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

Dr Glyn Williams, Dr Binitha V Thampi, Prof D Narayana, Dr Sailaja Nandigama, Dr Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya

Address for Correspondence:
Dr Glyn Williams
Department of Town & Regional Planning
University of Sheffield
Sheffield
S10 1TN

Email: glyn.williams@sheffield.ac.uk;
Tel: +44 114 222 6179

Abstract

Any attempt to define poverty, or to produce policy interventions for its alleviation, is necessarily both partial and political. The dominant mode of ‘seeing’ poverty currently adopted by the Indian state is that poverty pertains to households (or individuals), and can be captured by certain indicators whose presence (belonging to a Scheduled community) or absence (such as land ownership) is amenable to social verification. This is to some degree both innovative and progressive, in that it recognises the multi-dimensional nature of poverty, and potentially democratises the process of labelling households as ‘BPL’ (below poverty line). It is, however, problematic in that it fails to recognise the relational nature of poverty, and also bolsters a set of poverty alleviation strategies that take ‘capacity impaired households’ as naturalised objects for intervention (c.f. Tilly, 2007).

This paper uses evidence from two Districts in Kerala to question this current framing of poverty, and its alleviation through strategies important at the national level (the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) and within the State (Kudumbashree, Kerala's innovative anti-poverty mission, and its Ashraya programme for dealing with ‘destitute’ households). In doing so it draws on the perspectives of respondents traditionally seen as poor, such as landless labourers and Scheduled communities, and the ‘new’ poor, including farming households affected by the collapse of prices for Kerala's key cash crops. The argument put forward here is that these programmes are well-attuned to the local state's own capacities for intervention, and put in play a particular mode of poverty alleviation which is potentially open to popular scrutiny and participation. What they ignore, however, is a deeper politics of the production of poverty, in which the local state is seen as helpless in the face of ‘market forces’ to address underlying issues around the production of secure livelihoods.
1 Introduction
The choices governments make over defining and alleviating poverty are inherently political. Particularly in countries like India, where absolute deprivation is all too visible, it appears self-evident that poverty should be an issue for public policy. The decisions about how poverty should be defined, the practices through which it should be measured, and the aims and mechanisms of policies to tackle it are, however, anything but self-evident. Instead, they contribute in often haphazard and cross-cutting ways towards the framing of a ‘poverty problem’ which naturalises some state practices (such as providing employment in public work schemes), but place others (such as broader government regulation of labour markets) beyond the realms of what is possible, or appropriate, in its name. As a result, this paper takes its theoretical starting point from what Hickey and du Toit (2007) call Adverse Incorporation/Social Exclusion (AISE) approaches to poverty. Although emphases vary between different writers here, this is a family of approaches which explicitly highlights the political nature of poverty interventions, and involves a number of key common pointers for poverty analysis.

First, and most importantly, AISE approaches argue that poverty is not simply an individual attribute, but rather a relational condition ‘arising from the operation of existing social relations and the adverse terms of inclusion in socio-economic systems’ (Mosse, 2007: p.5). Ideas of poverty as an individual attribute are subtly but deeply written-in to state practices for the management of poverty, for example in the act of defining a poverty line, and categorising households as being above or below this. The problems with this individualisation of poverty are serious: it reinforces the idea of ‘the poor’ as a separate group in need of specific intervention to address pathologies/abnormalities that are specific to them as people who lack skills, capital, awareness, or other ‘normal’ qualities. This can turn the responsibility for poverty alleviation back on to poor households/individuals – they have to make good their own ‘abnormalities’ – but more generally by placing the poor as a class apart, it takes attention away from the roles of the non-poor in producing poverty (Tilly 2007).

Second, and directly related to this, AISE approaches recognise that poverty is not a residual condition, but actively (re)produced through these power relationships. This means that we should not expect to see the category of ‘the poor’ as something to be incrementally reduced through economic growth or direct intervention, even though this is a common theme both nationally in governments’ accounts of anti-poverty policies, and globally in the discourse of the World Bank (Thérien, 1999) or the framing of the MDGs. Instead, economic development can bring about adverse incorporation into market relationships (Mosse, 2007; Harriss-White, 2005), and this can in turn generate new forms of poverty. A critical analysis should therefore consider poverty’s dynamics, recognising routes into, as well as out of, poverty.

Finally, an understanding of poverty has to be contextualised, with proper attention paid to historical and geographical specificity of the power relationships producing it (Hickey and du Toit 2007). Here, AISE approaches share common concerns with an earlier generation of Marxist accounts of poverty in the Global South. They distinguish themselves by resisting the universalism inherent in some reductionist accounts of class dynamics, arguing instead that economic relations need to be placed in
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t heir social context, to understand where and how other bases of power (including gender and caste) may compound or counter-act them. In addition, this means paying attention to an under-developed theme in mainstream poverty research, ‘analysing the political economy of the locality and of the state’ (Harriss 2007: p.9). This includes an understanding of the multi-scale processes of governance, and in this paper we argue that there is a need for critical evaluation of how the state’s poverty alleviation strategies themselves effect the reproduction of poverty.

These ideas of the relational, dynamic and contextualised nature of poverty are of great practical importance in the analysis of poverty in contemporary Kerala. Kerala has been celebrated since the mid-1970s for its achievements in improving Human Development Indicators at a relatively low per capita income and remains, in official terms, one of the least poor states within the country (rural poverty stands at 13.4%, against a national average of 28.3%\(^1\)). It is also a state where poverty alleviation has historically been associated with the provision of a range of welfare measures won through the mobilisation of different labouring groups. Given these ‘pro-poor’ political dynamics, and the State’s enthusiastic embracing of decentralised government from the 1990s onwards, Kerala is an interesting place to study India’s current national strategies for the management of poverty.

This paper is structured around three guiding questions. First, how is Kerala’s approach to the management of poverty framed by national policy priorities and the state’s own structures of governance? National policies (section 2) offer a particular view of how rapid poverty reduction is to be achieved in India today, in which the poor take steps towards secure livelihoods and active citizenship. Kerala’s own interpretation of these policies (section 3) has to be understood through its history of class struggles, and the geography of India’s most ambitious example of decentralised local government. Second, how does Kerala’s particular framing of ‘the poverty problem’ shape the identification of poverty, and interventions for its alleviation on the ground? Third, what are the implications of these practices for different groups of ‘the poor’ within contemporary Kerala? These final two questions are addressed through detailed fieldwork in two of Kerala’s poorest Districts (Section 4) to investigate how households locally understood to be poor experience poverty, and interact with the state’s own techniques for its management. Our analysis is informed throughout by the elements of an AISE approach outlined above, and we begin by looking at three key elements of India’s national approach to the poverty problem. These are the measurement of the poor, and the rise of two strategies of poverty alleviation; delivering the ‘right to work’, and equipping people for self-employment.

2 India’s Changing National Perspective on Poverty

The Indian state’s approach to poverty has constantly evolved since Independence, with both definitions of ‘the poor’ and the forms of intervention into their lives shifting considerably over time. Anti-poverty programmes have proliferated, particularly since the 1970s, targeting groups of the poor according to particular visions of their disadvantage defined through occupation, location, gender, community and other factors (see Corbridge et al., 2005, Appendix 1). This variation continues, but within it, the

Government of India (2008) aims to provide an overall direction for poverty reduction through the idea of ‘inclusive growth’, described as a “simultaneous focus on a three-legged strategy—economic growth, income-poverty reduction through targeted programmes, and human capital formation” (Gol, 2008: p.84). This recognises that India’s wider economic growth has to be employment-generating, and that universal provision of key public services – particularly health and education – will be necessary for the development of poor people’s ‘human capital.’ Within its ‘third leg’ of directly targeted poverty reduction programmes, however, there is a particular focus on income generation and moving the poor towards ‘self-sustaining employment’ above the poverty line: it is here that practices of poverty measurement, and policies for providing wage work and self-employment become critical.

**Measuring Poverty**

There are two central ways in which poverty is measured by the state in rural India today. First, poverty at a population level is measured by the National Planning Commission using data from India’s National Sample Survey (NSS) which provides the basis for the spatial and historical analysis of poverty trends. Second, poverty is measured as an attribute of individual rural households – their status as BPL (below poverty line) or APL (above poverty line) – through a series of surveys (1992, 1997, 2002 and 2009) conducted under the guidance of the Ministry of Rural Development. These forms – which we call ‘statistical poverty’ and ‘categorical poverty’ as shorthand – do not necessarily match up, as there is not any necessary direct correspondence between households meeting the criteria for inclusion in the BPL list and their nominal position above or below an income/calorific poverty line.

