

**Working Paper
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**LAND, POLITICS, WORK AND HOME-LIFE
IN A CITY SLUM: RECONSTRUCTING
HISTORY FROM ORAL NARRATIVES**

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**LAND, POLITICS, WORK AND HOME-LIFE IN A CITY SLUM:
RECONSTRUCTING HISTORY FROM ORAL NARRATIVES**

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

ABSTRACT

This paper is a limited attempt at sketching the history of a prominent slum in the city of Thiruvananthapuram, using mainly the memories of residents collected as oral narratives. It stops in the mid-90s, when decentralization and women's self-help-groups began a new phase of social change. It focuses mainly on changing vicissitudes of land, politics, work and domestic life in this urban slum to reflect on the specific form of marginalization that the residents of this pocket of extreme disadvantage have suffered since its earliest days, in the mid-20th century, which I refer to as 'marginalization by abjection'. It also examines the usefulness of widely-used concepts such as 'political society' to make sense of politics there, and concludes by cautioning against the perfunctory use of concepts such as political society and clientalism.

Key words: Urban development, JNNURM, political society, abjection, local history

Introduction

Oral history is, by now, recognized to be a complex practice. No longer identified with a mere gap-filling exercise where no other reliable sources exist, or the collection of ‘authentic experience’ and the pure resurrection of subaltern voices (Portelli 1981), it is now widely recognized, as Pierre Nora would put it, to be “the deliberate and calculated compilation of a vanished memory. It adds a secondary and prosthetic memory to the actual experience, which is altered by the very practice of being recorded” (Nora 1996: 10). In other words, historians remind us that no memory can be purely primary (LaCapra 1988: 20-21). Besides, it is now widely accepted that oral histories are co-constructed between the narrator and the listener – that it involves the memories of both, which need to be examined (Dowd-Hall 1998: 441).

Acknowledging these complexities, the effort in this paper is to use techniques of oral history-generation to make sense of the vicissitudes of three vital aspects of social life in an urban slum in Kerala—land, politics, work and home-life— without making any claims to produce a full-fledged and comprehensive oral history of the place. I begin with this caveat because this account does not engage fully with the range of issues that have emerged in the debate in oral history on the nature of oral evidence, the question of interpreting oral evidence, the question of subjectivity, and the relationship between the historian and

the interviewee. This account, however, has very minimal claims and purpose¹: it seeks to construct, through the memories of selected local residents, a coherent narrative of the past which would help us contextualize the present in this site. Other historical sources being rather meager, it is important to carefully access local memories, and in hopefully a complex way – for example, by selecting a set of sufficiently diverse interviewees whose narratives would not only complement, but also deviate from each other, so that a range of positions within the same location are covered, deploying careful textual analysis, and by cross-checking with the available historical and other sources. While the several important questions mentioned above cannot be simply ignored, they are addressed only minimally.

This account focuses rather narrowly on concerns about the history of land, politics, gender, home-life and livelihoods in a present-day squatter settlement in Thiruvananthapuram, one of the oldest slums in the capital city of Kerala. It is located close to Thiruvananthapuram's main market and the symbols of the erstwhile Hindu kingdom of Travancore, a fort, a major temple and the brahmin settlements inside the fort. An old canal runs through marshy land, which was once unpopulated. It is now surrounded by busy roads on all three sides, and the land to its south, which was lush paddy land once, is now completely urban and built-up. It has been the focus of a number of development and welfare initiatives since the mid-50s, culminating in an important housing programme implemented by the Thiruvananthapuram City

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

Corporation as part of the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM)².

The above-mentioned concerns emerge not from the subjects of this research, the residents of Kulamnagar³ Colony who were interviewed, but they surely shared them: one of the criteria for the choice of interviewees was the degree of enthusiasm they displayed in speaking with us about the past and present of these aspects of social life in their neighborhood. It would be correct to say that I did go there with analyses and concepts shaped by my theoretical understandings and familiarity with the recent history of this squatter colony. For example, it appeared to me that the illegality and the constant negotiations very apparent in present-day Kulamnagar made the Chatterjean reinterpretation of the idea of ‘political society’ an apt description of the squatter-settlement. Surely, my assumption about what I sought to uncover was pegged on this concept: I was seeking to understand the historical shaping of ‘political society’ at Kulamnagar. By ‘political society’ I refer to Partha Chatterjee’s articulation of this idea, which refers to the very large domain that lies outside modern politics, defined by rights and citizenship, where the poor made claims upon the state often through organizations that engage in strategic and contextual mediations, and often advance moral claims, which would be, in strict terms, actually illegal. In Kerala however, ‘political society’ did have a somewhat distinct history, one which was closely related to the history of the left parties. The communist movement in Kerala seems to have drawn members of ‘political society’

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2. At the moment, the spatial features of the Colony are being radically altered with the third phase of this new housing programme. Two Phases of the current housing programme have been completed and a third phase is starting now.
 3. All names in this paper, including the name of the slum, are pseudonyms except for some well-known public figures who are no more – this is necessary to protect the privacy of my interviewees.

into its fold from the mid-20th century decades onwards at least till the mid-1990s; being largely composed of entirely assetless workers, welfare demands advanced by ‘political society’ were shaped and championed by the communist parties in the post-independence period.

