% more than West Bengal on per capita elementary and secondary education (Kerala’s Rs. 1509 compared to West Bengal’s Rs. 941, see Table 1.1 and Appendix 1 for year-by-year calculations). This is not an aberration; as Table 1.1 reveals, Kerala has historically spent 40 to 60% more per capita on school education. While real per-capita expenditure on elementary education grew at an average rate of 1.4% per year across 15 major Indian states between 1990 and 1998, West Bengal’s share declined by 2.5% per year, making it the leader among the laggards (Drèze and Sen 2002, 169). Public spending on education is also more equitably distributed in Kerala between genders and among different social groups and regions in the state (Kerala 2010).

Similar trends persist in the health sector. In 2008-09, Kerala spent 80% more than West Bengal on per capita health and family welfare expenditure (Kerala’s Rs. 563 compared to West Bengal’s Rs. 310, see Table 1.1). This too shows a historic trend of a widening gap (see Table 1.1 and Appendix 1). The growth of ‘social services’ expenditure in general has been worryingly low in West Bengal, falling far behind even the non-Left ruled states during the period 1991-2005 (Dev and Mooij 2002; Maharatna 2007).
Table 1.1: The level of public spending on education and health for Kerala, West Bengal and India (snapshots of 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s)

### Kerala

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Elementary &amp; Secondary Education Per capita (in Rs.)</th>
<th>Health &amp; Family Welfare Per capita (In Rs.)</th>
<th>Elementary &amp; Secondary Education as % of GSDP</th>
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<td>17.08</td>
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<td>0.12</td>
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<tr>
<td>2007-08</td>
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Source: Same as Table 1.1c

### West Bengal

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<th>Health &amp; Family Welfare Per capita (In Rs.)</th>
<th>Elementary &amp; Secondary Education as % of GSDP</th>
<th>Health &amp; Family Welfare as % of GSDP</th>
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<tr>
<td>1992-93</td>
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<td>2002-03</td>
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<td>310.75</td>
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Source: Same as Table 1.1c

### India

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<td>49.31</td>
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<td>1992-93</td>
<td>143.02</td>
<td>55.07</td>
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### Policy Outcomes

Among policy outcomes, ‘incidence of poverty’ (the proportion of people below poverty line, defined as a nutritional norm of 2400 calories per person per day) is widely cited. According to a ranking of 14 major Indian states (see Table 1.2), Kerala has the lowest rate of poverty in rural areas while West Bengal is placed at the seventh highest position. While Kerala remains the top performer in rural poverty alleviation by all conventional measures of poverty including headcount, poverty gap, and squared poverty gap, West Bengal ranks consistently in the middle strata (World-Bank 1997). In parts of West Bengal (the eastern
plains) rural poverty index is as high as 54.2%, while Kerala’s highest rural poverty is in the vicinity of 30% (Dreze and Srinivasan 1996).

Table 1.2 State-wise Incidence of Rural Poverty

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<td>20.2</td>
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<td>Punjab</td>
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<td>9.1</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>14.6</td>
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<td>Andhra Pradesh</td>
<td>15.92</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>32.3</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Rajasthan</td>
<td>26.46</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>35.8</td>
<td>26.4</td>
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<td>19.1</td>
<td>39.1</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>West Bengal</td>
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<td><strong>28.6</strong></td>
<td><strong>38.2</strong></td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Maharashtra</td>
<td>37.93</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>47.9</td>
<td>29.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Orissa</td>
<td>49.72</td>
<td>46.8</td>
<td>60.8</td>
<td>39.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Uttar Pradesh</td>
<td>42.28</td>
<td>33.4</td>
<td>42.7</td>
<td>39.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>45.01</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>39.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Madhya Pradesh</td>
<td>40.64</td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td>53.6</td>
<td>42.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Bihar</td>
<td>58.21</td>
<td>41.1</td>
<td>55.7</td>
<td>55.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>All India</td>
<td><strong>37.27</strong></td>
<td><strong>28.3</strong></td>
<td><strong>42.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>33.8</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (India 2012b); calculations from India (2000)

Note: Tendulkar Methodology figures are not comparable with the other figures. The Tendulkar Expert Group on estimating poverty adopted a wider definition of poverty and a new methodology to calculate poverty since 2004, including caloric intake as well as education, health, electricity, clothing, and footwear. As a result, rural poverty estimates produced by the two methods show vastly different figures for 2004-05. Ranking is according to the Tendulkar methodology figures.

Another way to examine redistributive commitment through policy outcomes is to look for change in incidence of poverty across several years. According to the change in rural poverty index for 33 years (1957-1991), Kerala managed to eradicate poverty for about 2.26% of its rural population every year, compared to 1.49% for Bengal (World-Bank 1997; Datt and Ravallion 1998, 22). If we shift the timeframe to 1973–2004, West Bengal’s performance
improves considerably vis-a-vis national average, but still stays marginally behind Kerala
(See Table 1.3a & b).

Table 1.3a  Percentage of rural population below poverty line

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Kerala</th>
<th>West Bengal</th>
<th>India</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1973-74</td>
<td>59.19</td>
<td>73.16</td>
<td>56.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977-78</td>
<td>51.48</td>
<td>68.34</td>
<td>53.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>39.03</td>
<td>63.05</td>
<td>45.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987-88</td>
<td>29.10</td>
<td>48.30</td>
<td>39.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993-94</td>
<td>25.76</td>
<td>40.80</td>
<td>37.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-05 URP</td>
<td>13.25</td>
<td>28.60</td>
<td>28.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (India 2012a)
Note: URP stands for Uniform Recall Period consumption in which the consumer expenditure data is collected from a 30-day recall period.

Table 1.3b  Rural Poverty Reduction Rate (per cent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Kerala</th>
<th>West Bengal</th>
<th>India</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1973-74 to 1977-78</td>
<td>7.71</td>
<td>4.82</td>
<td>3.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977-78 to 1983</td>
<td>12.45</td>
<td>5.29</td>
<td>7.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983 to 1987-88</td>
<td>9.93</td>
<td>14.75</td>
<td>6.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987-88 to 1993-94</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>7.50</td>
<td>1.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993-94 to 2004-05 URP</td>
<td>12.51</td>
<td>12.20</td>
<td>8.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average rate of change per annum (1973-74 to 2004-05)</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: same as Table 1.3a

The pattern holds for other human development indicators. The male adult literacy rate in Kerala is 96% compared to 82.7% in West Bengal. Female literacy rate in Kerala is at 92% compared to 71% in Bengal. The overall literacy rate is 94% in Kerala and 77% in West Bengal while the national average is 74% (India 2011). Female life expectancy at birth in Kerala is 76.3 years compared to 65.8 in Bengal (UNDP 2011b). Average lifespan is 75 years in Kerala with a per capita income of roughly 1000 USD, while Americans live on average for 77 years with a per capita income of approximately 48,000 USD. Infant mortality
is 12 per 1000 live births in Kerala compared to 7 per 1000 live births in the United States. It is 35 in Bengal and 53 in India as a whole (UNDP 2011b). Sixty-five percent of mothers in Kerala receive full antenatal care (3 visits) and 96.5% of all mothers experience a safe child birth. The respective figures for West Bengal are 12 and 42 (India 2005).

Bengal’s basic educational achievements have also steadily deteriorated making it one of the lowest achievers in this category among Indian states. For instance, in the composite ranking of primary and upper primary education tracking the progress of Indian states in providing universal elementary education (known as Education Development Index or EDI) for the year 2006-07 released by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (HRD), West Bengal is, strikingly, at the bottom of the list, ranking 33rd out of 35 Indian States and Union Territories, while Kerala ranks first (India 2007a). Also, the proportion of male children attending school remained below the national average throughout 1990s and 2000s (see Table 1.4). If we use the human development index (HDI) compiled by the Planning Commission of India as a composite measure of achievements across several social policy fields, Kerala is number one among the largest fifteen states and West Bengal is eighth (see Table 1.5). Interestingly, economies of both states have grown at roughly equal levels across the period of study at around 6% average (see Table 1.6).

Table 1.4    Proportion of male children (age 6-14) attending school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>West Bengal</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerala</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (India 2007b), (Drèze and Sen 2002, Statistical Appendix Table A.3. Part 4)
Table 1.5  Human Development Index for Major Indian States³

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kerala</td>
<td>0.677</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.790</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punjab</td>
<td>0.543</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.605</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maharashtra</td>
<td>0.501</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.572</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamil Nadu</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.570</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haryana</td>
<td>0.501</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.552</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gujarat</td>
<td>0.466</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.527</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karnataka</td>
<td>0.432</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.519</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>West Bengal</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.422</strong></td>
<td><strong>8</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.492</strong></td>
<td><strong>8</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andhra Pradesh</td>
<td>0.368</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.473</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>0.336</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.444</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajasthan</td>
<td>0.387</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.434</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uttar Pradesh</td>
<td>0.316</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0.380</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madhya Pradesh</td>
<td>0.285</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0.375</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bihar</td>
<td>0.292</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.367</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orissa</td>
<td>0.275</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0.362</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (UNDP 2011b)

Table 1.6  Annual Growth Rate of State Domestic Product

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>1980-2008</th>
<th>Rank 2007–08</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Bengal</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerala</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (Kohli 2012, 148)

³ The HDI is a cumulative index of health, education, and income, combining many indicators of these dimensions into a numerical figure between 0 and 1, with 0 being the lowest and 1 the highest.
The picture that emerges from the above analysis is of Kerala as a high achiever in many fields, whereas West Bengal is a mixed case in poverty alleviation and a laggard in public health and primary education. What explains this variation given the identical character of Left-led political regimes in Kerala and West Bengal?

1.3.3 Conceptualizing the Independent Variable

My research shows that modes of lower-class integration are crucial in shaping the redistributive capacities and outcomes of radical democracies. Modes of integration specify the forms and extent of lower-class political inclusion, their strategic capacity to catapult demands to the policy table, and to harness state power to entrench their interests. As such, the three important dimensions of the concept are: organization, contestation, and institutionalization.

Organization refers to the manner in which lower-class power is mobilized and organized. The salient political identity (class vs. ethnicity), the level of organizational autonomy (dependent vs. autonomous), the nature of leadership (independent vs. dependent), and the agents of incorporation (trade unions and labor-friendly political parties vs. peak associations) may vary across distinct modes of lower-class integration.

Contestation mainly refers to the capacity for intra-class bargaining by different sections of the working class. This depends on the terms at which the poorer sections of the working

---

4 Lower classes refer to a variety of social groups at the lower strata of society, namely peasants, tenants, landless laborers, unorganized workers, and rural and urban wage-earners. It is broader than the traditional ‘working class’ in the sense that it includes a wider gamut of politically-excluded groups. I use the terms ‘labor,’ ‘lower class,’ ‘subordinate class,’ and ‘working class’ synonymously. To denote their heterogeneity, I use it mostly in plural.
class participate in working-class politics (equal/unequal), on the manner of resolution of competing demands (adversarial vs. conciliatory), forms of struggle (parliamentary vs. extra-parliamentary), and on whether necessary channels for full contestation among competing material interests within the lower classes are available (forums of negotiation and bargaining).

Institutionalization refers to the capacity of lower classes to harness state power to institutionally entrench rights and entitlements. In so far as this is possible only through affiliated political parties, lower class-party relations mediate lower class-state engagements. The extent of the institutionalization of lower-class power can be gleaned from the levels of state intervention to end dependent forms of labor, to entrench the collective bargaining power of workers, and to expand social welfare entitlements through laws, regulations, and statutory protections.

These dimensions of party-state-society engagement develop out of specific historical and structural contexts. The cumulative effect of variations in these three dimensions produces distinct modes of lower-class integration, which in turn sets in motion different redistributive outcomes.

1.4 Argument

As elaborated in Chapter 5, my research shows that the welfare divergences of Kerala and West Bengal are a function of their divergent modes of lower-class integration. Modes of lower-class integration refer to the cumulative ways in which the lower classes engage with the political process. It specifies the mechanisms and processes through which different sections of the lower classes gain political participation, representation, and influence.
Different modes of lower-class integration engender distinct visions of social citizenship, which in turn produce policy environments and outcomes that enable varying levels of redistributive action.

Broadly, the nature of lower-class integration in Kerala and West Bengal can be characterized as one of strong democratic inclusion. The lower classes have achieved deeper and wider access through class-based mobilization and organization under the umbrella of a socially penetrating, programmatically committed, and organizationally disciplined political party. The inclusive character of their lower-class incorporation is particularly pronounced in comparison to the rest of India. Yet, when compared against each other, the structures and processes of interest representation of the poorer sections of the working classes, and thus the degree of representation and clout obtained by them, remain markedly different between the two cases. The dynamics of lower-class integration manifestly varies along the three dimensions of organization, contestation, and institutionalization in Kerala and West Bengal.

The poorer sections of the working classes in Kerala are better organized in autonomous class organizations with independent leadership, while their Bengali counterparts lack effective and legitimate political representation and power that could be optimized by self-representing class organizations. The development of a just social compact between the poorer citizens and the state is more likely when the poor wield adequate autonomous power. Political actors such as left-wing political parties can help in bringing about and then nurturing such a compact. But the state’s redistributive zeal is unlikely to flourish in the absence of adequate political power of the poor. Independent organization of the poor has a welfare dividend.
Autonomous organization makes for a more level-playing field in Kerala where the poorer workers have higher bargaining capacity to assert their interests within the broader labor movement vis-à-vis competing interests of other class fragments. In the absence of powerful, self-governing class organizations representing them, the Bengali working poor have relatively lesser capacity to bargain for a fairer share. The pursuit of divergent agrarian mobilization tactics (peasant unity vs. labor militancy) by the dominant left-party in Bengal had a conspicuous effect on the capacity for self-assertion by poorer groups. The mobilization of different class fractions within the working class is competitive and adversarial in Kerala even under the organizational ambit of the same political party, while it is dependent and conciliatory in Bengal.

In democratic contexts, the potential for a labor-friendly political breakthrough hinges upon the formation and consolidation of a broad-based alliance of lower classes (peasants, tenants, landless agricultural laborers, formal and informal sector wage-earners, industrial workers, and other disadvantaged social groups) into a political bloc by programmatic, left-of-center political parties. Such consolidation complements the collective empowerment of working classes, but also has the potential to gloss over the disparate economic demands and class contradictions within the working classes in the absence of necessary channels for full contestation among competing material interests and the intra-party mediation of such conflicts. The capacity for transformative action thrives when lower-class integration achieves the mobilization of lower classes into powerful, but competing, trade unions, and uses their mobilizational power to extract significant concessions from the traditional landed oligarchy and the bourgeoisie and at the same time facilitates the simultaneous empowerment of all sections of the working class, including the poorer ones.
Kerala has *institutionalized* the interests of the poorer sections in the state arena to a much better extent than Bengal. The state in Kerala has involved itself in a wide-range of social and legislative interventions to protect the working poor. High labor militancy and repeated confrontations with the propertied classes have facilitated the institutionalization of class conflict and previously-won distributive gains. In contrast, weak institutionalization of the interests of the poorer masses, as evident in the absence of wide-ranging pro-poor legislation and enforcement, has prevented the state in West Bengal from being as effective a purveyor of social and human development as its counterpart in Kerala. Ultimately, differential institutionalization has led to qualitatively different state-class relationships. In Kerala, the poor interacts with the state largely without the mediation of intermediaries while in West Bengal, state-poor interface still remains mediated by the party and unions controlled by the middle class.

Taken together, the ways in which the poorer classes participate in and influence the political process are qualitatively different in the two states. I argue, as elaborated in chapter 5, that their cumulative differences constitute *distinct modes of lower-class integration*. A *radical-mobilizational* mode of lower-class integration, as found in Kerala, relies on autonomous organization of the poorer sections of the working class that is powerful enough to assert their interests independent of their class collaborators, and this enables a direct state-poor relationship. A *clientelist-corporatist* mode of lower-class integration, as seen in West Bengal, on the other hand makes use of controlled and dependent mobilization of the poorer sections of the working class that brings about a mediated state-poor interface and hence a weaker welfare zeal vis-à-vis the poor. These distinct modes of lower-class integration in turn engender qualitatively different welfare regimes.
My central argument, then, is that a radical-mobilizational mode of lower-class integration has created and sustained a robust redistributive commitment in Kerala, while a clientelist-corporatist mode of lower-class inclusion has stunted the politics of social citizenship in West Bengal. These different modes of integration have set in motion two different leftist models of dealing with poverty and inequality, that is, two visions of social citizenship, one of which is far more effective and empowering than the other. In Kerala, a more direct state-poor interface has given rise to a vision of social citizenship where social policy commitment is robust, spending levels high, and policy outcomes empowering. In West Bengal, dependent and mediated state-poor encounter has resulted in a model of social citizenship where redistributive commitment is evident but inconsistent with lopsided spending levels, less-empowering outcomes, and weak enforcement.

These two models are not polar opposites in poor welfare and empowerment, rather two points in the continuum of democratic-welfare regimes in the developing world. It is evident from the divergent trajectories of Kerala and West Bengal that a favorable political alignment is not the only condition for a robust redistributive commitment. The presence of a committed, organized and pragmatic political agent is a necessary, but not sufficient condition.

1.5 Alternative Explanations

Differential starting points

Better policy outcomes are often treated as effects of initial endowments in human and physical resources. Can the divergent outcomes be simply explained by the fact that the two states began at different starting points in terms of income distribution and/or social
outcomes? In the scholarly literature, Kerala is often treated as having had a wide-ranging head-start, and, therefore, inheriting some of the succeeding gains. This does not seem to be validated conclusively by evidence. Kerala was distinctly ahead of West Bengal in literacy, but it also had relatively higher levels of poverty and weak economic endowments at the starting point. West Bengal was considerably ahead of Kerala on all economic measures (per-capita income, consumption levels, per-capita net domestic product, level of industrialization, urbanization). On other indicators such as levels of nutrition, health facilities, and standards of living, they seem to be at par or at marginal distance from each other. What is evident from examining time-series data is that the differences between West Bengal and Kerala became sharper in the 1960s and 1970s, with Kerala pulling ahead and West Bengal falling behind on a wide range of policy arenas. While Kerala improved or held its relative position among Indian states on many of the policy areas examined, West Bengal slipped considerably vis-a-vis Kerala and other Indian states. For example, in the 1950s, Kerala and West Bengal were the highest literate states in India, but by 1971 West Bengal slipped to the fifth position while Kerala’s position remained unchanged (Nag 1983). Similarly, West Bengal was the second richest state in India in the late-1950s (income close to 100 percent of the richest state in 1957), but by the mid-1990s, its ranking fell to about eighth and per capita income declined to about 60% of the richest state. In the meantime, Kerala improved its position to about fourth among the major Indian states (World-Bank

5 I take mid-to-late 1950s as the starting point for comparative examination of initial endowments. My rationale is two-fold: First, Indian states underwent a linguistic reorganization in the mid-1950s and it was in 1956 that the current states of Kerala and West Bengal were formed in the present form. Second, 1957 is the year in which the left-wing parties in Kerala first won political office, with an opportunity to influence redistributive policy. It seems prudent to set a starting point before the effects of any such reforms could be reflected in policy outcomes.
The population dynamics in West Bengal and Kerala have remained largely similar in relation to the share of national population for the last five decades. This is noteworthy, as the in-bound migration from Bangladesh is often cited as one of the reasons for West Bengal’s lacklustre performance.7

The most controversial claim regarding starting points might be with regard to the level of rural poverty. West Bengal is often cited as one of the top performers in poverty alleviation in the last three decades. While this is true, a larger timeframe yields a different picture. In 1957 roughly 67% of Kerala’s rural population was below poverty line, as measured by head-count index, making it the second highest state in incidence of rural poverty among the 15 large Indian states. In comparison, West Bengal had only 53% of rural population in poverty, making it the sixth lowest among major Indian states (World-Bank 1997; Datt 1998). Kerala proceeded to become one of the top performers in rural poverty alleviation by the 1990s. During the same period, West Bengal’s relative position slipped from sixth to ninth, even though it reduced poverty at an impressive pace beginning in the early 1980s (World-Bank 1997) (also see Table 1.2 and 1.3 a&b). The faster pace of poverty alleviation, while impressive when viewed in a shorter time frame, ultimately served as catch-up after the dramatic rise in Bengal’s rural poverty in the 1960s and 1970s. Table 1.7 provides a comparative picture of the two states’ economic and social well-being in the 1950s. The overall story seems to be that while initial assets matter, subsequent developments have the

6 As a result of this change in relative positions, if one sets a starting point of mid-1970s, the picture looks considerably different.
7 Between 1951 and 2001, West Bengal’s population remained steady in the range of 7-8% of the national population. Kerala was at 3-4% for the same period (India 2001).
capacity to neutralize initial disadvantages. This insight forces us to delve into the independent importance of political agency and choices.

Table 1.7  Kerala and West Bengal in late-1950s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Kerala</th>
<th>West Bengal</th>
<th>India</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Per-capita income 1960-61 in Rs. (NCAER estimates)</td>
<td>326</td>
<td>462</td>
<td>336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per-capita income 1960-61 in Rs. (CSO estimates)</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>321</td>
<td>306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Poverty (head count) Average for 1957-60</td>
<td>69.18</td>
<td>50.33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural per-capita consumption expenditure as % of all India figure 1957-58</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy (including 0-4 age group) 1951</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per capita public expenditure on health in Rs. 1959-60</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infant mortality Average over 1951-60</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female life expectancy in years Average over 1951-60</td>
<td>48.3</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (Nag 1983)

Historical Processes

It can be argued that Kerala’s achievements were a result of long-term historical processes which created a conducive environment for better policy outcomes. This is largely true but needs to be qualified. Historical antecedents do not automatically result in better outcomes; they shape the parameters of the possible but do not determine the outcomes. West Bengal, too, had its own share of favorable historical conditions which could have translated into a more successful trajectory. In addition to its second highest ranking in per-capita income, West Bengal was the most industrialized state in India in the 1950s in terms of capital investments and number of persons employed. West Bengal also shares with Kerala a
historic tradition of emphasis on education, albeit with a focus on higher education. The pioneering efforts of the British-educated Bengali middle class led to early establishment of excellent schools and colleges around Calcutta as early as the nineteenth century. As a result, West Bengal started out as one of the most educated states in India in terms of number of graduates and the second most literate state in India (Nag 1983). There is no reason to believe historical circumstances have somehow disadvantaged West Bengal’s progress in the post-independence period. The key to explaining the post-independent trajectories of these states lie not in the annals of history, but in the political choices of post-independent period through the formulation and effective implementation of a set of redistributive policies.

**Remittances**

Remittances from a sizable contingent of Kerala workers in the Middle East is yet another factor cited to have helped Kerala’s performance. While it has had an impact in driving up consumption levels in Kerala, significant migration from Kerala to the Gulf did not occur until the late-1970s and 1980s, and remittance income did not assume a significant share of state income until the 1990s—after Kerala had already made its strides (Kannan and Hari 2002). I return to this issue in chapter 4.

**1.6 Contribution**

The study contributes to two sets of literature. Within the welfare state literature, the ‘social democratic’ or ‘balance of class power’ perspective views the expansion of social programs as a function of the balance of class power. This perspective posits a positive correlation between the expansion of social programs and the power of organized labor and social democratic parties. My research aims to achieve analytical differentiation among such cases,
all of which show a favorable balance of class power, by examining the variance in redistributive commitment. My findings provide nuance to the ‘balance of class power’ perspective by specifying the conditions under which the societal power of lower classes and state power can be harnessed to create the most redistributive and empowering social outcomes. It outlines more precisely why and how the mode of lower-class integration diverges, despite the same party organization and similar political contexts. It also makes a contribution in linking agrarian labor movements to the nature of welfare regimes and more broadly to social citizenship, which encompasses more facets of redistribution than what is typically undertaken by the western welfare state. In predominantly agrarian societies, agrarian labor movements influence the character, coverage, and quality of welfare regimes. In exploring the relationship between the labor movement and the welfare regime, the study moves beyond the precepts of the ‘balance of class power’ perspective by proposing particular historical accounts of social citizenship in a comparative context and thus contributing to a theory of determinants of social citizenship in agrarian societies. Agrarian mobilization that strives for the unity of agrarian classes and thus achieves less differentiated agrarian mobilization and hence less radical agrarian reforms in small-holding settings may lead to increase in productivity, but will yield comparatively lesser political and economic empowerment of the poorer classes. The welfare zeal of a left-wing regime in such a scenario is likely to be relatively less redistributive than in contexts where there is a higher differentiation of rural classes, autonomous mobilization of class fragments, and more radical land reforms. Put simply, the relative power of the agrarian poor determines the nature and extent of social welfare provision in agrarian societies.
Second, the findings of this study support Atul Kohli’s observation that “politics makes a difference” in patterns of socio-economic development, but refines it in one significant respect (1987). Class-based mobilization and a more egalitarian distribution of political power among social classes under a programmatic and organizationally well-knit party have significant impact on how states respond to poverty, but it does not end there. The same programmatic political agent can engender two considerably different transformative visions with distinct policy trajectories and outcomes, under varying modes of lower-class incorporation. This research then adds a fourth factor—the mode of incorporation of poorer classes—to the three already identified in earlier analyses (leadership, ideology, and party-organization) as responsible for shaping the redistributive capacities of states in the developing world.

Third, my research contributes to a subset of scholarly works that view the emergence, consolidation, and deepening of democracy as a function of changing class configurations. Employing the comparative-historical method, these studies treat democracy as an outcome to be explained, and they demonstrate how class relations have been consequential in bringing about and deepening democracy, or alternatively, dictatorships (Moore 1966; Luebbert 1991; Rueschemeyer, et al. 1992). For example, Luebbert and Rueschmeyer, Stephens & Stephens point to the role of working classes in advancing democracy in Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean. In the same tradition, my research findings point to the divergent modes of lower-class incorporation and the shifting trajectories of class alliances and state-poor relationships that are crucial in understanding the political conditions that will produce democracy-deepening social outcomes.
Politics defined as the processes of conflict, negotiation, and compromise over the
distribution of resources is central to bettering the lives of the vast majority of people in the
developing world. Over the last six decades, the stubborn persistence of poverty has emerged
as one of the central challenges for post-colonial, democratic India. India has the dubious
distinction of being home to the largest number of poor citizens in the world. While
population has tripled since independence in 1947, poverty levels have recorded a much
slower pace of change. Despite being a key concern in the minds of the constitution makers
and the central issue in several national elections, poverty alleviation and social justice have
not materialized. Three decades of medium but steady economic growth and three decades of
higher economic growth by itself also have not led to a substantial reduction of rural poverty.

Rather, the magnitude of socio-economic inequality and deprivation has worsened under the
recent neo-liberal economic reforms. While newly-generated wealth has made India the
fourth largest economy in the world in purchasing power parity, its human development
ranking has dropped to 134th among world nations, behind Botswana, El Salvador, and
Guatemala (UNDP 2011a). Lack of adequate commitment to the lower classes through
appropriate social policies have produced disastrous results in rural India, with roughly
250,000 farmers committing suicide between 1995 and 2010 due to dwindling prices,
inadequate access to credit, and mounting debt levels (Sanhati 2012).

Comparative research shows that emerging economies of east and southeast Asia, including
China, had done much better in social sectors and achieved a much higher level of equality
before they initiated major economic reforms than what India has achieved now.\textsuperscript{8} The implicit danger is a highly lopsided pattern of growth with high levels of economic inequality, as in Latin America of the 1980s and 1990s. This study thus calls urgent scholarly attention to the monumental neglect of social inequities in public policy in one of world’s emerging powers, and it shows how societal power and state power can be harnessed to tackle the problem.

Moving away from the specific Indian context, there are other reasons why the study is timely. First, a burgeoning research under globalization suggests that political processes should have very little or nothing to do with determining levels of redistribution. It is argued that redistributive policy making is severely constrained by “exogenous” factors and will prove abortive. The triumph of ideologies celebrating market liberalism and a consequent cut in social spending in the last two decades has had its impact on the developing world. The net result has been dramatic changes in social policies worldwide with far-reaching consequences for the most vulnerable groups. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, inequality and social exclusion due to lack of adequate redistributive protection by the state has reached alarming levels, not only in the developing world, but also in advanced-industrialized countries. While there seems to be consensus on the need to mount safety nets and invest in human capital, the debate on selectivity versus universality on most social benefits remains.

Also, previous research has established that, along with economic growth, moderation of socio-economic inequality is crucial for the survival of vibrant political democracy

\textsuperscript{8} In 1979, when China began its economic reform, adult literacy in that country was around 77\% compared to 52\% in India in 1991 (Drèze and Sen 2002).
(Przeworski, et al. 1996). This is particularly relevant for developing societies where the gap between rich and poor has widened during neo-liberal reform. A number of scholarly works that focus on environment, ethnic conflict, social movements, human security, and social capital suggest that the goal of equity is crucial (Sen 1992; Chalmers 1997). Where alternative socio-economic mechanisms that can mediate socio-economic gap are lacking, the state and its redistributive capacity is vital in binding together populations divided along several social and economic cleavages. Democratic deepening requires policy that enables a full enjoyment of citizenship rights – political and social.

This study generates a testable hypothesis for other sub-national as well as national contexts on how lower class incorporation and party-state-society linkages may affect egalitarian policy outcomes in formal democracies. It offers important insights towards building a theory of domestic determinants affecting the making and sustenance of state-managed redistributive social policies in the global South. Beyond theory building, the study adds to the empirical, comparative-historical works on the political economy of Indian states, which remains relatively under researched.

1.7 Data Collection

I undertook twelve months of field research, with six months each in Kerala and West Bengal. Data collection proceeded in three stages. The first stage comprised collecting relevant material from three sources. First, I examined published social science research in English and in regional languages, available in prominent libraries. The second source included annual reports, national sample surveys, and statistical data produced by central and state government agencies. I also collected governmental documents including ministerial
reports, spending levels and budgets, minutes from policy meetings, memos, briefing papers, political party positions and resolutions (published and unpublished) as well as newspapers and other periodicals published in English, Malayalam, and Bengali. This involved making countless trips to various libraries, administrative offices of government ministries, political party headquarters, and wading through endless mounds of papers. The third source was semi-structured interviews with ‘experts,’ people chosen for their knowledge of the field or for their involvement in the political and policy-making processes in the state and/or at the federal level. This included academics, political leaders, development practitioners, local government personnel, civil servants, and community and NGO leaders and activists. I approached about 40-50 individuals with varying areas of expertise for interviews in each state; I was able to interview roughly 30-35. I used a semi-structured format with a list of prepared questions for these interviewees, but varied my questions depending on the expertise of particular interviewees. I recorded these interviewees with a recording device and also took hand-written notes. These interviews lasted between 45 to 90 minutes.

The second stage of data collection involved participant observation and semi-structured interviews with ‘citizens at large.’ This stage was primarily used to corroborate the results that emerged from the first stage of data collection. Field visits took place in three villages in West Bengal and three village panchayats in Kerala (which included several wards, each larger than the size of a typical village). In order to make the sample as representative as possible, I chose two or three districts from different regions of these states (north-south) with differing performance in human development, and then chose one or more villages/panchayat areas from each district for closer visits. The village of Sitai was chosen from the North Bengal district of Cooch Behar and the villages of Subudhipur and
Santoshnagar from the South Bengal district of 24 South Parganas. In Kerala, Thillankery village panchayat from the Northern district of Kannur was chosen. While I spent about three weeks in each of the above villages interacting with villagers and observing patterns of village political life, I undertook several day-visits to two more village panchayats in Southern Kerala—Thalavady village panchayat in Alleppy district and Peringara village panchayat in Pathanamthitta district. Field visits involved a variety of activities such as attending village council meetings, meetings of social movements, protest demonstrations, labor councils, visiting local public libraries, clubs, interviewing village elders, political leaders, and social workers. I also conducted several impromptu focus-group interviews with villagers.

The third stage involved scouring the existing scholarly work again to corroborate the story that emerged from the compilation of my field data. It also involved, in some instances, going back to my sources and interviewees in the field for validation and clarity. The comparative-historical view of the cases in the pre-1980 phase relies heavily on existing scholarship, while the post-1980s section draws significantly from my field research. Majority of my interviewees, especially in West Bengal, agreed to participate on condition of anonymity. As a result, I do not disclose names of specific interviewees; I refer to their designation.

1.8 Chapter Outline

Chapter 2 lays out my theoretical and methodological choices and situates the research in existing scholarship. Chapters 3 and 4 are empirical in nature. Using the interpretive techniques of comparative-historical method, each chapter traces the historical and
contemporary trajectories of the two cases under study, divided into three distinct phases. The first phase tackles the structural conditions that paved way for the rise of radical politics starting in the late nineteenth century; the second examines how left parties spearheaded a program of revolutionary transformation through a program of land reform and other redistributive reforms between 1940s and 1970s; and the third demonstrates how radical mobilization of the rural poor fell on divergent grooves in the two states from the 1980s. Chapter 5 offers a comparative analysis of Bengal and Kerala to bring into sharper focus the economic and socio-political conditions that crystallized into divergent modes of lower-class integration.
Chapter 2  
The Analytical Framework

2.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the theoretical and methodological choices that undergird this dissertation. First, I briefly introduce the analytical framework adopted in this study and explain why this framework is best suited to the research problem. I then review existing scholarship pertinent to this research and point out some of its omissions. I conclude with a section on comparative-historical method and middle-range theory-building.

2.2 Analytical Framework

The political economy approach, which has primarily been concerned with the exercise of social and economic power in political decision-making, has successfully employed explanations based on social classes (variously defined) to explain resource-allocation conflicts and related policy outputs. Liberal-pluralists, Marxists, and neo-Marxists have disagreed on how social classes should be defined; yet there is consensus on the notion that classes are key social forces that shape and influence state action in the apportioning of social surplus.

Following the political economy approach, I employ a class perspective in unravelling the puzzle of the divergent redistributive commitment of Kerala and West Bengal. A central premise of my argument is that class organizations and class relations play a critical role in shaping redistributive policy in the developing world. How class power is organized in relation to the state and civil society is of fundamental importance to policy outputs and outcomes. Institutions such as political parties and interest-based organizations play key roles
in structuring inter-class and class-state relationships. Differential welfare policy commitment can thus be understood as a reflection of shifting class alliances and dissimilar state-class relationships, facilitated by class-based institutions and political parties.

In the Indian context, there has been much theoretical thinking on the class character of the state, especially from a Marxist perspective, but without corresponding efforts to corroborate the theoretical reflection with empirical reality. Much of this scholarship has focused on structural factors as the basis for policy variation, leading to over-determined explanations where politics or institutions have little causal weight. This literature could be potentially less deterministic if it could successfully integrate scholarship that attributes more explanatory weight to political factors, to the agency of social actors such as political parties, and to the contingent nature of collective political action. Structural conditions give us important cues for understanding the long-term trajectory of a society, but they are not always adequate in explaining why certain choices were made from a range of possible courses of action. Structural factors constrain choices but do not always determine outcomes. They also do not illuminate adequately the short-term and contingent factors which are responsible for trendsetting decisions made by collective actors. While political tendencies of classes can be deduced from their location, the exact choices made by social actors in any setting cannot be understood without attention to the nature of politics: the state and the institutional terrain, the nature of class alliances and coalitions, the role of political parties in facilitating such alliances, exemplary leadership, and the contingent critical events that alter course. For a fuller explanation, structural factors must be joined with subjective understandings of politics and the indeterminacy generated by their context-specific interactions.
My research is aimed at identifying the conditions that make robust pro-poor redistribution both possible and likely. In the tradition of Barrington Moore’s work which qualitatively examined historical patterns that made democracy likely, my research attempts to identify the historic constellation of events that make it possible for democracy to become more substantive, by way of pro-poor redistribution and lower-class empowerment in societies where procedural democracy has already been achieved. I share the central propositions of the Moorean tradition in conceiving of democracy as a matter of power and its emergence, stabilization, and eventual deepening determined most importantly by shifting power relations among social classes. My important addition here is that while social classes and class organizations engender structural conditions fostering or inhibiting the deepening of democracy, other actors, such as political parties, which mediate state-society relationships critically determine how class power is wielded and to what purposes. In particular, how the lower classes are organized and how they are integrated into the political process is of vital importance for redistributive outcomes. Different works in the Moorean tradition focus on different actors as primary promoters of democracy: the middle class, the bourgeoisie, the lower class. My work throws light on the processes by which lower class power is harnessed to engender a robustly redistributive democracy. It underlines the key role of political parties and autonomous class associations in moulding the state’s distributive priorities and capacity.

Political parties and autonomous class associations are key mediating institutions between state and social forces. They are vital mediums through which the organization of class interests takes place. They determine how the poor are organized (as classes, ethnicities, urbanites, ruralites etc.), how their interests are aggregated, what class alliances emerge, what intensity and priority these interests obtain, and what form of collective action will
follow. That is, the political tendencies of a class cannot be read off from its location in the class structure. Rather, within a range of possible courses of action, structuring of class interests and capacity for collective action are critically shaped by mediating institutions.

The framework strives to go beyond the stylized political economy trends of reading interests and identifications from structure, in order to understand how groups conceptualize the political world, how certain interests and identities become politically operative, and how policy issues get prioritized. It attempts to bridge the gap between social-structural position and contingent political action. While highlighting the constructed nature of identities and interests, it recognizes the structural power of capital. The multiple and situation-contingent nature of political identities, the interests derived from such identities, and the resultant political behavior goes against the structuralist frameworks and their tendency to derive interests from the location of groups in the production process. My intention is to go beyond a merely functionalist explanation of class impact on policy output and specify the processes through which class power is constructed and mediated with far-reaching consequences at the decision-making table.

While class-based analysis begins with the material interests of social classes, I see no necessary contradiction with other approaches which highlight ideational factors. In fact, ideology and astute political leadership are crucial in explaining the trajectories of my two cases. Similarly, institutions are not inconsequential in a class-based analysis, as is usually assumed, because they provide the terrain on which political conflicts are fought and they constrain policy outcomes in significant ways. Looking at social actors from a class vantage point, in effect, yields a better understanding of the dynamics of redistributive policy making, if one understands that class structures constrain but do not determine political action. Many
other factors intervene between class structures and political action including political parties and social movements.

Admittedly, class analysis is only one of the ways of analyzing the exercise of social power. Why should one be persuaded to accept this particular political morphology of seeing the world as divided by class as opposed to community or religion? What analytical advantages does class analysis bring to the study of the politics of social citizenship in southern and eastern India?

Employing class analysis does not presuppose the primacy of class in all social situations; rather it assumes that class influences social behavior pervasively and that it has consequences for a wide variety of social phenomena. In the case of India, the existence of a plurality of vertical and horizontal social stratification systems and their political salience make other social cleavages more relevant tools of social analysis and political action in some contexts. For example, in the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar (adjacent to West Bengal) caste identity rather than class conflict dominates political life. It is nonetheless possible to view the caste rivalry in these states as class conflict between upper caste and OBC (Other Backward Classes) landowners and Scheduled Caste landless agricultural workers. Similarly, in Tamil Nadu, neighbor to Kerala, the anti-Brahmin movement has shaped the political battle lines; although here, too, a class reading is possible.

Class analysis takes on added complexity in the context of the developing world due to the uneven nature of class formation and competing collective identities. Within the context of late, late-developers such as India, industrialization followed democratization and this hindered the growth of an industrial working class in the same way it did in Europe. This
sequence created the challenge of a dual-transition, of having to develop a democratic political framework and an industrial economy somewhat simultaneously. The structure of a dependent economy, specializing in agrarian and service sectors, created further barriers to industrial class formation.

It is difficult to come up with a class schema that captures the social hierarchies and occupational statuses in contemporary India. Many Indians have jobs in both organized and unorganized sectors, and share permanent and casual employment status. Many work in urban centers while controlling some land in the rural areas. Some are self-employed and salaried at the same time. This scenario makes it very difficult to demarcate clearly the different classes, unlike in the West. Indian sociologists of various ideological persuasions have presented an array of class schemas. There has been a raging debate as well on whether, if, and why class should be any more salient a political category than caste or religion. The next section examines how class scholarship on India has engaged with these questions.

### 2.3 Class Scholarship on India

Since the explosion of Marxist scholarship in the 1970s, there has been a robust tradition of research on India using class as the principal unit of analysis. Political sociologists, political economists, social anthropologists, and social historians have been the principal groups to use class as the chief operative category in their research (Bardhan 1984; Vanaik 1990; Chandavarkar 1994; Heller 1999; Joshi 2001; Gooptu 2001; Chibber 2003; Fernandes 1997, 2006; Harriss 2006).¹

¹ Chibber (2006) provides an excellent account of the history of class analysis in India scholarship and the reasons for its decline in the last two decades.
A range of questions have been explored: What is the class character of the Indian state? Which classes comprise the ruling oligarchy? Are there distinct ruling classes or just factions of a single ruling class? Is there a ruling ‘coalition’? Who are the social groups in it? How do they negotiate their relationship vis-à-vis each other and the state? What are the principal agrarian classes? How do class and other important social stratifiers interact? Does caste predetermine class or constrain class mobility? Similarly, do class origins determine occupational attainment? What is the location of the middle classes? Which classes control state actions and how?

Of these, two concerns that are relevant to this study are: the class basis of state policy and the role of classes in the deepening of India’s democracy. Moore (1966) made an early contribution in explaining how different class forces influenced the historical pattern of democracy and development in India. He pronounced the chances of India’s progression to a healthy political democracy unlikely, given the unfavorable balance of class power, with a weak bourgeoisie and the persistence of the peasantry. Similarly, the ‘mode of production debate’ among Indian political economists highlighted the weakness of the national industrial bourgeoisie at the time of independence and their inability to displace pre-capitalist modes of production.² Wedded to classical Marxism and its schema of successive stages of historical progression, these works asserted that the weakness of the industrial bourgeoisie stunted capitalist class formation and its desirable impact on democratic evolution.

² In the late sixties and early seventies, political economists were engaged in a vibrant exchange on the nature of agrarian economy in India and the role of classes in making the transition to agrarian capitalism from pre-capitalist forms of agriculture. This later came to be known as the ‘mode of production debate.’ For a review, see Thorner (1982).
In the same tradition, Bardhan (1984) and Vanaik (1990) argued that the Indian state’s redistributive zeal and democratic progression was held hostage by a powerful bourgeoisie-landlord-bureaucratic alliance. Corbridge and Harriss (2000) extended the analysis to contemporary times. They demonstrated how the new politically powerful rural middle class—a new class emerging from the ‘Green Revolution’—and their shifting class alliances explain the partial nature of India’s contemporary economic reform.

Departing from the classical Marxist framework, Chatterjee (1996, 1997) and Kaviraj (1998) invoked the Gramscian concept of ‘passive revolution’ in understanding post-colonial Indian political economy. According to them, the absence of a bourgeois revolution and the limited dominance of the industrial bourgeoisie at the time of independence necessitated a political compromise with the semi-feudal landed class. The institutional vehicle of this political compromise was the Congress Party. The conservative nature of the rural landed classes (the mainstay of the Congress Party in rural areas) stunted the redistributive intentions of the state. As the industrial bourgeoisie did not possess the capacity to initiate and sustain industrial transformation of newly independent India, the state provided key inputs for industrialization, in turn propping up the bourgeois-landlord alliance. State-bureaucratic elite were entrusted with the task of social transformation through the instrumentalities of economic planning (Kaviraj 1997). The use of the state apparatus to resolve the

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3 In considering the transition of European states to modern industrial democracies, Gramsci argued that Europe (except for France) went through a passive revolution (i.e., successive waves of changes as opposed to a revolutionary explosion) in which the rising industrial bourgeoisie gained dominance, not by eliminating the old feudal class but by making compromises with the feudal aristocracy (1971: 114-120). The new state was the product of a compromise between agrarian and industrial interests. Without any meaningful participation from the masses, the ruling classes and the state had a limited hegemonic base. Passive revolution thus signified a weak political transition and a weak economic transformation of society (1971, 116). To maintain their hegemony, dominant groups circumvent structural change and incorporate dissenting forces which threaten their dominance.
contradictions emerging from the weakness of the ruling classes and in sustaining their
dominance is a key feature of this kind of analysis.

All these accounts view the class character of the state as fundamental to understanding
India’s post-colonial political economy. By implication, what explains the lack of
redistributive reform is the elitist character of India’s democracy and its politics of class
accommodation.

Although many of these works examine the class basis of development policy in India,
exclusive attention is not paid to the class basis of redistributive policy (narrower in scope
than development policy), with the exception of Atul Kohli’s 1987 book, The State and
Poverty in India. The politics of redistributive policy is far too important a matter to be left
out of the India scholarship, especially in an era of high capitalism. Given the emergence of
new patterns of inequality, state-managed redistribution seems all the more vital to sustain
the democratic framework of such a vast and diverse country as India. This dissertation
hopes to make a modest contribution in throwing some scholarly light on this important
topic.

2.3.1 Chief Criticisms and Retreat of Class

Class analysis in India has met with three broad strands of related criticisms. All three derive
from a broader critique of Marxist theory and practice in India, and from the alien pedigree
of class. The earliest of these was a nativist critique from regional sociologists and
anthropologists who challenged the use of class in a society where caste represents a

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4 Another exception is Herring (1983) which examines the politics of Kerala’s land reform in
a comparative context.
“cultural” peculiarity. While recognizing the analytical utility of class, some scholars called for a native conception of class that went beyond the usual dichotomies of owner-tenant-worker based on Western industrial experience, in order to recognize local categories of stratification known to local people (Thorner 1962; Beteille 1974).

Second, the rise of post-colonial theories forced a radical rethinking and reformulation of ‘western’ categories of knowledge. For post-colonialists, although Marxism and its class analysis questioned colonial knowledge production, it did so using the master-narratives of antagonistic classes and of social relations determined by modes of production that were offered by Europe (Prakash 1992; Chakrabarty 1989). At the forefront of such postcolonial criticism is the Subaltern Studies collective, which challenged mainstream Indian historiography.⁵ While earlier theorizations posit class as central, Subaltern Studies historians emphasize the role of culture in shaping agency. They argue that elite historiographies—colonial, nationalist, and Marxist—depict India’s anti-colonial struggle and post-colonial experiment as a product of elite visions emanating from European or Indian sources. In contrast, subaltern historiography concentrates attention on the subaltern (peasant) voice and seeks to recover the autonomy of the subaltern/peasant consciousness which has traditionally been appropriated by western categories.⁶ The fact that there is no collective-subaltern class consciousness is used as the basis to argue that the subaltern is resistant to appropriation by Marxist categories. Subaltern consciousness and forms of action may be at odds with what is expected from a class perspective. Whether in the political realm

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⁵ A collection of historians writing from India and outside starting in 1983 in a number of edited volumes. (Guha 1981-89, 1983; Chatterjee 1986; Chakrabarty 1989). ‘Subaltern’ is used to mean exploited and oppressed people (mainly ‘peasants’) as opposed to ‘elites’.

⁶ For a classic example, see Amin (1984).
of mass rebellions or revolts, or in the economic realm of capitalist production, the politics of the subaltern constitutes an autonomous domain.⁷

The third strand of criticism simply borrows from the earlier critiques to establish the inadequacy of class in understanding the contemporary realities of fundamentally different cultures (Wignaraja 1993). A plethora of post-1980s scholarly works, in particular, employ ideational-cultural approaches to explain socio-political transformations, focusing largely on the salience of caste and religion. An example is Sudipta Kaviraj’s argument that it is community and not class that is the operative category in Indian public life (1991). In dominant discourses on the politics of market reform too, ‘class’ has remained largely absent because of the heavy attention on formal political institutions and processes (Sachs et al. 1999).

Against such backdrop, a new spate of very recent works have employed ‘class’ as the principal analytical tool in understanding historical and contemporary patterns of politics (Heller 1999; Gooptu 2001; Chibber 2003; Basu 2004; Harriss 2006; Fernandes 2006). They call for a nuanced understanding of the concept of class to illuminate patterns of domination and power in India and to understand the seemingly puzzling use of community frames in organizing political resistance in the era of high capitalism. These scholars argue that the intensification of capitalist production in the global periphery has aggravated the resource gaps between social classes. In their view, this makes class more significant in explaining the patterns of exploitation and domination in contemporary societies. Class as an analytical category, in this sense, seems to be making a comeback (Herring and Agarwala 2008).

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⁷ Marxist historians have protested the bundling of the whole of Marxist perspective together with colonial and nationalist historiography as elitist. For a Marxist critique of subaltern studies, see Alam (1983); Chopra (1982); Chibber (2013).
2.4 Literature Review

My research question—what are the political determinants of pro-poor social policy making in purportedly Left-leaning developing-world democracies—can be approached from the vantage point of a number of literatures. These include welfare state, democratization, and political economy of development literatures. While there are significant overlaps between the three, they offer competing, yet related explanations for policy outcomes and spending variances. A brief survey of these literatures follows. As stated earlier, I situate my inquiry mainly within the debates on the political economy of development.

2.4.1 Welfare State Theories

The welfare state has become a core institution in the West and the study of social policy almost a discipline in its own right. The dynamics of welfare state expansion has been noted as one of the “most well-tilled sub-field of comparative public policy” (Pierson 1996, 143). Though primarily based on advanced industrial democracies, insights from welfare state literature is often extrapolated to the developing world. Welfare state theories can be broadly classified into three camps: economic, political, and institutional.

Economistic explanations or what is known as the ‘logic of industrialism’ perspective suggests a correlation between the level of economic development and the scope and depth of welfare measures (Wilensky 1975). Economic development is the root cause of welfare state expansion, and differences in political ideology and organization of political system are deemed insignificant influences on welfare policy. Countries at the same level of economic development are expected to demonstrate roughly the same level and type of social policy
commitment, whether capitalist, socialist, democratic or authoritarian. Most recently, this literature has pointed to global economic factors such as trade and capital flows as important determinants of the trajectory of welfare states. However, these assertions do not seem apt when studying Southern welfare states as they are unable to explain variance in welfare measures across countries at similar levels of economic development or under similar pressures from global economic forces. Further, the economic determinism of this perspective overlooks the intensely political and contested nature of the resource allocation process.

Among the political explanations, the ‘social democratic’ or ‘power resources’ perspective attributes the expansion of social programs to the balance of class power. This perspective posits a positive relationship between the expansion of social programs and the power resources of organized labor and left-wing political parties. In capitalist democracies, power resources are unequally divided among social classes. The capitalist class control the economic resources and the institutionalized arenas of mobilization and representation, and, in so doing, dominate the decision-making process. To counter the dominance of the capitalist class and to enhance their power resources, the working class attempts to organize collectively under strong labor unions. Affiliating themselves with pro-labor political parties, they seek to channel competing class interests into the political arena and use their voting rights to alter the balance of power in their favor. With their ability to effectively represent a broad coalition of peasants, workers, and lower middle class, left-of-center political parties achieve class-based bargaining and use state power to enact better social programs (Korpi &

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8 There is a plethora of literature that suggests a convergence of national social policy models as a result of a new logic of industrialism, stemming from the global economic changes. For an overview, see Schwartz (1994).

Scholars explain the variance in welfare measures in terms of the varying levels of power resources possessed by the working class, which is gleaned from a variety of factors such as the numerical strength of the working class, the degree of organization and unity of labor unions, and the participation or representation of affiliated left-wing parties in power. Variations in welfare measures have also been explained in terms of the role of other political actors in facilitating or hindering welfare reform. For example, Castles (1982) finds the strength of the political spectrum generally opposed to progressive redistribution, namely, right-wing political parties and the degree of unity among them to be significant. Others point to the profound differences in the vision of political parties who generally support progressive welfare reform, such as the social democratic parties, socialist parties, and Christian democratic parties (Sainsbury 1999; Huber & Stephens 2001; Glatzer and Rueschemeyer 2005). The social-democratic perspective is the leading modern welfare state theory. Nevertheless, it needs more nuanced empirical research to fully explain the variation within the universe of cases that exhibit high level of pro-poor power resources, especially in the developing world. Between the two cases chosen for this study, West Bengal scores higher on all three variables identified as responsible for better redistributory commitment – 1) the numerical strength of the working class, 2) the degree of organization and unity of labor unions, and 3) the participation or representation of affiliated left-wing parties in power – yet displays weaker redistributory commitment compared to Kerala.

The institutionalist perspective looks at how routinized arrangements and structured political authority shape the patterns of welfare state development. Institutions, as rules of the
political game, are consequential for where, how, and when resources are allocated.

Emerging out of the study of American politics, this perspective points to rules of electoral competition, relationship between legislature and executive, and administrative and financial capacities of the state as crucial institutional structures shaping welfare outcomes (Weir, Orloff and Skocpol 1988; Skocpol 1992; Pierson 1995, 1996). These in turn put in place durable national institutions, veto points and veto players, and policy legacies as channels that hinder or facilitate social welfare provision (Immergut 1992; Tsebelis 2002). While it is best suited to explain cross-national differences, this approach too lacks explanatory leverage when used in a sub-national comparison where many of the institutional variables remain identical or similar.

Often, these three theoretical perspectives are offered as alternatives in explaining the origins and sustenance of various types of welfare regimes. Scholars have called for a synthesis of the insights of competing perspectives to better understand the welfare state. Economic development, class power or ideology, and institutional patterning may all be correlated in significant ways in producing an outcome. Often, they work in tandem to produce a certain outcome. Going beyond one-dimensional explanations, I think, will allow for better integration of previous research findings.

However, the direct application of theoretical insights from the welfare state literature to the developing world is a problematic endeavour. Welfare state theories in general take for granted several political features that cannot be assumed in the context of the developing world: a fully functional democracy, a mutually constitutive demand and supply policy process, organization of workers and economy, and popular access to the political process. Further, the policy demands and responses are much more varied and uneven in the latter
than what the literature suggests – due to the historical pattern of fragmented and often
clientelistic state-society engagement – and as such they have given birth to social protection
systems that seem more diverse across countries or sub-national units than these theories
would lead one to expect.

2.4.2 Democratization and Deepening Democracy

This literature has treated the issue of redistributive social policies as a matter of getting the
institutions right. The general assertion in democratization literature is that democracies as a
‘regime type’ are more likely than authoritarian systems to spend more on social programs.9
Voluminous research shows that the emergence of democratic institutions has a decisive
impact on policy-making, especially on those policies that impinge on social welfare. Such
studies have generated causal assertions that explain patterns of social policy change in
different societies with the advent of democracy as the key variable (Weyland 1996; Wong
2004). 10 The dispersion of decision-making power, characteristic of democratic political
institutions, it is argued, prod democracies to implement policies that maximize aggregate
social welfare (Sloan and Tedin 1987; Ames 1987; Przeworski, Stokes, and Manin 1999). 11

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9 Based on the experiences of South Korea and Taiwan, the position that authoritarian
regimes are better than democracies in stimulating development was popular during the Cold
War era. It no longer held wide currency in the 1990s. This literature has since been coupled
with the ‘good governance’ literature popularized by the Western aid agencies. For a recent
review of this debate, see Mainwaring and Perez-Linan 2003.
10 For more on democracy’s social policy consequences, see Brown and Hunter 1999; Kwon
1999; Avelino, Brown, and Hunter 2001; Kaufman and Segura-Ubiergo 2001. For a broad
sample of developing countries, see Fardmanesh and Habibi 2000.
11 For an account of the possibilities and constraints democracy brings to rural
However, skeptics have cautioned against sweeping generalizations on the impact of democracy on public policy (Remmer 1990; Nelson 1990; Przeworski and Limongi 1993; Leftwich 1993; Haggard and Kaufman 1995). More recent research that studies democracies under neo-liberal policy pressure from global economic forces has further questioned any necessary relationship between democracy and social welfare (Petras, Leiva, and Veltmeyer 1994; Stallings 1992).

To correct the crude democracy-welfare correlation some scholars have tried to pin down precisely the conditions under which democracies introduce, sustain, and enhance social spending (Stallings and Kaufman 1989; Brown and Hunter 1999). Others have attempted to disaggregate the composite variable of ‘democracy’ into various sub-types in order to find finer distinctions in terms of their policy patterns (Karl 1990; Schmitter 1992; Hicks and Swank 1992; O'Donnell 1994; Geddes 1995; Schneider 1995; Leftwich 1996; Held 1996).

An older subset of democracy literature views the emergence, consolidation, and deepening of democracy as a function of changing class configurations under capitalistic mode of production (Moore 1966; Luebbert 1991; Collier and Collier 1991; Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens 1992).\(^\text{12}\) It links the emergence and deepening of democracy with the arrival of antagonistic class politics under industrial capitalism in the western world, and agrarian capitalism in the developing world. The struggle for democracy in this account is not just a struggle for the right to choose a government, rather a long-drawn, historical battle between social classes for a higher share of political power.

\(^{12}\) This is a key branch of literature that I use as a springboard. I illustrate its contributions in understanding the Indian case in detail in the section titled “Class Scholarship on India.”
Contrary to previous studies, which linked democracy to modernization in a functional way where democracy is the fixed, natural, and automatic outcome of economic development, these studies view democracy as a highly contingent outcome; it is a result of particular historical circumstances and depends on the nature of class competition and class coalitions. Beyond the contextual specificities, these works advance the central argument that democracy is the outcome of the contradictory processes set in motion by capitalist development. These processes altered the class structure of pre-capitalist societies, engendered new classes, marginalized politically powerful ones, and created new avenues and opportunities for political organization.