There are conflicts over the definition of statistical poverty, both in terms of the particular methodologies used and the cut-off points adopted, but these are largely played out at a national level within a policy community closed to all except experts in the field. As is perhaps unsurprising given that it delivers a label – BPL or APL – which has a direct impact on the well-being of the households concerned, measurements of categorical poverty have been subject to open and public debate, and each survey round has been conducted under a new methodology. The 1992 and 1997 surveys aimed to categorise households primarily on the basis of income, but this was seen as susceptible to under-reporting and manipulation. The 2002 survey used thirteen variables to produce a compound index of poverty (with scores ranking from 0-52), with households been classified as ‘BPL’ if their score was lower than a particular cut-off point. The variables were intended to be clear and observable indicators of poverty, but in practice were a rather eclectic mix: some directly measured capabilities, but others measured poverty indirectly, if at all. As Drèze and Khera (2010, p.55) note, the 2002 survey was also

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2 For example, the poverty line adopted by the NPC is significantly tighter than the World Bank’s own measure which would place over 450 million Indians in poverty (Dutt and Ravallion, 2010), and the Government of India itself recognises that around half of India’s calorie-deficient population may be ‘non-poor’ according to the NPC’s definition (Government of India, 2009).

3 Whilst ‘literacy status of highest literate adult’ fits into the former category, it seems slightly strange that answers to this question should be of equal importance to ‘average availability of normal wear clothing’. Other measures, like ‘reason for migration from household’ seem to encapsulate a government vision of rural migration as being a problem in itself, rather than having any direct link back to income or capabilities.
cumbersome and expensive to administer, and although most individual criteria were clear, the index based around them was not open to public verification to the degree which had been hoped.

The recent NC Saxena Committee was established to provide an improved methodology for the 2009 census with ‘simple, transparent and objectively measurable indicators for identification of BPL’ (GoI 2009, p.2). Definitions of categorical poverty have thus changed again, but regardless of the ‘simplicity’ of Saxena’s proposed methodology⁴, its report has reconfirmed some underlying aspects of the way in which poverty is seen by the state. First, the importance of categorising households as APL or BPL is reiterated: the Saxena report argues that there should be a single list for all targeted poverty relief schemes, and that the Ministry of Rural Development is the right agency to control this list.⁵ Second, it underscores the fact that, from the Federal Government’s point of view at least, ‘categorical’ poverty remains subservient to ‘statistical’ poverty. The report calls for the BPL list to be expanded to 50% of all rural households nationally on the grounds that poverty is being systematically underestimated by the Planning Commission, but it confirms the principle that the BPL survey should continue to identify poor households up to limits informed by NSS-based poverty estimates. It thus suggests a maximum number of BPL households for each State based on these figures (Government of India, 2009: p.10), and a methodology to disaggregate this to a set of District, Block and even panchayat-level quotas. The BPL survey therefore ranks households by depth of ‘poverty’, but with the proviso that the cut-off line for inclusion within the final BPL list will continue to vary between jurisdictions according to the number of BPL households allotted to each.⁶ Households with identical BPL survey scores may thus find themselves on opposite sides of the poverty line solely due to their place of residence, a perverse outcome which helps to fuel contests between different levels of government (both National-State, and State-Local) over the fairness of this categorisation.

Providing Work

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act was notified on 7th September 2005, and marks the latest in a long series of centrally-sponsored programmes providing work for the rural poor. Earlier schemes – the JRY, EAS and SGRY – had grown out of initial experiments in providing slack-season work particularly to agricultural labourers, but where NREGA marks a significant break with the past is that it is a statute delivering the right to work, rather than a development programme that sporadically

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⁴ Saxena proposes a three-stage process in which there is first a set of automatically excluded households (those paying income tax, owning land over a certain threshold, etc.), followed by a list of automatically included households (those amongst a set of categories of deprivation based around caste, disability, and other measures), and finally a BPL questionnaire based around a ten-point scale to rank the remaining households.

⁵ The argument Saxena presents for MoRD directing a BPL census is entirely one of realpolitik: “Which Ministry in GOI has the best control over the district collectors, CEO Zilla Parishads, and Panchayats? The obvious answer is the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD), because it transfers huge funds to the DRDAs and … panchayats have always regarded MoRD as their mentor. Hence MoRD is the only Ministry in GOI that can make the field officials and panchayats take its guidelines seriously” (GoI 2009: p.4)

⁶ As noted above, the 2002 BPL Census scored all households between 0 (poorest) and 52 (richest) – but the cut-off points for inclusion in the list varied from State to State – ‘in most cases, the cut-off was between 16 and 25’ (Mehrotra and Mander, 2009: p.40).
provides this to ‘beneficiaries’. Once workers have put themselves forward for registration, they are issued with a job card, and then are eligible to seek employment through a written application for work. The state must respond to this demand within 15 days by providing appropriate work, and if it is unable to do so, the worker is entitled to unemployment benefit. The scheme is 90% funded by central government, but the cost of unemployment benefit is to be borne by the State government, giving all States a clear financial incentive to ensure that work is delivered.

The demand-led nature of the scheme means that local governments must establish a ‘shelf’ of projects which can be activated when required, and these are in turn intended to link with local-level planning processes so that the work projects contribute to the development long-term of the localities affected. The Act also stipulates that the works undertaken are subject to a social audit in *gram sabhas* (village open meetings), muster rolls of workers are open to public inspection, and that wages are paid to local banks or post offices, in an effort both to reduce corruption and encourage workers’ savings and access to formal financial institutions. Given the nature of the benefit it delivers – manual labour, paid the local official Agricultural Wage Rate – the programme is deemed to be self-targeting, and is therefore established as a universal right rather than being dependent upon BPL status. NREGA (now renamed the Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) was allocated over Rs 40,000 crore (US$ 8.5Bn) in the 2010-11 Union budget, and is undoubtedly “one of the main planks of rapid poverty reduction in the Eleventh Five Year Plan” (Government of India, 2008: p.86).

**Promoting Self-Employment**

Like NREGA/MGREGS, the Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY) builds on another long-standing strategy in India’s battle against poverty, the promotion of self-employment. Initiated in 1999, SGSY replaced the earlier Integrated Rural Development Programme (1980-1999) which had given small loans (supported with a subsidy element) to poor households to provide them with employment-generating assets. The innovation which SGSY proposes is that loans are distributed to Self-Help Groups (SHGs) of households. Group formation is to be voluntary, with at least 70% of their members being from BPL households, and group activities start with regular meetings and collection of savings from all group members which are placed in a group bank account. Those groups able to maintain meetings, savings, and proper financial records over a six-month period are rewarded with the receipt of a Rs.25,000 revolving credit fund. ‘Effective’ use of this fund (deemed to be increasing per capita loan amounts, and a shift from consumption to production loans) then allows access to a significant loan (often over Rs 200,000) for group-based income-earning activities. The scheme recognises that households just below the poverty line may be best able to face the challenges that self-employment presents: its detailed guidance mentions that those with some assets, such as land, or skills as artisans may be particular targets for group formation as a result (Government of India, 2004: p.1).

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7 Central government funds 75% of costs of materials and skilled/semi-skilled labour for any work project under NREGA, and 60% of unskilled labour costs, which should themselves comprise at least 60% of total project costs.

8 Indeed, there have been suggestions that the process of targeting should work in reverse: a household’s repeated participation in NREGA is concrete indicator of poverty, which should itself trigger its inclusion within the BPL list [Find Reference].
Group-based activity is supposed to deliver a range of benefits. In terms of financial stability, it is hoped that ‘group dynamics compensate for the basic weaknesses of the individual rural poor and present them as credit worthy and financially accountable units’ (Government of India 2008: 90). As such, SGSY draws directly (but without recognition) on the experiences of micro-finance organisations such as the Grameen Bank which see the creation of ‘social capital’ within the group as compensating for a lack of formal collateral, and the path from savings through revolving credit to income-generating ventures providing a series of ‘stepping stones’ where progress can be measured. Administratively, it allows for better integration of incoming-earning activities with local development plans, and targeted support for members through skill development and other means. Group formation and development is also intended to deliver a more general ‘social mobilisation’ which goes far beyond better control over the income-earning activities themselves (c.f. Sanyal, 2009). Through the skills and solidarity of group membership, the poor are to become better informed in their dealings with local government and ‘this process would ultimately lead to the strengthening and socio-economic empowerment of the rural poor as well as improv[ing] their collective bargaining power’ (Government of India, 2008:90).