But as may be evident later on, what emerged from the interviews was not a history of ‘pure’ political society. The picture, it appears, is far more complex, more in line with what some sympathetic critics of Chatterjee have suggested, that we view civil and political societies as not watertight domains but as distinct political styles (Menon 2010) – and in the context of the history of politics and welfare in mid-20th century Kerala, it may even be not the case that one style was more available to a specific group than the other. In other words, the narratives produced by our interviewees made me change my objective – instead of seeking to uncover the past of Chatterjean ‘political society’ as if it were a solid presence there since the mid-20th century, I moved towards tracing the vicissitudes of political and civil societies in this settlement from the mid-20th century to the 1990s, when political decentralization and democratically-elected urban governance made their appearance in Kerala. In other words, the aim of this paper is not to ‘fit’ Kulamnagar into Chatterjean political society or use the concept as a Procrustean bed but to reflect on it critically from the field work. Also, this paper covers the period from roughly the 1940s to the mid-1990s; the interesting developments during and after the mid-1990s are the major concerns and questions raised by the larger research project. This is an account to deepen those questions through historical analysis.

This paper is divided into three sections, each of which is focused on the three aspects mentioned, followed by concluding reflections. They are based largely on a purposively selected sample, of nineteen in-depth open-ended interviews, mostly with women (only three are men) and a few other conversations. The latter happened when I got into casual conversations with some residents which then turned more formal.

Most of them are life-time residents of Kulamnagar, with forty or more years of residence. The exceptions, however, have had very intimate ties with the place – one of them is a prominent political leader widely regarded by Kulamnagar residents as their greatest support since the 1980s. Most of them are above the age of 50, and nearly one-third are from the earliest families who settled there. Caste/community-wise, our interviewees are from the two prominent groups there, the Muslims and the Dalits and some of the Muslim interviewees are converted Dalits. Their educational attainments, with three exceptions, are very low and this is understandable given the preponderance of senior people among the interviewees. One of the reasons why women dominate in numbers is that women in Kulamnagar have been relatively less mobile compared with the men. However, there is one interesting exception to this — an exceptionally mobile woman —in our list. All names however have been changed in this paper, to protect the identities of our interviewees (see below for the list of interviewees). Besides these interviews, other primary and secondary sources, admittedly meagre, have also been used.

Land in Kulamnagar

In a recent study on seven slums in Thiruvananthapuram city (Madhusoodhanan, nd, c.2006), Kulamnagar is identified as one of the earliest slums to take shape in the city, dating from the 1940s and 50s, along with others like the Chirakulam and Poundukadavu slums (ibid. : 4) – a piece of land of about 4 acres. In the study’s description, the early, pre-settlement Kulamnagar emerges as ‘abject space’⁴ – in both

4. I refer to the Kristevan notion of ‘abjection’ – the horror that the self faces when it comes face to face with the ‘abject’, and object cast out of the symbolic order. In her important work, *Powers of Horror* (1982), Kristeva speaks of the abject as marking the pre-lingual moment in which boundaries such as those between the self and the other are established. For example, through abjection, primitive societies “have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening worlds of animals or animism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder.”

social and physical senses: it claims that on the one hand, this piece of land was originally the property of a Brahmin religious institution, but changed hands so many times that it finally became ownerless. On the other, it housed a grove (*kaavu*), dedicated to serpent worship. Serpent-groves in Kerala, were wild and sacred — mini-tropical forests. There were very strong cultural and social injunctions against encroaching into these spaces, and all human access to such spaces was regulated through customary practices and beliefs (Raju 1991). However, it appears that this sacred grove was not being tended ritually in a regular sense, because it seemed to have been, by the mid-20th century, also become a waste-dump (*ibid.* p.4). The other important feature of Kulamnagar is mentioned to be a pond, located in swampy land, with large ant-hills (probably a sign of the undisturbed nature of the area). In fact, Kulamnagar seems to have had the same physical features as the other areas in Thiruvananthapuram occupied by ‘abject’ people, especially the lower caste sanitation workers of the local government, leather workers, and butchers — it was swampy, uninhabited, prone to water-logging, and generally unhealthy. This view re-echoed in the memories of the political leader who is a major patron-figure at Kulamnagar – an upper-caste, educated, senior left politician who hails from a ‘respectable’ Nair neighborhood in the city. He remembers the place as terribly water-