The emergence of industrial capitalism in the west in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries transformed the economic, social, and political organization of human societies fundamentally. Capitalist mode of production and its associated processes created an unprecedentedly strong modern state with far-reaching ‘infrastructural power’ (Mann 1984). It also altered the social structure of the pre-industrial society by shifting power from the traditionally powerful landowning class to the emergent bourgeoisie. The accumulation of economic wealth enabled the bourgeoisie to enter the political arena and mould state actions. Examining its role in promoting wider political inclusion, Moore identifies the bourgeoisie as the principal pro-democratic force in modern society (1966).

Yet, the same processes also threw up opportunities for the working class (mainly, manufacturing workers and peasants forced off land) to increase their political power. Their new concentration around urban centers and their ability to disrupt capitalist production through collective action gave the working class unprecedented power. Trade unions and labor-friendly political parties emerged as important conduits of labor demands to the
political system. Consequently, rejecting Moore’s argument, Therborn (1977, 1979) and Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens (1992) identified the working class as the chief promoters of democracy. A number of works that place emphasis on the role of the subordinate classes and affiliated political parties in deepening democracy followed (Heller 1999; Eley 2002; Sandbrook et al 2007).

Collier and Luebbert, among others, further argue that classes play contingent but not fixed roles in pushing for or reversing a democratic trajectory. In their powerful book, *Shaping the Political Arena*, Collier and Collier (1991) compared eight countries across Latin America. They argued that the type of labor incorporation determined the political trajectory of the country. What form of government one ends up with depends on how the working class was incorporated into the political process by the state or by political parties. The ‘critical juncture’ thrown up by the recasting of state-labor relations lead to a unique sequence of conflict, negotiation, and accommodation, and crystallize into different political systems—some democratic, some not. Luebbert (1991) showed how the outcome varied depending on who the middle peasants allied with (urban middle classes or working class) to produce fascism or social democracy in interwar Europe. Collier (1999) too argued for a context-specific understanding of the role of the organized working class in bringing about democracy. He demonstrated the complexity of patterns of involvement of the working class in Western Europe and South America in two time periods.

A more recent transmutation of the democratization literature has resulted in a burgeoning number of works on ‘deepening democracy.’ Despite their varying ideological affiliations, there is some agreement among scholars on the need for democracies to deliver on welfare-
enhancing policies, if democracies are to be sustained and deepened. However, their prescriptions for achieving this diverge considerably. A small subset of works produced by international development agencies suggests technocratic decentralization, participation, and good governance achieved through institutional redesign as the principal pathway to a deep democracy (World Bank 1992, 1997; UNDP 2002). Another stream of works see participatory planning through popular mobilization (Isaac & Franke 2000), more grassroots/localized decision-making and collective action in civil society (Roberts 1998; Heller 2001), and participatory, deliberative redesign of democratic institutions (Fung & Wright 2003) as the catalysts to a more responsive, accountable, and redistributive democracy. A somewhat related but distinct argument finds higher levels of social capital responsible for better responsiveness, which encompasses not just more political participation but also a more vibrant associational life (Putnam 1993, 2000; Blomkvist & Swain 2001).

In summary, democratic deepening appears to hinge on a bewildering array of explanatory variables. Institution-building, class predilections, social mobilization, social capital, and political participation are all potent and plausible stimuli to deepening democracy. Extant research suggests that these variables have mattered significantly but varied in their impact in different contexts. The clear delineation of what factor is salient (or what combination of them) under which conditions is a task that requires more nuanced and sustained scholarly attention. The raging disagreement between liberals and Marxists on ‘what is the best route

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13 A recent study shows support for democracy is waning in Latin America due to the failed promises of democracy. The study argues that disparities in distribution of national income and skyrocketing poverty are triggering a deep sense of popular dissatisfaction with democracy. See, UNDP 2004.
to a deep democracy’ or even on ‘what is a deep democracy’ has also not helped to systematically explore the issue.

2.4.3 Political Economy of Development

My research inquiry is firmly grounded in the literature on the political economy of development since these studies have expended considerable energy on the political determinants of welfare-enhancing redistribution. Using both Marxist and liberal-pluralist modes of analysis, a majority of these studies adopt a state-society approach, locating their explanations somewhere along the continuum of the relational dynamics governing state and society engagements. While those who emphasize ‘societal’ variables explain the variance in redistributive spending/outcomes as a function of the nature and nexus of social classes (variedly defined) and their ability to institutionalize their interests within the state, those who stress the ‘statist’ approach explain the variance in terms of the capacity and relative autonomy of the state or the nature of its democratic political institutions. A third group of explanations can be placed somewhere in the middle, focusing on political parties, regime types, and party systems.14

2.4.3.1 State-Society Perspective

In the last three decades, the state-society perspective has become a robust research tradition for studying developing societies.15 The intellectual crucibles for the perspective were the debates between Marx and Weber on the primacy of economic or political/ideational factors.

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14 It should be noted that the boundaries of this classification are not sharp. It is possible to classify the statist-explanations as society-oriented, and vice versa, as all of them deal with, to varying degrees, the relationships between formal state apparatus, political parties and various social forces. Bates 1981 is a good example of the blurred boundaries.
15 For a definitive overview of the state-society framework, see Kohli 2002.
For Marx, the economic structure of the society constituted the base from which arose the political and ideational superstructure. The mode of production conditioned the social, political, and intellectual terrains in general and set limits to the forms of political life within it. Crudely put, economic variables determined political life. Weber attempted to bring into the analytical equation factors left relatively unemphasized by Marx, namely, the autonomous and independent role of politics, ideas, and psycho-cultural factors. Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1958) challenged the Marxian hypothesis that Protestantism was the consequence of the rise of capitalism. On the contrary, Weber argued that the emergence of European capitalism was, according to a hard interpretation, contingent upon the Protestant ethic.

The same debate also proved central to the paradigmatic wars between radical and liberal scholars of the post-war era. Explanations based on economic interests of social groups dominated early post-war scholarship. The first three decades of the post-war scholarship, which predominantly comprised of liberal-pluralist and Marxist scholars under the rubric of modernization and dependency perspectives, were focused on society. The primary interest was in the socio-economic variables determining political behavior. There was little emphasis on the role of the state as an autonomous social actor. By early 1980s, however, the society-centrism of this literature came under attack for its tendency to reduce political life to conflicts and negotiations among social forces – a kind of ‘social reductionism.’ Critics affirmed the state’s relative autonomy from the dominant social class. Such criticism also ignited a renewed interest in studying states or state-like arrangements in the developing world (Stepan 1978; Collier 1979; Evans 1979; Bates 1981). Following this, there was a call to recognize the independent role of the state in socio-economic change, and to bring it back
to social analysis (Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol, 1985). In the two decades since, statism became a dominant framework in comparative politics, though the theoretical battle for primacy of state or social forces has continued with vigor.

The overall objective of the above-described state-versus-society framework was to locate the key influence-moulding variable in policy output either in the state or in the society. This resulted in a rather simplistic binary between state and society, between the primacy of economics or politics, leading to single-factor explanations that did not do justice to the complex political processes of contemporary times.

From critique and counter-critique emerged a synthesis in the 1990s that called for a ‘state-in-society’ perspective as opposed to the earlier ‘state-versus-society’ binary (Migdal, Kohli, Shue 1994; Migdal 2001). Going beyond the intellectual polarization of the earlier era, it offered a synthetic framework that integrated insights from both intellectual traditions. It also challenged several key assumptions of the earlier scholarship. First, that states and societies were not locked in zero-sum conflicts, rather they could be mutually empowering under some circumstances. Second, the asserted positive correlation between state’s strength and its insulation from society was misleading in many cases. State’s disconnectedness from society or its ability to ignore social actors while making policy could indicate strength as much as weakness. State needs to cajole and co-ordinate with various social actors for effective governance. Third, states and societies constitute and transform each other in context-specific ways. In essence, the new perspective moved away from a statist orientation towards one that highlighted the mutual interconnectedness of state and society as the centre-piece of political sociology. Viewed as such, policy outputs and outcomes are by-products of particular kinds of state-society engagements.
Several recent works on India have employed the state-in-society approach implicitly or explicitly (Heller 1999; Chibber 2003; Kohli 2004). My own analytical framework builds on the broad contours of the state-in-society framework. Within such a framework, my research employs class as the main unit of social analysis.

**Society-centered explanations**

Societal explanations highlighted the role of dominant elites, classes, interest groups or other pre-existing social groups in the making and functioning of specific public policies that have poverty-reducing effect, as they sought to appropriate a bigger share of the public resources for their own gain (Frankel 1978; Bates 1981; Bardhan 1984; Frankel & Rao 1987). The pioneering work of Francine Frankel (1978) in the Indian context pointed to the institutionalized patterns of domination by powerful propertied classes (landowning castes and urban businessmen), entrenched in constitutional and administrative frameworks, as the chief obstacle to redistributive reform in India. The nexus between the ruling classes and an elaborate network of local chiefs ensured compromises by the former in return for electoral support by the latter. This politics of accommodation effectively circumscribed the state’s ability to pursue transformative social policies that could have challenged existing forms of social domination. Whenever there were redistributive demands, the dominant ruling alliance contained it through the spoils of the politics of accommodation. Frankel predicted that only the mobilization and integration of the lower classes, especially the rural agrarian class, into political parties will turn the policy process in favor of the poor.16

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16 For updated version of the book that extends the analysis from 1977 to 2004, see Frankel 2005.
Pranab Bardhan (1984) continued this line of inquiry from a neo-Marxist perspective and reached a similar conclusion. He found dominant class alliances and the politics of patronage as the chief obstacle to redistributive state intervention. The pressures of patronage, that is the need to maintain the support of heterogeneous dominant classes – industrialists, professionals, and big farmers – by distributing favors, resulted in the plundering of public resources for private gain. While none of the groups were individually powerful enough to dominate the process of resource allocation, their uneasy alliance ensured collective power. At the same time, their competing demands for subsidies and grants exacted a horrible drain on public resources. They effectively forestalled any genuine redistribution that could abate their own power and privilege.

**Statist explanations**


Focusing on the first decade of post-independence existence, Gunner Myrdal (1968) blamed a ‘soft state’ for the slow pace of development in India. Myrdal’s ‘soft state’ was incapable of pursuing much-needed developmental work as it failed to impose ‘social discipline’ on the
masses because it was permeable by privileged interests. Its softness enabled the rural and urban elite to undermine and block state-managed redistribution that was a prominent feature of the Nehruvian vision.

Rudolph and Rudolph (1987) analyzed the subject from the unique analytical lens of “demand groups” instead of classes. For them, the Indian state exhibited the paradox of being weak and strong at the same time. Its command over the economy and political centrism made it strong while its lack of capacity to govern well, primarily due to systematic deinstitutionalization of political institutions by personalistic rule, made it weak. Such erosion of state autonomy and capacity effectively eliminated the channels through which demand groups such as labor, students, and agriculturalists had traditionally expressed their interests. This, in turn, curtailed the state’s ability to respond to urgent social problems through redistributive mechanisms. The effective veto power exercised by the above social forces is indicative of the absence of a ‘hard’ (i.e., coherent and effective) developmental state that could enact and carry forward redistributive priorities.

Similarly, Kohli (1991) wrote of a ‘crisis of governability’ in India due to the deinstitutionalization of the Indian state and its apparatuses that forfeited their capacity to resolve resource conflicts and promote redistributive development. Violence ensued as a result in the face of intense collective mobilization and growing demands from new social groups. The propensity and capacity of the Indian state to intervene in economic resource allocation atrophied due to deinstitutionalization of the state and its agencies.
**Political parties, regime types, and party systems**

A third group of explanations of policy variation in the state-society framework can be placed somewhere in the middle of the state-society continuum, for their focus on political parties, regime types, and party systems (Kohli 1987; Harriss 2000; Chhibber 2004, Desai 2007).

Exploring a similar research question as mine on redistributive outcomes, Kohli’s *The State and Poverty in India* (1987) is a seminal text in the field. Kohli argues that variations in redistributive outcomes are a function of regime type. Leadership, ideology, organization, and class basis are crucial regime attributes that have significant consequences for redistribution. Prospects for redistributive reform are much better under left-of-center regimes with a cohesive leadership, programmatic commitment to exclude propertied classes from direct interference in policy-making, and a cohesive organizational structure, like the CPI(M) in West Bengal. Such regimes manage both the institutional penetration of the society as well as retain a degree of autonomy from the propertied classes. They are also able to discipline the marginalized classes to limit their redistributive demands.

John Harriss’s essay (2000) on regime differences and rural poverty reduction takes Kohli’s work a step further. Like Kohli, he finds regime differences as the key variable in explaining high levels of social spending. But unlike Kohli, Harriss defines regimes in terms of the balance of local class/caste power, not in terms of the characteristics of the ruling party. This distinction is significant as there are important conceptual differences between the two scholars. Kohli emphasizes the ideology, leadership, organization, and pragmatism of the ruling party to denote the kind of regime it represents. Harriss’s regime is defined more in
terms of the class-caste power equations within the local context. It has nothing to do with individual political parties *per se*, but with the whole party-system which reflects the dominance of upper, middle or lower castes/classes and the principal lines of confrontation among them. In the end, Harriss’s conclusion is similar to that of Kohli’s in suggesting that variation in patterns of public social expenditure can be explained in terms of the balance of class power and the character of regime types. In both accounts the structure and functioning of local power and its relations with the state-level power holders exercise a significant influence on policy processes and outcomes.

Somewhat differently, Pradeep Chhibber and Irfan Nooruddin (2004) present ‘party systems’ as the salient factor explaining variance in the delivery of public goods by Indian states (provinces). States with two-party competition provide more public goods and commit more funds to development than states with multiparty competition. Two-party systems require parties to secure a higher proportion of votes to win political office and force them to appeal to a broader section of the electorate by providing more ‘public goods.’ On the contrary, multiparty competition requires only a plurality of votes and parties are tempted to secure this by handing out ‘club goods’ (as opposed to ‘public goods’) to smaller sections of the population.

In a more recent work, Manali Desai (2007) offers a longer-term historical explanation for the welfare preferences of sub-national states in India. Comparing Kerala’s more radical trajectory with a number of other states, including West Bengal, Desai hinges her explanation for Kerala’s welfare exceptionalism on what she calls “party formation.” The specific historic conjuncture under which the Communist Party emerged in Kerala allowed
the early communists to exercise considerable political autonomy and hegemony, unlike in other Indian states, which ultimately facilitated a more radical welfare orientation.

2.4.4 What is Missing?

This brief survey of existing scholarship has generated a plethora of explanatory variables, ranging from state autonomy and capacity, dominant classes, interest groups, regime type, party system to left-of-center political parties. However, none of these explanations in isolation adequately explain the empirical phenomenon of the contemporary politics of social policies in India that I am interested in. For instance, though parsimonious, statist explanations do not capture the full complexity of redistributive politics. These explanations add to the puzzle rather than resolve it. If anything, they put forth some intervening variables rather than independent ones. For instance, it is a fact that state capacity and autonomy varies noticeably across Indian provinces. One can make a persuasive argument that the differential developmental outcomes across Indian provinces are related to different degrees of “stateness.” But to leave it at that is to leave the crux of the problem unanswered. The question of what has produced varying degrees of stateness within the same constitutional and legal framework and similar socio-economic conditions needs to be tackled effectively for a fuller explication of the puzzle.

Similarly, political parties, regime types or party systems also do not fully account for subnational variation, as redistributive commitment varies tremendously even between states that are ruled by the same national parties/regimes with identical organizational and ideological cohesion. For instance, Kohli’s assertion that a well-organized left-of-center political party like the CPI(M) in West Bengal is the key to successful redistribution does not
explain the divergence in redistributive outcomes in other states ruled by the same party, namely, Kerala. The Kerala CPI(M), it appears, is no different from the West Bengal CPI(M) in terms of its ideological and leadership commitment, organizational cohesion, and pragmatism. It appears from the divergent paths of Kerala and West Bengal that a favorable political party is not the only ingredient to robust redistributive commitment. While the presence of a committed, organized, and pragmatic political agent is a necessary condition, it is not a sufficient one. Reliance on the left-of-center party as the key variable also cannot explain why non-Left governments in Kerala did not, on the whole, reverse the course of redistributive preference introduced by the Left.

Similarly, welfare policy variation across states that have a similar regime type or party system makes these, too, unsatisfactory explanatory factors in themselves. Harriss’s contention that states that have made the highest investments in key social sectors are those in which the lower castes/classes are most strongly represented in the political regime, such as Kerala, West Bengal, and Tamil Nadu, leaves us with unanswered questions. First, if both Kerala and West Bengal have similar regime-types as well as party systems, why have the two exhibited significant variance on their redistributive commitments? Second, if the representation of lower classes/castes in the ruling alliance is the crucial indicator of regime type, then states like Uttar Pradesh, where political power has since been captured by the hitherto untouchables, ought to be doing a lot better on redistributive policies. This has not happened (Dreze & Sen 2002). These gaps in existing scholarship, therefore, call for a meticulous, inductive empirical analysis that can generate more adequate explanations.

Finally, society-oriented explanations, too, suffer from some limitations in clarifying the redistributive conundrums adequately. Much of this literature is concerned with how
collective interests are organized in the society and to what extent such collective interests are responsible for changes in policy outcomes. A significant analytical flaw has been the tendency to make a leap of faith from sketching out the interests of social groups to policy outcomes, i.e., the tendency to pronounce group interests as primarily responsible for policy change. The supposed causal connection, however, is only one of multiple possibilities; there may have been other independent pressures on the state to legislate a particular policy outcome. Such an approach based on inferring the causal weight of economic or political attributes of social groups underrates the complex political process that is central to policy-making, thus treating the political process as a typical black box. These explanations are less persuasive when the emphasis on social classes downplays the democratic framework and democratic political process that conditions and mediates the demands of powerful groups and the responses of power-holders. Political behavior, identity, and interests of classes cannot be conclusively derived from their class locations. The debate over what is the appropriate social unit for analysis, classes or demand groups, is another vexed question among societal explanations. These limitations notwithstanding, they offer us some important insights into the social origins of political power and the role of social forces in the allocation of public resources.

### 2.5 Comparative-historical Method and Middle-range Theory

My dissertation employs the comparative-historical method as the overarching analytical tool. It is one of the most used methods in the qualitative tracing of complex causal paths of macro-level, unrepeatable, long-term social phenomena.\(^{17}\) It synthesizes elements of

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\(^{17}\) A classic example is Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens (1992).
historical sociology and comparative politics by combining the methodological advantages of comparative rigor and rich empirical detail. Its distinctive strength lies in its ability to trace the historical sequence and the surrounding conditions that lead to a particular outcome by comparing a small number of cases, using qualitative historical data. It retains the specificities of individual cases, yet offers a generalizable insight. Drawing causal inference about long-term social change is fraught with difficulties, but the comparative leverage provides some traction on the multitude of relevant factors.

This method lies somewhere between historically rich case studies on one end and large ‘n’ comparative work on the other. It is most appropriate for a small ‘n’ study because of the depth of qualitative examination. Notable works that employ the comparative-historical method include, Moore (1968), Skocpol (1979), Luebbert (1991), and Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens (1992). In recent years, there has been considerable growth in the number of works employing this method.18 Full length monographs have come out to coincide with the growing popularity of this method (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003).

I use the comparative-historical method to trace the divergence in the redistributive trajectories of Kerala and West Bengal with the intent of building “middle-range theory.” I use the term middle-range theory to refer to theory that lies between methodological and epistemological extremes. Methodologically, it strives to generate insights that are generalizable; while not claiming universal applicability, they are not limited to a single case. Epistemologically, it covers the middle ground between the theory-scepticism of postmodern/cultural approaches on the one end, and the ahistoric, asocial, deductive universality of rational choice/game theoretical approaches on the other. Middle-range theory

18 For a recent example, see Sandbrook et al. 2007.
thus distances itself from the universalizing tendencies of the earlier era (modernization and dependency) and its aspirations for a set of grand, systemic theories. Peter Evans describes this as the “eclectic messy center” (Kohli et al. 1996).

My aim is to uncover the causal paths of divergent redistributive commitments in Kerala and West Bengal that grow out of seemingly similar historical sequences. Both cases have, to varying degrees, reconciled the two most important, yet competing, goals of development: growth and equity. While working within market economies, governments in both states have expanded and entrenched the social and economic rights of those at the bottom rungs of the social ladder. Their highly interventionist governments have been successful in breaking through the constraints imposed by domestic power structures in pursuing egalitarian social goals, through such redistributive mechanisms as land reform; literacy and health promotion campaigns; basic public health delivery; and social security for the unorganized sector. In both cases, programmatic left parties have used the state to ameliorate the exploitative conditions and social relations produced by the capitalist mode of production. They stand out in their developmental paths when compared to such of the developing world.

The cases are thus similar in their broad historical, institutional, social-structural patterns and in the critical role of the same political party in social transformation. But there are obvious differences that account for the divergent redistributive paths of the two cases. By looking at a period of over hundred years to understand the divergences that have become visible in the last thirty years or so, the study seeks to identify the most important variables responsible for the divergence. It seeks to develop a generalizable explanation for my research question, without sacrificing the historical and contemporary specificities of the cases.
Chapter 3
From Radical to Moderate Politics in West Bengal

3.1 Introduction

The redistributive preferences of the left regimes in Kerala and West Bengal are historically constituted. One cannot grasp the present day developmental dynamics of either region without understanding their socio-economic history. This chapter will survey the history of West Bengal in three sections, with a view to highlighting the trajectory of radical politics in that province and its formative influence on the kind of welfare regime that came to exist.

The first section examines how the introduction of new land tenure and land revenue policies by the colonial state starting in the late eighteenth century radically altered the agrarian class structure in Bengal. It illuminates how the working of colonial land policies through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries altered the primary contradiction in rural Bengal from one of landlord-tenant cultivator (zamindar-raiyat) in late eighteenth century to rich peasant-sharecropper (jotedar-bargadar) by the 1930s. This transformation of rural class configuration, I argue, shaped the contours of radical politics in Bengal in the subsequent period.

In the second section the focus is on the mobilization of rural peasantry and the politicization of agrarian antagonisms into class-based politics by emergent left groups from the 1940s to the 70s. In the late 1930s, a section of the urban, educated, Bengali middle class, radicalized by its contact with the nascent international communism, became the chief protagonists of rural peasant mobilization. The utter misery that had set in during the Great Depression provided the right conditions for the drawing of the masses into the vortex of nationalist
politics. Peasant struggles highlighting the plight of poverty stricken sharecroppers due to exploitation by rich peasants began in the mid-1940s and acquired unprecedented militancy between 1967 and 1974 with peasants seizing land and redistributing it to the landless. The capture of political power by the Left groups in 1977 and subsequent land reform and local self-government reforms were instrumental in bringing about unprecedented rural transformation.

The third section analyzes the period between from early-to-mid 1980s, arguing that after a long period of intense political turmoil and class struggle, West Bengal adopted political moderation in the 1980s. Faced with the burden of governance, the pragmatic shifts in the political practices of the CPI(M)—the dominant constituent of the Left Front Government—resulted in the weakening of its redistributive zeal and capacity under the framework of peasant unity. Under a rural leadership dominated by the middle peasantry, the peasant wing of the Party and the local self-governing institutions became key forums to entrench a conciliatory accommodation of agrarian labor interests. The imperative to sustain this friendly containment of class contradictions in rural Bengal offers us a plausible explanation for Bengal’s lacklustre performance on redistributive reforms despite the long rule by a programmatically committed party.

3.2 Land and Social Relations in Late Colonial Bengal

3.2.1 Permanent Settlement of 1793

The late eighteenth century witnessed key transformations in Bengal’s class structure. The pre-British agrarian structure under the Mughal rule contained a class of land-revenue
collectors (known as zamindars\(^1\)), and a class of cultivating peasants (known as raiyats). As revenue collectors, zamindars served as intermediaries between the state and the peasantry. They extracted a share of produce from the raiyats who cultivated on the tracts of land under zamindar jurisdiction and punctually remitted a stipulated amount to the Mughal exchequer after keeping a portion as personal income. Zamindari rights were inheritable by a successor upon obtaining a fresh charter from the government. The land rent paid by the zamindars to the state was mostly a fixed sum. Zamindars in turn fixed the tax share of each raiyat, guided by custom. The land revenue system was flexible: the state reduced or waived land taxes during natural disasters and failure to remit taxes punctually did not invite stringent states actions such as auctioning off one’s estate.

In general, there was no recognized right of private land ownership at this time and all land belonged to the state. Closest to ownership was the resident cultivators’ ‘right of occupancy’ i.e., the right to continuously cultivate the land and make production decisions as they saw fit.\(^2\) This right was protected by custom and such customary rights were inheritable. As land was easily available for cultivation, zamindars could not excessively raise the tax burden on the raiyats or infringe on raiyats’ customary proprietary rights due to fear of losing them to another estate.

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\(^1\) The term ‘zamindar’ (literally meaning holder of land) came into usage during the Mughal period. It referred to a class of people with varying types of proprietary rights over land-rent collection, but not over land. Zamindars under Mughal regime also enjoyed a wide range of civil, military, and judicial powers and were part of the governance system. These political powers on top of their already dominant social position due to their control over land-rent collection meant significant control of zamindars over rural societies.

\(^2\) Under the Mughal system there were two types of cultivators (raiyats) - the resident tenant cultivator (\textit{khudkasta}) and the non-resident/migrant/at-will cultivator (\textit{paikasta}). The resident cultivators enjoyed a wide range of customary rights in land. Migratory cultivators paid lower rent and had no rights in land. See Habib (2001).
The zamindari institution underwent significant modifications during the British colonial period. The British were interested in modernizing the land revenue collection system in order to ensure optimal appropriation of land revenue and its punctual remittance (Bengal 1940, vol.1, 19). In addition, as capitalist traders, the British aimed at turning the self-contained, low-productivity, subsistence economy into a capitalist economy, able to serve the needs of the empire. They believed this could be achieved by recognizing private property rights in land and anticipated that the zamindars would turn themselves into progressive landlords (Islam 1986). The absolute ownership of land by the zamindars, they hoped, would encourage them to increase productivity and accumulate surplus and, thereby, the British believed the foundation for agrarian capitalism would be laid. The absolute proprietary rights of the zamindar class were recognized in a landmark agreement called the Permanent Settlement (PS) of 1793. In addition to conferring ownership rights on zamindars, the PS fixed in perpetuity the land rent to be remitted by the zamindars. This meant that any increase in income received by way of higher productivity or expansion of cultivation could be kept by the zamindars (Mukherji 1986a). The intent was to provide incentive for entrepreneurship, innovation, and new investment in land. The PS also collapsed revenue collectors with varying types of rights under the Mughal system into one category of zamindars with similar rights. Thus, the Permanent Settlement of land revenue turned the zamindars from being revenue-farmers to proprietors of land. One immediate consequence of the conferring of ownership rights on zamindars was the degradation of cultivating peasants (raiyats), who were customarily landholders, to the status of tenants in the eyes of the law. Even though the PS restrained the proprietors from encroaching on the “prescriptive or customary rights of the tenants,” it failed to define or codify what these rights were, leading
to conflicting interpretations from courts regarding the extent of zamindari and raiyati rights.³

Under PS, while zamindars continued to remain at the top of the agrarian classes, their role and functions changed drastically. Zamindars acquired proprietary rights over land; they made production decisions as opposed to the raiyats; they paid a fixed rent to the British; and they could freely transfer, mortgage, or inherit the land without permissions or pre-approvals from the government. Despite these gains under the new land tenure framework, zamindars lost some of their traditional governance powers. Notably, zamindars were bound by a very stringent schedule for remitting taxes that allowed no leniency even when crops failed due to erratic rainfall, drought, flood, or other reasons beyond the zamindar’s control. Tax arrears were realized quickly by selling a proportionate share of their estate in a public auction in the very next month, in what was known as the ‘Revenue Sale Law.’ This was part of the British strategy to create an entrepreneurially strong landed class, while weeding out the weak from among the old zamindars.

The period under the PS (1793-1955) can be divided into two phases. The first phase (1793-1859) signaled an era of expanding zamindari power, while the second phase (1859-1955) witnessed the temperance of such power through several amendments to the PS. During the first phase, in addition to conferring proprietary rights on zamindars, the British added a series of regulations to the PS framework in order to entrench zamindari control over land

³ The British ended this ambiguity through the Regulation of 1799 which explicitly nullified some of the important customary rights previously enjoyed by the raiyats, effectively confirming their legal status as tenants. Once it became clear that the provisions of the PS negated the right of the raiyats who were customarily the landholders, and bestowed such rights on the zamindars, raiyats began to agitate. Successive tenancy legislation from 1859 onwards then reversed the rights loss in small measure, recognizing some of the raiyati rights.
and raiyats. The British were ultimately concerned about safeguarding the flow of revenue and this led them to protect and strengthen the hands of the zamindars, even when some of the regulations passed during this period noted the sanctity of raiyats’ customary rights. The regulations of 1799 and their subsequent interpretation by courts, gave the zamindars unlimited authority over raiyats—to raise rents, to summon, threaten, and even torture the defaulting raiyats. These regulations were intended to pacify the zamindars, who had been upset by the operation of Revenue Sale Law and lost their entire estate or large pieces of it in the initial years of PS due to non-payment of rent by the recalcitrant resident raiyats. The second phase of the PS began roughly in the mid-nineteenth century lasting until its abolition in 1955. This period saw the erosion of some of the core features of permanent settlement due to the socio-economic forces unleashed by its operation from 1793 to 1850s. Most importantly, the latter years of this period witnessed rise in prominence of the dominant raiyats (jotedars) overshadowing the weakening zamindar class.

3.2.2 Absentee Landlords and the Creation of Intermediate Tenures

The Revenue Land Sale resulted in the creation of absentee landlords in the nineteenth century as a large chunk of land sold in public auction was bought up by urban-based entrepreneurs, who had little experience in land management, but had accumulated savings. 

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4 The “Haptam” Regulation of 1799 gave the zamindars the power to arrest tenants who defaulted on rent payments, confiscate and sell all their property including the crop without involving the courts. The “Panjam” regulation of 1812 reversed some of the draconian powers, but did not offer anything to clarify the rights of the resident raiyats (khudkasta), who had refused to pay rents in protest of the zamindars flouting what they believed were their customary rights (Bengal 1940, vol. 1, 21-2).

5 Such sales were large in number in the early two decades of PS, until 1820s, when zamindars were still coming to terms with their obligations under the PS. During this period, more than half the estates in Bengal were sold, and several others dismembered for arrears of revenue, and some zamindars with large estates became entirely landless (Bengal 1940, vol. 1, 22).
from non-agricultural occupations. Civil servants, traders, and merchants, centered in and around Calcutta seized the opportunity to become large landowners. These urban-based absentee landlords—the *bhadralok* zamindars—were different from the traditional zamindars. Although both lived on surpluses from land, the old zamindars were part of a pre-capitalist subsistence economy while the new class was part of an emerging capitalist economy and a global commodity market. The absence of other investment opportunities and the permanent fixing of rent by the colonial state made land the only lucrative avenue to invest. These new landlords were mostly interested in increasing income through higher rents and illegal levies (*abwab*). Thus, contrary to British anticipation, the new zamindars did not become harbingers of agrarian capitalism by investing their surplus in land improvement and increasing agricultural production.

Their absence from cultivation sites, their social distance from cultivating classes, and the pressures of timely tax collection led them to turn to a wide network of intermediaries for land management. The regulation of 1819 provided the legal basis to this practice by allowing zamindars to create a middle layer of permanent tenure-holders between them and the raiyats. They came to rely on these land managers—mostly, dominant local peasants—to whom they sold their rights of land management in exchange of a punctual rent. This class of intermediary tenure-holders often created tenure contracts below them, sub-letting their rights in land (to receive rent) to another class below them, thus establishing several hierarchical layers of intermediary tenures above the actual cultivator. Each layer drew a

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6 *Bhadralok* literally means ‘genteel folk,’ refers to people of high social status and refined lifestyle. In the nineteenth century, access to western education and jobs in colonial administration were instrumental in creating such a status group, primarily among bureaucrats and clerks, with recruits from the old zamindar class. This class of landed, professional class was primarily Hindu upper caste. The term is still used to refer to well-mannered middle class.
small portion from the rent paid by the cultivator as income and passed on the rest to the next layer. Depending on how high or low one was placed in the hierarchical network of intermediary tenure holders, these tenures were known as dependent Talukdar, Jotedar, Pattanidar, Dar-pattanidar, Se-pattanidar, Dar-a-dar pattanidar, Hawladar, nim-Hawladar, Osat-nim-Howladar etc. The complexity of the tenure system and the nomenclature of different types of tenures varied across the eastern, western, and northern regions of Bengal.

Some of these middle interests were largely engaged in land management (e.g. pattanidars), while others in the reclamation of large tracts of uncultivated land (e.g. ijaradars, hawladars). A statutory commission appointed by the British Parliament reported that in some cases as many as fifty intermediate interests had been created (Simon 1930, 340). This process, referred to as ‘subinfeudation’ by the nineteenth-century revenue officials, led to the fragmentation of rentier interests at the top of the agrarian hierarchy, and in the long run created a powerful agrarian middle class with permanent tenures in land. The proliferation of rent-receiving middlemen naturally meant rent increases for the raiyats. The intermediate layers paid no tax, but merely extracted a share of the rent paid by the raiyats as their income. Zamindars gained greater control and efficiency in the tax-collection process through reliance on these middle men of varying tenure rights, and it slowed down and eventually stopped the sale of zamindar estates due to tax default. The beginning of export of cash crops, increasing population and consequent demand on land, higher rents, and rising prices of food also made for a prosperous period for the zamindars during early to late nineteenth century (after the brief slump in fortunes in the initial years of the PS).

While the zamindars prospered in the mid-nineteenth century, raiyats suffered an economic decline. Their customary rights were trampled and rents increased manifold to satisfy the
bloated rentier interests at the top. In the zamindari estates in Bardhaman district, rents increased by 3 per cent by 1850s and by upto 5 percent by 1870s (Ray and Ray 1975, 88). Raiyats fiercely contested the newly acquired zamindari right to increase rent unlimitedly and organized resistance movements against zamindari encroachment on their customary rights. The emergent intermediate tenure-holders, whose coming into existence was a cause of higher rent demands, stood with the zamindars against the raiyats. From the late 1850s to 1880s, a series of peasant uprisings called for the restoration of raiyati rights.7 The colonial state intervened with a Rent Act in 1859 codifying rights of raiyats.8 But the decisive point of departure in delineating tenant rights came in 1885 under the Bengal Tenancy Act.9 By then, containing peasant anger had become a political necessity for the British due to widespread peasant revolts in the 1870s.

The Tenancy Act of 1885 strengthened raiyati interests and protected them from arbitrary rent increase by legally recognizing and protecting the rights of all landed interests below the zamindar (i.e., different types of intermediate tenures and raiyats). The Act reclassified raiyats into two groups: occupancy raiyats and non-occupancy raiyats. Occupancy raiyats were those who had uninterrupted possession of a holding for twelve years or more. Inheritable and transferable, the occupancy tenures were protected from arbitrary rent increases. Non-occupancy raiyats held land for less than twelve years. Their rent could be increased by the zamindar, but they could not be evicted if they paid rent regularly. While the

7 The Pabna peasant uprising of 1872-73 is one of the most famous among these.
8 For the evolution of land laws under Permanent Settlement, see Banerjee (1980).
9 The Rent Act of 1859 codified the rights of different types of raiyats. It also significantly curtailed the right of zamindars to increase rent and levy illegal cess from raiyats. However, the loyalties of the colonial government to the zamindar class stood in the way of effective enforcement. As such, the Act did not give much relief to the peasants from zamindari oppression.
Act codified the rights of settled raiyats, the rights of a class of under-raiyats (tenants-at-will) were left undefined, leading to a spike in their numbers in the post-1885 period.

Among the under-raiyats who cultivated under various tenures (e.g. bargadar, karshadar, kurfa, dhankarari), sharecroppers were the largest group. That the under-raiyats cultivated on temporary basis without any rights in land and at more advantageous terms to the landlord compared to settled raiyats paved way for a phenomenal increase in their numbers, primarily sharecroppers, in the post-1885 period. By 1920s, a large section of Bengal peasantry had been turned to the status of under-raiyats under fast deteriorating material conditions due to the worsening land-man ratio and the phenomenal rise in rental demands on them. The introduction of competitive politics and left-wing activism in the 1920s made the condition of under-raiyats the burning agrarian issue in Bengal. Additional tenancy legislation in 1928, 1938, and 1940 were aimed at codifying and strengthening the rights of under-raiyats, gradually undermining the control of zamindars on all classes of tenants and sub-tenants. By late 1930s, the decline of the zamindar class was complete and the Bengal Land Revenue Commission recommended its abolition. In the Commission’s opinion, the zamindari institution had become a redundant appendage of the rural society (Bengal 1940).

3.2.3 Commercialization of Agriculture

Another important change in the peasant economy of Bengal during colonial rule was the commercialization of agriculture. Under PS, land became a marketable commodity, and, through the operation of the Revenue Sale Law, a land market emerged in Bengal. Surplus grain produced from agriculture also began to be sold and exported leading to the
establishment of an organized domestic market network involving richer peasants, grain traders, and professional moneylenders (mahajans) by the mid-nineteenth century.

In addition, with the British encouraging extensive cultivation of cash crops for consumption in international markets, more and more land was turned into producing cash crops for export. One of the early cash crops patronized by the British was indigo, a plant from which blue dye was derived, for the growing textile industry in England.\(^\text{10}\) With the British financing cultivation and setting up indigo processing factories in and around Calcutta, indigo cultivation and production in Bengal intensified during the early period of the British rule (between 1780 and 1860). In 1830s, when European planters were allowed to buy land, indigo cultivation took an exploitative turn. Planters gained significant control over peasant cultivators as landlords-cum-creditors. Dependence on world markets required a new organization of production that responded to demand and price levels and made appropriate adjustments in cropping patterns. With increasing demand for blue dye in Europe, planters coerced the raiyats to convert their most fertile lands into indigo cultivation and to increase production, without offering a fair price (as low as 2.5% of market price). Advance money loans to cultivators entrapped them in debt and made them unable to break free from indigo cultivation. The demand for blue dye in the international market made it enormously profitable for the planters while increasingly unviable for the peasant cultivators (Bhattacharya 1977), (Chaudhuri 2008).\(^\text{11}\)

\(^{10}\) Other prominent cash crops cultivated in Bengal during the 1750-1860 period included opium, silk, sugarcane. Post 1860, Bengal’s major cash crops were jute, cotton, wheat and sugarcane.

\(^{11}\) A drop in demand and price of indigo since the 1840s, and the continuation of the coercive system of cultivation led to an uprising of indigo cultivators against the planters in 1859 (Indigo revolt/Nil Bidroho).
The discontent of the raiyats and the arrival of chemically-produced dye in the 1870s resulted in the gradual decline of indigo cultivation in Bengal after 1860s. Starting 1870s, jute became the leading cash crop of Bengal. Jute caught the attention of the British East India Company as a cheap raw material for producing various domestic and industrial products, at relatively little cost of production. The British invested in jute mills to process raw jute around Calcutta, and areas under jute cultivation increased significantly as the worldwide demand for jute increased. Unlike the coercive nature of indigo cultivation, more and more peasants voluntarily turned to jute cultivation anticipating higher profits from international markets. By the early twentieth century jute became the cornerstone of Bengal’s economy.  

A boom in jute cultivation due to higher demand during the First World War saw the trend reaching a climax. However, it also revealed the total dependency of the jute cultivators, mostly small cultivators, on the world market and their vulnerability to external shocks. The complete British control of the manufacturing houses that turned raw jute or raw coir into sellable products in the international market compounded their susceptibility. Further, the terms set out by the moneylender who advanced a loan to the cultivator in the lean months, kept the price of raw-jute very low, making it hard for the small cultivator to eke out enough for subsistence. The effects of the Great Depression compounded these problems, bringing the small peasantry to the brink of starvation. Earlier when rice was cultivated, the

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12 Jute cultivation shot up in Eastern Bengal starting late 19th century. Bengal became a major exporter of jute and in 1901 jute accounted for a third of Bengal’s all exports. By 1905, jute and jute products constituted more than a third of all Calcutta trade. With the textile industry in ruins, jute was also the only manufacturing industry that Bengal had at the time, employing half of its industrial work force. 1888 to 1940 is the overall period of jute expansion in Bengal with 1900-1920 being the period of high growth. In 1900, Bengal had 36 jute mills and employed 114,800 workers. By 1920, it had more than doubled to 77 mills and 288,400 workers. Districts in East and North Bengal were the primary producers of raw jute.
subsistence of peasant families was never in as much doubt. Jute could not be eaten; to keep the family alive it had to be sold, at whatever prices available.

3.2.4 The Rise of Jotedars

Two by-products of the commercialization process, which became important features of the early twentieth century Bengal agrarian scene, were the rise of jotedars and the expansion-cum-degeneration of the sharecropping system. These features vitally shaped the struggle for land reform and ultimately the mode of incorporation of rural poor in Bengal in the latter half of the twentieth century. The prominence of jotedars (translated as dominant raiyats, substantial peasants, and rich peasants) reveals how the evolution of landlordism in Bengal took a new twist in the last decades of the nineteenth century, with jotedars overshadowing the zamindars in many parts of Bengal.\(^\text{13}\)

British officials surveying Bengal villages as early as 1800 had recorded the presence of jotedars as leading cultivators with considerable power over the local peasantry (Colebrooke 1884, 85). They held sizable portions of village land and occupied a dominant social position in village affairs, wielding substantial influence among the peasants. But in the nineteenth century, jotedars deepened their control over land and labor and, in the process, their authority over the peasantry. They rose slowly and gradually from the ranks of peasantry to become superior raiyats or tenants-in-chiefs, and in some cases, tenure-holding rent receivers. Although bhadralok zamindars legally owned the land, they often had no contact with the raiyats. Rather, they depended on the cooperation of jotedars for revenue from their

\(^{13}\) Although this economic class was known by different names in different parts of Bengal, jotedar has come to be the common referent. Jotedars were dominant in North Bengal districts of Jalpaiguri, Dinajpur, and Darjeeling; in the adjacent native kingdom of Cooch Behar; and in many parts of South-West Bengal.
estates. Unlike zamindars, jotedars shared the bonds of community with the rest of the peasantry, resided locally, and involved themselves in cultivation with physical labor. They were rustic like the peasants and did not aspire to emulate the zamindars’ genteel way of life. They also belonged to the same middle agricultural castes as the rest of the raiyats while the zamindars were mostly from the upper bhadralok castes. These dominant village cultivators hailed from one or more locally dominant lower castes: Kaivartas and Sadgops in Midnapur, Aguris in Burdwan, Rajbanshis in Cooch Behar, and Muslims and Namasudras in some of the eastern districts. All of these factors contributed to the jotedars’ effective control of both village land and labor (Chatterjee 1984, 128-9). In return for their cooperation, jotedars acquired superior raiyati rights from the zamindar, such as reductions in land rent.

As the nineteenth century wore on, the jotedars’ power vis-à-vis zamindars increased considerably. In the first half of the nineteenth century, zamindars and jotedars had worked collaboratively to keep the peasantry under their collective control. In the second half of the nineteenth century, this relationship transformed into one of antagonism as zamindar infringement on rights of raiyats reached alarming levels (Ray and Ray 1975, 82-3). Jotedars, who were fellow cultivators, organized the raiyats against zamindars in lobbying for better protection of raiyati rights and the abolition of several types of transaction fees owed to the zamindar; this resulted in the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the zamindar class in Bengal declined drastically as a result of improved tenant rights and the zamindars’ wasteful ways of life. The beginning to mid-twentieth century saw the rise of jotedars into the growing power-vacuum left by the declining zamindars, and into the role of the rural oppressors. The Great Depression of 1929-40 and the Bengal Famine of 1943 were instrumental in reinforcing the process of jotedar
domination and oppression of poorer peasants. During the Depression, a severe cash crunch as a result of sharply dropping crop prices left the small and marginal cultivators at the mercy of the jotedars. Peasants who borrowed money and grain became perpetual bonded laborers, unable to pay back their multiple debts in the forms of cash, grain, and labor. Between 1929 and 1934, forty-three percent of Bengal’s rural population was indebted to the tune of twice their annual income, sixteen percent up to four times, and another eighteen percent more than four times their annual income (Mukherji 1986b, PE-13).

With the drop in price and in the international demand for jute during the Depression, peasants in the jute-cultivating districts of eastern and northern Bengal became the worst hit. Credit became extremely scarce as the usual moneylenders (mahajans) withdrew from the market in the aftermath of the economic downturn. Jotedars stepped in by lending money and grain to fellow cultivators. Also, peasants found it easier to obtain credit from the co-cultivating jotedars than from the professional moneylenders. But jotedars advanced loans with a hidden motive of acquiring the land of the cultivator after entrapping him in a cumulative debt burden that was bigger than the value of his piece of land. Jotedars stored the grains obtained from peasants only to loan or sell it back to them at unaffordable prices during lean months. Likewise, they obtained jute for a paltry sum from the cultivator and stored it to take advantage of the demand-supply dynamics in the international market. Thus, combining their control on land, resources, and credit, jotedars became landlords-cum-moneylenders-cum-grain dealers in the jute-growing districts. In the process, they became
the face of the traditional twin evils exploiting Bengal’s peasantry: the oppressive landlord and the usurious moneylender.\textsuperscript{14}

The scene in the rice-growing districts of southern and western Bengal (Bardhman, South 24-Parganas, Birbhum, Midnapore, Bankura, Hooghly) was not too different. Although commercialization had made rice a market commodity in the local and district markets, much of it was still used for subsistence consumption. Here, too, the small cultivators became victims of a cycle of indebtedness owing to rent payments, and high interest loan payments of grain and money incurred during the months before harvest, when the cultivators were desperate for credit and food. The terms of the loans stipulated the sale of the crop to the lender immediately after the harvest at a price determined by the lender. Insurmountable debt burden accrued over several years resulted in the gradual acquisition of fertile lands of small and marginal peasants by jotedar-type substantial cultivators. Partha Chatterjee describes the scene as follows:

The more substantial cultivators, on the other hand, particularly in West Bengal, ‘habitually stored their surplus stock for months on end, and sometimes even for more than a year.’ A market of this nature, combined with the mechanisms of debt, mortgage, transfer and still greater control, economic as well as extra-economic, over the actual cultivator, enabled a class of landlords to find avenues of enrichment which had nothing to do with investment in land or increases in its productivity. Typically, they were \textit{jotedar}-rich peasants who also engaged in money lending and grain trading,

\textsuperscript{14} For more on the impact of the Great Depression on Bengal’s agrarian relations, see Saugata Mukherji (1986b).
and often also in small agricultural processing industries, such as rice mills.

This was the range of new *kulak*-type activities in Western Bengal (1984, 148).

Thus, in the aftermath of the Great Depression there was an alarming increase in the level of indebtedness of the poor peasantry. Peasant dependence on the jotedar for capital for both production and daily consumption needs at high interest rates reduced them to a permanent vicious cycle of poverty and to the distress sale of their land.\(^{15}\) Unlike professional moneylenders who were interested mainly in raising the rate of interest, jotedars used their hold over a multitude of indebted peasants to dispossess them of their small holdings, and then to resettle the very same people on the same plots of land with inferior rights as under- raiyats (most commonly sharecroppers) and in a much greater degree of bondage to the creditors.\(^{16}\) This process of “depeasantization” pauperized the poorer peasantry, and destroyed the viability of the small-holding peasant economy (Chaudhuri 1975). At the same time, large-scale land alienation, that is transfers of land from the hands of the small and marginal peasantry to the rich peasant, reinforced jotedar dominance.

### 3.2.5 Spread and Degeneration of Sharecropping

The process of land alienation reached its zenith in the 1930s. Between 1930 and 1943, the sale of land in Bengal increased by over 600 percent from 25,000 deeds of sale registered in 1930 to 169,000 in 1943. The average value of such land sales dropped from Rs. 292 in 1930

\(^{15}\) Bhaduri notes that the interest rates charged by jotedars were as high as 200\% over a period of four months (122-3).

\(^{16}\) The enactment of Bengal Moneylenders Act (1933) and Bengal Agricultural Debtors Act (1935) and creation of Debt Settlement Boards in each district were attempts to lessen the extent of indebtedness. Mukherji, 1985, p. 3.
to Rs. 187 in 1943. That the average value of sale decreased while the number of sales increased proves that the land being sold belonged to the small-holding raiyat, who became a sharecropper on his own land after it was sold (Mukherjee 1957, 39). Azizul Haque notes that the number of transfers of occupancy holdings, mostly from impoverished peasants to superior raiyats, doubled between 1930 and 1936, going from 152,639 to 295,371 (1939, 311). The concentration of different village roles on the jotedar—chief cultivator, creditor, gain dealer, landlord, employer, socially powerful-village headman—made him capable of unprecedented and multi-sided exploitation of the peasantry. Amit Bhaduri argues that this multi-sided dependency on the jotedar contributed to jotedars gaining semi-feudal control over the erstwhile landed peasantry, almost reducing them to a serf-like position as sharecroppers (Bhaduri 1973).

The process of land transfers and jotedar dominance was intrinsically related to the wide growth of sharecropping as the chief means of survival for the pauperized peasantry. The lack of legal protection for sharecroppers provided an incentive for landlords to turn more and more cultivating tenants into sharecroppers. The Tenancy legislation also did not accord any occupancy right to the cultivators on lands held under direct possession (khas land) by the landlords. The combination of these two factors signalled a possibility of

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17 Transfers included registered sales, permanent leases, and mortgages. Registered sales were highest in the jute-cultivating eastern districts of Noakhali, Tippera, Dacca, Bogra, and Pabna, followed by the rice-growing western districts of Midnapore, Bardhaman, Hooghly, Howrah, and Birbhum (Chatterjee 1984, 146-7). A sharp rise in the sale of small raiyati plots is recorded between 1926-43 by the Annual Reports of the Registration Department, Government of Bengal 1926-27, 1943-44, cited in Mukherji (1986b).

18 As per the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885, which codified the rights of tenants, even the temporary raiyats had some rights in land and their rent was legally determined. This motivated landlords to look for categories unprotected by the Tenancy legislation so that they could claim a higher share of the surplus with higher rents, and without conceding any land rights to the cultivators. Sharecroppers were one such unprotected cultivating class.
boundlessly increasing profits by converting raiyati land into land-in-direct-possession, to be cultivated by sharecroppers (bargadar). In addition, sharecropping yielded produce-rent as opposed to cash-rent, which was always more profitable, as grain could be sold back to the peasants at much higher prices during lean seasons.\(^{19}\) Bargadars cultivated the land without any resource input from the jotedar and was expected to hand over to the jotedar a significant portion of the harvest, sometimes up to seventy five percent. Further, the demand for cash crops in the international market made it enormously profitable to intensify the cultivation of cash crops, employing the cheapest labor, i.e., sharecroppers, in every bit of land available.

Lack of legal protection combined with the devastating effects of the global economic downturn turned the small peasantry of West Bengal into bargadars on their own land as sharecropping spread phenomenally in the 1930s.\(^{20}\) Although bargadar ranks were swelling and many of them facing impoverishment, the proposal to offer security of tenure to bargadars (by making them tenants) in the 1928 amendment to the Tenancy Act met with stiff opposition from landed interests in the Bengal Legislative Council, who successfully circumvented the proposal.\(^{21}\) By 1940, 41.8% of families in rural Bengal lived mainly or entirely as bargadars (Bengal 1940, vol. 2, 118-9).

Thus, sharecropping, which had been means to sustainable livelihood for the lowest in the agrarian ladder and a partnership between the landholder and the cultivator in the nineteenth

\(^{19}\) In 1930s, from one acre of aman paddy, the jotedar would receive Rs.14 if cultivated by sharecroppers, Rs.12 if cultivated by agricultural laborers, and only Rs. 2 if cultivated by the resident cultivator or raiyat (Mukherjee 1957, 49). Aman paddy is harvested in the winter (November-December) and has been the staple crop of the region.

\(^{20}\) For a detailed account of the spread of sharecropping and its changing forms during the 1930s, see Chatterjee (1982).

\(^{21}\) During the 1920s, the Bengal Legislative Council—the legislative arm of the colonial state in Bengal—allowed limited representation from the native population.
century, became a tool of exploitation in the hands of the twentieth-century landlords. The worsen- ing land-man ratio and land-hungry landlords who connived to evade the tenancy laws were responsible for the worsening of sharecropping as an institution. In the nineteenth century sharecroppers had the possibility of deserting a tenure-holder and moving to a new estate that offered more attractive terms. That bargaining power was completely lost in the twentieth century as bargadars found themselves at the mercy of jotedars, who even extracted free labor from the peasant, if he was unable to repay his debt by giving up his land. The multi-sided dependence on the jotedars reduced the bargadars to somewhat of a bonded laborer. By the 1930s, extreme levels of indebtedness and land alienation turned a large chunk of the landed peasantry into indigent bargadars.

3.2.6 Summary

In sum, the changes in land tenures and land rights introduced by the colonial state paved way for a new process of agrarian class differentiation, with important changes at the top and at the bottom of the agrarian classes. As Chatterjee (1984) notes, at the top of the agrarian ladder, it revolutionized the structure of rent-receiving classes, initially creating a class of absentee landlords and a hierarchic network of intermediate tenure-holders, who were eventually eclipsed by the rich-peasants (jotedars). At the bottom, Bengal’s landed peasantry was turned into a vast army of landless or almost landless sharecroppers (bargadar/adhiyar). The importance of these early developments for West Bengal’s eventual trajectory is noteworthy, with important consequences for the eventual incorporation of the rural poor. As is evident from the foregoing analysis, agrarian capitalism in Bengal did not produce the emergence and consolidation of wage laborers as a distinct class. Indeed the distinction between subsistence agriculture and commercial agriculture was more fluid in Bengal than
elsewhere in colonial India as the organizational base of cash crop cultivation was small peasant farming to a higher degree.

As a result, the creation of a class of landlords and the introduction of a range of commercial crops did not usher in capitalist agrarian relations, nor proletarianization of the labor. Instead, even when agriculture became more market-oriented and monetized, labor remained stuck in relatively un-free forms of labor and associated social coercion, with exploitative sharecropping arrangements spreading rapidly and becoming the dominant mode of surplus-extraction. The specific form of agrarian capitalism pauperized, not proletarianized, the agrarian labor in Bengal through the interrelated processes of debt-entrapment and expropriation. The traumatic experience of land alienation and the extreme cultural affinity for some kind of attachment to land forced impoverished Bengal peasants to be sharecroppers on their own lands under the jotedars. As the next section demonstrates, the politicization of the divide between the jotedar and bargadar vitally shaped the evolution of radical politics in Bengal between the 1940s and 1970s.

3.3 Organization of Rural Peasants and Workers

The organization of rural peasantry in Bengal is intricately connected to the development of left-wing politics, especially of the Communist Party of India, which grew out of the anti-colonial nationalist movement. This section attempts a brief recounting of the arrival of left-wing groups on the political horizon and their attempts to draw the rural masses into protest politics. By organizing them and launching mass movements, left-wing activists attempted to transform the anti-colonial movement in Bengal into a broad-based revolutionary mass
movement that, along with national liberation, called for a fundamental alteration of the socio-economic order.

### 3.3.1 Early Nationalist Mobilization

Bengal witnessed the emergence of state-wide organized politics in the early decades of the twentieth century in the form of a broad nationalist front with links to rural Bengal in the *swadeshi* movement of 1905-08 (see Sarkar 1973). Protesting the division of Bengal in 1905, the liberal section of the English-educated urban professionals, who bitterly resented their exclusion from political and economic power by the British, launched a movement to boycott British manufactured goods. The movement mobilized the peasantry initially, but ultimately failed due to the material and cultural divisions within the Bengali population (e.g. class, caste, religion, region) and the physical and social distance of the urban bhadralok radicals from the peasantry.