There is an internal coherence to the Government of India’s understanding of poverty and its alleviation, even if this ignores some of the questions raised by an AISE approach. The Eleventh Five Year Plan recognises that poverty is not merely an income or calorific shortfall, but also involves a lack of capabilities, which has its roots in occupational position, and social and geographical disadvantage. Set against this, however, is the state’s practical need to delimit ‘the poor’ as a category for the targeting of its efforts and resources: here discussion of poverty’s multi-dimensional nature is replaced by a concern with defining a nominal poverty line and ‘lifting’ poor households above it. Although it is recognised that some rights should be universal, and some anti-poverty efforts (such as NREGA) will be self-targeting, it is clear that the BPL list remains key to governmental efforts in targeted poverty relief. Accordingly, a range of benefits – including old age pensions, house-building subsidies, and subsidised food under the Targeted Public Distribution System – are all dependent on BPL status (Mehrotra and Mander 2009, p.37), making this act of categorisation ever more important.

There is also a clear sense of what the poor lack – secure livelihoods – and the state’s efforts are clearly focused on delivering this. For the poorest, the first step is access to work, and so NREGA is proposed as a universal and underlying guarantee of this. Self-employment is seen as a higher goal, to be achieved through the SGYS. Here, state support and group solidarity can, over time, compensate for poor people’s existing lack of skills, or of financial and social capital. Overall economic growth and good service delivery in health and education are recognised as essential in supporting these efforts, as is state provision for those unable to work in the form of ‘safety nets’. Targeted anti-poverty measures do however maintain a strong, background sense of their effects in moving the poor towards a ‘graduation’ point at which ‘sustainable livelihoods’ are achieved. Running alongside this is a parallel, supra-economic narrative, in which the poor move towards ‘active citizenship’ (Robins et al. 2008) through an equivalent set of steps: approaching the state with demands for employment, participating in the planning and evaluation of NREGA schemes, receiving state training and mutual support through the
formation of SGSY groups, and ultimately being part of strong, federated institutions of the poor which will enable their voices and demands to be heard.

What both stories lack, however, is a clear sense of the barriers and reversals to be faced on these transitions ‘out’ of poverty, and as such the AISE approaches outlined above would highlight at least three important corrections. The first is that poor people’s problems are largely represented as a series of gaps – in skills, information or ‘capital’ (financial, human or social) – which can be addressed by the state. An AISE approach would instead see these gaps as actively produced by asymmetrical relationships – involving hoarding of information, practices of social exclusion, or forms of primitive accumulation – and that these asymmetries need to be challenged and restructured, rather than the more apolitical act of ‘filling in’ presented here. Second, there is a degree of silence over the dynamic nature of poverty. The Government’s narrative is about ‘lifting’ the poor above a poverty line in response to targets for poverty reduction (both its own and those of the MDGs), and its subtext is that poverty is residual condition of those people which its programmes have not yet (fully) reached. The sense that all livelihoods are open to change, and that new forms of poverty are constantly emerging, is absent here. Finally, there is a lack of reflection on the state’s own role: there is an acceptance that the act of labelling households as BPL/APL is contentious, but beyond this, there is little acknowledgment that the state’s strategies for managing poverty might themselves expose household to new risks or create inequality.

This national framing of India’s ‘poverty problem’ therefore has important absences, and there remain further questions about its application to Kerala. Accordingly, the next section looks at the degree to which this understanding of priorities and mechanisms for attacking poverty is appropriate to Kerala’s particular social and economic conditions, and how important it has been in shaping local strategies for managing poverty within the State.

3 Kerala: from social welfare to the neoliberal management of poverty? (c.2,300 words)

As noted by Heller (1995), Kerala’s history of land struggle had made the organised left (particularly the CPI(M) – the Communist Party of India (Marxist) a significant electoral force, and had set in train widespread working-class mobilisation for two sets of redistributive demands, those based in production (welfare programmes and other benefits fought for by particular occupational groups) and those based in consumption (access to government jobs, education and welfare services). This mobilisation went far beyond the narrow base of trades unions in many other parts of India to include both formal and informal employees, such as agricultural labourers, toddy-tappers, and construction and head-load workers. This ‘Kerala model’ of social development resulted in significant achievements in poverty reduction, particularly over the 1970s, but by the late 1980s, its limitations were already recognised by local commentators (Thomas Isaac and Tharakan, 1995). Overall economic growth was slowing down, triggering a wider shift from ‘class struggle to class compromise’, within which the CPI(M)

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5 In the chapter on rapid poverty reduction, the Eleventh FYP mentions globalisation and market liberalisation once, and exclusively in terms of the opportunities it presents for new SGSY schemes, rather than the risks it might pose for other rural livelihoods.
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itself aimed to curb the demands placed upon the state by organised labour, and was active instead in promoting growth (Heller, 1995: 659). Occupational-based mobilisation for welfare provision was also far from all-inclusive: Parayil (1996: 950) estimated that around 15% of Kerala’s population were ‘outliers’ to this model, and these included female domestic and agricultural workers, migrant workers and fishing communities.

Two consequences of this history are particularly important in the management of poverty in Kerala today. The first is that the economic and political deadlock of the late 1980s helped to propel the Left towards a programme of decentralised government, which was intended to reintegrate Kerala’s rural society around local development issues, overcoming partisan politics and encouraging economic dynamism (Thomas Isaac and Franke, 2002). The People’s Planning Campaign (1996-2000) was a key moment in this transformation, setting in train a devolution of fiscal control to the grama panchayats (village councils) that has made these stronger institutions in Kerala than elsewhere in India. As a result, panchayats have become key players in the implementation of national and state poverty alleviation programmes over the subsequent decade.

The second is that a discourse of ‘poverty’ – rather than employee rights, or class-based exploitation – has only relatively recently become important within Kerala’s politics (Vijayanand, interview 27/05/10). Kerala has been enthusiastic in taking up an anti-poverty agenda, as seen by the establishment of its State Poverty Eradication Mission, Kudumbashree, in 1998, and its innovations have won it praise and recognition nationally. It is doing so, however, in a context in which absolute poverty is low by all-India standards, and a breadth of groups (based on occupation, religious/community identity and party loyalty) have all been active and successful in making claims upon the state, even if this has been at the expense of the most marginalised (Tharakan, 2006). Disconnections between local perceptions of being ‘deserving’ and national definitions of who constitutes ‘the poor’ therefore make the recognition of poverty particularly contentious.

Recognising Poverty

The state continues to recognise ‘the poor’ in a range of ways, and both community and occupation have traditionally been important within Kerala. Kerala’s history of labour mobilisation has left it with a series of employment-related benefit schemes whereby registered workers pay small regular contributions to state-directed, subsidised funds. These provide both a small pension on retirement (around Rs.150/month for registered agricultural labourers), and also provide some support at other times of financial stress such as a daughter’s marriage, or incapacity of the worker. As elsewhere in India, the Scheduled Communities are the subjects of state support, which comes in various forms. At the individual level, these include support for education (fees exemptions, school books and uniforms), and occasional distribution of rice and other commodities at times of distress. At a collective level, the Tribal Sub Plan and the Special Component Plan (for Scheduled Castes) are special funds intended for the ‘uplift’ of these communities, and are administered through the panchayats. In addition Kudumbashree, Kerala’s anti-poverty mission, has established a programme for the relief of destitute households, Ashraya. This programme is 75% funded by the Mission, and 25% from the panchayats’ own
funds: it uses Kudumbashree’s structure of self-help groups identify destitute families at the ward level, and directly meets some of their immediate needs (clothing, food, etc.) on a case-by-case basis. Decisions are made by Kudumbashree leaders in conjunction with the panchayat board: this is intended to target the very poorest households, and provide them with assistance for a time-bound period (normally 2-3 years).

Increasingly, however, it is the state’s recognition of a household as ‘BPL’ which is of crucial importance in Kerala. A BPL card gives a household access to subsidised goods in government ration shops, but of greater significance than this are the additional forms of support that have been tied to BPL status since the 1990s. These include targeted all-India programmes, such as SGSY or subsidised housing provision, but also additional measures such as Kerala’s Comprehensive Health Insurance Programme, initiated in 2009, which provides BPL households with cover for medical bills up to Rs. 30000/- for a subsidised premium of Rs 30. This has had the effect of enhancing the demand for BPL status far beyond those households dependent on ration shops.

