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**LAND, POLITICS, WORK AND HOME-LIFE
AT ADIMALATHURA:
TOWARDS A LOCAL HISTORY**

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This paper is from the on-going collaborative research project ‘Self-help or Social Transformation? Women in Local Governance in Kerala, India and South Africa’ in which CDS, NIBR, Oslo, and the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa are involved. I thank my co-researchers Guro Aandhal, Berit Aasen, Vinoj Abraham, and Glyn Williams for discussion and insights. Dr. M.A Oommen’s comments have helped to fine-tune my arguments – heartfelt thanks to him. Hearty thanks, also, to my co-workers in the project, Santhi R and Mary Samual, and to Sruthi Herbert too. The comments offered by the reviewer have been truly useful; I thank her/him too.

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the fishing hamlet of Adimalathura located on the coast of the Thiruvananthapuram district in Kerala, which has been identified as an area of extreme developmental disadvantage. Without claiming to be a full-fledged local history, it seeks to construct, through the memories of selected local residents, a coherent narrative of the past which would help us contextualize the present in this site. Tracing the intertwined trajectories of land, politics, development, and home-life at Adimalathura through in-depth interviews with local residents, it reflects upon the ‘multiple governmentalities’, that of the Catholic Church and the State, that have shaped everyday life in this hamlet. It is argued that the specific form of marginalization experienced by the people here is that of dispossession. Of particular interest is the shaping of an ‘oppositional civil society’ here in the late 20th century, which challenged this dispossession, but which is now being reshaped into a more non-oppositional ‘state-centric’ civil society.

Keywords: Adimalathura, Kerala fishers, civil society, governmentality, marginalization

Introduction

In the discussion of Kerala's achievement in social development, coastal communities have been recognised as one of the 'outliers' to the central tendency, exhibiting considerably lower levels of social development and disadvantage compared to more powerful communities in the State (Kurien 2000). Nevertheless, the coastal people of Kerala, especially the communities on the coasts of the southern districts, have been deeply politicized in the 1980s, which has considerably improved their access to state welfare (Kurien and Paul 2000: 17). Also, this history of politicization may also be behind the fact that much more research is available about coastal communities when compared to other 'outliers' – after all, the independent trade union movement that sprang up among the fishworkers of Kerala in the 1980s was supported by the research of activists, which greatly strengthened their engagements with the authorities (Dietrich and Nayak 1990: 109; Subramanian 2009).

However, this relative abundance of information should not blind us to the fact that the experience of coastal communities in south Kerala has not been even. For example, it has been noted that there are significant differences in social development between the villages on the coasts of the districts of Kollam where the Indo-Norwegian Project¹

1 The Indo-Norwegian Project for Fisheries Community Development (1953) took effect after a tripartite agreement was signed between India, Norway, and the UN. This was the world's first development project of its kind inspired by the UN's Expanded Programme for Technical Assistance. John Kurien divides it into two phases: (1) 1953-63, when it was concentrated mainly in the southern coast covering three villages in the Kollam district, and (2) 1963-72, when some of the activities begun at Kollam were extended, and in part, extended to the States of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Kurien 1985: A.72.

was operational, and others (Kurien 1985: A 86, footnote 106). But this is true even of fisher communities along the coast of the district of Thiruvananthapuram, which have had a common history since the 16th century. In general, the coastal people of this district have been identified as among the most severely disadvantaged groups along the coast (*Human Development Report of the Fisher Folk of Kerala* 2009) – however, even within this evenly-bleak scenario, some villages have been worse-off than others. Neither the larger history of the southern coast of Kerala, nor the abundant data about fisher communities in this region are enough to allow us to make sense of the processes that have shaped the specific experiences of these worse-off communities.

The fishing hamlet of Adimalathura of about 1134 households² is unmistakably one such worse-off community on the southern coast. The *State Finance Commission Report* (2011) identifies Kottukal panchayat, in which Adimalathura is located, as most vulnerable as far as fisher folk are concerned (p. 164)³. Adimalathura's location is such that it was cut off not only from the mainland but even from other fishing villages on the coast until recently. Bounded by the Chowara village in the north, the hills of Chowara on the west, and the Karichal backwater on the east, it is very near Kerala's linguistic border with Tamil-speaking area, and therefore the fisher folk of the area represent a 'cusp culture', of Malayalam and Tamil. The Adimalathura village now stands on land that was formed as the sea receded over the past century; much of the adjacent Chowara beach and the extreme end of the Chowara hill has now been converted into high-end beach resorts. Compared to other nearby villages, its achievements are poor – the neighbouring

2 According to the website of the Kerala State Coastal Area Development Corporation. [<http://keralacoast.org/pdf/tvm/adimalathura.pdf>] Accessed, 11 June 2013. The population of village is about 9000 according to an account by the Catholic Church of the parish (Pereira 2012: 76)

3 Kottukal Panchayat contains only two coastal wards which form together the fishing village of Adimalathura.

Pulluvila, for example, has a rich history of educational achievement (Pereira 2012: 73) while Adimalathura's record of educational achievers is quite scanty. And while neighbouring Poovar seems to have shaken off exploitative relations in the organizing of fishing to a considerable extent (Ignatius 2008: 60), they seem to be persist even today in Adimalathura. This paper makes an effort to make sense of the specific historical processes which shaped such disadvantage; it also seeks to understand local people's perception of the past and present of the place, and of the socio-political processes that unfolded there. It makes use of residents' oral narratives that draw on their memories, both of their personal lives as well as the place itself. These are read alongside available secondary sources to produce a micro-history of the region. Clearly, no claim is being made that the present exercise is 'oral history' – for the complexities that emerge in such an exercise are not explored in the present account.

My view of Adimalathura was informed by accounts of the exceptionally intense deprivation experienced by people there, which had already received some publicity in the late 1980s in Kerala and was familiar to some of us who were exposed to the fisher folk's activism of those times. However, outsiders like myself tended to regard this state as not specific to Adimalathura but as signifying the general condition of Kerala's fisher communities. I viewed the history of democratization in the coastal communities as essentially 'civil social'⁴ — a view that has acquired considerable nuance through both the interviews and a consideration of the long-term history of coastal communities in Thiruvananthapuram, as may be evident later. Thus, instead of focusing on a pure 'oppositional civil social' domain that arose in the 1980s, I

4 Aparna Sundar (2010) has argued that Partha Chatterjee's well-known thesis about subalternity and political society in Indian democracy does not apply to the fishing communities of south western India. I agree with her on this; only that I would see its emergence as part of a larger intertwined history of religious and state institutions on the coast, a point she would probably concur with.

became inclined to trace the history of multiple or parallel systems of governance in the area— that of the Catholic Church and the secular state. The question this raises is whether the Catholic Church may, in this context, be referred to as ‘civil society’ at all. Viewing it as a structure running parallel to secular government seems to make more sense, a feeling confirmed by recent scholarship (Subramanian 2009)⁵. This means that the oppositional civil society – the democratizing moves within the Catholic Church that played a key role in facilitating the rise of the fisher folk’s activism that challenged the secular state’s ideas of development of the 1980s – was oppositional not just with regard to the secular state but also to the essentially hierarchical control structure of the Catholic Church of the 1980s.

This paper makes use of mainly oral narratives but without making any claims to produce a full-fledged and comprehensive oral history. This account does not engage fully with the range of issues that have emerged in the debate in oral history on the nature of oral evidence, the question of interpreting oral evidence, the question of subjectivity, and the relationship between the historian and the interviewee. It has very minimal claims and purpose⁶: it seeks to construct, through the memories

5 The manner in which the church councils functioned virtually as the village assembly on the south Kerala coast has been noted by scholars. See Klausen (1968); Houtart and Nayak (1988); Meynen (1989). For a much more detailed account, see Subramanian 2009. She writes: “Rather than the religious encompassing all of the Mukkuvar life, one sees the traffic between religious and civic interpretations of authority, community, and rights that resist its characterization as either a wholly religious universe or one that is being inevitably secularized.” Subramanian 2009: 25.

6 This effort to reconstruct the past of this site is part of a larger project focused very much on the present, which explores the manner in which local efforts at women’s empowerment through decentralized governance and development in Kerala has impacted on women living in areas of extreme deprivation. It seeks to compare the impact of such efforts in Kerala and South Africa. The focus of this attempt at writing a local history is limited precisely because it is not really an end in itself but instrumental to generating deeper understanding of the present, investigated through extensive interviewing of the women involved in local governance at an urban slum and a fishing hamlet.

of selected local residents, a coherent narrative of the past which would help us contextualize the present in this site. Other historical sources being rather meagre, it is important to carefully access local memories, and in hopefully a complex way – for example, by selecting a set of sufficiently diverse interviewees whose narratives would not only complement, but also deviate from each other, so that a range of positions within the same location are covered, deploying careful textual analysis, and by cross-checking with the available historical and other sources. While the several important questions mentioned above cannot be simply ignored, they are addressed only minimally. Also, this is necessarily a partial history of the place; it does not, for instance, offer a full account of the vicissitudes of labour and capital and most importantly, does not cover the changes in the post-1990s period. These changes are the larger concern of the research project of which this is a part of. The purpose of this local history is to construct a larger canvas, against which these changes may be understood better.

This account is based on 18 in-depth open-ended interviews with residents of Adimalathura and several long conversations with others who were eager to share their memories with us – besides the available secondary sources on the coastal villages of Thiruvananthapuram district, which is not meagre. Our interviewees are from all age groups. They have at least thirty-five years of experience of living there, are both men and women, and with different levels and kinds of exposure to the world outside. Women from the 40-50 age-group were relatively hard to find – not surprising, because it seems that these women have very little time to spare, bearing almost the entire burden of domesticity and of dowry making for their daughters. Two of our interviewees are from neighbouring areas but were deeply involved in the transformative activism that changed political equations in Adimalathura in the 1980s. All of them belong to the Latin Catholic-Mukkuva community which constitutes the large majority in the village. All names have been changed to protect the identities of our interviewees. The paper has three sections,

each of which focuses on a key aspect— land, politics, and work and home life. This is followed by a concluding section.