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(p. 12-13). Through such exclusion, the self consolidates itself — when the abject reappears, however, boundaries are threatened. As she elaborates, the abject has to with “what disturbs identity, system, border. What does not respect borders, positions, rules “ (p.4). To the self, the abject appears as precisely “...what I permanently thrust aside in order to live.” (p.3). The reaction to the abject is not to be confused with gaining knowledge of the breakdown of borders; rather, it involves being confronted with the very fragility of borders and boundaries, which is a traumatic experience (p.3). She points out that often, the abject is the scapegoat or the powerless person blamed irrationally for the ills that beset his/her group and hence must be suppressed, confined, exiled, or killed. Recent writing on the shift in public policy in India regarding slum-dwellers’ rights confirms the appropriateness of the term to characterize the nature of social exclusion endured by them (for example, Mahmud 2010).

logged and almost always full of wet and stinking mud. “The houses were on tiny islands that stood here and there above the stinking swamp-like land,” he remembered. This memory is from the late 70s, which long-time residents who we interviewed agreed to have been the time of their greatest hardship – their own recollections offer a richer history.

In the memories of our oldest interviewees, the vision of Kulamnagar as ‘abject space’ did appear, and vividly so. Yet, the abjection was not linked merely to physical features and ownerless/untended status, or the *resultant* use of the area as a waste-dump. Rather, the specific *cultural* use to which the land was put was mentioned — one of the oldest of our interviewees, 66-year-old Ayesha Beevi, associated her earliest memories of Kulamnagar, of the early 50s, with death and death-rituals. She remembered a road which ran south from the present main junction on the main road from which one turns left to Kulamnagar – it went to the cremation-ground at Puthenkota, exclusively for the Brahmins. She remembered that all the Brahmins from the Brahmin settlements inside the East Fort cremated their dead there, and could recall the manner in which bodies used to be carried in a procession to the cremation-ground through this road. By the road there was a small granite pavilion too, she says, which was used as the space to ritually remove from the widow the auspicious marks of wifeness and shave her head. “We used to go and watch when we were children,” she says, “and at the end of the ceremony, they would distribute coins”. Not surprisingly, Ayesha Beevi remembers not a pond, but a constructed tank with stone-steps leading to it. “The Brahmins would cleanse themselves ritually after the death-rites there ... and immerse copper vessels in its waters.” She associated the area’s desolation to the combined effect of the grove and the tank, and all the ritual and cultural associations around it. The unworshipped serpent-grove was just next to the tank and its wildness, and the funerary waters of the tank, both as contributing a certain haunted gloom which kept most people away.

It is of course well-known that ecological exclusion is a key aspect of socio-geographical exclusion of the poor in urban contexts – Wood and Salway (2000) identify it as one of the three aspects of their concept of urban vulnerability. However, the degree to which such vulnerability limits the lives of residents depends on their ability to cope with and overcome the disabilities that the site imposes on them. It was evident from several other interviews that this was not necessarily discouragingly daunting to the early residents, even while they clearly remembered the intense difficulties of living in such an area. First, there were many recollections of other pleasant and inviting features of the landscape unmentioned by non-residents – especially of a clean, fast-flowing canal (the Thekkenekkara Canal) which ran through the area. Many of our interviewees shared many happy memories of swimming and bathing in the clean, flowing, sparkling waters of this canal, which, according to Ayesha Beevi, “lay clear, *like tears* and sparkling bright” — a common way in Malayalam, to express the purity and clarity of liquids. The tank was itself remembered as containing clean and fresh water and when it was not being used for funeral rites, the residents of Kulamnagar used it to bathe and wash their clothes. Another interviewee, 60-year-old Jisha Beevi, also remembered Kulamnagar to be a sparsely-populated area full of bushes, but with patches where sugarcane grew wild and abundant. Ayesha Beevi remembers bountiful fish-catch from the canal, coconuts and plenty of fruit from the many kinds of fruit-trees that grew wild there on which she feasted as a child. These happy memories re-emerge in the recollections of a younger interviewee, 40-year-old Karthika, from the late 70s and 80s – mentioning precisely the abundance of fruit and fish from the paddy fields of Kuryathi which lay outside, south of Kulamnagar. Interestingly, such memories are not mentioned by Jameela, who is Karthika’s exact contemporary. The difference was later explained by them as to do with the specific locations of their houses in Kulamnagar: Karthika’s home was at the southern edge abutting the fields of Kuryathi while Jameela’s was more towards the northern side inside Kulamnagar,

which was, by the late 1970s, very highly congested. It then appears that by this time, such inviting features seem to have been confined to the very edges of the colony, close to open paddy fields, which have been filled up since then.