The criteria used in the definition of BPL status, and processes through which this is assessed, have been subject to intense public debate in Kerala for over a decade as a result. The BPL survey conducted in 1998 was conducted by Block level officials, and received much public criticism for excluding many needy households from the list. The Government of Kerala entrusted the task of correcting the list to local self-government institutions: Kudumbashree volunteers (see below) undertook re-survey work, but the grama panchayats had the final say over adding names to the list which ultimately expanded to include around 2/3 of the population in the majority of grama panchayats (Vijayanand, interview 27/05/2010). The 2002-3 survey, which was again opened to a round of corrections undertaken by Kudumbashree workers in 2006, faced similar political pressures. New Delhi has refused Kerala’s claims that this is an accurate reflection of poverty in the State, indicating that Kerala does not even take up all PDS food grains which are allocated according to current Planning Commission estimates of poverty.

In response, Government of Kerala announced in May 2009 that the local governments would be kept away from the most recent BPL survey, and entrusted the task with school teachers: data collection took place the same month, but the results were still not officially released over a year later. This move has been criticised as an attempt by the state to take away the autonomy and constitutional rights of local governments: for senior civil servants however, this was a necessary step to correct the political self-interests of panchayats in inflating their own BPL lists.

**Encouraging Self-Employment: Kudumbashree**

Within Kerala, the national SGSY programme has been subsumed within Kudumbashree, the State’s Poverty Eradication Mission. The mission as a whole has many different elements, but ideas of group-based savings, revolving credit and ultimately self-employment remain central to its vision of the pathway out of poverty. Kudumbashree has promoted the massive development of self-help groups across Kerala since its launch, with 177,000 groups (representing an estimated 3.8 million households) being registered within the programme in November 2006 (Oommen, 2008), and two organisational
features are of particular note. First, Kudumbashree groups are women-only, part of an explicit attempt to make women the focus of the state’s poverty alleviation efforts, on the basis of their existing vulnerability, and their assumed centrality to household wellbeing. Second, groups are actively tied into the activities of the local state. Individual neighbourhood groups are federated at the level of the electoral ward and the panchayat, thus not only giving women strong institutions within which to express their voice, but ensuring that these directly map on to local government boundaries. Responsibility for the development of panchayat anti-poverty plans has been entrusted to the federated groups, and their active role in panchayats’ public meetings and wider activities is intended to ensure that poor women have awareness of, and strong representation within, local government. As a result, the Government of India (2008) has recognised Kudumbashree as one of the models a revitalised SGSY could follow nationally.

If providing steps towards political empowerment remains an important element of Kudumbashree, its underlying conceptualisation of economic support appears to have narrowed over time. The immediate forerunners to Kudumbashree, the Alappuzha community-based nutrition programme (1991 onwards) and experiments with Community Development Societies in Malappuram District, emphasised the provision of public goods (public health, literacy, Integrated Child Development Services) at least as much as the individual and group assets raised through savings and micro-enterprise. As Kudumbashree has ‘gone to scale’, however, these other elements have dropped away, and ‘most neighbourhood groups focus only on thrift, credit and microfinance activities’ (Kadiyala, 2004: p.40). Where there are exceptions, this often involves groups being employed as (largely voluntary) labour in supporting activities of the local state, as in their correction and verification of BPL lists. This in turn shows a particular framing of women’s roles in poverty relief, as entrepreneurial, and yet at the same time public-spirited and volunteering. This has ‘somewhat removed the image of the woman performing unpaid family labour from the heart of the domestic ideal... [y]et this operation has been effected without much damage to prevailing gender norms’ (Devika and Thampi, 2007: 39). Kudumbashree thus offers one potential model whereby the pathways to livelihood security and political voice envisaged within India’s Eleventh Five Year plan could be linked. It appears to do far less, however, to challenge the individualised image of poverty on which micro-credit assistance is based, and indeed an AISE approach would alert us to the additional potential dangers its ‘feminisation’ of poverty relief efforts raises for poor women.

Providing Work: Kerala’s Rural Employment Guarantee Programme

Kerala’s performance in the first year of the NREGP (2006) was poor: data compiled from the NREGA website show that it was the State which produced least total employment per rural household (three days), and that it had the weakest fund utilisation rates of the major states (Drèze, J., and C. Oldiges, 2007; Mathur, 2007). Some of this failure can be attributed to difficulties of applying a national programme to Kerala’s field conditions. The work projects envisaged within NREGA’s national guidelines

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10 Panchayat-level federations of neighbourhood groups, the Community Development Societies, are registered under the Charitable Societies Act, an official status on a par with registered NGOs.
include activities such as road building, minor irrigation works and reforestation, all of which are arguably inappropriate in a State which has some of the best rural infrastructure in India. Other reasons were economic: the scheme’s wage rates were higher in Kerala than (Rs. 125/day) any other State in India, but still below local market rates for construction work, and overall the demand for unskilled labour is limited within the State.

Given that it would be politically impossible for any political party, particularly of the Left, to mobilise the population to participate in a scheme which offers below-market wages, there has been little effort to stress the demand-driven nature of the programme. Nevertheless, the State has shown some innovation in its implementation, giving responsibility for implementing public works schemes to the ward-level Kudumbashree groups. As a result, 66% of NREGA work went to women in Kerala in 2006 (the third highest proportion in India), strengthening the links between poverty relief and women’s work noted above. More negatively, Government of Kerala has devolved the financial responsibility for the payment of unemployment benefit under NREGA to the panchayats, meaning that the panchayats have a vested interest in silencing any potential demand for this benefit. Because potential claimants would have to lobby their own GP member/chair for benefits, this can be a more difficult ‘right’ to exercise, than if it were being exercised against a distant, more bureaucratic all-Kerala Department.

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For Kerala, national policies are combining with the State’s history of ‘pro-poor governance’ in ways which are dramatically changing the management of poverty. First, it appears that Kerala has broadly accepted the national framing of poverty policy, which represents a marked change in the definition of welfare claims within the State. Both all-India and Kerala-specific programmes have made BPL categorisation central to welfare provision, and Kudumbashree, which is itself focused on BPL women, has embraced and informed the SGSY model of poverty relief. Whereas previously in Kerala, groups would have mobilised to demand government support according to the specifics of their occupational needs, current poverty measurement practices aim to ‘fix’ a BPL population for a five-year period, and then provide this group with a set of standardised welfare benefits. Kudumbashree, has continued this move away from union-based demands for welfare through its powerful mix of self-help, entrepreneurialism and (women’s) familial duty. Kerala’s lacklustre performance in NREGA is not unexpected for a scheme more suited to the labour and infrastructure needs of northern India, but its routing through and reliance upon Kudumbashree workers further develops the ‘feminisation’ of Kerala’s current poverty alleviation efforts.

Second, there are important changes in the scale of state action. The BPL listing process highlights the conflicting interests of local, State and National government in delimiting the numerical extent of ‘the poor’. More broadly, however, the combination strong panchayat institutions and national and Kerala-specific relief programmes has localised the management of poverty. Kudumbashree and NREGA are focused on the demands and action of poor people themselves, coordinated through and supported by the panchayats: the panchayats (assisted by Kudumbashree groups) have also had an important role in defining the poor through verifying BPL surveys and the identification of Ashraya beneficiaries. This has
in turn dramatically changed the politics of claiming state support from union-based demands articulated collectively (and often confrontationally) in relation to the Government of Kerala, to far more diffuse strategies to influence the decisions of local government and its representatives.

An AISE perspective requires us to critically examine both sets of changes. As noted above, the national framing of poverty policy has important blind spots which ignore poverty’s relational and dynamic nature. Kerala’s adoption of these ideas has focused welfare efforts on a numerically expansive and homogenised category of ‘BPL’ households, raising questions about which elements of poverty get recognised and excluded. In addition, localising the management of poverty may facilitate direct engagement of the poor in practices that are more sensitive to grassroots conditions, but the effects of this rescaling – intended and otherwise – have to be investigated in practice. It is with these questions in mind that we turn to the concrete effects of these changes on different poor groups.

4 Measuring and Alleviating Poverty in Kerala: Grassroots Perspectives

4i Experiencing Poverty in Palakkad and Wayanad

The empirical work presented here is part of a wider study of the participatory governance practices in West Bengal and Kerala, based around extensive qualitative fieldwork conducted in 2008–9: in Kerala two case-study panchayats were selected, one in each of two of the State’s poorer Districts.\(^{11}\) The first case study area was in Palakkad District, the heart of Kerala’s rice-producing area and also one of the core power-bases of the CPI(M). Following Kerala’s land reforms of the late 1950s onwards, land ownership was transferred to former tenant farmers: although a small number of high-caste Nair and Brahmin landowners remain, they have been relatively marginal to the economic and political history of the panchayat from this time. In our panchayat, it has been the Ezhava community (officially designated as one of the OBCs – ‘Other Backward Castes’) that has primarily benefitted from this transfer and become small farmers as a result. Although connectivity to local towns and off-farm job opportunities in Palakkad and Thrissur (both within 35km) is good, the area is suffering from the long-term decline in the profitability of rice cultivation in Kerala as a whole, and remains far less economically dynamic than many other parts of Kerala.