Land at Adimalathura

The coast of Thiruvananthapuram was populated by the ancestors of the present day Latin Catholic Mukkuva community. They appear in the historical record as early converts to Latin Catholicism by St. Francis Xavier in the 16th century (Subramanian 2009). The Kerala coast, it is observed, has been among the most densely populated maritime areas in India. John Kurien observes that there are about 250 densely-populated hamlets situated less than half-kilometre from the seafront along the 600-km coastline, with an average population density of some 2330 people per square kilometre (Kurien 2000a: 11)

Adimalathura, however, has a much more recent history. The recent exercise by the Latin Catholic Diocese of Thiruvananthapuram to collect local traditions and memories of churches, parishes, and religious institutions mentions that human habitation of the area began around 160 years back from the present (Pereira 2012: 76). Almost every senior interviewee recalled the stories of settlement of their forefathers in this area mostly in the early decades of the 20th century – in other words, memories of migration into this village from surrounding villages like Pulluvila and Poovar, or from villages further south, in Tamil Nadu State, allow us to date it as relatively recent, from about the early decades of the 20th century. Many of them mentioned one grandparent or parent—usually the female – as hailing from of the oldest families, eight in number, which lived on the slopes of the hillock, just behind the present village church. Men from other villages apparently married into these families, and though there are exceptions to this, they seen fewer. These new families then began to move into the marshy land that was forming as the sea slowly receded. Memories of Adimalathura depict it as wild, unpredictable, inhospitable, and prone to the incursions of the sea – an image that appears also in the local tradition cited in Pereira 2012:

according to this account, this area was a jungle, filled with wild bushes, thorny shrubs, trees and wild animals like monkeys, mongooses, foxes, wolves, and snakes (p. 76). This account mentions early migration to this area by families from the Tamil coast — the name of the leader of the first wave, Munias or Muniar, is still associated with a well near the village church, the sole reliable source of fresh water for the village. Later, people from the neighbouring villages such as Pulluvila began to move in too (ibid. above). The stories about the past of the region stress its uninviting, dangerous nature – for instance, the story of the ‘Anevizhungi’ [Elephant-Swallower] or ‘Aaleppidiyan’ [Human-Eater] shark that once lived on its coast, a terror which was apparently ended by a Catholic priest who hunted it down.

Memories of its physical appearance, of both insiders and outsiders, and across all age-groups, emphasized its inhospitable, unhealthy nature – very damp, with water rising from below and overflowing in the toilets whenever the sea swelled in the monsoon, full of stagnant pools in which mosquitoes and flies bred abundantly, plenty of rotting vegetation amidst excessive shade from abundant coconut palms, and the constant threat of the sea rushing in. Interviewees whose memories date from the 1960s remember how pig-farming in the area made things unbearable. Younger residents remember an exhibition by the Health Department, apparently with UN support around the early 80s, which identified Adimalathura as the place with the highest incidence of scabies and worm infestation in the country (some say the world’s highest!) and with high incidence of tuberculosis and leprosy as well. This picture conforms to the images of overcrowding and lack of hygiene in the coastal villages in the vicinity, like that of the fisher people’s settlement in the Vizhinjam village nearby, etched in the Census Village Survey of the Kottukal Panchayat of 1961 (p.154),⁷ but the situation seems to have been much

7 The Kottukal Panchayat of 1961 was much bigger than the present one; it contained the present-day Venganoor Panchayat and the areas of Vizhinjam recently designated urban.

worse at Adimalathura since the land was not conducive to human settlement. Meager sources of freshwater⁸ and practices like pig-rearing must have made it worse.

But besides being inhospitable, Adimalathura also appears as unapproachable in these memories. It was largely cut off – one had to either climb the hill or cross the backwater to reach the road leading to town. Seventy-five-year-old Sahaya Matha who married into Adimalathura remembers the difficult journey here after her marriage ceremony at her home-village, Poovar. “We walked all the way here through the beach,” she said. “It was the monsoon, the time when the sandbank between the sea and the backwater would shrink. My husband grabbed my hand and we ran across the sandbank before the sea took it!” At present, a bridge across the backwater connects the village to the mainland but she does not remember any bridge on the backwaters then. She was 16 then, and it was the 1940s. Senior residents remember that there was just a very narrow foot-bridge across the backwater in the 1960s, which was replaced by a wooden bridge by none other than the legendary VK Krishna Menon, who contested as a left-independent candidate in the elections of 1971. He apparently met the local strongman (much feared in the area then, who we will refer to later as A) and promised the bridge – however, the strongman himself did not show any interest in securing this promise. In spite of this explicit non-cooperation of the local elite, Menon got a wooden bridge built soon as his term was about to end, and local people believe that he spent his personal money on it.

Nevertheless, the disadvantage of the coast seemed to be more than compensated by the richness of the sea. Thomas, a native of the

8 It appears that the situation is not very different even at present. The spring near the church is still the sole reliable source, but it is under great pressure now. See the report in *The Hindu* from 2010: [<http://www.hindu.com/2010/03/24/stories/2010032462790300.htm>], accessed, 14 June 2013.

village, pointed out that the natural formation on the sea-coast ensured an abundant supply of fish, very close to the sea-front at Adimalathura. He pointed to the way the coast curved as the Chowara hill sloped into the sea in a series of rock-formations at the one edge of the village, while the other edge was defined by the backwater emptying itself into the sea. “The water from the Karichal backwater is full of rich vegetal deposits which the fish like to eat, and the water is muddy and so they can’t see too well either. The rocks provide plenty of reefs below.” Thus it is not surprising that the owners of shore-seines, the *kambavala*, from the neighbouring – and more prosperous – Pulluvila⁹ moved swiftly to colonize the land being formed there. This was through allowing the workers who they hired – through a system very close to debt bondage – to work the shore-seines, to settle down in the land. From the accounts of the interviewees, it seems that the settlement began to quicken at a period that coincides with the times in which the demand for dried fish began to intensify in the late 19th–early 20th centuries, with plantations being set up in the Western Ghats and increased road and rail connectivity, which improved exports (Kurien 1985: 471).

In other words, the settlement of land at Adimalathura paralleled the shaping of very highly exploitative class relationships within the Mukkuva community, between shore-seine owners and their workers, which were not shaken until very recent times. Not surprisingly, interviewees of all age groups remembered with bitterness how their parents and grandparents had toiled to raise the newly-formed land above the sea’s incursions, but had been denied ownership. In Adimalathura, all land resources were cornered by two strongmen who

9 Besides having a richer history of education and participation in public life, Pulluvila was also enriched materially by its residents who migrated to Ceylon in the early decades of the 20th century. The funds for the new Church – St. Jacob’s Forane Church – at Pulluvila were raised in 1938, from these migrants (Pereira 2012: 72-73). It is quite likely that some of the surpluses from remittances might have also gone into the colonization operations of relatively unpopulated Adimalathura.

hailed from the nearby Pulluvila and their families, but one is remembered with exceptional anger – who we will refer to as A– whose power, according to a 38-year-old Christuraj, was extinguished completely only about fifteen to twenty years back. He is remembered as especially adept at bribing officials and forging title-deeds, and cheating local residents to surrendering whatever claims they may have to the land on which they lived, usually through trapping them in debt. Mercy Alexander, one of the leading women activists who fought such exploiters during the 1980s, remembers that these men captured much land all over the area through many kinds of strategies – a prominent one was to advance loans on coconut palms on the debtor’s piece of land. The yield would be harvested as interest; soon the debt would pile up and the debtor’s land would be seized. Almost all interviewees remembered vividly the violence that these men unleashed, and they all agreed they did not remember much resistance at all, at least before the late 1970s. On the whole a series of connections seemed to be working which always put the workers and their families at severe disadvantage. For example, Rajan, another activist from the 1980s, who lived on the mainland very near Adimalathura, points out that the practice of planting coconut palms¹⁰ – which was a source of income to the settlers — as soon as people moved into the swampy land formed when the sea withdrew was a very unhealthy one as the trees grew quite prolifically and blocked the sunlight from drying the damp, marshy sand. Not only were these trees taken over by creditors soon, they made for most

10 John Kurien, who has studied these villages very closely, remarks that planting coconuts was also a very clever way of “creating land” in this ‘fuzzy ecological interface’ between land and sea. After the strong South Western monsoon as the sea recedes, a row of coconuts is planted. The sand and clay ‘aggregates’ around the palm and creates land. In the next season another row is planted in front. The palms had to be planted at a spacing of less than 7-10 feet. The result is medium-yielding coconut palms but rapid yield of new marsh land under the shade of the palms. He points out that this practice may also be seen in Pulluvilla. The accretion of land in these villages is also a direct result of the building of the breakwater of Vizhinjam harbour in the north. Personal communication.

insalubrious living conditions. Pig-farming too was a source of income that helped reduce income instability characteristic of fishing, but it produced severe health problems.

Occupying the land was also very risky, as sixty-year-old Augustina remembered. She and her husband had occupied a part of the new beach soon after their marriage in 1975 (most of our interviewees above 50 remembered that the sea could reach right up to the foot of the hill in their childhood): “At first, there was no land till the road which now runs below the hill. Then when the sea drew back, people filled up the marsh and moved forward, planting coconut palms. We too built a small hut – of flimsy cadjan and coconut thatch, which was all we could afford, all of us, those days. But that was felled so many times by the sea! In fact, just about some 20 years back, the sea swept a part of the house down ... that’s how we have lived – right under the sea’s gaping jaws!” Clement, a 54-year-old fisherman remembered from his childhood how people struggled valiantly to save high-yielding coconut trees and the despair when a particularly fruitful palm was felled by the sea despite all efforts.¹¹

The pattern of land-grab seen at Adimalathura, however, seems to have been common on the coast. The Census Village Survey of 1961, which studied a fishing community in the Vizhinjam village, noted the existence of debt-bondage of the shore-seine worker to the owners of these nets; it found nearly 40 such owners who were better-off than the workers and trapped them in unprofitable work (1961: 170). Mathew (2001: 57) argues that this class hierarchy was identical to the internal caste hierarchy at Vizhinjam as well: the owners of the shore-seines

11 The low-lying beach still poses major problems making flood conditions much worse at Adimalathura than elsewhere. For instance, when the entire Thiruvananthapuram coast was struck by freak flooding in 2005, Adimalathura residents suffered the worst. See *The Hindu’s* report of 25 May 2005. [<http://www.hindu.com/2005/05/25/stories/2005052520990300.htm>], accessed 12 June 2013.

