

Communists and Democracy: Two Indian Cases and One Debate

by Olle Törnquist*

Introduction

Generally speaking, communists do not have a reputation for being full-fledged democrats. What is the conventional wisdom with regard to India?

It is usually accepted that most Indian communists substituted a combination of parliamentary and legal extraparliamentary struggles for armed struggle and immediate revolutionary changes as early as the beginning of the fifties. The first democratically elected communist-led government in the world actually came to power in 1957 in the southwest-Indian state of Kerala. Two years later this government was undemocratically toppled—by the union government and the Congress-I party with Indira Gandhi in the forefront. But the communists were reelected and led several of the following state governments. Moreover, two United Front governments with influential communist ministers were elected into the Writers' (government) Building in Calcutta, West Bengal, during the late sixties. And three equally democratically elected Left Front governments, almost totally dominated by the communists, have now led this important northeast-Indian state since 1977.

Once this has been said, we are, however, reminded of other events. Soon after the united Communist party was divided in

the midsixties, the Moscow-oriented Communist Party of India (CPI) aligned itself with Indira Gandhi and contributed to the crisis of democratic rule by actually supporting her state of emergency between 1975 and 1977. Even if the stronger, more radical and Stalinist Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) defended liberal democracy during these years, its policy was mainly to survive. "Democracy is necessary. We have to defend ourselves against liquidation," said one of the party leaders.¹ Or even more straightforwardly, another leading member stated: "It was a short term tactic to support parliamentary democracy. We were weak and needed it. A non-hostile government during some years would then make it possible for us to expand. At present we have become prisoners within these tactics."² And when General Secretary E.M.S. Namboodiripad (E.M.S.) was confronted with the question of why the Left Front government in West Bengal had for many years been reluctant to democratize their rule of the Calcutta municipality, he frankly admitted, "I have no answer."³

The fact that India's Marxist-Leninists, the Naxalites, have since 1967 returned to the ideas of armed revolutionary struggle is also frequently mentioned, while the recent interest among the

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1. Basavapunnaiiah in interview with author, New Delhi, 16 Mar. 1985. In relation to democracy within the party he added in another conversation in New Delhi, 18 Mar. 1985, that "strategy is something for the generals, not a mass question."

2. Off-the-record interview of leading CPI-M member by author, Calcutta, 5 Mar. 1985.

3. E.M.S. in interview with author, New Delhi, 14 Mar. 1985. Municipal elections finally took place about a year later. The Left won with an extremely tiny margin.

Naxalites in struggles for democratic rights is characterized as purely tactical.⁴ And the ideas of “proletarian dictatorship” and “democratic centralism” are still employed by other communists as well.

Neither have any communists managed to come forward with a consistent alternative to the current euphoria over privatizations, deregulations, emphasis on the market, and so forth, as the way out of the crisis of state-led postcolonial development. According to the perspective currently in vogue, the crisis is due to arbitrary and at best overambitious political intervention. The correlation between capitalist development and democracy in the Far East as a whole is often mentioned, and many scholars would have us believe that the increasing strength of a so-called national bourgeoisie is a basic prerequisite for transition to democracy. Others prefer the slogan “civil society against the state,” and look for alternatives among the many so-called new social movements and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—while the CPI-M, which at present leads the state governments in West Bengal as well as in Kerala, vindicated the repression of the movement for democracy in China.

The weak peasants are not entrusted and empowered, nor united on the basis of their only prime resource—their ability to work and to produce—but are given some . . . support and protection, and are being mobilized in favor of top-down campaigns.

None of the above facts are false—but the picture tends to be. It is unsatisfactory for empirical, methodological, and theoretical reasons. There is a need for additional perspectives. I will present some in this paper. The full picture, however, remains to be elaborated on.

Democracy is difficult to apply as a concept, but if we make an attempt and assign it the general meaning of equal rule (government)⁵ of what people hold in common, we should not only concentrate on how people are elected and how decisions are made—including the prerequisites for this—but also on what is decided. In addition to form and content, we should also discuss the extension of democratic rule. Are most of the resources that people in practice actually hold in common equally controlled, or are many of them excluded because they are, for instance, privately owned? Are many of the radical struggles about democratic rights and rule taking place outside the traditional political institutions? And is there only some kind of equal

rule on the central national level but not locally—or vice versa?

On the following pages I will therefore begin by concentrating on the communists’ attempts to implement local democracy in West Bengal and Kerala, first as part of their struggle for demonopolization of agricultural production in both states, and second in order to promote further social and economic development in Kerala.

Another methodological problem is how to analyze the more or less democratic character of communist policies. Do communists become democrats if they exclude ideas about proletarian dictatorship and democratic centralism, and when are demands for democratic rights purely tactical? An answer to the latter question may be that demands for democratic rights are “only tactical” if they are not consistently linked with the strategic aims and means. Behind this perspective is the more basic materialist assumption that the best way to validate democratic aims and means is to determine if the organization applies democratic means to reach democratic goals in order to reach other basic aims, such as land being provided to the tiller or better living conditions for laborers. To put it differently, many people maintain that democracy is important as such, but one should not trust any of them unless it can be substantiated that both democratic aims and means are instrumental to their strategic thinking and that democracy makes sense for them.

If democracy makes sense, we should ask why. The conventional idea, referring to the experience of Western Europe, is that democracy is the class project of a strong national bourgeoisie. According to a more plausible analysis, the essential element of democracy is capitalism—not the capitalists. It created a working class that forcefully demanded more equal rule in order to reproduce itself, as well as an institutionalized system wide and flexible enough for popular demands to make themselves so strongly felt that democracy emerged.⁶ However, the expanding capitalism in countries such as India has a special character. According to my conclusions elsewhere, the decisive state interventions tend to be semiprivatized, and the basis of the state tends to include what I call political rent and finance capitalists who cooperate with more traditional private capitalists and farmers.⁷ The power of these political capitalists is based on monopolized control over state regulation and resources, and they demand monopoly rent for their services. It is therefore more difficult for them than for the private capitalists of Western Europe to accept a democratization that implies the demonopolization of the state. On the other hand, huge parts of the population are negatively affected and should have a potential interest in democratization—while dissidents within the stronger classes, as well as the political capitalists who foresee powerful demands for demonopolization, may rather opt for more or less state-led privatization.

I will use this general perspective when trying to analyze why democracy sometimes made sense for the communists in Kerala and West Bengal. It should also be useful in an attempt to clarify the controversy over civil society vis à vis the state.

4. Even the general secretary of the most moderate Naxalite faction, Santosh Rana, strongly emphasizes that it is purely tactical. Interview with author, Calcutta, 3 Mar. 1985.

5. A form of government that may be analytically separated from its socioeconomic basis: more or less equal power.

6. See for example Göran Therborn, “The Rule of Capital and the Rise of Democracy,” in *New Left Review*, no. 103 (1977).

7. See Olle Törnquist, *What’s Wrong with Marxism? On Capitalists and State in India and Indonesia* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1989), chaps. 5 and 6.

One of the main problems with this debate is precisely the lack of analysis of when and why privatization rather than democratization may make sense for the many new social movements, the NGOs, and those who support them.