The next successful broad political front with a province-wide reach was realized in the early 1920s, close on the heels of Gandhi’s launching of the Non-Cooperation Movement, aimed at taking the struggle for independence, hitherto limited to the urban and educated middle class, to the masses. Around the same time, in Bengal the *Swarajya* Party (a faction within the Congress) under the leadership of C. R. Das managed to cobble up a broad nationalist front against colonial rule, that included a vast array of social forces, possibly, the broadest Bengal witnessed in its anti-colonial history. Through strategic bargaining and compromise, the lingering prejudices in the minds of Hindu and Muslim religious communities toward
each other was sought to be assuaged. To this end, C. R. Das negotiated an agreement (known as the Bengal Pact) to strengthen Hindu-Muslim relations and share political power in the province. This pact and the Congress Party’s endorsement of the khilafat movement endeared the Muslim peasantry of east and north Bengal and their rural leadership to C. R. Das’s swarajya alliance. The alliance also included the Calcutta professionals and literati, the rural rent-receiving classes, and the various militant-nationalist groups, all working under the broad umbrella of the Congress Party (Chatterjee 1984, 101-7). This period (1921–25) saw brief but impressive instances of peasant mobilization in the form of anti-tax movements in West Bengal and the praja (tenant) movement in East Bengal. The unity of purpose

22 In the aftermath of the swadeshi movement, Hindu-Muslim communal strife had become a major obstacle in building a united front against the British. The turn of a section of the bhadralok leaders of the swadeshi movement to Hindu-revivalist ideas and practices, and the propaganda by the British that the swadeshi movement was a Hindu ploy to keep the Muslims under continued economic subjugation had led to communal tension and violence. The swadeshi movement produced two competing factions, the moderates and the radicals. The radical wing advocated violent means to overthrow the British. At the core of this political extremism was urban educated bhadralok Bengali youth who had been radicalized by the inferior treatment meted out by the British and what they perceived as ineffective tactics of the moderates in the Indian National Congress in fighting the British. Jugantar was the leading revolutionary group in Calcutta; Aurobindo Ghosh, the famous revolutionary-turned-philosopher was a key figure. Anushilan Samiti, a related revolutionary youth club aimed to cultivate spiritually, intellectually, and physically vigorous youth to fight the British with branches in many parts of Bengal. Their activities faded by the 1920s with many of their leaders beginning to work within the Congress, and others joining socialist and communist parties. See Laushey (1975).

23 The no-tax movement was part of the broader non-cooperation movement in 1921 in Midnapur district. Here the rich peasants (jotedar) acquired dominant position in the Congress organization and were able to mobilize the lower peasantry against the infamous Union Boards (the local self-government body created by British, dominated by local landlords). See Sanyal (1988).

24 The praja movement was an East Bengal phenomenon where the large majority of Muslims peasants were tenants of Hindu zamindars. Some of its demands were the abolition of landlord’s illegal exactions, transfer fees, and waving of debt arrears. Praja Samitis (Tenants’ Associations) were formed in different districts and they undertook processions, boycotts, and other protest activity aimed at the zamindar and his amla (agent). The movement later became a political party under the name Krishak Praja Party in East Bengal.
and the upsurge in anti-British solidarity were, however, short-lived. By the end of 1920s, the broad political unity collapsed due to the peculiar nature of property relations in East Bengal, its head-on collision with the interests of the Calcutta Hindu bhadralok who dominated the provincial Congress organization, and the inability of the colonial state institutions to facilitate cross-cutting alliances. The death of C. R. Das in 1925 and the Congress Party’s subsequent betrayal of the Bengal Pact resulted in escalating communal violence between 1926–28, especially in East Bengal, shaping the political fault-lines along communal identities.

The final blow to broad political unity came in 1928 when the Tenancy Act Amendment Bill came up for deliberation in the Bengal Legislative Council. By this time, the political scene had become highly polarized along communal lines due to the above mentioned reasons. The Bill considered granting minimal tenancy rights to the actual tillers of land: bargadars (sharecroppers) and other types of under-raiyats (tenants-at-will). The sharecroppers had hitherto been looked upon as mere laborers. On every important motion during the deliberation of this bill, the Swarajya-Congress Party, almost exclusively Hindu-upper castes, voted to protect the interests of the landlords (zamindars and jotedars) as opposed to those of bargadars and under-raiyats. The leadership of the provincial Congress organization...
remained with the former at this time, and it alienated the Muslim peasantry of east and north Bengal, and did not penetrate even the Hindu peasantry of West Bengal. On the whole, the social distance of the middle class, English-educated, urban nationalist leaders weakened the Congress Party’s ability to build a genuine mass movement, that forged wider political unities across class, community, and region, as desired by Gandhi. Most notable was their inability to mobilize the rural peasantry to any significant extent and to integrate anti-landlordism as a major plank of the anti-imperialist movement in the 1920s. Congress’s inability to understand and articulate the aspirations of the poor peasantry provided crucial political space for left-wing groups and facilitated the growth of left groups in rural areas (Sarkar 1987).

### 3.3.2 Arrival of Left-wing politics

Early communists in Bengal were educated middle class who were radicalized by exposure to revolutionary ideologies. The success of the Bolshevik revolution (1917) made Marxist ideas highly influential among the Bengali nationalist-revolutionaries. Between 1918 and 1922, many émigré revolutionaries and English-educated militant-nationalists affiliated to groups such as *Jugantar* and *Anushilan Samiti* traveled to Russia (Chattopadhyay 1970). These Bengali intellectuals became well connected to the international communist movement and it resulted in the emergence of a group of Indian communists abroad in the early 1920s. In the ensuing period, Bengal became a hotbed of left-wing political activity with numerous political groups springing up. Urban militant nationalists of the swadeshi era were a readymade social base attracted to the revolutionary ideas (Dasgupta 1995). Many turned to

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27 The first organized attempt to form a Communist Party of India took place in Moscow, led by Bengali revolutionary, M. N. Roy.
the communist movement and became its early leaders, notably M. N. Roy, Bhupendra Nath Dutta, and Abani Mukherjee. Some radical-nationalists, who had begun to function within the Congress after leaving Anushilan and Jugantar, who were unhappy over Gandhi’s pacifist leadership, also turned to left-wing alternatives. Muzaffar Ahmed, M. N. Roy’s emissary to Bengal, emerged as a key figure in the spread of Communism in Bengal. The period also saw the surfacing of various leftist periodicals, published outside and inside the country, with the aim of disseminating revolutionary ideas.28

Left groups made substantial progress in organizing workers in the urban industrial sectors in their early years. Higher commodity demand during the First World War pushed up prices but without corresponding wage increases, and that led to worker unrest in the industrial centers across the country. The period of 1918-23 witnessed the springing up of trade unions in several sectors—textile, jute, post and telegraph, and railways—and cities like Madras, Bombay, Calcutta, and Kanpur were engulfed in strike activities led by trade unions (Sen 1997). (The All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), which is India’s oldest trade union, was formed in 1920.)

The flurry of left-wing activity eventually led to the formation of the Communist Party of India (CPI) in 1925. Bengali intellectuals were in the forefront of the CPI and the other leftist political groups that sprang up in different parts of the country. The early Communists focused their energies on developing a radical character to the intensifying nationalist movement. They also faced a tactical dilemma on the question of forming an alliance with

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28 Other than the Bolshevik journals, one of the early journals in circulation was Vanguard published from Berlin by M.N. Roy. Some others were Ganavani, Lal Nishan, Jagaran (all published by Workers’ and Peasants’ Party of Bengal), Atmasakhi, Samkha, and Dhumketu (published by Jugantar and Anushilan Samiti). See Roy (1972).
the national bourgeoisie (represented by the Congress Party) within the anti-colonial nationalist movement: whether to mobilize the masses for national liberation in isolation from the Congress Party, or to collaborate with it despite its multi-class character and upper-class dominance. Following Lenin’s *Theses on the National and Colonial Question*, Indian Communists supported the “bourgeois-democratic liberation movement” led by the Congress Party, while preserving their organizational and ideological independence, and worked for the establishment of a united front made up of anti-imperialist forces (Overstreet and Windmiller 1959). By 1925, the tactical line was to form a mass revolutionary bloc comprising of peasants, workers, and the petty bourgeoisie within the nationalist movement. This resulted in the formation of the Workers and Peasants Party of Bengal (WPP) in 1926. The WPP gradually became a front organization for Bengali communists within the Indian National Congress through which all communist activities were carried out during 1925-29.\(^\text{29}\)

It was successful in organizing workers’ strikes among railway, textile, and jute workers (Sen 1997) and in raising the tempo of trade union activity between 1926–28 (Roy 1972).

As the WPP gained influence within the Bengal wing of the Congress Party (Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee or BPCC), it was able to build important alliances between the Communists, militant nationalists, mainstream nationalists, and other leftists like those in the Congress Socialist Party (CSP). However, the collaborative political environment ended rather abruptly in 1929 when the Communist International (Comintern) changed its ‘United Front’ policy which allowed communists to join forces with workers of all political stripes against the bourgeoisie. The changed position viewed multi-class, moderate-left political

\(^{29}\) Muzaffar Ahmed, a known communist, became the General Secretary of WPP in 1928. Many others like Benoy Krishna Chowdhury, who later became prominent communist leaders, were converted from militant-nationalism to communism through their involvement in WPP.
platforms like the WPP, which mobilized the revolutionary as well as non-revolutionary segments of workers in pursuit of national liberation, as having a largely petty-bourgeois character with ties to the landlord class. This was a conspicuous deviation from the position of the second congress of the Communist International which had called for a ‘united front’ between the proletariat, peasantry, and national bourgeoisie in colonized countries (Rao 2003). The change signalled the end of communist collaboration with socialists and ‘nationalist-reformists’ such as the Congress. Instead, the new call was to build a strong communist party and a militant labor movement in isolation from the socialists and the liberals. Following this change, most Bengali communist leaders deserted the WPP in 1929 and many others were imprisoned by the colonial government. The Party went out of existence soon after. With several leaders imprisoned and without a province-wide organizational network, the Communists kept aloof from the Congress Party and from the mainstream nationalist movement from 1929-34. This, as we shall see, further delayed the galvanizing of rural Bengal into nationalist fervor.

The first two decades of communist activity in Bengal remained more or less concentrated in the industrial centers as the industrial working class was considered the vanguard of the revolution, as in the Bolshevik revolution. The primary focus of the urban, educated, young middle-class early recruits was on organizing workers under trade unions and encouraging militancy. It was only in the late 1930s these urban-intellectuals turned their attention to organizing the rural peasantry taking up the unfinished work of the WPP.

Faced with the threat of fascism in Europe, the Comintern reversed its policy in 1935 to allow communist parties to return to broad alliances with non-left bourgeois parties (Popular Front). The Comintern’s ‘popular front thesis’ exhorted the Indian communists to join anti-
imperialist mass activities within the Congress while maintaining their political and organizational independence from it (Dimitrov 1950). Thus, the Bengali communists joined the Congress Socialist Party (CSP), which was then a radical wing within the Congress Party, and soon took on leadership roles in the Bengal CSP, Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee (BPCC), and All India Congress Committee (AICC) (Dasgupta 1995, 23). At the same time, the Bengal Provincial Committee of the CPI worked underground and began to build a presence in all districts of Bengal. The building of communist organizations in far flung areas of Bengal received a boost when a fresh wave of militant-nationalists (released from Andaman and other prisons beginning 1937) became ardent activists. Some notable figures who became key functionaries at the district level are Benoy Chowdhury in Bardhaman and Birbhum districts, Hare Krishna Konar in Bardhaman, Bejoy Modak in Hooghly, Provash Roy in 24-Parganas, and Moni Singh in Mymensingh (Sen 1972, 24). Interaction with militant-nationalists at various stages of its formative period helped in the consolidation of the Communist Party in Bengal. By 1940s, the CPI had branches in all 28 districts of undivided Bengal, with about 1000 Party functionaries across the state, though the Party remained underground between 1934 and 1942 (Dasgupta 1995, 28).

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30 The British reopened the cellular jail in Andaman Islands in 1932 and imprisoned a large number of revolutionaries from across the country. Many secretly read Marxist literature and became part of the Communist Consolidation Committee in the prison (Mazumdar 1979; Dasgupta 1995, 22-3). Of the 385 prisoners in 1937, 339 belonged to Bengal and 200 were members of the Communist Consolidation Committee. Once out of jail, some joined the CPI, while others joined CSP and later formed the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP). The high numbers of freedom fighters from Bengal is a testament to the intensity of revolutionary fervor in Bengal in that period and the vital role Bengal played in the nationalist movement. Communist Consolidation Committees were formed in other prisons, too, at this time.

31 For a more detailed analysis of the organizational development of CPI in Bengal, see Franda (1971).
3.3.3 Organization of Rural Peasantry

Due to the distinctive urban middle class character of early Bengali leftism, organized politics spread from the metropolis to the village. A key component of communist organization-building was the organization of the rural peasantry in a class organization through which the peasants could be politicized and their sporadic outbursts of dissent coordinated into a sustained movement. The deplorable material conditions of the lower peasantry in the aftermath of the Great Depression and the political opportunities it opened up prompted the urban radicals in the Congress Party to turn their attention to rural mass movements. The leftists within the Congress took leadership in establishing a state-wide peasant union—the Bengal Provincial Krishak Sabha (BPKS)—in 1937. The BPKS was to be the state branch of the national peasant front of the CPI, the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS). Although the early BKPS was an amalgamation of congressmen, socialists, communists, and independents, it gradually became dominated by the communists. With the BKPS leadership receiving a boost from the wave of communist activists coming out of jails in 1937, its membership rose to 50,000 within two years of its formation, and close to 200,000 by 1944 (Dasgupta 1995, 38) (Rasul 1989, 22). Early leaders included Muzaffar Ahmed, Abdulla Rasul, Abdul Halim, Harekrishna Konar, and Benoy Krishna Chowdhury (Rasul 1989). Following the agrarian program of the Congress, the initial attempt of the Kisan Sabha was to speak for the entire peasantry, including small and big owner cultivators, sharecroppers, and agricultural laborers. Its demands reflected the interests of the widest sections of the peasantry, such as the abolition of landlordism, elimination of all parasitic

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32 All India Kisan Sabha (All India Peasants Union) was formed a year earlier in 1936. ‘Kisan’ in Hindi and ‘Krishak’ in Bengali are used synonymously to mean ‘peasant.’ Thus, the West Bengal unit of All India Kisan Sabha is known as Bengal Provincial Krishak Sabha.
intermediaries, and the return of the land to the tiller. The BKPS played a pioneering role in linking anti-imperialism to anti-landlordism; it exhorted peasants to free themselves from the twin grips of imperialism and landlordism through organized resistance. The rising tempo of peasant political activity prompted the government of Bengal to appoint a Land Revenue Commission (Floud Commission) in 1938 to document the plight of the lower peasantry (Bengal 1940).

With a politicized peasantry, the BKPS launched a number of successful movements in the 1940s. These movements were the beginnings of a long period of class struggle in Bengal that lasted until the late 1970s. When the ban on CPI was lifted in 1942, its leaders emerged from underground and involved themselves in BKPS activities. They undertook relief work, unearthed illegal grain hoardings, formed co-operative grain banks (*dhrama gola*), and educated the peasantry through political education classes. The spread of left-wing ideas from urban to rural areas, with urban-centered radicals as their chief proponents, continued during this period. The Party sent activists from Kolkata to different parts of the state, with specific missions and instructions. All these led to a popular upsurge in Bengal and notable strides were made in the growth of the communist movement.

The socio-historical context of the Second World War, cyclones, famines, and epidemics, that compounded peasant misery facilitated the consolidation of the communist movement from a small group of scattered middle class radicals working underground. The Bengal

33 In 1935, the Congress Party adopted a resolution calling for the abolition of the zamindari system. In 1936, The All Indian Kisan committee of the Congress Party prepared a Kisan Manifesto calling for the vesting of ownership of lands released from grip of the landlord classes to the cultivators, reduction in rent, security of tenure, living wages for laborers, and abolition of feudal levies. The Agrarian Program of the Congress Party subsequently adopted at the Faizpur conference in 1936 was based on the Kisan Manifesto.
famine of 1943 killed 3-4 million, mostly impoverished peasants, due to starvation and undernourishment (Sen 1981). The famine further intensified the process of land alienation, turning small owner-cultivators into sharecroppers, with jotedars-cum-grain hoarders acquiring much of the land (Dasgupta 1995, 32). This gave further urgency to the collective organization of lower peasants through which they could claim a fairer share of the surplus produced by their labor. As the jotedar-bargadar conflict heightened in the 1940s, the communist-led BKPS shifted its focus from representing the peasantry as a whole to improving the deplorable conditions of the lower peasantry—the indigent bargadars, chasis (poor peasants), and khet majur (agricultural workers).

Agrarian discontent across the country was reaching a boiling point at this time and resulted in a wave of peasant uprisings in Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh and, of course, Bengal. Most notable of these was the Telengana movement in Andhra Pradesh where peasants extracted significant victories from their feudal oppressors. In Bengal too, the sustained organization of the peasantry that had begun in late 1930s reached a flashpoint in the mid-1940s, culminating in the Tebhaga movement of 1946-50. The radical fervour of this period was such that it raised hopes of a peasant revolution in India (Bose 1993).

Meanwhile, the Congress-communist relationship which was full of twists-and-turns entered a new phase of antagonism after the Tripuri session of INC in 1939 and came to a complete break in 1942 when the communists failed to oppose the Second World War and support the Quit India Movement. Also, numerous smaller Marxists groups (emerging out of sections of the militant-nationalist groups), which had been working along with the CPI, deserted the

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34 For a firsthand account of the Tebhaga Movement, see Sen (1972). Also, see Cooper (1988).
Congress and the CPI, when the latter failed to fully back the leadership of Subhaschandra Bose. Thus, despite its sizable growth during the first two decades, the continuous vacillation in its orientation to the anti-colonial movement and fractious ideological debates within the CPI and the larger left cost the CPI the opportunity to make a bigger impact by making broad political alliances and, thus, offer a broad-based, cohesive, pro-people alternative to the Congress.\textsuperscript{35} Nor could the Bengal CPI use the Congress as effective a vehicle of social transformation as the leftists in Kerala.

\textbf{3.3.4 The Tebhaga Movement (1946-50)}

Their extreme vulnerability and swelling numbers had made sharecroppers and marginal peasants the focal point of peasant mobilization in the 1940s. It culminated in the Tebhaga movement in 1946. Tebhaga was the first, organized peasant action led by the left organizations in Bengal. It demonstrated the potential of the peasantry in transforming rural agrarian relations. To the left organizations which, following the classical Marxist understanding had hitherto considered industrial workers as the exclusive vanguard of the revolution, the militancy of the peasants offered a new understanding of the role of the peasantry on the path to socialist revolution. It also was a turning point in the history of the Krishak Sabha for it moved away from representing the interests of all cultivators to supporting those of the lower peasantry. It also defined the central focus of peasant mobilization in Bengal for decades to come: the protection of bargadars.

The prime target of the Tebhaga movement was the large jotedars, who were fast replacing the declining zamindars in assuming the role of the exploiter. The chief demand of the

\textsuperscript{35} For an analysis of the ideological and factional battles among the left groups in Bengal, see Weiner (1957, 117-63).
Tebhaga movement was the granting of two-thirds share of the harvest to the sharecroppers. Sharecroppers were known as *bargadar* in Eastern Bengal, as *adhiyar* in Northern Bengal, and as *bhagchasi* in Western Bengal. However, in the course of their struggle against the jotedar, the term *bargadar* acquired political salience and became an umbrella term that referred to the landless and almost landless sharecroppers under the *barga, adhi, bhag, tanka* and *kishani* systems of cultivation in different parts of Bengal. Although known by different names and guided by local customs, the basic features of crop sharing systems were the same. Cultivators paid a share of the produce as rent, at average fifty per cent of the gross produce, sometimes up to seventy-five per cent, while bearing all or almost all of the costs for inputs (plough, cattle, seeds, manure) and contributing the entire labor. Whatever the local variations were in rent rates, it invariably worked to the advantage of the jotedar as produce-rent was unusually high when compared to money-rent. Saha has recorded that money-rent constituted only one seventeenth of the gross produce value in paddy lands and a lower proportion in jute lands in the 1920s while produce-rents constituted 50 per cent or higher of the gross produce value (1930, 102). In the post-Depression years, the rent rates were much higher than in the 1920s. On top of rent, usurious interest was charged for the grain loan (*karja*) advanced to the sharecropper during lean months, which further reduced the share of the bargadar. At the same time, the existing tenancy law (Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 and its Amendment in 1928) did not consider the sharecroppers to be tenants and allowed them little security of tenure. Landlords evicted them regularly at the end of a crop season and turned the land over to a new bargadar to prevent any rights accruing from longer terms of cultivation.
The demand for two-thirds crop share came out of the recommendations of the Bengal Land Revenue Commission (Bengal 1940). The report also recommended granting of tenant status to bargadar in the following words:

…the barga system overrides the principle that the tiller of the soil should have security and protection from rack-renting. No one denies that half the produce is an excessive rent. …Our recommendation is to treat as tenants the bargadars who supply the plough, cattle and agricultural implements. We also recommend that the share of the crop legally recoverable from them should be one-third, instead of half (1940, vol. 1, 68-9).

Between 1945 and 1946, the BKPS transformed the recommendation for two-thirds share into a slogan (Tebhaga chai – we demand two-thirds share) that reverberated throughout Bengal. Close on the heels of massive industrial strikes and widespread urban unrest over the trial of freedom fighters, the BKPS launched the Tebhaga movement in November 1946. The Krishak Sabha members organized peasant processions mainly of poor peasants, agricultural laborers, and sharecroppers. These processions in many locations proceeded to harvest the paddy without the permission of the jotedar and carried it to the peasants’ courtyard (khamar), and asked the jotedar to go there to collect his share. The usual practice was to carry the harvest to the jotedar’s threshing floor before it was divided into portions. When the jotedar retaliated, peasants fought pitch battles with bows, arrows, batons, and spears, and imposed social boycotts on the jotedar and his family.

The upsurge continued for the whole of the harvest season between November 1946 and March 1947. As usual, the movement was led by middle-class leaders, some natives of the respective districts and some outside activists of Krishak Sabha, who operated from hideouts. They travelled from village to village conducting meetings, raising political awareness, forming village-level action groups, and disseminating tactics and slogans. As the movement
gathered momentum and spread out to far flung areas, it witnessed, for the first time in Bengal politics, the rise of peasant cadres as local leaders. The movement was most active in North Bengal districts—in Dinajpur, Rangpur, and Jalpaiguri—where jotedar oppression had become acute. By BKPS accounts, the movements spread to not less than 15 districts of undivided Bengal involving roughly five million peasants (Rasul 1989). At its height in January 1947, the land revenue minister of the Bengal government (led by Muslim League) announced the Bengal Bargadars Temporary Regulation Bill to address the demands of the bargadars. The government’s recognition of the two-thirds demand gave the movement a new degree of legitimacy.

However, after conceding a brief victory to the peasants, the jotedars retaliated with guns. Large jotedars were also able to break away a section of smaller landlords, who were supporting the sharecroppers initially. This was partly a result of peasant agitators not differentiating between large and small jotedars after the initial successes, despite BKPS’s efforts to keep the target solely on large jotedars (Dasgupta 1995, 64, 86). Emboldened by the newly-found support, jotedars organized themselves and pressed the government to use the police in full force against the insurgents. The government issued elaborate orders to suppress the movement with brute force and conveniently laid aside the proposed Bargadars Bill. Severe repression of the agitating peasants that included mass arrests, physical assault, and gun fire forced the BKPS to halt the movement. In March 1947, Hindu-Muslim riots rapidly engulfed Calcutta and its surroundings as plans to transfer power from Britain to India were being finalized. Hence, peasant militancy temporarily receded to the background.

Peasant and worker belligerence returned to the centre-stage of rural Bengal again between 1948 and 1950, when the national CPI adopted a militant posture vis-à-vis the Congress-led
government in newly independent India, describing it as the agent of imperialism and feudalism, and calling for its expulsion in an armed revolution.\textsuperscript{36} The repercussions of such a political line, which was later characterized by CPI itself as ‘adventurist,’ were far-reaching in Bengal.\textsuperscript{37} Following the CPI’s call for an armed revolution, cities and the countryside in Bengal seethed in popular unrest accompanied by violence. Increasing unemployment and post-war retrenchment of industrial workers agitated the cities while rural Bengal simmered with food scarcity and epidemics. Trade unions (factory workers, teachers, bank and government employees) and student unions played a key role in keeping Calcutta in the thick of worker-student insurrection. Armed street battles with law enforcement personnel using bombs, acid bulbs, brickbats, road blockades, vandalism, and arson became regular features of urban protest to which the government retaliated with draconian legislation and repressive action (Bandyopadhyay 2008, 16-20).

In the rural areas, the Krishak Sabha and the CPI attempted to reignite the Tebhaga movement, but broadened the scope of the movement to include demands of agricultural workers and marginal peasants. While some form of localized peasant agitaiton was underway in vast areas of rural Bengal, pockets of 24 Parganas, Bardhaman, Bankura, 

\textsuperscript{36} The militant line advocated by the then General Secretary of CPI, B. T. Ranadive came to be encapsulated in the slogan “Yeh azadi jhooti hai” (independence is a sham). It declared the newly-won independence a mirage and the Congress government’s policies as serving the interests of the imperial powers. Real freedom could only be achieved by a ‘people’s democratic revolution’ with fundamental changes in the political and social structure of the country. For a short description of the period, see Nossiter (1988).

\textsuperscript{37} The CPI admitted in 1950 that the decision to choose an armed insurgency line soon after independence was a tactical error (Chandra, et al. 1999). Some argue that it was the partial success of the Telengana peasant movement in Andhra Pradesh and the advance of fellow communists in countries like China, while others believe it was the possibility of imminent marginalization of the CPI by the Congress in the post-independence context that led to such a decision. According to some scholars, widespread partition-related communal riots in Bengal might have motivated the shift of political discourse quickly from community to class (Guha 2007, 96; Bandyopadhyay 2008, 3-6).
Birbhum, Howrah, Hooghly, and Midnapore witnessed the most intense strife, fuelled by communist rhetoric and actions. In all of these places the local zamindar/jotedar and his personnel were attacked, and his property destroyed or looted. Non-payment of rent, forceful land seizure, attack on police camps, political opponents, and informants were part of the protest repertoire. According to Intelligence reports, there were 170 reported incidents of organized violence in West Bengal between May 1949 and January 1950 and 200 incidents of labor strike just in 1948 (Quoted in Bandyopadhyay 2008, 19). Police responded with mass arrests and gun fire, while the government unleashed a virulent anti-communist campaign. Like Tebhaga, this uprising—described as the second phase of Tebhaga in some accounts—too was muzzled by brutal repression. The Communist Party was banned again in 1948 in Bengal, and many of its mass organizations like the Krishak Sabha and the Student Federation were banned in 1950. Using the illegal status as a cover, the newly-formed Congress government in Bengal, first under the chief ministership of Prafulla Ghosh and then under Bidhan Chandra Roy, terrorized CPI cadres through mass arrests, detention without trial, torture, and custody murders. The violent upsurge abated beginning 1950, when the CPI decided to shelve the political line of violent insurrection and move to a more moderate course of participating in parliamentary elections and functioning within the parameters of a constitutional liberal-democracy (Bandyopadhyay 2008). In the first general elections in 1952, the CPI became the largest opposition party in Bengal and at the Centre.

3.3.5 Independence and Partition

Bengal and Punjab were the two regions in the subcontinent that paid a heavy price for independence from Britain. The Partition of British India split Bengal into two: the Hindu-majority districts in the Western half became part of India and the Muslim-majority regions
in the Eastern half became part of Pakistan. The Indian side of Bengal, which became the state of West Bengal, was the smaller of the two in size, comprising only 89 constituencies out of 250 in the undivided Bengal legislative assembly (Chatterji 2007, 211). The communal basis of the Partition produced the largest human displacement in history; extreme violence, dispossession, and trauma accompanied the massive population shifts. In the population exchange that followed, West Bengal received a far higher number of refugees, arriving empty-handed, leaving their homes, land, property, and, in some cases, family behind.38

The trauma and irreparable loss of honour resulting from becoming refugees and the struggle to rebuild their lives in a new setting made the East Bengali refugees in India dependent on others. With the local population unsympathetic at times and the Congress government machinery indifferent, the refugees turned to the Left to fight for their interests. The dispossessed refugees who arrived in hordes from East Bengal made common cause with the peasantry, who were in a similar state of dispossession, and swelled the ranks of the Communist Party. A good number of East Bengali refugees were communist activists and they involved themselves in organizing the refugees. The presence of East Bengali leaders and a large number of followers prompted the Left to include refugee rehabilitation in its

38 In Punjab, mass migration of people was a one-time affair. In Bengal, the process of population exchange was more protracted. Also, unlike the Punjabi refugees, their Bengali counterparts did not receive adequate compensation or rehabilitation from the Government of India. Between 1946 and 1956, West Bengal received about 3 million refugees from East Pakistan and about 0.7 million in the reverse direction (West Bengal 1956). After 1965, migration from the Indian side to East Pakistan virtually came to an end but the unidirectional flow of refugees and migrants in the other direction continued with various peaks until after the Bangladesh liberation war in 1971. By 1972, roughly 8 million refugees had crossed over to West Bengal (West Bengal 1980a). Although the flow of population has since subsided, movement of economic migrants into West Bengal from Bangladesh continues to this day. See Chakrabarty (1999).
broad agenda of social justice. They carved out a political discourse in which entitlement to rehabilitation and assistance was an inalienable right (adhikar), not a charity (Chatterji 2007). It emboldened groups of refugees to forcefully occupy unused lands in the margins of Calcutta and erect hutments (Jabardakhal colonies). The Left successfully maintained the focus of refugee mobilization on class lines—the narrative of victimhood was based on being dispossessed (udbastu or bastuhara)—preventing it from acquiring further communal colors and degenerating into violence (Chakrabarty 1999). The refugee experience left a firm imprint on the Bengali psyche.

3.3.6 Early Land Reform (1953-55)

In the context of widespread rural poverty, land reform as a policy goal commanded wide consensus in independent India. All political parties recognized that access to land ensured income for the rural poor, conferred them with some social status, and served as a social security measure against starvation and hunger. The long-term potential of land reform to increase agricultural output and transform rural power structure was also recognized.

In the federal division of labor, land reform was assigned to the states. Even when it remained part of the Congress Party’s policy goals, the dominance of landed interests in many state units of Congress prevented determinate action even with the Congress at the Centre. In West Bengal too, where the peasant movements of the 1940s had shaken, but not completely broken, the hold of semi-feudal landlord power, the landed interests in Congress stood in the way of effective land reform. However, the militancy of the peasant masses and the growing support for the Left in rural Bengal forced the Congress to make some, if only half-hearted, action on the legislative front in the early post-independence days.
On the face of mounting peasant unrest following Tebhaga, the Muslim League government of 1946-47 had proposed two bills: the Bengal Bargadars Temporary Regulation Bill to grant two-thirds crop share to bargadars and the State Acquisition and Tenancy Bill designed to abolish the zamindari system (i.e., abolition of all rent-receiving interests above the raiyat). Both had been recommended by the Bengal Land Revenue Commission in 1940. However, these bills never became law under stiff resistance from landed interests. In 1948, the BKPS re-launched the struggle to pass the above pieces of legislation with improved protections for bargadars. Under pressure, the Congress enacted three pieces of legislation in quick succession: the West Bengal Bargadars Act in 1950, the West Bengal Estate Acquisition Act (WBEAA) in 1953, and the West Bengal Land Reforms Act (WBLRA) in 1955.

The Bargadars Act for the first time recognized bargadars as legal under-tenants with justiciable rights. It stipulated that the proportion of crop division between a bargadar and landowner was to be mutually decided. In the absence of an agreement, the bargadar was entitled to sixty percent of the gross produce if he supplied all the inputs (plough, cattle, manure, seeds). Bargadars could not be evicted except in cases where land was required by the landowner for personal cultivation or when bargadars failed to cultivate the land. The WBEAA abolished all intermediary rent-receiving interests between the state and the cultivator including zamindars and middle tenure-holders, and the state acquired as compensation their estates and rights (proprietorship, tenures, sub-tenures) in excess of a stipulated limit (ceiling) for personal cultivation.

Compared to the Bargadars Act and the WBEAA, the WBLRA was more comprehensive. It plugged some of the loopholes of the previous acts by repealing prior land, rent, and tenancy laws and consolidating laws, customs, and usages contained therein. It established the
ryotwari system, whereby every landowner in the state came to hold land directly from the state and paid rent directly to the state. Also, since the Bargadars Act was directly incorporated into the WBLRA, the WBLRA defined the rights and duties of raiyats. Those who were recorded as settled or occupancy tenants were made the owners of land with a ceiling of 25 acres. The WBLRA served as the basic legal document on which subsequent land reform agitation and amendments were based, regularly adding new provisions, and streamlining older ones.

These three Acts were, at least in paper, the undoing of the legacy of the Permanent Settlement and its several amendments which trampled on the rights of peasant cultivators. However, the Congress government faltered in implementing several key provisions of these laws. The most notable breach was with regard to the implementation of land ceiling and the mass eviction of bargadars. The still powerful landed classes managed to conceal the real size of their holding or undertake fake land transfers (benami) in the names of relatives, friends, and even deceased persons in order to escape the ceiling. They also converted lands into orchards, lakes, and fisheries or showed them as under fictitious religious or charitable institutions in order to enjoy the exemptions in ceiling limit allowed for these institutions (Bandyopadhyaya 1981, 14).

At the same time, the fear of new land reform provisions triggered a raft of pre-emptive eviction of bargadars, intended to deny legal rights to them. Utilizing the provisions for self-cultivation, landowners evicted bargadars and claimed that the land was brought under personal cultivation, but instead of self-cultivating they employed wage laborers. In other cases, sharecroppers continued to cultivate the same lands but were now told that they were daily-laborers, not sharecroppers. The absence of written contracts between the bargadar and
the landowner made it impossible for the sharecropper to contest the forced change of status. The highest number of evictions of bargadars took place between 1958-67 (Bandyopadhyaya 1981, 12-3). The balance of power in the countryside still weighed in favor of the landlord, and as a result, no significant improvement in preventing concentration of land or in ensuring tenure security and crop share to indigent bargadars could be achieved during this period, although zamindari had been abolished and a land ceiling had been set in paper.

The major demand of the left parties and the Krishak Sabha in the post-1955 period remained the implementation of these provisions. However, there was a hiatus in their militancy from 1953 to 1965 as the internal ideological strife that had gripped the Left and its mass organs since independence intensified in the 1960s in the face of division in the international communist movement. The CPI endured a decade-long bitter power struggle between a moderate wing and a radical wing for dominance within the party, and it manifested itself in rapid twists in the approach to the Congress party and national independence. The moderate wing advocated working with the Congress and adopting less militant forms of struggle. The radical wing preferred a path of militancy and believed that the conditions of the peasantry required a militant mobilizing of the lower peasantry—agricultural laborers, sharecroppers, and poor peasants— and exposing the pro-landlord and pro-rich-peasant policies of the Congress. The long and testy cohabitation of the radical left and the moderate left within the CPI came to an end in 1964 when the party split into two— the radical wing formed the CPI (Marxist) or CPI(M), and the moderate elements stayed in the CPI. The CPI(M) gradually emerged stronger with more cadres, electoral seats, with militant and pro-Chinese positions, while the original CPI was Congress-friendly, close to the Soviet Union, and attracted a
larger chunk of the communist leaders. Following Chinese experience, the CPI(M) turned its
attention to mobilizing the peasantry.

Signs of a factional split were visible in the state unit of the Congress party, too; this united
the opposition parties in their desire to end the Congress rule of two decades (1947-67).
Frustrated at the Congress’s foot-dragging in implementing land reform, the peasant masses
were ready for a mass upsurge as well and the left parties made good use of the
circumstance. They made the non-implementation of existing land reform provisions a
major plank for mobilizing the masses and this was further intensified with the slogan, ‘land
to the tiller’. It created a massive rural euphoria as the lower peasants were told that they
could be owners of the land they cultivated, and they supported the Left en masse in the
ensuing elections.

3.3.7 United Front Governments of 1967 and 1969

The period from 1967 to 1970 witnessed two fractious experiences at coalition governments
in Bengal, of which the CPI and CPI(M) were part. Though short-lived, they were
momentous in reconfiguring the political landscape of post-independence Bengal. In 1967,
for the first time in independent India’s history, the Congress Party lost power in eight states,
including Bengal. The fall of Congress led to the formation of a coalition government in
Bengal, known as the United Front (UF) government, comprising of 14 left and non-left
parties.39 The first UF government lasted only nine months between March and November

39 This ideologically disparate coalition included the Bangla Congress (a break-away faction
of the Congress Party, which held the chief ministership of both UF governments),
Communist Party of India (Marxist), Communist Party of India, All India Forward Bloc,
Revolutionary Socialist Party, Socialist Unity Centre of India, Samyukta Socialist Party,
1967. After a short period of direct federal rule (President’s rule), the UF constituents returned to power with a clear majority and formed a second UF ministry in 1969 in which the CPI(M) became the largest party in the house. Both CPI and CPI(M) almost doubled their seat share compared to 1967 (CPI from 16 to 30 seats; CPI(M) from 43 to 80) commanding a total of 110 seats in a 280-member house.\(^{40}\) Another 45 seats gained by the rest of the left constituents gave the leftists a more dominant role and better policy leverage in the second UF ministry, which lasted for one full year during 1969-70 (Franda 1969, 282-3).

The coming to power of left parties under the two United Front governments set off a period of intense peasant-worker activity and increasing radicalization of West Bengal politics. The emergence of the *Naxalite* movement and other militant movements in parts of Bengal were manifestations of this radicalization. For the first time in Bengal, peasant masses and trade unions encountered a level playing field to bargain with their employers, when the UF governments decided not to use the police to intervene on behalf of employers in labor disputes. Trade unions and peasant agitators soon assumed militant character and resorted to new forms of protests, such as *gherao* (coercive encircling and confinement of the landlord/employer) (De 1970, 201). Backed by the UF government, peasants and workers rejected the legalistic processes that regulated employer-worker relationships, which the Congress Party had been using to deprive them of their rights. The arms of legality were always used to neutralize peasant-worker militancy and stunt their collective power. Trade

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\(^{40}\) This was a crucial period for the CPI(M) in West Bengal for it began to penetrate the rural peasantry during this period. Prior to late-1960s, the Bengal CPI(M)’s base was primarily urban-based industrial workers, professionals and middle-class intellectuals.
unions in almost every sector—electricity workers; government employees; jute, cotton, and tea laborers; coal mine workers—saw a hike in protest action and associated militancy.

In the rural areas, the level of combativeness reached unprecedented levels. Even while part of the government, the Krishak Sabha and the left parties actively mobilized the peasantry demanding the implementation of the previously enacted land reform legislation, and criticized the government for many of its actions and inactions. Without the threat of police repression, peasants began to press the demands for legal crop share and seizure of excess land. During the second United Front government (1969-70), the CPI(M)led-Krishak Sabha launched a quasi-judicial campaign to seize and occupy land held illegally, above ceiling and in proxy (benami). Land ceiling was established in 1955; however, by 1967 (i.e.12 years), only 300,000 acres had been vested in the state (Bandyopadhyay 2003). The land seizure movement set up village-level committees to identify land held in excess of the legal limit, confiscated it through largely non-violent collective action, redistributed it to the landless or near-landless, and then defended the rights of the new owners. This was an effective way of implementing existing land reform legislation, which the Congress governments had failed to do in the face of landlord power. The CPI(M)-held Land and Land Revenue ministry of the UF government followed proper bureaucratic procedures to ensure the legality of these transfers.

This movement became a big political success, and it spread to every district of the state. It endeared the rural masses to CPI(M), expanded its rural base, and virtually crushed landlord dominance in rural Bengal. Close to one million acres of land was seized and a significant portion of it redistributed between 1967 to 1970 (Bandyopadhyay 2003). Given the small plot sizes in Bengal, this redistribution drive benefitted a sizable section of the rural peasants
creating a party foothold among the lower peasantry. By its own admission, before the 1969 land seizure movement, the CPI(M) and its Krishak Sabha were largely confined to five districts around Calcutta and limited in its social base, primarily to the middle and working classes (Dasgupta 1973, 4; Surjeet 1995, 133).

The UF years, although brief and politically volatile, were transformative; they set in motion a great churning in rural Bengal.41 The land seizure movement altered the balance of political power in favor of the lower peasantry. With their direct involvement in seizing land and in bearing witness to excess land in their immediate neighbourhoods, peasants were no longer passive subjects of this movement, but active agents. These years also laid down the early crucibles for Bengal’s bi-polar party system between 1970 and mid-1990s, a polarization between the centre-right forces represented by the Congress and the centre-left represented by the Communist-dominated left front. The proliferation of smaller socialist, Marxist, and other independent parties that Bengal had witnessed between 1947 and 1967 abated under the new realignment. Those that remained had to coalesce around these two poles. The new polarization also virtually liquidated the communal parties, such as – Hindu Mahasabha, Jana Sangh, and Swatantra party, from Bengal politics. From the UF experience, communists learned techniques of electoral-alliance building and the necessity to join forces with a broad array of progressive social constituencies, even with considerable differences on policy, program, and strategy.

41 For more on the UF years, see (Franda 1971).
3.3.8 The Naxalite Movement and the Repression of 1970s

The reverberations of the Sino-Soviet split of international communist movement continued to impact Indian communism when a radical section within CPI(M) split in 1967 to lead the Naxalite Movement. The participation of the CPI(M) in the United Front government of 1967 was the trigger for the split. The Naxalites accused CPI(M) of betraying the cause of revolution by choosing the parliamentary path. In contrast, the Naxalites opted for a more left-wing, Maoist strategy of armed revolution. The modus operandi was to establish base areas in the countryside through protracted armed guerilla struggle, and then to use the countryside to encircle and capture the cities. In 1969, the Naxalites formed the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) or the CPI(ML).

The Naxalite movement began in March-May 1967 under the leadership of Charu Majumdar and Kanu Sanyal when peasants surrounded several plots of land in Naxalbari village, planted red flags around the perimeter, and began harvesting, raising the land-to-the-tiller slogan. When a peasant was attacked by the landlord’s agents, peasants struck back violently, attacked jotedars, and forcibly seized land and grains. Any resistance offered was met with mass violence.

In the face of this armed insurrection, the CPI(M), which was in-charge of the Home ministry (responsible for internal security) as well as Land and Land Revenue (responsible for protecting land property) in the UF coalition, faced a delicate task. Physical security and

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42 This was the second major split in Indian Communism after the CPI-CPI(M) split in 1964. The name ‘Naxalites’ was derived from the name of the village—Naxalbari in Northern Bengal—where a revolutionary peasant uprising began and which eventually shook the whole state.

landed property were under attack and they had to be protected, using, if need be, the coercive apparatus of the state against the agitating peasantry, a constituency the CPI(M) had long nurtured. Resolving this political dilemma involved exercising a fine sense of political pragmatism to stave off the twin dangers of a dismissal by the central government on charges of breakdown of law and order, or demobilization of its peasant constituency on which its own power depended. The CPI(M) responded by pursuing an ambivalent, yet astute political stance that promoted and curbed rural militancy at once. Faced with the prospect of Naxalites hijacking the rural masses with their more militant agenda, the CPI(M) pursued strategies of controlled radicalization of its membership. It launched the already discussed quasi-judicial land seizure movement (1967-70) to seize vested lands. At the same time, the CPI(M) ministers particularly deputy chief minister Jyoti Basu and land minister Harekrishna Konar attempted to quell the fears of propertied classes by repeatedly urging the agitating peasants not to take the law in their hands, and eventually calling in the police. This dual tactic of controlling mobilizational excesses while promoting dissent at the same time paid rich dividends to the party by way of consolidating its rural base. However, the CPI(M)’s role in the UF government also resulted in a fratricidal war that pitted CPI(M) against its former members, now in the CPI (ML).

Even when the Naxalite movement was crushed by the police in a span of four months, its legacy spread to other parts of Bengal, including Calcutta where it inspired a generation of radicalized students and educated middle class. Calcutta exploded as a result of the tactical line of urban guerrilla struggle and the annihilation of “class enemies,” namely, landlords, police, and politicians. These resulted in many instances of mindless violence and terrorist
episodes, quickly attracting the brute force of the state. By 1970, the second UF government was dismissed by the Central government on charges of failure of law and order.

The Congress-led new government led by Siddhartha Shankar Ray, with a carte blanche from the central government to sound the death knell of leftism in Bengal, unleashed a reign of terror between 1970 and 1974 not just on Naxalites but the Left in general. The 1971 Bangladesh War provided a cover for such repression. Ray’s government resorted to draconian measures in the form of detention without trial, torture, human rights violations, custody murders, and staged shootouts. By one account, the CPI(M) suffered heavy losses between 1972 and 1974: 3000 trade union offices were destroyed, 1200 activists murdered or detained, and another 5000 activists absconding (EPW 1975). The repression in Bengal was extended by Indira Gandhi’s imposition of the state of Emergency nationally between 1975 and 1977, a period notorious for press censorship, political violence, and police repression. The 1970s also witnessed the independence movement in Bangladesh, its eventual split from Pakistan, and the migration of close to ten million additional refugees to India, mostly to West Bengal. Both added to the political turmoil of the seventies in Bengal.

The turbulent events of 1967-74 help explain the contingent nature of Left political choices in the post-1977 period. Class struggle was in full play in Bengal at this time as land-seizure and Naxalite movements brought a militant angle to the peasant consciousness and the participation of Left parties in ruling coalitions helped deepen and broaden peasant mobilization in rural Bengal. Yet, counter-mobilization by propertied classes, continued

44 Notwithstanding its strong assault on landlordism, it is now largely accepted that there was a great deal of misplaced romanticism in the Naxalite movement as it was seen in Calcutta. The movement was fully contained in a few years, and its participants fragmented into various left-wing organizations.
influx of refugees, ideological squabbles, and the state repression of early seventies threw up
unanticipated challenges. In particular, the repression left a dampening effect on the vitality
of Bengali civil society, from which it never fully recovered.

3.3.9 First Left Front Government and 'Operation Barga'

During the Emergency (1975-77), six leftists parties in Bengal came together to fight the
authoritarian turn of the Congress. These included the CPI (M), the Forward Bloc, the
Revolutionary Socialist Party, the Marxist Forward Bloc, the Revolutionary Communist
Party of India, and the Biplabi Bangla Congress. In the post-Emergency elections, these
parties formed an electoral alliance and called themselves the “Left Front” (as opposed to the
United Front of late 1960s which comprised non-left as well as left parties). Much to its
surprise, the Left Front won an overwhelming victory. The CPI(M) alone won 177 out of 293
seats. The main item in the 36-point Common Minimum Program of the Left Front was
agrarian revolution. Accordingly, the Left Front government (LFG) immediately got down to
furthering the land reform agenda, which, except for the brief interlude of UF years, had been
stalled for decades due to the lack of political will of incumbent governments. A very wide
gap continued to persist between existing land laws and their effective implementation. LFG
focused its attention on strict enforcement of existing land reform legislations passed by the
previous Congress governments and plugging its numerous loopholes.

Between 1970 and 1977, a number of amendments to the Land Reform Act were introduced
by the Congress Governments in the state and centre in order to keep peasant militancy in

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45 The CPI was not part of this formation as it was supporting the Congress Party and the
Emergency at this period. Later, in 1982, it snapped ties with the Congress and joined the
Left Front.
check. Many long-pending demands of peasants were conceded during this period and were made part of the statutes, but not implemented. According to the new provisions, sharecroppers could bequeath occupancy rights and were entitled to receive a crop share of seventy-five percent when supplying all inputs. Bargadars were also entitled to own up to one hectare of the land they cultivated, if such land was vested in the state as ceiling-surplus land. The scope of the clause permitting resumption of lands for personal cultivation, which had been widely misused to justify evictions and evade ceiling, was restricted. Land ceilings were lowered (maximum of 2.50 hectares of agricultural land per single cultivator and a maximum of 7 hectares for a family of more than five) in order to reduce concentration of land. New amendments also called for redistribution of vested land to landless cultivators and conferring of homestead plots to landless laborers, artisans, and fishermen (West Bengal 1955, [2003]).

These were radical measures; however, without the political will to press the administrative machinery to implement these laws, they remained meaningless. Bargadars continued to be denied their crop share and their legal status. Their rights could not be enforced, due to lack of written, legally binding contracts. The Congress government did not act on the vesting of ceiling-surplus land, redistribution of surplus land to landless cultivators, or the conferring of homesteads plots. On the contrary, it acquiesced to landowners forcefully taking back benami land seized and vested by the peasants during the land seizure movement of 1967-70.

Upon assuming power in 1977, the LFG decided to turn its immediate attention to the goal of clinching tenure security for bargadars. Its most notable initiative was a program called ‘Operation Barga.’ It was launched in 1978 to record the names of bargadars in land records, in an effort to accord them legally enforceable cultivation rights, and, in turn, a higher share
of the produce. Operation Barga sought to address difficulties in identifying eligible bargadars as bargadars themselves did not come forward fearing the wrath of landowners, while landowners made use of every possible loophole to reduce bargadars to wage laborers. It provided an opportunity for the direct participation of beneficiaries backed by their class organization and supported by local democratic institutions and administrative machinery. Instead of the usual top-down enumeration process where a beneficiary goes to a government office for registration, a bottom-up approach was employed where the local arm of the state came to the villagers. Evening group meetings of bargadars were set up in villages where local land officials, local elected representatives, and Krishak Sabha representatives participated. After a collective airing of grievances by bargadars, officials explained the multifarious benefits of new land reform provisions and encouraged them to come forward to record their names in the record-of-rights. Memories of retaliation by the landowners for informing on their excess-lands during the 1969 land-grab movement made the bargadars naturally afraid of retaliation and eviction. To avoid being targeted by landowners, bargadars were advised to put forward their names in groups. The involvement of local Krishak Sabha and the backing of panchayats emboldened them. Lists were then drawn up based on their claims and verified in the presence of landowners the next day, following which, the list was displayed in prominent places in the village inviting anyone to file objections. After a public hearing and verification of the objections, names of bargadars were entered into the land records and certificates of registration distributed among the sharecroppers.46

The innovative methodology of Operation Barga was particularly helpful in instilling confidence among bargadars. Earlier, the landowners were able to contest the claims of

46 The above account of sharecropper registration process is based on (Bandyopadhyaya 1981).
sharecroppers in the absence of documentary evidence. The new method and the public hearings based on oral evidence offered collectively by the village residents precluded that possibility. In addition, the law was amended to shift the onus of proof onto the landowners. In the event of a dispute, instead of bargadars marshalling evidence to prove their past attachment to the land, now landowners had to prove that the said bargadar did not cultivate the land (Bandyopadhyaya 1981). Operation Barga also developed a functional network among the local bureaucracy, local self-governing institutions, and peasant organizations as a way to generate a movement-effect to the land reform program. Operation Barga’s intensive phase lasted for 3 years between 1978 until 1981, by which time 1.2 million bargadars were recorded (Bandyopadhyay 2003).

3.3.9.1 Redistribution of surplus and homestead lands

The two other major components of West Bengal’s land reform program were the redistribution of vested land (known as *patta*) to landless or near-landless cultivators and the provision of homestead land to landless cultivators, artisans, and fishermen. The task of identifying and acquiring surplus and *benami* land had already made headway under the UF governments in late-1960s. Of the total of 1.37 million acres of land vested, a majority was seized by peasants in the land-grab movements of 1967-70. About 200,000 acres were vested by LF after it came to power. About 1.04 million acres of vested lands were distributed to 2.5 million landless or land-poor beneficiaries (Mishra and Rawal 2002; Bandyopadhyay 2003). LFG expanded the ceiling limits on agricultural lands to all lands seeking to stop the conversion of agricultural lands to ponds or fisheries, which had been a widespread ceiling-

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47 The process has since continued, albeit at much slower pace, recording a total of 1.6 million names until 2005, benefitting 11% of the population and covering 6.4% of land in West Bengal (Mishra and Rawal 2002; Deininger, et al. 2007).
evading tactic. Other provisions were also introduced to detect and seize lands registered under fictitious or proxy names (benami). These measures increased the amount of excess land available in the state. With the active cooperation of panchayats, LFG also conferred homestead titles on 241,000 beneficiaries. These were tiny plots of about 0.05 acres (five cents) each, some of which the beneficiaries had been occupying without valid title.

In fact, acquiring and redistribution of ceiling-surplus land was the most radical component of West Bengal’s land reform. 15% of agricultural land in the state was acquired and it constituted 18% of all vested land in India, even though West Bengal accounted for only 3.5% of total agricultural land in India. Land redistributed to 2.5 million beneficiaries constituted 20% of all land redistributed in India (Deininger, et al. 2007).

The net benefits of land reform program were manifold. Operation Barga brought the bargadars tenure security (protection from forcible eviction), food security (guarantee of a fair share of the crop), and social security (their rights were now permanent and heritable). The abolition of intermediaries and imposition of land ceiling, decimated the erstwhile landed classes of zamindars, intermediate tenure holders, and jotadars. What remained of the upper echelons of the rural society were a numerically insignificant group of rich peasants and a large group of middle peasants, who slowly became the dominant strata of Bengal’s agrarian classes.

Changes in agrarian structure and accompanying political changes had an impact on agrarian production as well. Bengal’s agrarian output increased in the 1980s, and, increased productivity of lands cultivated by sharecroppers was noticeable (Banerjee, et al. 2002). In the aftermath of land reforms, rural poverty declined remarkably while food intake and
agricultural wages showed significant increases (Gazdar and Sengupta 1999). Together, it raised the socio-economic status and political power of the lower peasantry. By the end of the first term of the LFG (1982), close to 3 million rural households had benefitted from the land reform program. It consolidated the rural base of the party and the Left Front, whose support allowed it to remain in power for the next 34 years (until its defeat in the 2011 elections).

On the whole, the piece-meal land reform program half-heartedly initiated by the Congress government in the 1950s and vigorously carried forward by the UF/LF governments in the next two decades activated a process of rural transformation in Bengal. In fact, West Bengal’s agrarian reform program has been described as one of the most radical in the country (Gazdar and Sengupta 1999). The two main components of its land reform—redistribution of land and security of tenure and crop share for sharecroppers—had a distinct impact on the political empowerment of the lower peasantry. It also stabilized the smallholding peasant production in Bengal which had dwindled under depeasantization in the second half of the colonial rule.

### 3.3.10 Revitalization of Panchayats

Another noteworthy initiative of the LFG that further reinforced the new socio-political assertion of the rural poor was the revitalization of local self-governing institutions known as *panchayats*. They had been on the books since 1958 nationally but were practically non-existent across the country. West Bengal blazed a path by revitalizing these local democratic institutions in 1978. West Bengal’s panchayat reform had two innovative features: 1) it put in place a three-tier panchayat system (at the district, block, and village levels) with specific
tasks and resources for each level. They were then used as instruments of development planning, implementation, and delivery of state-sponsored welfare benefits. Most notably, they were a central part of land reform implementation: in mediating between state officials and bargadars in the name-recording process, in vesting new lands, redistributing vested and homestead lands, and determining beneficiaries. The institutional linkage between land reform and the new panchayats replaced the discredited old local administrative set-up which was ineffective in undertaking land reform. 2) Political party-based competition was allowed for the first time at the panchayat level in West Bengal. Participation of political parties provided another opportunity to raise political consciousness among the rural poor, increase their political participation, and break off long-standing loyalties based on non-political considerations. As we shall see later, politicized panchayats were a crucial part of CPI(M)’s strategies for organizational consolidation. The revitalization of panchayats played a huge role in buttressing the political effects of land reform and toward achieving a decisive change in the balance of class forces in the countryside. The participatory effects of panchayat rejuvenation provided a fresh impetus to the rural upsurge already underway from the land reform program (Kohli 1987).

3.3.11 Summary

Under the overarching frame of the anti-colonial movement, the 1920-40 era ushered in province-wide politics of popular protest and left-wing groups. It brought to the fore a variety of material and ideational conflicts that had been simmering for a while, but had not found organized expression. Most notable of these was the agrarian conflict between the jotedars and bargadars that signalled the incorporation of rural Bengal into the vortex of popular politics. The most significant contribution of the agrarian movements of this time
was the politicization of the peasantry who realized that they could change their plight by collectively resisting the oppression of the landed classes and the consequent disintegration of the legitimacy of zamindar-jotedar authority. The communist party and its mass organizations played a vital role in organizing the rural peasantry and in drawing them into nationalist politics by articulating their grievances and integrating them in their political program.

Political activity peaked between 1940 and late-1970s heralding a long period of political instability and class-based agitation. In the 1940s, Calcutta was burning with militant trade unionism, peasant insurgence, agitation for and against partition, the Quit India movement, the 1943 famine, communal riots, partition and migration, and the CPI’s attempt to overthrow the Congress government (1948-50). The clamour for land reform in the 1950s resulted in half-hearted legislation, but the capture of power by left parties first in the United Front Governments of 1967-70, and then in the Left Front of 1977 signalled another intensive phase of class-based action in rural Bengal. Land reforms and revitalization of panchayats by the LFG made for unprecedented economic and political empowerment of the village poor. West Bengal seemed poised for sustained upward mobility and empowerment of the poor under the rule of pro-poor political parties. As I demonstrate below, these expectations, however, did not come to fruition in the long-term to the extent originally anticipated.

3.4 Political Moderation

After a long phase of intense political turmoil and raucous class struggle in previous decades, West Bengal adopted the path of political moderation in the 1980s. The changing political
practices of the CPI(M)—the dominant constituent of the LFG—was the driving force behind the change. The Party gradually turned away from its radical past to moderate forms of protest and conciliatory strategies of political mobilization. Kohli describes this shift thus:

> Over the years the CPM’s ideology has shifted from a revolutionary to a reformist orientation. The doctrine of “class confrontation” as a means of establishing the “dictatorship of the proletariat” is no longer central to the party line. Instead, the CPM has evolved a somewhat moderate stance. This is best characterized as a developmental and a democratic-socialist ideology. It emphasizes the preservation of democratic institutions on the one hand, and on the other hand emphasizes the use of state power for facilitating “development with redistribution.” In practice ... this results in leaving capitalism intact as a mode of production, but directing efforts towards the consolidation of electoral power by channeling some public resources to the lower agrarian classes (1987, 98-99).