Secondly, in sharp contrast to many popular accounts (that appear in the speeches of contemporary politicians and officials) that identify water-logging as the perennial problem that has plagued this area, many interviewees remembered that the water-logging from the overflow from the canal, and from swampy pits that dotted the area was less of a hardship, even in the 1970s, since the water drained back rapidly into the canal and the tank. The hardship, according to 49-year-old Pakeeza, was caused by not just water-logging but also by the poor quality of their shacks, which were not weatherproof. When it rained – and it rains heavily for nearly five months during the monsoons, not counting then often-copious summer rains in Thiruvananthapuram — water would collect inside houses, and it had to be drained physically; flooring was either poor or non-existent. The water-logging became unbearable as the Colony became more and more congested, by the late 70s and early 80s⁵, and combined with the rainwater collecting inside the house during the monsoons, life became truly hard. She remembered how her baby daughter, presently in her mid-thirties, when she was still an infant, fell off her bed one monsoon and was nearly drowned. Besides, it was very hard to obtain clean water – it had to be fetched manually from more than a kilometer away. “So soon after the rain, the real problem was how to wash out the mud that the flooding canal brought – and didn’t it stink! The water in the canal would be all muddy for a few days, and so clean water would have to be fetched from outside – carried in. Women did all that!” said Pakeeza. And even in dry weather, drinking water had

5. According to the report *Urban Slums of Kerala 1985* published by the Kerala Government’s Department of Town Planning, there were some 493 households in Kulamnagar which was estimated to be around 2.80 hectares, and it had a population of nearly 2500.

to be fetched from the public taps on the main road on the east side and from near East Fort – this was mentioned by both Pakeeza, whose memories are from the early-to- mid-1970s, and 60-year-old, Jisha Beevi, whose memories are from the early 1960s.

But they also remembered ways in which residents dealt with these problems: clearly, solutions were sought, and some of them appear to have been quite effective. The earliest settlers had to deal, of course, not just with the physical hardships that living in this area proposed, but also with the psychological effects of the apparent somber haunted atmosphere. Vimala, the daughter of one of the earliest residents of Kulamnagar, Jacob, remembers vividly how her father dealt with the latter. He was a Dalit migrant from Aryanad, a rural area in Thiruvananthapuram district, a sanitation worker with the city authorities who migrated here in the 1940s. He was converted to Christianity by the London Missionary Society while still a teenager in Aryanad and had imbibed their determination to fight superstition among their flock – and besides, he hailed from a family of traditional Pulaya exorcists and had apparently been taught exorcism and magic by his own grandfather. Thus doubly armed against the spirits and serpents that haunted the tank and the sacred grove, he entered Kulamnagar fearlessly. She remembered: “Papa was not scared – he strode boldly towards the wild area where the serpent-grove stood, a little away from the tank – and built a fence around the land between these two places. He was not superstitious at all – he would regularly urinate inside the sacred grove and wasn’t ever afraid! Gradually people stopped being scared of the place, and the grove shrank to just a few trees and then almost disappeared.” There are also memories of how early settlers dealt with the physical hardships from flooding and water-logging. Forty-year-old Rahila remembered a senior uncle and aunt who had settled down right next to the tank, tackling the flooding in the late 1970s: “He used to dig several water-channels around the house which would drain all the water from around his house straight into the tank; and more

importantly, he would regularly clear the tank of the mud and silt – it was excellent manure and he would grow vegetables in great abundance! He also kept away the mosquitoes and the filth by raising hens and ducks and made sure that the grass and tall weeds on its banks, where the flies and mosquitoes bred, were cleared properly ... they coped very well indeed, living right next to the dilapidated tank – remember, it no longer had any granite slabs to stop the water from flowing out! However, the problem apparently became uncontrollable by such means as these when the filth from the city sewerage began to surface in the tank⁶. As for the scarcity of potable water, it appears that there were ‘market solutions’ — our interviewees remembered female residents earning a living working as water-carriers, fetching clean water from the taps down

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6. *The City Development Plan (2006) and the Draft City Master Plan (2012)* for Thiruvananthapuram have useful information about the roots of this problem. The canal that originates at Kulamnagar, called the Thekkenekkara Canal has been one of the city’s main storm-water drains since long. It covers a wide area spread over populous parts of the city including the East Fort and the areas inside the Fort, and joins the man-made canal, the Parvati Puthenar, which was used for water transport until mid-20th century. The sewerage system of Thiruvananthapuram originated in the 1940s. The city’s sewage is pumped to the Valiyathura Sewage Farm from several pumping stations in the Blocks which cover the city only partially. The system is presently very heavily overloaded. The latter document says: “... the entire sewerage system is practically defunct with raw sewage finding its way through punctured manholes and leaky sewer lines, ultimately dumping into open yards or surface water bodies.” (p.107). The City Development Plan noted that the Thekkenekkara Canal is highly silted and clogged and that the flooding therefore is frequent and water now drains much slower (p. 99). The COSTFORD executive director, P B Sajan, who has been actively involved in city planning in the recent years, however, points out that the Thekkenekkara canal does not join the Parvati Puthenar but the Amayizanjana canal, and so the problem is not of the city sewage reaching Kulamnagar through water flowing back from the former. Rather, the sewage comes through rainwater drains – which now also carry grey water — that end in the Kulamnagar pond from four thickly populated residential areas, which have vocal residential associations which have successfully prevented any effort to block those drains. In other words, the lack of attention to the development of urban sanitation through better sewerage systems over the decades is entirely responsible for the plight of the Colony; it is this neglect that has contributed to deepening its abject image by actively enabling the piling of city filth there.

the east-side main road. In fact, one of our interviewees, 71-year-old Rahima Beevi who had married into Kulamnagar but became a childless widow, used to make a livelihood carrying water for relatively better-off families in Kulamnagar.