This article has three sections. The first section is a comparison of communist attitudes about local democracy within the framework of their struggle for land reforms in Kerala and West Bengal. The results of these reforms are part of the crisis of the postcolonial state-led development that has given birth to dissident ideas about the need to strengthen the civil society against the state. The second and third sections of the paper are about the communist response to this challenge and to the crisis itself. I begin with a critical reading of the main arguments in the debate about the state and civil society, and conclude with an analysis of how the communists in Kerala have actually tried to tackle the problems by extending democracy, among other methods.⁸

Land Reform and Local Democracy in Kerala and West Bengal⁹

The reasons why the Kerala communists came to governmental power in 1957 included their clear stand on the so-called national question—the state of Kerala had just been created—and their consistent struggle in favor of antifeudal agrarian reforms.¹⁰ Struggles for these reforms continued for more than two decades. The communists were mainly based in strong mass movements among small peasants, tenants, and agricultural workers, as well as among workers in other sectors. Landlordism was uprooted, and land was given to the tenants. But the tenants were not necessarily the tillers. Very little “surplus land” above the ceiling was available for redistribution to agricultural workers and former subtenants. Thanks to the communists many of them did at least get improved working conditions and homestead plots.

State and Mass Movements

The communists worked through their mass movements. However, as soon as they managed to win governmental power they emphasized top-down approaches via the organs of the state, and used mass actions mainly in order to demonstrate capacity. Politicization of state apparatuses and control over the police was given priority. The latter was intended to give the mass movements full democratic rights and freedom to act, and

this was one of the few things that the first and second communist chief minister, E.M.S. Namboodiripad, actually promised his followers.

But the communist mass movements as well as state apparatuses guided from the top down were one thing, and more independent local governments something else. The communists often found it hard to decentralize powers to legal organs of the state that were, generally speaking, more affected by communal than political loyalties.

The communist emphasis on concrete socioeconomic demands and political struggles was, finally, at the expense of development issues—for example, within the framework of cooperatives—unless the communists were not very influential in the area and could dominate the associations from the very beginning, such as in some cases in north Kerala. Cooperatives could, according to the communists, give people the illusion that radical political change was not necessary.

Stalelated Conflicts and Development

In place of what had been a dependence by producers on local patrons, government and bureaucratic intervention became a kind of at best friendly and not too corrupt “superpatron.” Until recently in Kerala, the priority given to party-led struggles for power implied devastating alliances with communal parties in order to win elections, and seriously downgraded efforts to promote economic development. The party’s neglect of cooperatives and immediate work for economic development made it possible for some more or less progressive groups and so-called NGOs to undertake cooperative efforts. But more often individual and family solutions became necessary, and communal loyalties received a new lease on life.

The Kerala government in its turn was restricted by the union government in New Delhi, which must approve land reform laws proposed by the states. This constantly delayed the chances of rapid implementation in Kerala. Those with vested interest could restructure their assets. Radical governments often lost the next election before their laws were approved.

At the same time many landowners—including the new former tenants who had previously supported the communists—soon became fairly unhappy with their agricultural laborers, who also used to get communist protection but had gained far less from the reforms. Land-owning peasants and agricultural laborers fought for increasingly radical—but unfortunately different—demands. These new contradictions were thus within the communist-led movements themselves and led to serious

8. I draw mainly on excerpts from Olle Törnquist, *What's Wrong with Marxism? Vol. 2: On Peasants and Workers in India and Indonesia* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, forthcoming 1991).

9. In this section I draw on results from an evaluation of the political struggles for land reforms in Kerala, West Bengal, and on Java. All sources are found in Törnquist, *What's Wrong? Vol. 2*. In the following text I give priority to references with special emphasis on local democracy, while sources relating to the more general struggle for land reforms are excluded because of lack of space and time. This means that there are comparatively few references in support of the first analysis of Kerala. The best studies, which I frequently draw on, include Francine Frankel, *India's Green Revolution: Economic Gains and Political Costs* (Princeton University Press, 1971); K.N. Raj and M. Tharakan, “Agrarian Reform in Kerala and Its Impact on the Rural Economy—A Preliminary Assessment,” in *Agrarian Reform in Contemporary*

Developing Countries, ed. A.K. Ghose (New Delhi: Selectbook Service Syndicate, 1984); T.J. Nossiter, *Communism in Kerala: A Study in Political Adaptation* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982); the writings of Ronald Herring, particularly *Land to the Tiller: The Political Economy of Agrarian Reform in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983); and “Managing the ‘Great Transformation’: The Truly Awkward Class in Rural Development,” Paper delivered at the International Workshop on Rural Transformation in Asia (New Delhi, 2–4 Oct. 1986).

10. A very densely populated state with about 25 million unusually well-educated persons who for many years have mainly worked in cash-crop-oriented agriculture and trade and commerce. Industry is weak, and many people have become migrant workers in the Persian Gulf countries.



The CPI-M office in Sonarpur in West Bengal in 1985. The man in the middle wearing glasses is Jayanta Bhattacharyya, party and peasant leader from the militant struggles of the late sixties. During those struggles the Bengali communists focused on giving sharecroppers legal rights to land, but they later limited their efforts to regulating landlords and protecting sharecroppers. All the photos accompanying this article are by Olle Törnquist, courtesy of Olle Törnquist.

problems. In addition, production stagnated and left governments found it difficult to split a nongrowing pie as well as to give some relief to more and more people—including under-employed youth, many women, and most people in the so-called informal sector—who did not benefit from land reform measures and increasing wages.

The communist project in Kerala—the struggle for land reform—was no longer functional. A communist-led government briefly held power in 1980, but thereafter the electoral support stagnated even in the old strongholds.

I will return to the Kerala communists in the last section of this paper, because they have made an exciting attempt at renewing their policies. And to everybody's surprise, including their own, the Left Front managed to return to power in the government in 1987, after six years in opposition.

During the late sixties, communists in West Bengal,¹¹ who then led a United Front government for a brief period, had already learned from the Kerala experience and did not wait for central approval of more radical land reform laws, but relied instead on popular enforcement of the existing ones. On the other hand, the Bengali communists were reluctant to give sharecroppers any legal right to land in order not

to promote bourgeois interests in private ownership.¹² In the midseventies, they decided instead to downgrade militant struggles for land and to give priority to favorable regulation of landlordism in general and protection of sharecroppers in particular, the so-called Operation Barga, supplemented by subsidies to a broadly defined middle peasantry, quite often actually petty landlords. And after some years the communists transferred the responsibility for implementation from individual peasants with different interests and their organizations to the local organs of the state.

Immediately after the victory of the Left Front in the 1977 West Bengal state elections, the communists, who were lacking the kind of genuine rural basis their comrades had in Kerala, thus used their new political bastions in the central Calcutta administration to grab and develop solid roots for local state power. The communists have been able to lead the West Bengal governments ever since. Having opened up for party politics in local elections, they could also rely upon a comparatively well-functioning party machinery and mass organizations.