The manifestations of political moderation were immediately visible in a number of areas. On the peasant front, the Krishak Sabha reined in militancy of the lower agrarian classes. Sticking to the slogan of peasant unity, they strived for unified mobilization of the peasantry while their counterparts in other states were pursuing autonomous mobilization of the sharecroppers, agricultural workers, and near-landless peasants. Even through the Krishak Sabha’s past militant struggles had centered on the demands of these lower echelons of the peasantry, the new tactic was to contain class contradictions and temper demands that pitted
segments of peasantry against each other. On the organizational front, the Party entrusted its rural leadership to a class of economically ascendant, middle-holding peasants, riding the crest of a new surge in agricultural productivity, even when its program considered poor peasants and agricultural workers as the main axis of agrarian revolution. The control of the panchayats by the middle peasantry further entrenched the dependence of poorer cultivators on the middle peasantry. The economic and political ascendency of middle peasants dovetailed neatly into the increasing preference for political moderation over radicalism.

This section argues that, over the long-term, these political choices came at the cost of a decisive weakening of CPI(M)’s redistributive agenda and zeal. Further, they collectively came to crystallize a clientelist-corporatist mode of incorporation of the rural poor within the larger context of a friendly, but welfare-enervated, class compromise. Accommodation of the interests of the rural poor (sharecroppers, marginal peasants, and landless laborers) through clientelistic exchange of anti-poverty goods and a conciliatory labor-capital framework controlled by middle-class unions are the hallmarks of such a mode of integration. Within a hierarchically organized and centralized party, its mass organs and local self-government institutions (esp. the Krishak Sabha and the panchayats) became channels to institutionalize this unequal class-compromise. After discussing briefly the political and economic conditions that paved way for CPI(M)’s turn to moderation, I analyze in more detail the mechanisms of a clientelist-corporatist mode of incorporation marked by the dependence of the rural poor on middle classes.
3.4.1 The Political Imperative

The motivations for the CPI(M)’s turn to moderation, after two decades of radical land struggles, had its immediate roots in the brutal political repression on leftist activity between 1970 and 1977, which eliminated a generation of Bengali youth. The mindless violence forced a realization that it was necessary to instil a sense of moderation in the Party’s actions and rhetoric. CPI(M)’s shift from the militant land seizure movements of late 1960s to tenancy reform as the major pillar of its land reform agenda in 1978 was a precursor to the decisive fall in militancy to come in the 1980s. Operation Barga was less threatening to the landed classes compared to the movement for redistribution of excess land as it did not threaten property rights. On the contrary, along with ensuring tenure security to sharecroppers, it legalized the ownership of existing owners. This was at a time when landowners were genuinely afraid of the possibility of land loss due to the militant peasant movements.

A second, related reason for moderation was the state government’s fear of dismissal by the Central government on the false pretext of breakdown in law and order.\textsuperscript{48} The Central government’s hostility toward non-Congress state governments meant that radical forms of protest were perceived as failure of law and order. Invocations of class struggle and mass insurrections were violations of law. The judiciary considered the right to private property as sacrosanct; this legitimized the politically motivated dismissals of democratically elected

\textsuperscript{48} Article 356 of the Indian constitution allows the central government to dismiss a state government or dissolve a state assembly in the event of a failure of constitutional machinery in that state, and place it under direct federal rule, known as President’s rule. In the early decades of independence, the Congress Party regularly invoked this provision to dismiss state governments headed by opposition parties. Communist-led governments were under constant threat of such unilateral dismissal by the centre.
state governments through the use of Article 356. United Front governments in both Bengal and Kerala had been on the receiving end of this. Article 356 was first wielded against the communist government in Kerala headed by EMS Namboodiripad in 1959. The UF government in Bengal was similarly dismissed in response to the militant land seizure movement and Naxalbari movements of the late 60s and the widespread political violence of the 1970s. In addition, brief stints in power as members in the UFGs in Kerala and West Bengal made the Party recognize the need to make a transition from ‘permanent-agitation’ mode to ‘governance’ mode. In a hostile political environment, political survival of the left-led governments was to be valued on par, if not more, with programmatic action.

Another political imperative that indirectly influenced the shift to moderation was the necessity to consolidate power, both of the CPI(M) itself and of the LF. As one CPI(M) leader put it, “Only if a pro-people government was in power, any redistributive action could be undertaken. The long-term survival of the left in office provided the best course of providing relief to the masses even if at a gradual, slower-than-originally-planned, pace. This course was to be contrasted with the experiences of the communist government of Kerala during 1957-59 and the UF governments in Bengal between 1967 and 1969, where a rapid push for radical reform in a short period through parliamentary as well as extra-parliamentary means attracted fierce counter-mobilization, dismissal, repression, and long subsequent periods out of power for the CPI(M).”

So, in a hostile political environment, pragmatism called for temperance in Party’s actions and forms of mobilization.

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49 Interview with former academic and left intellectual, Kolkata, 23 June 2005. My interviews with CPI(M) leaders in Kerala support this interpretation.
In order to ensure the continued victory of the LF, the CPI(M) needed to shore up its organizational network in the countryside. In 1977, when the CPI(M) won a landslide victory with over 60% of the seats in the state legislative assembly, it had a membership of less than 1% of West Bengal’s population. Its rural mass organizations were equally small. It needed to build independent strength in order to prevent a relapse to the political instability of the previous decade and to take its rural reform to the villages. The consolidation of organizational base in the countryside was crucial also for the capacity to stay in power. In the absence of basic literacy among large sections of the rural poor, the CPI(M)’s strategy for organizational consolidation was to rely on the middle agrarian classes to provide Party and panchayat leadership. As I elaborate in the following sections, the necessity to build its rural organization centered on middle peasants impelled a conspicuous dilution of Party’s mobilizational and agitational vitality. Understanding how the CPI(M) came to win seven consecutive elections requires examining closely how the Party built a superior and cohesive organization in rural Bengal and established every-day links with the rural society through its mass organs (like the Krishak Sabha) and the panchayat system.

### 3.4.2 Agricultural Growth of 1980s

The economic imperative for CPI(M)’s restraint was the necessity to infuse some dynamism into West Bengal’s sluggish economy. In 1977, the CPI(M) had inherited an economy that was on the verge of stagnation. The past three decades had seen dismal economic growth (at an average of roughly 2% per annum), with the industrial sector stagnating in 1960s and 1970s and the agriculture sector facing an “impasse” (Boyce 1987; Bhattacharya and

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50 CPI(M) membership in 1977 is estimated to be about 30,000 against a total population of roughly 50 million (India 1981; Bandyopadhyay 2003).
Sakthivel 2004). The political instability of the recent past had dried up private sector investment in industry and retarded public sector undertakings, frittering away the industrial advantage West Bengal had at the time of independence.

The most notable economic development in rural Bengal in the 1980s was the reversal of a century of agrarian stagnation and the dramatic rise in agricultural production. Starting 1983-84, there was a noticeable upsurge in food-grain production that continued well into the 1990s (Table 3.1). Changing agrarian relations coupled with the introduction of new technology under Green Revolution (high yield seeds, ground water irrigation, chemical fertilizers), new institutional reforms (improved access to credit and other non-farm inputs), and new farming practices such as expansion of boro (summer paddy) cultivation resulted in turning around a century of agrarian stagnation in West Bengal (Harriss 1993; Saha and Swaminathan 1994; Sengupta and Gazdar 1997; Rawal and Swaminathan 1998). West Bengal agriculture grew at more than two and a half times the national average of agriculture growth, prompting one scholar to call it the “agricultural success story of the 1980s” (Sen 1992). It achieved the highest rate of growth in food-grain production and the highest rate of growth in per hectare yield of food-grain production among all Indian states during 1980-90.52

51 Food-grains include various cereals (rice, wheat, bajra, jowar, barley, corn etc.) and pulses. In the 1980s, food-grains consumed over 80% of the cultivated area in the state, and rice was grown in 90% of areas under food-grain cultivation. Hence, the data for rice production is used to show the spike in productivity.

52 There is controversy around the accuracy of the growth rate reported by the West Bengal government and its methodology for data collection. See Datta Ray (2002b) and Rogaly et al (1999, 18-9). Nonetheless, the fact that West Bengal recorded unprecedented levels of agrarian growth, marking a definite break from the past growth trends, remains uncontested.
The causes for agrarian acceleration in Bengal in the eighties have been the subject of extensive scholarly scrutiny (Harriss 1993; Gazdar and Sengupta 1999). It is practically impossible to isolate the impact of the multiple factors cited as responsible for the turnaround. However, research has shown that the changes in agrarian relations brought about by radical land reforms (redistribution of land and tenancy reform) enabled the agrarian scene to fully benefit from the technological and institutional changes that followed. Political reform in the form of participatory local democratic bodies with a role in agrarian matters (in redistributing vested land, in wage bargaining for agricultural laborers, in determining beneficiaries for state-provided agrarian inputs) that accompanied land reform also had an impact. Further, the levelling of agrarian structure had a positive impact on productivity (Banerjee, et al. 2002). The late arrival of Green Revolution in Bengal—in the 1980s after the rentier interests had been weeded out—lends credibility to this view.

Table 3.1 Rice Production in West Bengal (Compounded Annual Rate of Growth)

Source: (compiled from Rawal and Swaminathan 1998, 2597)
The middle peasants were the primary catalysts of this productive surge. Unlike the landed gentry who survived on rent, the middle peasantry was interested in cultivation and turned themselves into agricultural entrepreneurs in the new setting. They began to experiment with capitalist farming, lease in land from poorer cultivators, and use new farming technologies associated with the Green Revolution. New high-yield seeds and chemical fertilizers were introduced and widely employed. The high-yield seeds and the expanding summer paddy (boro) cultivation required an extensive irrigation network and availability of water throughout the year. Canals and deep tube wells (DTW) that were established in the 1960s and 70s were the usual sources of irrigation. However, the coverage areas of these publicly-funded irrigation sources were very limited. As new methods of ground water extraction for irrigation, mainly Shallow Tube Wells (STW), were adopted, water became available throughout the year and mono-crop areas became double-crop areas. In the process, the rural middle peasantry, who were the chief protagonists in bringing about this agrarian change and delivering a dramatic rise in agricultural yield, consolidated their economic power over rural Bengal.

The new agrarian dynamism in Bengal countryside also produced new antagonisms. The earlier correlation of class forces, which consisted of a political alliance of peasant proprietors, tenants, bargadars, and landless laborers against jotedar-zamindar oppression, had changed. In the new alignment, the rural middle class became the “new masters of the country-side” as large landlords vanished (Rogaly, et al. 1999). In the absence of a landlord

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53 Till 1970s, much of the agricultural land in the state was mono-cropped. Winter paddy (aman) was the only crop from paddy lands. After harvest, lands were left fallow during summer, used for cattle-grazing etc, due to unavailability of water in the summer. Summer paddy cultivation slowly picked up in the seventies as the government began to invest in developing an irrigation network.
class, the middle peasants (and rich peasants where commercial agriculture had taken root) became the surplus-producing, labor-employing class, on whom the landless laborers and poor peasants became dependent.

### 3.4.3 Political Ascendency of Middle Peasants

The economic ascendency of middle peasants was buttressed by the political role accorded to them by the CPI(M). Soon after the first LFG came to power, the Party began to rely on the rural middle classes for leadership, and to both further build and consolidate its rural electoral base. At the 1978 panchayat elections the CPI(M) had a total membership of about 30,000 in West Bengal, most of which was concentrated around Calcutta, but, along with its allies, it needed to field over 80,000 candidates across the state (Bandyopadhyay 2003, 882). The Party turned to the upper and middle peasantry who with their ability to read and write had emerged as natural leaders of the illiterate peasantry during the anti-*jotedar* struggle. Peasants trusted them because middle peasants as co-cultivators were allies of the poor peasants, sharecroppers, and agricultural workers and in the forefront of the political coalition of cultivators in the fight against the rentier classes of zamindars and jotedars. The Party also recruited generously from the urban-trained, but rural-bred, university students and teachers who returned to their villages to take up Party work. Many of them belonged to land-owning families of the middle peasant variety. Many of the candidates in local-government elections also came from this class, with or without prior Party involvement or adequate political education. The composition of panchayats after the 1978 elections reflected this heavy reliance on rural middle classes with close to 90% of elected

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54 Interview with panchayat member, Sitai I Gram panchayat, Cooch Behar district, 2 May 2005.
representatives coming from the upper or middle strata of rural society (see Table 3.2 and 3.3). The composition of the panchayats after the 1983 elections was not too different (Bandyopadhyay 2007). In effect, the rural middle class, who were beneficiaries of the previous phases of land reform, became the political leaders of the mostly illiterate peasantry after the stranglehold of jotedar-zamindar combine crumbled.

Table 3.2 Distribution of Gram Panchayat Members by Occupation in 1978 (based on a sample of 100 villages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Owner cultivator</td>
<td>743</td>
<td>50.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Teachers</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Unemployed</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Landless laborers</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Sharecroppers</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Artisans</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Shop owners</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Technical workers</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Doctors</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Tailors</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Students</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Fishermen</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Others</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (West Bengal 1980b, 42-3)

Table 3.3 Landholdings of Owner Cultivator Gram Panchayat Members in 1978 panchayat elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acres</th>
<th>Percentage of Distribution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Below 2</td>
<td>42.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-5</td>
<td>28.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-8</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-10</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 10</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: same as Table 3.2
In West Bengal, a middle peasant typically holds a plot of land roughly between two and five acres of wet land (slightly larger in case of dry land). In Marxist theory, what makes middle peasants a potential class ally of the proletariat is that they involve themselves and their family in cultivation-related labor. They also employ hired labor. In contemporary rural Bengal, they are minimally educated and still maintain a largely rustic lifestyle, while in regions close to urban centers (such as Hooghly and Bardhaman districts) their lifestyle has increasingly become more in line with urban trends. In parts of these districts, following multi-crop cultivation, i.e., higher demand for labor and higher productivity, rich peasants involved in capitalist farming have become more numerous and socially dominant compared to middle peasants. Middle peasants are of mixed caste background. Depending on regional caste composition, they may be from a locally dominant, yet lower caste. Many of them were tenants in the previous era and received land through land reform. They are industrious, and engage in a variety of non-land occupations along with cultivation—as school teachers, shop owners, and panchayat members—and derive household income from a combination of those sources. In some cases, the head of the household is a panchayat member while the spouse or the son is a school teacher or shop owner, typically bringing home more than one income. Some of them make a part-time occupation out of getting things done for others, such as

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55 The landholding size-class categories used by Indian statistical agencies (NSSO) are as follows: 0 to 0.5 acres - landless, 0.5 to 2.5 acres - marginal holding, 2.5 to 5 acres – small holding, 5 to 10 acres – semi-medium, 10 to 25 acres – medium holding, over 25 acres – large holdings. How these correspond to the Marxist categories of wage labor, poor, middle, rich peasants and capitalist farmers is a matter of some debate (Patnaik 1976; Sundarayya 1976). For our purposes of the analysis of Bengal’s class structure we may consider the classification as follows: agricultural labor - landless or near landless, marginal/poor peasants – up to 2 acres, middle peasants - 2 to 5 acres and rich peasants - 5 to 10 acres. In the context of the historical preponderance of smaller size holdings in Bengal, middle peasant holding size is somewhat smaller than national.

56 Interview with professor of political science, Bardhaman University, 25 July 2005.
getting services from the panchayat or a government office, arranging a certificate, filling forms, writing letters, getting pensions and allowances sanctioned etc. They get political support/deference (and often material benefits) in return for the favors, even if the beneficiary is entitled to what he/she receives. As we shall see below, the economic and political dominance of the middle peasants had two distinct consequences for West Bengal’s pro-poor politics in the next three decades: 1. the emergence of a clientelistic relationship between the Party and the rural poor and 2. the weakening of the Party’s redistributive zeal.

3.4.4 Political Clientelism

By the mid-1980s, the radical-mobilizational path of lower-class integration of the previous decades began to give way to a clientelist-corporatist mode of poor-incorporation. The relationship between the poor and their middle-class leaders in rural Bengal gradually came to be based on clientelistic reciprocity, through partisan distribution of material benefits to the former by the latter. As intermediaries between the state and the poor in their party and panchayat roles, the middle peasants controlled local institutions and access to public resources. They had at their disposal assets, influence, and a dominant social position with which they could distribute essential survival goods and thereby help in the social mobility of the poor. In return, the poor extended political support to them and in turn to the party and its mass organs. The repeated iterations of this exchange over the long-term gave rise to well-coordinated clientelistic networks as documented extensively (Ruud 1999; Bardhan and Mookherjee 2006; Chakrabarty 2006; Bardhan, et al. 2008; Narayan 2009; Bardhan, et al. 2010; Banerjee 2011; Bardhan and Mookherjee 2011b). Bardhan and Mookherjee explain the specific nature of clientelism:
Clientelism refers to strategic transfers made by political parties and governments to poor and disadvantaged groups as a means of securing their votes, in an effort to consolidate political power. Such transfers by their very nature can provide an appearance of successful pro-poor targeting of public services. But they often come at the expense of long-term development, since they usually take the form of private transfers with short-term payoffs rather than public goods or private benefits of a long-run nature (such as education or health) (2011a, 2).

The modus operandi of clientelism in West Bengal is most evident from the delivery of public services to poor voters by local governments. The supply of private, personalized benefits, with a bias toward recurring goods, has been the primary form of clientelism in rural Bengal (Bardhan and Mookherjee 2011b). These include access to employment, agricultural inputs, shallow tube wells, mechanized tractors, anti-poverty schemes, subsidized food, emergency financial assistance, right to cultivate a piece of vested land, right to live in a hutment which is situated on vested land, distribution of jobs in non-agricultural occupations etc. as opposed to one-time, public goods (roads, schools, hospitals, bridges, street lights etc). Access to several state and central government funded anti-poverty schemes such as the Integrated Rural Development Program (IRDP) providing subsidized credit, Jawahar Rozgar Yojana proving employment in public works, Indira Awas Yojana providing housing and toilets, Below-Poverty-Line (BPL) cards providing subsidized food and preferential consideration for a variety of welfare benefits—all require the endorsement of panchayat members. The panchayat members, most notably the president of the local
government (Pradhan at the village level Sabhapati at the block level) have direct control of the village development plan, the power to allocate funds to appropriate priorities, and the power to determine beneficiaries. These benefits are significant to the poor considering the extent of landlessness and levels of poverty in rural Bengal. Bardhan and Mookherjee (2011b) present a “capture-cum-clientelism” hypothesis with regard to the distribution of state-sponsored benefits and services in West Bengal in which middle-class patrons deliver goods they do not themselves value to poorer ‘clients’, while keeping to themselves state-sponsored benefits they personally value such as agricultural inputs and access to credit. I find this to be a fairly accurate representation of what I encountered in the Bengal countryside.

My fieldwork shows that Party supporters or potential supporters are favored unabashedly in determining beneficiaries of various public services. Political support for the party in power is nourished through such clientelistic exchange of personal benefits. This is corroborated by the strong positive correlation between political affiliation and receipt of locally distributed services and benefits (Bardhan, et al. 2008). This is true not just of the CPI(M) but every party in West Bengal big enough to govern a gram panchayat. Local politics is intensely competitive and politicized, and in many parts of the state, coalition partners of the Left Front fight each other for political dominance. I witnessed terrifying, violent competition for panchayat dominance between the All India Forward Block and the CPI(M) in Cooch Behar district. Even though part of the LF, at the panchayat level they are bitter enemies fighting hard for every inch of political space. I was intrigued how such bitter competition among the local cadre of the two parties can turn into friendly cooperation when the state or central elections rolled around.
On the whole, the evidence I encountered in the field was overwhelming with regard to the clientelistic nature of Bengal’s local politics. In every interview and focus group with the poor, there were passionate accounts of how the local panchayat’s partisan considerations had deprived them of well-deserved anti-poverty schemes or benefits. The party governing the village panchayat was often at the receiving end of these complaints, with some directed against the ruling party at the block level. In instances where the village and block panchayats were ruled by different parties, supporters blamed the other party. A general complaint of villagers not belonging to the faction of the panchayat member was that development money was being directed exclusively to the member’s friends and supporters.

My experience in the field shows that the ability to provide patronage through the panchayats is a significant factor enabling local political dominance. The panchayat system has become a tool for consolidating the power of the dominant party. Delegating more funds and functions to the panchayat means that more goods and services can be exchanged through clientelist networks. The imperative to consolidate power in rural areas have led political parties to excessively control panchayats and this in turn has subverted local self-government objectives. In districts of Bardhaman and Hooghly Bhattacharya (1998) outlines that decisions of the panchayat, including various lists of beneficiaries, are taken beforehand by the party only to be nominally approved by the panchayats. Bhattacharyya (2009) notes that the most striking feature of Bengal politics is the fusion of the party and the government at the local level. Instead of creating new spaces and means for the continued empowerment of the poor, local government institutions have become sites of dependent development. Over the long-term the panchayats have emerged as a tool to secure middle-class control of the
poor, stunt autonomous political development of poorer citizens, and through it secure the political hegemony of the CPI(M).

I observed evidences of personalized reciprocal relationships in a variety of settings. In the most bizarre example, poor villagers in Cooch Behar district referred to the local politician as “the panchayat.” I found this intriguing as the term panchayat is widely known in India as an ancient institution of local conflict resolution. For the poor in contemporary India the village panchayat provides the most proximate and most direct encounter with the state. Hence, I found it odd that the poor in West Bengal, who had been thoroughly politicized by left parties, mistook the panchayat for an individual as opposed to an institution. Upon further probing, I realized that the individual in question had been a member of the local panchayat for over a decade and a half, losing his seat to women’s reservation sometime after 1993. With his wife becoming the new panchayat member, he refocused his energy on leading the local party. When asked, why they were not calling the lady member “the panchayat,” the villagers told me that it did not make sense to do so because the male member was still the distributor of all the benefits they received. The concerned individual himself made light of my questions saying it was a long-standing local practice to refer to the panchayat member as “the panchayat.” He did not satisfactorily answer my questions as to why his wife, who had by then been panchayat member for close to 10 years, never came to be called “the panchayat.” Leaving aside the gendered dynamics at play in this instance, the poor understood their relationship with the state, at least in the local setting, as dyadic personalistic relationships. This example although not representative of the average West Bengal village provides a foray into the extent to which clientelistic arrangements, not programmatic appeals, can form the basis of political participation. While the contours of
clientelistic arrangements vary across local contexts, based on material needs and political expediency, their presence in some form is fairly stable across much of the state.

Williams (1999, 235-36) corroborates my findings:

The control of development funds for JRY [Jawahar Rozgar Yojana] and IRDP [Integrated Rural Development Programme] schemes gave [panchayat] members a degree of economic influence beyond that of most landlords, and thus supported them in fulfilling …[their] leadership role. Also, any development work a member undertook became highly personalised: rather than the fulfilment of an objective set of criteria, it was seen by potential beneficiaries as ‘help’(saheb), especially by those amongst the labouring classes. This is significant in that by requesting ‘help’ from their (panchayat) members, villagers were using a ‘language of claims’ equivalent to that used by, for example, a tenant requesting a loan from his landlord. Such requests are indicative of the way in which the whole panchayat system is viewed by many: rather than being an institution in which they actively participate, it is seen as a distributor of personalised benefits.

The wheels of the patronage machine are oiled by the penetrating and well-knit organizational network of the party and the personal knowledge of relevant characteristics and behavior of specific households even in the remotest corner of the village. Local party leaders have firsthand and accurate knowledge of political attitudes and grievances of
individual households in the village, and can use this knowledge to reward supporters and exclude others. This can also be used to lure potential new supporters into the fold. I was impressed multiple times with the extent and accuracy of knowledge of the local party leaders of each household’s political behaviour.

In West Bengal, the poor-friendly orientation of the dominant parties provides a measure of successful pro-poor redistribution, but it also masks widespread incidence of clientelistic arrangements at the local level. Once we disaggregate the composition of public spending and the social outcomes, patterns of inconsistencies begin to appear, which can ultimately be explained only as distributional consequences of the specific variety of clientelism in West Bengal. In fact, the logic of clientelism has been instrumental in feeding what Amartya Sen called West Bengal’s “conspicuous failures,” that is in expanding basic education, literacy, and public health (Dreze and Sen 1997, 1-32). The dilapidated state of public infrastructure (roads, schools, hospitals, street lights, drains) is a consequence of the incentives of clientelism where private goods are preferred by politicians instead of long-lasting public goods whose benefits are enjoyed by everyone and which cannot be taken away. The politicization of public sector jobs is another example because employment is a private good that is selective and reversible and one that ties the voter to supporting the party in the long-term. Patterns of clientelism also accounts for the high rates of absenteeism among health and education service providers, especially school teachers. As teachers owe their appointments and job security to local politicians, participating in party activities takes precedence over teaching.57

57 Teacher absenteeism was rampant during my visits. In one primary school in Cooch Behar district, one teacher was simultaneously teaching grade 1, 2, 3 and 4. Two of the classes were held inside the school building, while the other two were on the open field outside. The
The clientelistic machinery in West Bengal has an in-built enforcement mechanism, unlike in other developing-world contexts where patrons and clients fear for mutual betrayal. Bengali politicians do not falter on their promises to deliver goods as they themselves do not need the benefits distributed. On the other hand, the poor have to continually publicly proclaim their political allegiance by attending party meetings, doing errands for the party, shouting slogans, and by voting. Not displaying their political allegiance can result in the withholding of recurring benefits. Even when individual secret ballot votes cannot be verified, the requirement to continually pledge allegiance to the party ensures there is adequate incentive to ensure the party wins in order to avoid punishment from the opposition party should it win (Bardhan and Mookherjee 2011b).

The turn to a clientelistic mode of incorporation, after a short but decisive period of radical mobilization in the late 1960s to early-1980s, has come with discernible social and political costs. Due to the overarching rhetoric of working class power and left-wing dominance, the distinction between redistribution motivated by clientelistic impulses and programmatic principles become difficult for those unfamiliar with the nitty-gritties of local politics. In fact, the pro-poor orientation of the political parties ensures the poor benefit from a wide range of publicly provided services, even if through clientelistic exchanges. This makes the workings of clientelism subtle in West Bengal and often passes as pro-poor empowerment. Such a mode of incorporation is not based on programmatic considerations, but on the necessity to survive in an economically and socially powerless local context.
The political costs of the specific variety of clientelism in Bengal has inhibited political competition, consolidated the electoral strength of the Left (and the continued rule), and detracted politicians from devoting resources to long-term political and economic empowerment of the poorer workers or developing long-term public goods.

3.4.5 Middle-Class Unions and Corporatist Tendencies

The wheels of clientelism are greased by West Bengal’s powerful middle-class unions by arranging jobs, transfers, benefits, and political protection in return for political support. These unions have become so powerful that the relationship between them and the state evokes resemblance to corporatism. The blurring of party-state distinction and the close interlinking of union and party leadership ensures that these sectorial organizations receive special recognition and influence at the policy table and in return they often help propagate and implement government policy. By linking the government and the governed, these unions provide inputs to an everyday feedback loop between policy-makers and citizens which may not be otherwise available. At the local level, union representatives are powerful actors, often viewed as spokespersons for the party or the government.

The CPI(M)-led trade union federation, Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), represents approximately 30 million industrial workers. The All Bengal Teachers’ Association represents 70% of secondary teachers in the state in Government Sponsored/aided schools, with a membership of 140,000. All Bengal Primary Teachers Association (ABPTA) represents primary teachers in the government aided primary schools, with a membership of

58 Interview with state secretary, All Bengal Primary Teachers Association, Kolkata, 29 June 2005.
59 Interview with former civil servant, Kolkata, 2 July 2005.
West Bengal Government Teachers’ Association represents teachers in government schools. West Bengal College and University Teachers’ Association represent the post-secondary teaching profession. The Government Employees Union and Bank Employees Union are also very powerful. The Coordination Committee controls and coordinates multiple government employee unions and is the biggest and most powerful trade union organization of government employees. The Krishak Sabha represents the largest rural contingent. By securing favorable policies and benefits from the government, these unions have underlined their special status and have gained enormous respect among their supporters.

### 3.4.6 Weakening Redistributive Zeal

A qualitative change in CPI(M)’s approach to redistributive reform and governance became conspicuous from the beginning of the Left Front’s second term in 1982. With local leaderships and panchayats captured by the rural middle class, the party swung to less radical positions on a number of issues. Some characterized it as a “clear and noticeable change in the class character of the CPI(M)” (Bandyopadhyay 2007). Others called it a slide to the “politics of middleness” that has “brought about a gradual de-radicalization in the character of redistributive reforms in rural West Bengal over the 1980s” (Bhattacharyya 1999, 296).

In the new economic milieu of the eighties, the chief material conflict in rural Bengal was between the richer sections of the peasantry and the landless or near-landless cultivators (poor peasants, sharecroppers, and agricultural workers). The CPI(M)’s strategy to keep a tight lid on the maturing of this new class contradiction meant that issues that mattered to the lower peasantry—wages, ownership of tiny plots, homestead lands, and independent
organization—steadily took a backseat under a Krishak Sabha led by the middle peasantry. Land reform slowly lost steam and eventually stagnated, without new radical slogans, without autonomous organization of the lower peasantry, and without vigorous class action. Tenancy reforms to ensure security of tenure to sharecroppers, while successful in significantly moderating the exploitation of sharecroppers, did not completely break relations of dependency, nor did it help in the consolidation of a separate class of wage laborers. The flagging redistributive and empowerment zeal of the Party was also evident in the shortcomings in macroeconomic management, and persistent indecision in undertaking further structural reform to take land and panchayat reforms to its full potential. However, the impressive agricultural growth of the 1980s and the direct and indirect benefits reaped by all rural agrarian classes from rising output and higher days of employment helped to mask the creeping slowdown at least until the rural growth began to ease up in the 1990s.

From the vantage point of the CPI(M), these political choices were perhaps underwritten by sound political, organizational, and electoral imperatives. Most importantly, the Party risked the potential loss of its middle-peasant base and its rural leadership if it were to push ahead with further reform in favor of the poor. Political pragmatism embodied in these choices surely paid rich electoral dividends—the party’s rural supported swelled and has never declined since—but it came at the cost of a decisive weakening of its redistributive agenda. And, most importantly, it shaped the modes of incorporation, the terms and mechanisms through which the poor participated in politics.

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60 Interview with scholar-activist, Kolkata, 21 June 2005.
3.4.6.1 Peasant Unity and the Stagnation of the Land Reform Process

The effects of moderation were particularly visible in the agrarian sector. The All India Kisan Sabha had adopted the slogan of ‘peasant unity’ as mobilization strategy since its early years. The objective was to unite the rural cultivators, big and small, against the non-cultivating landlords and their designs to keep the peasantry divided. The right balance of ‘struggle’ and ‘unity’ within the peasant classes was always a point of debate within the Kisan Sabha. As the old landlord class got decimated and capitalist agriculture intensified, there was a need to recognize the new class contradictions and work them into the strategies and tactics of the Kisan Sabha. This is what the CPI(M)-led Kisan Sabha attempted nationally in the early seventies (CPI(M) 1973). The CPI(M) criticized the fellow communist party, the CPI, as right-reformist on the role accorded to agricultural laborers and poor peasants in a united peasant movement:

One of the causes for the failure of Kisan Sabha to grow faster was its undue stress on what the reformist leadership saw as the need for ‘all-in peasant unity’ against the feudal landlordism. The way this need for all in peasant unity was interpreted only helped to maintain the leadership of the rich and middle peasants in the struggle, and to overlook the role that the poor peasants and agricultural laborers could play in the struggle against feudalism. The highly important task of organizing the fights of the agricultural laborers for wages and better working conditions was not taken up out of the fear that this would alarm and antagonize the richer sections of the peasants and would thus undermine peasant unity. From this understanding, the agricultural laborers and poor peasants were assigned a subordinate role, and not the pivotal role
expected of them. Nor was much effort given to integrate them with the rest of the peasantry, while the leadership in the movement rested with the rich and middle peasantry. As long as this particular mistaken understanding of the concept of peasant unity was not discarded, and the agricultural laborers were shoved one side, the Kisan Sabha could not be expected to display a higher order of militancy in its anti-feudal, anti-monopoly and anti-imperialist struggle (Surjeet 1995).

This is, however, exactly what the CPI(M)-led Krishak Sabha did in West Bengal. Although the Party program requires building peasant unity of lower peasantry centered on agricultural workers and poor peasants, the West Bengal unit of the Party has, instead, built peasant unity centered on middle peasants.

The dilution of redistributive intent was most visible in the agrarian reform agenda. The Krishak Sabha abandoned its earlier militant stance to engage in direct action with the propertied classes in order to secure the radical demands of ‘land to the tiller’ and the ‘total abolition of all forms of tenancy.’ The land reform process as a whole lost steam in mid-1980s, as most of the remaining items in the land reform agenda were inconspicuously dropped or not pursued. They include the gradual conversion of bargadars into landowners, the distribution of all vested-surplus land to the landless, and the securing of homestead plots and stable wage increases for agricultural workers. Bengal’s persistence with the sharecropping mode of cultivation was puzzling, given that by the 1970s previous land reform efforts in other South Asian settings had clearly indicated tenancy reform without transfer of land ownership to tenants worked to the net disadvantage of weaker sections of the tenantry (Herring 1983). Even when tenure, rent, and crop share were fixed by law, the
continuation of landowner-tenant organization left behind conditions that fostered dependence.

The most credible explanation for the stagnation of agrarian reform program even as agricultural growth skyrocketed is that it was incompatible with the interests of the ascendant rural middle class, which controlled the local party and the panchayat. There was no alternative social class on which the CPI(M) could depend for rural organizational leadership, if it were to alienate the middle peasants with further land reform and progressive measures. The Party thus became captive to the interests of its rural leadership.

Repeated attempts by successive LFGs through separate initiatives to pay attention to sharecroppers, poor peasants, and agricultural workers were ultimately thwarted at the local level. Because the local entanglements involved forces internal to CPI(M), attempts to effect a course-correction were rarely successful. Foot-dragging by politicized local bureaucracy in the land reform and land records departments also helped in considerable measure to choke efforts to take agrarian reform to its logical culmination.

3.4.6.2 Sharecropper's Plight

The logical progression of land reform agenda would have been to facilitate the gradual conversion of bargadars into small owner-cultivators. A 1973 CPI(M) resolution on agrarian issues held that the “right of the tenant to the ownership of the land he is cultivating is to be guaranteed, except to those who are lease-holders from small owners” (CPI(M) 1973). The

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61 Interviews with former leading civil servant, former district secretary of CPI(M), civil society activists, Kolkata. June-July 2005.
62 It should be noted that in the specific context of West Bengal, there is considerable overlap among the lower agrarian categories, especially among marginal peasants, sharecroppers,
Land Reform Act (LRA) made an implicit recognition of this when it laid down provisions for giving priority rights to bargadars in the event of sale of the land they cultivated. The LRA amendments of 1981 also called for the establishment of one or more Land Corporations to financially assist recorded bargadars in such land purchases (section 21 C). However, neither step was seriously pursued. In recent times, however, bargadars have been negotiating on their own with landowners for mutual agreements to own part of the land they cultivated in exchange of giving up cultivating rights on the rest (Hanstad and Nielsen 2004). In the absence of any state initiative to confer them with land ownership, bargadars continue to depend on the survival of the CPI(M) in power, as their limited rights in land could be reversed or weakened by another government.

By securing tenure rights for sharecroppers but not continuing to legislate to confer them with ownership of land, the Bengal CPI(M) has inadvertently institutionalized and entrenched sharecropping—a transitional mode of surplus extraction between feudal servitude and a fully commoditized labor market according to Marxist theoreticians—leaving a large section of the peasantry at the subsistence level even today.63 Operation Barga and agricultural laborers. Some poor peasants, unable to cultivate, may let out their land to sharecroppers, while many sharecroppers also engage in wage labor to supplement their income. As a result, sharecroppers are not always a distinct class; they lease-in land from fellow cultivators of similar economic standing in addition to cultivating their own holdings. In such cases, there is not a clear-cut conflict of interests between the two. Both are pretty close to bare survival, making abolition of tenancy a goal fraught with difficulties.

63 “...sharecropping is a particular method of surplus appropriation by which surplus labor is transferred to the landlord in the form of surplus product. ...sharecropping actually represents a transitional mode of surplus appropriation ‘between forms of agrestic servitude and the full commoditization of rural labor itself’. ...It may persist in the early stages of capitalist development when accumulation and technical changes are slow in creating developed wage-labor market, but ‘there will be a tendency for such contract to be superseded by others more appropriate to high rates of accumulation in agriculture’” (Pearce 1983, 44). Several Marxist authors in this edited volume treat sharecropping as a form of semi-bound labor that is a short and transitional stage in the passage of labor from feudal to wage labor.
mitigated the oppressive conditions, but it did not break off relations of dependency on the richer sections of the peasantry. The dependence on the landowner, in the face of rising cost of inputs, falling prices, and abundance of labor, has reignited some of the semi-feudal characteristics of the past era. While recording of sharecroppers continues to this day, there are reports of sharecroppers being forced into arrangements with a lower crop share than their entitlement by law (Bhaumik 1993).

3.4.6.3 Vesting and Redistribution

Although the contribution of the West Bengal in vesting of ceiling-surplus land is impressive in comparison to what has been achieved nationally, full and effective vesting of all surplus land in the state has not yet happened. The amendments to LRA in 1981 had taken measures to expand the ceiling net, however, vesting of land, under improved provisions, was not pursued with vigor. Of the 1.37 million acres vested, 0.35 million acres have been lying unallotted due to various reasons, the flagging zeal of the party to redistribute being one of them. This is particularly puzzling as vesting of land, not redistribution, is the most politically and legally challenging part of land reform. In many places, rural landowners, including CPI(M) cadre, as I discovered during my field research, continue to exercise influence on local officials to delay redistribution while a relative, an agricultural laborer, or a sharecropper loyal to the owner or the local party continues to cultivate the vested land. In many others, Krishak Sabha or the village panchayat itself has custody of the vested land on which it has allowed selected beneficiaries (often bargadars) to cultivate on a temporary

64 Interviews with landless fisherman, fruit vendor, sharecropper, Sitai and Subudipur villages, April-May 2005 and July 2005.
65 Focus groups with villagers in Santoshpur, July 2005; Interview with member, state legislative assembly representing Trinamul Congress, and with BJP state leader, Kolkata, June 2005.
basis in return for political support. The lack of political will to redistribute large chunks of already vested land by a Party wedded to land redistribution lends credibility to the clientelistic-dependence account offered by many of my informants. In addition to obfuscation by influencing local officials, long and protracted litigation has arrested the pace of redistribution. Taking advantage of the legal loopholes, a good amount of this land remains in the hands of private owners. About 250,000 acres of vested land is caught up in litigation and the LFGs’ attempts to clear the long backlog have not been successful. The attempt to appoint a separate legal cell to advocate for beneficiaries did not produce favorable results either. Deliberate poor maintenance of land records is another ceiling-evading tactic that has been very effective.\textsuperscript{66} It makes it impossible to identify the total land possession of a family and the tracing of \textit{benami} land, let alone taking action against defaulters.

\textbf{3.4.6.4 Agricultural Wages}

The 1967-70 phase of vesting excess land phase certainly energized the agricultural laborers in Bengal. However, agricultural workers’ demands did not become the focal point at any time. Their demands, such as the confiscation and redistribution of excess and \textit{benami} land, were always tied to the demands of the sharecroppers who were the primary target of the land reform process.

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{66} I could not obtain credible information on landownership patterns from any of the panchayat officials I visited in West Bengal, verbally or in paper. My repeated requests were either ignored or politely refused because, according to local officials, they did not possess land records. One panchayat official in Cooch Behar district produced a crinkled and illegible sheet of paper which he claimed was the land records prepared during 1977. That was the latest available even though the pattern of landownership had changed considerably in the last three decades. April-July 2005, various parts of West Bengal.
\end{footnotesize}
Although agricultural wages saw an initial increase and periodic upward revision, no effective measure to ensure the payment of the legislated rate has been successful. At the time of the fieldwork (2005-06), the legislated minimum daily wage for an agricultural labor was Rs. 64.10 in West Bengal (Bengal 2005). In Cooch Behar district, laborers got between Rs. 25 and 35, and in some cases as low as Rs. 20 (less than half a dollar) a day. With employment limited to little over three months in a year, laborers are forced to work at whatever rate is offered. Though there are minor regional variations, the statewide picture of agricultural wages is not much different. Even the growth of legislated agricultural wage rates has been far lower than other states, notably, Punjab and Kerala. The struggle for better wages has been confined to periodic references to the necessity of organizing wage struggles in annual organizational reports or to ritualized iterations of wage struggle where the Party controls both the capital and the labor and settles for a pre-approved, modest wage increase.67

The pretext for not enforcing higher agricultural wages has always been that in the context of a small-peasant economy, higher wages would make many small and marginal peasants unable to hire agricultural laborers, leading to a crisis in small-peasant cultivation. This has, however, been a vicious cycle. Small and marginal peasant cultivators are neither able to turn themselves into wage laborers to earn a surplus, nor able to engage in profitable agriculture, leaving them permanently at the subsistence level.

67 Interview with state secretary, non-affiliated agricultural labor union (Paschim Banga Khet Majur Samiti), Kolkata
3.4.6.5 Access to Agricultural Inputs

The middle classes, by virtue of their control of panchayats and the party apparatus in the rural areas, have been the prime beneficiaries of state-provided resources in the form of various development schemes. Using their influence in panchayats, middle peasants channelize money intended for rural development coming from various state and centre-funded schemes into projects that directly benefit them. One good example is funds from the Sixth Five Year Plan (1980-85), which made a substantial allocation for rural development, going into digging privately-owned shallow tube wells. Middle peasants who had enough personal and political resources to invest in ground water extraction dug STWs and began to sell water to nearby smaller cultivators, or lease in land from such cultivators, giving rise to a water market and seasonal tenancy arrangements. Thus, the STWs helped handsomely in expanding boro cultivation, and, in turn, the economic consolidation of middle peasants.

Between 1977 and 1986, when tube well irrigation increased by only about 60 per cent in all of India, it went up by 575 per cent in West Bengal (Bandyopadhyay 2003, 881-3). The middle peasants also controlled the panchayat-based beneficiary committees allocating the use of publicly-funded agrarian supplies at subsidized rates, including water from deep tube wells, seeds, fertilizers, and diesel pump sets, all of which were essential for the new farming techniques.

Post-Green Revolution, agriculture became increasingly commoditized and dependent on expensive inputs—chemical fertilizers, high-yield seeds, machinery, irrigation facilities—that needed to be bought from the market, unlike before when peasants saved grains from previous harvest for seeds, used household waste as manure, and cattle for plough. Increased costs of production and fluctuation of prices made agriculture unviable for a large section of
small cultivators. This was a general predicament across the country. Even when agricultural
prices stayed above the costs of production, the threat of price fluctuation made them
vulnerable. Higher prices of non-land inputs necessitated the dependence of small cultivators
on subsidized provisions distributed by the panchayat. All these factors increased the
dependence of marginal peasants and the landless on middle peasants.

The Left government provided the right to cultivate, but not access to inputs. This points to
another unfulfilled aspect of the land reform agenda—the promise to follow up land reforms
with broader agrarian reforms involving the setting up of new support institutions providing
key inputs and credit to poor cultivators. Following Operation Barga, new amendments were
incorporated into the Land Reform Act to provide for the formation of Cooperative Common
Service Societies by poor peasants or sharecroppers. Membership was limited to those who
owned or cultivated one acre or less as these societies were intended as a source of credit as
well agricultural inputs (seeds, manure, plough, and other agricultural implements) to the
poor cultivators (section 48A). These were in addition to the Cooperative Farming Societies
with government-funded subsidies on rent, seeds, manure, and access to credit which already
existed. The rationale provided was that the Cooperative Farming Societies were controlled
by richer cultivators; they did not benefit the marginal cultivators and the bargadars. The
Cooperative Common Service Societies would provide an alternate institutional support
system to meet the credit needs of the poor cultivators and wean them away from usurious
moneylenders. Successive LFGs tried to infuse some steam into this proposal through
involvement of local banks and panchayats, giving priority to assignees of vested land and
bargadars for credit, and other benefits. These measures however did not take root, leaving
the poorer cultivators without access to a proper support network, and dependent on their
richer colleagues for consumption loans as well capital for cultivation. In very recent times (post-2000) the flourishing of micro-credit organizations has mitigated the problem to a small extent. However, even their functioning is dependent on the middle peasants as endorsement of panchayat representatives are needed on a number of transactions. In sum, the bulk of the credit needs of the poor cultivators are not met by institutions, but by richer cultivators at high rates.68

### 3.4.7 Organization of Agricultural Workers

According to the CPI(M)’s program, the agrarian movement is to be built centred on landless laborers and poor peasants, yet in Bengal they remain under the dominance of the richer sections of the peasantry. The Party’s decision not to independently organize the agricultural laborers, potentially the most militant and revolutionary class in the countryside, is clear evidence of the attenuation of its revolutionary zeal. The broad peasant unity strategy without independent mobilization of agricultural laborers, has, in effect, facilitated the covert domination of the richer peasantry and consolidated the leadership role of middle peasants. No meaningful mass campaigns have been launched for the rights of agricultural laborers, so that agricultural laborers and marginal peasants could gradually come to be the central constituencies of the peasant movement, as envisaged by the Party program.

This situation is surprising given the work of CPI(M) among agricultural workers in the rest of the country, including its other stronghold, Kerala, where agricultural workers are organized under a separate class organization. The need for a separate organization for

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68 Out of a total need of 100 billion rupees for agricultural credit per year in West Bengal, only 8-9% comes from institutional sources, such as banks. The rest came largely from informal money-lending sources (Bandyopadhyay 2007).
agricultural workers at the national level was recognized by the CPI(M) in the seventies, when the numbers of agricultural laborers across India were swelling to unprecedented levels.\(^{69}\) The intensification of capitalist farming under Green Revolution and consequent land alienation had turned many small and marginal peasants into landless or near landless laborers. Movements of agricultural laborers demanding better wages and homestead sites attracted national attention. In this backdrop, the CPI(M) decided in the 1970s that the “formation of a separate all India class organization for agricultural laborers had become an organizational imperative” (Surjeet 1995, 218-20).\(^{70}\) As a result, All India Agricultural Workers Union (AIAWU) was formed in 1982.\(^{71}\) The basis of this new, independent, national union for agricultural laborers was the realization that agricultural laborers had become a distinct class in the agrarian sector—in fact the largest, most oppressed and most militant class—and that the task of agrarian revolution could not be completed without organizing this class. It was however decided to leave it to the different state units of the

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\(^{69}\) Total number of agricultural workers in India increased from 47.48 million in 1971 to 74.6 million in 1991, constituting more than 45% of the total agrarian population in 1991 as opposed to roughly 25% in 1961 (Surjeet 1995, 226).

\(^{70}\) The first time Kisan Sabha formally recognized the need for a separate labor union for agricultural workers was in 1954 in its Moga session. One of the resolutions noted, “It is time that agricultural laborers are brought in large number into the organization of agrarian movement. This can best be done by organizing them in their separate agricultural labor union. In view of the division into a separate class of wage workers and of their separate class demands from the peasantry, they require their own organization to fight better for their own demands besides their common demand for land.” This resolution was not acted upon and the issue assumed renewed urgency in late-70s and early 80s. Twenty years later, the Sikar session of CPI(M)-led AIKS in 1974 called the “attention of all units of the Sabha towards the problems of agricultural workers and the necessity of reorienting the peasant movement, making the agricultural workers and poor peasants as the main basis of its work.” The central kisan council meeting in Trivandrum in 1974-75 took serious note of “the new turn in rural agrarian movement, where the wage problems of agricultural laborers are becoming the main issues for kisan and agricultural labor unions” (Surjeet 1995, 223).

\(^{71}\) Even before the formation of AIAWU, party-led trade unions representing agricultural laborers existed in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Tripura, and Punjab and those unions became respective state units of the AIAWU.
Kisan Sabha “to decide whether it was necessary or not to form separate state agricultural laborer organization, after considering the concrete conditions obtaining in the respective states” (Resolutions passed by AIKS Council meeting at Trichur 1980, Surjeet 1995, 112-3).

Eight state units were formed immediately with a total membership of roughly 0.8 million at its inaugural conference in 1982. Gradually, a state unit was established in every major state in India except West Bengal. The West Bengal unit of Kisan Sabha decided not to form an independent agricultural laborers union on the grounds that it would prove disruptive to peasant unity. They held that the contradictions between the richer and poorer sections of the peasantry had been minimized through their collective struggle against landlords. Therefore, it was better to organize all sections of the peasantry under one union. That the hardships faced by agricultural laborers needed serious attention was recognized, but those were to be tackled through united struggles. Undoubtedly, this approach was based on the realities of Bengal’s peculiar class structure, its landholding pattern, and on the lessons learnt from Party’s experience in others states like Kerala where it had been involved in organizing the laborers separately even before the formation of AIAWU. The average landholding size of the Bengali middle peasant is smaller than a middle peasant elsewhere in India. In a small-peasant economy, the plight of laborers can only be improved if the plight of the employing peasants can be improved. The material well-being of the two is positively correlated. The Bengal Party held that it would be incorrect to set the two classes on a potentially

72 The 15 major Indian states with a separate CPI(M)-led agricultural worker’s union are Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Haryana, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Tripura, and Uttar Pradesh.
73 Interview with the state secretary of West Bengal Pradeshi Krishak Sabha, 25 June 2005. Interview with member of West Bengal legislative assembly representing All India Forward Block, Sitai, 1 May 2005.
74 Interview with Zilla Panchayat member representing the CPI(M), 24 South Paraganas district, 8 July 2005.
antagonistic path by organizing them in separate organizations and chose not to pit agrarian laborers against cultivating peasants.

Here the Bengal CPI(M) adopted a conciliatory approach—a friendly fusion of the interests of the rural poor with those of the not-so-poor—along the lines of the pre-independence Kisan Sabha, which was trying to bring together the peasantry under the leadership of rich and middle peasantry. However, an ongoing debate persists within the Party on the need to have a separate class organization for agricultural laborers. In its review, after the sixth consecutive victory of the LF in West Bengal in 2001, the CPI(M) Central Committee observed that there was a necessity to strengthen work among agricultural workers and raise their political consciousness:

> We must overcome the reluctance to organize the agricultural workers and pay attention to develop their political consciousness. Similar initiative has to be taken to draw unorganized workers into the organized movement both in the towns and villages (CPI(M) 2001)

### 3.4.8 New Class Contradictions

It is clear that a by-product of the strategy of broad peasant unity and the containment of class contradictions in the countryside has been to ignore the increasing differentiation of the peasantry under the impact of capitalist agriculture. Several scholars studying the rural agrarian scene have pointed to new material conflicts emerging in rural Bengal under the impact of agrarian growth spurt and new political realities (Rogaly, et al. 1999). 1990s and

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75 Swami Sahajanand, a leader of AIKS, had argued in the 1940s that it was correct to regard laborers as peasants and peasants as laborers and to have them struggle together as the process of depeasantization had made the demarcation between the two classes almost impossible (Sahajananda and Hauser 1994, 59-60).
2000s have shown trends of increase in the numbers of landless laborers and marginal peasants, increase in the percentage of land owned by middle peasants, decline in tenant cultivation, significant leasing in and leasing out of land by small and marginal peasants, rise in seasonal tenancy, rise in absentee landlords, continued prevalence of usury—most of which point to the maturing of new class contradictions in the countryside (Rogaly & Rafique 2003; Bandyopadhyay 2003; Rogaly et al. 1999; Bhaumik 1993). Reverse tenancy, where richer peasants lease in land from marginal peasants, has been a definite trend. In Bardhaman district, 70,000 cases of reverse tenancy, where marginal cultivators and bargadars sold or leased out their tiny pieces of land to richer landowners were reported by the district administration. Similar trends have been identified in North Dinajpur, Malda, and Midnapur. Reverse tenancy strengthens the hold of the richer peasants and continues the trend of depeasantization which the land reform program was designed to arrest.

By the beginning of this century, nearly 15 per cent of land reform beneficiaries had either sold their land or surrendered their cultivation rights and shifted to non-farming livelihoods (Hanstad and Nielsen 2004). Rich peasants and a smaller section of middle peasants have also rented land back from sharecroppers and marginal peasants for capitalist farming due to the increasing inability of sharecroppers and marginal peasants to afford agricultural inputs.

In place of CPI(M)’s claim of minimized contradictions between the agricultural laborers and the rural rich, these trends point to increasing socio-economic and political polarization between the middle peasants, who control the Party and the local administration, and agricultural laborers and marginal peasants in many parts of the state (Bhattacharyya 2009). Instances of agricultural laborer discontent in CPI(M) strongholds of Bardhaman (Karanda), Birbhum (Suchapur), and Midnapur (Chotta...
Angaria) offer glimpses of an underlying contradiction between the rural poor and the middle peasantry that has not yet solidified into a movement. The increasing appeal of Maoist political groups in many districts of Bengal is partly a political manifestation of this contradiction. The CPI(M) rural leadership has stifled and, in a few cases, terrorized agricultural laborers from airing their discontent outside Party forums; independent initiatives to organize agricultural laborers have also been thwarted (e.g. Dhanekhali, Hooghly). 76

An event that reveals the growing polarization was the 2007 food-riots. The confrontation started in the CPI(M)-dominant districts of Birbhum, Bankura, and Bardhaman and eventually spread to 10 districts, when villagers violently attacked fair-price shop owners who, with the collusion of corrupt local leaders and food department officials, diverted fair-priced food for the rural poor from the public distribution system. Widespread expressions of anger and discontent against this led to violence against party leaders and offices across the state (Outlook 29 October 2007; multiple interviews during field research).

In 2011, the Left Front lost power in the West Bengal legislative assembly elections after 34 years of uninterrupted rule. The proximate cause of this defeat was the alienation of CPI(M)’s rural peasant base due to the Left Front government’s aggressive pursuit of a new industrialization agenda, even at the cost of forceful take over of fertile lands from peasant cultivators. The repression of peasant resistance in Singur and Nandigram and its political fallout eroded the CPI(M)’s rural support considerably and heightened the disenchantment of left-minded intellectuals. The media and the opposition used the opportunity to further

76 Interview with central committee member, CPI(ML) liberation, Kolkata, 24 June 2005.
wedge the growing disconnect between the CPI(M) and its rural constituency. But the long-term cause of the Party’s disengagement from the rural poor was its gradual yet distinctive middle-class turn.

### 3.4.9 Summary

There is wide consensus that the land reform agenda was not carried to its full potential in Bengal. On the whole, land reforms brought an end to the *jotedar-zamindar* domination and freed the poorer cultivators and bargadars from their oppressive hold. It made the lives of those at the lower echelons of rural Bengal better, economically and politically. However, the emancipatory potential emanating from the change in the structure of land ownership did not percolate all the way down to poor peasants, sharecroppers, and landless laborers. The *jotedar* who was the landowner-cum-moneylender is long gone, but middle peasants exercise similar modes of domination by control of land, inputs, capital, and commodity market.

Tenancy reforms for bargadars brought them security of tenure and the guarantee of a certain percentage of the crop; however, it did not end relations of dependency. In the absence of more radical land struggles, the gradual abandonment of the land to the tiller slogan, and the continued dependence on the local politicians and middle peasants for various inputs and machinery, sharecropping has reproduced semi-feudal forms of labor control.

It seems clear that the CPI(M) has not been able to continue its land reform agenda with its earlier vigor, while basking in the legacies of previous land reform initiatives and relatively impressive agricultural growth figures of the 1980s. The 1990s have not witnessed any innovative land struggle or the continuation of the land reform program, which is essential if poor peasants and laborers are to be saved from subsistence existence.
The containment of class contradictions within the Party fora has meant that the CPI(M) currently represents the interests of both the rural propertied class and the poor peasantry in West Bengal. The mediation of the Party has helped to regulate the battle to advance competing rural class interests within the framework of a benign, but unequal class compromise. Central to the building of this friendly negotiation of competing interests is the clientelistic delivery of welfare goods where the poor depend on the rural middle class for state-provided benefits.

The Bengali middle class with its characteristic left-wing mentality, however, is far more considerate of the interests of the lower classes than their counterparts elsewhere. Communism and left-wing ideas enjoy a level of acceptance in Bengal that is unrivalled in the rest of the country. The upper echelons of the Bengali society are not congenitally averse to socialism or communism, as it is elsewhere, even in states like Kerala. Quite on the contrary, their affinities are with the broad Left and Left politics takes place under the political and cultural hegemony of the bhadralok. This is precisely why such a friendly mediation of contradictory class relationship is possible within the overarching ideological framework of Marxism-Leninism.