were also most often the highest strata of the Mukkuva known as the ‘Kutumbakkar’ [‘Family –folk’ or ‘well-born folk’] who bore prestigious Portuguese names and were well-off. Below them were the ‘Pulikkiyar’, asset-less labourers who usually were migrants from the Tamil coast and worked under an ‘udampati’ (contract, agreement) system, usually performing debt bondage¹². Besides these, there were the lowest strata of people who performed bodily services – barbers and others. (Mathew 2001: 57-58). However, the situation at Adimalathura might well have been worse, since the exploitative relationship between the shore-seine owners and the workers seem to have shaped land relations entirely. In many fishing villages in the vicinity, this was not the case. About the Vizihinjam fishing settlement in the late 1950s, the Census Village Survey noted: “The whole of the surveyed area belongs to the Vizhinjam Catholic Church and all the surveyed households are tenants. They do not pay rent and they do not own any other land. The ‘Stay on Eviction of Kudikidappukar Act’ and the ‘Agrarian Relations Act’ have conferred legal permanency on their tenancy. But even before the Acts came into force there was no threat of eviction.” (1961: 164-65). In the neighbouring Poovar, where the land was traditionally owned by Muslim merchants, the parish began to buy up land when the original owners began to sell it cheap in the early 1960s, faced with the impending threat of land

12 Platteau and Abraham (1987) argue that even as they restrict the workers’ opportunity to search for more advantageous arrangements, such ‘labour-tying loans’ are not necessarily disempowering and hence it may not be treated as the same as debt bondage, which they claim, involves extra-economic coercion (p. 478). They however note that the intensity of the tie is likely to be high for workers with a “low asset base and strong risk aversion” (p. 475). Surveying Poovar village in the late 1970s, they found that about sixty percent of the fishermen owned one or several such loans to their employers (ibid.). However, there is reason to think that labour-tying loans lay closer to debt-bondage at Adimalathura at least till the 1980s for two reasons: first, the fisher folk who settled there more dependent because their asset-base was very poor, as it emerged through the interviews. Secondly, as may become clear later, resort to extra-economic coercion seems to have been quite widespread there – and so the accounts of the villagers of this system diverge quite vastly from its depiction by Platteau and Abraham. It is also interesting that such studies often pay little attention to caste hierarchies on the coast.

reforms in Kerala (Ignatius 2008: 76).¹³In contrast, all land in Adimalathura was grabbed by strongmen who managed to forge title deeds. Fifty-eight-year old Gracy remembered how there was much talk in her youth about how the parish had tried to buy the land that strongman A had secured but was rebuffed – “If the Church had got that land, all the parishioners would’ve had had houses by now,” she comments. Interestingly, our interviewees complained that the strongman A refused to even sell land for a convent to the Church at a fair price and recalled how he managed, in many neighbouring villages, to exploit the ambiguities of ownership in cases where the land was owned by the parish but the house belonged to the families staying on it. He was highly connected in the courts and the police, and so it was futile for lesser people to resist.

However, this situation began to change in the early 1980s when important changes at many levels, including the entry of a non-governmental organisation, the Programme for Community Organisation (PCO)¹⁴ allowed simmering discontent to erupt into a fairly long-drawn-

13 This did not, however, mean that the Church was being necessarily benevolent. Ignatius notes that instead of paying the Muslim merchants the cost, the Church gave them a monopoly of collecting church levies for two years. The first major Christian-Muslim riot on the coast was an expression of Christian resentment against the exploitation by the Muslim merchants facilitated by the Church, he says (Ignatius 2008: 76-78). See also Subramanian 2009: 44-45.

14 The PCO was registered as a separate organisation in 1977 by the seven activists who had led the Community Development Programme at the newly-settled village of Marianad initiated by the Bishop Peter Bernard Pereira in 1961. The Bishop was made Patron of the organisation – this was a strategy to get it registered at a time when the TSSS was still in existence. It was also apparently a move to prevent the future bishop from claiming the right to be a patron. John Kurien, personal communication. The very success of this effort in transforming the village into a truly people-led faith community provoked a backlash against the activists from within the Catholic Church. The activists then withdrew and formed the PCO which actively intervened in the epic struggle of the fisher folk of the 1980s and also empowered local people, especially women, to raise questions to entrenched forms of power. Dietrich and Nayak 1990: 100-9.

out struggle by educated local youth to end the dominance of the landed elites. Meanwhile, the fish workers' struggle against trawling and unsustainable fishing practices which was by now causing widespread distress, with falling fish-catches and incomes, heavier burdens borne by artisanal fishers, intensifying class differentiation, (Achari 1988; Kurien and Achari 1990; Dietrich and Nayak 2000) became intense in the 1980s. This was the culmination of a modernization-cum-growth model which had led to the depletion and dispossession of the natural resource to the people who had depended upon it for centuries (Kurien 1985) managed to increase the flow of state welfare resources into the coastal communities¹⁵. Assistance for housing was made available through new agencies such as the MATSYAFED (Kerala State Cooperative Federation for Fisheries Development)¹⁶. This led to the distribution of land titles to petty-holders who received housing loans from MATSYAFED in the 1980s and though tensions around the denial of title-deeds continued to surface till about the mid-90s, gradually, the violent opposition mounted by the strongmen and their supporters was broken. Land titles have continued to be distributed steadily and this continues in the present as well. The Church too began to distribute title-deeds to the fisher folk living on parish land from the 1980s onwards. Simultaneously, the struggle also connected Adimalathura to the mainland. The strongman who enjoyed near-total control till the 1970s seems to have been vehemently opposed to all such efforts –interviewees recounted his manipulations that foiled all attempts to improve physical connectivity of the village with the mainland. He had even opposed building a decent road through the village, remembered Timothy, a

15 The percentage increase in the volume of social security assistance before and after 1986 was about 1814 points. Mentioned in Kurien and Paul 2009: 17.

16 Kurien and Paul 2009 note that as a whole, the outlays for MATSYAFED social security schemes were small; however, the rehabilitation housing scheme of 1985-86 was an exception in that its per capita benefits were not small (p. 23).

sixty-two-year-old fisherman, from the early 1970s: “Father Richard, who was a priest here in the 70s, decided that we should have a good road that was to run right below the hill, dividing the slope-side and the beach-side. He encouraged people to build a laterite road there and also gave them wheat flour rations. But that was all – A would not allow anything more. Only Father Richard had the guts to stand up to that bully. All the other priests who came here were thoroughly intimidated.”¹⁷ The wooden bridge became a site of deep conflict as politicized youth began to resist the violence of A’s henchmen. “They were desperate to stop outsiders from entering the place – that was one of the key ways in which they had managed to control the place,” said Thomas, who had been a leader of the youth resistance. “Things became really serious when they burned down the bridge in desperation.” However, with an ‘oppositional civil society’ taking shape through the PCO in Adimalathura and educated youth becoming attracted to the communist parties, the resistance only grew stronger. Importantly, the elections of the 1980s saw the coastal people abandon the Congress-led United Democratic Front which had traditionally received their unstinted support¹⁸. The government moved in to provide road connectivity and wooden bridge was replaced with a concrete motorable bridge and a bus service connecting Adimalathura to the mainland was started. Electrification of the village, health services, childcare and nutrition programmes through state welfare– all these remembered as following these events. Women, especially women who were active in the PCO-initiated-struggles, remember the opening up of physical space as

17 The reference is to Father Richard D’Souza who was one of the early priests to take charge of Adimalathura after it was separated from Pulluvila and made into an independent parish in 1970 (Pereira 2013: 78).

18 For a detailed account of these shifts, see Kurien 1991. Also, fisher folk in other areas were also mobilized around these times by radical Catholic priests – for an account of such work in the coast of the Kollam district which lies to the immediate north of Thiruvananthapuram, see Halfdanardottir 1993.

connected with a rising sense of freedom. Sixty-year-old Greta who was a leading activist of the 1980s remembers:

True, women from here used to go all over the city and beyond selling fish – they were surely not afraid to travel. But they never enjoyed it for sure, never thought they had anything to get from all that traveling. It was just work, that’s it. Besides women who went out to sell fish were often with their senior kinswomen – usually mothers or aunts – and so one stayed well-within the eyeshot of the community.¹⁹ But travelling for struggles with PCO made a huge difference. It brought the women a sense of *pauratvam* [citizenship]. Women now travelled in groups like before, but this wasn’t just work, it was learning. One learned about oneself and the insides of the places one visited too. So one was no longer scared of going there and seeking work. I think it is after PCO women activists mobilized us that we became truly confident – if this place wasn’t helping us find a living, we could find it somewhere else. Though there used to be women who migrated for work even in the 1980s that was just mechanical work. This was different. In the 1990s we were looking for work but with confidence and without fear.

Nevertheless, there are apprehensions voiced in the present, that the connections to the mainland, especially to the resorts, are bringing in moral corruption among the youth. A social worker and staunch Catholic, Tobias, remembers a past when connection to the mainland used to be regarded as a source of strength to resist “the evil of forces like A and his minions.” But the scene, he claims, has changed. “Nowadays children are sent to schools in the city and that’s a matter of prestige. But they lose all connection with their own village. Worse, young people who work in the resorts develop all sorts of connections with rich white guests and turn into bad ways, losing respect for their communities.” Senior interviewees mentioned fears about money pouring into the

19 This was confirmed by the senior women fish vendors we interviewed.

community through these guests, who then make local males dependent on them completely.

And while insecurities about land are mentioned usually as a thing of the past, there are apprehensions entirely of the present, explicitly mentioned by the most politicized of our interviewees. Again, this is related to the possible incursions by encroachers from outside. Thomas, the veteran of the struggles of the 1980s as well as young community members like Christuraj and Ansamma, both in their 30s, speak of the potential encroachments of the resorts which now occupy quite a bit of the land on the slope-side towards Chowara to the north of Adimalathura. Also, Thomas especially mentions the generation of solid waste in these resorts which he feels is being dumped indiscriminately into the sea, which “will finally make us a waste-dump – like all the spaces in Kerala in which the poor live.” Ansamma was concerned about the increasing demands and offers being advanced by the resorts – “they offer to fill up the swampy edges of the village – one can’t help feeling wary – they aren’t obviously doing it for charity. They first just wanted a road, now they are offering to clear the swamp there!” They also felt that the Church was the agency that could stem the tide, but it had to be more active and alert.

However, there were also interviewees who told us that they had sold their land to resort owners and moved closer to the seafront. Perhaps it is no coincidence that such responses tended to be from owners of shore-seines who live in the village – some 16 in number – who enjoyed a greater degree of economic security than their neighbours. Definitely, a land market has sprung up at Adimalathura in the post-1980s period and it is growing. Timothy, a shore-seine owner who sold his land to the resort-builders some ten years ago for about a lakh and a half rupees now feels this to be a mere pittance. Ansamma who bought two cents of land near the road that now runs in front of the beach, paid five lakhs for the land and a small thatched house on it – she feels she has been cheated,

but admits that land prices are soaring. Tessy, an activist from the 1980s, felt that the arrival of a market in land was the single most significant change in Adimalathura in the recent years, and that it had completely upset social ties. “I remember how we participated in a march led by our parish to the State Secretariat in the city to demand proper drainage facilities at Adimalathura, so that the floods that inevitably inundate us during the monsoons would abate sooner. But now, when this proposal finally turned into a proper project, there is so much non-cooperation! People don’t want to yield an inch of land for a public purpose!”