11. A state directly colonized by the British, including and dominated by Calcutta. It is densely populated by more than 50 million people who are mainly agricultural workers. A lot of the previously quite important industry is "sick."

12. Cf. Swasi Mitter, *Peasant Movements in West Bengal*, Dept. of Land Economy, Occasional Paper no. 8 (Cambridge University, 1977), pp. 48ff. See also the revealing statement by the late main CPI-M peasant leader Konar in Bhabani Sen Gupta, *CPI-M: Promises, Prospects, Problems* (New Delhi: Young Asia Publications, 1979), pp. 74f.

The 1978 *panchayat* (village council) election was impressive in many respects. About 25 million voters would elect nearly 56,000 representatives at the village, block, and district levels. It

was the biggest ever democratic exercise in free India electing the largest number of candidates on a single day through secret ballot. . . . A high degree of political activity was noticed. . . . There were very few cases of political somnolence leading to candidates being returned uncontested. . . . The voters' turn-out was on an average about 70 percent. . . . Considering the weather conditions (it was the height of a grueling summer in early June in West Bengal), the enthusiasm and patience of the voters in rural Bengal appeared simply unbelievable. . . . Compared to Bihar's experience. . . elections witnessed little political violence. The administrative challenge of organising the poll was simply stupendous, but the whole show could pass off peacefully because of the administrative skill of the Left Front government, the political parties' commitment to democratic norms and, above all, people's co-operation."¹³

This was actually the first time that India had experienced a keen political contest at the grass-roots level. Candidates had to be residents of the areas where they were contesting seats. Only the CPI-M (48,392 candidates fielded) and the Congress-I (28,126 candidates)¹⁴ were able to make a strong showing all over West Bengal. Most importantly, the CPI-M captured about two-thirds of all *panchayat* seats and all districts except Darjeeling. Except in some pockets, the party became absolutely dominant within the Left Front. It gained votes not only from the poor but also from the rural "middle classes," thereby undermining previous alliances between such groups as rich and middle peasants. The rural roots of the Congress-I party began to be undermined. Finally, when West Bengal was severely hit by floods only a couple of months after the elections, the new *panchayats* were instrumental in the distribution of relief to the victims.¹⁵

In the next local elections (May 1983), the CPI-M did not do as well. Besides the fact that the Congress-I party was more alert than it had been in 1978, and that there was some disunity within the Left Front, there was also discontent over the way in which the communists had governed the *panchayats* during the first period. (I will soon return to the latter point.) The CPI-M lost some 4,000 seats or about 10 percent; the Left Front as a whole somewhat more. Despite this, the CPI-M itself still controlled about 60 percent of the seats.¹⁶

In February 1988, however, the Left Front in general and the CPI-M in particular regained their previous losses. The

CPI-M won about 66 percent of the seats, the Left Front partners a bit more than 7 percent while Congress-I received only 23 percent. This was despite many disputes within the Left Front, an attempt from the Naxalites¹⁷ to make a peaceful comeback (which totally failed), and criticism against the CPI-M for hegemonic behavior and malpractices in the local governments. This time more than 75 percent of the electorate had cast their votes.¹⁸

Decentralization of Power

Real powers were decentralized to the *panchayats*. Most rural development programs were assigned to them, including, for example, rural works, water supply, food-for-work, irrigation, the distribution of credits together with the banks, and so forth. Financial resources were allocated to them, as well as some rights to carry out their own taxation. Moreover, they could administrate the land reforms, including Operation Barga, and the identification of surplus land and selection of beneficiaries. The *panchayats* were also supposed to regulate and act as conciliators in local conflicts (between tenants and landlords or between employers and employees, for example), and to try to promote higher standards of living, including better wages, for the poor. The idea of promoting cooperation among the peasants, by group farming, for example, was also brought forward.¹⁹

Alternative Communist Patronage

In a recent review of various studies of the effects of agrarian reforms in West Bengal, Biplab Dasgupta concludes that the most significant impact of the rural reforms is that various old forms of patron-client relationships between landowners et al. on the one hand and peasants and laborers on the other hand have been severely weakened. This, however, seems to have been achieved because the latter can get alternative support and protection, particularly from the new *panchayats*,²⁰ not necessarily because the weak themselves have become more independent and viable.

Comparing the tenancy reforms in Kerala and West Bengal, Ronald Herring has concluded that the difference in political terms is "whether or not to risk embourgeoisement of the tenants

13. A.K. Mukhopadhyay, *The Panchayat Administration in West Bengal* (Calcutta: The World Press, 1980), pp. vi f.

14. Sen Gupta, *CPI-M*, p. 125. The CPI-M says that it contested 47,000 seats. See *Documents of the Eleventh Congress of the Communist Party of India (Marxist)* (New Delhi: Desraj Chadha and the CPI-M, 1982), p. 168.

15. Sen Gupta, *CPI-M*, pp. 118–34.

16. *Reports of the CPI-M and Its Various Frontal Activities (1982–1985)*, part 1 (Calcutta: Sushil Chowdhury and West Bengal CPI-M State Committee, 1985), pp. 68ff.; and part 2, p. 145. Cf. Amit Roy, "Panchayat Polls Reviewed," in *Frontier* (Calcutta), 25 June 1983.

17. The usual label of the particularly northeast Indian brand of Maoists who separated from the CPI-M in the late sixties and took up armed and often terrorist struggles.

18. Kalyan Chaudhuri, "Testing Time for Left Front in West Bengal," in *Economic and Political Weekly (EPW)*, 20 Feb. 1988; and "CPI(M) Rides Left Front Squabbles," in *EPW*, 19 Mar. 1988.

19. See, for example, Mukhopadhyay, *The Panchayat Administration*, chap. 12, pp. vii–xvii; S. Dasgupta and L.S.N. Murty, *Panchayati Raj Institutions in West Bengal: A Study in Communist Participation* (New Delhi: National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development, 1983), pp. 9–14; and Sen Gupta, *CPI-M*, pp. 134–39. Cf. also *Significant Six Years of the Left Front Government of West Bengal* (Sushil Chowdhury and West Bengal CPI-M State Committee, 1983), pp. 50ff.

20. Biplab Dasgupta, *Monitoring and Evaluation of the Agrarian Reform Programme of West Bengal* (Calcutta: Mimeographed manuscript, 1987), part 1, p. 39; part 2, pp. 46–52; and part 3, pp. 9f. I also draw on discussions in New Delhi with the author (who is also a CPI-M agrarian reform organizer, peasant leader, and member of the union parliament), 16 and 17 Nov. 1988. Cf. the CPI-M leader and ex-leading member of the West Bengal state planning board Satyabrata Sen's way of putting it: "The *panchayats* undermine the power of the landlords. Now people come instead to the *panchayats* to get advice, etc." Interview by author, Calcutta, 20 Feb. 1985.

and permanent alienation of the small stratum of rentiers. As we have seen, the CPI-M took that risk in Kerala, and, at least in the short term, lost. In Bengal, it seems as if Operation Barga was tailor-made to be a partisan political success—that is, tenants' rights depend on the local state, and continuation of the Party's policies at the State level."²¹

On one level, Herring's assessment does not contradict the communist thesis that political support and protection are necessary to oppose the extra-economic ways in which the present rulers sustain their positions. However, the communists also implied that their alternative backing would liberate the producers' political and economic creativity. As far as I can see, this is where the main problems lie.