Given this ability to cope and survive though conditions were always precarious, it is hardly surprising that a land market emerged in Kulamnagar quickly – from the accounts of our interviewees, almost within a decade after the first settlers arrived. However, this was initially waste land, and then, in the 1960s, senior residents remember, the government made plans to acquire it for sewerage development and thus Kulamnagar was identified as ‘government land’. The non-availability of title-deeds seems to have been no deterrent at all. The pattern of occupancy remembered by several residents was of occupation by a settler and family, who then leased parts of the land occupied, or built shacks on parts of it which were rented out, and then often sold the land/shacks to the lease-holder or tenant. There were exceptions – Jacob’s daughters remembered how he had simply allowed members of the sanitation workers’ union he led to build shacks on the land he had occupied, free of cost. However, it appears that this was hardly the practice especially after about a hundred Dalit families were resettled in the new government-built colony built under the aegis of the erstwhile Harijan Welfare Department in the early 60s. Occupation, renting, and buying are what the later generation of interviewees remember and forty-year-old interviewees have direct memories about mostly the latter two. Generally, this confirms the picture that emerges from Madhusoodhanan’s (nd, circa 2006) interesting data for seven slums in Thiruvananthapuram: he notes that till about 50 years or further back, the larger share of the most important Dalit caste in the slums, the Cheramar, occupied land – he counted 63 Dalit families that occupied the land and only 3 who bought it, fifty years ago or more. This continued to be the pattern till some thirty years back, when it reversed, with 15 Dalit families occupying the land while 16 bought their plots (*ibid.* : 26). The pattern seems to

have been slightly different for Muslims – they seem to have been few in numbers, fifty years ago or more, just 10 families, all of which occupied the land. Then the numbers of Muslim families which occupied land seems to have increased, peaking at around 30 years back, and then falling some 20 years back.

The instability of these positions, which Madhusoodan also notes for all the slums he studied (*ibid.* : p, 25), is also very apparent through the memories of our interviewees: they recount how tenants became owners by marrying into the family of the owner, how owners turned overnight into tenants when the shack became part of the dowry payment for a daughter, and how people born and raised at Kulamnagar who sold their shack and left for a while, returned as tenants but refused to let go of their sense of entitlement and sense of belonging. Thus Jameela remembered how her grandmother had bought a shack at Kulamnagar in the 1950s for Rs 150, lived there for decades, and then sold it off for Rs 33,000 in about 2000, which her parents bought again for Rs 100,000 in 2004. Her mother and father, who had stopped living in Kulamnagar in between (though their family continued to be closely connected to both immediate and extended family there) unable to bear the illicit liquor-trade, had returned after this trade was suppressed in the 1990s, and were living there in a rented shack. This ‘family shack’ was bought to be given to Jameela as her dowry. Several interviewees, for instance, Jacob’s three daughters and Rahila, remembered how they became tenants after they got married: two of Jacob’s daughters who married local men who were long-time tenants did not get shacks as dowries and the third was married out of Kulamnagar, from where she returned after suffering a great deal of domestic abuse, to re-settle in Kulamnagar as a tenant. Rahila, the daughter of an early migrant, also became a tenant after marriage as the ‘family shack’ had been set apart for the only son of the family. The memories also indicate that the men who moved in had most often suffered large economic losses – they were downwardly mobile. Jisha Beevi had been married into a fairly prosperous family but

had to return with him when he lost all his money paying his sisters' dowries. Such stories are also heard from earlier times: Ayesha Beevi recounted how her father moved to Kulamnagar from the nearby Attakkulangara, a 'respectable locality'⁷, after having lost all his wealth in precisely dowry payments, and this is in the 50s. One of our male interviewees, the 71-year-old Abdul Majeed, was born in 'respectable' circumstances but was orphaned at birth and grew up suffering abuse in his joint family, finally escaping it once he began to work in his early teens and marrying a "poor girl" from Kulamnagar.

One of the most persistent ills to beset the task of preparing the list of eligible list of beneficiaries for the current JNURRM housing scheme – which has caused much violence and delay there – lies precisely in this instability of positions within the Colony⁸. Poor upward mobility means that the only asset available to the slum dweller is often the shack, which then gets transferred frequently to others for a variety of purposes, very frequently, dowry payments. Many who attempt to move out through marriage or otherwise also tend to return, again due to lack of significant upward economic and social mobility; long-time residents alter quickly from being 'owners' to 'tenants' but still continue to view themselves as rightful residents with valid claims, equal to the 'owners'. From our interviewees, it appears that these tendencies are by no means recent – or, in other words, the lack of upward economic and social

7. Needless to say, these perceptions are those of our interviewees, who compare the statuses of their families with those of their wives. To substantiate this, they provided caste information – their wives were 'ordinary' Muslims while they were Ravuthers, who are perceived to be upper caste Muslims.