Interestingly enough, men and women had very different memories of the land at Adimalathura from their childhood. Timothy, for instance, said that all his childhood memories were of the sea and the sea alone – he could not even remember what the land was like in his childhood, some fifty-five years back. “As toddlers, we played by the sea; I began to go to the sea with my father at the age of 9. We would rest when we were on shore, and I was always looking forward to getting on the waves!” he remembered them landing on beaches in other places, making rice gruel there, but had the faintest memories of his own childhood home!²⁰ Men’s memories of Adimalathura are usually from later in life, even of men much younger than Timothy – 38-year-old Christuraj and 52-year-old Tobias both confirmed that they too played exclusively on the seashore as children, making some pocket money helping to pull the shore-seine and spending it on treats sold by hawkers from the mainland. In contrast, women remembered only the immediate environs of their homes – even memories of going to Church were scanty. Women of all generations remembered how flimsy their homes used to be; how much childcare there used to be. They

20 This, it appears, is not unlike fishermen in the neighbouring areas. P T Mathew, for instance, quotes a fisherman from Vizhinjam who says that “After we return from fishing we do not know what to do on land; time doesn’t seem to pass, and it is real boredom ...” (Mathew 2001: 65).

seem to have been much less exposed to the beach – at least as a place of pleasure – than men. The Census Village Survey of 1961 speaks of how men, women and children at Vizhinjam relax on the beach – “...They sit clustered on the beach playing cards and chatting. The children jump into the sea and ride the waves.” (1961: 182). At Adimalathura one still sees men sitting in clusters on the beach and playing cards, but hardly any women relaxing. And as Christuraj pointed out, children are no longer encouraged to go out to the beach and play on the waves. They come back from school and go straight to tuition classes.

Women who worked as fish vendors do not also remember much of the mainland except for the families they sold fish to on a regular basis and who offered help in times of need. This is despite the fact that they travelled very far inland often. Interestingly, they all remember going out to distant places to buy fish when the catch was poor in the nearer areas. Sixty-seven-year-old Martha, for instance, remembers the trips they used to make to Kollam and other places in the 1960 – places where they had friends and well-wishers. However, these happy memories are also scarred with memories of anxieties about unattended children at home and sheer exhaustion since the journeys were inevitably on foot. Getting out of Adimalathura into the main road to town was remembered as a terrible ordeal by all the senior women fish vendors that we interviewed — 65-year-old Maria, 75-year-old Freesca, and Martha. Maria remembered: “There used to be no footwear at that time, so we trod the hot sand and the road barefoot, running because the road was too hot to step on ...” Pointing to the hill, she continued, “There was no road or bridge at that time to get across. We had to climb the hill and cross over. Imagine, we had to carry the fish basket on our heads and climb the rocks with our bare feet ... how scary it was! But we were desperate. And we would return late, very late.” “It used to be pitch-dark when we returned,” said Martha, “there used to be no electric lights, only the faint glow of kerosene lamps in a few houses. And this road,

now tarred, used to be all wet, squishy, slippery ...” This generation of women remembers that going to a hospital for childbirth was beyond imagination; and doctors could not be fetched since the village was cut off from the mainland. However, this does not seem to have been the case for women from better-off families. Timothy, who belonged to a family of shore-seine owners and became a shore-seine owner himself in the 1970s, remembers how his wife had delivered their third child at a hospital. She was also from a better-off family. In other words, it appears that the disadvantages of settling in an insecure, unwelcoming, unwholesome Adimalathura were borne largely by women of the poorer families among the fisher folk, especially those who had to travel out of the place to sell fish for a living.

Interestingly, women of such families who moved out early in life seem to have done better, if the experience of Sahaya Matha’s sister is of any significance. Sahaya Matha’s mother’s extremely strained circumstances were the reason why she was married into this inhospitable place (she was a native of Poovar —many interviewees remembered that people in the region were reluctant to marry their daughters here, since it was such a poor place) and that too, to a man many years her senior and two-time widower. But her younger sister was accepted in a convent as an orphan and raised by nuns. Sahaya Matha said that she worked as a servant in several convents, all over north India too, till she was married off by the convent in her earlier twenties. She seems to have done much better in life and is clearly upwardly mobile, with a daughter completing nursing studies and a son working in the Gulf region. Her husband was an autorickshaw driver and died eight years back, but they are quite stable financially. In contrast, Sahaya Matha’s son and daughter are still struggling to make ends meet in Adimalathura, and both did not gain access to higher education. However, Sahaya Matha says that the convent did not ask for any payment when it accepted her sister. However, she remembers how her step-daughter who had three daughters and had lost her husband had approached them some thirty years back for a sum

of five thousand rupees to put her daughter into a convent. The convent had apparently agreed to raise her, but they asked for this sum to cover her (future) marriage expenses.

Politics, Development, and Government

Historically, the southern coast of Kerala has seen multiple systems of government functioning simultaneously since the 16th century. The Mukkuva people have been ‘fringe-dwellers’ both in the sense of living by the sea coast and of being marginal to the Hindu kingdom and caste order dominant in the region. The Muslim merchants on the coast, for instance, were more valuable, it appears, to the Hindu kings who ruled Travancore in the 17th century (Ignatius 2008: 38-41); the Portuguese records on the 16th century seem to indicate that the fisher folk were pawns used by the Hindu kings in their power-struggles. Thus, the local Hindu chieftain allowed the Portuguese to convert the Mukkuvas on the coast in return for the Portuguese Governor’s permission to buy horses for war (Mathew 2001: 43-44). St. Francis Xavier who converted the people of Mukkuva villages in present-day south Kerala in 1536-37 also negotiated with the local chieftain. However, the support offered by the latter was not stable and was withdrawn in 1547 (ibid.: 45-46). It appears that a system of Church government, ultimately subject to Portuguese royal authority, was already in place by the mid-16th century – Mathew (2001: 48) mentions how the Portuguese captains could control those who had been baptized by forbidding them from fishing or confiscating their boats or catamarans in case they lapsed though these controls may have been quite weak then. The structure of government set up there by St. Francis Xavier included a Portuguese Law Officer, and some reports in the Portuguese records mention a judge and a policeman appointed by the priest in each village (Mathew 2001: 49-51). There are also reported instances of resistance by the Mukkuva to the Church’s government in the Portuguese records: a report of 1644 quoted by Mathew (2001: 52) mentions that the converts even bribed

Hindu officials of the Raja in order “to be able to resist with impunity the authority of the priest.”²¹ The ‘evils’ identified in the reports, like belief in magic (ibid. : 51-52), continue to persist on the coast – as confirmed by Tobias, who mentioned this in his interview with great concern, identifying the belief in magic and sacred amulets as “one of the curses of social life at Adimalathura.” Scholars note that this has led to the destruction of pre-existing structures of communal life and regulation of the fisheries among the Mukkuva (Kurien 2000: 27) and entrenched unchallenged obedience to the priest. Mathew (2001: 141) points out that under the *Padroado* system²² which was followed in these parts until recently, under which “... the priest had been conferred the triple powers over the caste, the village, and the Church.” Indeed, the Church levies a tax, often given as a monopoly to others, and collects donations (Mathew 2001: 134). In Poovar, for a long time, the levy was collected by Muslim merchants (Ignatius 2998: 76-78). The Church also exercised considerable control of social life, through sanctions such as *ooruvilakku*, which as Mathew notes (2001: 133) “combines within it not only religious, but also social and judicial control systems and through punishments such as shaving the ‘wrongdoer’s head or making them carry the cross on Sunday. “Mathew quotes reports from *The Latin Catholic* of such punishments from 1935 and from the early 1960s (ibid.). Clearly, these practices remain in the living memory of Adimalathura: many of our interviewees mentioned that the trigger for the rebellion against strongman A by educated young men in the late

21 This confirms Subramanian’s critical observation (2009: 39) that the popular mainland notions about the fisher folk as a passive population subject to theocratic yoke pay scant attention to dynamism of their relationship with both religious and state authority over many centuries.

22 The *Padroado* was a form of benefice granted by the Holy See to Portugal and Spain for their services to the faith in the New World, granted in 1471 and extended to India in 1497. It continued in India till the 1950s, and the coastal villages of Thiruvananthapuram were under the *Padroado* diocese of Cochin till 1937 after which they were brought under the newly-erected diocese of Thiruvananthapuram. Mathew 2001: 141.

1970s was when some members of the latter group were denied water at a Church occasion. And one of our interviewees admitted to have undergone such a punishment for ‘sin’ in the late 1980s or early 1990s.

As for secular government, its presence seems to have been rather minimal at least in the memories of our oldest interviewees. The Census Village Survey of 1961 remarks that the fisher folk of Vizhinjam are of a “very simple nature” and “not bothered about the social or political change taking place around them.” (1961: 158) However, our interviewees at Adimalathura do not seem to conform to this developmentalist stereotype. They do recall that the State’s policy that aided the intensification and marketisation of fisheries was viewed with hostility and apprehension, and this was somehow intermixed with fears about ‘communists’ against who priests thundered from the pulpit regularly in the 1950s. Thus Gracy remembered, rueful now, that the fishing harbour, presently at Vizhinjam, would have been at Adimalathura, had they been less afraid of ‘development’ and ‘communists’ in equal measure in the 1950s. Apparently, the first Communist Ministry was keen on this, and a native of Adimalathura, a communist who no longer lived there, had taken the initiative to invite the Chief Minister to visit the hamlet. But people were scared and refused to grant assent, something that many of our interviewees regretted now – clearly, many of our interviewees have departed from the earlier generation and no longer distrust modernization and marketisation of fisheries. However, in any case, secular authorities appeared to have been completely hand-in-glove with the shore-seine-owning elite, especially strongman A. The field of modern politics, too, was dominated by the elites, and there, the Church and elites (in the 1950s and 1960s) seemed to favour the same party, the Indian National Congress. Strongman A represented Adimalathura as a member of the panchayat for decades together, remaining largely uncontested. People hardly participated in the modern field of politics or in Kerala’s public sphere – few of our literate interviewees remember a newspaper at home until

the 1980s, when they began to read and debate, encouraged by the PCO. This seems to have been the picture elsewhere on the coast too: the Census Village Survey of 1961 notes that the fisher folk do not listen to the radio though the panchayat has a radio house at Vizhinjam, nor are they interested in politics or the activities of the panchayat until election time (1961: 182). Thomas remembers how every election used to be rigged by the supporters of A so that victory for the Congress was assured. The rebellion against him by Thomas and his friends began when Thomas, a very young man in 1979, decided to contest the panchayat elections against A. He won with a thumping majority, and this, he points out, was because “we stubbornly prevented them from flooding the booth with false voters when there were just a few hours for the polling to end.”