To begin with, despite the impressive decentralization of powers, even the *panchayats* on the lowest level usually comprise several villages. Top-down approaches seem common. Where the CPI-M is in power, the real decisions are made within the party. National or even global questions rather than vital issues in the villages may dominate in local political campaigns. Emphasis is more on representation and enlightened leadership than on the participation or even consultation of those who are affected by various measures. Therefore it is a serious problem that very few of those who are elected are landless peasants and sharecroppers.²²

Restricted Extension of Democracy

We should also consider what has actually been democratized? The *panchayats* do not reach and are definitely not based on the very many parts of the "complex molecule" in the village that Gunnar Myrdal spoke about.²³ Rather it seems to be a more radical and consistent version of Nehru's statist approach. Progressive forces contradict old loyalties, not least those based on caste. But this also means that traditional forms of self-help are eroded. These are mainly replaced by state intervention. In between the individual and family on the one hand and the government on the other there is, thus, very little.²⁴

Cooperatives could have been there. But the communists have been and, despite some statements among intellectuals, still are very skeptical about this idea.²⁵ The reason is primarily political. If you cannot control the cooperatives through the party but have to rely

on the strength of some few sympathizing peasants, there is an obvious risk that the weaker ones will get lost—and that the better-off will take over. There are, of course, ways of approaching such problems, if the party and the peasant movement could and wanted to. But these organizations include not only weak peasants but also a generously defined middle peasantry, who are also petty landlords. In fact, the communists have not worked much to improve the viability of the weaker producers through cooperation. Thus they have failed to promote growth, extend democratization beyond the traditional political institutions, and base the *panchayati raj* on a more equally governed local economy. Hence the weak peasants are not entrusted and empowered, nor united on the basis of their only prime resource—their ability to work and to produce—but are given some (although not negligible) support and protection, and are being mobilized in favor of top-down campaigns.²⁶

Adding to this is the fact that radical forces in general have not, even from above—and I must stress this again—made much effort to promote production, but rather have given priority to political mobilization and change, and more equitable distribution of the present pie.²⁷ It is true that there has been more interest in stimulating growth during recent years. But then, who can—under the present circumstances—promote production and how? Weak, noncooperating producers or the viable and somewhat better-off ones?

Towards Communist Monopolization of Regulation and Resources

There are also problems about how the *panchayats* are controlled and run. Independent observers, not to mention CPI-M's political opponents, report on malpractices, preferential treatment of people who are vital to those who are in control or who are simply able to pay in one way or another.²⁸ Even the chairman of the ruling Left Front Committee admitted in early 1980 that the money provided by the government to the *panchayats* for relief of the people was no doubt insufficient but "it was sufficient to breed corruption."²⁹ And during the 11th National Congress of the CPI-M it was stated that "When running the Government, *panchayats* or other organisations, work is not always done according to collective decisions and through the direction of the concerned party committees. . . . In many cases such defects have been noticed."³⁰ The losses in the 1983 local elections were often blamed on such practices.³¹ It has also been noted that *panchayat* bodies have delayed and distorted the

21. Herring, *Managing the "Great Transformation,"* p. 32.

22. See at first hand Kirsten Westergaard, *People's Participation, Local Government and Rural Development: The Case of West Bengal, India* (Copenhagen: Centre for Development Research Report no. 8, 1986). Cf. also Boudhayan Chattopadhyay et al., *Agrarian Structure, Tensions, Movements, and Peasant Organisations in West Bengal 1936–1976: Vol. I, Part 3: Field Reports*, (Calcutta: Manuscript, 1983), on the predominance of parties as compared to mass organizations.

23. I am drawing on a discussion with Ashok Sen (senior researcher with the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences in Calcutta), Calcutta, 27 Feb. 1985. Cf. Gunnar Myrdal, *Asian Drama: An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations* (New York: Pantheon, 1968), pp. 1063f.

24. Cf. Biplab Dasgupta, "Comprehensive Rural Development: The CADC Experience," in *Asian Seminar on Rural Development: The Indian Experience*, ed. M.L. Dantwala et al. (New Delhi: Oxford and IBH Publishing Co., 1986), p. 356.

25. For a recent report on this, see Dasgupta, *Monitoring and Evaluation*, part 2, pp. 31ff; part 3, pp. 6–11.

26. I am particularly indebted to fruitful discussions with B. Chattopadhyay (then director of the CRESSIDA research centre, Calcutta) on this point, for example, Calcutta, 26 Feb. 1985; and with N. Bandyopadhyay, (senior researcher with the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences in Calcutta), Calcutta, 22 Feb. 1985.

27. In this connection I am drawing on interviews with, among others, Satyabrata Sen, Calcutta, 20 Feb. 1985.

28. Eg. Westergaard, *People's Participation*, pp. 90f., and Ashok Rudra, "Panchayati Raj," in *Frontier*, 9 Jan. 1982. I also draw on my interview with the then finance minister Ashok Mitra, Calcutta, 5 Mar. 1985.

29. Quoted from Mukhopadhyay, *The Panchayat Administration*, chap. 12, p. xviii.

30. *Documents of the Eleventh Congress*, p. 173.

31. See, for example, Amit Roy, "Panchayat Polls Reviewed," *Frontier*, 25 June 1983.



The communists have led West Bengali governments since 1977, with significant power decentralized to the panchayats (village councils). This photo shows the communist presence in Sonapur in West Bengal in 1985.

implementation of programs that could cause conflicts, such as Operation Barga or the identification of surplus land that should be distributed to poor and landless peasants.³² Finally, many people, not only those related to the CPI-M, often maintain that “some” or “certain” parties of the Left Front attract fairly well-off villagers who, for the time being, find that the best possible way of defending their interests is to help themselves to good contacts within even fairly radical governments and administrations.³³

None of this is surprising. To begin with, malpractices within local governments and administration in India are very common and widespread. My understanding is that the problems in West Bengal are less than those in most other Indian states. Moreover, since unusually large amounts of power have been transferred to the *panchayats*, it is inevitable that serious and difficult struggles will take place within them. And since there have been severe limits on ownership of land, control over the limited but strategic resources within the local organs of the state is naturally a good alternative if and when one wants to advance.

32. Eg. Westergaard, *People's Participation*, pp. 79ff.; Profulla Roy Choudhury, *Left Experiment in West Bengal* (New Delhi: Patriot Publishers, 1984), p. 161 (referring to a West Bengal government workshop); and T.K. Ghosh, *Operation Barga and Land Reforms* (Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1986), pp. 83f.

33. Cf. *Frontier*, 27 Feb. 1988; leading members of the CPI-M seem to prefer to speak off-the-record about this. Interviews with the author in Calcutta, e.g. 5 Mar. 1985, and New Delhi, 17 Nov. 1988. Cf. also Pardip Kumar Bose, *Classes in Rural Society* (Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1984), eg. pp. 213ff., for examples from the early seventies.