CPI(M)’s conciliatory impulses has curtailed the possibility of a neat alignment of competing class interests around different political parties, leaving opposition parties without a cohesive class character. The lack of a class constituency is the reason why the Congress Party in the state withered away and why it attracted charges of being hand-in-glove with the Communists. It is also for the same reason that the Trinamul Congress (TMC)—a breakaway faction of the Congress and the chief opposition to the CPI(M) in Bengal—is a mishmash of disparate ideas, without any coherent program. The TMC has the profile of a left party in
urban areas, where it has taken up demands of urban poor, and the profile of a centre to right-wing party in some rural areas. On its part, the CPI(M) has, in the recent times, stretched its arms wide open even to the big bourgeoisie, expanding its base over a bigger social space.

Pro-poor redistributive reforms do not facilitate class conciliation and class conciliation in turn does not auger well for pro-poor reforms; on the contrary, pro-poor reforms intensify class contradictions, as the act of taking from the haves to give to the have-nots hardens class antagonisms. It is no surprise then that under a societal framework of class conciliation, redistributive action has wilted in West Bengal.
Chapter 4
The Evolution of Radical Politics in Kerala

4.1 Introduction

The content of social citizenship in the Indian state of Kerala cannot be understood without reference to the historical forces that have shaped its origin and gradual consolidation. This chapter chronicles the emergence and maturing of Kerala’s social democratic welfare regime as a natural corollary of the evolution of radical politics in the state. The voluminous literature on the “Kerala Model” has highlighted the multifarious factors that have contributed to Kerala’s unique development trajectory. However, most of these offer a segmented view, highlighting or negating the decisive influence of one or more factors on Kerala’s track record of high human development despite its low economic development. While recognizing its myriad sources, the attempt here is to construct an encompassing narrative of the evolution of Kerala’s redistributive preferences.

Section One of this chapter is a survey of the material and social foundations of class formation in Kerala during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, through an analysis of the transmogrification of land relations under the British rule and the emergent socio-cultural changes in its highly caste stratified society. Against this structural backdrop, Section Two delineates the arrival of the left-wing political groups and their efforts to kindle political consciousness and build class organizations among the rural poor in Kerala between 1920s and mid-1940s. Section Three chronicles the era of class struggle (1940s–late-1970s) during which the organized agrarian and working classes confronted the propertied classes in a series of militant political struggles to wrest important victories from capital as well as the
state. Section Four analyzes the shift from class struggle to class compromise in the 1980s concentrating attention on its political and economic motivations and its impact on Kerala’s welfare zeal.

4.2 Land and Social Relations in Late Colonial Kerala

Kerala was formed out of three different political entities: the princely states of Travancore and Cochin ruled by local kings, and Malabar, part of the Madras presidency, under the direct control of the British.\(^1\) Soon after India’s independence, Travancore and Cochin joined the Indian union to form the state of Travancore-Cochin. Later, as part of linguistic reorganization of Indian states, the Malabar district of Madras presidency was joined with Travancore-Cochin to create the state of Kerala, bringing all Malayalam-speaking people into one state, on 1 November 1956.\(^2\)

Although sharing a common language and a shared cultural legacy, the three constituent parts of Kerala differed markedly from each other in levels of socio-economic development. During the nineteenth century, Malabar drifted into relative stagnation and, at independence,

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\(^1\) Princely states were nominally sovereign political entities ruled by a local king under British suzerainty, as opposed to the British provinces in India which were ruled directly by the British crown through a viceroy. A British Resident functioned as advisor to the kings of the princely states, exerting considerable influence, albeit indirectly, in the day-to-day administration of princely states. Princely states paid an annual tribute to the British in return for protection from both internal and external threats to the dynasty.

\(^2\) Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar roughly correspond to the Southern, Central, and Northern parts of today’s Kerala. Southern districts of Thiruvananthapuram, Kollam, Alappuzha, Pathanamthitta, Idukki, and Kottayam were part of erstwhile Travancore. The central districts of Ernakulam and Thrissur were part of the princely state of Cochin, and the northern districts of Wyanad, Malappuram, Palakkad, Kozhikode, and Kannur were part of Malabar. In addition to Travancore, Cochin and Malabar, the Malayalam-speaking areas of south Canara district (Kasargod taluk) also became part of Kerala under linguistic reorganization, and the Tamil-speaking southern regions of old Travancore were excluded.
it was considered ‘backward’ in comparison to Travancore and Cochin. Differences in the nature of British intervention in their agrarian systems—direct in Malabar and indirect in Travancore-Cochin—recast their agrarian structures in distinct ways. Under the British land policy, Malabar developed a fiercely exploitative land tenure system with over three quarters of those dependent on land forming part of the exploited tenant classes. In contrast, the commercial interests of the British and the political interests of the ruling kings coalesced to create a predominant class of peasant proprietors or owner-cultivators (more than half of the agricultural population) in Travancore (Varghese 1970). These differences in agrarian structure interacted with locally specific socio-cultural features setting the stage for differential growth of radical politics in Kerala’s constituent regions.

4.2.1 Travancore

The history of modern Kerala begins with King Marthanda Varma bringing the territory of Travancore under a centralized and powerful monarchy from the scattered feudalism of medieval times. Marthanda Varma annexed numerous petty principalities and, by mid-nineteenth century, brought under state control three-fourths of all cultivated land, formerly owned by the feudal nobles (Nair chieftains known as Madampis, Thampis, Pillais). The rise of the centralized monarchy and the declining political and material power of the feudal nobles resulted in open confrontation between the two. Under threat from neighbouring Kings (Mysore) and from rebellious feudal nobles, the Travancore dynasty entered into an agreement of paramountcy with the British in 1805. This antagonistic arraying of elite interests laid the political ground for the early introduction of many progressive reforms in an otherwise highly conservative society. Determined to weaken the feudal institutions of nobility and landlordism and to buttress royal power, the Travancore kings initiated reforms
in land, education, health, caste relations, and religious toleration that took away the
privileges of the landed gentry and granted new rights to the masses.\(^3\)

In early nineteenth century, the landholding structure in Travancore resembled European
feudalism but it also mirrored the highly caste-centered social and economic division of
power in Travancore. The upper caste Namboodiris and Nairs were the large-landowners,
known as Janmis, owning about 20% of the total cultivated land. The remaining 80% and the
waste lands known as “temple lands” (pandaravaka)\(^4\) were under the control of the
Government of Travancore, cultivated by rent paying tenant farmers. Nair chieftains were the
principal holders of such land on superior tenancy rights. Nairs and Namboodiris thus owned
or controlled almost all of the land in Travancore, making it a monopoly of the upper castes.
The Syrian Christians and the Ezhavas (the dominant among the lower caste groups), were
tenant cultivators (kudiyan) of the upper caste landlords and formed part of the middle layer
of the agrarian hierarchy. Parayas and Pulayas, the former “untouchable” castes were
agricultural laborers (kudikidappukar), cultivating lands under the possession of upper-caste
landlords and tenant farmers as cultivation-related physical labor indicated low ritual status.

\(^3\) Scholarly disagreements abound on whether Travancore kings were forced to adopt these
progressive policies in land, education, and health care by indirect pressure from the British
(to contain political instability and promote commercialization of agriculture), or to
consolidate their own position vis-a-vis the rebellious Nair nobles, or due to their
“enlightened benevolence” (See Chasin, et al. 1991). For an argument that places the
explanatory weight of Kerala’s contemporary social policy exceptionalism on nineteenth
century welfare measures undertaken by Travancore kings, see Desai (2005).

\(^4\) These were the lands forcefully brought under state control by Marthanda Varma after he
annexed petty principalities and subdued rebelling feudal chiefs. He dedicated these lands to
the favorite deity of his dynasty, Sri Padmanabha; hence the name “temple lands.” Tenures
of state land were known by different names: pattam, otti, kudijenmom, danam etc.
(Eashvvaraiah 1993, 116).
From mid-nineteenth century onwards, the social structure of Travancore began to change, owing to a variety of factors, most notably the impact of an emerging market economy, the diffusion of elementary education through protestant missionary activity, and a resultant social awakening among the oppressed castes. The land reform policies adopted by the Travancore kings and the infusion of British capital into the economy, starting 1850, removed the material basis of the old order. In 1865, in a historic land reform proclamation known as the “Pattom Proclamation,” the Travancore king conferred full ownership rights on those tenant cultivators of government land who cultivated more than three quarters of all cropped land. Although the state tenants had virtual ownership of the land, they cultivated as rent-paying cultivators and did not have the right to transfer or sell their holdings. The Pattom Proclamation offered a comprehensive set of full ownership rights to the state tenants including the right to divide, mortgage, transfer, and sell the land (Varghese 1970).\(^5\) By the closing decades of the nineteenth century, tenants in private Janmi estates were also given similar rights. The conferring of full ownership on tenants resulted in the creation of a class of owner-cultivators or peasant proprietors. The number of owner-cultivators nearly doubled between 1865 and 1900; they owned two-thirds of all cultivated land. Thus, by late nineteenth century the Travancore tenants came to enjoy proprietary rights of the lands they cultivated, when tenants in other parts of India, notably Malabar, had not even received security of cultivation rights. Similarly, the ability to buy and sell cultivable land resulted in the emergence of a land market fairly early on in Travancore.

The primary beneficiaries of these changes were the Ezhavas and the Syrian Christians who from tenants became small-holding, owner-cultivators. They were hard-working and

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\(^5\) Modi et al (1983) have compared these reforms to Japan’s post-Meiji Restoration land reforms.
entrepreneurial, and had prior personal experience in farming, unlike the Janmis. As their profits increased due to higher prices and output, they made significant investments in buying up land from declining landlords and in expanding agriculture.\(^6\) Taking advantage of loans and tax concessions offered by the Travancore government in the reclamation of waste and forest lands, they extended cultivation of paddy in the western low-lands, coconut and tapioca in the midland, and cash crops like rubber, coffee and cardamom in the slopes of eastern hills, which were largely uninhabited and uncultivated till the late nineteenth century. The abolition of state monopoly on the trade of plantation commodities augmented the profitability of the plantation sector as British patronage encouraged the development of tea, rubber, coffee, pepper, cardamom, and tobacco plantations.\(^7\) The wealthier among the owner-cultivators became capitalist farmers cultivating large tracts of paddy or plantation-land with the help of agricultural laborers. Thus, capitalist production and trade of a variety of cash crops helped to rapidly commercialize agriculture in Sothern Kerala. Gradually, the widening reach of education due to Missionary activity, the beginnings of an indigenous credit system, better transportation and communication facilities, and the possibility of employment in the

\(^6\) Land acquisition by Syrian Christians and Ezhavas was helped by the general decline of landowning castes such as Namboodiris and Nairs, and, in particular, by the legalization of the partition of Nair joint family properties (\textit{tharawad}) in 1925. These properties were undividable and unsellable before. The process of land diffusion to Ezhavas and Christians continued into the mid-twentieth century.

\(^7\) Cash crops like pepper and spices had been cultivated in Kerala for centuries. However, with significant British investment and rising prices in late nineteenth century, plantation crops like rubber, tea, and coffee saw significant expansion in the hilly regions, which were not suitable for paddy. The majority of tea estates, which were larger in size, were owned by the British, while the cultivation of rubber, coffee, and cardamom (in smaller estates averaging 3 acres each) were predominantly under Syrian Christian farmers (Nossiter 1982, 53-54). The comparatively advantageous crop prices triggered a steady shift from the cultivation of food crops (rice, cereals) to cash crops across the state. In a span of four decades, cash crops came to occupy about 46% of Travancore’s total cultivated area—a significant shift from subsistence production of food crops to capitalist production of cash crops (Varghese 1970, 109).
public sector attracted sections of the upwardly mobile owner-cultivator class into service professions. By the 1930s, a small but noticeable non-agricultural professional middle-class engaged in banking, teaching, agro-processing and other industries emerged from these communities.

On the flipside, the shift from consumption-oriented production to production for markets prepared the ground for the proletarianization of agricultural labor. Increasing demand for labor in parts of Travancore, which witnessed intensive capitalist cultivation of wetland paddy and plantation crops, attracted laborers from the untouchable castes who were eager to break free of traditional arrangements of tied labor. Plucking of tea leaves and daily tapping of rubber trees were labor-intensive tasks that required a large pool of laborers. At the same time, the newly powerful owner-cultivators, eager to claim their higher ritual standing, gradually withdrew from cultivation-related physical labor. They hired agricultural laborers to till their land, even when the holding size was small enough to not warrant outside labor.

The growth of agro-based industries, with British patronage like coir and cashew processing

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8 The land reforms of mid to late-1800s had left lower forms of tenancies (primarily tied labor) untouched, thus not entirely eliminating feudal landlordism in Travancore. The abolition of slavery in Travancore in 1855, however, minimally loosened agricultural labor from the entrenched grip of patron-client loyalties.

9 Travancore’s smallholding owner-cultivators’ aversion to physical labor invited the label of “gentleman farmer” in the 1931 All India Census Report: “The majority of the agricultural holdings in Travancore . . . are so small that the cultivators can attend to the farming operations themselves without the help of hired labor. But the Travancore cultivator, though his holding may only be a few cents, is, as a result, a gentleman farmer. He does not like to soil his hand by handling a plough . . . that is why we find here a larger number of agricultural laborers than the smallness of the size of the majority of the holdings warrants” (India 1932).
centres in commercial towns such as Alappuzha (formerly Alleppey) and Kollam (formerly Quilon), also accelerated the formation of a class of agro-industrial workers.\footnote{10}

In the paddy-cultivating western coastal regions of Travancore, known as Kuttanad, agricultural laborers emerged as a distinct, exploited class. Here, the rise in the prices of paddy and the incentives offered by the Travancore government led to the reclamation of large tracts of low-lying, water-logged areas for cultivation between 1880s and 1930s. Conversion of wetlands was a capital-intensive enterprise and could only be undertaken in large tracts of land (\textit{padasekharams}) by commercial farmers.\footnote{11} Cultivation in wetlands was similarly labor intensive. Erecting water-tight bamboo and clay embankments (\textit{bunds}) around blocks of submerged land and draining the water inside required the back-breaking toil of a large pool of agricultural laborers.\footnote{12} However, working in the fields could not be the sole source of livelihood for laborers because of the seasonal nature of wet-land cultivation. In the late 1930s, in the aftermath of the Depression, labor livelihoods became more vulnerable. The proportion of agricultural laborers in the agrarian population of Travancore rose from 20\% in 1901 to 31\% in 1931, one of the highest in India (Varghese 1970, 128). In Kuttanad, it was higher, forming close to 70\% of those engaged in agriculture and 44\% of the entire work force (Tharamangalam 1981, 19). The topographical and production-related features of these low-lying wet lands, different from the rest of the rice cultivating areas of

\footnote{10} The Travancore Coir Workers Association (formed in 1925) was the first trade union in Kerala and it led general strikes in the Alappuzha-based coir industry starting 1938.\footnote{11} Paddy fields held by Kuttanad farmers ranged roughly between 4 and 960 hectares (Tharamangalam 1981, 24).\footnote{12} See Tharamangalam (1981) for a vivid account of the special character of paddy cultivation in Kuttanad and the conditions that led to agrarian class conflict.
Kerala, thus contributed to a sharp differentiation of between large capitalist farmers and landless agricultural laborers, by the 1930s.\(^\text{13}\)

The conditions were ripe for political mobilization of landless laborers and a labor-capital encounter between an army of landless agricultural laborers and their capitalist employers. Left-wing mobilization of agricultural laborers began in Kuttanad in the early 1940s through the work of the first agricultural workers union in Kerala, which was formed in 1942. By the 1950s, laborers became an organized political force, unlike the rest of India where they remained tied to their patrons. Kuttanad eventually produced one of the strongest agricultural labor movements in India, by creating a politically conscious, organized, and militant class of agricultural laborers fully detached from their vertical loyalties and interacting with their employers in the framework of capitalist-contractual relations. The agricultural labor movement was pivotal in the formation of a revolutionary working class from among the rural poor in Kerala.

In sum, early land reform set in motion important changes to the agrarian structure of Travancore. In Kuttanad, it created classes of large capitalist farmers and landless agricultural laborers. Elsewhere in Travancore, it paved the way for the rise of a predominant class of independent, small-holding, owner-cultivators, ushered in capitalist agriculture in a society characterized by feudal relations, and laid the ground for the proletarianization of agricultural labor. Rapid commercialization of agriculture resulted in the emergence of a cash economy connected to world markets and the maturing of capitalist relations in production processes. The combined effect of these material and social changes ended the

\(^{13}\) Curiously, the small-holding, owner-cultivator—the dominant agrarian class in the rest of Travancore—was absent in Kuttanad (Tharamangalam 1981, 90).
monopoly of Hindu upper castes/feudal landlords, diffused land ownership among a wider set of social groups, paved the way for the rise of an entrepreneurial middle class and a proletarianized working class, thus releasing agricultural labor from the grip of pre-capitalist social institutions.

4.2.2 Malabar

Malabar witnessed the most oppressive land system and agrarian relations among the three constituent parts of modern Kerala. It was under British direct rule roughly from 1792 until India’s independence in 1947. Although it had been a prosperous region through its long trade relations with the Arab world and Europe, the comparative neglect and deprivation under the British resulted in Malabar’s economic decline. The land system in pre-British Malabar consisted of three principal right-holders: the Janmi (landlord), the kanakkaran (superior tenant), and the verumpattakkaran (cultivating tenant).¹⁴ Despite hierarchical caste and land relations, Malabar society remained politically stable and economically integrated. Ancient customs were followed and upheld by all social groups. Land ownership was not absolute ownership in the European sense, but joint proprietorship among the three principal land holders, each taking an equal share of the produce.¹⁵ Joint ownership was evident in that tenure holders below the Janmi—the kanakkaran and the verumpattakkaran—had the right to

¹⁴ Admittedly, this is a simplified picture of a complex land tenure system. Often, several layers of sub-tenures existed under each class of landholders and in some cases one of the principal tenures was absent altogether. Below the tenant cultivators were two agrarian classes who did not have rights in land: the cherujanmakkar (service castes) and the agricultural slaves who worked as laborers.

¹⁵ This interpretation of land rights in pre-British Malabar was first advanced by William Logan, one of the British officials who headed a special commission studying the agrarian situation in Malabar, which submitted its report in 1882 (Logan, et al. 2000, vol. 2: 19). For a review of different interpretations of land rights in Malabar, see Radhakrishnan (1989, 24-27).
freely sell or sublet their interests in land (Prakash 1988, 56). Even within the framework of joint proprietorship with an equal right to the produce, the superiority attached to the Janmi’s land rights and the various ranks and prerogatives entitled to the Janmi ensured that the land system, and society in general, remained hierarchical and oppressive. Nonetheless, social customs governing agrarian relations had the weight of law and Janmis could not evict a tenant except on legitimate grounds such as non-payment of rent.

Similar to Travancore, the land system in Malabar followed a caste-centered division of labor. Namboodiri Brahmins, who ranked highest in the caste hierarchy, held superior land tenure, known as *janmam* (birthright) signifying their hereditary, inalienable right to a fixed share of produce and to lord over all other occupants of land under him. The *Rajahs* (kings), *Naduvazhis* (local chieftains), and *Devaswom* (temple managements) were also considered part of the Janmi class. Their ritual status prohibited the Janmis from undertaking cultivation labor. Like the zamindars of pre-British Bengal, the Janmis used their numerous socio-political privileges and prerogatives, in addition to their rights as large landlords (*thampuran*), to perpetuate their social domination over other classes and castes.

The next layer of land tenure was known as *kanam*, enjoyed by the kanakkaran, the supervisor or protector of land. The kanakkaran held marginally inferior land rights and social status compared to the Janmi and belonged mostly to the martial Nair caste. The kanakkaran not only oversaw the lands of a Janmi but also protected him and his property.

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16 For an overview of the multiple legitimation-myths on how land system in Malabar came to be so caste-centric and upper-caste dominated, see Radhakrishnan (1989, 24-40).

17 In its widest sense, the term ‘Nair’ refers to a large number of sub-castes between the Brahmins and the lower castes, not all of which enjoyed land rights nor engaged in martial occupations. The high-status Nairs were janmis themselves or the kanakkars of Namboodiris and royal families, while the low-status Nairs were service castes of artisans, potters, barbers, weavers, etc.
from armed attacks. Kanam tenures were usually for twelve years and were renewable. The Janmis considered the kanakkaran as belonging to the class of tenants (kudiyan), while the lower tenants referred to the kanakkaran and the Janmi as the landlord (thampuran).

Verumpattam was the lowest type of land tenure that entailed actual cultivation rights with a simple lease of land for a period of one year. Verumpattakkar were drawn mostly from the lower castes, primarily the Thiyyas and Muslim peasants, known as Mappilas, in South Malabar.\(^{18}\) Below verumpattakkar were agricultural laborers, who were drawn from the polluting castes of Thiyya, Paraya and Pulaya (also known as Cherumar). The Thiyyas were casual laborers while the “untouchable” Parayas and Pulayas were agricultural slaves of the Janmis. These laborers held no rights in land, but all tenure-holding classes relied on their physical labor. Figure 4.1 shows the relative size of the principal social groups in British Malabar.

\(^{18}\) Mappila is alternatively spelt as ‘Moplah’ and ‘Mopla.’ They were the product of religious conversion of Malabar natives by Arabs, who came for trade, starting in the thirteenth century. By the nineteenth century, they were a prosperous group of native Muslims. They were mostly tenant-cultivators under Hindu landlords. During the mid-nineteenth century, when agrarian slavery was abolished, large-scale conversion of freed slaves, who were agricultural laborers, into Islam swelled the ranks of Mappilas. See Dale (1980).
The Janmi received an equal share of the produce from each of his kanakkarans and, likewise, the kanakkaran received an equal part from each of their multiple verumpattakkars. However, the verumpattakkaran received only his single share. The multiplicity of shares entitled to the Janmi and the kanakkaran facilitated their accumulation of a highly disproportionate surplus from the toil of the verumpattakkaran who was entitled to much less (Radhakrishnan 1989). The close nexus between land status and caste status provided the Janmi the means to perpetuate his unquestioned dominance in all walks of life, while it left the low caste under-tenants and laborers reeling under the double burden of social and economic exploitation.

British interventions in this agrarian structure produced agrarian tension in Malabar. As elsewhere in their colonies, the familiar imperial imperative to find a locally powerful political ally and ensure smooth accretion of land revenue led the British in early nineteenth century to confer proprietary rights on the Janmi class, subject to payment of land revenue to

**Figure 4.1 Caste Composition of Malabar in 1871**

![Caste Composition of Malabar in 1871](image)

Source: (Radhakrishnan 1989, 37).
the colonial government (Namboodiripad, 1985, 173). The conferring of absolute proprietorship, in the European sense, on the non-cultivating Janmi class in effect restored and strengthened the landlord oppression which had abated under the Mysore rulers, just before the arrival of the British. In addition, the British courts interpreted the traditional agrarian customs in favor of the Janmis. Emboldened by the political and legal backing of the colonial state, the Janmis began to actively tinker with the customary rights of other landholders, namely the intermediaries and the actual cultivators. Their decreasing dependence on the Nair intermediaries for legitimacy and power led them to abandon the kanam tenure altogether in favor of the verumpattam tenure. On the verumpattam tenure, the Janmis began to extract excessive rents, numerous illegal levies, and renewal fees as well as effect arbitrary evictions that impoverished the tenant cultivators. Janmis also acquired titles to vast tracts of uncultivated waste lands and their complete control over the terms of the lease reduced actual cultivators to the status of tenants-at-will. On the whole, both intermediary and cultivating tenants became insecure and exploited, and this created widespread peasant discontent in Malabar.

Thus, the changes in land relations under British rule reduced the lower-tenantry to the status of agricultural laborers in violation of customary rights. The verumpattam tenants were the worst hit as they bore the double brunt of exploitation by the Janmis and the kanam intermediaries (Radhakrishnan 1989). Also, Janmi oppression prevented the emergence of a

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19 A brief occupation by Muslim rulers of Mysore–Haider Ali and Tippu Sultan–in the late eighteenth century raised the self-awareness and collective identity among Mappilas as a distinct religious community oppressed by Hindu Janmis. Fearing religious persecution, the Janmis had become much subdued during this period and the mappilas increasingly unwilling to passively suffer under the traditional authority of their Hindu superiors.

20 The usual kanam leases were prepared in writing, for a period of twelve years, and was renewed without questions if the kanakkaran performed his duties (Varghese 1970).
land market and retarded agricultural productivity and expansion, despite Malabar’s rich natural resources and its status as a world leader in the export of pepper (Prakash 1988, 56). In fact, the lack of incentives for cultivators to increase productivity and the use of primitive farming practices led Malabar to near-famine conditions in the second half of the nineteenth century. Unavailability of employment outside the agrarian sector and a fast growing population added to the misery of the lower tenant. All these factors earned southern Malabar the reputation of being the “the most rack-rented country on the face of the earth” in a settlement report of 1900 (Quoted in Varghese 1970, 78, 192-8). Rent and tax payments constituted as high as 60% of the net agrarian income of Malabar, while it was a paltry 15% in Travancore. Owner-cultivators held only 8% of all landholdings in Malabar, while their counterparts in Travancore accounted for two-thirds of all cultivable land (Isaac and Tharakan 1986).

Thus, in contrast to Travancore, British intervention in Malabar strengthened the top of the agrarian hierarchy (Janmis) and weakened the bottom strata (verumpattakar). It created an agrarian structure where the impoverished classes (tenants-at-will and agricultural laborers) constituted over three-quarters of the agrarian population. Against this backdrop, a peasant movement developed in Malabar, gaining radical character in the 1930s, with the impoverished tenants as its chief social base. Malabar’s stagnation under the British and the strengthening of landlordism by British courts made it a cradle of militant peasant uprisings and, later on, of peasant mobilization under the communist party. Malabar witnessed the

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21 Namboodiripad (1984a, 175) compares the predicament of Malabar to that of Ireland under Britain.  
22 Malabar slipped from being a net exporter of food grains to a net importer of rice during this period (Logan, et al. 2000)
strongest agrarian movement, and eventually became the strongest base for the communist party in Kerala.

4.2.3 Cochin (Kochi)

True to its geographic location, sandwiched between Travancore and Malabar, Cochin was an amalgamation of its neighbours’ socio-economic features. Like Travancore, Cochin became a client state of the British in 1809, nominally independent, but advised by a British Resident. The landholding pattern in Cochin lay somewhere in the middle between Travancore and Malabar: Janmi landlords in the northern areas adjoining Malabar held about 60 percent of all cultivated land with their tenantry in oppressive conditions similar to those in Malabar. The remaining 40 percent of land, located closer to Travancore, was held by the government and cultivated by state tenants with security of tenure, similar to Travancore (Varghese 1970, 32). In the late nineteenth century, Cochin monarchs enacted land reforms similar to that of the 1865 proclamation in Travancore, bringing state tenants into direct contact with the state by conferring ownership on them. Cochin’s political system and patterns of political mobilization were similar to that of Travancore. Given Cochin’s lack of distinctive features as a region, Travancore and Malabar will form the core of my analysis below.
Table 4.1  Agrarian Structure of Kerala, 1901-1931
(as percentage of agricultural population)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>1901</th>
<th>1931</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Travancore</td>
<td>Non-cultivating owner</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Owner-cultivator</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tenant cultivator</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agricultural laborer</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cochin</td>
<td>Non-cultivating owner</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Owner-cultivator</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tenant cultivator</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agricultural laborer</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malabar</td>
<td>Non-cultivating owner</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Owner-cultivator</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tenant cultivator</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agricultural laborer</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (Varghese 1970; Kannan 1988, 46). The figure for tenant cultivators includes superior and inferior tenants, whose tenure privileges and cultivation roles varied vastly.

**4.2.4 Rigid Caste System and Early Mass Movements**

Nineteenth-century Kerala was a fiercely caste-bound society. There was a sharp distinction drawn between “clean” castes (Brahmin, Nair) and “polluting” castes (Ezhava or Thiyya, Pulaya, Paraya) and stringent guidelines were laid down regulating every aspect of inter-caste interaction. The “clean” Brahmins eschewed alcohol, non-vegetarian food, and manual labor, and fiercely protected their ritual purity by avoiding contact with “polluting” castes. The “polluting castes” were subjected to numerous socially demeaning practices such as
untouchability, unseeability, prohibition from entry into temples, ban from access to public services such as roads and wells, imposition of self-deprecating language and attire, and lack of access to education and government employment. The severity of caste oppression increased as the caste status went down the order of hierarchy (Pulayats, one of the lowest in the hierarchy had to keep a longer distance from the upper castes—at least 96 feet). Caste rules and regulations were fiercely enforced by the conservative upper castes who also controlled the livelihoods of “polluting” castes as landlords and patrons, reducing the latter to complete social and economic subservience.

Caste oppression and landlordism were woven closely together and they reinforced each other in the process of social domination. The rigid schematic division of the society into hierarchical castes and the conferring of land rights on the basis of that status meant that caste groups occupied different structural positions in the material and social order of Kerala. The severity of caste oppression prompted the nationalist leader Swami Vivekananda to refer to parts of Kerala as a “lunatic asylum” in 1897. In Travancore, the strangulating hold of the caste system began to ease up in the late nineteenth century due to a series of socio-economic changes. Emergence of a land market and commercialization of agriculture created new entrepreneurial possibilities for communities previously under the bondage of landlord oppression. These material changes also spawned cultural and social transformation. While Ezhavas and Syrian Christians became upwardly mobile from the mid-1800s, it set off a collective desire for social mobility and dignity in all those who were previously disadvantaged. Social awakening was also fostered by the spread of elementary education among the lower castes and the inculcation of liberal ideas through the activities of Christian

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23 Houtart and Lemercinier (1978) views the socio-religious movements of late nineteenth and early twentieth century as a reaction to capitalist mode of production.
missionaries. Starting 1830, a number of protestant missionary schools were established in different parts of Kerala. Between 1873 and 1893, the number of aided private schools, many with English as the medium of instruction, jumped from 20 to 1375 taking advantage of the introduction of state funding for private schools in the form of grants-in-aid (Lieten 1977, 7). Private schools, mostly run by Christian churches or missionaries, admitted lower castes and Christians as opposed to state-run schools in Travancore and Cochin which were originally reserved for upper-caste Hindus. A burgeoning awareness about education as a tool of social mobility became widespread. By the end of the nineteenth century, a generation of lower castes had received education, and it created the yearning for a decisive break from the stranglehold of the caste system.

Detached from their traditional occupations and old patron-client ties to the landlord, the lower castes and untouchables demanded equality and sought social change through organized collective action (Tharakan 1998). Early expressions of this were the social reforms and anti-caste movements among the Ezhavas, Parayas, and Pulayas. And, by the beginning of the twentieth century, every lower-caste group was mobilized under an organization agitating against injustice and demanding access to education and jobs. These

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24 Grant-in-aid (financial assistance for private schools) was introduced in 1865 as a follow up to the widely acclaimed 1817 declaration of the then Queen of Travancore, Gouri Parvati Bayi, that “the state should defray the whole cost of education of its people.” Jeffrey records a massive rise in the number of vernacular schools between 1866 and 1890—from 12 to 1283. Enrolment in the same period rose from 865 to 83058 (Jeffrey 1976, 79-80). For an analysis of the role of bottom-up popular demand in the rapid spread of elementary education in nineteenth-century Travancore, see Tharakan (1984).

25 Interestingly, Tharakan (1984) notes that this urge for reform was not limited to the lower castes. It was apparently present in upper castes and other religious communities as well. The Christians, Muslims, Namboodiris and Nairs also witnessed community reform movements. As economic changes produced social contradictions, reform movements were an attempt to negotiate these contradictions. For the traditional upper castes—Nairs and Namboodiris—declining economic status and outdated rituals amidst the economic and social ascendency of
social reform movements made great strides in winning unparalleled social dignity for the lower castes and untouchables in Kerala and in raising consciousness of Kerala’s oppressed masses. Anti-caste movements, newly-acquired education, and new employment opportunities weakened the edifice of the caste system and upper-caste domination. As caste oppression was greater in Travancore, these changes took place at a faster pace and even scale in Travancore than in Malabar.

The reform tendency was most conspicuous among the Ezhavas, traditionally an oppressed caste with toddy-tapping, cultivation-related physical labor, coir-making, and weaving as their caste occupations. The contradiction between their new found social mobility and the suffocating caste framework carried over from an earlier era incited them to fight for anti-caste social reform. An Ezhava reform organization known as Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) was founded in 1903. Under enlightened Ezhavas, most notably, Sri Narayana Guru, Dr. Palpu, and Kumaran Asan, the organization campaigned for the upliftment of Ezhavas in Travancore and for equal access to education and jobs, eventually winning temple entry and access to public service jobs in the 1930s.

The Pulaya movement for social equality was led by an illiterate leader, Ayyankali, who founded the Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham (Association for the Welfare of the Poor) in

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26 Palpu, a bright Ezhava student, who eventually became a leader of the community, was denied admission to medical school, even after he qualified in the entrance test. He was further denied permission to practice in Travancore when he returned with a medical degree from Europe, with the help of a scholarship from the Mysore government.
1905. Pulayas (known as Cherumars in Malabar) were the largest of the erstwhile “untouchable” castes. As agricultural laborers they were at the receiving end of very oppressive working conditions with subsistence remuneration and lack of adequate rest. An unique contribution of Ayyankaali was to win rights in the economic sphere for his fellow caste men who were agricultural laborers. Much before the arrival of trade unions in Travancore, in 1907, Ayyankali organized a strike of agricultural laborers for better working conditions and access to schools and roads.

The work of Ayyankali and Sri Narayana Guru complemented each other. They questioned the social disabilities imposed on the purportedly polluting castes and asserted equal status by flouting rigid caste rules and caste prohibitions. While the oppressed in Travancore won significant victories through caste-based mobilization, their counterparts in Malabar, where mobilization took a distinctly class angle later on, were still subjects of considerable exploitation by the powerful Janmis. The agitation for land rights had been repeatedly stifled by the state-Janmi nexus. But the example of Travancore citizens, inspired the Thiyyas of Malabar (somewhat equivalent to Travancore’s Ezhavas in ritual status) to imagine a better future and fight for it.

The Ezhava and Pulaya social reform movements are two snapshots of a series of socio-cultural reform movements that early twentieth-century Kerala witnessed. The successes of the anti-caste movements heralded change in the political attitudes and behaviour of the oppressed castes in comparison to their compatriots in the rest of India. The neat overlap of

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27 According to the 2001 census, Pulayas were the largest of the dalits, constituting 33% of the dalit population in Kerala (India 2001). For more on the Pulaya reform movement, see (Saradamoni 1980).
28 For a recent biography of Ayyankali, see Nisar and Kandasamy (2008).
caste and class positions with members of the lower-castes working as agricultural laborers or wage workers in agro-based industries meant that caste solidarities could be used to solidify class antagonisms (Sivanandan 1979). A good example of this is the toddy-tappers’ union that was formed in the 1940s in Kuttanad. As a traditional caste occupation, only members of the Ezhava caste took to toddy-tapping, which made the toddy-tappers’ union, at once, a class-based as well as a caste-based organization. Ezhavas, being also agricultural laborers and coir-makers, then used caste networks to forge close links among the toddy-tappers’ union, the agricultural laborers’ union, and the coir-workers’ union, advancing the emergence of a politicized and cohesive working class from among disparate social forces. The struggle against caste-oppression also became a struggle against oppressive landlordism and caste affinities solidified the wellsprings of class solidarity. Caste-based mobilization in Kerala thus provided a basis for and strengthened class politics. This is a unique feature of Kerala’s class formation; even though caste-class correspondence existed elsewhere, its political synergy was never realized as fruitfully as in Kerala. As we shall see later, the nascent communists in Kerala played a vital role in enabling this.

With the anti-colonial nationalist movement gaining steam, social movements demanded their rightful place in it by claiming to represent the aspirations of the masses. The most notable milestones of anti-caste and anti-colonial movements were the Vaikom Satyagraham of 1924-25 and the Guruvayur Satyagraha of 1931. Vaikom was the first systematically organized agitation for the rights of lower castes in Travancore. The key demand was giving the right to access public roads leading to the Vaikom temple to all sections of the population, including the untouchables. The Congress, despite its upper-caste background, took up the movement and worked along with Ezhava leaders under the direction of
Mahatma Gandhi. Activities such as this pitted the Congress leaders, against their upper caste fellow-men, and its steadfastness won Congress many a follower among Ezhavas and untouchables, making the Congress in Kerala a mass-based party.\footnote{However, the extent of anti-caste activity of the early Congress remained limited to reforming the more oppressive practices, rather than a radical transformation of the social structure. The communists who arrived on the scene a bit later had a more radical agenda.} Upper-caste activists shattered social taboos by eating with lower castes and visiting their huts. Following another satyagraha in Guruvayur in 1931, devotees belonging to backward castes were permitted into the Kerala temples in 1936. It came in the form of the Temple Entry Proclamation Act of 1936 introduced by the Diwan (chief minister) of the princely state of Travancore.

What is significant here is that the overall character of Kerala’s early mass movements was bottom-up; they were predominantly uprisings of oppressed masses fighting for social equality, dignity, and economic emancipation.\footnote{Interview with prominent leftist intellectual, Thiruvananthapuram, August 2005.} These movements-from-below were the first experiments in mass-based participatory democracy and by the 1920s they had a legacy of extracting significant victories. Many scholars refer to this period as Kerala’s “renaissance” (Panikkar 1995). The protest tradition that emerged and the aspiration for dignity and equality it ignited continues to be a consistent feature of Kerala politics. The social reform movements were thus the beginnings of a long, historical process of welfare-oriented democratization of Kerala society (Namboodiripad 1984a).

4.2.5 Summary

The significant changes to land tenure system undertaken in the nineteenth and early twentieth century had a radical impact on the agrarian structure of the future Kerala. These changes altered the relative economic and political positions of dominant classes in different...
ways. In the directly-ruled Malabar, colonial policies buttressed the socio-economic dominance of the landlord class at the expense of the lower tenantry, while in Southern Kerala, commercialization of agriculture led to the socio-economic and political assertion of owner-cultivators (from hitherto marginalized communities), and led to a sharper internal differentiation of agrarian classes. The penetration of a capitalist market economy in Travancore swelled the ranks of the owner-cultivators on one end and the agricultural laborers on the other while rentier and tenant interests became insignificant. The combined impact of these material changes, along with expanding literacy, accompanied and exposed caste-ridden Kerala society to socio-cultural forces unfriendly to the traditional social structure. The resultant social awakening paved way for grassroots anti-caste movements which were incorporated into the broader anti-colonial movement.

4.3 Organization of Rural Peasants and Workers

4.3.1 Early Nationalist Mobilization

The early nationalist movement was the cradle of class formation in Kerala, even though it assumed different characters in Kerala’s constituent parts—Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar. Land-based exploitation and sporadic peasant rebellion gave a distinct anti-feudal and anti-landlord character to anti-colonial agitation in Malabar. In Travancore and Cochin, community and constitutional reform demands were at the core of nationalist mobilization making it a movement predominantly for dignity, opportunity, and representation for the newly ascendant communities against the social, political, and economic domination of the upper castes. Agrarian polarization in Kuttanad and worker unrest in urban-based agro-industries provided limited avenues for class-based mobilization, but, overall, the character
of the nationalist movement in Travancore and Cochin remained one of social and political reform. These patterns of nationalist mobilization ultimately shaped the dynamics of class formation and the political space for left groups.³¹

4.3.1.1 Travancore

Given the indirect presence of the British and their favorable role in many reforms that benefitted the lower classes (abolition of slavery, spread of education etc.), the movement for social reform and political democracy in Travancore was less about opposing the British and more about extracting democratic rights and dignity from the upper-caste oligarchy. The battle against caste domination assumed two forms in Travancore. On the socio-cultural domain, it turned into social reform movements seeking dignity and equal rights for lower castes and “untouchables,” spearheaded by caste and community organizations. On the political front, the aspirations for dignity and social mobility got translated into a demand for more representation and employment opportunities. Although Travancore witnessed the formation of a representative political body fairly early (1888), political representation was limited to property owners and tax payers. Employment in public service was limited to the Hindu upper castes.³² Between 1890 and 1920 the upwardly mobile communities of Ezhavas, Christians, and Muslims became politicized and began to collaborate against their collective marginalization by a microscopic minority of Nairs and Namboodiris. The

³¹ For a review of the role of the Left in the nationalist movement in Kerala, see Isaac (1986).
³² Apparently in an effort to select the best talent for its modern bureaucracy, Travancore kings chose public servants from among the Hindu upper castes. Public sector jobs were forbidden for anyone other than upper-caste Hindus, thus excluding over 70% of Travancore subjects from these prestigious positions. The King, however, recruited liberally from among the Tamil Brahmins from the neighbouring Madras Presidency, who were not residents of Travancore. The Travancore administration of late nineteenth century thus came to be dominated by Hindu upper castes, primarily Tamil Brahmins, and without adequate representation of the majority local population.
educated sections of Christians and Ezhavas viewed the Hindu upper-caste domination of the state machinery as the chief obstacle to their social mobility.\textsuperscript{33} The demand for wider representation in government culminated in two memorandums submitted to the Travancore King—the ‘Malayali Memorial’ in 1891 with signatures of over 10,000 people from the three communities demanding more representation in government jobs and the ‘Ezhava Memorial’ in 1896 demanding civic rights and jobs for Ezhavas (Jeffrey 1976, 106). These were the first signs of organized political activity and it made community and caste-based politics for receiving state largesse a staple feature of Travancore-Cochin politics quite early on. In the absence of a broad organizational vehicle that could articulate the demands for representation and opportunity in an inclusive and non-sectarian manner, communal and caste organizations became the organizational channels for articulating collective interests.\textsuperscript{34}

By the 1930s, the demand for more representation in public service for Christians, Muslims, and lower-caste Hindus became a movement for political democracy. Limited popular consultation within Travancore Legislative Council and Popular Assembly fuelled participatory and representative aspirations of the socially-ascendant Travancore subjects. In 1932, these three communities and other lower-caste Hindus together constituted close to 74\% of the population, yet they only held 24\% of seats in the elected body (Sundararajan 2002). Forming the ‘Joint Political Congress’ (\textit{Travancore Samyukta Rashtreeya Samiti}) in

\textsuperscript{33} Other than agriculture, government jobs were the only available avenue for social advancement in the absence of a thriving industrial sector. Exclusion of non-Hindu minorities and lower castes from public services worked fine when education was inaccessible to these communities. However, once an educated generation reached adulthood from these communities, their exclusion from public services became untenable.

\textsuperscript{34} Since the Congress Party followed a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of princely states, there was no Congress organization in Travancore or Cochin until 1938. In contrast, in the British-ruled Malabar, a district wing of the Congress Party existed from 1908 and became the chief organizational vehicle of anti-colonial politics by the 1920s.
1933, they called for the boycott of assembly elections until proportional representation was granted to them. This movement, which came to be known as the *Nivartana Prakshobhanam* (abstention movement), coincided roughly with the Temple Entry Movement of the lower castes in Travancore which the Congress party supported. This attracted the appreciation of the lower castes and the resentment of the orthodox upper castes leading them to split ranks with the party. It was only then—in mid-1930s—that a broad democratic political movement with large mass participation emerged in Travancore and Cochin, while the civil disobedience movements in the British provinces, including Malabar, had already attracted considerable mass participation (Namboodiripad 1984b). The demands for proportional representation were largely conceded in 1936 through the introduction of provisions for communal representation in public service and the expansion of the criteria for voter eligibility. In the 1937 elections to the Travancore Legislative Assembly, more citizens from the Christian-Muslim-Ezhava communities were eligible to vote and thus elect a majority of candidates sponsored by the Joint Political Congress. Once the Congress Party decided to form separate Congress organizations in princely states (in 1938), Travancore State Congress and Cochin State Congress were formed and the Joint Political Congress merged into these.

In the 1940s, the focus of the movement for political democracy shifted to a demand for ‘responsible government’ (*uttaravaditha bharanam*) against the autocratic misrule of chief ministers (*Diwans*) in Travancore and Cochin. The Diwan of Travancore, Sir C. P. Ramaswamy Iyer, notorious for his tyrannical ways, refused to accept the directions of the Travancore Legislative Assembly. In response to the Congress’s demands for his dismissal, he banned the Congress, arrested its leaders, clamped down on civic freedoms, and conferred on himself more expansive executive powers. The Diwan’s repressive actions further fuelled
popular dissent. Under popular pressure after a violent encounter between workers and Diwan’s army in what is known as the punnapra-vayalar struggle, Diwanship was ended and responsible government based on full adult franchise was granted in 1947. Dignity, opportunity, and political representation thus became the rallying cry of the anti-colonial struggle in Travancore.

4.3.1.2 Malabar

Although the Malabar district committee of the Indian National Congress was formed in 1908, there was virtually no anti-colonial activity in Malabar till 1916 when the Home Rule movement in Madras attracted the attention of intellectuals in Malabar. From 1916 the Malabar District Congress Committee began to hold regular conferences. Unlike Bengal, which had witnessed revolutionary-nationalist movements led by the English-educated middle class as early as 1905, nationalist activity in Malabar only picked up steam in the 1920s (briefly) and 30s. Once the Congress began its activities, however, Malabar became a focal ground for nationalist mobilization by the Congress Party in south India.

The emergence of the anti-colonial nationalist movement in Malabar coincided with the sporadic unrest of the peasantry acquiring an organized form through the tenancy-reform movements of the 1920s. More than national independence, agrarian exploitation propelled early Congress Party activity in Malabar. The arrival of the Congress Party and the emergence of an organized tenancy-reform movement coincided, giving Malabar’s nationalist movement a distinct anti-landlord flavour. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the superior tenants (mostly upper caste Nairs) became victims of increasing Janmi power as they faced arbitrary evictions and various extractive levies.
Against the backdrop of this material conflict, these two dominant groups fought for control of the Malabar Congress. In the widely attended 1920 Malabar District Congress Committee conference held in Manjeri, the superior tenants who were broadly left-wing and supportive of the cause of the peasantry wrested the control of the District Congress Committee from the Janmis. Janmis quit the Congress subsequently and superior tenants became the leaders of the nationalist movement as well as the fledgling tenancy-reform movement in Malabar. Some prominent figures were K. P. Raman Menon, K. Madhavan Nair, K. P. Kesava Menon, and U. Gopala Menon (Radhakrishnan 1989, 75-81). With left-wing activists gaining control of the Malabar Congress and Gandhi assuming national leadership, the 1920s saw brisk political activity in Malabar under the newly formed Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee (KPCC).  

In Muslim-dominated southern Malabar, Gandhi’s non-cooperation movement and the Khilafat movement (supported by Congress) progressed side by side, generating for the first time a flurry of anti-colonial political activity in 1921 (Namboodiripad 1984b). Gandhi’s visit to Malabar in the same year boosted the profile of the Congress and drew wider mass participation. Similar to Bengal, this period politically united the two dominant religious communities, Hindus and Muslims, albeit temporarily. The anti-British thrust of the Khilafat movement and the anti-landlord consciousness of the mappila peasants of southern Malabar, in addition, created political unities between the mappila peasantry and the rising anti- 

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Although an united Kerala was still not a reality, in the early 1920s the Congress Party committed itself to a reorganization of territories on linguistic basis. Accordingly, the Party formed the KPCC, the Kerala State branch of the Congress Party much before the formation of Kerala state in 1956. Due to Gandhi’s policy of non-interference in princely states, the KPCC limited itself to Malabar and excluded the adjoining princely states of Travancore and Cochin until late 1930s. Between early 1920s and late 1930s, the KPCC was effectively the Malabar District Congress Committee.
colonial movement. The synergies resulted in the formation of Congress and Khilafat committees, with more or less the same office-bearers, in almost every village of Malabar. When rising mappila discontent manifested in the form of a violent rebellion against the British in 1921, the Hindu-dominated Congress withdrew support for the movement. Muslim perceptions of Hindu betrayal along with the heavy British repression gave the movement a communal color, triggering violence between Hindus and Muslims, and ending the fragile political unity of the two communities.

After a brief interlude in late 1920s, nationalist agitation picked up steam again during the second non-cooperation movement of 1930-32. The Congress Socialist Party (CSP)—a caucus for left-minded groups within the Congress Party—gained control of the Malabar Congress organization in 1934, and devoted itself to the organized mobilization of the lower peasantry. The CSP’s imaginative linking of peasant struggles and the anti-imperialist movement facilitated unprecedented mass participation. Malabar thus witnessed the integration of peasant struggles into the anti-colonial movement to an extent unmatched by any other part of India. Despite its late beginning, by the mid-1930s the reach and sweep of the nationalist movement in Malabar was remarkable. By 1938-39, all territories under the future united-Kerala were fully drawn into the struggle for freedom from foreign rule.

4.3.2 Peasant Movements in Malabar

As argued above, peasant movements predated nationalist mobilization in Malabar. The landlord-tenant material conflict not only shaped patterns of nationalist mobilization but also the process of class formation within it. Janmi oppression and economic hardships resulted in a series of ‘pre-political’ violent protests in varying intensity by the mappila tenants-at-will
(verumpattam) of south Malabar, starting in 1836 and lasting almost a century. In these unorganized, sporadic, and largely spontaneous peasant uprisings, poor tenants demanded fixity of tenure and an end to arbitrary eviction. They were brutally suppressed by the Janmis and the colonial state. In retaliation, they attacked the hated Janmi and the moneylender, their property and their agents. These events forced the colonial government to initiate a dialogue on agrarian reform and, between 1850 and 1900, four special commissions were appointed to look into the problems of the Malabar tenant classes.36 Similar demands from the peasantry for fair rent, fixity of tenure, and freedom from arbitrary levies were successful enough to warrant legislative intervention as early as 1863 in Cochin and 1865 in Travancore. But the special commission recommendations to curtail Janmi power did not translate into legislation in Malabar since the revenue extraction interests of the colonial government in the form of land revenue were tied up with those of the Janmis. The first legislative step to alleviate peasant hardships in Malabar came in 1887 in the form of the Malabar Compensation for Tenants Improvements Act, enacted by the Madras Government. While the peasants were asking for the right to continue cultivating their land, this legislation offered fair compensation upon eviction for improvements undertaken on land. But, the government did not enforce even these meagre rights.

The most violent episode of peasant revolt was the 1921 mappila lahala (mappila rebellion). The British government’s repression of mappila rebels initiated this six-month long armed struggle against both landlordism and the colonial state. With the killing of 3,000 agitators and associated communal tensions there was a lull in political activity, which only regained momentum in the second phase of the non-cooperation movement, 1930-34 (see Choudhary

1977). The rebellion of 1921 however integrated the spontaneous revolt tradition of the mappila peasants into the organized political activity of the 1920s under the early freedom struggle.  

The rest of the 1920s witnessed the second phase of peasant movements that were primarily tenancy reform movements led by the superior tenants. The superior tenants had largely escaped the rapacity of the Janmi for much of the nineteenth century. However, as the twentieth century wore on, they, too, became victims of arbitrary evictions and various forms of levies. The Nair superior tenants (holding kanam tenure) and the Muslim tenants-at-will (holding verumpattam tenure), the two other principal right holders other than the Janmi, came together in a tenancy movement to fight the Janmi excesses. That this happened not long after the communally charged ‘mappila rebellion’ which was widely perceived as forestalling the popular unities of the Muslim tenants and the Nair superior tenants is a testament to the primacy of the material conflict and the level of collective grievance against the Janmi. For the first time, the Malabar peasantry was politically organized in a tenancy reform movement under the leadership of the superior tenants. The movement demanded

37 The characterization of the 1921 rebellion by the Muslim tenants of southern Malabar (Mappilas) as a peasant rebellion is contested for it had a distinct communal flavor. Wood (1987) argues that the 1921 rebellion was rooted in economic exploitation and was an expression of agrarian discontent; others point to religio-political motivations behind it. Panikkar (1989) takes a middle view arguing that the causes of the rebellion were to be found in the complex interplay of economic grievance and religious belief. Also see Dale (1980). Given the social composition of southern Malabar, where almost all Janmis were upper-caste Hindus and the most oppressed tenants were mappila Muslims, opposition to landlordism was likely to have been articulated through communal frames. The complex intermingling of economic grievances and religious ideology provided the right ingredient for a powerful uprising by the mappilas seeking relief from an oppressive agrarian system.

38 The classification of the Malabar peasant movement into three phases is Radhakrishnan’s (1989).

39 A widely prevalent form of premature eviction of superior tenants was the practice of melcharth (Karat 1973).
security of tenure and offered a cohesive leadership to the relatively uneducated lower peasantry. The considerable influence of the Nairs within the fledgling nationalist movement in Malabar helped to further advance the tenancy movement. They made tenancy and independence common slogans of the Malabar Congress and passed resolutions demanding tenancy reform at every meeting of the Malabar Congress from 1920.

As a result of their efforts, a number of tenant unions (kudiyan sangham) began to appear on the political scene. The most notable of these were the Malabar Kudiyan Sangham (Malabar Tenants’ Union) formed in 1922, which within a few years had over hundred local units spread across Malabar. Its efforts to increase the profile of the tenancy issue were an unprecedented success due to the educated middle-class members at its helm, who adopted newer methods of publicizing their demands. These included newspaper articles, petitions, conferences, and getting representatives elected to the legislative council. They also published a newspaper by the name Kudiyan (tenant).40 The most significant achievement of the Malabar Kudiyan Sangham was the passing of the Malabar Tenancy Act in 1930. After almost a decade of painstaking work countering Janmi opposition and foot-dragging by the British government, the Act secured most of the demands of the superior (kanam) tenants—protection against arbitrary eviction, fixed rents and renewal fees, and abolition of levies. The Act also offered minimum protection to the lower (verumpattam) tenants; however, their rights could not be fully protected due to the various loopholes in the Act. The enthusiasm of the relatively better-off superior tenants to fight for the rights of the poorer tenants-at-will waned once the former achieved their demands through the Act. The cause of the tenants-at-

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40 Interestingly, the Janmis too had been counter-mobilizing from the beginning of the century under an organization called the Janmi Sabha (landlord council) and publishing a monthly mouthpiece, Janmi (Radhakrishnan 1989, 81).
will (verumpattakkar), in abject conditions after the Great Depression, was taken up by left-wing groups in a third phase of peasant movement starting in the 1930s. The organization of the tenants-at-will in militant tenant unions during this phase laid the foundation for left-wing politics in Malabar.

4.3.3 Arrival of Left-wing Politics

Left-wing groups, who organized workers and peasants into class-based organizations, were the principal agents of the formation of a politically conscious, revolutionary class from among a plethora of disparate and disconnected social forces in Kerala. Communism arrived on the political scene relatively late in Kerala, in the late 1930s, almost two decades after it had announced its presence in other parts of India. In the 1920s, when communist ideas and literature were in wide circulation among educated Bengali middle classes, Kerala remained aloof from left-wing influence. The Congress Party in Malabar attracted a significant contingent of radical youth during the 1920s, primarily educated young Nairs and Namboodiris, who were moved by the demands for justice by the peasantry and the lower castes and participated in the tenancy reform movement. Working under the banner of the Congress Socialist Party, many of these radical congressmen became the leaders of the early communist movement in Kerala. Unlike early Bengali communists, they, however, did not have much knowledge about or connection with socialism or communism.

4.3.3.1 The Congress Socialist Party (CSP)

The Congress Party in Malabar, though progressive through the 1920s, did not take on a radical character until the mid-1930s. Its upper caste affiliations and ambivalent relationship to other local struggles other than the tenancy-reform movement, inhibited its growth among
the oppressed masses. Nationalism itself, devoid of a link to everyday struggles for emancipation from the domination of local power structures, did not enlist substantive participation from the masses, except for the brief interlude of Khilafat-Non-cooperation movement in early 1920s (Menon 1994). In fact, there were perceptions of a contradictory relationship between the anti-colonial struggle and the anti-feudal struggle. Some in the early Congress believed that the anti-caste movement was divisive and could diminish the power of a unified anti-colonial movement. The masses on the other hand were not inspired by the prospect of an oppressive upper-caste, landed class replacing the British.

Following the civil disobedience movement of 1930-32, the ideological clash within the Congress Party between those who advocated pacifist forms of political agitation and others who advocated radical action came to the fore. This led to the formation of the Congress Socialist Party (hereafter CSP) in 1934. The CSP was a broad political grouping that included radical congressmen, socialist and some nascent communists; it functioned as a left-wing faction within the Congress Party. It was led by a cluster of young, educated leaders drawn from the upper-caste communities, such as EMS Namboodiripad, P. Krishnapillai, and A. K. Gopalan, who were radicalized by their involvement in the community reform movements and the anti-colonial struggle (see Namboodiripad 1943).

Even though a communist group known as the Communist League existed in Travancore from 1931, it was with the establishment of the CSP in Malabar that left groups began to have a visible presence in Kerala. The CSP activists were convinced that if the anti-colonial movement was to become a genuine mass movement, the toiling peasantry and their everyday struggles against the upper-caste, feudal landlord had to be brought into its mainstream. That is, if mass involvement was to be realized, the anti-imperialist struggle had
to be anti-feudal and anti-caste at once. Based on this understanding, the CSP began to simultaneously mobilize against exclusions based on class, caste, region, and nation, and organize the masses on a class platform; this created political unities among various struggles. The work of the CSP was informed more by a concern for social justice as they understood it from their lived experiences, than by any affinity to socialist ideology (Mannathukkkaren 2006). Their involvement in grass-root struggles, against the wishes of upper caste fellow-men, endeared the CSP to the oppressed masses, predominantly the Ezhavas and the “untouchables,” making the CSP-led Congress in Kerala more of a mass-based party. In turn, the banner of the Congress Party provided a higher profile to the struggles of the oppressed.