Strongman A’s strategies of keeping local folk in thrall are much remembered, and with considerable anger. One of our senior male interviewees whose father was brought over by A to work in the shore-seine and occupy the marsh remembers him as a “true *pramaanī*” – someone who is able to both exercise and perform authority. Another interviewee confirmed this, recalling that the man never owned a car but made it a point to hire a taxi in public (which even today involves heavy expense) and go off to the police station or court. “He would reach these places in this car and get down there like a lord while those who opposed him had only their poverty to reveal. He also made it a point to visit the police station, the courts, and the government offices frequently, and was extremely well-connected in these places.” Recalling his presence in the Congress, a male interviewee, an activist of the 1980s, said that his dominance was unquestioned there. “This was during the 1950s and 60s when the organizational set-up of the Congress wasn’t very strong. Even the *Mandalam* Committee of the Congress, at the lowest level, was formed after those times. He had the money and the muscle-power; his men were the ‘leaders’ (*pradhaanikal*) who constituted the parish

committee²³ and they secured people's votes for the Congress. That was enough for the Congress to acknowledge him as leader." More importantly, he pointed out, he maintained very amicable relations to the other communities who lived on the mainland. "And he was a great host. Go to his house, and even the lowliest man would be fed well, given some ten rupees or so, and a drink as well." Others spoke of his openly-womanising nature and that he 'kept' women as a way of asserting his power over the community – the Church did not dare to even investigate. Interestingly, our senior-most women interviewees, all above 70, seemed rather reluctant to criticize him openly – in sharp contrast with those below fifty, who are vehement in their criticism. And Clement remembered the first meeting the PCO had organized at Adimalathura in 1979: "There, the leader Eugene Culas, of the PCO, asked us to name the most powerful person in Adimalathura. Not one of us opened our mouths. There was not even a whisper. That was the extent of fear."²⁴

Also, the connections that A maintained with his native Pulluvila seems to have been important in undergirding his power. In many ways, the subservience of Adimalathura to Pulluvilla – clearly the more prosperous village – seems to have inhibited place-making at Adimalathura. The record of Church and Parish histories of the Thiruvananthapuram diocese mentions that Adimalathura was one of the four segments that made up the Pulluvila parish and was the latter's major source of income, from church levies (directly collected by the Church in this case) and the sale of coconuts. However, people there found it very difficult to access spiritual services and a small makeshift chapel was built there in 1948 (close to the beach is the present village Church, which is dedicated to Our Lady of Fatima). However, efforts to separate the village from Pulluvila and set it up as a separate parish

23 For greater detail on this system of governance, see Sundar 2010: 177-78.

24 Interestingly, John Kurien, who was a PCO activist, points out that Culas was able to lead the struggle precisely because he was A's social equal – he was from Pulluvila and the son of highly respected school teachers. John Kurien, personal communication.

gained ground in 1969 but were resisted by the church authorities at Pulluvila since this meant serious loss of income (Pereira 2012: 77). However, in the face of persistent effort, the Adimalathura village was separated from Pulluvila in 1970 and made into a separate parish. In local memory, this year marks a turning point – people remember that priests who stood up to A and resisted his pressure from after 1970, not before. “Till then, A made sure that priests were all rubber-stamps. After we became a separate parish, we had a leader of all Adimalathura, the priest, who could now stand up for us. Earlier, any priest who dared to resist him was ‘punished’. We have known instances in which such priests were beaten publicly and chased away over the hill.” But they mentioned that things were hard to change because the lay leaders in the parish council, the *pradhaanikal*, were mostly A’s supporters and so it was not easy for the priests to resist him effectively. The separation also meant that Christian festivals were celebrated now not under the leadership and supervision of the Pulluvila church authorities and laity but independently from Adimalathura. Rajan remembers that after 1970, the procession bearing the sacred body of Christ on Good Friday which used to begin from Pulluvila, now began from the parish church at Adimalathura. Local people began to have a much greater role in organising it.

Post-parish-formation, the Church’s presence increased remarkably and Church charity activities also seem to have increased. However, simmering discontent, especially among young men who were accessing high school education, was apparently growing. Thomas recollected his own trajectory into communist politics in the 1970s:

At that time, we were all silent but seething witnesses of the depredations that A’s supporters were wreaking on this community, the ways in which they reduced the parish priest, who was our representative, into a passive rubber stamp through isolating and intimidating him. Heavy corruption happened, but few responded. The only member of the council who did not co-operate with them was one of the well-

educated men from here, someone who was a school teacher in the government school. He was a *pucca* communist. This chapel was being repaired or refurbished at that time, and the contractor submitted the bill and claimed it not once, but three times. Unable to tolerate this, he resigned, and all of us admired him for that. He used to give us books to read and had informal discussions with us all the time. I realized that communist ideals were quite close to the ideals that the Bible upheld and that's how my mind began to change ...

By the end of the 1970s, political change was imminent. By that time, other agencies had also entered Adimalathura. The Gandhi Smaraka Nidhi bought some land there in 1979, built a small hall and began to provide training in mat-making to young women, besides offering lectures and classes on a number of social issues. Tessy, who had attended these classes as a teenager remembered that the audience was usually around 40 young people. "It was a place on which many young women and young men who had been through school could meet and talk about things we never discussed here before," she remembered. It was also there that she chose her partner, and that was uncommon those days. PCO activists began to visit Adimalathura around the same time; the young men including Thomas decided to fight the panchayat elections against A in 1979. Memories abound of how the PCO activists broke down entrenched privilege and attacked the culture of fear. Thomas remembered how, true to their usual strategies, A had sent his young son to participate in the meeting that PCO had organised in a house at Adimalathura. Eugene Culas, the PCO activist, spoke in Malayalam, and quite openly about the terrible exploitation local folk were subject to in this village. Then A's son began to speak to Culas in English. "Eugene Culas told him to speak in Malayalam. We are here so that everyone can speak and understand – speak in a language that all of us can understand. He then knew that his game would not work here." For women, the visits of the women activists of the PCO opened up a whole

new world – in Greta’s words, *pauratvam*– citizenship. Her memories recollect the process of empowerment closely:

It was about 1980 I think when one of the PCO *chechis* [older sister] – Leenamamma, Mercy ... one of them ... came here and had a meeting with some us in the house of a friend. She asked us to get our friends so that we could meet regularly, once a month or so. Slowly, a group of us gathered to meet with these *chechis* regularly. Every meeting, we would read parts of the Bible together first, pray, and discuss these readings at length. Then the *chechi* would teach us about something related to the bigger world, it could be about politics or social issues, the condition of women in this country or other places ... and we would discuss that too. Then, last, we would talk about issues and problems in our own village and think together about how to deal with them. Slowly we gained the courage to join in the struggles they organised for fish vendor women, for safe transport, and went to the city to march and demand welfare from the government. And soon, women began to enjoy travel and became very confident about finding a job somewhere else too ...

This however was not easy. The women faced tremendous opposition from the henchmen of A, who would shower them with abuse and even threaten them with violence. In general, the 1980s is remembered to be a decade of tension and violence and women were not spared. “I became a communist then,” remembered Martha, “though my family is still Congress and they don’t know about this. I became a communist when those hooligans stomped into my house and threatened all of us at knife-point.” The young men who had stood up to A were severely assaulted – Thomas himself was threatened with a sword, tied to a coconut palm, and beaten black and blue. The women of their families also suffered (Martha remembered that these ruffians’ female relatives sometimes supported them, even participating in their violence

at times through helping them gather stones to pelt resisters). “We couldn’t come home alone – nor could the *chechis* ... These men would be waiting everywhere, dead drunk, showering the filthiest abuse ... Our anti-liquor activism sprang from that.” The exemplary courage shown by the women activists, Ansamma remembers, was the reason why she herself wanted to become a social activist. “The PCO was already helping us a lot, to build houses and re-thatch them and with tuitions for children. But it was the *chechis* who really made me want to become a social worker – I wanted to be like them. Our vehicle – the women fish vendors’ van – used to be stopped by A’s goons and then there would be violence. The *chechis* would quickly gather us – I was but a child – and keep us in the back to the van and they would take the brunt of the violence ...”

But at home too, opposition was not inconsiderable. Greta’s daughter remembered how her father, who was less educated than her mother, was not averse to her activism first but resented it when she questioned the alcoholism of the men and their neglect of domestic affairs. “Men began to oppose the PCO when we began to question their behaviour at home and engage in anti-liquor activism, and when the PCO began to question practices such as dowry.” It is clear that the PCO activism could not break domestic controls over women, and these were often sustained by precisely the older women activists themselves. Martha for example, admitted that she could not expose her daughters to PCO activism “because there would then be no one to mind the house and their brothers did not anyway like it.” Forty-two-year-old Merina who was a leading activist even while in her teens had to give up active public work and the language of feminism once she married a male activist in the early 1990s because he did not like her becoming “too public” and thereby exposing herself to danger.

All this seems to have not only undermined A’s dominance, it also helped the growth of support for the communist parties in the village, a phenomenon that was visible in this region in the 1980s (Dietrich and Nayak 1990: 130). Thomas pointed out that after his victory not a single

Congress candidate had been elected from Adimalathura until very recently. Rajan who was a full-time activist of the PCO at that time and a native of the mainland right above Adimalathura, remembered that this was time when A's influence in Pulluvila was waning – another Congress leader had arisen at Pulluvila and A's support-base shrank to just a few families in Adimalathura. Also, when the fish workers' struggle began in 1981, the government in power was of the LDF – and so the Congress offered wholehearted support. “Lorry-loads of people from Adimalathura participated.” Rajan remembers the strong leftist orientation of the PCO and the clergy that supported it, and feels that the ideological ground for the growth of the communist parties there was laid by the joint activities of the many radical activists in Christian and fish workers' organisations²⁵. They however, began to weaken towards the end of the 1980s, and left political parties like the CPM stepped into the gap. This account reappears in the memories of most of our male interviewees. Also, in the 1980s, welfare began to flow into Adimalathura. In the 1960s, remembers Rajan, “the government set up feeding centres at Adimalathura under the local Community Development Block. A Mahila Samajam (women's association) was set up at Adimalathura to oversee it, but it was controlled by A's wife – and so only the families of his cronies could hope to get any benefit.” But in the 1980s, an ICDS child care centre and anganwadi was set up and a local woman, Tessy, began to work there. The PCO and the sisters in the convent (opened in the 1970s) offered tuitions to local students cheap or free, and our younger interviewees feel that they crossed school successfully only because of the extra help. These were places in which activists urged the young to resist dictatorial control by A and others – Tobias who was a college student and Church activist in the 1980s was also a teacher in the convent tuition class and his students like Anamma

25 The organisations mentioned were the All-India Catholic University Federation, South Indian Federation of Fishermen Societies, Programme for Community Organization, the FIDES Centre, and of course, the Kerala Swantantra Matsya Tozhilali Federation, the independent fish workers' trade union, formed in 1980.

and Christuraj, who completed high school successfully, became ardent activists against A very soon. However, the massive changes in Church – which moved at the end of the 1980s to a system of democratic governance drawing hugely from visions of participatory democracy – was perhaps equally significant in speeding up the fall of strongmen like A on the coast. This appears to have been the case not just at Adimalathura but also in neighbouring Poovar (Ignatius 2008).