Concluding Remarks on West Bengal

It has been argued that the problems can hardly be serious, since the Left Front in general and the CPI-M in particular were actually able to gain votes in the last local elections—otherwise people would simply get rid of them.³⁴ This, however, brings me back to my main argument. Unfortunately, poor people in West Bengal may vote communist for the same main reason that motivates other poor people in other places to support, instead, reactionary parties—they simply stand by the best possible patron.

The main problem seems to be that democratization was not extended beyond the traditional political institutions to the sphere of production and the market. The communists emphasized the struggle for political power while immediate popular efforts to develop production would have to wait. The complicated and contradictory socioeconomic basis of the party and its broad peasant front made radical agrarian reforms difficult. Most tillers are therefore not socially and economically autonomous enough to prevent new forms of top-down approaches and patronage. Petty landlords and sharecroppers, for example, are very much dependent on top-down mediation as well as the distribution of resources. This may help the CPI-M to sustain their electoral hegemony for quite some time. But contradictions over the politically controlled conditions of

34. Maintained by Biplab Dasgupta in interview with author, New Delhi, 17 Nov. 1988.

production may also give rise to demands for further democratization—or privatizations.

State and Civil Society

In a comparative Indian perspective, the communists' attempts to implement land reforms by such means as struggle for democratic rights and rule has been comparatively successful. Nevertheless, the stalemated production and conflicts in Kerala as well as the new communist patronage in West Bengal belong to the general problems of the postcolonial political development projects. This situation has generated intellectual criticism from a left-libertarian point of view as well as from new movements and organizations. These have also brought forward another challenging approach to democratization.

The new approach is based on increasing actual struggles against the state, its resources, and its often brutal enforcement of uneven capitalist modernization. The so-called new social movements comprise farmers' movements, women's organizations, movements among scheduled castes and tribes, cultural organizations, and so forth, which fight the level of state-regulated input and output prices for agriculture, devastating construction of dams, acquisition of land, ecological changes leading to drought, and repressive communalism and casteism. There are also various more or less related nongovernmental issue and action groups that try to promote alternatives.³⁵ And the general slogan is one of civil society versus the state.

The development of new social movements and NGOs has led to different communist responses. Lack of space prevents me from discussing their actual political maneuvers. But the general and more central controversy is also of interest, particularly since it is often directly related to the issue of democratization. I will thus first try to refine and further develop the main arguments from each side in the controversy. Then I will give my own attempt at trying to go beyond the—in my opinion—rather unfruitful dispute. This does not mean that I am ignoring the communists' concrete political responses. In the last section I will instead turn to the Kerala communists' attempts at finding new paths by aims and means that include extended democratization.

The Crisis of Development: Strengthening the Civil Society

Speaking in favor of so-called nonparty formations in the Indian framework, Rajni Kothari has summarized the decisive arguments in the following characteristic way:

The engines of growth are in decline, the organised working class is not growing, the process of marginalization is spreading, Technology is turning anti-people. Development has become an instrument of the privileged class, and the State has lost its role as an agent of transformation, or even as a mediator in the affairs of Civil Society. It is a context of massive centralisation of power and resources, a centralisation that does not stop at the national frontiers either. . . . The party system (and the organised democratic process) is in a state of decline

and is being replaced by a non-political managerial class and technicians of corruption. . . . Revolutionary parties too have been contained and in part coopted (as have most of the unions). . . . The traditional fronts of radical action—the working class movement and the militant peasantry led by left parties—are in deep crisis. . . . There appears to be a growing hiatus between these parties and the lower classes, especially the very poor and the destitute. . . . There is taking place a massive backlash from established interests. . . . against the working classes as well as the unorganised sections. . . . and a steep rise in the repression and terror of the State. . . . It is with the plight of these rejects of society and of organised politics, as also ironically of revolutionary theory and received doctrines of all schools of thought, that the grass roots movements and non-party formations are concerned. . . . They are to be seen as attempts to open alternative political spaces outside the usual arenas of party and government though not outside the State, rather as new forms of organisation and struggle meant to rejuvenate the State and make it once again an instrument of liberation from the morass in which the underprivileged and the oppressed are trapped.³⁶

Social Power Against the State

Similar characteristics are also put forward by A.G. Frank and M. Fuentes in an attempt to analyze what they maintain is a worldwide rise of new social movements:

Working class social movements must be regarded as both recent and temporary. . . . Far more than "classical" class movements, the social movements motivate and mobilise hundreds of millions of people in all parts of the world—mostly outside established political and social institutions that people find inadequate to serve their needs—which is why they have recourse to "new" largely non-institutionalised social movements. . . . Social movements generate and wield social power through the social mobilisation of their participants. This social power is at once generated by and derived from the social *movement* itself, rather than from any institution, political or otherwise. . . . Thus, the new self-organising social movements confront existing (state) political power through new social power, which modifies political power.³⁷

Besides stressing this antistate position even more than Kothari, Frank and Fuentes also give prime importance to "the world economic crisis" as a basic cause for the emergence of the new social movements. They have very little to say about the character of this crisis and almost totally neglect any analysis of the state and its institutions, as well as relations of political power. Their grand generalizations are instead exclusively sociological and almost economicist. The crisis has nevertheless "reduced the efficacy of, and popular confidence in, the nation state and its customary political institutions as defenders and promoters of people's interests."³⁸

This is thus a kind of defensive popular struggle. But Frank and Fuentes also maintain that in view of the defeat of socialists who have tried to grab and utilize state power, the old ideal of the "utopian socialists" may be much more realistic. The new

35. For review analyses of the NGOs, see Harsh Sethi, "Groups in a New Politics of Transformation," in *EPW*, 18 Feb. 1984; and "Non-governmental Organisations in India: A Troubled future?" in *Policy Issues for Indo-Norwegian Development Cooperation*, ed. Arve Ofstad (Oslo: NORAD, 1987).

36. Rajni Kothari, "The Non-Party Political Process," in *The Non-Party Political Process: Uncertain Alternatives* (Delhi: UNRISD/Lokayan, 1983), pp. 28–30. (Also in *EPW*, 4 Feb. 1984.) Cf. Sudipta Kaviraj, "On the Crisis of Political Institutions in India," in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, New Series, vol. 18, no. 2 (1984).

37. A.G. Frank and M. Fuentes, "Nine theses on social movements," in *EPW*, 29 Aug. 1987, pp. 1503f.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 1505.