8. Typical of many slum upgradation initiatives since the 1990s which emphasize 'community' and its 'participation' as key to their success (O'Hare, Abbott, and Barke 1998), the present efforts at Kulamnagar also seem to rely upon rather simplistic notions of both community and participation. This leads to the non-perception of the fact that internal homogeneity, fixed boundaries, and other features often assumed by the notion of 'community' are even weaker in slum communities compared to others or even non-existent (Clever 1999; Berner and Phillips 2005).

mobility which would have helped residents to break this pattern has been consistent over the decades, irrespective of the rise in incomes. Some of our interviewees, and the worst-off among them — did assert, quite forcefully, that economically, the present was far more rewarding, and that incomes were steady for those who could work. But this does not mean that incomes have been big enough to break this undesirable pattern for many families at Kulamnagar.

Another interesting pattern that emerges from our interviews is about gender and access to land at Kulamnagar in the early decades. In the interviews in which the interviewees recollected the routes through which their parents or grandparents settled here, the likelihood was that mothers and grandmothers began as tenants and then bought land, compared with fathers or grandfathers, who were more likely to be occupiers. For instance, Karthika's grandmother, one of the earliest migrants, who however settled down in a plot on the edge of Kulamnagar which abutted the paddy fields of Kuryathi in the 1940s, lived for some years as a tenant in a shack, finally buying it for Rs 100. Men occupied the land, but it appears that this was not easy at all because the police attacks were frequent — I heard several stories of illegal occupants asserting their moral claims to housing and deploying tactics often found typical of 'political society'⁹. Jacob, the pioneer, reputedly perfected a whole array of tactics in the 1950s, remember his daughters.

9. Menon and Nigam (2007) cite Chatterjee to make the point that subaltern existence in the city was never really sustainable as a matter of right in India. However, in the pre-1990s period, "... it was a duty that the government owed to the populations it governed to provide the minimum basic requirements for a decent life, failing which the moral claims of the subaltern population continued to provide some kind of a horizon for policy-making." (pp. 76-77). Not surprisingly, such claims resonated more deeply on the left of the formal political spectrum, strong in Kerala in this period. Besides, the communists in Kerala were militantly critical of the state in the immediate post-independence decades — and for this reason were more open to supporting 'ethical illegalities' and the claims of those who were outside formal politics and bourgeois civil society.

“Whenever the police came, Papa would tell us to quickly put a pot of water with a handful of rice on the stove, and when they came near our door, to smash it, throw around the pots and pans, break a few, scatter the condiments and the vegetables all around, and scream the loudest we could!” At times, they remember, he bought time by paying the fine, which was Rs 55 then and would move against the authorities in the gap thus obtained. He also taught these ways of surviving police raids to others who he brought to live in Kulamnagar. And these tactics could be quite effective too, as it appeared from an anecdote that his oldest daughter, the 59-year-old Valsala recounted with much enthusiasm an incident from the late 1950s, during the first Communist government in Kerala. Someone had spread a rumour that Jacob was selling illicit liquor from his home; an Excise Officer soon descended to raid the house.

They trampled all the flowers that my mother had planted so painstakingly, forced their way into the house, and even threatened to pour arrack down her throat if they found it. Now, this was too much for Papa: he pulled the five of us into a taxi, drove us straight to the State Secretariat, and literally dragged us into the office of the Minister for Harijan Welfare, Chathan Master! He made a huge fuss there and was let in – and the Minister promised immediate action. Soon, the Excise Officer was at our door, begging my parents’ mercy. My father had even told the Minister that he had peeped into the bathroom where I was at my bath – nothing of that sort had really happened! Papa didn’t let him go so easily – he made him enter the house and search everywhere, and then made him search all around the house. He came back begging forgiveness and admitting that there was no illicit liquor to be found!

Another early settler of the early 1950s, a butcher by profession, now deceased, is however still well-known and largely by his nickname

‘Stay’ – a well-earned one, apparently, because he was famed for his skill in obtaining stay orders from courts on very different matters! In fact some of his children, who also practice these techniques, are also known by the same name¹⁰! It also needs to be remembered that the threat of eviction was a real one. The *Kerala State District Gazetteers* for Thiruvananthapuram of 1961, for instance, mentions Kulamnagar as one of the worst slums here, saying that the government intended to evict the residents and build eighty-eight tenements there. However, it admitted that evicting squatters “has been a hard nut to crack, but efforts are still being made to persuade, to vacate the land.” (Menon 1961: 719-20).