The Congress Socialists were at the helm of the Congress Party in Kerala (KPCC) for two short periods: 1934-35 and 1938-40. At the 1934 conference, the CSP won roughly two-thirds of the KPCC executive committee seats (Nossiter 1982, 71-2). They used this opportunity to move the Congress Party and the nationalist movement in a radical direction, giving a left-wing orientation to the KPCC. Within the Congress, the CSP reached out to other left-minded non-socialist quarters to create broad-based support for progressive positions. Under the CSP leadership, the Congress Party in Malabar became a mass organization with active committees and workers all the way down to the village level (Namboodiripad 1984b, 38).

The colonial government had largely ignored the longstanding demand of the tenants-at-will (verumpattom) for protection through tenancy legislation. Neither the Congress nor the Malabar Tenant’s Union, both dominated by superior tenants, had pushed hard to ensure adequate recognition for the actual cultivators (Varghese 1970, 226-31). Already on the
verge of starvation from the impact of the Great Depression which had resulted in a huge decline in crop prices, the rapacious landlords further pushed the lower tenants to impoverishment by not allowing remission of higher rents (agreed to during a period of steady price rise). Further, the Janmis slapped a wide variety of illegal exactions on the peasants.\footnote{The \textit{Janmis} managed to come up with an amazing variety of illegal exactions such as \textit{oppavakasham} (fees for signing the deed), \textit{anandiravakasham} (entitlement of Janmi’s nephew), \textit{thandasthavakasham} (mediator’s right), \textit{nuri} (a pick of paddy for every 10 \textit{paras} of paddy), \textit{mukkal} (some extra paddy for any shortages during measuring), \textit{vashi} (extra paddy to make up the deficiency after drying), \textit{moonnidangazhi} (paddy as wages to Janmi’s measurer). These were in addition to other feudal extractions such as \textit{vechukanal} (gift for an appointment with \textit{Janmi}), \textit{kazhcha} (offering on special occasions such as birth, death, festival etc.), \textit{kankani} (offering of first harvest). (\textit{Para} is the measuring unit, roughly equivalent to 10 kilograms). See Karat (1973, 1977), Radhakrishnan (1989, chap. 3).} Defaulting on rent payments added to their mounting indebtedness and eventual eviction. Any resistance invited physical violence and humiliation in the form of physical assaults, flogging, eviction, stealing of livestock and harvest, setting their huts on fire, sexual harassment of tenant women, social ostracization, and denial of access to roads, wells and other essential services. Such oppression was possible because, unlike in Travancore where diffusion of land-ownership had substantially reduced the Janmi power, land ownership still remained concentrated in the hands of the Namboodiris (in southern Malabar) and the Nairs (in northern Malabar) (Varghese 1970, 192-8).

This material social context instilled a sense of urgency to CSP activists in politically mobilizing the lower peasantry. Through their organizing work, they helped to form a number of peasant unions (\textit{Karshaka Sangham})—the \textit{Kerala Karshaka Sangham} and the \textit{All Malabar Karshaka Sangam} (AMKS) in mid-1930s—which became the key organizational vehicles for the mobilization of the tenants-at-will and landless agricultural laborers at the
taluk (county) and the village levels.\textsuperscript{42} The primary demands of these peasant unions comprised of fixing rent rates through standardized measures, abolishing illegal exactions, and amending the 1930 Malabar Tenancy Act to give legal recognition to the rights of tenants-at-will. Organizational presence even in far-flung villages helped in the rapid diffusion of agitational campaigns. Between 1934 and 1939 the peasant unions launched numerous agitations ranging from peasant conferences to raise awareness, anti-levy agitation, and inter-caste dining aimed at destroying caste taboos, to hunger \textit{jathas} (processions). Radical slogan shouting and singing of revolutionary songs were common at the functions of the AMKS, and they helped to raise the political consciousness of the peasantry. As AMKS acquired considerable strength in a short span of time—over 150 village units and 30,000 members within a year of its formation, with the lower tenants from the Thiyya caste in north Malabar as its chief social base (Jeffrey 1979, 91)—defiance of Janmi authority and privileges became a chief weapon of protest. The peasant movement in Malabar, which had been hitherto led by the relatively well-off tenants, assumed a militant character because of CSP activities. Militancy was a result of the attention paid to the demands of the lower peasantry including the agricultural laborers, who represented a truly oppressed lot unlike the Nair tenants who led the tenancy-reform movement in the second phase. For instance, social boycott, which had hitherto been used by the Janmis against the peasants, was turned against the Janmis. Barbers, washermen, and laborers refused essential services to the Janmi and his family while tenants refused to pay rents and illegal levies (Radhakrishnan 1989, 92-99).

\textsuperscript{42} The \textit{All India Kisan Sabha} (All India Peasants Union), the peasant front of the Communist Party of India, was formed in 1936.
The CSP-led KPCC also extended its activities to the adjoining princely states of Travancore and Cochin. It organized workers and peasants and attempted to draw them into the movement for ‘responsible government.’ In Travancore, the CSP worked with the Coir Workers Union in Alappuzha that had grown strong enough to conduct industry-wide general strikes by 1938. The coir worker’s union provided economic and political assistance in the formation of the first agricultural workers union (Travancore Agricultural Workers Union) in the neighbouring Kuttanad in the same year. The workers of the agro-industries were quite similar in their class position to agricultural laborers as they hailed from families of agricultural labor class with deep rural roots; this facilitated the co-operative functioning of the two unions. The early demands of the agricultural workers union involved abolition of socially subservient norms of behavior, such as addressing the landlord as master, keeping a physical distance, and not being allowed to grow a mustache or wear headgear. When these practices disappeared due to labor activism, the union made new demands: proper lunch breaks, increase in the share of harvest, and increase in daily wages. The union organized various forms of job action on the harvesting field to press for these demands. The CSP provided the necessary political backing through regular training classes and eventually enabled the emergence of leaders from the workers.

Yet workers of all kinds still remained deeply immersed in the grip of traditional patron-client loyalties and feudal institutions. The CSP-led KPCC’s efforts to organize all-Kerala jathas, covering Malabar, Cochin, and Travancore sought to integrate the democratic impulses of different political movements across the state and, thereby, assist in the formation of state-wide political consciousness and solidarity. In 1935, the CSP facilitated

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43 For more on the political mobilization of agricultural workers in Kuttanad, see Jose (1979), Tharamangalam (1981), Kannan (1988).
the linking of the peasant movement and the newly-organized trade union movement in Malabar with the already existing agro-industrial trade unions in Travancore and Cochin in an All Kerala-Trade Union Conference. When state Congress organizations were formed in Travancore and Cochin in 1938, the CSP, in control of the Malabar Congress, established contacts with left-minded sections of the state Congresses in the princely states. This was a conscious effort of the CSP leadership to introduce class content to the democratic movement in the princely states, which had hitherto largely been the forte of community elites (Namboodiripad 1984b).

Widespread worker discontent in the agro-industries of urban centres like Alappuzha and the agricultural workers of Kuttanad region proved conducive to the labor-organizing activities of the Travancore socialists. The arrival of trained activists from Malabar introduced a sense of militancy in the popular movements of princely states by turning the discontent of the organized working class of Alappuzha (a communist stronghold by then) into an active part of the movement for responsible government in Travancore and Cochin. In the 1946 general strike, the workers of the All Travancore Trade Union Congress placed responsible government as the first item in the charter of demand. It became a violent agitation against the authority of the Diwan, mainly in Punnapra and Vayalar villages of Alappuzha district (known as the Punnapra-Vayalar uprising). The Diwan ordered the Travancore army to shoot the workers who were armed with bamboo spikes, spears, and machetes. Over 1,000 workers were killed, turning public opinion decisively against the Diwan, who fled the state. The Punnapra-Vayalar struggle announced the arrival of the working class in Travancore politics as a decisive force.
Many of the innovative strategies and slogans that the CSP adopted to carry out its organizing work were primarily the brainchild of communists like EMS Namboodiripad. When EMS (as he was popularly called) was elected as the organizing secretary of KPCC in 1937, a campaign to establish a reading room and night school for literacy classes in every village was launched. EMS issued a circular to all Congress committees to include library work as part of their grassroots mass education program. These libraries were run by left-wing activists through voluntary activity and donations from the public. Libraries became a political hotspot with newspaper reading and engaged discussions (Pillai 2000). Through literacy, study classes, processions, creative slogans, folk music, and theatre, the CSP’s intent was to produce a discursive terrain that legitimatized the organic link between various popular movements. These helped immensely to communicate the congruity of goals and to form three-way linkages among anti-imperialist, anti-landlord, and anti-caste struggles. With its deep roots in all three movements, the CSP played a momentous role in realizing this symbiosis.

4.3.3.2 The Communist Party of India

The core leadership of the Kerala wing of the CSP had become covertly communist by 1936, forming an underground nucleus. Differences within the Congress and the CSP over India’s forced participation in the Second World War exacted a formal split, leading to the formation of the Kerala wing of the Communist Party of India (CPI) in 1939. When the left-wing KPCC was suspended by the national Congress for its decision to organize a war protest day disregarding the national leadership’s directive, the entire CSP leadership left the Congress Party and joined the CPI. Early communist leaders were thus a product of social and political
movements of their time.\textsuperscript{44} They continued the work of the CSP, developing and further
strengthening independent class organizations of the working class, peasants, and other
sections of the toiling poor. While left-wing ideas received an auspicious foothold in the
popular consciousness of Kerala under the banner of the CSP, the CPI took the
organizational and agitational program of action initiated by the CSP to its logical
culmination (Andalat 1979).

The CPI provided further impetus to peasant militancy in Malabar and strengthened the
organization of the rural peasantry. It began a wave of violent agitations, which resulted in
brutal repression by the government and the Janmis. The police unleashed terror on the
peasants, injuring, imprisoning, and killing leaders and activists. Notable instances of peasant
resistance include confrontations with police in Morazha, Mattannur and several other parts
of Malabar, and the anti-eviction riots in Kayyur in 1941.\textsuperscript{45} British repression forced the CPI
and the \textit{Malabar Karshaka Sangam} to go underground from 1939 to 1942. Communist
leaders used this period productively to build the organization and educate cadre by offering
party-study classes, while they moved from one hideout to another. By mid-1940s, the
communist movement had taken root in many parts of Kerala. In the aftermath of the 1943
famine, the CPI and the AMKS organized the peasants for no-rent campaigns, to curb
hoarding and black-marketing by the Janmis, forced purchase of paddy at fair prices from
hoarders, and called for the cultivation of all available cultivable land, private or public. The

\textsuperscript{44} The three leaders acclaime to have laid the foundation for the CPI in Kerala, namely, A.
K. Gopalan, P. Krishna Pillai, and EMS Namboodiripad, were recruited from the CSP and
had roots in the anti-caste social movements. The combined weight of their talents helped to
establish a strong base for the communist movement in Kerala. Gopalan was a charismatic
leader with mass appeal, Pillai understood how to build an organization, and EMS provided
the intellectual prowess.

\textsuperscript{45} For a first-hand account of the Kayyur struggle, see V.V. Kunhambu (1974); Kurup
(1978).
strong peasant upsurge in the post-war years was a national phenomenon as the CPI launched a series of agrarian agitations across the country. These activities invited a crackdown by the government which perceived the communists as inciting the masses to violence. Political agitations for responsible government, agrarian rights, and social dignity for lower castes went ahead with unprecedented vigor during this period. New trade unions began to be formed in the mid-1940s and existing ones gained strength.46

Following the path blazed by the CSP, the communists also took an active interest in the domain of culture and literature, which had been the forte of upper castes and landed aristocracy in the previous era. This was a unique contribution of the Kerala communists: they recognized the decisive role of culture, art, and literature in the struggle for social transformation, long before the Gramscian critique of Marxism was read by the world.47 By the 1950, most villages in Kerala had a reading room, and newspaper reading was part of the daily routine even for the poorest (Nossiter 1988, 42). Apart from enabling the growing reading culture of Kerala through ‘the library movement,’ they effectively used street theatre, story-telling, poetry, novels, and folks songs to educate the masses and to disseminate their message. Following the formation of the All India Progressive Writer’s Association in 1936, the Kerala communists helped organize a conference of progressive writers and artists in 1937. Communist involvement caused a radical shift in the content of popular culture and literature. The forties and early fifties witnessed the outpouring of revolutionary ideas in literature as a new group of progressive novelists emerged in Kerala. Their novels were, on the whole, a commentary on the socio-economic exploitation of Kerala’s masses and the

46 Travancore Coir Workers Association had a membership of 20,000 in 1945 (Nossiter 1982, 60).
47 For an in-depth study of culture and communism in Kerala, see (Mannathukkaren 2006).
changing social order.48 The comparatively higher rate of literacy among Kerala’s population made these progressive literary works accessible to a wider audience. In the field of performing arts, the CPI formed the Kerala People's Theatre Association (KPAC) in 1951. A play staged by KPAC in the 1950s—Thoppil Bhasi’s You Made Me A Communist—created such popular surge that the Travancore-Cochin government had it banned.

The CPI in Kerala, like elsewhere in India, suffered a temporary reversal in popularity due to its sudden change of stance vis-à-vis the Second World War and its opposition to the ‘Quit India Movement.’49 When the Quit India Movement suddenly gained momentum across the country, the communists were on the wrong side of the popular sentiment, and lost an opportunity to be the vanguard of the mass movement. The loyalty to the official Comintern line had trumped the tactics necessitated by the ground realities in India, and as a result, the CPI faced isolation and popular fury in the between 1942 and 1945 (Chakravartty 1994). The Kerala communists’ insertion into the movement for a united Kerala (Aikya Kerala), peasant campaigns, and the movement for responsible government in Travancore and Cochin, however helped them to regain popular confidence by the mid-1940s and avoid continued isolation from the political mainstream as had happened to other state units of the party.

48 The novels of this time included Vaikom Muhammad Basheer’s Baalyakaala Sakhi (Childhood Playmate) and Nhuttaappadakkoraanendaarunnu (My Grandpa Had an Elephant), Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai’s Randidangazhi (Two Measures of Paddy), Thottiyute Makan (Scavenger’s Son), and P. Kesava Dev’s Odayilninnum (From the Gutter). Young poets such as Changampuzha and Vailoppily extended this progressive trend to poetry.

49 The communists had initially denounced the Second World War as ‘imperialist war.’ However, when Hitler attacked Russia in 1941, the communists changed their stance to support the war in solidarity with Russia, calling it the ‘people’s war.’ Considering fascism as more menacing than imperialism, and not wanting the freedom struggle to impede the united efforts of Britain and Russia against fascism, the CPI stayed away from the freedom struggle temporarily and did not participate in Gandhi’s overwhelmingly popular ‘Quit India Movement’ launched in 1942.
Within a decade, from mid-1930s to mid-1940s, the illiterate agrarian masses of Kerala were transformed into a politically-conscious class who were fighting for independence from imperialism and landlordism. This process of revolutionary class formation entailed the linking of the movement of the tenants-at-will in Malabar and the movement of agricultural workers and agro-industrial workers in Travancore to construct a pan-Kerala working class. In establishing a strong protest tradition, in rejecting imperialist rule, in battling social and economic oppression by feudal landlords, and in asking for a fair share of the economic pie, Kerala’s peasants and workers played a foundational role, defining the radical ethos of modern Kerala.

4.3.4 Summary

The fusing of class, community, and nationalist struggles was a unique feature of Kerala’s class formation and it was accomplished by the close involvement of leftist groups and leaders in everyday struggles of the masses. The leaders of left-wing movements in Kerala had deeply entrenched roots in villages. Their active involvement in local movements earned them both legitimacy and familiarity in the eyes of the masses. Their proximity to the masses enabled them to transcend the narrow limits of segmented social reform movements and sector-based labor mobilization and create a sense of class solidarity among disparate social forces. Early communist leaders joined the communist party, not out of a sound knowledge or firm belief in the principles Marxism-Leninism, but out of a concern for substantive justice imbibed from decades of experience in anti-caste, pro-democracy, and nationalist struggles. They were thus able to articulate the goals of communism in an indigenous idiom that was meaningful to the everyday struggles of the masses.
Although the official documents of the Comintern or the Communist Party did not provide a clear perspective on how caste struggles were to be integrated into class-based politics, Kerala socialists and later communists comprehended the congruity of purposes of the two movements and devised appropriate movement tactics. They understood that the principal contradictions in Kerala society, material and ideological, were articulated in caste inequality and that any serious attempt to reorder its social universe had to meaningfully engage with the problem of caste inequality. Thus, the Left provided an overarching framework of class that linked local struggles for caste equality, temple entry, community-based social reform, and fair share of agrarian surplus for tenants, laborers, plantation workers, and agro-industrial workers and in so doing successfully harnessed their synergies. This has resulted in the formation of an encompassing “social-movement dynamic” in Kerala that pays attention to not just the economic emancipation of workers, but also to their social and political empowerment in a manner somewhat atypical of Marxist labor movements (Heller 1999).

The three decades between mid-1940s to mid-1970s witnessed a fundamental transformation of Kerala, due to a series of class struggles launched by the Communists and their mass fronts. Within a short span of time, Kerala was transformed from an extremely unequal and oppressive society to “one that had made substantive socio-economic equality its principal preoccupation.” (Heller 1999).
4.4 Radical Mobilization of Peasants and Workers

4.4.1 First Communist Government, 1957-59

After the national CPI abandoned its adventurist line and joined the parliamentary path in 1951, the Kerala CPI formed a United Front with smaller socialist parties in the 1952 and 1954 Travancore-Cochin elections and became the principal opposition to Congress. The incorporation of Malabar into Kerala in 1956, where the communists had preponderance, and the severing of southern regions of Travancore where they had practically little influence, bolstered the strength of CPI in a united Kerala and emboldened it to contest on its own in the 1957 general elections—the first after the formation of a united Kerala—without a united front with other parties. Using the fragmentation of votes and the inter-communal rivalry in the Congress to their advantage, the CPI emerged as the biggest party with 60 out of 126 seats and 39% of popular votes (44% with party-backed independents). A CPI-led ministry came to power with a slender majority of 65 seats against 61 in a house of 126. The 11 member ministry, comprising of 9 communists and 2 independents, was one of the first communist governments anywhere in the world to come to power through the ballot box.\(^5\)

The assuming of power by a communist ministry in April 1957 was a critical juncture in Kerala’s history. The institutional changes and the alternative policy agenda that this EMS Namboodiripad-led government introduced during its term were important building blocks of

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\(^5\) By some accounts, the earliest instance of communist ascension to political power through ballot box was of the People’s Progressive Party (PPP) of Guyana, under Cheddi Jagan in 1953. Others point out that PPP did not refer to itself as a communist party, although it was influenced by communist ideas. The tiny Italian principality of San Marino is also cited as another example of earliest communist rule by democratic election (in 1945). French and Spanish communists were part of United Front governments, in alliance with other radical parties before the Second World War.
modern Kerala’s political trajectory and its redistributive preference. The government lasted only for 28 months; however, during its short term, the government proposed legislative changes on a whole range of issues that were aimed at improving the lives of the working poor. These included debt relief, wage increase, new industries, and administrative reforms. The most notable initiatives were its bills on education and land reform.

The objective of the ‘Kerala Education Bill’ was to clean up the education sector. Under the financial support provided by the state government in the form of grant-in-aids, private schools in the state had proliferated, but without provisions for state oversight, standardization of quality, and efficient use of state funds. Private managements, which received state funding, had a free hand in appointing and terminating teachers; this attracted charges of corruption, nepotism, and dictatorial behaviour. The Bill proposed to improve the rights of teachers vis-à-vis managements, and allow the state to supervise and control the running of state-aided schools. As the majority of aided schools were run by Christian churches, dominant sections of the Christian community viewed it as an infringement on the right of minorities guaranteed by the Constitution. Although the Bill was passed with minor amendments in 1958, the President of India referred it to the Supreme Court for opinion on the legality of its contents (due to the pressure from the Congress government at the Centre). The Supreme Court upheld the provisions in the Bill, validating the state’s right to regulate management of aided schools. The Communist government’s initiatives to revise school textbooks were also reviled by the churches as an attempt to indoctrinate the future

51 For a detailed analysis of the formative influence of the 1957 government in Kerala’s remarkable human development record, see Lieten (2002).
52 By late 1950s, Kerala had between 6,000-7,000 private-aided schools . 37% of them were run by the Christian churches. Aided schools received state funds to the tune of 90% of their expenses in 1959 (Lieten 1977, 6 & fn. 11, 12).
generation with an “anti-religious” “totalitarian” ideology. The opposition to the Education Bill was strident in Travancore-Cochin region due to formidable Christian presence.

Although the Muslims and Nairs, too, had a stake in the education sector, inter-community rivalry muted the opposition from these sections, at least initially. The Nair Service Society, in fact, supported the Bill as a way of neutralizing the Christian dominance in the sector (Lieten 1977). However, the Bill’s objectives to restrict the power of managements and strengthen the right of teachers found supporters in every community, mostly among teachers and workers. The Congress Party itself was not united in its opposition to the Bill; its members belonging to the Ezhava community were in favor. The Praja Socialist Party (PSP) also witnessed similar internal dissent. The Bill, thus, forced a class polarization in the state, even within the communities and the parties that opposed it.

The EMS ministry’s most formidable contribution was, however, its Land Reform Bill. Introduced as the ‘Kerala Agricultural Relations Bill’ (KARB) in 1957, it recommended far-reaching changes in tenure security, land ceiling, and land ownership. On tenure security, the Bill proposed to stay eviction of all tenants and offer fixity of tenure. It proposed to prevent resumption for self-cultivation by landholders of more than five acres where it deprived the tenant of a subsistence holding. It also stipulated rent to a maximum of one fourth of the gross produce, in many cases, much less. A land ceiling maximum of 15 acres of double-cropped land per family was to come to effect and all the remaining land were to be vested in the state and redistributed by Land Boards dominated by elected representatives, peasants, and agricultural laborers.
The Bill endangered the material interests of the dominant landowning communities in Kerala, notably that of the Christians and the Nairs. The elite of both communities held vast tracts of plantation and paddy land, some owning more than 400 hectares of backwater-raised paddy land (kayal) in Kuttanad. Not surprisingly, these sections were most opposed to the land reform proposals (Namboodiripad 1967, 204). Nairs, who were the principal landholding caste in the Travancore-Cochin area, recanted their earlier support for the Education Bill and asked the government to withdraw both Bills. The congruence of interests of the dominant sections of the two major communities led to the formation of an anti-communist front. The Nair Service Society under Mannathu Padmanabhan joined hands with the Christian churches, supported by the Congress Party, and together they mounted an anti-communist campaign called Vimochana Samaram (the Deliverance Struggle), not just to demand the withdrawal of the Bills, but to oust the communist ministry. The underlying material interests behind the struggle were evident from the fact that in Kuttanad, 22 out of 31 members of the Deliverance Struggle Committee owned more than 400 hectares each of backwater lands, about to be brought under a land ceiling (Nossiter 1982, 152).

Given the wide popular acceptance of the land reform agenda, the campaign to oust the government was tactically framed as a fight against the trampling of minority rights (Education Bill), against the failure of the government to provide basic necessities (rice, work, clothes), and to maintain a modicum of law and order. Land reform, however, was the underlying bone of contention (Namboodiripad 1959; Pulikkunnel 2004). Although the Bill
contained nothing that was outside the programmatic statement of the Congress Party, the Kerala unit of the Congress Party opposed it.53

A frenzied campaign led by the anti-communist front threatened violent direct action and bloodshed, while calling for the dismissal of the communist ministry. By portraying communists as propagators of atheism and evil, they helped to entrench hatred against communists in the Christian and Nair communities. Religious sentiments and influence were used to elicit participation in the activities of the anti-communist front. Communal rhetoric was also used to stem class polarization internally, especially among Latin Catholics who constituted a sizeable portion of the workers. It is now known that anti-communist interests within India and abroad helped generously in the campaign (Moynihan and Weaver 1978, 41). In the Cold War context, with China already having embraced Communism, Kerala going red was viewed by the capitalist block as signifying the possibility of a spread of Communism in India. The Kerala Legislative Assembly passed the Bill in 1959, but the government was dismissed by the Centre before it received Presidential assent in the face of violent anti-communist agitation, police firings, deaths and the arrest of an estimated 150,000 people.

Yet, the policies and proposals of the first communist ministry shaped the public domain of contemporary Kerala to an extent unmatched by any other political idea or event in its

53 Land reform as a desirably policy goal had been recognized by the Congress Party as early as 1931. An Agrarian Reforms Committee set up by the Congress Party in 1949 recommended comprehensive land reform and transfer of ownership to the tiller (Herring 1988). Nehru announced ‘socialistic pattern of society’ as the object of policy making in 1955. Further, the plan document for the second five-year-plan (1956-61), which received the approval of Indian Parliament in 1955, also recommended land reform to states and proposed the following measures as a guide to enacting land reform: protection of tenants, provision of credit to farmers, increase in the ownership of land of those who actually till the soil, and the imposition of a ceiling on agricultural holdings (India 1956, 195-97).
modern history. Numerous scholarly works has justified the EMS ministry’s symbolic and substantive significance (Fic 1970; Lieten 1982; Nossiter 1988).\textsuperscript{54} Though short-lived, the EMS ministry set a precedent in the use of mass mobilization as an effective instrument in policy-making and implementation. Legislative power of the state from above and popular demand from below through political mobilization became two inseparable instruments of radical policy change. This was achieved through open village meetings, popular education, innovative forms of political action including mass processions, collecting feedback from peasants through various channels of the state machinery, and by explicitly linking the reform proposals to decades of peasant struggle. This kind of popular involvement in policy formulation was unparalleled in the rest of India at that time. As we shall see later, the Kerala Left continues to sustain this kind of bottom-up, top-down synergy in the policy processes. The communist ministry also inaugurated a radical vision for modern Kerala based on equitable public policies, state intervention in social welfare, and protection of the socially and economically vulnerable. A comprehensive agenda for Kerala’s development was put forward in the “Communist Proposal for Building a Democratic and Prosperous Kerala” in 1956 as a precursor to CPI’s election manifesto for the 1957 elections.\textsuperscript{55}

The inimitable contribution of the first communist ministry was in making ‘class’ the principal political cleavage in contemporary Kerala. Although Malabar had witnessed class-based mobilization in the previous decades, Travancore and Cochin largely remained in the grip of caste and community as dominant political cleavages even after national independence. The first communist ministry forced a class-based polarization of Kerala

\textsuperscript{54} For a firsthand account of the chief minister himself on the life of the first communist ministry, see Namboodiripad (1959).

\textsuperscript{55} For an elaboration of the development vision embedded in this document, see Namboodiripad (1969).
society as a whole, and facilitated the eventual hegemony of class politics in a society where caste and community continue to hold significant clout. Class schism forced serious cracks in the appeal of caste and community rhetoric and impelled the working people to unite for radical action. This consolidated a political constituency for the left parties and its psychological impact on the poor who saw in the Left the possibility of a radical transformation of their socio-political circumstance was immense. Kathleen Gough observed in 1965 that “… the communist period so deepened the existing class struggle and liberated property-less from their old ties of subordination, that traditional relations of private property, tenancy and wage labor cannot now be made to work harmoniously” (Gough 1965, 417).

4.4.2 Mobilization of Opposing Class Forces, 1959-1964

Unprecedented levels of popular mobilization elicited by the land reform bill did not dissipate even after the end of the EMS government. The political energy it unleashed sustained adversarial mobilization of opposing class forces, totally consuming Kerala society in the ensuing decade. For the communists, the thwarting of the Land Reform Bill and the “unfair” dismissal of the Communist government by the Centre became a rallying point in bringing together workers, peasants, and laborers with a renewed vigour. Karshaka Sangam (Peasant Union) and other trade unions began to attract larger membership, became more militant, and extended themselves to previously unorganized sectors. On the opposite side, the radical reform agenda of the communists became a rallying point for all those social

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56 Aiyappan (1965) charts the empowerment of Ezhava workers during the communist period.
57 80% of Kerala’s unionized workers in 1957-58 were members of the CPI-affiliated labor federation, All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC). Its membership rose from about 43,000 in 1959-60 to 280,000 in 1968 (Nossiter 1982, 60).
forces that stood to lose from such a social transformation. Counter-mobilization by the anti-communist front that included the Congress Party, the Muslim League, the NSS and the churches was fierce, marked by attempts to win the poor masses away from the communists through an appeal to religion and caste.

A near 30% rise in voter turnout in the 1960 election can be seen as an indication of the level of popular mobilization in Kerala, bringing out a record 86% of the total electorate to the polling booths, as opposed to 67% in 1957. The distribution of votes between the two competing political blocks is further evidence of the heightened class polarization: while the anti-communist electoral alliance comprising the Congress, the PSP, and the Muslim League defeated the CPI, which contested on its own, the CPI increased its popular vote share from 40.7% (in 1957) to 43.1% (in 1960). Despite the vigorous anti-communist campaign and the electoral unity of disparate constituencies, the support base for CPI’s radical redistribution agenda was growing.

Realizing the popular support for land reform agenda, the landed classes shifted their tactics from one of outright rejection to cautious accommodation in the early 1960s. Accordingly, the Congress-PSP coalition government headed by PSP’s Pattom Thanu Pillai that came to power in 1960 introduced a considerably diluted land reform bill and passed it in 1961. This was an attempt by the Congress to diffuse the rising class polarization that continued to bolster communist appeal and, at the same time, steal the thunder from the leftists and cultivate a lower class/caste constituency for itself. Deliberate loopholes and adverse court challenges threw the operation of the land reform bill into jeopardy, providing crucial time for landlords to organize, evict, and conduct illegal land transactions in anticipation of future legislation if the Communists returned to power.
The large number of political groups and factions present in Kerala at this time, and the intense political competition led to permanently changing electoral alliances. The five years between 1959 and 1964, with dismissals, resignations, and realignments, was however only a prelude to the next two decades in Kerala politics – its hallmark being intense political instability. Between 1957 and 1982, only one government was able to complete its full term of five years. No political party was able to remain politically dominant. Political alignments changed with every election, with allies becoming enemies, and enemies becoming friends. The state gained a national reputation for political volatility during this period.

4.4.3 Fragmentation of Party system and Political Instability, 1965-1980

The almost simultaneous split in the Communist Party nationally and the Congress Party in Kerala in 1964-1965 set the stage for a redrawing of Kerala’s political landscape. The dominance of Congress Party was a key ingredient for political stability in state politics in India. Congress’s lesser stature took away this key component of political stability in Kerala and contributed to the fragmentation of the party system in Kerala. By the 1960s, contradictions in the large and unwieldy multi-class coalition of the national Congress Party had manifested in the form of factionalism across the country. Nehru’s death in 1964 provided a new impetus to factional wrangling. In Kerala, due to the communal history of Congress politics, factionalism assumed a communal angle but with underlying material antagonisms. In southern Kerala (erstwhile Travancore-Cochin), the competitive jockeying for electoral representation and employment opportunities by the two dominant communities of Nairs and Christians turned into distinct party factions. Congress Party’s functioning became a delicate process of bargaining and compromise among the leadership of the two communities. Communal rivalry between Nairs and Christians had brought the end of every
government in Travancore-Cochin between 1949 and 1957 (Nossiter 1982). With a view to expanding its base among the upwardly mobile Ezhavas, the low-caste community which the communists had made inroads into, the Congress national leadership appointed R. Sankar, a prominent Ezhava leader from south Kerala, as the chief minister of Kerala in 1962. The Nair-Syrian Christian communities viewed the national leadership’s backing of an Ezhava leader with scepticism. Congress high command’s consistent support to R. Sankar on a number of issues, especially in sidelining a prominent Syrian Christian leader, P. T. Chacko, led to a division in the Congress legislative ranks and to the fall of the Sankar ministry in 1964. Chacko’s role as the agriculture minister played a role in the marginalization of Chacko within the Congress (Pulikkunnel 2004). Fifteen legislators quit the Congress Party and formed the ‘Kerala Congress’ in 1965. The state fell under direct federal rule (President’s rule) again as the mid-term polls of 1965 did not yield a majority to any political party or alliance.

The fragmented mandate of 1965 was not only a reflection of the split in the Congress, but also the CPI. Only a few months earlier, the CPI had undergone a national split on the issue of the communist approach toward the national bourgeoisie. Two political parties emerged from the split: the right-communists (who continued to be known as the CPI) and the more radical left-communists (known as the CPI(Marxist) or CPI[M]). The right communists advocated an alliance with the progressive section of the national bourgeoisie (Congress Party) in building a national democratic front led by the working class. The left-communists argued for the exclusion of the Congress and the national bourgeoisie from the people’s democratic front it strived to build, considering their reactionary and counter-revolutionary character (see Mohan 1969). In the newly-drafted programs of the two communists parties,
the CPI considered the industrial proletariat as the vanguard of the revolution while for the CPI(M) it was the peasantry (Wood 1965, 59).

The CPI commanded majority in the Party’s official bodies in Kerala, including the state council and its parliamentary wing; however the CPI(M) had an overwhelming majority among the cadre, mainly the mass fronts of the Party. In addition, the CPI(M) also had the two most influential leaders of the undivided communist party: EMS Namboodiripad and AK Gopalan. The left affinity of mass organizations gave the CPI(M) control of the Party’s local organizations. The CPI(M) thus became the dominant communist party in Kerala post-1965, controlling left politics in almost all regions of Kerala, except in Trichur (Thrissur) and Quilon (Kollam) districts (Nossiter 1988, 82).

The split in the dominant parties resulted in the fragmentation of Kerala’s party system and a decade and half of highly unstable coalition governments. Fragmentation diminished the prospect of electoral majority for any single party as it resulted in the dispersion of votes among a wider number of political parties. The number of political parties rose from 5 in 1957 to 25 in 1980 and the percentage of vote share of the single largest party dropped from close to 40% in 1957 elections to a mere 18.9% in 1980. The end result of the disintegration of the party-system was the early onset (in comparison to the rest of India) of Front Politics. Kerala moved from an era of coalition politics dominated by two parties to an era of multi-centered Front politics. Coalition governments of the previous decade were built around two poles, the Congress and the CPI. In the new era of Front politics, three, and, at times four sets of electoral coalitions became the order of the day, with a majority of constituencies witnessing four or five-cornered contests. High electoral competition and the necessity to stay electorally relevant by winning a handful of seats left little scope for ideological
cohesion in the rapidly mutating electoral fronts. For the two Communist Parties, the changed reality called for the deployment of the ‘United Front’ tactic—the endeavor to create broad electoral coalitions of disparate classes and parties that had an anti-landlord and anti-big business orientation—however their fundamentally different assessments of the class character of the Congress resulted in dissimilar understandings of which groups were potential allies in a prospective United Front. The CPI perceived a role for the progressive section of the Congress Party in a United Front, while the CPI(M) followed a policy of consistent isolation of the ‘reactionary’ Congress Party—the main opposition. In the process, the communist parties, sharing a largely unfriendly relationship, joined forces with non-left, sometimes even blatantly communal and sectarian groups during the 1967-79 period.

Thus, the rivalry between, and the divergent understandings of, the two communist parties had inauspicious consequences for further consolidation of class consciousness and the polarization of right-left political forces in Kerala. The masses did not readily understand the finer ideological distinctions on which the parties based their positions. The division of left votes into competing electoral blocs provided an inadvertent boost to the communal interests vying to influence Kerala politics. In addition to the Kerala Congress and the Muslim League, new communal parties cropped up in the 1970s representing communal interests: the Nair community’s National Democratic Party (1973) and the Ezhava community’s Socialist Republican Party (1972). The tight electoral competition helped in no small measure in lending credibility to these short-lived formations. The communist parties, while recognizing the need to diminish the influence of communal interests, played into reinforcing the short-term political salience of communal formations by entering into various tactical alliances with them. Class-based polarization became a temporary causality of the
ideological confusion that resulted from the fragmentation of the party system. The historical salience of caste and communal organizations in southern Kerala has been the primary reason for the trajectory; however, this prevented the building of a hegemonic working class or left political block in the way it was possible in Bengal in the post-1970s period, despite the early and wide-reaching mobilization of the working class. The tension between the tactical demands of electoral competition and the strategic requirements of social revolution has been a classic dilemma for the Left in Kerala’s highly competitive electoral arena (Herring 1983, 11).

However, beneath the veneer of ideological incoherence and fractiousness, the sustained pressure for material justice in the form of land reform and other redistributive reforms maintained the class character of Kerala politics. The underlying political dynamic of antagonism between two classes is evident from the long association of the dominant sections of caste and communal groups with the right of the political spectrum and their time-tested antipathy for left-wing politics. In a struggle for hegemony between the two classes in Kerala’s highly fragmented and competitive electoral arena, the left parties sought to use the correlation of caste-communal forces to advance the interests of the property-less.

4.4.4 Land Reform

Agriculture was the dominant sector of Kerala’s economy during 1950s to mid-1970s. Implementation of land reform not only altered the balance of agrarian class forces, but it had a decisive yet somewhat counter-intuitive impact on agricultural productivity. In 1957, the

58 A United Nations study credited Kerala’s class-based political environment as the main difference between Kerala and the rest of India with regard to implementation of land reform (UNRISD 1975)
year in which the first land reform bill was proposed, Kerala’s landholding structure was still highly skewed (see Table 4.2). Of particular concern was the land inequality in Malabar where minimal tenancy reform had taken place.\textsuperscript{59} Over 75% of Malabar’s agrarian population were still tenants (including superior and lower tenants) and another 12% were landless laborers. The number of ownership holdings of over 5 acres constituted more than 30% of the total holdings in Malabar, while in Travancore-Kochi larger holdings only constituted 5% (Eashvaraiah 1993, 115). Differences in agrarian structure existed \textit{within} the respective regions, too. For example, the agrarian structure of the paddy-cultivating area of Kuttanad was notably different from the rest of Travancore, of which it was a part, in having a very high percentage of landless laborers among agriculturalists (41% compared to 13% in all of Travancore), lower percentage of owner-cultivators (18%), higher proportion of tenants (35%) and rentiers (6%) (Varghese 1970, 161).

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\caption{Agrarian Structure of Kerala in 1957 (as percentage of agrarian population)}
\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
Tenure Status & Malabar & Cochin & Travancore & All Kerala \\
\hline
Landless laborer & 12 & 19 & 13 & 14.67 \\
\hline
Owner-Cultivator & 10 & 29 & 56 & 31.67 \\
\hline
Tenant Cultivator & 75 & 50 & 25 & 50 \\
\hline
Rentier & 3 & 2 & 1 & 2 \\
\hline
Other & - & - & 5 & 1.67 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{59} The Malabar Tenancy Act of 1930 had been amended three times (1945, 1951, 1954) due to pressure from the peasant movement. The lower tenants improved their position with each amendment in a piecemeal manner, yet by 1957 they hadn’t added up to a whole lot. Tenants-at-will and laborers were still largely at the mercy of the landlords.
The salient point here is that the agrarian situation of post-independent Kerala was not uniform. The constituent geographical regions differed widely, across and within, in their agrarian structure. The spatial variation in agrarian relations led the growing communists to anchor their mobilization efforts on the impoverished lower tenantry in Malabar and among the landless agricultural and agro-industrial workers in Travancore. Any land reform agenda for the whole of Kerala thus had to recognize the demands of these classes—radical tenancy reform and redistribution of land to the landless—while striving to bring uniformity in tenure system across the state.

From the introduction of the first Land Reform Bill in 1957, it took twelve long years for Kerala to pass a comprehensive piece of legislation that mirrored the radical intent of the original Bill (See Appendix 2 for a chronological account of Kerala’s Land Reform legislation). The decade of 1959–1969 witnessed the continued renegotiation of the substance of the Bill as landed interests aligned with the Congress, the Kerala Congress, and the Muslim League blocked or sabotaged its redistributive intent. The radical provisions of the 1957 KARB were removed ostensibly on the pretext of constitutional propriety and two diluted versions of land reform legislation were enacted, Kerala Agrarian Relations Act (KARA) in 1960-61 and Kerala Land Reforms Act (KLRA) in 1963-64, in order to placate the landed interests. As the contents of the successive Bills incurred meticulous scrutiny inside the legislature and in courts, the peasantry and the landed classes fought a class war through mass agitations, land grab agitations, no-rent campaigns, surplus land recovery

Source: Adapted from (Varghese 1970, 161-67; Herring 1983, 160-61)\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{60} As shown by the national census of 1951, Kerala’s agrarian structure as a whole was somewhat distinct from the national picture. In comparison to the rest of India, Kerala had a low percentage of owner-cultivators, high percentage of tenants, and a significantly high percentage of agricultural laborers (India 1952).
movements, hunger strikes, state-wide jathas, hartals, public meetings, petitions, house-to-house campaigns, and picketing of government offices (Andalat 1979; Oommen 1985). The long gap in settling the terms of the legislation caused by administrative delays, prolonged litigation, adverse pronouncements by courts, and political instability served as valuable preparation time for landlords to rearrange their holdings through bogus transactions and partitions, in order to evade the ceiling provisions. Illegal transactions accompanied non-compliance and intimidation. In the absence of land records and effective administrative machinery, implementation became difficult without the involvement of local citizenry. However, given the highly charged political atmosphere, local involvement was fraught with problems. While the Left advocated popular involvement in the implementation process, the courts and opposition parties objected. Popular mobilization had to contend with the superior resources available to the landed classes to evade the law, co-opt the administration, and persuade the judiciary.

4.4.4.1 Kerala Land Reforms Amendment Act (KLRAA), 1969

Following mass agitation under a Left-led United Front government, a comprehensive land reform bill was finally enacted in 1969: the Kerala Land Reforms (Amendment) Act (KLRAA). The Act came into effect in January 1970. Even though technically an amendment to the 1964 Act, in effect, it was a thorough revision of the previous Act. It restored many of the radical provisions of the 1957 Bill. The three major components of the 1969 Act were 1) the abolition of tenancy and conferring of ownership rights on tenants, 2) redistribution of house and garden lands to homestead occupying tenants (kudikidappukar), and 3) the imposition of land ceiling and redistribution of excess land to the landless and land-poor.
Kerala communists contributed critically by creating an effective mechanism for implementation, much like in Bengal. They successfully mobilized the beneficiaries to participate in the reform process, facilitated their taking possession of redistributed land, and provided physical protection to them. Anticipating law-evading manoeuvres of the propertied classes, the legislation was also meticulous in avoiding loopholes and in providing clear supplementary regulations so that litigation was not pursued as a way of delaying implementation. In light of the experience of other Indian states where land reform had failed due to the class bias of the state and the bureaucracy, the Kerala Act directed the state to act in favor of the beneficiaries (e.g. onus of disproving tenancy shifted to the landowner, possession of land as adequate basis for tenancy claim, and power to recognize tenancy *suō moto*).

**4.4.4.2 Abolition of Tenancy**

The primary objective of the 1969 Act was to put an end to landlord-tenant organization of agricultural production and rentier landlordism (payment of rents and levies by actual cultivators to non-cultivating landlords). The Act proposed to vest in the state all rights of landlords and intermediaries on lands cultivated by tenants (both paddy *nilam* and garden lands *parambu*), and subsequently confer such rights on the latter. In effect, this made the cultivating tenants owners of their leased-in holdings, free to cultivate as they pleased without the burden of excessive rents and levies. Landlords losing land under the provision were entitled to compensation from the government, while the tenants acquiring ownership were to pay a purchase price directly to the government. Given the oral and implied nature of most tenancy arrangements, possession of leased-in land alone was made sufficient ground to claim tenancy rights.
Tenants constituted about 45% of Kerala’s agrarian households immediately prior to the implementation of KLRAA, as shown in Figure 4.2. Kerala’s tenant class was a highly heterogeneous group comprising of different types of tenancies—supervisory, cultivating, tied labor—with a wide differentiation in the size of the leased holding, terms of the lease, and in levels of wellbeing. The Act broadened the definition of cultivating tenant, listing persons holding over twelve different types of tenures as ‘tenants’ or ‘deemed tenants,’ extending the benefits to a wider section of the agrarian population. The definition of cultivating tenant included not only those who personally cultivated leased-in lands, but also those who cultivated such land with family labor or hired labor or both, or personally supervised such cultivation.\(^6\) While the heterogeneity and the broad definition enabled a wider beneficiary pool, it had, as will be discussed, problematic distributional consequences.

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\(^6\) Accordingly, ‘tenant’ tenures included *kanam* (supervisory), *kuzhikanam* (cultivating, garden lands), *ottikuzhikanam* (land improvement), *verumpattom* (cultivating, at-will), *mulgeni* (perpetual with fixed rent), *kudiyiruppu* and *karaima* (resident tenant laborer) (KLRAA section 2.57). The terms of the tenures also varied depending on the type of contract (lease or sub-lease; express or implied), type of land (wet, dry, garden), duration (perpetual, fixed, at will), and rent arrangements (in cash or crop at fixed or variable rates). ‘Deemed tenants’ included mortgagees with possession of land, lessee of a mortgagee, bamboo-cutters (*odacharthu*), sharecroppers (*varam*), land improvers (*vechupakuthy*), occupants of private forest lands and un-surveyed lands, and recently dispossessed tenants (section 4-12).
Of the three land reform components of the Act, the tenancy provisions were the most effectively implemented and it resulted in palpable enhancement of the security and income levels of the tenants. Since the large landlords of Kerala leased out most of their land, the overwhelming majority of land that changed hands in the land reform process (over 95% of all land redistributed) were through the abolition of tenancy measures. Roughly 1.3 million tenant households received ownership of two million acres of land (36.5% of the net sown area in the state) after the land tribunals received 3.7 million applications from tenants and approved 2.4 million (Radhakrishnan 1989, 174-75). Its biggest impact was in Malabar as close to 50% of agrarian households there depended on tenant cultivation as the main source of income compared to near 20% in Travancore and Cochin (Varghese 1970, 199-201).

Source: (Kerala 1968; Herring 1983, 182)

62 By 1982-83, implementation of land reform was virtually over in Kerala with land tribunals having disposed of over 99% of pending applications. All implementation data is thus until the year 1982-83. 2.4 million approved applications produced only 1.3 million beneficiaries because each application was for a separate holding and many tenants held multiple holdings.
Malabar also accounted for 64% of all tenant households in the state immediately prior to land reform, Cochin 23%, and Travancore 12% (Kerala 1968, 133). Of all the tenants assigned ownership through land reform, roughly 82% were in erstwhile Malabar, 14% in Cochin, and 4% in Travancore (Radhakrishnan 1989, 164-67).

4.4.4.3 Distribution of homestead lands to hutment dwellers

Agricultural laborers (kudikidappukar) were among the most vulnerable of Kerala’s agrarian classes, trapped in a form of perpetual tied or bonded labor with no or little remuneration. They were permitted to live in tiny self-erected homesteads or huts provided by the landlord in one corner of the estate. The Act not only protected these laborers from eviction, but also made them eligible to purchase the hutment and a tiny parcel of adjoining land (0.10 acres in rural areas, 0.03-0.05 acres in urban areas) at effectively 12.5% of the land market value or lower. Crops grown on the miniscule plots around the hutments were to be a subsistence guarantee against starvation. The Act also waived the rent arrears of kudikidappukar upon payment of a stipulated amount and made homestead rights heritable.

By the time land reform implementation had been effectively completed (1982-83), homestead lands to the tune of 21,522 acres were transferred to 273,118 agricultural laborer households. Another 60,000 homestead tenants had fenced off their land during the land grab agitation of early 1970 without going through the administrative formalities, bringing the total house-compound beneficiaries to about 340,000 (Gopalan 1975; Radhakrishnan 1989, 168-76). With a higher percentage of agricultural laborers, Travancore accounted for 47.4% of the homestead owners.
4.4.4.4 Redistribution of Surplus Land

These provisions aimed to set up a land ceiling, vest in the state land held in excess of the ceiling, and subsequently redistribute such land to the landless and land-poor. The ceiling was set at a comparatively low level, of 10 ‘standard’ acres for a family of up to five members, with one additional standard acre for every member to a maximum of 15 standard acres. Surplus land was to be redistributed first to landless agricultural laborers and then to small-owners holding less than one acre. The Act brought more lands under the purview of the ceiling compared to its predecessor Act by removing the more expansive definition of plantation lands. Ceiling exemption for plantation crops was to apply only to rubber, tea, coffee, cocoa, cardamom, and cinnamon, and no longer for cashew, coconut, and pepper, and kayal (polder) lands.

While Kerala’s land reform was successful in abolishing all forms of tenancy and in distributing hutment land to agricultural laborers, it has been less effective in implementing ceilings and in vesting surplus land in the state (Herring 1980). The absence of credible land records and an effective administrative machinery to identify and confiscate surplus land complicated the operation of these provisions. The landed interests who were to lose from the implementation of a land ceiling mounted serious hurdles—constitutional, legal, and political—in trying to circumvent the effective implementation of ceiling. Various exemptions and illegal transactions such as sales, partitions, and gifts reduced the total amount of available surplus land. Between 1957 and 1967, a total of 216,000 acres changed hands, most of which were bogus transactions undertaken to escape the ceiling provisions.

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63 The size of a ‘standard’ acre varied depending on the type of land, ranging between 1.2 to 1.5 actual acres. Thus, 10 standard acres = 12 to 15 acres.
Similarly, in anticipation of land ceiling exemption for plantation lands, large areas of food crop lands were converted to plantation crops further reducing the total available surplus land. Cash crop cultivation nearly doubled between 1958 and 1975 (Oommen 1979, 17). At the introduction of the first land reform bill, the government estimated a surplus of 1.75 million acres; 10 years later in 1967, however, the estimate had been lowered to less than 200,000 acres (under 3% of the net cropped area in the state) even though the ceiling had not changed (Oommen 1975a). By 1982, only 163,000 acres had been identified as surplus, of which roughly 85,000 acres were vested in the state, and 53,000 acres redistributed to 85,000 landless or land-poor households in the state, at an average of 0.59 acres (Radhakrishnan 1989, 171-76).

4.4.4.5 Structural Impact

The structural impact of land reform was significant for its elimination of the rentier class and the levelling of land ownership. Despite delays, evasions, and setbacks, the implementation of the principal element of the reform—abolition of landlordism and transfer of ownership to tenants—was successful enough to earn it the distinction of “the most radical, comprehensive and far reaching [land reform] in South Asia” (Nossiter 1982, 292). Land reforms as a whole benefitted 1.7 million households (1.3 million tenants, 340,000 homestead recipients, and roughly 85,000 surplus land allottees). Total land redistributed was 2.04 million acres. Between 1967 and 1982, Kerala noted a significant decrease in the

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64 Some estimates put the number of beneficiaries of tenancy reform at 2.4 million instead of 1.3 million. This is because land tribunals actually approved ownership transfer of 2.4 holdings. However, the average number of holdings received by each tenant was 1.9, bringing the number of beneficiaries down to 1.3 million. Herring puts the number of beneficiaries (by 1980) as follows—roughly 1.3 million tenant-turned-owners, 266,000 homestead owners, and 75,500 surplus-land receivers (Herring 1983, 211, 13).
number of landless households (from 57\% of all households in the state to 14\%) and a corresponding increase in the number of landowning households (from 43\% to 86\%). The number of landowning households with less than one acre saw an increase of over 200\%, while the number households owning over 20 acres recorded a 73\% decrease (See Table 4.3). These numbers reflect the significant diffusion of landownership. The average size of homestead land was only 0.08 acres and average size of surplus land distributed was 0.63 acres, both small in size but reasonable when Kerala’s intense land scarcity is taken into consideration.\textsuperscript{65}

What is invisible from the above picture is the differential economic and political impact of the distribution of landownership on the highly heterogeneous tenant class of Kerala. It has been argued that land reforms in Kerala benefited the relatively well-off tenants who held larger holdings, while poorer tenants and agricultural laborers gained tiny bits of land (Krishnaji 1979; Herring 1980, 1983; Kannan 1988; Radhakrishnan 1989). While all classes of tenants received some land, the tenants who leased-in larger tracts benefited disproportionately.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1967</th>
<th>1982</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Landless</td>
<td>57.4</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landowning</td>
<td>42.6</td>
<td>86.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{65} Kerala had the highest population density among Indian states; over 91\% of its land had already been brought under plough, and per capita availability of cultivable land was 0.32 acres in 1967 (Herring 1983, 180,213).
Of Kerala’s 1.3 million tenant households immediately prior to the abolition of tenancy, 56% were landless, depending entirely on leased-in lands, with a holding size of one acre or less. Even though they constituted more than 50% of the tenants, they were only cultivating about 13% of the total leased-in land in the state. Another 35% of the tenants held between one and five acres with an average holding size of 1.8 acres, holding 42% of the total leased area. The remaining 9% of tenant households held more than five acres with an average size of about 7.3 acres and the largest share of the total leased-in land at 44% (Radhakrishnan 1989, 190-92). In other words, the tenant class included poor, middle, and rich peasants. The poorer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Holding Size</th>
<th>Tenants</th>
<th>Share of Total Leased Area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;1 acre</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>74.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2.5 acres</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5-5 acres</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-10 acres</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-15 acres</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;15 acres</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (Kerala 1968; Radhakrishnan 1989, 188-89)

66 While Radhakrishnan’s three-fold classification of tenants is based on holding size, Herring (1983), drawing from the same source (Kerala 1968), presents a two-fold classification of Kerala’s tenantry based on type of tenure: “Kudiruppu tenants” and “other tenants.” Kudiruppu tenants were attached-resident-tenants (not to be confused with kudikidappukar who were attached-laborers); they held larger homesteads and had a marginally higher social status, owning almost no land and leasing in a house-site in addition to a small parcel of land, with an average holding of less than one acre. The “other tenants” were better off, holding larger holdings and controlling (95% of the total land held by tenants) while owning 32% of their holdings. Kudiruppu tenants and “other tenants” were roughly 50% each of the total tenantry. While the type of tenure is a broad indication of the economic plight of a tenant, it is not uniformly so. 43.1% of the “other tenants” held less than one acre while 28.2% of the kudiruppu tenants possessed more than one acre. In total, 56.7% of the tenantry held less than one acre (including both types of tenants) while 49.2% of all tenants belonged to the poorest stratum of the agrarian classes (households with annual
tenants were larger in number holding a smaller portion of the tenanted land, while the richer tenants were numerically smaller, but holding a higher percentage of the land. Given the vast disparity in holding sizes, transfer of ownership resulted in the enrichment of the relatively better off tenants, who cultivated larger tracts and had the resources to purchase ownership right and pursue litigation, if necessary, than the lower ranks of the tenantry. In addition, tenants who got ownership of land through the tenancy provisions, and not through redistribution of surplus land, received larger entitlements.

A survey conducted in 1976 in seventeen villages found that tenant households holding less than five acres, though constituting the larger portion of the erstwhile tenantry (91% of the tenantry in 1967 and 84% of the sample) only received 36.2% of the redistributed area, while those holding more than five acres (9.1% of the tenantry in 1967 and 16% of the sample) received 63.8% of land redistributed through tenancy reform (Oommen 1979, 18-28; Herring 1980). Many of the larger tenants combined cultivation of leased-in plots with self-owned lands. Their involvement in tenant cultivation was neither a reflection of their economic predicament nor an expression of feudal tenancy relations; rather leasing-in of larger tracts by better-off tenants had a capitalist character. However, in considering all tenancy in the state as feudal in nature, land reform policy obscured the capitalist nature of some of the tenant-landlord relations. The reform logic was primarily focussed on the elimination of parasitic rentiers as a class and in that sense tenants who leased lands from rentiers were to be the primary beneficiaries, regardless of the nature of the leasing arrangement (Herring 1983, 212).

income of less than Rs. 1000 or USD 125 in 1967). In contrast, 34.4% of all tenants belonged to the wealthiest stratum (annual income of Rs. 6000 or more; USD 750) (Kerala 1968; Herring 1983, 180-82). Irrespective of which classification is followed, there is evidence of vast inequality in the landholding size and economic plight of the tenants.
4.4.5 The “Embourgeoisement” of the Peasantry

Like in Bengal, the implementation of land reforms produced new material conflicts and in turn accelerated new political alignments. Labor-farmer conflict had been brewing for almost two decades in Kerala starting in the 1950s, but the aftermath of land reform triggered a full-blown conflict. The first half of the 1970s witnessed a new polarization between laborers and tenants-turned-owners who were former allies in the struggle against rentier landlordism. The material basis of their political unity had been broken once rentier landlords were eliminated and tenants became independent owners with sizable plots relative to Kerala’s average holding size (Krishnaji 1979; Raj and Tharakan 1983). Conferment of ownership and the intensification of capitalist agriculture (due to expansion of irrigation and adoption of green revolution technologies in northern Kerala) created ‘bourgeois’ aspirations among the tenant-turned-owner peasantry who wanted to profit from their newly-acquired assets (Herring 1983; Törnquist 1995; Heller 1999). The new owners employed agricultural laborers for much of the cultivation-related toil. Labor livelihoods became more insecure in the post-land reform period due to commoditization of labor and the sudden disappearance of employment guarantees associated with pre-reform patron-client arrangements. As a result, laborers demanded employment security and wage guarantees while owners preferred to maintain low wages, reduced cost of labor, and control over hiring decisions. A case in point is the introduction of mechanized tractors by farmers in the early 1970s for ploughing, ultimately aimed at increasing production and decreasing labor costs. The labor unions resisted the adoption of such labor-displacing technologies fiercely, resorting to violent tactics. In Kuttanad, the militant labor unions enforced a wage payment to the traditional laborers.