A heavily loaded boat on the backwaters of Kerala. The needs of the people are great in this densely populated state. As elsewhere, they can be autonomous only if social and economic developments are such that they do not have to depend on the dominating classes and communal movements for protection.

social movements may “modify the system. . .by changing its systematic linkages.”³⁹

An Alliance Between New Social Movements

Several revolutionary Marxists are rethinking and discussing social and political change in a slightly different way. In the Indian framework, Bharat Patankar, for example, stresses the fact that there are many urgent contradictions—like those generated by women and caste oppression, state repression, and ecological crisis—besides the one between capital and labor. These are the basis for the genuine new social, cultural, and political movements. The contemporary political project is, therefore, not to build the party on the basis of a workers and peasants’ alliance and to grab state power, but rather to work from below, within various movements and in favor of an alliance between them.⁴⁰

The “Foreign Funding and New Imperialist Strategy” Argument

Among many established communists, most of the new social movements and voluntary organizations in India are, however, not only seen as threats to an authoritarian state but also to revolutionary tradition and forces. According to their first

main argument, most new social movements and NGOs are part of an imperialist strategy. Many of these movements and organizations are entirely dependent on foreign funding. They are seen as part of a World Bank strategy to bypass Third World governments and thus covertly enforce more “liberal” development policies. The movements and NGOs become a hothouse for new interventionism and privatization.⁴¹

According to this point of view, nothing is necessarily wrong with charity and voluntary relief groups, as long as they are truly nonpolitical. But many of the new movements and organizations are actually political. They should therefore be subject to the same restrictions political parties are when it comes to foreign funding.⁴² They aim at making people conscious, and able to mobilize and organize themselves. According to the CPI-M’s leading theoretician in this field, Prakash Karat, they make a “caricature of a revolutionary party’s Leninist organisational principles,”⁴³ and they “divert and derail the working people’s attention from the real tasks of social revolution.”⁴⁴ He

41. For a straightforward analysis of this kind, see Prakash Karat, “Action Groups/Voluntary Organisations: A Factor in Imperialist Strategy,” in *The Marxist*, Apr.–June 1984; and *Foreign Funding and The Philosophy of Voluntary Organisations: A Factor in Imperialist Strategy* (New Delhi: Rajendra Prasad and National Book Centre, 1988).

42. Karat, *Foreign Funding*, pp. 57 and 64.

43. Ibid., p. 14, for example.

44. Ibid., p. 16, for example.

39. Ibid., p. 1509.

40. Bharat Patankar, *Transcendence of the Traditional Communist Movement: The Case of India* (Kasegaon, Maharashtra: manuscript, 1985 [?]).

also claims that “their very existence challenges the notion of a macro-Bolshevik party as the only viable agency for social transformation. . . . The left is irrelevant, it has to be by-passed.”⁴⁵ So-called action-oriented documentation and research groups contribute to “information imperialism.” Their information provides a “valuable intelligence base for policy-planning, and for interventionist strategies.”⁴⁶ The so-called autonomous women’s movement is based on “the bourgeois feminist ideology which is in vogue in the western capitalist countries,” and this is “injected into India.”⁴⁷ Many social movements and voluntary organizations are also a threat to national unity because they promote communalism and caste and ethnic conflicts.⁴⁸ According to Karat, they have even managed to infiltrate the union government in such a way that the present ministries and government have entrusted many voluntary foreign-funded groups with the running and implementation of development programs. This is thus a concrete example of privatization.⁴⁹ It is quite another thing if elected and publicly responsible governments cooperate with private business and various foreign agencies. And these new social movements and NGOs are in no way free from abuse and corruption.

There is, therefore, a need for an “ideological campaign against the eclectic and pseudo-radical postures of action groups. Their suspicion of the working class movement, their hostility to any centralised organisations, their silence on the socialist bloc and its struggle for peace against the war threats of imperialism, their willingness to become vehicles of anti-Soviet propaganda, their simplistic glorification of ‘people’ at the expense of classes, their ideological roots in American community development and pluralist theories” must be exposed and resisted.⁵⁰

This “foreign funding and new imperialist strategy” argument may also include the important observation that many of the new movements and NGOs can take the place of solid socioeconomic roots and popular mobilization with their access to funds that naturally attract many people.⁵¹ Some leading activists turn petty entrepreneurs. And their role as intellectuals is less organically linked with the dynamics of popular struggles than with trendy discussions among the concerned international development “jet set.”⁵² It could also, among other things, be added that the increasing frustration among left- as well as right-oriented development officers over inefficiency and corruption in Third World state

administration may lead to renewed interest in Huntington’s old prescription. This prescription, which was adopted not least of all by the United States, was that effective assistance in building modern and stable institutions, including the army as often the only reliable and modern one, is a prerequisite for effective economic and social development aid.

Adding to this is the fact that radical forces in general have not made much effort to promote production, but rather have given priority to political mobilization and change, and more equitable distribution of the present pie.

These and similar arguments, however, totally neglect the question as to whether the basic thesis of those in favor of the new social movements and NGOs—the crisis and the authoritarian character of the postcolonial state development project—is valid or not. Also, the very argument about funding and backing is often based on the logic of guilt by association. Struggles for human rights and democracy may be polemically linked with figures like ex-presidents Carter and Reagan: the fact that many businessmen and CIA agents, for example, were involved in the struggles for democracy in the Philippines can be used against many of the new movements and action groups. “A lot of what Kothari says may be right but he used to be linked to the American Lobby, so I prefer to stay away,” said a previously prominent Indian communist, who is rethinking his position on many other questions. If the same logic is applied from the other point of view, an interesting case could be made of the fact that the Suharto government in Indonesia and conservative Indian communists both make use of almost the same arguments and propose similar restrictions against new social movements and many NGOs. Also, why did the communists not give up “bourgeois” land reforms during the fifties and early sixties when agencies like the Food and Agricultural Organization actually intervened in favor of them? And why is it that most anticolonial struggles after World War II were not branded counterrevolutionary, since Washington was quite supportive as long as previous colonial monopolies were undermined and the way for free international capital was opened?

The basic logic of those who are against the new movements and organizations may therefore be another one: that human rights and democracy are fine, but only when fought for and led by organizations that, according to the critics, have a solid base among the working classes. But who is to judge and how? According to most communist parties, they are, almost by definition, the sole representatives of the working classes. Reflective communists sometimes agree that this is a significant problem.⁵³ Experienced

45. Ibid., p. 10.

46. Ibid., p. 30.

47. Ibid., pp. 13f.

48. For a recent concrete example, see the conflict between the Left Front government in Calcutta and the tribal population in northeast West Bengal.

49. Karat, *Foreign Funding*, pp. 45ff.

50. Ibid., p. 65.

51. An argument frequently bought forward by frustrated and long hard-working social and political activists within as well as outside established left parties and movements. From this point onwards, where I am adding to or refining supplementary arguments within the framework of the two main ones, I draw on my attempt to follow the debate particularly in India and Indonesia, especially by communicating with activists and scholars.

52. Cf. James Petras, “Metamorphosis of Latin America’s intellectuals,” in *EPW*, 8 Apr. 1989.

53. For example, the late leading intellectual within the CPI-M and adviser to the first left government in Kerala, Mathew Kurien, Kottayam, interview by author, 7 Feb. 1985.

left-oriented NGO activists in Kerala, for example, remarked that the CPI-M seemed to be more nervous about the lack of communist influence within certain movements and organizations than about foreign funding as such.⁵⁴

There is, of course, something sound in the argument that there is a major difference between foreign interests cooperating on the one hand with an elected government that is basically responsible for its actions, and on the other hand with private nonelected organizations, nondemocratic movements, and foreign agencies. But if democratic organization and control is the main precondition for nongovernmental international cooperation, why isn't the democratization of the movements, organizations, and the parties (including the communist ones) made into a major demand? And if we once again apply the problematic "class position," why should priority be given to a state/government that, according to most Indian communists themselves, is based on big monopoly capitalists, and landlords who cooperate with imperialists?

