

To BCAS: Comment on Joseph Tharamangalam's essay

**BEYOND ROMANTICISM -- REMARKABLE POPULAR REORGANISING**

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Tharamangalam's essay includes many important points, and I agree with several of them. In fact, a major conclusion from my own research in the mid-80's was precisely that previous Kerala Left politics in favour of social and economic development had reached a dead end.<sup>i</sup> I must object, however, to his analysis of the new popular attempts since the late 80's at breaking new ground from below; and especially to his way of referring in his footnote 51 to my own (in co-operation with P.K. Michael Tharakan) results from studying those attempts.

Tharamangalam would have it that our "conclusion is that even this 'exciting new project' and 'fresh start' have been failures". This is not correct! Quite on the contrary, the result from my studies (for which possible weaknesses P.K. Michael Tharakan is not responsible)<sup>ii</sup> is that those initiatives proved very imaginative, relevant, and dynamic. So many activists were really trying out and demonstrating various ways in which people themselves, democratically, could do away with the new forms of patronage and promote the revitalisation of the civil society, the politics, the social and economic ethic, the productive initiatives, the local co-operation and much more that Tharamangalam himself also talks about -- talks about but has been unable to identify any other social and political force that has even come to think of a better democratic alternative. On the contrary, what I held as problematic - at least till the mid-90's - was the insufficient politics of those impressive initiatives. For lack of space, let me only summarise the common denominators.<sup>iii</sup>

Firstly, in the social setting of Kerala marked by the expansion of petty capitalist relations after the land reform and with incoming migrant money from the Gulf there did not seem to be widespread immediate interest among the many dispersed farmers in the movements' ideas about joint democratic control and management of land and other resources to improve production. Despite the campaigns, no powerful social movement (like the one for land reform) came forward.

Secondly, most non-party development alternatives that were suggested made little if any sense within the logic of the institutional and political-cum-economic interests of the public administration and the established leftist movements and parties – aside from when such

activities formed part of the Left front government's top-down development policies. The activists were politically isolated, therefore, and left without such necessary measures as a consistent democratic decentralisation.

Thirdly, the reformists themselves found it difficult to explicitly politicise their development actions (by which is not necessarily meant party-politicise). Or perhaps they were incapable of, or uninterested in, so doing. The reformists (besides first linking up with, and then suffering from the fall of, the leftist government in mid-1991) rather restricted themselves to creating preconditions for major social and political forces to move forward – which the latter did not do.

Fourthly, analytical reductionism and/or political considerations prevented the reformists from dealing with the origins of such problems, including the multiplicity of socio-economic interests and conflicts, plus their links with vested interests within the obstructive logic of established politics, conservative as well as leftist.

To sum up, there was basically a lack of convergence of fragmented issues, groups and actions because in the last instance the renewal oriented groups could not master the politics of promoting this, while the established parties and institutions abstained from promoting it.

Activists, however, have learnt their lesson. Most of the campaigns could not be sustained when the Left Front lost the elections in 1991.<sup>iv</sup> But after some time reformists managed to turn instead a decentralisation scheme imposed by New Delhi against the dubious ways in which the new Congress-led Kerala state government tried to undermine the same. Hence the reformists succeeded also in getting the opposition Left front politicians, who used to be hesitant while in office, to jump on the bandwagon and to commit themselves to more consistent decentralisation, if and when voted back in office.

Interestingly, this did neither cause the Left front to really use the 1995 Panchayat<sup>v</sup> elections to develop local demands, initiatives, and visions, nor to give decentralisation and local development top priority in the following 1996 Assembly elections. Such an orientation, quite obviously, called instead for alternative forces and pressure from below. But now (as compared to the previous 'campaign period' until 1991) this pressure was rapidly and skilfully

facilitated. Once the Left had won the elections and the late communist patriarch E.M.S Nambudiripad insisted in consistent decentralisation, scholarly as well as politically very able activists managed to get access to the state planning board, to use years of experiences from KSSP (People's Science Movement) projects to immediately launch a well prepared massive popular campaign for planning from below, and to simultaneously have leading politicians to proudly promise that no longer would only a few percent of the state development budget go to all panchayats that seriously involve themselves in the programme, but between 35 and 40%.

Hence there is new space for the previously contained popular efforts – but only thanks to elections, political pressure and to government intervention. The local governments have got some real powers (and many fresh politicians have been elected, particularly women). The centralised parties must produce results at the new development arenas, which give some elbowroom for reformists. Supported by reformist experts local governments may alter the centralised and compartmentalised administration, try to co-ordinate various measures on the district, block, and village levels, and most importantly facilitate the coming together of the myriad of dispersed voluntary associations (and the fragmented social capital that they have come to nourish) for joint societal efforts. The earlier kind of popular movement campaigns may be more institutionalised and legitimate (including from a democratic point of view) when carried out in mutually respectful co-operation with elected local governments. Anglo-Saxon scholars might talk of associative democracy. In Scandinavia we may recall 'the good old' co-operation between popular movements and governments at various levels that currently so fashionable civil society and social capital theorists tend to forget about.

At any rate, many obstacles are still ahead in Kerala. Since late 1996 I am particularly worried that politicians and bureaucrats with factional and personal vested interests may cause the impressive planning from below to not be followed up rapidly and efficiently enough by new laws and regulations and an equally impressive campaign to institutionalise both the fruitful efforts and new or reformed political and administrative rules and organs – to thus facilitate local co-operation and government, so that the panchayats and the many voluntary organisations are able to really implement all the local projects now planned and approved of.

Yet, a politically further developed society of citizens stands a good chance of taking crucial steps ahead.<sup>vi</sup> Tharamangalam is right in saying we should not romanticise Kerala but wrong when not pointing to the persistent need and efforts at popular reorganisation.

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<sup>i</sup> Törnquist, Olle *What's Wrong with Marxism: Vol. 1: on Capitalists and State in India and Indonesia; Vol. 2: on Peasants and Workers in India and Indonesia*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1989 and 1991 respectively.

<sup>ii</sup> Due to a printing error when the articles were published in Economic and Political Weekly it was not clearly indicated that they were written with P.K. Michael Tharakan, whose positive contribution cannot be overestimated but who did not share the final responsibility for the approach, data collection, analysis and formulations. See the initial footnote with the articles!

<sup>iii</sup> For a further discussion in comparative perspective, see my "Making Democratisation Work: From Civil Society and Social Capital to Political Inclusion and Politicisation. Theoretical Reflections on Concrete Cases in Indonesia, Kerala, and the Philippines," *Democratisation in the Third World*, in L. Rudebeck, and O. Törnquist, with V. Rojas (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1998); an updated version will also appear in my *Politics and Democratisation: A Critical Introduction* (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage Publications, forthcoming early 1999).

<sup>iv</sup> The loss was mainly due to special sympathies with just assassinated Rajiv Gandhi's Congress party.

<sup>v</sup> Local authorities, in addition to the municipalities, on district, block and village level.

<sup>vi</sup> See my *Marginal Notes on Impressive Attempts*, International Conference on Kerala, New Delhi, 9-11 December 1996 and the interview with me in *Indian Express* (Kerala edition), January 11, 1997.