This process began in 1987 when the priests of the Thiruvananthapuram diocese gathered to discuss the golden jubilee of the diocese; this led to a meeting at Kottar where there was considerable rethinking about the diocesan administration, to bring it “into the mainstream of Vatican II” (*Report of the Commission for Social Action* 1990: 1). Later, in 1990, Bishop M. SoosaPakiam set up several Commissions to enquire about the state of the action programmes set in motion after the Kottar meeting. In the Bishop’s reporting of the findings of these Commissions, he articulated the ‘Emerging New Vision’, “which recommended that the Church systems be reoriented in such a way that the participation of even the lowest members of the parish was ensured”. The vision moved from the ideal of the “Church for the people” to that of the “Church of the people” (*Report of the Thiruvananthapuram Archdiocese Synod* [RTAS] 2012: 2). It set up a three-tier elected structure of governance which extended from the parish to forane to diocese, and which was based on the Basic Christian Community at the parish-level, which was to be of 30 families or so (*ibid.*)²⁶. Each parish was to have

26 These seem to have been attempted at different times in different dioceses. Sundar (2010) mentions their establishment much earlier in villages under the Kottar diocese, just south of Thiruvananthapuram, in the late 1970s. Sundar 2010: 183. However, it was ‘mainstreamed’ in Kottar at roughly the same time in Thiruvananthapuram. The similarity with the structure of panchayati raj institutions which were instituted in full-fledged form in Kerala during the mid 1990s is evident. This rests of the panchayat-level Neighborhood Group, comprising of some 20 families, and moves up from the panchayat to the Block and District levels. Indeed, the structure, aims, and instruments of the Thiruvananthapuram Archdiocese seems to increasingly rely on ideals of participatory democracy and planning. See the RTAS 2012.

committees with participation from these family units for parish governance, education, social, and youth ministry. Elections were to be the basis of the committees at each tier. Gradually, the parish finance committee and the disputes resolution committees were formed. In general, the thrust was to be towards action programmes that tackled people's problems, rooted in their local life-circumstances. The first of such actions was against liquor consumption, which attained considerable success (ibid. :3). The Commission for Social Action set up by the Bishop recommended a total overhaul of the social service and charity activities in the Thiruvananthapuram Archdiocese (*Report of the Commission for Social Action* 1990). It found that most of the recommendations of the Kottar meeting had been largely ignored and that the Trivandrum Social Service Society (TSSS)²⁷ was still stuck with a social service orientation which limited people's participation. The TSSS was functioning merely as a 'foreign fund broker', with the result that "... instead of becoming active participants in the programmes, the people remain only as passive receivers expecting more services to come." (ibid.: 23) Further, the TSSS' approach was flawed: "While TSSS projects were trying to save individual families through service-oriented projects the accessibility to and control over the material resources on which their livelihood depends like fish resources and agricultural resources have been eroding

27 The TSSS was founded by the Bishop of Thiruvananthapuram in 1960 as a formally registered body to extend the charity and social service activities of the Church. It was re-registered in 1985. It was conceived as a professional social science organization by Bishop Pereira who appointed an economist, a retired registrar of cooperatives, and foreign consultants to help design low-cost housing and smokeless ovens. The TSSS formed the Marianad Community Development Programme, in which Nalini Nayak, Eugene Culas, John Kurien, and others – all of who later went on to form the PCO – worked till 1977, until the formation of the PCO. John Kurien, personal communication.

faster than the rate at which families are ‘saved’ one by one.” (ibid.: 24). Thus the Commission recommended a total shift (ibid. : 25).²⁸

The impact of these changes are remembered with much enthusiasm by our younger interviewees who were high school or college students in the early 1990s, that these had spurred them to critical action against the control of A. Ansamma remembers the anti-liquor activism led by women which wiped out illicit liquor-making at Adimalathura. Christudas, Tobias, and Ansamma remembered how they joined the TSSS and worked together to wipe out the practice of *thengotti*, debts on coconut trees, which was a trap to many. TSSS began to offer cheaper and easier loans to indebted people to pay off such usurious loans and many began to free themselves from obligations to strongmen. Also the TSSS began a consumer store in the village to free people from dependence on the shops run by A’s henchmen which offered credit but charged much higher prices.

The attempts of A and his supporters to upset these highly successful moves sparked off further violence in the early 1990s and this generation of youth also began to be assaulted and intimidated. A larger proposal to liberate the shore-seine workers economically brought

28 It is indeed instructive to quote Sundar (2010) here who writes about the fluidity of religious identity and the shifting nature of the Catholic Church itself: “As an institution of civil society the Church represents the polyvalence of the sphere. On the one hand it carries out several of the functions of the state, both those that are directly administrative and those which have the function of generating hegemony for its values of development, democracy as institutionalised participation, and secularism. At the same time, struggles within the Church challenge these hegemonic understandings. Against development as modernisation, they pose development as social justice; against democracy as institutionalized participation, they encourage more radical and open-ended conceptions of democracy; against secularism as equal respect for all religious institutions and practices, they seek to infuse and transform the public sphere through a critical and political reading of Christ’s message ... members can espouse either poles of these binaries for radically different political and economic ends, and still claim to be acting in the name of the community.” Sundar 2010: 174-75.

the confrontation to a head: the priest was threatened and allegations were raised against him. The owners of shore-seine nets made common cause and demanded that the TSSS accounts be shown to them. This was possible only if the parish committee made a request, but they did not take this route. Young activists decided to stage a play – written by Tobias. A twenty-three-member cast rehearsed for a whole month and *Lucifer*, which mounted sharp criticism of A and his depredations, was staged under the aegis of the Kerala Catholic Youth Movement at the village church grounds in 1995. The play was a grand success; however, A and his followers were out for revenge. There was much violence and young activists like Christuraj and Tobias had to go into hiding when A used his political clout in the then-ruling UDF government to set the police on them. However, the people of the parish rose up against A and his family and the Church declared him out of bounds of the parish for twenty-five years. Our interviewees recount this dénouement as the triumph of their incessant efforts – A’s power, they feel, is finally broken and he has no followers now.

However, a sense of unease is very palpable as they speak of the present. These activists as well as veterans of the 1980s like Thomas feel that the communist parties do not attack predatory capital – such as the resorts. And even welfare distribution which is much smoother now, is turning ambiguous. “Much welfare is forthcoming now,” said Augustina “because we had communists in power in the panchayat and they gave us all pensions.” And not just the poor benefitted, apparently – Timothy said that he received a loan for the very first time in his life after a communist represented Adimalathura, which he promptly re-lent at usurious rates. The young left supporters are insistent that the communist parties were now turning their backs on larger issues and were also fostering nepotism. The Church too, they felt, has now turned back to religiosity and the practice of faith. There is much disillusionment about the Basic Christian Communities – many young activists told us how

their work had deteriorated into mere formalities²⁹, and more worryingly, they had become forums that may be manipulated by political parties. While they agree that power is now more decentralised in the community, the elections to the Church committees have not yet ensured that the best and most virtuous people are entrusted with running the affairs of the community, and in fact, political parties now seek control of these forums now. The sense of cynicism and disillusionment is summed up eloquently by one of senior interviewees: “The current motto is ‘Smoke and fire for the High Heavens; On Earth, *Appams* [a Malayalee breakfast delicacy] and meat curry for those in power!’”

The TSSS too they feel has become ‘feminized’ and essentially reduced to thrift-and-credit. Women activists from the 1980s are very vehement when they criticize this shift, looking back to PCO’s efforts at politicizing women. “There was a time when the PCO would make a hue and cry when even a small girl-child was insulted. We have fought against murder of women by their husbands on the coast, and actually got the man punished by the courts. But it is impossible to imagine the TSSS women doing anything like that. Not that it is bad – it is useful indeed. But it is only a bank. It does not help you learn and grow,” said Greta. And Merina, a young woman who was a PCO activist in her teens, agrees. A TSSS organiser now, she remarks about the difference between the PCO’s empowerment-activism and the TSSS’: “The PCO’s activism was really empowering in that we were directed to look out of our narrow little cells ... to the world outside and the possibilities it held. It connected us with other women struggling for similar causes and took us out – we travelled much. The TSSS work is equally enjoyable, but it is limited. It makes us look inside, inward, and we stay within bounds.” Rajan, an external observer, feels that TSSS provides the kind of activism that “the wives of Gulf-workers would find very comfortable. It is very

29 Sundar (2010) mentions a similar process of non-functioning in her work on villages in the Kottar diocese. See pp.188-89.

‘respectable’, low-key, does not disturb patriarchy too much. It doesn’t require you to scream and shout slogans on the streets.”

The Kerala government’s poverty alleviation programme based on women’s self-help groups engaged in micro-finance and micro-credit activities — popularly known as the Kudumbashree — is viewed as a vital life-line and all interviewees, male and female, admit that it has been beneficial especially its management of the NREGS. The sole exception was Timothy who feels that women receive all the attention from officials and this has made them arrogant and headstrong. This seems an interesting point to explore – it is quite likely that the Kudumbashree represents a further stage of democratization, of greater financial inclusion of the women who were certainly much disadvantaged, which has piqued people like Timothy who have perhaps received far greater attention from the secular authorities until recently. As for the women, Ansamma agrees that the Kudumbashree has given her much better connections with the secular authorities and better exposure to the world outside. However, bearing the twin responsibilities of TSSS and Kudumbashree besides her own family responsibilities gives her much less time for anything else. And it appears that the women tend to place Kudumbashree largely in the mould already cast in and through TSSS: as essentially a thrift-and-credit society which ensures food security in families. TSSS women, she observed, usually do well in the Kudumbashree.