The "Lack of Driving Social and Political Forces" Argument

The second main argument from within the communist tradition is less preoccupied with the question of funding and tackles instead some of the theoretical fundamentals, and the political implications of the new social movements and voluntary organizations.

Frank and Fuentes, for example, are accused of overgeneralizing and neglecting both historical and contemporary regional and local specificities. They do not carry out any analysis of the relations between various movements and groups on the one hand, and social and political actors on the other hand. When the concept of a social movement includes almost everything from football associations to political study and action groups, there is some room for clarification. And while they put forward "social power" and autonomy as alternatives to "state power," the historically obvious need for conscious and organized activist intervention to foster radical change is totally neglected.⁵⁵

The argument based on the lack of driving social and political forces is often justified by the observation that many new social movements and NGOs tend to avoid conflicts over relations of exploitation. But it could also be added that, with the main exception of some fundamental religious organizations, the new movements have rarely been able to replace traditional parties and mass organizations as major political agents of change. And most attempts at forming new parties on the basis of social movements have failed.⁵⁶

One could also question the idea about a general crisis of the postcolonial state development project. The state has no

doubt been a leading agent in almost all the cases of rapid development, particularly in the Far East. And modern state regulation has been decisive in most places where economic growth has been combined with some equity. What would happen if weak groups like the scheduled castes in India, for example, were left without the possibility to rely on at least some state protection in addition to local social forces and movements? Wouldn't the strong groups dominate totally? And even if tribal populations or unviable peasants, for example, must be defended against state-enforced rapid growth, what other force but the state *could* guide a reasonably balanced national development? Neither free hands for the strong or conservative defense of so-called backward sectors would work. If the postcolonial state is incapable of solving a lot of problems, the way out is clearly not the state's foreign intervention and privatization but improvement of capacity and functioning.

There is a need and an option for the real producers to fight for more control over means and conditions of production by way of democratization.

From another point of view it can, however, be maintained that the communists—not to mention most other political parties and leaders, who accuse new social movements and NGOs of defending primitive petty-commodity producers who have to give way for modernization—are equally eager to defend "their" petty producers and/or special communal and interest groups in order not to lose sympathizers. And even if the state might stand for the common will and good, regulate balanced development, defend the weak, and keep an eye on the strong, a necessary though not sufficient precondition for this seems to be some autonomy and capability among the citizens themselves to protect, enforce, and sustain such policies against authoritarian tendencies. To promote new social movements and NGOs is not necessarily worse than to contribute to such a stronger civil society. The development of any kind of absolutist state in the Third World must be fought against there, as it has been in Eastern Europe.

The communists who talk about the need for political actors, efficient organizations, grabbing state power, and so forth, should, finally, also consider some neglected aspects of their political strategy. The established Left has been incapable of mobilizing the majority of the weaker and often marginalized population. This is precisely what many of the new movements and groups try to do. It is a paradox that traditional radical organizations are strongest within, and capable of attacking, the comparatively well-functioning and productive parts of the economy—while they are quite weak and incapable of counteracting the increasing "informal" production within "sweat-shops," for example, as well as more or less parasitic trade and commerce, and political and administrative rents. Just as an army is quite powerless without the constant supply of food and ammunition and a well-functioning infrastructure, opposing forces among the people have to develop their logistical base—by way of organizing and making use of the only capacity that poor and weak

54. For example, in an interview by the author with the leading NGO activist associated with the Programme for Community Organisation, Nalini Nayak, Trivandrum, 8 Feb. 1985.

55. See, for example, D. Dhanagare and J. John, "Cyclical Movement Toward the 'Eternal'," in *EPW*, 21 May 1988.

56. One interesting example is the failure of the farmers' movement in Tamil Nadu to transform itself into a political party. Discussion with senior researcher on agrarian structure and peasant struggle in South India, Staffan Lindberg, Lund, 26 Apr. 1989.



CPI-M appeal and meeting on a street in Kerala in 1985. Kerala communists have been working to prevent peasants from losing their land, increase their standard of living, improve the wages given to workers, and create new jobs for those outside agriculture. To accomplish this, Kerala communists have been moving in the direction of greater democratization and further development of the state on various levels.

people have left: their capacity to work. Various independent cooperatives may therefore be created. Alternative health, education, information, and other networks could emerge. It may also be more efficient to undermine the base of the generals in this way, rather than by trying to confront their machine guns and tanks.⁵⁷

Beyond "State and Civil Society"

The problem is that many of the arguments on both sides are important, but neither mutually exclusive nor possible to combine as they stand. At present the conceptual vagueness and arbitrariness of the arguments against the new movements and organizations are best illustrated by the fact that a similar reasoning can even be

employed, for instance by the CPI-M, in order to defend the onslaught on the Chinese movement for democratization.⁵⁸

The arguments in defense of the new movements and organizations, on the other hand, often boil down to a sympathetic strengthening of the civil society against the state. The civil society is often used as a synonym for the economy or the market, and for the area of private life. The state is usually the political and administrative superstructure. It is not necessary to enter the discussion about various definitions of state and civil society⁵⁹ to realize that the two are extremely difficult to separate

57. For a particularly exciting and pioneering discussion in another concrete framework, the Chilean situation, about the neglected strategical aspects, see Bosco Parra, "Labour and democracy in Chile," in *Strategies and Practices: Workers in Third World Industrialisation*, ed. Inga Brandell (London: Macmillan, forthcoming 1991).

58. See *People's Democracy*, 25 June and 2 July, as well as the Chinese analyses published in several of the following issues.

59. I am aware of attempts by, for example, Habermas, Anderson, and others to solve the problems, but I believe Boris Frankel is right in saying that they all start from the problematic assumption that a basic distinction is possible; see his *Beyond the State? Dominant Theories and Socialist Strategies* (London: Macmillan, 1983).

on the level of abstraction, which makes them unfruitful as concepts. This antithesis is far from the classical bourgeois and popular struggles against a monolithic and fairly solid absolutist state.

A main result of my analyses is that state and private institutions and processes are more or less informally intertwined. The concept of civil society against the state is not particularly helpful when one wants to distinguish among various movements and their aims and means. And the frontier against "New Right" libertarians is at present wide open. Much of the recent regeneration of these notions, with their basis in the development of private property and civil liberties, is actually based on an understanding of what happened in then-noncapitalist Poland, which makes it even more paradoxical. Solidarity was not based mainly on private property holders, but on attacking the dominance of the ruling party and bureaucrats. Until a few years ago it was usually against, rather than in favor of, the privatization of formally public resources.

But to argue, on the contrary, that a distinction between state and civil society is unfruitful because the state is just a reflection of the civil society, is really throwing out the baby with the bathwater. What is going on within the state and its nonprivate bases is then at best reduced to what is functional for the reproduction of the mode of production.

