

The Politics of Defining Poverty and Its Alleviation: Questioning state strategies through grassroots voices in Kerala

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Embedding Poor People's Voices in Local Governance
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India's national perspective on poverty

Poverty measurement:

- 'Statistical' poverty and the 'BPL' as category

Core programmes:

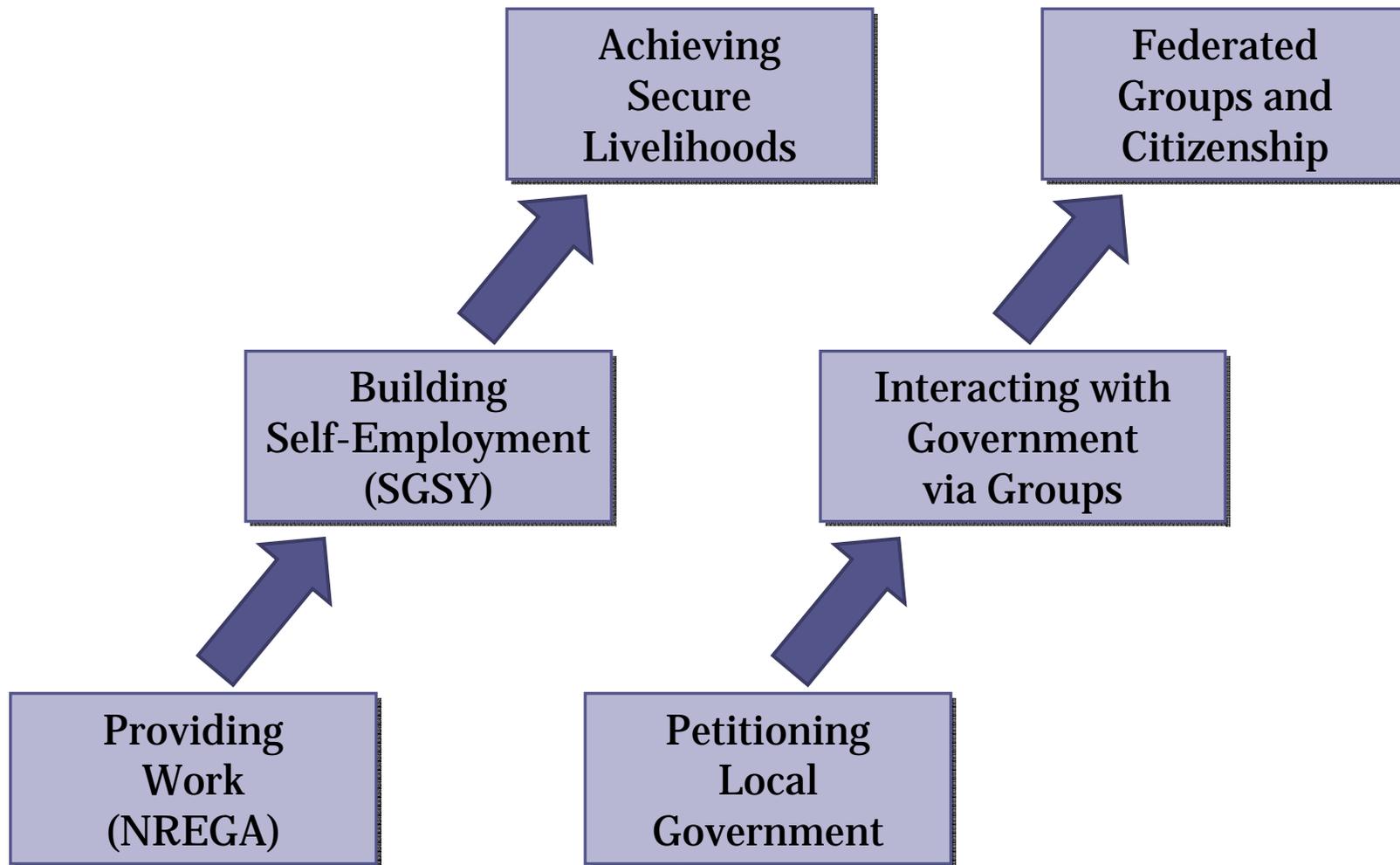
- NREGA/MGREGA
- SGSY

Underlying ideas:

- A 'double graduation' out of poverty...

'Economic Graduation'

'Empowerment'





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Underlying ideas:

- A 'double graduation' out of poverty
- An individualised view of poverty



Kerala - from social welfare to poverty management

Kerala's history

- From politicised struggles for welfare...
- ... to a discourse of poverty...
- ... in a context of decentralised governance.

Some consequences

- Measuring BPL – a desirable label
- Kudumbashree – a model for SGSY nationally?
- NREGA – right programme, wrong place?

Grassroots perspectives...

‘Snapshots’ of poverty in Wayanad and Palakkad

- The Diversity of Poverty

Changing battles over poverty:

- BPL measurement
- Kudumbashree
- NREGA



	Livelihood Pattern	Change in Livelihoods	Key Poverty Indicators	Social and Political Exclusion
The 'Traditional Poor': Scheduled Communities				
Paniya, ST (Wayanad)	Primarily agricultural labour	Declining local farm work – migration as response	Physical incapacity	Severe social and political marginalisation
Nayadi, SC (Palakkad)	Gathering of wild foods and medicinal plants, alms	None – but hyper-marginal and no upward mobility	Physical incapacity, hunger	Severe social and political marginalisation
Cheruma, SC (Palakkad)	Mixed: primarily labouring (off and on-farm)	Declining agricultural work – increased off-farm labour	Low educational achievement	Limited caste stigmatisation, becoming politically marginal
The 'New Poor': Other Groups				
Marginal Farmers (Wayanad)	Farming – commercial	Acute decline in profitability of agriculture	Often extreme debt, distress land sales	'Mainstream' socially, politically well networked
Marginal farmers (Palakkad)	Farming – with some diversification to other work	Long-term decline in profitability of agriculture	High debt, distress land sales	'Mainstream' socially, politically well networked
Artisan group (Palakkad)	Traditional crafts: carpentry, metal working	Long-term decline in profitability of caste occupations	Debt, forced change of livelihood	'Mainstream' socially, but politically marginal

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[The 2006 BPL list] was an utter failure. All scrutinised it. Many people were coming to include their names in the list. Not for buying rations: they were looking for free treatment at the MCH [government hospital] and grants from school. We felt kind and somehow included them. You know how we did that? Make alterations in that questionnaire. Then a 'new house' becomes a 'dilapidated house', healthy members become chronically ill, and the distance between the house and drinking water source stretches up to half a kilometre. The clean latrine we provided last week vanishes into thin air... Somehow, the guy gets enough marks to fall below that poverty line. We should not have entrusted the job to the ward members. If a ward member declines to budge, the voter will take revenge next time.

(Wayanad panchayat president, interview 23/04/09)

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Conclusions

- **The dominance of a national poverty agenda**
- **The homogenisation of ‘the poor’**
- **The localisation of poverty management**
- **The (unrecognised) importance of resilient forms of social and political exclusion**