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67 Interview with minister of agriculture, Thiruvananthapuram, August 2005.
ploughman even when the tractor did the ploughing (Kannan 1999). The preponderance of small holdings, high wages, and high employment of wage labor thus brought the owner-proprietors (of all holding sizes) in conflict with the increasingly militant agricultural laborers. As their location in the class structure changed, political attitudes of the former tenants underwent a change and they withdrew their political solidarity with the struggles of laborers. Laborers felt betrayed by former tenants for abandoning their cause after benefiting handsomely from land reforms (Herring 1983, 214-16).

In Travancore, where capitalist agriculture had taken root relatively earlier, a similar polarization between capitalist farmers and agricultural laborers had been in the works since the 1930s. By the 1970s, the ‘gentleman’ character (abjuring physical labor) of Travancore’s owner-cultivators had become more pronounced as higher education and access to non-agricultural occupations reduced their dependence on income from agriculture. Even when holding sizes became smaller due to division among siblings, owner-cultivators largely refused to involve themselves in cultivation-related physical labor, but continued to hold on to their lands (owner-cultivators turning to owner-proprietors). As survival became less

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68 An overwhelming majority of Kerala’s landowners are marginal (below 2.5 acres) to small-holding (below 5 acres). In 1976-77, over 95% of Kerala’s holdings were below 5 acres compared to the national figure of 72%. Kerala’s average landholding size was 1.2 acres in 1976-77 compared to all-India average of 5 acres (India 1983). Nearly 80% of all owners in Kerala held less than 1.25 acres with an average size of 0.33 acres. Post land-reform, Kerala’s smallholders cultivated close to two-thirds (62%) of the total cropped area while their national counterparts claimed only less than a quarter (23.5%). All these numbers demonstrate the predominance of marginal to small-holding owners in Kerala. Despite the tiny holdings, incidence of employment of wage labor was unusually high, so were the wage rates. These peculiar features were at the heart of a new polarization between owner-cultivators (big and small) and laborers.

69 In the 1951 census, the state of Travancore-Cochin had the highest percentage of agricultural workers in India among its agrarian population – 37%. In Kuttanad, agricultural laborers constituted as much as 86% of the agrarian population in 1971 (Varghese 1970, 128; Tharamangalam 1981, 19).
reliant on cultivation, they became increasingly averse to meeting the high wage demands of laborers and threatened to keep their lands fallow (Eswaran 1990). These material contradictions that had become progressively starker in Travancore, arrived in Malabar in the late-1960s with the rapid commercialization of paddy cultivation in Palakkad, and reached a crescendo in early to mid-1970s. Land reforms solidified the contours of class antagonism between smallholders and agricultural laborers.

Labor-exploitation became the principal axis of conflict in agriculture in post land-reform Kerala, rather than the size of ownership holding as was common in most of India. With the emergence of new capitalist actors, primarily, a class of producers who did not till the land nor entirely depended on income from agriculture, the wage question pitted small and big owners alike against a class of wage laborers. It can be argued that this process did not just produce differentiations within the peasantry, but paved the way for its disintegration.

4.4.6 Rising Militancy of Agricultural Laborers

Land reforms and the accelerated commercialization of agriculture transformed labor into a commodity at the mercy of market mechanisms. Laborers became free wage earners: free to sell their labor as they saw fit, liberated from the shackles of patron-client loyalties, caste

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70 Interview with two prominent economists, Thiruvananthapuram, September 2005.
71 Except for the smaller size of their holdings, contemporary Kerala’s small-owners are virtually indistinguishable from capitalist farmers. They do not contribute physical labor even when the plots are tiny; rather they bear the risk of cultivation by paying wages to the labor, investing capital, and making crop decisions. In this sense, they are neither tillers, nor peasants. They are small-scale capitalist farmers. Production is hardly consumption-oriented, but market-oriented with a high incidence of commercial crops, and these smallholders are not dependent exclusively or even primarily on income from agriculture for livelihood. This is why the description ‘peasant’ is inappropriate for Kerala’s small-holders and also why the classic Marxist agrarian categories are somewhat unsuitable for the contemporary Kerala context.
indignities, and social subservience. But while wages were on the rise, availability of work and cropping intensity were on the decline. Many independent cultivators preferred to keep their lands uncultivated as wages and labor militancy increased. Also, mechanization of farming operations, especially ploughing and power tilling by tractors, diminished work days. Both of these resulted in a net fall in their real incomes. The permeation of labor-intensive capitalist agriculture augmented the contrast of wealth and poverty between the small-holding farmers and laborers. Also, from the gains made by the former tenants through collective political action, the laborers realized that political mobilization could yield results. All these factors laid the ground for shifting the focus of agrarian movements from land reform (which had been legislated and was in the process of implementation) to the welfare of agricultural laborers. The CPI(M) was instrumental in making this shift possible by adeptly harnessing the increasing militancy among laborers through its Agricultural Worker’s Union—the Kerala State Karshaka Thozhilali Union (KSKTU).

KSKTU was formed in 1968 in the face of rising militancy of agricultural laborers and their propensity for independent action. Prior to this, the Party had mobilized middle, small, and marginal owners, tenants, and landless laborers under the united platform of Karshaka Sangam (Peasant Union). The peculiar polarization described above nudged the Kerala CPI(M) to form a separate trade union for agricultural workers, over a decade prior to its

72 Due to the early fixation of minimum wages in agricultural operations, Kerala laborers were comparatively better off in wage rates. Average daily wages for male agricultural laborers increased by 92 per cent between 1956 and 1971, the highest in any Indian state, due to strong labor unions, higher prices, and an increase in the yield and acreage of paddy (Raj and Tharakan 1983). Punjab, the most prosperous agricultural state in India, recorded a wage increase of only 17% during the same period (Oommen 1971, 64). However, high wages had a negative impact on the number of available work days. Available days of employment for agricultural laborers decreased from an average of 173 days in 1964-65 to 138 in 1974-75 (Raj and Tharakan 1983, 31; Eashvaraiah 1993, 148).

73 Interview with CPI(M) state secretariat member, Thiruvananthapuram, 6 August 2005.
formation of an agricultural worker wing nationally. High levels of literacy, extensive newspaper readership, and political awareness among Kerala’s poor were important factors enabling fast and effective communication between organizations and laborers.

Labor militancy was at its peak in principal paddy producing areas of the state—Kuttanad and Palakkad—with a high concentration of seasonally employed agricultural labor and high degree of unionization. Labor-farmer conflict reached its pinnacle between 1968 and 1974. Between 1950 and 1970, the plight of agricultural laborers in Kerala deteriorated at a much faster rate than elsewhere in India as documented by the second national enquiry on agricultural labor (India 1961). Between 1951 and 1971, the percentage of agricultural laborers in Kerala rose from 39% to 63%, when the national figure was 38%. In 1971, agricultural laborers were the single largest occupational group in Kerala (30.69%), accounting for about 2 million in a population of 21 million (Raj and Tharakan 1983; Eashvarariah 1993, 139).

The primary issues confronting laborers were landlessness, wage protection, and availability of work. Although landlessness among agricultural laborers had marginally decreased due to the homestead land provision in the land reform program, vast number of laborers still remained landless.74 However, given the land scarcity in Kerala, the possibility of material improvement of agricultural laborers through land redistribution was limited.75 Historically, the thrust of agricultural labor union demands had been wage protection and regulation of work conditions. These demands as early as the 1940s cultivated a self-perception of

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74 The rate of landlessness among agricultural laborers was highest in Kerala among Indian states (31 per cent of all laborer households held no land in 1961 against the national average of 12%) (India 1961, 1972). Only 12% of Kerala’s agricultural laborers received land as a result of land reform.
75 Interview with CPI(M) state secretariat member, Thiruvananthapuram, 6 August 2005.
agricultural laborers as “workers,” part of the rural proletariat, as opposed to aspiring peasants. Early proletarianization of agricultural labor and the mobilizational tactics of pioneering agricultural unions played a role in enabling such self-reference. Struggles for wage increase and regulation of work hours and working conditions were successfully launched in the 1940s. Minimum wage legislation for agricultural laborers and tripartite dispute settlement mechanisms in the form of Industrial Relations Committees that included representatives of capital and labor had been in effect since the late-1950s.

In the 1970s, the KSKTU launched protests that were both peaceful and violent, localized and state-wide. Demands were for higher wages, guarantees of continued hiring, and closed shop policies to exclude cheaper labor from neighbouring Tamil Nadu. Labor Unions also demanded curtailment of owner prerogatives to depend on market mechanisms to maintain low wages and discipline labor in the context of labor oversupply and declining days of work. This resulted in the Kerala Agricultural Workers Act [KAWA, 1974], a landmark piece of legislation which protected wages, standardized working conditions, work hours and recess, and attempted to secure employment by creating a class of ‘permanent workers’ for pre-reform attached laborers. It also established a preference in hiring for laborers who worked in the same land during the previous season, called for the establishment of an Agricultural Worker’s Provident Fund, and laid down an improved dispute settlement mechanism through conciliation officers and labor tribunals. The militancy of agricultural labor unions across the state ensured the effective enforcement of these rights. The

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76 This is reflected in the name of the union—Karshaka Thozhilali Union (Agricultural Worker’s Union), a rejection of the traditional terms ‘karshakan’ (peasant) or ‘koolikkaran’ (laborer). I have used both ‘agricultural worker’ and ‘laborer’ synonymously.
4.4.7 Labor Militancy vs. Peasant Unity

The tenant-labor conflict and its political ramifications presented a tactical dilemma for the CPI(M). The conspicuous material gap between former tenants and laborers made it difficult to continue to advocate unity between the two core constituencies of its agrarian front. The predominantly small-holding agrarian structure and the high incidence of wage labor precluded the possibility of building peasant unity (or unity of smallholders and laborers) against large capitalist farmers. Thus the political option of curbing labor militancy in order to keep the peasant base intact was structurally constrained. The Kerala CPI(M) had no other choice, but to throw its lot with the militant laborers even at the cost of alienating some of its peasant base.

A number of other contingent political factors also forced the CPI(M) to back the laborers and pursue a path of high labor militancy in the 1970-75 period. The Party had worked hard to bring the land reform bill to fruition but found itself out of power as soon as the bill was passed. The KLRAA was legislated by a CPI(M)-led United Front government, but that government fell before the legislation came into effect on 1 January 1970. It was implemented by CPI-led coalition governments for the next decade while the CPI(M) sat in the opposition. The only way to claim any credit for it was to throw itself into agitational heat demanding speedy and effective implementation. There were other motivations as well. The ‘mini’ and ‘maxi’ front ministries during 1970-77, the most significant period of land reform implementation, relied for survival on political parties that represented landed
interests—the Kerala Congress and the Muslim League initially, and then the Congress Party and the Muslim League. The fear of the land reform program being sabotaged was credible.\textsuperscript{77} Kerala CPI(M)’s internal dynamics—a serious charge of peddling political centrism against its leader and former chief minister EMS Namboodiripad—also nudged it along the path of militancy. In the absence of an aggressive courting of laborers, the Party risked losing its most militant constituency to other political parties (who had also taken to organizing laborer unions) and validating charges of revisionism from the ultra-Left whose rhetoric had high purchase in the early 1970s.

The militancy and the independent strength of its agricultural workers’ union (KSKTU) was a factor in ensuring the backing of the Party. In several districts, CPI(M)’s strength was directly correlated to the strength of KSKTU. In Alappuzha and Palakkad districts, where KSKTU was most powerful, the Party had the best organizational base. The explosive speed at which the CPI(M)’s agricultural labor front grew to become the most powerful trade union in Kerala is not only an indication of the rapid maturing of material antagonisms between owners and laborers, but also the powerful backing it received from the Party.\textsuperscript{78} KSKTU doubled its membership in Alappuzha district and quadrupled its membership in Palakkad (where land reforms had the most pronounced impact) between 1970 and 1973, reaching a state-wide membership of 130,000 within five years of its formation (Jose 1977; Kannan 1988, 249). The Party backed the laborers even when its own peasant wing was at loggerheads with laborer demands.

\textsuperscript{77} Interview with minister of agriculture, Thiruvananthapuram, August 2005.
\textsuperscript{78} Interview with CPI(M) state secretariat member, Thiruvananthapuram, 6 August 2005.
In support of laborer demands, CPI(M) launched a “land grab movement” in January 1970 encouraging forceful occupation of excess land, fencing off one tenth of an acre by kudikidappu tenants as homestead lands, taking of crop yields from such land, and non-payment of rent to owners. In doing so, it rapidly shed its meticulously constitutional approach to land reform while in government (1967-69), and instead initiated radical mobilization and direct action by landless laborers. Two years later, in 1972, the CPI(M) launched another agitation—the excess land agitation—aimed at identifying concealed surplus land. Samara samithis (struggle councils) were formed at the local level to investigate concealed surplus holdings, enforce compliance, and defend beneficiaries. Forceful occupation of private land, processions, and picketing were common features of these agitations.\(^7\) The direct action modus operandi of these agitations further radicalized the agricultural laborer class. Laborer unions demanded local popular oversight over implementation and forceful takeover of homestead and surplus land without completing administrative formalities as laid out in the land reform act. Coordination meetings between farmer and labor wings of the party in many districts indicate that by 1972-73 laborer militancy had exceeded Party’s calculations and control, seriously alienating farmers (Herring 1989, 96-99). Countering labor militancy, owners in Palakkad district formed a Farmer’s Association (Deseeya Karshaka Samajam [DKS]), with many former tenants with larger holdings as its support base. The period of 1973-95 witnessed heightened militancy to secure higher wages as paddy prices appreciated. The DKS and KSKTU locked horns in a series of legal battles, strikes, crop destruction, physical violence, and even murder—another

\(^7\) The agitations identified between 135,000 and 180,000 acres as surplus land (Oommen 1975b). Over 10,000 activists, mostly of CPI(M), were booked for involvement in the agitation (Gopalan 1973).
open class conflict was born. The objective realities in Kerala did not permit pursuing a peasant unity path.

4.4.8 Economic Crisis, 1975-1985

Land reforms were intended to expand the production base and increase agricultural productivity. However, in Kerala it had the opposite effect in precipitating a “crisis of accumulation” (Kannan 1990; Heller 1999). After enjoying a phase of extensive growth in the 1950s and 1960s due to increasing acreage and yield, Kerala’s agricultural output slowed down in the early 1970s once the impact of land reforms became palpable, and went into negative growth by the mid-1970s. This was in sharp contrast with the 1960s when Kerala’s agricultural growth had outperformed the national rate (4.4% compared to 2.8%). In the 1970s, this equation was reversed as Kerala fell far behind national production rate. Kerala registered a negative growth of 0.52% between 1975-76 and 1987-88 (George 1993; Kannan 1998), marking a period of decline and stagnation in aggregate agricultural growth. All key indicators—net area sown, production level, per hectare yield—dropped considerably during the decade of 1975-76 to 1985-86 (Kannan and Pushpangadan 1988). Increasing militancy of labor unions, high wages, and the landowner’s decision to convert lands from labor intensive to non-labor intensive crops (e.g. paddy to coconut) were cited as reasons. Availability of income from non-agricultural sources permitted the landowners, small and big, to withdraw from agricultural operations when faced with decreasing profit margins and increasing cost of labor, thus exacerbating the slump in production. The share of agriculture to state income (state domestic product) dropped from about 42% in 1975-76 to roughly 26% in 1995-96.

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80 Kannan and Pushpangadan (1988) cite other reasons: inadequate water management, ill-conceived land development, and increasing environmental degradation.
Agricultural wages in real terms dropped sharply in 1974-75 after almost two decades of steady increase and the growth rate of wages slowed down since. Decline in productivity and production also meant a fall in days of work available for agricultural workers (Kannan and Pushpangadan 1988, 1990).

Similar trends were present in the industrial sector which was dominated by traditional, labor-intensive, low-value adding, agro-processing industries (Subrahmanian 1990). Kerala outperformed all-India growth in the manufacturing sector (Kerala-6.8%, India-3.6%) during 1965-75, but the figures plummeted in the next decade (Kerala-1.7%, India-5.5%). Traditional agro-industries like coir were also in a highly vulnerable state. Labor militancy and resultant capital boycott were hypothesized as having played a decisive role in addition to the historical pattern of industrial backwardness of the state (Prakash 1994). The all-round economic stagnation heightened an already poor unemployment rate, taking it three times higher than the national rate by 1983.

The phenomenal growth in remittances from Kerala expatriates in Gulf countries from the mid-1970s onwards is another variable that has had some, though controversial, impact on Kerala’s economic crisis. While some scholars argue that the remittances-boom (to the tune of a quarter of the total state domestic product) masked the extent of the economic crisis and moderated its impact (Gulati and Mody 1985), others contend that Gulf money partly caused the stagnation in domestic production, particularly in the agriculture and manufacturing sectors (Harilal and Joseph 2003). However, there is consensus on the notion that remittance inflow did not contribute to the modernization or diversification of the economy, while pushing up the level of consumption beyond the limits of a stagnating economy. Kerala’s consumer expenditure and rate of consumption shot up dramatically in comparison to the rest
of India by mid-1980s.\textsuperscript{81} Dwindling production and investment on the one hand and rising consumption on the other created a wide gap between Kerala’s income and expenditure.

By the mid-1980s, it was amply clear that the material antagonisms triggered by the implementation of land reform had led to a “stalemate class conflict” in which neither capital nor labor had “sufficient power to win decisively” (Herring 1989, 101). Land reforms had failed to deliver the expected dynamic developmental effects. Instead, in its aftermath, capital lost much of its managerial prerogatives to control the labor process and adapt to market pressures, while still holding enough strategic capacity to adversely impact labor. Labor won important guarantees of higher wages, regulation of work conditions, and collective bargaining, yet in the face of declining employment, flagging production, and productivity, its misery aggravated. The mutual despair was compounded by a high rate of inflation which wiped out wage increases for laborers and imposed a severe price-cost squeeze on farmers. Militancy without productivity led to labor market segmentation, creation of ‘insider’ vs. ‘outsider’ distinction among workers, and impeded structural change in the economy in favor of more efficient production. Redistribution without expansion of the production base had become unsustainable.

The stagnation of productive sectors lasted until the late 1980s and contributed to an acute fiscal crisis well into the mid-1990s, raising serious concerns over the sustainability of the “Kerala model” and the future of the Left itself (Isaac and Kumar 1991; Kannan 1998; Tharamangalam 1998). The logic of electoralism in a highly fragmented polity had pushed

\textsuperscript{81} Kerala became the second highest state with per capita consumption in 1986 compared to its tenth position in 1973 (Isaac and Kumar 1991, 2693).
all sides, including the Left, to prioritize short-term political gains ahead of long-term developmental goals.

### 4.4.9 Political Crisis

Scholars have argued that the decade of 1975-85 marked a deep rooted crisis of not only Kerala economy, but also its society and polity (Isaac and Kumar 1991; Tornquist and Tharakan 1996c). The primary catalyst of the crisis was the stagnation of its productive sectors, but there were also significant political, cultural, and social dimensions to it. The salient issues on the political side of the crisis revolved primarily around the continued viability of the politics of class struggle (the primary means of social change in traditional Left understanding) and the sustainability of previous redistributive gains hard-earned through decades of struggle.

The structural limits of the politics of class struggle were laid bare by its repercussions on the economy. Land reforms did not produce the expected expansion in production or economic growth. On the contrary, the decade of 1975-85 witnessed economic stagnation and an acute fiscal crisis. The adversarial-redistributive thrust of political mobilization divided the rural masses into competing classes and locked them in a zero-sum game. Labor militancy took a debilitating toll on productivity, cropping intensity, availability of wage employment, and ultimately the welfare of the Left’s key constituents. The tactics of heightening the labor-owner conflict and vigorous mobilization of laborers were thus a dead-end in the long-term, not just in terms of productivity, but also in bringing about a decisive change in the correlation of class forces in favor of the Left. It heightened the Party’s capacity for revolutionary action briefly and expanded its base among some of the most disadvantaged in
Kerala, but it also squandered the winning social coalition built through decades of struggle. Post-land reform, the strength of the CPI(M)’s peasant wing became inversely correlated to CPI(M)’s electoral success and to the strength of its laborer union (Isaac and Kumar 1991). In the face of increasing militancy of wage workers, sections of the tenant-turned-owner class switched political affinities to the Congress and to other parties that supported the interests of the propertied. Palakkad district, where the farmer-laborer antagonism reached a crescendo, witnessed the most dramatic impact of changing political loyalties in the form of unanticipated electoral reversals for the Left during the late-1970s and 1980s (Herring 1989, 97; Isaac and Kumar 1991). As land and wages ceased to be central issues of political mobilization, movements of peasants, agricultural laborers, agro-industrial workers in coir and cashew processing, all major support bases of the CPI(M), lost their mobilizational vitality and showed signs of stagnation by the late-1970s (Isaac and Kumar 1991). Left politics became defensive in nature, and new visions were lacking. Some scholars called it “the dead-end of the radical project of the traditional Left” (Tornquist and Tharakan 1996a).

In addition, economic stagnation and higher levels of unemployment enhanced the appeal of divisive politics based on caste and community. A resurgence of communal and caste-based political groups further undermined the Left’s ability to convert the revolutionary groundswell of 1970s into concrete political and electoral predominance. Even after two and half decades of class-based mobilization, not only had the Left been unable to check the salience of caste and community as political categories, but also their continued growth and

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82 Interview with former chief minister of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, August 2005.
83 Also interview with CPI(M) state secretariat member, Thiruvananthapuram, 6 August 2005.
consolidation. There were historical reasons for the prominent political role of these categories (e.g. the institutionalization of communal identities in the form of state-aided schools granted to communities and the elaborate system of reservation in the public sector on the basis of community identity), but the Left’s short-term electoral tactics and inability to balance redistribution with production inadvertently served to magnify and reinforce the political salience of these categories.\footnote{The Nair and the Ezhava elite launched their own separate political parties in the 1970s (National Democratic Party and Socialist Republican Party, respectively). The Muslim League and the Kerala Congress, two parties representing Muslim and Christian interests respectively, gained disproportionate clout by the late 1970s and ensured continuous power for themselves by planting a rival faction of each party in competing electoral coalitions. The strategy earned them important ministerial births and patronage. Through hectic political manoeuvring, a faction of the Muslim League even gained the chief ministership for a short-term in 1979, when it held only 13 seats in a house of 140. The perception of appeasement of the minorities (Christians and Muslims) by the rival electoral fronts, in the form of disproportionate political clout and patronage, fanned the flames of majority communalism. As a reaction, Hindu communal groups like the RSS, BJP, and Hindu Munnani gained ground in Kerala in the early 1980s. The anxiety of the Hindu upper-caste over the rapid material rise of middle to low sections of Ezhavas, Muslims, and Christians, benefitting from the sudden jump in migration of Kerala workers to the Middle Eastern countries in late 1970s and 1980s, was also a contributing factor in the rise of Hindu communalism. Two communal clashes, one between Hindus and Muslims (burning of Muslim commercial areas in Trivandrum in 1982) and another between Christians and Hindus (dispute over a church site in Nilakkal in 1983) signified increasing communal tension in a state which had hitherto had an impressive record of communal peace. The rightwing BJP-Hindu Munnani combine contested state elections for the first time in 1982 gaining 2.75% of popular vote. In 1987, its vote share increased to 6.48%.

That the Left failed to expand its social base to an electorally dominant position, while sectarian groups gained increasing clout was evidently a failure of its electoral tactics. Even when the CPI(M)’s capacity for mass mobilization was at its peak and its mass front membership at unprecedented levels, its electoral support did not increase noticeably. On the contrary, it suffered electoral setbacks in its traditional strongholds. The CPI(M)’s vote share in 1977 and 1982 was under 22% compared to 39% of its predecessor, the CPI in 1957.
The combined vote share of CPI and CPI(M) in 1982 (29%) was still far lower than what the united CPI achieved in 1957. Communal resurgence was proving a serious impediment to advancing class solidarity and Left politics.

This backdrop of a deep and multi-dimensional crisis opened up the space for debate on a democratic developmental state that prioritized economic recovery and growth without subordinating social outcomes to economic imperatives. A section of the CPI(M) sounded a call for a new kind of Left politics, redefining the radical project of the traditional Left in light of the changes in Kerala’s political economy. The recognition that economic stagnation and political degeneration seriously threatened prior achievements and the future of the Left itself constituted a sound basis for reform. On the economic side, the new agenda promised a shift of focus from redistribution to growth-with-equity, employment-generating growth, and expansion of the productive base. On the political side, it offered a vision of newer struggles beyond land reform and laborer-welfare to further democratization of Kerala society through decentralization of power and a firm opposition to communal politics. The new ‘democratic-developmental’ project was to be undertaken in partnership with new social movements and civil society, constituencies typically unengaged by the traditional Left (Isaac and Kumar 1991; Tornquist and Tharakan 1996b). On the whole, the emphasis on raising productivity and employment through labor-capital cooperation signified a switch in the dominant communist party’s and its mass fronts’ modus operandi from the politics of class struggle to the politics of class compromise.  

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85 See Heller (1999) for a seminal account of the dynamics of class compromise in Kerala.
4.5 Insurrection to Negotiation

The 1980s signalled a momentous change in the CPI(M)’s approach to capital and capitalist production. Its political rationale was the realization that in the context of Kerala’s class structure—preponderance of petty production and high wage labor—improving productivity through mutual compromise between petty capital and labor was necessary to build the unity of rural masses. The class compromise strategy was not limited to small-scale agrarian production, however. Workers in all sectors of the economy, who were hitherto routinely advised to oppose landowners/managers at all costs were now encouraged to cooperate with them. Productivity increases were not to be thwarted as exploitative ventures but embraced, as workers directly benefitted from higher levels of productivity. Labor-management cooperation was to be achieved within the framework of local, sectoral, and state-wide corporatist institutions and collective bargaining; it would be mediated by the state, with equal representation for labor and capital. In other words, the prevalent zero-sum nature of capital-labor interaction was to be converted into a positive-sum trade off through the institutionalization of labor’s right to a higher share of the surplus and capital’s right to manage the production process (Heller 1999).

There was no abrupt point of departure to political moderation announced by the CPI(M), nor a detailed enunciation of a tactical shift; rather the change was gradual, uneven across sectors, and highly contested. A bitter and acrimonious internal debate meant that the change of course occurred over a decade (late-1970s to early 1990s). Signs of labor peace were first visible in sectors that were organized comparatively earlier and in which labor-capital

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86 Interview with editor prominent left-wing weekly and leader of popular science movement, Thiruvananthapuram, August 2005.
confrontation had already peaked. The highly militant Kuttanad agriculture sector witnessed its first harvesting season without a laborer agitation in 1975. But this was not the result of any programmatic transformation of the Party or the KSKTU to the side of class compromise; the continued agrarian stalemate and the conciliatory environment in Kuttanad influenced the Party’s thinking in that direction. The thinning of KSKTU militancy in Kuttanad’s agrarian sector was quickly emulated by the CPI(M)’s labor federation, the Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU), though with less success in eliciting compliance from all its member unions. While CITU was successful in effecting a remarkable slowdown in the incidence of industrial disputes in the organized factory sector beginning in the late 1970s, freshly organized informal sector unions like head-load workers and construction workers continued to pursue high militancy at least until the mid-1980s. The life of the CPI(M)-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) government of 1981-82, which came to power with a promise to tame the unions, was cut short partly due to its failure to rein in militancy.

Around the mid-1980s, the contours of a class compromise trajectory became visible in the Party’s actions and rhetoric (Isaac and Kumar 1991), but the forging of the compromise was not a smooth process. Two factions emerged in the Kerala CPI(M), one advocating continued...

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87 If anything, the calming of agrarian antagonisms in Kuttanad seemed to be the inadvertent result of short-term electoral manoeuvres of the highly volatile Kerala politics of the 1970s. Forced to stay out of power between 1969-74, the CPI(M) entered into an agitational alliance with the Kerala Congress—a party it had derided as representing landed interests and the principal political organ of landowners in Kuttanadu—in 1974 in order to win back the small-owners into its fold and defeat the incumbent Congress-CPI front government in the impending elections of 1975. In Kuttanad, Akhila Kuttanad Karshaka Sangam (AKKS)—the Farmer’s Association sponsored by the Kerala Congress—was the dominant organization of farmers and thus the preeminent class enemies of agricultural laborers. Once in alliance, the CPI(M) laborer union (KSKTU) and AKKS had to learn to work with each other and raise slogans like ‘farmer and laborers are partners, not enemies.’ The alliance imposed from the top created considerable confusion in the ranks, yet brought agrarian peace in Kuttanad.
labor militancy and the other moderation. The public wrangling of the two factions during 1982-87 confused both the cadre and mass fronts, and impeded much needed ideological re-orientation. The electoral victory of 1987 and the subsequent formation of an LDF government (1987-91) was the first tangible opportunity to galvanize the Party’s fractured base and use state power to create the necessary institutional apparatus to forge and sustain class compromise. The imprints of a state-wide vision for a new developmental politics appeared in the manifesto of the LDF in the 1987 state elections, in the capital-friendly Industrial Policy of the LDF government, and in its approach to the eighth five-year plan published in 1989.

The shift to class compromise contained a basic contradiction between theory and praxis for the CPI(M). While theoretically the Party still professed class war and the dictatorship of the proletariat, its actions on the ground increasingly conceded accommodation of capital in the interest of production. Class compromise in a democratic-capitalist setting essentially meant support for private-property capitalism in return for basic welfare of the working class (Przeworski 1985). For a section of the Party, compromising with capital in this fashion, even with the intention of improving the conditions of the working class, amounted to legitimizing and reproducing the existing bourgeois-landlord system, instead of replacing it. Others held the view that in the absence of a radical rethinking of Left politics in order to rejuvenate the economy and polity, the sustainability of redistributive gains of the past and radical politics itself was under threat. The former were predominantly trade-unionists affiliated to CITU and the latter were mostly middle class intellectuals and social movement activists. Most commentaries of CPI(M) during the 1980s makes note of the divide in the party, although they label the competing camps differently. Tornquist and Tharakan describe it as “state-modernist” vs. “popular-developmentalist” factions; Heller as “corporatist” vs. “social movement” factions; and Ravi Raman as “trade union” vs. “middle class” factions (Tornquist and Tharakan 1996b; Rammohan 1998; Heller 2001). The differences of the two groups were thrown into sharp relief in the mid-1980s on the issue of the Silent Valley Hydroelectric Project and later on the question of decentralized planning. The latter group gained control of the party as the 1980s waned, on account of support from the student and youth wings of the party and a wide array of social movements.

In a pamphlet titled “The Politics of Development,” EMS Namboodiripad was the first CPI(M) theoretician to make a comprehensive attempt to lay out the rationale for the change of course in 1989. EMS’s iconic status helped considerably to garner wider support for the idea within the Party.
4.5.1 Institutional Manifestations

Despite the variability of timing across sectors, the dominant trends of a shift to class compromise were conspicuous. The modalities of social change envisioned by the Party and its unions steadily changed from anti-systemic and revolutionary to gradual and reformist (Heller 1999). Labor unions toned down militancy and wage demands, while increasingly opting for formalization of labor relations through legislation and dispute settlement mechanisms like the Industrial Relations Committees (IRC) in which labor enjoyed equal voice. Tripartite bodies offered a much needed flexible, localized and/or sectoral forum to thrash out specific compromises between capital and labor in the interest of expanding production. Even though the IRCs had no statutory power, the legitimacy that such bodies accrued from the enthusiastic response of labor unions meant that their settlements became widely accepted across the state. Deviations from standard wages and working conditions were agreed through local IRCs in several sectors, while the state guaranteed the social protection of workers through its welfare provision. Some labor welfare measures (such as pensions) that were originally envisioned as employer’s responsibility in certain sectors were shifted to the state in an attempt to lighten the burden of employers (Herring 1989).

In agreeing to institutionalized collective bargaining, unions agreed to bring class battles that were once fought at the worksites and streets into institutions of liberal democracy. The difference in approach becomes evident when contrasted with the Party’s highly sceptical view of the IRCs as late as 1967. This is illustrated by a central committee resolution that reminded that these bodies be treated as “class weapons to corrupt, disorganise and to cheat the working class and our business is to see that they do not succeed” (CPI(M) 1968, 47). In the new political climate, however, labor unions regularly demanded the setting up of more
IRCs, conciliation officers, and expanding the scope of labor legislation (Oommen 1985, 233-36). Formalization of relations was intended to curb the ability of capital to reverse labor gains in the face of adverse market conditions. On the other end, it simultaneously restricted arbitrary job action and wage demands by unions, routinizing such processes and reducing uncertainty.

On the agrarian front, these tactical shifts translated into agricultural laborer unions halting the militant pursuit of “expropriatory” wage demands. The Party and its unions now favored the use of local corporatist structures and processes to manage class conflict in contrast to its earlier style of unilateral, direct class action. Unions recognized the plight of farmers who were squeezed by the provisions of Agricultural Worker’s Act on one end and volatile prices on the other. Stipulation of wages and benefits by legislation had made farmers unable to reduce the cost of production in the face of dwindling crop prices. In a marked contrast from past practice, laborer unions agreed to compromises on wages and other KAWA provisions in mutual interest, on a case-by-case basis. Farmers were assured of labor peace and increased autonomy on managerial prerogatives on a localized basis. Laborer unions also lent their voice to farmer demands for higher prices and subsidies as the CPI(M)’s laborer (KSKTU) and farmer (Karshaka Sabha) organization charted out strategies for farmer-laborer unity. Their new slogan described farmers and laborers as two sides of the same coin, not enemies but partners in raising production (Tharamangalam 1981, 86).

On the whole, the CPI(M) advocated policies that signalled a shift from a distributionist to a broadly accumulation-with-equity strategy. It attempted to defuse the zero-sum trade-off between farmers and laborers by calling for raising productivity through joint operations and by highlighting non-wage factors responsible for retarding productivity such as ecological
degradation and inappropriate technical inputs (Kannan and Pushpangadan 1988; Herring 1989). In addition, the blame for economic slowdown was deflected on to external factors such as the lack of fiscal autonomy and unfair allocations by the central government. Thus, the Party redefined the nature of farmer-labor conflict by pro-actively framing the demands of the two agrarian classes in a manner that did not pit them against each other. While continuing to press for the interests of laborers, the Party supported farmer demands for farm subsidies, credit, debt waivers, lower taxes, and fair prices for crops. The strategic shift from redistribution to expansion of production, not only served the Party’s economic imperatives but also political ones as it sought to win back the small-owners to its fold and expand its base among the middle class.

The turn to class compromise was accompanied by a steady decline in the incidence of labor disputes in Kerala. The number of production-days lost due to strikes and lockouts was amongst the lowest in the country in the late 1980s compared to the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Kerala topped the list, with nearly 2.5 million days lost only in the year 1968 (Nossiter 1982, 245-46; Subrahmanian 1990, 2054). The number of strikes in Kerala declined from 309 in 1970s to 133 in the 1980s (Kerala 1991). The thinning of labor militancy however did not mean decreasing levels of unionization or diminished political power for unions. On the contrary, 1975-90 witnessed an increase in the extent of unionization as the number of registered unions in Kerala increased from 4491 to 7998 (Kerala 1991). KSKTU membership also increased from 47,000 in 1970 to over a million in 1990. All these point to the fact that despite institutionalization of class conflict, the breadth and depth of unionization steadily increased, (though mobilizational vitality dwindled in some sectors) and augmented the bargaining capacity of unions. Unions were not co-opted
from above or arm-twisted by the state into collective agreements, rather these agreements were the result of repeated negotiations between capital and labor on a level-playing field (Heller 1999).

The CPI(M)’s position as the primary representative of the organized working class in Kerala (by way of the strength of its affiliated unions), its strategic capacity for fomenting as well as restraining radical collective action, and its track record in using state power to underwrite labor interests were the political pillars of Kerala’s class compromise. The tight organizational integration of the most militant unions (KSCTU and CITU) to the CPI(M) played a big role in eliciting compliance from the workers on the terms of the compromise, but also in ensuring adequate political clout for their demands. Its institutional carriers were Kerala’s robust democracy, its autonomous class organizations, and an expansive range of quasi-corporatist structures, mostly formed or rejuvenated in the 1970s. The mediation of an interventionary state, convinced of the necessity for pro-growth strategies and with a history of pro-labor action, rounded out the political and institutional configuration necessary for adapting Kerala’s zero-sum conflict between capital and labor into a positive-sum trade-off (Heller 1999).

4.5.2 The LDF Government, 1987-91

Despite its sound political base, Kerala’s class compromise lacked an adequate material base—something so central in the institutionalization of class compromise in industrialized nations. As already elaborated, the agrarian sector, which constituted the primary site of capital-labor interface and the dominant sector of the economy in the 1970s, was experiencing a downward spiral and not showing immediate prospects of recovery. The
The industrial sector was also weak and mainly dependent on traditional agro-based industries like coir and cashew with limited prospects of growth. The material edifice on which the compromise had to be erected was thus small and fragile. The basis of any compromise is the perception of simultaneous, albeit differential, improvement of the interests of the competing parties. Parties in a compromise can be convinced of such gains only if it can be shown that their interaction can indeed be positive-sum. Without expanding the economic pie, this was an impossible proposition in Kerala.

Realizing this, the CPI(M) led LDF government of 1987-91, laid out policy packages aimed at rekindling growth, generating and protecting employment, and improving the investment climate in Kerala, quite unlike any previous Left-led governments.\(^90\) It was conceived as a ‘democratic alternative’ to stimulating growth vis-a-vis the increasingly popular neo-liberal growth strategy. Its industrial policy welcomed private investment from within and outside the state offering tax waivers and infrastructure subsidies, and simplifying the bureaucratic clearance process. The approach to the Eighth-Five Year Plan prepared by the State Planning Board—the planning arm of the Left-led government—indicated a reorientation of the planning process around the strengthening of material production, including the recognition of the role of private capital: “Private investment, which in the state even now amounts to less than 40 per cent of the total investment in modern industry in the organised sector, has enormous potential to expand and it must be given all needed assistance to play its due role in invigorating the industrial economy of the state” (Kerala 1989).

\(^90\) The first Communist Ministry of 1957 had announced a policy of industrial peace. But, as it turned out, the mass militancy line of the party quickly subordinated the conciliatory impulses (Namboodiripad 1957).
By the late 1980s, the government and the key stakeholders in almost all sectors of the economy including unions, ranging from agriculture, to traditional agro-industries like coir and cashew, to manufacturing had endorsed the necessity for expanding production in the interest of long-term economic viability. Policies that improved production efficiency and productivity through co-operation between capital and labor received special attention in every sector. The initiatives of capital to reorganize production and increase productivity through modernization had been fiercely resisted by the unions in the 1970s. The new emphasis was to strike a balance between protecting jobs and facilitating long-term growth and modernization. The Party successfully prodded the unions to mute their strident opposition to mechanization and adopt new technology in agriculture, coir, cashew and handloom. Accordingly, unions educated workers that they had a stake in increasing productivity. Worker bonus schemes in numerous sectors were increasingly tied to productivity and actively encouraged by the CITU, defusing the most potent cause of industrial conflict in Kerala. This was a significant departure from earlier practice given that the CITU had rejected linking wages to productivity in 1972 (Heller 1999, 225).

Comprehensive, long-term, and productivity-linked collective agreements were negotiated in many sectors conceding key demands of capital and ensuring labor peace for longer periods. The government also actively promoted the development of worker cooperatives as a way of protecting employment in sectors where capital’s response to high wage demands were to close down production or migrate to neighboring states where subsistence wages were still the norm. Several cooperatives were formed or revamped in the 1980s in coir, beedi-making (hand-rolled cigarettes), handloom, toddy-tapping, cashew, and handicrafts; theywere
credited with generous government assistance. Cooperatives allowed higher control by labor in the production process as well as a higher share of the profit. However, without adequate capital, quality control, and effective marketing strategy, they gradually lost out to private capital after an enthusiastic initial period. Loss of demand for products meant that cooperatives failed to achieve their objectives to boost productivity and protect employment. They were also riddled with partisan politics, corruption, and financial mismanagement. Heavily dependent on government assistance, cooperatives became a burden on the government exchequer. As elaborated, the political support was consistent and robust, but the necessary economic conditions did not emerge to sustain the cooperatives.

In agriculture, the LDF government introduced the policy of ‘group farming’ for paddy and ‘group management’ for coconut and pepper, that brought together farmers and laborers in an effort to increase productivity. Group farming provided an opportunity for collective decision-making about efficient use of inputs (land, water, and pesticides), crop management, and the viability of new technology in Kerala’s extremely fragmented landholdings. Extension offices of the agricultural ministry (Krishi Bhavans) were set up in every village to provide technical and financial services and benefits to groups that undertook joint farming. These included, scientific advice on crops, sustainable use of water, land, access to credit, subsidized inputs, and new technology. The uniqueness of joint

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91 Worker co-operatives had been functional in Kerala since 1957. However, labor unions considered them more as a “scheme” promoted by the government, rather than an avenue for worker participation and taking control of the production process. This changed in the late 1960s as cooperatives became the primary solution to worker retrenchment in the face of capital boycott and flight. Unions now began to look upon cooperatives as key to worker welfare and empowerment.

92 The Kerala Dinesh Beedi Worker’s Cooperative Society, formed in 1969, has been a singular exception, earning the distinction as the “world’s largest and most successful experiments in industrial democracy” (Isaac, et al. 1998). Credit cooperatives, offering credit for farm and non-farm operations, have also been successful in Kerala.
farming lay in offering a breakthrough in the farmer-laborer stalemate while stepping up production and reducing the cost of cultivation. Joint farming did not infringe on the proprietary rights of the owners (landowner demand) and did not cut back on the quantum of labor required (laborer demand). For a brief period, joint farming recorded rapid advances in area of cultivation and in productivity. In 1990, close to 50% of the paddy land in Kerala (120,000 hectares) was under group farming with a noticeable increase in productivity (Jose 1991). However, as in the case of worker cooperatives, joint farming did not realize its goals in the long-term due to Kerala’s agrarian and market conditions. Small-owners who had turned in a big way to non-agricultural occupations lost sustained interest in farming activities. The prospect of higher profits from converting to cultivation of less-labor intensive, commercial crops also played a role.93 Group farming declined after 1992 when the succeeding Congress government withdrew subsidized benefits for joint farming.

The policy initiatives of the LDF government did fend off the class conflict, but it did not translate into a strategy for accumulation that could expand the narrow material base of the compromise. Growth in agriculture and industrial sectors picked up steam in the late 1980s after more than a decade, but their share to the economy continued to decline drastically as productivity of crops remained below national average and area under cultivation continued to slide. On the whole, the economy did not yield as robust a recovery as anticipated in the commodity producing sectors. While the growth was modest, new commitments in procurement prices, farm subsidies, and new welfare benefits like pensions added to the fiscal strain on the state, already under considerable pressure from the elaborate social security expenditure, as the share of agriculture to economy continued to decline drastically.

93 Interview with member of Kerala legislative Assembly representing CPI(M), Thiruvananthapuram, 6 August 2005.
Weak capital, little new investment, largely production-indifferent smallholders, reputation of labor militancy, migration of labor-intensive industries, and a widespread shift in favor of less-labor intensive crops were serious hurdles in the path of an economic turnaround (Kannan 1998, L64).

### 4.5.3 A “New Development Culture”

Seeking to engage a wider section of Kerala society in the dialogue for re-orientation of development policies, between 1991-96, the CPI(M) moved beyond its membership and mass fronts. New research that linked wage increases in excess of productivity growth to dwindling production and employment brought a sense of urgency to this engagement (Krishnan 1991). This time, however, the reformist wing of the Party had more control of the organization and enjoyed the unequivocal support of veteran leader, EMS Namboodiripad. In the early 1990s, EMS called for a “new development culture” in the state that was free from partisan wrangling and short-term thinking. Between 1989 and 1994, he wrote extensively in Party and public organs on the necessity for a non-partisan dialogue on “how the development process in…[the] state can be sustained through strengthening the material production base.” He exhorted “mass organizations of workers and peasants and other sections of the people and political parties giving leadership to them” to “realize the importance of improving production and productivity in agriculture” and “to come forward to increase production in the public and private sectors and help mobilize capital for social investment” (EMS 1991). In 1994, EMS wrote:

Kerala today faces an intense economic crisis in production, agricultural and industrial. I am inclined to believe that while we have spent much time and attention on “social sector” issues of welfare and improvement in the living standards of the people we have not paid enough attention to or shown
adequate concern for pressing problems of economic growth and material production....

I feel that one big question we face is whether the organised strength and political consciousness of our people can be used to increase production and productivity. I want to answer in the affirmative. But there is a precondition: the government and the ruling classes must change their attitude to the organisations of the people and their demands....(EMS 1994 quoted in Isaac and Franke 2002, 23-25)

In its attempt to generate broader social consensus for its new development agenda, the Party under the auspices of its research wing, AKG Centre for Research and Studies, organized an International Congress on Kerala Studies in 1994 which attracted the participation of academics, scientists, and development practitioners from around the world to chart a new development agenda for Kerala. The new agenda that evolved emphasized the solidification of the class compromise trajectory in its call for maximization of growth, while preserving the existing gains in the social sectors. The two pillars of the new agenda were 1) intervention at the state-level in infrastructure and focused industrial development and 2) decentralized production with popular involvement for increasing productivity in small scale sectors (Isaac and Franke 2002). These parameters formed the basis of CPI(M)’s ‘democratic response’ to Kerala’s economic and political crises and informed the policies of the LDF governments that followed (1996-2001 and 2006-11). The most notable initiative of the 1996 LDF government was the ‘People’s Campaign for Decentralized Planning.’ It received widespread scholarly attention as an unique experiment in decentralization and people’s planning in the developing world.

4.5.4 Economic Turnaround

On the economic front, the pessimism of the 1980s slowly gave way to cautious optimism in early 2000 when scholars talked of a ‘turn around,’ ‘a virtuous cycle of development,’ and a
‘revival’ from the prolonged fiscal crisis and economic stagnation (Harilal and Joseph 2003; Chakraborty 2005; Kannan 2005). These prognoses were based on the steady improvement in economic growth during the previous decade. The rate of growth of Gross State Domestic product increased from an annual average of 2.3% to 5.5% in the 1990s. Post-2000, GDSP rates have soared higher, touching 9.2% in 2004-05. The growth patterns of the 1990s and later point to a structural transformation of Kerala economy from a predominantly agrarian economy to a service economy. Growth rates since 1990 have been propelled by the growth of the service sector (mainly tourism, banking and finance, transportation, and communications). The contribution of agriculture to Kerala’s economy (Net State Domestic Product) dwindled from 41% in 1975-76 to just 13% in 2003-04. The share of manufacturing also dropped from 13% in 1975-76 to 7.5% in 2003-04 while the service sector grew from 37% to over 60% during the same period (India 2008, 96). (The remarkable growth of the service sector has been a decisive national trend since India’s liberalization of its economy in 1991).

It is evident that agriculture has lost the importance it once enjoyed in Kerala’s economy. Yet, in politics, agrarian classes and their demands continue to play a decisive role due to their close integration with trade unions and political parties and their historic role in politics. About a quarter of the labor force continues to depend on agriculture.⁹⁴ In addition, given the movement away from food crops like paddy to commercial crops like rubber and coconut (commercial crops currently account for 85% of the states’ net sown area), and the latter’s susceptibility to international competition and price fluctuation, coalitions of commercial

⁹⁴ According to the 2001 national Census, out of a total of 10.3 million workers in Kerala, 1.62 million were agricultural laborers, another 0.7 million cultivators, and a smaller percentage had agro-based household industries (India 2001).
crop-owners are likely to retain significant political clout (India 2008, 95). The organization of new distributional coalitions around material conflicts in the service sector, however, has shown less momentum.

With the liberalization of India’s economy in 1991 a new set of challenges emerged for Kerala. The intense competition by Indian states for private investment created a ‘race-to-the-bottom’ with a high premium on “flexible” labor laws. Given that Kerala’s highly regulated labor market and a lingering perception of labor militancy have inhibited investment, the state has been pro-active in advertising the noticeable drop in recent incidence of industrial disputes and the availability of an educated and skilled work force, but without much avail. As a result, Kerala’s industrial growth rate pales in comparison to its neighbors in the post-liberalization period. Further, the phenomenon of “jobless growth” under liberalization has been particularly vexing for Kerala given that its labor intensive, traditional industries (cashew, coir, handicrafts, handloom), mainly dependent on exports, have been victims of unfair terms of trade (Economic Review 2008). Despite the higher growth rate post-2004, Kerala’s unemployment rate continues to be one the highest in the country. It jumped from 11.2% in 1999 to 19.3% in 2004 (India 2008, 392). Relative inadequacy of key infrastructure (power, transport) has been another obstacle to industrial growth and employment generation.

Kerala adopted a softer response to neoliberal reforms somewhat reluctantly from 2000 in the aftermath of a fiscal crisis and under pressure from austerity prescriptions from the Centre. A number of recent trends in Kerala’s political economy stemming out of the neo-liberal turn raise serious challenges to the sustainability of its radical path. The reorientation of its economy, in line with the national policy, necessarily involved reforms that directly
undercut some of its cherished public institutions that guaranteed an equitable redistribution of social surplus. Most notably, the public provision of education and healthcare has come under increasing attack due to a fervent push to commercialize and privatize institutions of higher learning and healthcare. Cut-backs on social spending have reduced the scope of the public distribution system. The need to attract private and foreign capital has created pressures to insulate certain sectors of the economy from trade-union activity. The change in the sectoral composition of the economy has excluded large number of laborers in agriculture and manufacturing from tapping into the newly-generated wealth. Inequality has risen considerably in the last decade retarding the progress in poverty eradication. These developments have coincided with a conspicuous de-radicalization among Kerala’s Left, most notably the CPI(M), which has been defending charges of right-wing deviation, factionalism, corruption, and criminality. Given the enthusiastic support of Kerala’s middle classes to neoliberal reform, the political ability of the Left to fashion an alternative to neoliberalism has been limited. All of these challenges have serious implications for the future of the Kerala model, although it is early to predict a definitive end to Kerala’s radical trajectory.95

The dilemma of finding the right mix of economic policies and bottom-up demands for redistribution that can sustain the high quality of life and at the same time generate employment and stimulate economic growth persists in Kerala. Despite clear signs of recovery, Kerala’s search for a development strategy that will retain its progressive legacy and redistributive gains while launching it on the path of long-term economic growth

95 For a recent critique of the Kerala model, see Raman (2010). For a more sympathetic account of Kerala’s new challenges, see Tharamangalam (2010).
continues. Two notable observations in recent studies, however, offer an optimistic prognosis: Kerala’s human development record has not faltered despite its comparatively slow economic growth in the first decade and a half of economic reform (Kerala’s Human Development score has improved from 0.591 in 1991 to 0.790 in 2008 at a rate faster than the national average and retaining its number one position among Indian states), and its ongoing turnaround may indeed be driven by its high human development achievements (UNDP 2011b; India 2008).
Chapter 5
Social Citizenship in Kerala and West Bengal

5.1 Introduction

The central purpose of this dissertation is to explain the emergence and maturing of dissimilar welfare systems in Kerala and West Bengal, despite similar background conditions. Comparable levels of economic development and prolonged rule by left-of-center coalitions make these cases likely to converge rather than diverge on welfare policies and outcomes. The convergence expectation is borne out to some extent when these cases are examined against other Indian states. Yet, when compared against each other, Kerala and West Bengal exhibit demonstrable differences in welfare policies, outcomes, and their empowerment effects.

Having undertaken a detailed historical survey of the two states in previous chapters that bring to light the social, political, and economic preconditions that gave way to divergent welfare systems, this chapter moves to a comparative analysis in order to bring their suggestive similarities and contrasts into sharper focus. As a methodological tool, this comparative exercise allows me to demonstrate the variation between two otherwise similar cases, sort out alternative explanations, and provide a focused explanation on how these states came to develop divergent social-protection systems. Explaining cross-national variation has surely been central to the study of welfare states in advanced industrialized countries (e.g. Esping-Andersen 1990), yet there has been little scholarly work on similar themes in the developing world (e.g. Gough and Wood 2004).
After elaborating on my key argument that modes of lower-class integration shape levels of redistributive commitment (foreshadowed in Chapter 1), this chapter attempts to explain how Kerala and West Bengal came to develop distinct paths of lower-class integration. It argues that the differing modes of integration can only be understood in light of their historical and peculiar patterns of state-society engagement. It contends that the divergent development paths of contemporary Kerala and West Bengal represent two variations of the classic, social-democratic class compromise. Despite the conciliatory impulses within the agrarian coalition in Bengal, a broader view of the development strategy and the governing framework for labor-capital relations in the state suggests that it approximates a class compromise trajectory. Yet, controlled and dependent mobilization of the agrarian poor has made it a weak class compromise. In Kerala, the militant path of agricultural and informal-sector workers, the support of the party for their demands, and repeated confrontations with the propertied classes under the watch of an interventionist state have entrenched an institutionally robust, strong class compromise.

5.2 Divergent Modes of Lower-class Integration

Kerala and West Bengal have traversed similar but not identical paths of agrarian labor mobilization and this, I argue, ultimately explains the character of social citizenship in these states. As outlined in Chapter 1, the mode of lower-class integration is a key variable in explaining the divergence in redistributive commitment. These modes shape the forms of collective political action, the structures of lower-class interest representation, and the strategic capacity of the lower-classes to advance their interests. Differences in the mode of lower-class integration in these two states give rise to different visions of social citizenship,
which in turn produce empowerment-enabling or limiting policy environments and outcomes. In what follows, I delineate how Kerala and West Bengal vary along the three dimensions of lower-class integration: organization, contestation, and institutionalization.

5.2.1 Organization

The degree to which landless agricultural workers and rural informal sector workers are politically and economically incorporated is the single most important difference between Kerala and West Bengal. Kerala has developed a highly politicized, and often militant, rural wage-earning class, organized under autonomous class organizations while their West Bengal counterparts remain politically timid and under-organized. The most compelling piece of evidence that can be marshaled in support of this claim is the organization of landless agricultural workers in autonomous trade unions in Kerala, most notably by the CPI(M)—the dominant left party representing the working class—but also by other political parties. In contrast, agricultural laborers are organized under the Peasant Union in Bengal that is dominated by middle peasants. As the Bengal CPI(M) negotiated a shift from the politics of class conflict to a politics of class compromise in the 1980s, controlled mobilization of the peasantry as a whole replaced the radical mobilization of sharecroppers, agricultural workers, and near-landless peasants in the previous decades. While the slogan of peasant unity helped immensely in keeping a tight lid on the contemporary class conflict in Bengal countryside between the rich/middle peasants and the landless workers/marginal peasants, in raising agricultural productivity, and in facilitating the continued victory of the CPI(M)-led Left Front government for over three decades, it also led to accommodation, not autonomous empowerment, of the poorest sections of the rural population.
In addition to the independent organization of agricultural workers, various other occupational groups in the rural informal sector in Kerala—tree climbers, *beedi* (hand-rolled local cigarettes) makers, head-load workers, fishermen, tailors, artisans, toddy tappers, construction workers, and handloom workers—are organized in distinct trade unions. In contrast, the vast majority of informal sector workers—vendors, hawkers, rickshaw pullers, domestic workers, auto rickshaw drivers, washer-men, fish and forest workers, construction workers, and employees in small scale industries like brick kilns, tailoring industry, tanneries, among others—continue to remain largely outside the ambit of unionization and labor legislation in Bengal and, hence, in comparatively worse economic and social conditions.

This dissimilarity in the breadth and depth of autonomous unionization is often overlooked in scholarly analyses of Kerala and West Bengal as both are bracketed together as states with highly organized labor. It is largely true that the balance of power in both states tilts in favor of the lower-classes. Political parties of all stripes are dependent on powerful unions for electoral support. Capital of all kinds (agrarian, industrial, mercantile) has been weak due to the historically active role of radical political movements and labor-friendly political parties. Yet, when the heterogeneous category of labor is disaggregated, we begin to see a divergent picture vis-a-vis the depth and breadth of unionization.

The autonomous mobilization and organization of poorer workers has a salutary effect on welfare. In democratic contexts, where the poor are organized, the state is subject to bottom-up pressures to satisfy a wider range of welfare demands. In contexts where the poor are organized in self-governing, class organizations powerful enough to exert pressure on policy
tables, these pressures are intensified. And, this is true even when a committed political agent, such as a left-wing political party, is in power.