The second panchayat was located in Wayanad, a hill District which has been socially and politically quite distinct from many other areas within Kerala. The area had traditionally been largely ‘Tribal’, and adivasi communities comprised 20.9% of the panchayat’s population according to 2001 census (and 17.7% of that of the District as a whole).\(^{12}\) Many of the other groups – Muslims, Hindus, and Christians –

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\(^{11}\) Research was funded under the ESRC/DFID Scheme for Research on International Poverty Reduction, award number RES-167-25-0268. The panchayat-based fieldwork included a range of methods, but the sources primarily drawn upon here are interviews with local resource persons (elected panchayat and Kudumbashree office holders, administrators, and political leaders) and with purposively sampled groups of households from communities facing different forms of marginalisation. Importantly for the purposes of this paper, whilst the former enabled an overview of the panchayat-level politics, the household interviewees were predominantly among the poorest groups within the panchayat.

\(^{12}\) The adivasi (aboriginal) peoples of India are a state-recognised category: as ‘Scheduled Tribes’, they have been targeted within various government programmes aiming at their ‘uplift’ or integration with ‘mainstream’ society.
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were more recent incomers to the District, in a settlement process which had involved widespread dispossession of *adivasi* groups from their existing access to land, particularly over the last 100 years. The principle reason for in-migration was cash-crop agriculture with coffee, tea, rubber and spice cultivation together forming the economic mainstay of the region, alongside some more recent growth in tourism. Large plantations and family-operated small holdings have been important in the growing of cash crops, but both forms of farming have suffered acute reversals in profitability following the simultaneous collapse of prices for these commodities over the last decade (Sunil, 2007).

Both Districts were included in the first round of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme on the grounds of their relative poverty, which is important when placing our evaluation of Kerala’s current poverty-alleviation measures in context. We are looking at tough areas to test Kudumbashree’s impact, as the lack of economic dynamism of both means that small enterprises are less likely to succeed relative to more prosperous Districts of the State, such as Ernakulam. For NREGP by contrast, we are taking the two Districts where the programme is longest-established, wages are lower and demand for unskilled labouring work is higher than other parts of the State. If NREGP is running into problems here, they are therefore likely to be worse elsewhere.

Fieldwork centred on several different groups of poor and marginalised people in both panchayats: here we present a sub-set of these to highlight the range of conditions affecting those locally recognised as ‘poor’. Three groups are drawn from the Scheduled communities, those which have been recognised as in need of support from the Indian state since Independence: the Paniyas (a Scheduled Tribe), and two Scheduled Caste communities, Nayadis and Cherumas. We term the other groups (marginal farmers in both panchayats, and an artisans in Palakkad) the ‘new poor’ as they are facing livelihood crises, but are not commonly-recognised ‘outliers’ to Kerala’s own social development successes (c.f. Kurien, 2000).

The ‘Traditional’ Poor

The Paniya community are numerically significant within the Wayanad panchayat – more than half of the Tribal population, and around 10% of that of the panchayat as a whole – but remain one of the lowest-status and most marginalised groups within it. Their educational levels are very low by Kerala’s standards [DATA], all were landless with very few other assets, and the primary occupation of men and women was agricultural labour. These objective measures of poverty have to be understood as part of a broader process of development of commercial agriculture within Wayanad’s hills in which the Paniyas, along with other *adivasi*, groups have been dispossessed of customary rights of access to land, and then re-integrated into the economy as labourers. The Paniya community has been particularly marginalised within this process: they had been agricultural slaves during pre-colonial and colonial rule, and since Independence their customary use of forest land was restricted further (Jose Kjosavik and Shanmugaratnam 2007) such that today their only formal land titles are to 10 cent homestead plots. From this position of structural insecurity and exclusion, the impact of the current agrarian crisis has been severe. With declining opportunities for agricultural labour within the panchayat some among them seasonally migrate to Kudaku and other areas. Some of this migration was connected to land leased-in by local landlords in other areas, but more generally Paniyas have a reputation as compliant labourers who have little recognition of their rights, and the harsh conditions of migrant work were
noted by our respondents (focus group discussion, 19/01/2009). As a Scheduled Tribe, they should benefit from spending under the panchayat’s Tribal Sub-Plan, but there was little evidence of this in the survey area: they remain the beneficiaries of some specific welfare benefits (free ration during lean season, educational support to their children, free health care provisions and some support for housing), but were not recognised as agricultural/plantation sector workers as they are not unionised.

The Nayadi (Scheduled Caste) community in Palakkad faces, if anything, even more severe forms of social marginalisation. Originally nomadic, they have been settled in different parts of the district including our panchayat in government ‘colonies’, but are otherwise landless and have very few other assets. They still practice elements of their traditional occupations, which include the gathering of medicinal plants and hunting for small animals such as frogs and tortoises for food. They also collect alms (rice, clothing and other commodities) from certain high-caste families to which they are attached, a form of charity which was traditionally associated with the performing of polluting duties for these families, and still carries this stigma today. Nayadis’ upward social mobility is very low in comparison with other SC communities: their educational levels are low, and they have limited economic opportunities through either their traditional livelihoods (income from plant collection is marginal at best) or participation in local wage labour, where they have taken on unskilled labouring jobs, often of the lowest status such as waste-picking. They are numerically small group in the panchayat, and although there have been attempts to link them with other Nayadis through a community organization (Nayadi Makkal Sabha), this was not active during our fieldwork. They do participate in Grama Sabhas and some are the beneficiaries of Ashraya programme of the Grama Panchayat.

The Scheduled Caste Cheruma community is, in comparison, much more part of ‘mainstream’ life within Palakkad. They have long been associated with the CPI(M) and the agrarian struggles of the District, but with the majority of this community being agricultural labourers rather than tenant farmers, few have benefitted directly from land reform in the way that the local Ezhava community have done. The stagnation in agriculture experienced across Palakkad over the last three decades has adversely affected the livelihoods of many labourers: in response to the decline in paddy farming and the mechanization of farming activities, most of the agricultural labourers engage in general wage labour available in the market. They remain registered as agricultural labourers, and as such are able to access the benefits of the Agricultural Workers Welfare Scheme and pensions offered by the state government.

The ‘New Poor’

Poverty is not, of course, coterminous with membership of India’s Scheduled communities, and there are many households in both of our panchayats facing severe financial crises despite being part of ‘mainstream’ society. Marginal farmers in Wayanad are socially mixed (Christian, Hindu and Muslim), but have all suffered a distinctly ‘modern’ disruption of their livelihoods from the recent collapse in the

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13 Colonies in Kerala are collections of government-assigned homestead plots that have been granted to landless SC and ST households. Sometimes they merely formalised rights to land already squatted and built on by these groups: at other times (including for the Nayadis in our panchayat) land titling has accompanied by state-built basic housing. In all cases, the colonies are associated with a degree of social stigma, as neighbourhoods to be avoided by the better off.
prices of the area’s key cash crops. This has had significant effects across the sector, the first being that availability of new agricultural loans has reduced as most of the District’s commercial and cooperative banks had to write off a major chunk of the loans already given to farmers. Following this credit squeeze, farm input in terms of fertilizer and labour time had substantially reduced, and farmers had shifted cropping patterns towards food crops (particularly low-labour crops such as tapioca). At the individual level, these coping strategies were in no way sufficient to assure financial solvency: because capital inputs to cash crops are high and financed through lending, small farmers were saddled with high indebtedness at the point at which prices collapsed. Furthermore, interviewees reported that state responses to the crisis had been inadequate. Many marginal farmers leased-in farmland, but government-supported loan write-offs were exclusively directed at the owners of land, and so largely benefitted large farmers. Although many of these households still show the outward signs of prosperity – paccu houses, ownership of consumer durables – this is masking both high levels of debt and crisis-induced land sales that have been necessary to repay the loans.