However, women occupiers were surely not unknown. Karthika mentions that her grandmother bought her shack from a certain Chellamma, who had occupied a large area of land at the Colony’s edge. Many senior women remember a Dalit woman leader, who is still around, who managed to corner a good amount of land: she was a Congress worker in the 1950s and the organizer of a women’s association called the Priyadarshini Mahila Samajam which came in the wake of the community development initiatives of the 1950s, holding literacy, dance, and sewing classes, and offering other kinds of training to women. Jisha Beevi, who had nearly completed high school, remembered working in the *samajam* as an accountant since this leader was not good at letters. However, she seems to have been canny enough to corner quite a large portion of resources meant for the community, managing to sell all the sewing machines allotted to the members of the women’s association kept in a development centre and a playground at one corner of Kulamnagar. She also occupied this land and sold it to others. The same

10. Madhusoodhanan notes that there were efforts to evict slum dwellers even in the erstwhile princely state of Travancore, and the residents of the Poundukulam slum had been evicted thus in the 1940s. But they managed to return and re-build their huts with the “help of some officials”. (nd, c.2006: 5).

woman appears as a close relative in the memories of Jacob's oldest daughter Valsala – as someone who was quarrelsome and given to doing things her way. Her main tactic, it appears, was to get her opponents tangled in police investigations and court cases: “No one dared to say anything to her – she would go and file a case at once. She even filed a case against me and my sister when we hadn't even reached puberty!” Her tactics, apparently, were different — instead of advancing moral claims, she made use of her connections with the lowest strata of the police and familiarity with the legal machinery. A third female ‘occupier’ who figured in the stories of our interviewees was a matriarch who led one of the earliest families in Kulamnagar, which was better off than others and large in size as well. Still a powerful (and often much-criticized) presence there, she managed to stall the distribution of the government apartments built in 1981, filing a petition in court that they were weak constructions and unsafe to live in. She managed to hold it down until a senior left leader became the Councillor (of the ward of which Kulamnagar was a part) and negotiated a deal with her. As a result she and her family were given around 7 apartments there – out of a total of 72! But these exceptions apart, the story, mostly of the second wave of settlers, is of women buying land and settling down. It appears that such sale did guarantee possession for most of the time, but there were instances in which people who took money reneged on their promises. That is when the aggrieved parties went to political leaders and complained. From the mid-1970s, with the rise of a communist leader who controlled the headload workers, (mentioned above) he made sure that these informal agreements were honoured. This seems to have been a source of the man's power – he was the de facto guarantor of the local informal land market.

The great difficulties that a woman encountered when she tried to occupy some land and build a shack were also recounted: Rahila vividly recollected her mother's travails – sometime in the 70s, when she tried to occupy some land and build a shack after being turned out of her

family house by her brother – which became his house — with her five children when her husband’s alcoholism became unbearable. After living in a coir-making shed with five little children, she decided to build for herself a small shack. Two of her husband’s friends – who were local toughs – took pity on her and decided to help. They built a structure and were thatching it, when the police arrived and arrested them all, including the children. Apparently, the neighbours who considered themselves owners of that land had complained to the police. With great difficulty, Rahila’s mother returned to the same spot and managed to put up her shack, making part-payments to the ‘owners’ over time. Another harrowing tale was recounted by 62-year-old Abida about her mother’s struggles. Her mother had migrated to Kulamnagar in the mid-1950s from a nearby area with her nine children in protest after her husband took another wife without her consent. She selected a small area, chopped down a coconut tree, and built a small hut. The police got the wind of this – now this was ‘government property’, earmarked for the city’s sewerage project, and they had desecrated it by chopping down the tree. She remembers that the case dragged on for four whole years, but the judgment ultimately favoured them. Abida’s mother figured in the memories of other interviewees as a Dalit woman who converted to Islam and made money selling illicit arrack which she distilled along with her children. These were mentioned as survival strategies which single women who migrated into the area had to often resort to. However, Abida mentioned that fighting a case was much easier in those days as the support of the other residents who were quite adept at dealing with the police and the courts, was always assured. Nevertheless, women seemed to have struggled to find the resources to buy shelter. Some women, who came early, by the late 1950s, could afford to buy a shack only much later. Fifty-eight-year old Farida remembered this of her mother – she was an early settler, starting to live here as a tenant in 1957. However, she could afford to buy a house only some twenty years later, paying Rs 1000 for the shack she lived in.