5.2.2 Contestation

Contestation mainly refers to the capacity for intra-class bargaining by different sections of the working class. In a democratic polity, the political power of the working class is aggregated by labor-friendly political parties, whose capacity to win office is typically achieved by the formation and consolidation of a broad-based alliance of lower classes (peasants, tenants, landless agricultural laborers, formal and informal sector wage-earners, industrial workers, and other disadvantaged social groups) into a political bloc and their mobilization under class-organizations that are organizationally tied to political parties. While the different segments of the working class occupy similar (but not identical) class positions, there are significant material conflicts among these class fractions. These are typically resolved within the institutional channels of the political parties and trade union federations. Party discipline and integration of union and party leadership allow close coordination and consensual resolution of distributive conflicts within the working-class movement. Such controlled mobilization allows the lower classes to move beyond narrow self-interests of particular segments and extract concessions and negotiated compromises from capital that promote their larger interests (Heller 1999). However, it also has the potential to gloss over demands of those with weaker organization. As evident from an analysis of the Kerala and West Bengal cases, even when organized labor wields significant bargaining power in determining the appropriate apportioning of social surplus, such power may not be used to advance the simultaneous empowerment of all sections of the working class. Much depends on the terms at which the poorer sections of the working class
participate in working-class politics and on whether the mobilization of working class takes account of internal differentiation and allows the capacity and necessary channels for full contestation among competing material interests within the lower classes.

The mobilization of different class fractions within the working class is competitive and adversarial in Kerala, while it is dependent and conciliatory in Bengal. In Kerala, the autonomous organization of the weaker sections of the working class offers a level playing field for internal contestation. Peasant union and agricultural workers union of the same party are often at loggerheads on key issues. These differences are publicly aired and resolved after repeated rounds of bargaining within the party as well as state institutional channels. As a direct corollary to their autonomous organization, Kerala’s rural labor is capable of bringing its demands to the policy table, independent of the initiative or support of other class fragments, trade unions, or even parent political parties.

In contrast, the Bengali working poor are comparatively less capable of asserting their rights within the labor movement vis-à-vis other class fragments. In the absence of powerful, autonomous class organizations representing the poor, agricultural laborers and informal-sector workers in Bengal have relatively lesser capacity to bargain for a fairer share within the party channels and the trade union federation. Without a level playing field, the interests of middle-class workers, mainly middle-peasants, teachers, and lower-level government employees, drown out those of the lower echelons.

The divergent agrarian-mobilization tactics of the CPI(M) has shaped the differential capacity for contestation. The CPI(M) cultivated labor militancy in Kerala while it emphasized peasant unity in West Bengal. Surely these differing tactics reflected the social-
structural and contingent political realities of the two societies, yet they had a decisive impact on the ability of poorer classes to advance their interests within the labor movement. United mobilization of agrarian classes in Bengal precluded militant action by poorer sections to secure their rights. Without independent organization and vigorous class action, issues that mattered to sharecroppers and laborers steadily took a backseat. This was in stark contrast to Kerala where the demands of laborers for better wages, employment, and social security received a higher profile due to their independent capacity for class action within and outside the labor movement. The CPI(M)’s political backing augmented the militancy of the agricultural worker and informal sector unions, which in turn reinforced the capacity of poor workers to protect and advance their interests within the broad umbrella of the working-class movement.

Thus, the pursuit of divergent agrarian mobilization tactics (peasant unity vs. labor militancy) had a conspicuous effect on the capacity for self-assertion by poorer groups. The party and the trade unions have a symbiotic relationship in both states, but in Kerala, on balance, the party is more dependent on the trade unions of agricultural workers and informal sector workers than the other way. The electoral and organizational strength of the party is directly correlated to the strength of the agricultural labor union. By contrast, their Bengali counterparts are dependent on the party and the middle-class peasant-worker unions.

As a corollary of the mobilization tactics, agrarian transition has been more complete in Kerala than in Bengal, despite the relatively impressive agricultural growth in the latter. Capitalist production relations have fully supplanted patron-client attachments in Kerala’s agrarian sector and wage labor has become the predominant form of employment. Neither is true of West Bengal. The penetration of capitalist relations remains uneven. Tenancy reforms
to ensure security of tenure for sharecroppers, while successful in significantly alleviating exploitation, did not help in the consolidation of a separate class of wage laborers.

The capacity for self-assertion by poorer groups has led to wider class polarization in Kerala. This has been manifest in the form of intense electoral competition between two stable fronts representing largely the right and left of the political spectrum. In contrast, the CPI(M)’s class conciliation tactics in Bengal allowed limited polarization, enabled working-class hegemony, and seven successive electoral victories. The weightiest explanation for the ‘permanent incumbency’ of Left Front in Bengal is the CPI(M)’s mediation of contradictory class relationships through a friendly, but unequal class compromise within the overarching ideology and framework of Marxism-Leninism.

5.2.3 Institutionalization

Kerala has institutionalized the social gains of previous worker struggles to a much better extent than Bengal. Through a wide-range of social and legislative interventions, the state in Kerala has sought to protect the gains, such as better wages, less oppressive working conditions, and welfare benefits, that the lower-class secured through competitive mobilization. High labor militancy and repeated class conflicts with the propertied classes facilitated the institutionalization of capital-labor encounter through a comprehensive array of laws, a collective bargaining system, and tripartite dispute settlement mechanisms. Their enforcement is regulated by state-level, sector-level, and local level industrial relations committees in which labor has equal voice. These measures have entrenched the interests of the working class, including the poorer sections within it. It protects them from exploitation by landowners, employers, and political parties as well as from the vagaries of the market.
The state in Kerala has been decisively pro-poor. It is both willing and able to use its administrative and legal apparatus (police, courts, various departments of the state, district, and local administration) to ensure that the poor get a fair share of the social surplus.

While similar processes of class conflict and class compromise have been at work in Bengal, weak institutionalization of the interests of the poorer groups (landless agricultural laborers, marginal peasants, and informal sector wage-earners) has prevented the state in West Bengal from being as effective a purveyor of social and human development. The initial enthusiasm generated by peasant-worker mobilization and radical land reform by a pro-poor state was not sustained and its gains not adequately protected by the development of an effective legislative, regulatory, and redistributive framework. The lack of institutionalization has led to clientelist dependence on the party and middle-class allies by the poor, encouraging the development of patronage networks. Instead of the state, the dominant party, its mass organs, the panchayat, and the coordination mechanisms of the Left Front have served as institutional avenues of class compromise. The containment and resolution of class conflict largely within party-controlled forums has increased the dependence of the poor on the party, leaving the continued enjoyment of their social rights dependent on the continuation of the party in power.

Weak institutionalization of the interests of the poorer masses has also paved way for a blurring of party-state distinction in Bengal. The ambiguity around a strict division of turf between the state and the party and the prioritization of partisanship and patronage over rule-bound behavior has, at least in some places, compromised the rational-legal basis of the administrative system.
While revolutionary mobilizations by poorer classes may be able to wrest important victories, in the absence of the institutionalization of those gains, they are prone to gradual reversal by the propertied classes. Revolutionary mobilizations cannot be sustained for long periods; it is through institutionalization that its gains are made durable and multiplied. If institutionalization is not backed by the necessary political will, the economically and politically dominant sections will inevitably weaken the interests of the working classes (SinghaRoy 2004). West Bengal has partly failed to institutionalize the mobilization of poor people by not organizing them in a separate class organization and by allowing the continued participation of the lower peasantry to hinge upon a dependent relationship with the middle peasants and the party itself. It is because of the lack of institutionalization of earlier gains that one does not see widespread political empowerment in West Bengal, despite widespread politicization.

5.2.4 Modes of Lower-class Integration and Visions of Social Citizenship

The cumulative and close interlinking of these dimensions constitutes different modes of lower-class integration and consequently different levels of redistributive commitment. A radical-mobilizational mode of lower-class integration, as found in Kerala achieves mobilization of lower classes into powerful, but competing trade unions, uses their organizational power to extract significant concessions, and enables a direct state-poor relationship. The autonomous organization of different segments of lower-classes (small peasants, agricultural laborers, and industrial workers) under different trade unions, yet under the same organizationally-disciplined party provides the necessary channels for full contestation among competing material interests within the lower classes. This mode of lower-class integration evidently pays better attention to the welfare demands of the poor.
Radical mobilization of lower classes creates increasing political consciousness about rights and social deprivations. Political awareness lays the foundation for a politics of social citizenship, where social entitlements are understood as rights—not charity of the state or upper classes—and won through organized collective action. Autonomous mobilization of the lower classes also creates possibilities for the emergence of capable leaders from within.

A clientelist-corporatist mode of lower-class integration, as found in West Bengal, on the other hand makes use of controlled and dependent mobilization of the poorer sections of the working class. This brings about a mediated state-poor interface and hence a weaker welfare zeal vis-à-vis the poor. It achieves an impressive level of mobilization and organization of the formal-sector working class, but does not autonomously mobilize the most vulnerable sections of the working classes. Lack of independent organization constrains the ability of such groups to ratchet up their demands to the policy table or engage in contestation with other competing material interests within the party channels. Their capacity for collective action is contingent upon the leadership and support from middle-class actors/unions (who share a privileged relationship with the state) with whom they share a relationship that hinges on clientelistic reciprocity.

Lack of autonomous mobilization masks the apparent material conflicts within the working classes and obfuscates contestation among different sectoral workers, which is essential for the simultaneous empowerment of various sections of the subordinate classes. It also stunts the emergence of leadership from the ranks of the lowest strata and this, in turn, inhibits their ability to establish a level-playing field for interest representation within the framework of united mobilization. Thus, although a clientelist-corporatist mode of incorporation achieves the formation and consolidation of a broad-based alliance of rural-urban workers into a
political class, it does so on unequal terms. State power is not fully tapped to end dependent forms of labor and institutionalize the collective bargaining power of those not fully represented within the lower classes. Although land reforms and other labor-empowering legislations take place, they do not fully institutionalize the rights of the working-poor. The administrative and planning capabilities of the modern state are not fully harnessed to further the pro-poor development pact. Under such a mode of integration, redistributive fervor and empowerment-enabling outcomes are weaker and uneven, and their cumulative effects do not give rise to a vigorous politics of social citizenship.

These two modes of incorporation are not polar opposites; rather two points along a continuum. They are also not pure instances of the respective modes because they share many attributes of each other (somewhat less prominently). For example, Kerala has made use of tripartite corporatist institutions over a long period of time to regulate labor-capital interaction. Yet, the ‘corporatist’ label befits Bengal more than Kerala because of the overwhelming power of its formal sector unions and their privileged access to the state and policy-making.

After having delineated the divergent modes of poor-incorporation in Kerala and West Bengal, I now turn to explaining how these states came to fall on these different tracks, based on the historical narrative provided in chapter three and four.

5.3 Tracing Comparative Origins

Below I offer a comparative analysis of the radical trajectory of Kerala and West Bengal in three phases: Structural Antecedents of Class Formation (late nineteenth century to 1930s), Class Struggle (1940s to 1970s), and Class Compromise (1980s onwards). As we will see, a
long-term view of the Kerala-Bengal cases, understood as a process of unfolding class relationships, facilitates a better understanding their respective modes of lower-class integration. Each mode represents the outcome of a complex interaction between structural features (agrarian relations, existing socio-political institutions) and contingent political choices (strategies and tactics of mobilization, class coalitions, electoral tactics).

5.3.1 Structural Antecedents of Class Formation

The economic, political, and ideological conditions that jointly structured the contours of class formation in Kerala and West Bengal shared many similarities, but also key differences. The objective conditions necessary for the formation of a rural proletariat began to crystallize with the penetration of colonial capitalism in these agrarian societies in the nineteenth century. Three principal features of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century deserve attention in understanding the structural conditions that shaped class formation in Kerala and West Bengal: the development of agrarian capitalism, the nature of early social movements, and the distinct character of left movements emerging out of the anti-colonial nationalist mobilization.

5.3.2 Development of Agrarian Capitalism

The development of agrarian capitalism, which was ushered in by colonial land policies, was the structural foundation of class formation in Kerala and in West Bengal. The emergence of a capitalist market economy transformed the peasant-based subsistence agriculture and feudal agrarian relations. Commercialization of agriculture altered the relative economic and political positions of dominant classes/castes and led to the socio-economic and political
assertion of marginalized classes/castes. Further, it fuelled internal differentiation of agrarian classes and gave rise to popular movements with a radical character.

In Bengal, changes in land tenure and land rights introduced by the Permanent Settlement altered the structure of rent-receiving classes at the top of the agrarian hierarchy. Initially, it created a class of absentee landlords and a hierarchic network of intermediate tenure-holders; they were eventually eclipsed by the superior tenants (*jotedar*). On the lower end, it pauperized Bengal’s landed peasantry and turned them into a vast army of landless or land-poor sharecroppers (*bargadar*). The politicization of the divide between rich peasants and sharecroppers vitally shaped class formation in Bengal, with important consequences for its redistributive trajectory. Sharecroppers became the focal point of communist rural mobilization in Bengal while the landless agricultural workers of Travancore and the lower tenants of Malabar became the fulcrum of Marxist mobilization in Kerala.

In Malabar, as in Bengal, erroneous understanding of local customs, and in some instances neglect of local social equilibrium, led the British to empower the highest strata of the agrarian classes. Large landlords known as *janmis* thus gained unprecedented rights in land. Emboldened by the support of colonial legal-bureaucratic apparatuses, these large landlords violated customary rights of the tenant classes, extracted higher rents and illegal levies, carried out arbitrary evictions and demanded their total subservience. This resulted in widespread indebtedness and impoverishment of the tenants-at-will (*verumpattakkar*), the lowest of the three tenure-holding classes of Malabar. In South-central Kerala, i.e., in the princely states of Travancore and Cochin, British commercial interests and the power struggle between the ruling dynasty and the landed elites led to the conferring of proprietary rights on cultivating tenants as early as 1865. Early land reform promoted the growth of a
class of owner-cultivators from among the erstwhile tenants and faster penetration of capitalist agriculture. The impact of British policies was therefore different in directly-ruled Malabar and indirectly-ruled Travancore and Cochin. In the former, British policies heightened the power of the top echelons of the agrarian hierarchy while considerably weakening the middle and lower strata. This reproduced a steeply hierarchical and exploitative land based social order. The highly caste-centered agrarian division of labor and the ferocity of caste rules made the system in Malabar a notch more oppressive than anywhere else in the country.

In Travancore-Cochin, the development of an owner-cultivator class from among the erstwhile tenants weakened the top of the agrarian hierarchy and shored up the middle. It undermined landlord power, levelled landholding pattern, and created a new contradiction between owner-cultivators and agricultural laborers. The more affluent among the owner-cultivators became capitalist farmers cultivating plantation crops in the eastern hilly regions and paddy in the reclaimed low-lands of Kuttanad. The capitalist nature of this enterprise facilitated better penetration of contractual agrarian relations and the development of a politically conscious class of free landless agricultural laborers (Tharamangalam 1981). Thus, the development of agrarian capitalism ushered in new class contradictions—in Malabar between large landlords (janmis) and their tenants-at-will (verumpattakkar); in Travancore-Cochin between capitalist farmers and landless agricultural laborers—laying the structural foundations of class formation.

Yet, it would be naive to conclude that the course of class formation was ultimately determined by the structural changes associated with commercialization of agriculture. While this process set the context, the precise trajectory of class formation was determined by
concrete political struggles for economic security, dignity, and freedom from oppression originating in distinct social movements (anti-imperialist, anti-caste, and anti-landlord) and eventually coming together under the banner of the communist party.

5.3.3 Early Social Movements

The interaction of the foregoing material changes with a hierarchical and oppressive indigenous social structure in Kerala gave rise to a variety of radical social movements, most notably, the anti-caste social movements. The synergistic interaction of early anti-caste social movements with emerging agrarian movements in the 1930s and 1940s played a vital role in shaping class formation in Kerala. Kerala’s notoriously oppressive caste-centered division of labor and the neat overlap of caste and class positions helped the crystallization of political solidarities between anti-caste movements and incipient class-based movements. The burden of dual oppression also made the emerging lower-class/lower-caste movements in Kerala militant in nature. The newly-found social mobility of lower castes such as Ezhavas, Parayas, and Pulayas under the emerging capitalist economy of Travancore in early twentieth century shook the edifice of the caste-based order. It gave rise to a series of anti-caste social movements through which important social rights were won. The early communists of Kerala recognized the complementarities of anti-caste and anti-landlord struggles and the possibility of combining the two struggles to ratchet up the collective social pressure on the oppressive socio-economic system through the anti-colonial nationalist struggle. They nurtured the anti-caste social consciousness and integrated it with struggles against economic and political oppression. The Communist Party was able to subsume anti-caste movements which predated its birth through the framework of class politics and by integrating them with the nationalist movement. They were thus able to tap the synergies of anti-caste, anti-
landlord, and anti-imperialist movements and to forge a broad revolutionary class alliance of tenants and laborers, with a militant orientation (Mannathukkaren 2006).

In Bengal, the social movements of the early twentieth century were middle-class reform movements that were led by the bhadralok elite. Aimed at inculcating a rational, modern outlook in Bengalis, they advocated an intellectual renaissance through the development of arts, culture, literature, and science. They also negated socially oppressive practices, such as sati (wife-burning), dowry, and polygamy. Although opposition to socially-demeaning caste practices formed part of their repertoire, these were not movements of oppressed masses as was the case in Kerala.

The class-caste equation was different and the agrarian division of labor was not as starkly caste-centred as in Kerala. As caste oppression was less vicious and more fluid in Bengal, the strong yearning for dignity and the propensity for self-organized collective action was notably absent among Bengals’s lower castes. Although large zamindars belonged to the privileged Brahmin, Baidya, and Kayastha castes, the superior tenants or jotedars who controlled land and labor in villages were frequently drawn from locally dominant lower castes. Jotedars, who were effectively village landlords, controlled the labor of fellow-caste men with inferior rights in land. Each village had a different caste structure and the social character of local domination did not conform to any state-wide pattern, except that the dominant cultivating groups often belonged to one or more locally dominant lower castes. The similar caste origins of jotedars and those below in the agrarian ladder meant that although land relations in colonial Bengal had a ritual angle, in the local setting it was not tightly constructed around caste and ritual status. Caste-class overlap in Bengal was thus less of a factor in building political solidarity against an oppressive order compared to Kerala.
5.3.4 The Left and the Nationalist Movement

As a result of its roots in anti-caste movements and its linkage with various grassroots movements including the anti-colonial movement, the Communist Party in Kerala evolved as a more popular party. With deeper roots in civil society, it was not inhibited by the straightjacket of an internationally-driven ideology. The early leaders of Kerala communism were anti-caste activists while their counterparts in Bengal were members of urban middle classes based in and around Calcutta at a significant social distance from the oppressed masses (Chatterjee 1984). The early communists in Kerala were attracted to the party because of their lived experiences of varied struggles for social justice. They shared no organizational contacts with communists outside, unlike the Bengal communists who learned the basics of communism through their association with the Soviet and British Communist Parties and focused primarily on the organization of industrial proletariat—jute and cotton mill workers around Calcutta—until the early 1940s (Franda 1971, 7-20). The Kerala communists’ immediate objective was not to overthrow capitalism but to fundamentally transform the social and economic order through organizing the lower castes, peasants, agricultural, and agro-industrial workers. Successfully drawing upon numerous sources of social, economic, and cultural discontent they were able to articulate the goals of communism through the indigenous idiom and thereby offer a political narrative that linked myriad struggles under a class platform. Further, they did not limit their activities to the industrial proletariat, as elsewhere, but worked among the lower-caste rural poor. The outcome was the formation of an encompassing working class with a social movement character that embraced many social constituencies and issues otherwise left untouched by traditional labor movements.
In contrast, their international connections alienated Bengali Communists from the nationalist movement between 1929 and 1934 when the Comintern assumed an ultra-left sectarian stance. At the same time, the urban, upper caste, and middle class character of Bengali leftism did not enable the kind of seamless intermingling between local struggles of the rural marginalized and communist politics as witnessed in Kerala. In addition, the Bengal CPI kept itself aloof from the Congress Party at least until 1938, losing an opportunity to build itself a wider base from within the anti-colonial movement. In contrast, the CSP in Kerala—the organizational vehicle of left-wing politics in Kerala at the time—placed itself at the forefront of the nationalist movement. This not only allowed it to gain legitimacy, but also attract a wide spectrum of masses into its fold (Desai 2001). The CPI, as CSP’s successor, benefitted from this popular acceptance when its Kerala unit was formed in 1939. And, by the mid-1940s, Kerala CPI had established itself a rural base, while it was only in the late 1960s that the Bengal left was able to gain a foothold in rural Bengal in a significant way (Sen Gupta 1979, ch. 3 & 5). The specific origins of the Left in these states reveal historical contingencies which nonetheless played a role in the maturing of left movements in these states.

5.4 Class Struggle

The period between 1940s and 1970s witnessed the maturing of the working class as a political force in its own right. An intense churning in the social and political landscape in both states during this period was an effect of the radical mobilization of the peasantry and the working class through mass organizations and repeated street-level confrontations with the propertied classes.
Simultaneous peasant uprisings and agricultural laborer agitations in various parts of Bengal, Kerala, and the rest of India in the 1940s and 1950s were manifestations of increasing political consciousness and militancy of the peasant-worker combine. The Communist Party and its mass organizations deployed a range of radical and innovative forms of protest in their agitational programs of action. In this restive political environment, existing trade unions and class organizations gained strength, while new trade unions emerged in a wide array of formal agrarian and agro-industrial occupations. These contributed to the growth and consolidation of left-wing politics and to the working-class movement. The suggestive similarities and differences of working-class politics during this phase coalesce around three factors: 1. the level of labor militancy and the extent of counter mobilization, 2. the radical character of land reform, 3. divergent economic and political impact of land reform.

5.4.1 **Labor Militancy and the Extent of Counter-mobilization**

The early politicization of agricultural laborers and agro-industrial workers in Kerala saw the maturing of these classes as autonomous political actors by the 1950s while it took at least over a decade more in Bengal for the rural peasantry to become a fully organized class-for-itself. The full incorporation of the rural working class took place in 1957-77 when for the first time communist parties came to power through the ballot box. Riding on the electoral strength of working classes, Left-friendly electoral coalitions captured political power—Kerala in 1957 and 1967, West Bengal in 1967 and 1969—and inaugurated an era of redistributive reform aimed at a complete transformation of these societies. Emboldened by this, class organizations of the poor pressed for a fairer share of the social surplus and an end to political and economic subjugation sparking a series of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary confrontations with the propertied classes.
During the late-1950s to late-1970s, the prolonged agitation for land reform became the primary site of class conflict. The political atmosphere in both states became starkly polarized between the two social forces supporting and opposing land reform. In West Bengal, the level of militancy reached a notch higher during the 1967-72 period when the Naxalite movement radicalized urban students and youth with calls for ‘armed struggle’ and ‘annihilation of the class enemy.’ The political violence that ensued paved way for brutal oppression by the state on behalf of constituencies opposed to land reform. The enduring trauma of state repression on Bengali psyche became an important consideration in the choice of agitational programs and issues in the post-1977 period. In Kerala, even though lower-class militancy often involved direct action and political violence, counter-mobilization did not amount to large-scale, state-sponsored annihilation of pro-poor forces. The pragmatism of the CPI(M) in deftly straddling its extra-parliamentary repertoires of contention largely within parliamentary limits and its meticulously legalistic approach to drafting the land reform legislation (in order to make sure it withstood the potential incursions of the central government as well as the judiciary) was instrumental in muting the intensity of counter-mobilization. That the tenor of counter-mobilization remained intense yet largely within legal limits even when the CPI(M) took to street-level direct action (land seizure) in the immediate post-reform period was due to a rare moment of political stability offered by the CPI-led government between 1970 and 77 which depended on sections of landed interests for its survival.

5.4.2 Radical Character of Land Reform

While the agitational route to land reform was more or less similar in the two states, the substantive terms of their land reform programs varied considerably. Yet both have attracted
admiration as the most radical land reform outside socialist countries (Franke and Chasin 1992; Gazdar and Sengupta 1999).

The radical component of West Bengal’s reform program was the vesting and redistribution of ceiling-surplus land. West Bengal accounts for one-fifth of all vested land in India and about half (46%) of all recipients of above-ceiling land in India (India 2001). As a result, in terms of the share of the total land vested and total land redistributed West Bengal stands in sharp contrast to other Indian states. Yet if we gauge the radical quotient of land reform after the LF came to power in 1977, West Bengal’s record appears less impressive. The principal feature of LF-initiated land reform was tenancy reform. Tenancy reform is politically easier to pull-off because it does not seek to abolish the landlord-tenant organization of production and make cultivators own the land they till (see Herring 1983, chapter 2). Through legislative protections such as lower and regulated rent, security of tenure, and a streamlined administrative procedure for tenants to claim their rights it aimed to ameliorate the condition of the lower peasantry. By its own admission, the land reform of the LF could not radically alter the relations of production and completely eliminate pre-capitalist relations of production (Mishra and Rawal 2002). Imposition of a land ceiling and redistribution to the landless and land-poor ultimately came to form a small part of the land reform program of the Left Front. About 60-80% of vesting and redistribution had already been completed before the LF came to power (Sengupta and Gazdar 1997).

By comparison, Kerala land reform’s radical content lies in the total abolition of the landlord-tenant organization, realization of ‘land to the tiller’ slogan, and its empowerment effects on the erstwhile tenant and landless-labor class. While the reforms accomplished a complete end to all forms of tenancy through transfer of ownership to tenants, inadequate
attention to the vast disparity in tenant holding sizes dampened its empowerment effects (Krishnaji 1979; Herring 1983). In addition, land-ceiling and land redistribution provisions were less successful than originally envisaged.¹

5.4.3 Political Impact

The effective implementation of land reform legislation in the 1970s brought an end to the economic and political subjugation of lower peasantry and laborers in both states, albeit to varying degrees. However, just as they resolved one class conflict, land reforms and associated changes in agrarian structure and agricultural production gave birth to another. As these societies experienced deeper penetration of capitalism and the introduction of new farming technology in the late-1960s to early 1980s, new axis of conflicts and new configurations of rural power emerged. These led to rifts in the grand agrarian coalition of small-owners, tenants, sharecroppers, and laborers which had been successful in bringing an end to rentier landlordism. The divergent response of the dominant party—the CPI(M)—to these developing cracks in the worker-peasant alliance partly explains the post-1980 agrarian trajectories of Kerala and Bengal.

In Kerala, tenancy reform provisions drawn without attention to the holding size or direct involvement in cultivation disproportionately benefited tenants with larger holdings (Krishnaji 1979; Herring 1983). The political attitudes of these former tenants who became small-holding landowners underwent a significant change in the post-land reform period,

¹ Kerala acquired only 1.3% of its total arable land as ceiling surplus land in comparison to West Bengal’s 8%.
leading to what is described as the “embourgeoisement” of the tenant-turned-owner peasantry in Malabar (Herring 1983, 210-16; Heller 1999).

The preponderance of small holdings, high wages, and high employment of wage labor brought the tenant-turned-owner peasantry (or smallholding farmers) in conflict with the landless agricultural laborers, despite their prior political alliance within the communist party’s agrarian coalition. Demands for greater employment security and higher wages by agricultural laborers in the post-reform period were in direct conflict with the interests of small proprietors who yearned for profits. In the absence of large landlords, the primary class contradiction in many parts of Kerala came to be between marginal to smallholding proprietors/farmers and the agricultural workers they employed. Paddy cultivating areas like Palakkad witnessed a stark polarization of class forces between laborers and farmers in the face of decreasing days of work, areas of cultivation, and increasing wages. The material contradictions between the smallholding owner proprietors and the wage laborers had already become stark in Travancore between the 1950s and the 1970s. In Malabar it began in the 1960s and, with rapid commercialization of paddy cultivation, reached a crescendo in the early to mid-1970s. On the whole, land reforms solidified the contours of this new class antagonism between erstwhile tenants and agricultural laborers.

The rift in the tenant-laborer agrarian coalition that had secured the abolition of landlordism caused considerable consternation in the CPI(M). The Party had made significant accommodations in its strategies and tactics to keep a minimum unity of these classes intact. However, between 1970 and 1977, a combination of contingent political factors forced the Kerala CPI(M) to throw its weight behind agricultural laborers, who were fast acquiring a militant character, even at the cost of alienating some of its small-owner base. In 1970s, the
CPI(M) shed its earlier legalistic approach to land reform legislation and pushed for a militant popular movement demanding implementation. Even before the land reform act of 1969 came into effect, the CPI(M) had decided to implement its provisions without the help of state administration. It formed an agricultural worker’s union (Kerala State Karshaka Thozhilai Union [KSKTU]) in 1968 and launched a land grab movement in 1970 for agricultural laborers who were hutment dwellers, demanding title to hutment and a small piece of surrounding garden land. The CPI(M) also pushed for legislation on wages and working conditions of agricultural laborers. The clash of interests between small-holding farmers and laborers often brought the peasant wing of the party (Karshaka Sabha) at loggerheads with the laborers wing (KSKTU). However, the long presence of militant agricultural laborers in party ranks and the independent strength of agricultural workers union ensured that the interests of the laborers did not suffer amidst considerations of political expediency.

In Bengal, the middle peasantry were the prime political beneficiaries of the land reform process. In the absence of basic literacy and adequate political consciousness among the rural masses, these minimally educated agrarian entrepreneurs became the rural face of the CPI(M) as rural party and panchayat leaders. Revitalization of participatory local democratic bodies with a role in agrarian matters that accompanied land reform entrenched middle peasant leadership. As co-cultivators, middle peasants were allies of poor peasants, sharecroppers, and agricultural workers in their fight against non-cultivating landlords and intermediate tenure-holders. However, in the context of the change in agrarian structure and a rise in agricultural yield, new material contradictions sprouted between the two classes.
Thus, while the agrarian class conflicts of Kerala and Bengal have been structurally similar (in resolving an earlier conflict between rentier landlords and actual cultivators and in developing a new antagonism between small-owners and those who till the land for a living), the mobilization tactics of the dominant left party have been divergent. In the context of Kerala’s class formation in which the agricultural labor matured into a politically conscious class of rural proletarians quite early on, the CPI(M) favored autonomous mobilization of laborers and in the process accentuated the small-owner-laborer conflict. In Bengal, however, the historical and cultural tendency to view the lowest of the agrarian classes as aspiring peasants (as opposed to exploited workers) led to the blunting of the new class conflict and the prioritization of peasant unity over autonomous mobilization. If agrarian policies of the colonial state, caste-class interpenetration, maturing of agrarian capitalism, and fledgling left politics shaped the contours of class formation, the patterns of class struggle were structured by the tactical responses of the Left to the classic dilemma of having to reconcile the strategic requirements of revolution with the demands of electoral politics in a highly competitive parliamentary democracy.

5.4.4 Divergent Economic Impact

The polarization between small-owners and agricultural laborers had a negative impact on Kerala’s productivity. It led to a period of agricultural downturn and general economic stagnation, starting mid-1970s. Kerala’s economic stagnation was not confined to agriculture, but it was most pronounced in the primary sector, which produced negative growth. For the next decade every major crop in the state, except rubber, recorded a decline or stagnation in output (yield and acreage). This contributed to decline in work days and eventually a full-blown financial crisis.
Bengal produced a strikingly contrasting scenario, with land reforms having a positive impact on agricultural production. Growing at more than twice the national average and achieving the highest rate of growth in food-grain production among all Indian states, Bengal became the agricultural success story of the 1980s. Rural poverty declined while food intake and agricultural wages showed significant increase. Agrarian dynamism was nourished by the ‘peasant unity’ strategy pursued by the Bengal CPI(M) and the political solidarity it generated was harnessed to contain the emergent contradiction between small-owners and laborers.

5.5 Class Compromise

The CPI(M) in both states settled on a path of political moderation in the 1980s, after the politics of class struggle had exhausted itself. It entailed changes in methods of mobilization (from unrestrained radical mobilization to controlled mobilization), in sites of class struggle (from street battles to institutions of liberal democracy), and in forms of class action (from insurrection to negotiation). The shift necessitated by changing political and economic conditions. Their low growth, capital averse, labor surplus economies were near stagnation and in serious need of revival, if the livelihoods and the fledgling social security network of the working classes were to be protected. The realization that redistribution without growth had reached its structural limits made it necessary to strategically engage with capital, and even nurture it. However, this had to be done without subordinating labor or reversing its hard-won rights. This was the political dilemma faced by the dominant left parties in the mid-1970s to mid-1980s, and it had to be resolved within the legal and institutional frameworks of liberal democracy. The result was an evolving developmental pact—a class
compromise—mediated by the dominant left party and negotiated among the state, the poor, and the capital in which the social costs of growth were to be shared by all (Heller 1999).

In Kerala, the realization that continued redistribution without expanding the production base was unsustainable, among other factors, led to the switch in the CPI(M)’s modus operandi from the politics of class struggle to class compromise. The party negotiated with affiliated unions and propertied interests and brought the class battles that were once fought at the worksites and streets into institutions of liberal democracy. The pro-active role of the state in routinizing labor-capital interaction secured the willingness of capital to pay a higher share of the surplus to labor, often mediated and augmented by the state, while labor unions agreed to ensure industrial peace and work within the collective bargaining framework. Tripartite bodies were established for dispute settlement in place of random job action. In addition, the state guaranteed protection from the vagaries of the market by sustaining and expanding an extensive system of social security benefits for a wide spectrum of the laboring classes (Heller 1999).

In Bengal, the pursuit of the slogan of ‘peasant unity’ by the CPI(M) in the post-reform era involved a gradual turn away from the Party’s radical past to more moderate forms of protest and conciliatory strategies of political mobilization. While the Krishak Sabha had led militant struggles for sharecroppers in the past, its new strategy was to forge a common peasant consciousness that did not pit the various agrarian classes against each other, even when the primary agrarian conflict had shifted from one of jotedar vs. sharecropper to rich/middle peasant vs. sharecropper/marginal peasant. The result was controlled mobilization of the peasantry centred on the middle peasantry in place of radical mobilization of sharecroppers, agricultural workers, and near-landless peasants. The social
and economic proximity of middle peasants to laborers/marginal peasants was an important structural feature of Bengal’s agrarian system that facilitated controlled mobilization.

The expansion of the economic pie through higher agricultural productivity was the material base that allowed the CPI(M) to pursue the course of ‘peasant unity’ in Bengal in the post-reform period, while its contraction made it virtually impossible for Kerala CPI(M) to pursue the same path in an agrarian system marked by the predominance of small-holding proprietors and high employment of wage labor. It is unclear if the Bengal Party learned from the Kerala experience in preferring agricultural growth and peasant unity over productivity decline and competitive mobilization.

The governing framework for labor-capital relations remains undoubtedly social-democratic in both states, with labor having considerable power at the state, sectoral, and local levels. The industrial relations regime in the formal sector is fairly well-balanced between capital and labor. Collective bargaining, tripartite institutions, and capacity for job action at various levels exist to protect the interest of formal sector workers (industrial workers, teachers, government employees). Labor-capital relationship is also structured to mitigate the labor-unfriendly structural conditions of backward capitalism. However, the crucial difference between the two cases is that radical mobilization of the previous decades and institutionalization of class conflict led to a sturdy class compromise in Kerala that governed labor-capital relations across industrial and agrarian sectors, even stretching to the fringes of the informal sector. The significant backing of the party and of the state (when the party was in power) was a crucial factor in enabling the rural poor in Kerala to wrest important victories from their employers. With a labor-friendly party in power, employers knew they were unlikely to find a supportive administrative and coercive apparatus, and thus were
forced to agree to the demands of agrarian labor for better wages and better working conditions.

In Bengal, while formal sector unions are party to a class compromise (enjoying high wages, better working conditions, and collective local, sectoral, and state level bargaining), absence of autonomous agrarian labor mobilization and the subordination of agrarian labor strategy to the exigencies of party politics have prevented the rural poor from leveraging their bargaining power to seek a robust class compromise. The result was the crystallization of a friendly but weak class compromise trajectory anchored in the ruling regime and the dominant party. In the context of blurred party-state distinction, processes of negotiation and compromise that are part of industrial relation settlements and public policy making were conducted not by state agencies but by forums of the ruling front and the dominant party, such as meetings of the Left Front, the co-ordination committee, and the worker and peasant wings of the dominant party (CITU and Krishak Sabha). The control of party organs and local self-governing institutions (panchayats) by the middle peasantry entrenched the uneven class compromise. The containment and resolution of class conflict largely within party forums increased the dependence of the poor on the party, and the sustenance of social security network on the continuance of the party in power.

In sum, the divergent contemporary development paths of Kerala and West Bengal represent two variations of the classic, social-democratic, class compromise. “Class compromise implies a particular organization of political relations, a particular relation between each class and the state, a particular set of institutions, and a particular set of policies” (Przeworski and Wallerstein 1982, 236). In Kerala, extensive autonomous lower class organization and an expansive and interventionary state-labor relationship created an
adversarial but strong class-compromise anchored in the state. It is strong because of its ability to create and nurture a wide spectrum of legal and institutional arrangements for working out competing class interests, and yet deliver on a broad range of social outcomes that indicate the progressive empowerment of the working class. The continued entitlement of the poor to a higher social surplus is guaranteed in Kerala irrespective of the party in power as Kerala’s class compromise is anchored in the institutions of the state, not in the ruling party. In Bengal, by contrast, the earlier trajectory of radical mobilization of the rural poor that had held out the promise of an impressive class compromise wilted in the post-land reform period. The middle-class character of the rural party leadership and its neglect of new class contradictions in the agrarian sector prevented the crystallization of a sturdy class compromise. Instead, the controlled and dependent mobilization of the agrarian working class and the corporatist mode of lower class integration produced a weak class compromise anchored in the regime. Bengal has merely accommodated, not maximized, the interests of the most vulnerable sections within the lower classes. The poorest of the working poor lack both autonomous organization and independent bargaining capacity.

The anticipated material benefits of the class compromise (high productivity, high wages), however, did not easily come to fruition in either case. In Kerala, the militancy of labor ensured high wages; however, high wages did not coincide with high productivity. The alienation of the largest component of Kerala’s agrarian classes—the owner-cultivators—meant that high productivity in agrarian sector did not materialize. On the contrary, in Bengal, the united mobilization of agrarian classes ensured high productivity, yet the lack of autonomous organization of agricultural laborers ensured that it was not accompanied by high wages. Thus, in both cases one of the two key ingredients for class compromise as
evident in the class compromise arrangements in the industrialized world was missing. The transition to technologically superior and high-value adding occupations, which was key in enabling high wages and high productivity in the West, looks equally distant in both states.

Previous research has conclusively shown that the possibility of forging a class compromise is correlated to the relative strength of the lower class and its strategic capacity to press the state to address its material interests (Przeworski 1985). My findings add nuance to this literature by showing how the relative strength of different segments within the working class and their autonomous ability to ratchet up their demands to the top of the labor movement is a significant determinant of the type of class compromise and its welfare zeal. Class compromises can thus cover a wide range, when viewed from the vantage point of emancipatory social outcomes. Depending on the nature of institutional mediation, a wide variety of pro-poor class politics is compatible with capitalist economic structures. Unpacking a cluster of cases treated as somewhat identical by previous research (as cases of high labor organization and pro-labor ruling regimes) shows how the same political party and similar political contexts can engender divergent modes of lower-class empowerment and developmental outcomes.

Class compromise, in the context of advanced industrialized countries, typically refers to compromises between business classes and organized labor. Where capital is traditionally weak, however, such a demarcation becomes less clear-cut. In agrarian contexts, the primary material conflict may be between capitalist farmers and wage labor or between different strata of the peasantry. In such cases, the orientation of business is less relevant for class compromises. My analysis, thus, focusses less on the role of business classes and more on the labor-exploiting agrarian strata. For example, the rural middle classes in West Bengal
who are themselves part of the peasantry exercise significant control over landless laborers, sharecroppers and marginal peasants. They are capitalist by way of their ability to control the labor of others, but they also share other attributes of the laboring classes (e.g., participate in cultivation-related physical labor). They are also the leaders of the united agrarian mobilization. In such a context, the orientation of the real capitalists (big, medium business, TNCs) becomes less relevant for the welfare of the rural labor compared to those of their real masters – the rural middle classes. If there is a compromise to be had in rural West Bengal it is between the lower-echelons of the working classes (rural wage labor, sharecroppers, marginal peasants, informal sector workers) and their middle-class employers (who are also part of the labor-friendly agrarian coalition).

5.6 Conclusion

The dynamics of social citizenship in Kerala and West Bengal can only be understood in light of their historical and peculiar patterns of class formation, class struggle, and class compromise. The working class movement in Kerala was born out of a convergence of a variety of social movements for substantive justice–economic, political, and social–during the anti-colonial nationalist movement in the 1930s and 40s. It therefore assumed a more encompassing character in its transformative vision, forms of struggle, and avenues of remedial action than its counterparts elsewhere in India. Early left-wing leaders of Kerala grew out of the anti-caste social movements and were fully aware of the nexus of social and economic oppression in a fiercely caste society with a caste-centred division of labor. Social and cultural movements of resistance received just as much attention as movements of
economic demands, and found a place under the broad banner of anti-imperialism and anti-landlordism.

Adeptly harnessing the synergies of the anti-caste, anti-landlord, and anti-imperial movement, the Left in Kerala constructed a broad based working class movement based mainly on the alliance of tenants and landless laborers. Its holistic vision of social transformation and militant repertoires of contention drew a wider section of the population, including informal sector workers of a wide variety, into its fold to give itself the character of a broad based radical social movement. These historical factors forced the Left to assume a social movement character, much like the ANC in South Africa, and to sustain a wider vision for social transformation and a distinct redistributive thrust, in comparison to its West Bengal counterpart. This is evident in Kerala left’s active engagement in a wide range of social movements – the co-operative movement, the science to people movement (KSSP), the library movement, the literacy movement, the campaign for People’s Planning, and other such sequential initiatives. This led the way for a more encompassing nature of redistributive action, which has taken citizenship in Kerala beyond the civic and political to the social realm (Heller 1999).

In Kerala, the CPI (M) is evidently the party of the poor, with a history of successful popular extra-parliamentary mass struggles fought under its banner. Its social base is distinctly the poor and the lower castes who recognize their struggle for better treatment by the state and society at large as a matter of right, not of benevolence or charity of the elite. The politicization and integration of the marginalized classes/castes has paved the way for a politics of social citizenship, ending traditional patterns of clientelistic dependence on the landlord and the upper castes. This has resulted in the expansion of welfare provisions and
one of the best redistributive outcomes in the entire developing world, even comparable to first-world levels in some areas. Enforcement of minimum wage levels, provision of accessible primary education and basic public health care, regulation of labor market, and provision of subsidized food through public distribution system have reduced the social and economic dependence of the poor on other classes. While unions are limited to the organized sector in most of India, workers in the informal sector are also organized in Kerala.

We notice a somewhat different trajectory of lower-class integration in West Bengal, resulting in weaker social policy commitment and lacklustre outcomes. While the Left in Kerala started with a ready-made mass base from its mass struggles and its crucial role within the nationalist movement, Bengali leftists had to build a rural mass base in the 1960s before they could be a significant force in the electoral arena. When such a social base was eventually developed, its primary constituency was not the poor or the lower castes, but the middle peasants. Nonetheless, like Kerala, West Bengal witnessed an initial phase of radical ‘class struggle’ politics in the post-independence era, propelled by the force of the peasant and worker movements of the earlier decade that led to the mobilization of the rural peasantry, mainly the sharecroppers. Key redistributive reforms were undertaken to ensure land tenure for sharecroppers and to redistribute land to the landless.

However, the emergence of the rural middle-classes as a significant power bloc within the CPI (M) attenuated its redistributive zeal towards the poorest. A concrete indicator of the middle-peasant dominance was the abandoning of the demand for ‘abolition of all intermediaries on land’ and the choice of mobilization tactics that masked new differentiation among the peasantry in the post-land reform era. The result was the continuation of the sharecropper system and the glossing over of competing class interests within the peasant
classes. The affirmation of ‘peasant unity’ led to accommodation, not autonomous empowerment of the poorest sections of the rural population. What was striking in Bengal’s experience was that this diverged from CPI(M)’s general practice in other states, including Kerala, where it organized separate unions for the landless laborers, which in turn became effective vehicles for advancing wage demands of the laborers.

Thus, the initial period of radical mobilization of the lower classes did not ultimately lead to the development of a vigorous politics of social citizenship or a full expansion of welfare entitlements to the poorest. Land reform, the most potent reform in any agrarian society, was not followed up to its logical culmination. By not transferring full ownership of land, the sharecroppers system created clientelistic dependence on the party, the panchayat, and the Krishak Sabha, where the security and survival of the sharecroppers depended on the continuance of CPI(M) in power.

What my analysis reveals then is that varying types of state-class relationships mediated and structured by interest-aggregating class organizations constitute distinct modes of lower-class integration which in turn results in different visions of social citizenship. In West Bengal, a clientelist-corporatist mode of lower-class integration (characterized by the absence of autonomous mobilization of the poorer classes and relatively weaker institutionalization of their interests) has led to a weak class compromise, anchored in the ruling regime. It is marked by high productivity, low wages, uneven redistribution and comparatively less empowering outcomes. In Kerala, contrastingly, the poorest sections of the working classes—landless laborers and informal sector workers—are self-organized and their rights better institutionalized in the state arena as evident in its radical-mobilizational mode of
lower-integration. It has led to a strong class compromise, with high wages and higher redistributive thrust, but comparatively lower productivity.

In every class compromise arrangement, there is an act of intra-class balancing of interests within capital and labor. However, the terms of this intra-class coming together varies from context to context. In countries where the incorporation of working classes is achieved by political parties, the forms and tactics employed by the political parties in mobilizing the respective constituencies and giving expression to their demands play a crucial role. These in turn are inevitably shaped by deeper, underlying factors such as the conditions of class formation and cross-class alliances. The terms of incorporation of different segments within the working class vary across cases leading to significant differences in their empowerment potential.

The type of class compromise, weak or strong, is directly correlated to the political organization of the last group in the chain of capitalist production—in agrarian societies, it is the landless laborers. Internal differentiation among the peasant classes and the political recognition of differences in collective interests are important factors in determining the nature of class compromise and its welfare zeal. It is widely recognized that different sections of the peasantry have different political orientations and they respond differently to processes of capitalist development.² The welfare character of a developing-world class-compromise regime is a function of the degree to which the different sub-sections of the peasantry are internally mobilized and organized. The institutional apparatus that represents the class compromise arrangement—policy and economic institutions that make

redistributive decisions, institutions of collective bargaining and dispute settlement—will also reflect the organization of that class power.

Viewed as such, different class compromise arrangements are not purely creations of social structures and historical contingency, but crystallization of historical political choices made within the constraints of particular social structures. Class structure of these societies did not predetermine the outcomes. While structure constrained the options available to the actors involved and influenced their actions, it was the latter’s agency—conscious political choices—that was fundamentally responsible for the differences in outcomes. Accounts of societal change that exclusively hinge on the inexorable march of capitalism overdetermine the outcomes, for in much of India pre-capitalist institutions and social forces have not given way, but have been resilient and adaptive to the challenges posed by the logic of capitalism. A structural argument also cannot explain why communist movements failed to grow deep roots elsewhere in India where similar alteration of socio-economic structures had taken place due to colonial contact. The structural potential for radical politics existed in many parts of the country but the political consciousness to make that happen had to be forged through the formation of radical classes and their political alliance. Even when radical politics had found itself a role in post-independence politics in these states, crucial political choices were made to gain and sustain political hegemony in their highly competitive political systems. Structural factors set the contexts, but concrete political struggles for land, wages, and dignity ultimately defined the trajectories of Kerala and West Bengal.
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## Appendix 1

### Public Spending on Education and Health for Kerala, 1987-2009

(In crores of Rupees)

| Year     | Kerala |  |  |  |  |
|----------|--------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
|          |         | Elementary & Secondary Education | Health & Family Welfare | Population | GSDP at constant prices | Elementary & Secondary Education Per capita (In Rs.) | Health & Family Welfare Per capita (In Rs.) | Elementary & Secondary Education as % of GSDP | Health & Family Welfare as % of GSDP |
| 1987-88  | 130.08  | 48.02   | 2.812   | 41624    | 46.26   | 17.08   | 0.31     | 0.12     |
| 1988-89  | 148.92  | 52.58   | 2.852   | 45692    | 52.21   | 18.44   | 0.33     | 0.12     |
| 1989-90  | 177.28  | 67.25   | 2.893   | 48299    | 61.28   | 23.25   | 0.37     | 0.14     |
| 1990-91  | 233.82  | 82.36   | 2.910   | 51523    | 80.35   | 28.30   | 0.45     | 0.16     |
| 1991-92  | 296.73  | 104.66  | 2.937   | 52755    | 101.02  | 35.63   | 0.56     | 0.20     |
| 1992-93  | 335.75  | 114.57  | 2.965   | 56325    | 113.24  | 38.64   | 0.60     | 0.20     |
| 1993-94  | 430.88  | 148.49  | 2.993   | 61642    | 143.97  | 49.61   | 0.70     | 0.24     |
| 1994-95  | 592.34  | 198.76  | 3.021   | 66735    | 196.07  | 65.79   | 0.89     | 0.30     |
| 1995-96  | 725.27  | 272.15  | 3.050   | 69748    | 237.82  | 89.24   | 1.04     | 0.39     |
| 1996-97  | 905.53  | 327.59  | 3.078   | 72329    | 294.16  | 106.42  | 1.25     | 0.45     |
| 1997-98  | 1053.54 | 398.09  | 3.107   | 74420    | 339.05  | 128.11  | 1.42     | 0.53     |
| 1998-99  | 1250.53 | 477.02  | 3.137   | 79674    | 398.68  | 152.08  | 1.57     | 0.60     |
| 1999-00  | 1809.84 | 614.48  | 3.166   | 85685    | 571.62  | 194.08  | 2.11     | 0.72     |
| 2000-01  | 1795.84 | 605.44  | 3.184   | 89136    | 564.00  | 190.14  | 2.01     | 0.68     |
| 2001-02  | 1605.31 | 672.28  | 3.213   | 91374    | 499.60  | 209.22  | 1.76     | 0.74     |
| 2002-03  | 2027.72 | 744.72  | 3.242   | 98980    | 625.44  | 229.70  | 2.05     | 0.75     |
| 2003-04  | 2278.76 | 828.86  | 3.271   | 109570   | 696.72  | 253.42  | 2.08     | 0.76     |
| 2004-05  | 2476.43 | 921.27  | 3.299   | 119264   | 750.68  | 279.27  | 2.08     | 0.77     |
| 2005-06  | 2744.95 | 1040.43 | 3.327   | 131294   | 825.18  | 312.77  | 2.09     | 0.79     |
| 2006-07  | 3314.49 | 1233.40 | 3.354   | 141667   | 988.37  | 367.79  | 2.34     | 0.87     |
| 2007-08  | 4088.50 | 1461.96 | 3.380   | 154093   | 1209.54 | 432.51  | 2.65     | 0.95     |
| 2008-09  | 5140.94 | 1917.88 | 3.406   | 162659   | 1509.24 | 563.04  | 3.16     | 1.18     |


Note: One crore is ten million.
# Public Spending on Education and Health for West Bengal, 1987-2009

(In crores of Rupees)

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<th>Health &amp; Family Welfare</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>GSDP at constant prices</th>
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Source: Same as above

Note: Family Welfare and Water supply and sanitation are included in public spending on health for India and excluded for Kerala and West Bengal.
Public Spending on Education and Health for India, 1987-2009

(\text{In crores of Rupees})

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Source: Same as above
Appendix 2

Kerala's Land Reform Legislation Timeline

December 1957 – Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill (KARB) introduced
   Chief Provisions of KARB: Fixity of tenure to all categories of tenants, including tenants-at-will and homestead laborers (*kudikidappukar*)
   Ceiling of 15 acres of double crop paddy or its equivalent for a family of five
   Acquisition of surplus land by govt on payment of stipulated compensation
   Distribution of surplus land to landless and land-poor
   Fixation of rent
   Cancellation of all rent arrears on payment of a stipulated minimum
   Invalidation of recent evictions, sales, and free transfer of lands
   Constitution of a Land Board and Land Tribunals with members elected from local bodies

June 1959 – KARB passed by Kerala legislature

July 1959 – Communist government dismissed by the centre before KARB became law as it was still awaiting the assent of the President of India

February 1960 – Mid-term poll, Congress-PSP coalition government in power

July 1960 – President returned KARB refusing assent and recommending modifications
   Chief Recommendations of the President of India
      1. Expand the definition of small-owners, who were protected from losing land to tenants, from owning 5 acres to 10 acres.
      2. Exclude certain homestead occupants (such as plantation workers) from the definition of tenants and hence from the right to fixity of tenure.
      3. Expand the definition of plantations, which were excluded from ceiling provisions
      4. Remove provisions for invalidation of recent land transfers
      5. Constitution of Land Board and Land Tribunals by nomination, not election.

October 1960 – Kerala Agrarian Relations Act (KARA), introduced by the Congress-PSP government and passed by the Kerala Legislature. KARA was a diluted version of KARB but still maintained some of the core elements of KARB. It incorporated the Presidential recommendations and other demands by the landed interest, blunting the radical character of the KARB.

February 1961 – KARA received Presidential assent in January 1961 came to effect in February
   Chief Provisions of KARA compared to KARB
1. Expanded the definition of small-owners, who were protected from losing land to tenants, from owners of up to 5 acres to owners of up to 10 acres.
2. Excluded certain homestead occupants (such as plantation workers) from the definition of homestead tenants and hence from the right to fixity of tenure.
3. Expanded the definition of plantations, which were excluded from ceiling provisions, to include adjacent agricultural lands.
4. Removed provisions invalidating recent evictions and land transfers.
5. Land Board and Land Tribunals were to be constituted by nomination, not election.
6. *Janmis* who wished to resume leased out lands for self-cultivation were to get a window of one year from resumption.

March–May 1961 – KARA implementation tardy due to a massive legal challenge in the Supreme Court and Kerala High Court.

June 1961 – Courts stay implementation of KARA until petitions disposed off.

December 1961 – Supreme Court judgement invalidating the operation of the act in two *ryotwari taluks*.

November 1962 – Two judgments by Kerala High Court invalidating the operation of KARA in Travancore and Malabar.


September 1963 – Introduction of new legislation by the Congress ministry headed by R. Sankar—Kerala Land Reforms Act (KLRA), a further dilution of KARA.

December 1963 – KLRA passed and received presidential assent.

April 1964 – KLRA came into effect. KLRA was a significant departure from the redistributive intent of KARB and even KARA – a product of the government led by the Congress Party, pressured by landed interests within.

Chief Provisions of KLRA compared to KARB and KARA:
- Landlord and tenants were to work out mutually agreeable purchase schemes instead of a compulsory vesting of all landlord rights on leased out land in state.
- Ceiling limit was raised up to 36 “ordinary” acres, reducing the availability of surplus land.
- Ceiling exemptions were introduced for a wider number of entities (religious and charitable institutions, commercial estates, dairy farms, *kayal* lands).
- Definition of plantation expanded.
- Gifts and voluntary transfers of land permitted.
1964–65 – Massive protests against KLRA led by the communists

1964–1967 – President’s rule in Kerala (Congress government fell in 1964; mid-term poll in Feb 1965 did not produce a government. As a result, President’s rule continued till 1967)

1964–1968 – Weak implementation of KLRA—not a single acre of surplus land seized, nor distributed

August 1968 – Introduction of new comprehensive legislation by UF government—Kerala Land Reforms (Amendment Act) or KLRAA. Technically an amendment of KLRA of 1964, but in effect a comprehensive revision of it.

October 1969 – Bill passes but UF government resigned a week after on 24 October

November 1969 – Mini Front ministry comes to power

January 1970 – KLRAA came to effect

January–May 1970 – State-wide land grab agitation by the CPI(M) for fencing off kudikidappu land

August–October 1970 – Kerala High court struck down several provisions of the Act as ultra virus of the constitution, the main thrust of its argument being that the reforms were ‘expropriatory’ in nature and violated the fundamental right to property.

1970–72 – amendments to the Act in response to the High Court’s concerns, and state-wide agitation led by the CPI(M) against tardy implementation


May–August and Nov–Dec 1972 – CPI(M) agitation to identify surplus land

November 1972 – New amendment in response to mass agitation establishing village committees and taluk-level Land Boards, with judicial powers to seize excess land and try non-compliance, creating popular involvement at the local level and sorely lacking information and implementation machinery.

June 1975 – Proclamation of the Emergency; mass agitations became illegal and the ability for popular mobilization was lost

October 1979 – Introduction of Gift Deeds Bill - another amendment to KLRA – validated all the land transfers under the pretexts of gifts between 1970 and 1974, that were held illegal by the Kerala High Court. Due to pressure from landed interests on the
coalition government in the state which depended on parties with landed interests such as the Kerala Congress and the Muslim League.

1980 – Formation of LDF and UDF; an LDG-govt led by CPI(M) comes to power

Source: (Oommen 1971; Oommen 1975b; Herring 1983; Oommen 1985; Radhakrishnan 1989)