Marginal farmers in the rice-growing area of Palakkad have faced a more gradual, but still significant, decline in their livelihoods over the last few decades. Rice farming is in crisis across Kerala, despite efforts to revamp the sector through various measures such as waiving agricultural loans, input subsidies, production bonuses and enhanced procurement prices. Returns on paddy farming are simply too low, in part due to the state’s high agricultural wage rates, to maintain a family at a ‘respectable’ standard of living, especially as these norms have expanded to include ownership of a range of consumer durables, and significant investments in children’s education. As in Wayanad, there have been changes in cropping patterns as a result: many farmers have shifted from double cropping to mono cropping, aiming merely to produce enough rice for their own consumption whilst minimising labour input. Others have abandoned cultivation altogether, leasing their land out to poorer women undertaking farming as a Kudumbashree income generation programme. Those marginal farmers unable to diversify their livelihoods away from agriculture been the ones most severely affected, and significantly this includes a section of farmers from upper caste Nair community now locally described as being poor. Unlike many other groups, farmers have been able to organise collectively in response to the crisis, with all marginal farmers participating in padasekhara samithies (farmers committees) which have been constituted to pool resources for paddy production and place the sector’s needs before the local government. Nevertheless, those solely dependent on rice farming are susceptible to livelihood shocks (illness, marriage of a daughter) which are in turn associated with high levels of indebtedness.

Finally, the artisan group within Palakkad also shows how once-secure livelihoods can be eroded over time. The craftsmen are all lower caste (OBC) households, with their particular occupations of carpentry, and gold, brass, and general metalwork being restricted to caste membership. Although this linking of caste and occupation may have once permitted what Tilly terms ‘opportunity hoarding’, today it is locking these communities in to low profit employment: home-based production in the locality is not collectivized and they are individually selling the products to the local market and nearby semi-urban

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14 Double cropping relies on expensive hand-reaping for the wet season rice harvest, whereas the dry season crop can be mechanically harvested.
markets. Demand for is some traditional products is declining anyway, but competition from factory-based products and from similar craft products coming from cheaper-labourer areas of North India is making their products less competitive. Furthermore, because most relied on the labour of the whole household – men and women – in the pursuit of their crafts, women had no experience of working outside the household, and faced caste restrictions in doing so. Debt levels were lower (between INR 10,000 and 50,000 per household) than those reported by farmers, but this reflects their limited asset-base, and debt levels remain significant given the declining productivity of their work.

Some of the main differences between and within the groups of ‘new’ and ‘traditional’ poor in our panchayats are summarised in table 1, and these show the importance of a relational and historical account of poverty. There are clear differences in the poverty indicators present within the ‘traditional’ and ‘new’ poor. For the Scheduled Communities, absolute poverty is visible in the form of limited human development and capability failures: this is particularly pronounced for Nayadi and Paniya communities, but Cheruma households also have the incomplete education of children. Poverty among the ‘new’ poor is masked behind ‘decent’ living conditions, but debt and debt exposure are significant. Economic development is not simply moving groups out of poverty, but incorporating them – often adversely – within a capitalist economy. Relative change here was perhaps felt most severely by Wayanad’s farmers, who were suffering the most acute change in circumstances. It should also be noted that farmers’ own responses to the different agrarian crises of both areas through diversification and disinvestment were clearly compounding the existing difficulties of Cheruma and Paniya agricultural labourers.

[Table 1 about here]

Poverty is not, however, produced by class dynamics alone, but is compounded by forms of social and political marginalisation. Social stigmatisation particularly affected the Paniya and Nayadi communities, and in addition they and the artisanal groups were also relatively politically isolated in their panchayats. Palakkad’s Cherumas, by comparison, were at least recognised within all-Kerala concerns over the decline of rice farming, although as their livelihoods diversified into off-farm labour, they were becoming more marginal to the politics of the panchayat. The state is a potentially important actor within these patterns of recognition and marginalisation, but its effects on the ground were mixed. Most Cheruma households were unionised and registered as agricultural workers, but Wayanad’s Paniya community was not, despite their livelihoods being primarily based around paddy and plantation labour. Official recognition as part of the Scheduled Communities made little impact on people’s lives in either panchayat: funds allocated to the Tribal Sub Plan and Special Component Plan remained underused, and the emphasis of state support has been on improving provide reasonable personal/collective infrastructure in the form of drinking water and housing, with mixed results.  

15 Contractors often exploit the low awareness of Paniya and Nayadi households in undertaking government supported housing work, and schemes often require additional contributions from the households concerned. The result is that little of lasting improvement is built, and households can be placed into debt.
Finally, individual and group-level coping strategies are able to provide only partial relief at best from the wider economic changes which are driving insecurity of livelihoods for all groups. The state’s changing engagement with ‘the poor’ therefore remains of great potential key importance their well-being, and we examine this below through the local impacts of BPL measurement, Kudumbashree and the NREGA.

4ii The Politics of Poverty Identification
The increasingly important category of ‘BPL’ does not easily fit these diverse experiences of poverty, despite the public debates which have guided Kerala’s own definition of particular poverty indicators. For the ‘new’ poor in particular, housing quality and land ownership were seen as problematic elements of the BPL check-list, as these were masking the declining profitability of agriculture and the significant changes this was making to their livelihoods:

“‘We have some land and hence are in the APL list though we have severe difficulties. We look fine and rich from a distance’”

(Interview Marginal Farmer, Wayanad)

“We got no help at all from the panchayat since we are in the APL. We sold our land to repay the agriculture loan. Now if they do the survey, we will fall in BPL”

(Interview, Marginal Farmer, Wayanad)

As noted earlier, point-in-time surveys inevitably cannot capture the dynamics of poverty, but it is perhaps more surprising that not all households within the most deprived groups of each panchayat – Paniyas and Nayadis – were categorised as BPL.

That some of these hyper-marginalised households remain excluded from the BPL list is a reminder that classification is not just a bureaucratic process, but a political one in which the pressures on local ward to include ‘deserving’ households are unevenly applied. Members had the ability amend the list in finalising a round of list corrections in 2006, a process which not only allowed the rectification of factual errors in the 2003 survey, but also opened up room for the re-interpretation of the some of the list’s criteria. One question particular open to this was ‘families who do not have even a single earning member having permanent income’: many people working in informal and private sector reported that they did not have permanent jobs, even though their income levels and job security were often high.

The heavy emphasis given to families having widows also sometimes resulted in the questionable categorisation of otherwise clearly non-poor households as BPL. 16 As an interim measure to deal with

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16 As the president of our Wayanad panchayat candidly noted, sometimes the pressure on Ward Members to bend the rules resulted in wider abuses:

[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 ration. They are looking for free treatment at the MCH [government hospital] and grants from school. We feel kind and somehow include them. You know what we do for that? Make alterations in that questionnaire. Then a ‘new house’ becomes
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the people excluded from the BPL list yet locally deemed to be deserving of inclusion, the panchayat in both field sites had placed a note on these households’ (APL) ration cards confirming its own recognition of their poverty. This temporary measure did not give access to subsidised food grains, but importantly it did give access to free heath care, and was seen by the households concerned as an assurance that they would gain ‘BPL’ status in future.

It was evident that organised political interests were engaged in these struggles for recognition: a local leader of the KSKTU (the CPI(M)-affiliated agricultural labourers’ union) in Palakkad mentioned that in 2005 they had given a memorandum to the Panchayat to include all registered agricultural labourers’ families who were excluded from the list (focus group discussion, 15/01/2009). This was a decision which benefitted many Cheruma households, but also those better-off Ezhavas still registered as agricultural labourers whose livelihoods had long since diversified towards more lucrative work. By contrast members of the artisan community noted that their political isolation within the panchayat and support for the CPI (a minority party locally)17 meant that they did not have similar leverage within these struggles:

“Of course, the selection of beneficiaries under Ashraya programme is done the proper way. I too joined in the selection process. But in the case of BPL list, things are different. We did a thorough list preparation and when the final list came, most of those [our households] were out. I pointed this out in the committees... CPI people too should get their due. Still, some compromises are to be made”

(Interview Artisan Community, Palakkad)

One ward member recognised that these political pressures make fair treatment of all difficult, and even argued that the government should remove ward members from BPL identification processes altogether as a result. It is important to keep the impact of list adjustments in perspective: in neither panchayat was there the openly partisan re-writing of BPL lists present in our West Bengal field sites.18 Nevertheless, the continued exclusion of some of the poorest households in both panchayats despite

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17 The undivided community party split into CPI and CPI (M) in 1964, and both parties are now LDF members. In our particular panchayat, there is a local rift between the two parties – this atypical of the whole State
18 In both West Bengal fieldsites, there was a general expectation that voting for the losing party in panchayat elections could remove a poor family from the BPL list, or at least stop the realization of any benefits.
the massive expansion of the BPL list which had occurred before 2009 suggests that political isolation can result in mis-categorisations going uncorrected.