From the point of view of the theoretical proposition that I arrived at in my study of what problems of Marxism the communist-led struggles in India and Indonesia disclose,⁶⁰ it is instead possible to continue the discussion about the obvious but diverse struggles against the state in terms of the struggle over control and regulation of certain resources of power. This does not imply that we have to replace the traditional historical materialist analysis of the economic base with, for example, institutional approaches of the state in order not to lose sight of state capacities. Before we enter into the institutional field, it is possible to add studies of whether and how surplus is appropriated via rent on the often decisive formally public conditions of production, conditions external to the direct processes of production and to a great extent controlled precisely from within the state in countries like India. One of the main conclusions from my project is that there is thus a need and an option for the real producers to fight for more control over means and conditions of production by way of democratization.

Struggles against the informal privatization of formally public assets and their regulation may go on in noncapitalist countries like Poland and China as well as in societies as diverse as India, Indonesia, South Korea, Burma, and the Philippines. And different new social movements, NGOs, and their well-wishers may be further analyzed in terms of what and whose control and use of formally public resources they are up against, as well as what alternatives they suggest and practice. Do they opt for privatization and/or democratization? Which state capacities do they want to weaken or strengthen and how? In a strategical perspective this thus brings us beyond not only the traditional idea of confronting the state from outside in order to "grab state power," but also beyond the recent supposition that new social movements and NGOs can transform societies by once again standing outside,

but being autonomous and negating state power. The option is rather to democratize control and regulation of public resources.

Struggle for Extended Democracy: A New Option in Kerala?

Interestingly enough, the Kerala communists have recently, consciously or not, made an attempt to move in this direction. Much to everybody's surprise, the Left Front managed to win the 1987 state elections. This was not because the old political project, which was based on demonopolization of private land, suddenly had become fruitful again. The election results clearly indicate that the communists had losses in many of their old strongholds in the north, while they gained new support in the center and the south and in urban and more commercialized areas where problems such as underemployment were most serious.⁶¹ I suggest instead that the new gains to a substantial degree were due to an unscheduled departure from the old political project to democratization of other conditions of production besides redistributing land, including the control and regulation of public resources—because this was necessary in order to develop production and create new jobs.

New Struggle for Democratization

To begin with, the old but still vital general secretary of the CPI-M and former Kerala chief minister, E.M.S. Namboodiripad, supported a radical shift from short-term tactical alliances with communal parties. This may have contributed to the party losses in some of its old strongholds in the north where support from Muslims had been important. But it attracted other voters who were fed up with the way communal and caste loyalties had undermined previous attempts to provide effective and reasonably equal rule of common resources. (It is, however, troublesome that a chauvinist Hindu-camp also made some gains.)⁶²

During the election campaign, the communists also realized that problems of standards of living and employment, which were among the main election issues, could not be handled with further struggles for a more radical distribution of the pie. It was almost impossible to stage another land reform in order to redistribute usually small plots of private land. There was instead a need for the development of production in order to prevent many peasants from losing their land and increase their standard of living and the wages given to the workers, as well as to create new jobs within and outside agriculture. To bet on rich peasants only was out of the question. To promote different existing capitalists would not help much since most of them were not production-oriented but mainly speculative. Cooperation among small unviable peasants in order for them to till the land more efficiently, buy enough inputs, bypass exploitative traders, and so forth, was necessary—as well as state intervention within trade and industry—but all this presupposed efficient administration and rule.

60. See Törnquist, *What's Wrong?* vols. 1 and 2.

61. See the analyses of the election figures in *Frontline*, 27 Feb. 1988, and particularly the computer analysis in *Frontline*, 18 Apr.–1 May.

62. Ibid.

As a consequence, democratization and the further development of the state on various levels, including the local governments, the *panchayats*, as well as, for example, future development of cooperatives, was necessary in order to reach other basic aims. In this way democracy made sense for the communists.⁶³

Problems Ahead

Naturally it is easier to draw up such programs than to carry them out. There have been new elections for the *panchayats* in early 1988. The results resembled those in the 1987 state election.⁶⁴ The balance between the Left Front and its opponents is fairly even. The Left won in the big cities, lost in most of the smaller ones, and won a majority in more than 50 percent of the *panchayats*.⁶⁵ Moreover, existing cooperatives are about to be democratized. And the previously somewhat strained relations between the communists and even the clearly left-oriented NGOs have become more fruitful.

But this does not in itself generate capital, which is still lacking, and New Delhi was as usual reluctant to contribute, at least until the central government under V.P. Singh took over. Many powerful vested interests are threatened at various levels and also within the Left itself. The best-organized movements are not found among the many new voters such as young people with employment problems in the urban areas, but rather among workers and peasants who are not prepared to give up their advanced special demands. And various communal groups are often just as capable of mobilizing the electorate as the Left at the local and district levels.

The implementation process has therefore been slow. Recent attempts include exciting group-farming projects, in cooperation with the Peoples' Science movement. New legislation on local government and decentralization is also in the pipeline.

Meanwhile, the Left Front suffered heavy losses in the late 1989 elections to the national parliament in New Delhi. There may have been special reasons for this, including a more united opposition, unskilled management of issues related to public and private education, and, more in Kerala than in other parts of India, a general questioning of communist policies due to developments in China and Eastern Europe. But widespread

discontent with what the Left Front government had achieved so far is also very likely.

The government has to deliver some goods, at least to the important new voters who gave the front a chance.⁶⁶ But the communists are neither in command of the necessary resources—nor able to rely as much as the West Bengal communists on massive support from the various agrarian producers who need basic protection. Alternative communist patronage is no option.

Sustained democratization in Kerala will therefore, I suggest, have to be based not on top-down patronage but on the further development of social and economic spheres in order to make people more autonomous and less forced to seek protection among the dominating classes and communal movements. This is what makes democratization in Kerala so exciting and promising—but also difficult.

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63. Olle Törnquist, "Krav på fördjupad demokrati i Kerala ledde till valseger" (Demands for democratisation in Kerala led to electoral victory), in *Socialistisk Debatt*, no. 5 (1987). I am particularly thankful for valuable discussions with senior researchers with the Centre for Development Studies in Trivandrum—Michael Tharakan, Trivandrum, 20 July 1987; John Kurien, Trivandrum, 20 July 1987; and Thomas Issac, Trivandrum, 21 July 1987—as well as with Nalini Nayak, 21 July 1987; and leading intellectual and journalist within the CPI-M in Kerala, Govinda Pillai, Trivandrum, 20 and 23 July 1987; plus with senior anthropologist Richard Franke, Kovalam, 22 [?] July 1987, with experience from Java and recently during the 1987 elections in Kerala.

64. See *Frontline*, 27 Feb. 1988.

65. *Peoples' Democracy*, 7 Feb. 1988.

66. An increasing nervousness was obvious at CPI-M headquarters in the autumn of 1988. Discussions with Basavapunniah and Prakash Karat, New Delhi, 13 Nov. 1988. For the more recent development, I am most thankful for comments from Michael Tharakan, Thomas Issac, John Kurien, and Govinda Pillai, 9–11 Jan. 1990.