Work and Home-life

The working life of fisher folk on the coast, our interviewees pointed out, is always a risky one, and incomes are always fluctuating, even for the better-off. Surely, the shore-seine system ensured a considerable profit for the owner but was never profitable for the workers, since their share would inevitably dwindle into meagre sums as their numbers were always high and catches were increasingly low in the course of the 20th century. And the workers received initial deposits

which tied them to this work. This gap was apparent in the life-stories of our interviewees: Timothy who owned a shore-seine since he was twenty-five retells a story of steady upward mobility in which he mentions the steady expansion of his dwelling and its amenities and payment of substantial dowries to marry off daughters. In sharp contrast is the family of Sahaya Matha whose husband was a worker, and whose children still struggle to fend off want. While Timothy did not recall food scarcity in his family (it owned shore-seines) as a child, Sahaya Matha, the wife of a shore-seine worker attached to A, remembered it with deep intensity. “I lived with hunger all my life, my mother was too poor to feed us well when I was a child. Then I got married and came here and some days he would have nothing at all. I would try to suppress hunger but I was young, and soon the silent tears would flow. He would see that and immediately, he would go out, borrow a little cash and buy us some rice for gruel.”³⁰ But the same experience was also recounted by interviewees who belonged to boat-owning families which were better-off than shore-seine workers, who could face huge losses too. Tessy, who hailed from such a family, remembered how her older brother who was a high school student in the 1960s, would come home and lie down pressing his stomach

30 Here our interviewees’ accounts differ considerably from the conclusions reached by Platteau and Abraham (1987) – they inevitably claimed that the moral economy that bound shore-seine owners and workers was quite weak and the relationship involved heavy extra-economic coercion. From their accounts it also appears that the transfers beyond narrow-self interest that were part of traditional social security systems, such as the distribution of a share of the fish catch to widows (Kurien 2000), does not seem to have been common here. Paul (nd: 22) points out that while feudal control over fishery was more characteristic of central and northern coasts in Kerala, the *karamadi* system on the Thiruvananthapuram coast (which our interviewees claim, was most prevalent in Adimalathura) was based on equally iniquitous, feudal relations of production. The circulation of assetless labourers from Adimalathura to other coastal areas was also not mentioned significantly by them. Rajan (2002: 67) who studied Vizhinjam South, a village very near Adimalathura, remarks that long-term circulation was minimal there because of year-round fishing opportunities. In fact, he points out that inward circulation was high there in some months – labour from Adimalathura probably did not have to venture very far in search of work opportunities.

hard on a mat to suppress the pangs of hunger. Other remembered the huge burden of debt that fell upon their homes when boats and nets were lost in stormy weather. Indeed, they mention the mid-day meal in school as a welcome relief. This is of course a more general story of those times and place – mentioned by the Census Village Survey of Vizhinjam (1961: 161). Food is remembered to be largely scarce, even fish, and mostly it was rice gruel and tapioca. People ate poor varieties of fish especially during the monsoon and that triggered diarrhoea in the village inevitably, recalls Rajan. Such insecurity is not a thing of the past – and now it affects even the shore-seine owners. Timothy mentioned that shore-seine ownership is no longer risk-free. In the first place, workers are hard to get and they demand a much higher sum as the initial ‘trust deposit’ – it can go up, according to him, to Rs 100,000. So the investment is high now. Secondly, nowadays boats are also employed in the shore-seine operation and so the risk of losing the boat also exists. He himself lost more than Rs 350,000 recently, when his boat broke in two while the net was being pulled ashore.

In such an economic scenario where all actors – the shore-seine owners, the workers, and the boat and drift-net owners — face insecurity, all are in search of additional funds to shore up their security. Thus the workers, especially the younger workers, are in search of opportunities abroad for secure incomes. There is a huge presence of recruiting agencies, many run by local men returning from abroad, especially to the Gulf but also to Israel and even distant regions like Brazil, which require them to invest very substantial sums for a work visa abroad. In local memory they seem to have sprung up faster since the late 1980s, after liberalization, and even die-hard activists like Tobias and Christuraj have tried their hand at this migration³¹. Thus this group is in dire need

31 However, migration of women to the Gulf in the early 1990s was still through friends and family-members – the labour recruitment agency seems to have gathered strength later.

of large sums of cash. For reasons mentioned above, the shore-seine owners too are in search of cash reserves. Since people in Adimalathura belong mostly to either of these groups, this logic works very palpably here.

One major consequence of such logic is the soaring dowry-rates that have reached stratospheric heights at the present³². Dowry rates are now as high as Rs 16 lakhs and 25 sovereigns of gold – as mentioned by 86-year-old Eustacia, who has been struggling to find an alliance for her granddaughter. She had been married at 20, in 1947, and “in those days a girl could be married with just 50 rupees – and with 200 or 400 rupees one could marry in grand style,” she remembered. She married again after her first husband died, some ten or twelve years later, but remembers that the dowry to the second man was a pittance too. Timothy paid six lakhs for his daughter’s marriage in 2007; others who married daughters around the period mention roughly the same sum. However, rates were certainly much lower between 1950s and 80s though better-off families seem to have paid rates higher than what seems the average. The spurt, definitely, is from the 1990s when the ‘labour supply agencies’ recruiting workers for the Gulf and other places began opening offices in coastal

32 Scholars have pointed out that motorization and its offshoots caused the investment in fishing equipment to rise inordinately – Paul (nd) cites Kurien and Wilman (1982) who mention that the cost of a medium craft equipped with standard fishing gear to be around Rs 20,000 – before the introduction of the ring seine nets. He points out that by 1998, the cost of craft and gear had shot up to nine lakh rupees by 1998, citing Chacko 1998. This is possibly one key reason for the rise of dowry rates all through the period – remembered by all our women interviewees. However, it appears that Adimalathura has a large preponderance of non-mechanized boats, close to 200 – less than 10 mechanized boats were mentioned. The information available from the Kerala Coastal Area Development Corporation confirms this roughly [<http://www.keralacoast.org/pdf/tvm/adimalathura.pdf>]

villages³³. Since then, much hard-earned money has been given away as dowry. Greta and Tessy who both migrated to the Gulf for work in the early 1990s to tide over desperate financial crises spent all their earnings on dowry payments – Greta paid more than twenty lakhs for her two younger daughters and is still paying off the debt. Naturally, these women, despite their commitment to women’s ‘citizenship’, do not hesitate to negotiate for large amounts for their sons when they get married. Tessy even found arguments to justify this, claiming that a woman with no dowry will not be respected in her husband’s family and pointing out that she even persuaded her partner who was against it, to receive some—however she did admit that the burden was heavy indeed and even cross-cousin marriages now involve close negotiation about dowry³⁴. This is exacerbated by the fact that on the coast, the dowry is usually divided into the couple’s share and the bridegroom’s parents’ share, and the parents may make use of their share as they deem fit. However, that the whole money does not go to them does work to the bride’s advantage at times and may give her greater voice in the conjugal relationship. Thus, though it may sound galling, Christuraj’s observation that almost all

33 Thus Mercy Alexander’s observation in her interview that the early-20th century migration to Ceylon and Singapore from the coast did not trigger such a rise in dowry makes sense – this migration within the colonial world did not cost so much. It did not require the kind of resources that transnational migration calls for.

34 The Census Village Survey of 1961 which studies the fisher community at Vizhinjam noted that cross-cousin marriage used to be common among the Latin Catholics until recent times but is vanishing “mainly due to the objections from the Church.” However it had not disappeared fully; three such marriages had taken place lately. Besides, matrilineal inheritance, which used to be common, was being replaced by patriliney by the mid-20 th century, according to this account (1961: 163)

households in the village are engaged in lending at considerably high interest rates is completely believable³⁵.

This can only be a race to the bottom for many households, especially where there are no male progeny even though men do stay on in their wives' homes in such instances. This has of course always been the case – incomes in homes with no men have been extremely poor, as noted by the Census Village Survey of 1961, and this is explained by the fact that women cannot go fishing in these communities. Some of our interviewees were from such families and they recounted their mothers' searing experience of trying to marry them off even in the mid-20th century decades. This situation they feel has only worsened over the years. Finding the dowry has always been a woman's responsibility, but the burdens are simply too much now³⁶. Yet the anxieties about marrying off daughters, they note, are heightened. Eustacia and Augustina noted that in their times, unmarried women were mostly confined to home and church, and they had plenty of work to do at home – minding the younger children, cooking, helping to mend the nets, drying fish, and so on. But young girls these days once they stop studies have little work. "In our times," said Gracy, "if our parents ordered us to go inside the house, we would do so at once. Now they linger on the doorway, and then go in, of course, with the cell phone in their hands so

35 Platteau and Abraham (1987) discuss at length the interest-free mutual lending, which they call 'reciprocal loans', with no stipulated time-period for repayment, as a traditional institution that made financial resources available to fishermen. Our interviewees made no mention of such loans which were given out whenever there was a bumper catch and fishermen earned well above the usual. It appears that mutual loans of the present command a rate of interest, often usurious rates – though the period of repayment may still be unspecified and the borrower is merely obliged to return the principal when the lender is in need. Our interviewees mentioned that most of the sums that parents received as their share of the son's dowry were leant out in this way.

36. The general picture seems to be a common one on the southern coast. The figures mentioned by our interviewees for dowry rates across four generations seem quite close to the figures cited by Lina Samuel (2007: 216) for the coastal villages of Kollam, immediately north of Thiruvananthapuram.

that they can call the boys sitting right inside the house.” The risk of raising dowry rates by failing in the performance of femininity is therefore quite high here and a hurdle for women, surely. As for senior women who surrender their last coin for daughters’ dowry, they face immense insecurity – as Augustina, who once owned two houses, both of which were given away as dowry for her daughters, mentioned. She lived with her younger daughter and had to put up with her son-in-law’s misbehaviour and callousness, and had nowhere else to go. There is also despair that the practice of the man moving into his wife’s family home was taking grotesquely oppressive forms: Greta pointed to a forty-five-year old woman who was supporting two of her son-in-laws at home. “She wasn’t able to pay up the dowry cash and so the men demand that she feed them. She has to take care of all their meals.” Nevertheless this has not reduced women into utter passivity as is clear, and moreover, better-off women seem to have asserted themselves more. Timothy remembers how his wife, who hailed from a well-off family, decided to undergo tubectomy without his permission after their third child – she has also refused financial support from him since then. This however seems to be an exception rather than the rule.