Comparisons with beneficiary selection within the Ashraya programme mentioned above are instructive here. Ashraya is a programme aimed at helping the destitute, the bottom 2% of every panchayat. Despite the fact that beneficiary identification was conducted wholly by local Kudumbashree members and verified through debate and discussion within ward-level open meetings of the panchayat, there was universal acceptance that those selected were deserving candidates, and no pressures were placed on those running the process to include additional people. ‘Destitution’ is, it seems, a label which only the poorest households are willing to carry, particularly as the Ashraya programme only offers recipients a time-bound programme of relief. ‘BPL’ by contrast is a desired status – and the contests over inclusion indicate any flexibility within its definition is used to the full.

4iii Kudumbashree in Practice

As noted above, Kudumbashree fits into a wider all-India model of ‘lifting’ BPL families out of poverty through their female members’ involvement in group-based savings and credit activities, and adds to this the federation of groups and their linking to activities of the local state. As such it potentially offered two different forms of assistance of direct relevance to poor households in our panchayats: improved financial security through group savings (with the aspiration of income-earning activities which would diversify existing livelihood opportunities), and the building up of forms of ‘social capital’ through group solidarity enhanced by encouragement to participate within the activities of the local state (and hence the possibility of challenging existing forms of social and political marginalisation). The problem with both is that there is something of a ‘talent effect’ at work here: those most able to take advantage of the opportunities Kudumbashree offered were those who were relatively well placed to begin with.

With regards to livelihood activities, this talent effect works at both panchayat and intra-community levels. For the whole of both panchayats, it was clear that Kudumbashree’s role in helping individual groups ‘graduate’ towards successful income-earning opportunities was limited. Under 10% of the Wayanad panchayat’s groups had started these activities, and they had a high reported failure rate in Palakkad. Micro-enterprise schemes attempted were generally low-profit activities: dairying, paper bag making, tailoring, rice marketing and lease-land rice farming, the latter being particularly important locally. These were based closely around participants’ existing skills and experience and the opportunities afforded within the local economy and as such, were far removed from Kudumbashree’s show-case successes of micro-tourism ventures and other high-end services undertaken in more economically dynamic parts of Kerala, such as Ernakulum. Support from members of the KSSP (Kerala People’s Science Movement) has been important in providing professional and technical support to some of these success stories, but the KSSP was not active in either of our panchayats. This highlights a wider difficulty of the self-help model on which Kudumbashree is based: micro-enterprise is less likely to succeed precisely within the ‘backward’ areas which need it most, unless it is combined with a wider challenge to regional inequalities, most of which are beyond the scope of individual panchayats or local Kudumbashree federations to address.
At the micro-level, our interviews indicated that absolute constraints on the money and time participants could commit to Kudumbashree were causing some groups to fail, or stopping the poorest households from joining them at all. For a number of our interviewees, the Rs 10/week subscriptions were impossible to meet on a regular basis, and households reliant on casual labouring work, especially those with ill or infirm female members, were clearly finding it impossible to combine their daily wage work with the expectations of group membership. These duties extended far beyond the economic activities of the groups themselves to embrace various forms of ‘public service’, engaging with and supporting the work of local government. Kudumbashree’s model perhaps has implicit ‘ideal type’ participants: women currently stopped from economic opportunity (and political engagement) by their work within the household, for whom group membership in itself provides a challenge to existing patterns of isolation. Our fieldwork certainly showed that Kudumbashree is challenging practices of female seclusion that continue to be part of ‘respectable’ behaviour for many rural households (see Williams et al. forthcoming). The principle difficulty women in the poorest households faced was not overcoming these norms of respectability, as these had already been broken by the economic need to work ‘outside’: it was in the time commitment involved in group membership, and combining it with the irregular spatial and temporal rhythms of low-skilled wage employment central to the livelihoods of all three of our ‘traditional poor’ groups.

With regard to Kudumbashree’s challenge to social and political marginalisation, it is perhaps unsurprising that those who are best placed to fulfil leadership roles within the programme were often those who already had the social capital, in Pierre Bourdieu’s sense of the term rather than Robert Putnam’s, to undertake these ‘proficiently’. Knowing how local government works, how to lobby for a group’s interests, or the seemingly more basic task of effective public speaking are dependent upon forms of tacit knowledge often not possessed by those at the edges of ‘mainstream’ society. As a result, Ezhava women – among the OBCs, but certainly not the poorest – were well placed to become Kudumbashree leaders in our Palakkad panchayat, drawing on both the financial support and political experience of their families, the latter built up through the community’s close involvement in leadership of the local CPI(M). For those women from more marginal backgrounds who did ‘break through’ to Kudumbashree leadership, alternative sources of this tacit knowledge – through prior experience in NGO-led self help groups, or independent political activism – were often important.

At a more basic level, the dynamics of group membership can sit uncomfortably with existing social divisions. The mundane and everyday aspects of group-based activity (meetings in peers’ houses, joint decisions over loan allocation) are built around an expectation of co-working among relative equals, but this was not necessarily a ‘natural’ position for lower caste women to find themselves in, or one in which their voices were equally respected. Participants thus found it difficult to ‘bracket off’ existing social positions from their group activity: the Kudumbashree mission has recognised this and made efforts to form groups with exclusive Scheduled Caste and Tribe membership in response. Equally, engagement with Kudumbashree created forms of identification of its own. In Palakkad, the close involvement of the CPI(M) in Kudumbashree’s day-to-day operations led the artisan castes to distance themselves from the
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programme. They argued that joining Kudumbashree was tantamount to pledging support to the party, and valued their communities’ political independence, and predominantly joined self-help groups run by private micro-finance groups instead.

As a result of these ‘talent effects’, Kudumbashree is a programme which effectively has high entry barriers for success, and this is reflected in the poor participation of the most marginalised communities of our panchayat. The Wayanad site’s Paniya community had a participation rate of only 25% of households, far below that of the area as a whole (55%). Figures for the Palakkad site’s small Nayadi community were even worse: there was no engagement with the scheme at all, despite the local CPI(M)’s efforts to engage the community with the panchayat’s activities more generally. Given the nature of caste-, community- and party-rivalry in Kerala, it is unlikely that these Paniya, Nayadi or artisans’ experiences are exceptional. Low-status groups beyond the pale of ‘mainstream’ society are likely to find insurmountable barriers to their participation, but also to be joined in their exclusion by other pockets of households finding themselves marginalised through their position within local political or communal divisions.

4iv Grassroots operation of NREGA

NREGA as a programme should, in theory, be able to overcome some of the difficulties of exclusion present within Kudumbashree’s structure, as it is providing a self-targeted benefit – access to manual labour – and allows individuals to claim this on demand. In other parts of India, this access to labour can and does have a wider effect on elements of the labour market of directly relevant to the poor, both by publicising ideas of the government minimum wage, and by providing alternative sources of work that can help to pushing up wage rates particularly during the agricultural slack season. As noted above, much of this ‘radical’ potential of the Act is lost within Kerala as NREGA, both because it is arguably more difficult to provide construction projects which meet the scheme’s conditions and because its wages fall below the market rate for various types of unskilled work. NREGA in Kerala is thus something of an anomaly nationally, but nonetheless it is still important to see how this scheme was being implemented, and what its effects were on the ground.

The difficulties of NREGA’s unattractiveness were being addressed by implementing it through the Kudumbashree groups: Kudumbashree women were both acting as project supervisors, and providing much of the NREGA workforce in both panchayats. Projects generally involved low-skilled manual work, but activities such as the cleaning up of public spaces within the locality, or the repair of village roads, were given a gloss of public service because of their links to and sanction by local government. NREGA was considered ‘respectable’ as a result, making it possible for some Kudumbashree women to take part in forms of work which would have broken strict social taboos if they had undertaken for employers other than the government. NREGA was therefore drawing some women in to the labour market – albeit at below market rates – and questioning existing norms about the work which women could do. It should be noted, however, that any challenges to gender-based exclusion this involved was not of much consequence to the poorest households: many Cheruma and Paniya women already undertook low-
status work for private employers, and for them questions of ‘respectability’ were less important than the compulsion to find wage-work at all.