Aspirations of both women and men too have changed over the decades at Adimalathura. Maria mentioned how she was eager to start fish-vending as a young married woman. Sixty-five-year old Maria who started fish vending in the late 60s was initiated into it by her mother who used to come home and tell her about the outside world. It was very hard work, but one always started eagerly. Martha remembered how she started vending fish when times were hard – but her husband never bothered to care for their three children when she was away and so she had to take them along when she went to distant places to get fish, leaving them at acquaintances or friends’ homes. However Tessy, ten years her junior, completed high school and was keen to study further but was discouraged when her brother declared that he was willing to educate her as much as she wanted but would not let her find employment.

Ansamma, who is about twenty years younger than Tessy, recalls that though she could not study as much as she wanted – they were too poor – she was determined to pursue employment, however low-paid it was. Her decision to join the TSSS as a voluntary worker was also driven by that desire³⁷. She recounted the pressures that mothers who were fish vendors exerted on their daughters, members of her generation, to end their education and take up domestic duties. She noted that a number of her peers succumbed to it; only a few, like her and Merina, whose mothers did not vend fish, reached high school. But she notes that the present generation of young women does not bend at all – her own 22-year-old sister-in-law used to run all the way to school and stay there whenever her mother, a fish-vendor, ordered her to stay at home and mind the hearth. Marriage however was mentioned by all generations as inevitability and there was a sense of despair across generations of women at the apparently thriving dowry demands.

Young men too do not seek to go to the sea, quite unlike Timothy's or Clement's generation. Tobias' and Christuraj's generation aspired for education, but their resources were poor and very few of them made it to secure employment. However young men in the present, felt Tobias, do not want to go fishing but they are not also interested in upward mobility through education and employment. The lure of the resort is apparently high among young men and is a source of worry for both families and the Church. Boys get entangled in sexual affairs with guests, women and men, and new relations of dependence are formed. These young men are elevated into a high-consumerist lifestyle that is flashed even by their family members. Our interviewees shared with us stories of young women from the neighbouring areas who went to work in peeling sheds in other Indian States who returned with husbands from those places, but with less disapproval compared with the stories they told of

37 The increasing difficulties that women face as fish vendors under changing market conditions post-liberalization is discussed in Hapke 2001.

the resort workers' amorous affairs, which were recounted with apprehension and distaste³⁸. Tobias was concerned that the tuition classes offered by the Church have been stopped and that this has altered young people's aspirations – they now join seminaries so that they can obtain a smattering of English with which they can approach the guests in the resorts. Rumours about a certain young man receiving 80 lakh rupees from his white lover, and another receiving a large concrete house as a present were mentioned to us as evidence of the 'rot' within the community. In other words, while women's aspirations seem to be extending towards education, public life, an economic independence, young men tend to aspire for higher incomes and consumption not necessarily through these routes. There is no lack of food in Adimalathura compared with earlier times, agreed all our interviewees – but this is because women are willing to work more and more. Greta felt that the Kudumbashree and TSSS are of great help there – but, she asked, "what about women's desire to travel, to learn? Can it be fulfilled through just some bank-work, which is also big responsibility?"

The other source of anxiety is alcoholism, which is widely perceived to be on the rise among young men. This is not a recent problem —it is mentioned in even the Portuguese accounts from the 16th century (Mathew 2001: 52). However, the local memories, especially of senior women, identify this as a recent problem. Our oldest interviewee, 86-year-old Eustacia and other women above seventy, insisted that the violence and self-destruction associated with drinking was not present in their youth when people drank mostly toddy — "there used to be people who sold the palm or coconut toddy who'd sell them in open places ... I used to go and get it for my family as a child,"

38 Interestingly, there was also an account of a widow who was apparently betrayed by her lover when she became pregnant – her teenage son who was in higher secondary school then tried to commit suicide but was saved by relatives and friends who counselled him. She herself did penance and gave birth to the child, which seems to have been accepted by the community – at the time of fieldwork, marriage negotiations were on for her.

remembered Eustacia. “It used to be very good, everyone in the family, including women and children drank it.” The troubles started, they felt, with arrack replacing toddy as the main drink around the mid-20th century. Wife-beating was quite rampant, and most of the younger women remember at least heavy quarrels, if not beating, over this. Gracy said that her embrace of the PCO’s call to empower herself through public activism was a reaction to her husband’s drink addiction and neglect: “when he questioned me about my work, I’d simply say, women have to work and agitate because men don’t fulfil their responsibility of taking care of the family. If they took proper care of us, we would be at home, wouldn’t we, and not doing back-breaking work?”

Men and women take different views of the effects of arrack, though. The women, of all age groups, found it the source of all troubles. “Our anti-liquor activism started when hostile men would wait for us dead-drunk on the roads to abuse and assault us. The drink was their license – it justified their behaviour. Besides, there was much violence inside homes too which women hardly talked about,” said Anamma. However, men of all age groups felt that the arrack brewed (illicitly) at Adimalathura – and the place was famous for this brewing, encouraged by A and his men who sold it cheap – was of very good quality and devoid of chemicals. “It was very healthy,” claimed Timothy, “and very cheap too. It was even given to women after childbirth. And since the neighbours brewed it, they took care not to sell it to your younger sons. Once the brewing here stopped people started drinking expensive stuff in the bars, which is still poison, or arrack brewed elsewhere which is pure poison.” Christudas remembered that many of his younger friends got addicted to it in the early 1990s when their fathers sent them to buy some arrack from other places and the sellers there gave them free samples to taste. “At least the money used to stay within the community,” he felt. Raids by excise officer and police were frequent, but women, they claim, did not suffer much. “First of all, the families that brewed illegal arrack were all on A’s payroll and he was well-connected with the police and

excise officials. Their raids were token – we used to be scared of the police not because of the arrack raids but because they could arrest men playing cards on the beach with gambling charges! Secondly, the arrack brewed here was mostly sold to men right here, no outsiders used to come. And thirdly, they know we are a close-knit community with a reputation for violence and so even the police don't mess with us a lot, even today. So it didn't bring a lot of trouble." The wife-beating was a result of economic want – there would be little income and the man would want to get himself the cheap liquor. The violence broke out when the wife questioned this. And our male interviewees stressed the arrack as necessary for their work: Clement, who fished in his boat, said that going into deep waters means that the fisherman has to deal with the intense cold winds and a swig of strong arrack helped. "The work is of that sort and when we come back too we need it to relax – but then the arrack those days was so good. Drink it, and the spray just evaporated when it fell on your skin!"

However, the older women insist that arrack was no good – while they agree that the increasing difficulty in catching fish make the men crave for it. Eustacia insisted that her grandchildren were much worse-off than her when she was youthful because of the "anxieties they have to live with." They work twice as hard, she thinks – they have to clean, look after the children's schooling, match up to respectability, be good believers and church people besides making sure that food was not lacking (which, she claims, was her worst and only anxiety when she was young). "And on top of that, they have to suffer the beating and the kicking from their men. In our days men did not beat their wives like this. I married two times; both of my husbands were mild. I did not know many men who were violent with their wives."

Conclusion

The history of Adimalathura of the 20th century is surely one of a struggle for democratization and one which achieved a remarkable degree

of success. Democratization here occurred not just in the secular sphere but also in the domain of religious faith, with considerable change to governance towards the end of the century. The PCO of the 1970s was part of a strong effort by sections of the clergy and laity to carve out a truly oppositional civil domain within the Catholic Church through emphasis on precisely questions of power, and action from below; it involved empowering individuals through the shaping of a resistant self through learning and exposure to a wider world. But by the late 1990s, the Catholic Church was itself making a tremendous effort to reincarnate as a truly civil social organization guided by principles of participatory democracy and development, from, so to say, ‘above’. The activists who lived through the 1980s, especially the women, however are uneasy about what they perceive to be the too-early evacuation of the ‘civil-society-from-below’ project even as they acknowledge the significance of the Church’s project for ‘civil-society-from-above’. In the domain of formal politics, democratization began when a small group of educated youth began to challenge elite dominance in institutions of local government and move away from the community’s traditional political allegiances towards the communist parties. This was indeed connected to the ‘civil-society-from-below’ project unfolding within the Catholic community there. The flow of welfare into the community was not facilitated by patrons but by the strength of the larger struggle of fish workers all over Kerala in the 1980s. The communist parties have not questioned the Catholic Church nor have their supporters abandoned the latter.³⁹

As far as the women are concerned, the strong associations that many of them – especially women who were exposed to the activism of the 1980s — seem to hold between empowerment and the connectedness to a wider socio-political world than spread over the community and

39 Indeed, as Sundar notes, by the end of the 1980s, the fisher communities of the south western coast of India had learned that “it was possible to work both ‘in and against’ the state”. 2010: 300.

beyond is worth reflecting on. Thus unlike the women of the urban slum which is the other focus of this project, who perceive in the expanding state-centred civil society of local governance their chance to intervene in the local – which is how they perceive ‘empowerment’ – the women of Adimalathura are grateful for expanded local governance but do not see it as particularly empowering. At the urban slum, women, despite their free-spirited participation in politics, were highly marginalized within their own local space, and the coming of local governance seemed to offer them a chance to both rescue the colony from abjection as well as assert themselves as residents of the slum. At Adimalathura too, women were equally, if differently, marginalized in their local space. They however learned to both assert themselves in that very space (through for example the anti-liquor activism) and to become less dependent on it (Greta’s point about gaining confidence to seek work outside) through participation in oppositional civil society. From this experience, participation in local governance in the Church community and in the secular government appeared to be a retreat from both of these. On the one hand, it was clear that local development in the Church and secular government was drawing women into their local community in ways that seemed at best ambiguous. The women leaders of such initiatives have had to inevitably labour heavily but without necessarily being able to assert themselves.

In other words, participation in local governance and the formation of the state-centred civil society around it from ‘above’ may appear to be the ‘roll-out’ of empowerment for the women of the urban slum but for the women of Adimalathura, at least those who lived through the exciting years of the 1980s, it would represent a ‘roll-back’ of empowerment, to a certain extent at least. Clearly, the degree to which democratizing processes affected women in these areas of disadvantage affect the ways in which they perceive the empowering potential of participation in local governance. The democratizing processes at the slum seem to have largely left the women untouched

but those at Adimalathura did touch the women to a certain extent at least. Nevertheless, in both places, the institution of marriage remains central to women's lives and dowry rates are very high. No wave of democratization – via formal politics, political society, and civil society from below or above, centred on state or Church – seems to have been strong enough to make even a dent on it. And indeed it appears that the process of dowry escalation now threatens to undermine the advances that women here had made through the tumultuous decade of the 1980s.

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