The more worrying aspect of routing NREGA through Kudumbashree was that this tied a poverty-alleviation programme that should have had low entry barriers to the activities and demands of self-help group membership. It was clear that Kudumbashree membership had become an unofficial entry criterion for participation in NREGA work in both of our households: this did not take the form of an absolute barrier, but worked through more subtle means. The Nayadi community in Palakkad was a good example of this: their participation in NREGA was negligible (only one of 19 households had worked under the scheme), despite the fact that they were one of the few communities for whom NREGA employment was more remunerative than their existing work. Nayadi interviewees pointed to difficulties of their physical ill-health and their fear of NREGA as ‘hard labour’ as reasons for their non-participation, but this explanation did not tally with the relatively light work most NREGA projects involved. What the interviewees were less willing to express was that higher-caste Kudumbashree women appear to have resisted their participation: the aura of respectability around NREGA work may have been shattered if they found themselves working alongside members of a community still seen by many as untouchable.

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Poverty measurement and alleviation in both panchayats therefore plays out in an environment which is both more overtly political, and more divided by long-standing forms of social division and differences in patterns of livelihoods, than is acknowledged within national or State-level poverty policies. It is also at the level of grassroots implementation that some of the negative consequences of a broad, homogeneous categorisation of ‘BPL’, and the localisation of responsibility for poverty alleviation are felt. We therefore turn finally to the insights gained from uncovering these hidden aspects of the management of poverty in contemporary Kerala, and the wider potential value of an AISE approach in re-framing poverty debates.

4 Conclusions
This paper has argued that Kerala’s official definition and treatment of poverty has largely accepted the terms of national policy debate, and is seeking to put these policies to work within a context shaped by a more devolved system of local self-government institutions than any other State in India, and by Kerala’s particular history of past political mobilisation. This has not stifled significant innovation within this framing of the ‘poverty problem’, as has been seen through the creation of both Kudumbashree and the Ashraya programme, and in the ways in which national policy has been modified to make use of the State’s advantages in terms of its strong Kudumbashree networks and panchayat bodies. Nor does this policy consonance mean that there are no tensions between National and State government – Trivandrum continues to assert that New Delhi should recognise Kerala’s special circumstances in the National division of resources for poverty alleviation – but it does mark a significant shift away from the classical ‘Kerala Model’ of employment-based mobilisation for welfare demands.
This shift has involved the homogenisation of ‘the poor’ as a category, and the localisation of responsibility for alleviating poverty, both of which are understandable in the context of Kerala’s history. A single, identifiable BPL population is not only a bureaucratic convenience, it also helps to secure the move of welfare debates away from the dominant theme of competitive demands between different groups of workers: these struggles had arguably become economically damaging, and they certainly did not include significant numbers of Kerala’s poor. The localisation of a whole host of elements of poverty policy – panchayat control over BPL measurement, the setting up of strong Kudumbashree groups and their engagement in Ashraya identification, and the implementation of NREGA – similarly plays to Kerala’s strengths in panchayat governance, and demonstrates a commitment to the idea of devolution that is rarely seen.

As the study of grassroots conditions in our two panchayats has shown, however worthy the original intentions of this adaptation of national poverty policy has been, it has had unintended consequences. The focusing of so many welfare benefits on a single category of recipients understandably led to local pressures to stretch the category of ‘BPL’ beyond recognition. Lack of differentiation within this category also downplayed the needs of the poorest to an extent which could not be rectified through the limited scope of the ashraya programme, and it is clear that competition over list adjustment was favouring the politically well-connected. The forms of social exclusion present within Kudumbashree – and their replication within the implementation of NREGA, which could have been an independent arena for poverty relief focused more directly on the needs of unskilled labourers – amplify further the ‘capture’ of localised poverty management by the moderately poor at the expense of the poorest.

Looking at these outcomes, and the grassroots experience of poverty, through an AISE lens provides some ideas of how poverty debates could be re-framed. Significantly, if experiences of the poor groups in our panchayats were placed centre-stage, this would suggest a different order of priorities for poverty alleviation efforts. First, concerns over economic insecurity were common to all groups in our panchayat areas, but in ways not addressed by the Government of India’s proposed ‘graduation’ towards self-employment. Marginal farmers’ exposure to price shifts, the declining profitability of artisanal production and the low-income traps within which labouring households found themselves showed the diverse ways in which economic insecurity was reproduced within our study areas: if there was a common element here, it was that many of these problems were not easily amenable to solutions that could be provided through localised anti-poverty measures. Many had their roots in elements of the regional – or even global – economy, and require a rethinking of poverty alleviation which is similarly spatially extensive in its outlook.

Second, there needs to be more explicit recognition of the role resilient forms of social and political exclusion play in the reproduction of poverty. Caste-based prejudice, the dominance of politically-networked groups and the marginalisation of groups and patterns of livelihoods deemed to beyond ‘the mainstream’ all worked against current poverty interventions reaching those most in need. This represents difficulties which need to be faced head-on, rather than being wished away in expectations that decentralisation of poverty identification will result in socially democratic outcomes, or that group-based activities will build solidarity and equity of treatment across communities. The management of
poverty can, of course, choose to ignore these insights and continue to press for – and even innovate within – a policy agenda that does not question the homogenisation of the poor as a category, or the assumption that localised strategies are the proper way to deal with their needs. An AISE approach is, however, useful in pointing out the blind spots of such an agenda, and reminding us that it is one that involves inherently political choices.
The Politics of Defining Poverty…

Draft version for CPRC Conference

Table 1: The ‘Traditional’ and ‘New’ Poor in Wayanad and Palakkad

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Caste/ Community</th>
<th>Livelihood pattern</th>
<th>Change in livelihoods</th>
<th>Key Poverty Indicators</th>
<th>Social and Political Inclusion</th>
<th>State support and recognition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The ‘Traditional Poor’ – Scheduled Communities</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paniya (Wayanad)</td>
<td>Scheduled Tribe</td>
<td>Primarily agricultural labour</td>
<td>Declining local farm work – migration as response</td>
<td>Physical incapacity</td>
<td>Severe social and political marginalisation</td>
<td>As Scheduled Tribe: and (some) as agricultural labourers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nayadi (Palakkad)</td>
<td>Scheduled Caste</td>
<td>Gathering of wild foods and medicinal plants, alms</td>
<td>None – but hyper-marginal and no upward mobility</td>
<td>Physical incapacity, hunger</td>
<td>Severe social and political marginalisation</td>
<td>As Scheduled Caste only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheruma (Palakkad)</td>
<td>Scheduled Caste</td>
<td>Mixed: primarily labouring (off and on-farm)</td>
<td>Declining agricultural work – increased off-farm labour</td>
<td>Low educational achievement</td>
<td>Limited caste stigmatisation, becoming politically marginal</td>
<td>As Scheduled Caste and (most) as agricultural labourers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The ‘New Poor’ – Other Groups</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginal Farmers (Wayanad)</td>
<td>Varied: Includes Hindus, Christians, and Muslims</td>
<td>Farming – commercial</td>
<td>Acute decline in profitability of agriculture</td>
<td>Often extreme debt, distress land sales</td>
<td>‘Mainstream’ socially, politically well networked</td>
<td>As farmers in distress – but support limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginal farmers (Palakkad)</td>
<td>Varied: primarily Ezhavas (OBC), also Nairs (high caste)</td>
<td>Farming – with some diversification to other work</td>
<td>Long-term decline in profitability of agriculture</td>
<td>High debt, distress land sales</td>
<td>‘Mainstream’ socially, politically well networked</td>
<td>As farmers in distress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artisan group (Palakkad)</td>
<td>Mixed OBC – caste based on traditional occupation</td>
<td>Traditional crafts: carpentry, metal working</td>
<td>Long-term decline in profitability of caste occupations</td>
<td>Debt, ...?</td>
<td>‘Mainstream’ socially, but politically marginal</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Access to poverty relief policies – selected groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Caste/Community</th>
<th>Number of Households</th>
<th>Proportion BPL</th>
<th>Proportion in Self Help Groups</th>
<th>Proportion in NREGA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paniya (Wayanad)</td>
<td>Scheduled Tribe</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>94.1%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>45.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nayadi (Palakkad)</td>
<td>Scheduled Caste</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>68.4%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheruma (Palakkad)</td>
<td>Scheduled Caste</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>41.5%</td>
<td>68.3%</td>
<td>24.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artisan group (Palakkad)</td>
<td>Mixed OBC – caste based on traditional occupation</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>54.8%</td>
<td>64.5%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:

1. All figures are based around a questionnaire undertaken with 100% of households for three sampled wards in each panchayat: marginal farmers were not identifiable within this questionnaire, so have not been included.

2. Self Help Group participation includes both Kudumbashree and other SHGs run by NGOs: the high percentage of SHG participation among Artisanal community and Cherumas reflects this.

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