Concerted struggles to secure title-deeds for Kulamnagar residents seem to have been few – Abdul Majeed remembered a few attempts from the 1960s; the senior communist leader remembered some efforts in the 1980s – they conducted sit-in-strikes in front of the State Secretariat in 1986. This leader felt that it would have been difficult to grant them these deeds since the land distribution at Kulamnagar was not even – people possessed different amounts of land and the claims to being a resident of Kulamnagar could not be pegged clearly to possession of land there. Thus it appears that the present problems in the distribution of housing were clearly what stood on the way of granting title deeds too. ‘Comrade’ Murugan, a senior communist activist, felt differently: he identified the failure to secure title deeds as a problem associated with the community composition of the Colony: “After the hundred scheduled caste families were moved to another colony in the early 60s, Muslims began to enter the place and fill it up completely. It is hard to get the government to grant them land, and so we couldn’t try for that even during the land reforms in 1971.” Indeed, the acquisition of the roughly 10 acre-plot at a location at a distance from Kulamnagar to build a Dalit colony, to where some 100 Dalit families from Kulamnagar were to be shifted apparently happened because of the pressure exerted by the Kerala Harijan Federation which had a presence in all the slums of Thiruvananthapuram¹¹. Nevertheless he still feels that determined efforts were not made – and people calmed down once they got certificates of possession in the late 1980s.

But for individuals, it appears, grant of land by the government was not the only route to gaining government-built housing (which means implicit government approval) or titled land at Kulamnagar.

11. It is also true that initially, Scheduled Caste (SC) Hindus seemed to be given preferential treatment over converted SCs in the land acquisition-assignment scheme of the Harijan Welfare Department of the 1950s. This was however also extended to the Christian converts in 1963. Madhusoodhanan nd. c. 2006: 39).

Murugan claimed that the land that he owned now, right next to the Colony, which had title-deeds, was bought by him after all the other Dalit families had left for the new Dalit colony: “We were given three cents here; I bought another eight and a half cents. This was owned by the Nair wife of a brahmin landlord who had taken a loan on it. I repaid the loan and bought it cheap.” This instance of acquisition was mentioned by other interviewees who had a very different interpretation: they claimed that Kulamnagar was actually much bigger than it is now – some 11 acres – and the land at its edges were gradually usurped by individuals who created forged land titles. Comrade Murugan is said to have taken advantage of his party connections to secure this land in his name. Besides, they pointed out, he had also been allotted a flat when the slum eradication housing of 1981 was distributed despite the fact that he already owned land with title-deeds. Likewise, Wahida, who became a resident here in the late 1970s, was not born or raised in Kulamnagar – she worked as a live-in domestic servant in a house near Kulamnagar with her daughters and was a staunch communist supporter. She and her daughters were given a flat during the housing distribution of 1981 despite the fact they were total newcomers — not born in Kulamnagar or raised there. It appears, then, that open occupation of vacant sites was not the only way in which landless people could acquire land at Kulamnagar. Being a key connected to the leadership of a leading political party, it seems, helped, and this of course may not be peculiar to slums¹².

Politics

Madhusoodhanan’s observations about politics in present-day slums in Thiruvananthapuram echo perceptions that are familiar, in both

12. Nevertheless, the importance of such connections in slum-life has been stressed repeatedly in the literature. It has been argued, for instance, that poor urbanites are “positioned weakly in relation to the state and different markets”, and hence require patrons and brokers who will provide them those vital links (Wood 2003: 464-65).

academic and non-academic discourses, about these places: he argues that welfare entitlements in these places are accessible only through the intermediation of politicians and those who are not supporters of the ruling parties tend to be discriminated against in the distribution of welfare benefits. He mentions a range of tactics deployed by ruling party supporters to deny welfare to their opponents – the denial of transparency, rejecting valid claims on flimsy grounds, withholding valid information, and even rolling back schemes before they can apply (nd, c.2006: 41-42). He especially mentions the presence of powerful patrons through who the slum dwellers obtain a range of benefits¹³. This gestures precisely at the presence of Chatterjean political society at Kulamnagar – which, since the 1960s, is identified by the government as an illegal squatter settlement on government land.

However, the narratives of our interviewees indicate that such political society *was not always the rule* at Kulamnagar; indeed, they make it possible for us to trace some of the processes through which it took shape there. An important fact, often obscured in the perfunctory use of concepts such as ‘political society’ to describe slum dwellers – that the early settlers were often very active participants in the political and civil organizations that were fully within the sphere of modern politics – comes through very strongly in these interviews. Take, for instance, the case of the early settler Jacob, mentioned in the previous section. The picture of his life as it emerges from the narratives of his three daughters Valsala, Jayanti, and Vimala is surely not just that of a shrewd ‘political society operator’ who makes good use of the cracks and crevices of the disciplinary apparatuses of government or deploys moral claims against the state (as it may seem from the earlier section). He was also a Congressman who was very close to the senior Congress

13. This adheres to the familiar view, common in both academic and non-academic discussions, that slums in India survive because they are primarily ‘vote-banks’ of particular political parties or leaders.

activist ‘Jubba’ Ramakrishna Pillai, a leading ‘Harijan uplift’ activist in the 1930s and the chief organizer of the scavengers’ union in Thiruvananthapuram. Jacob was the Secretary of this union. He sent his daughters to be trained in tailoring at the tailoring school for lower caste people Ramakrishna Pillai had started at Pulimood in Thiruvananthapuram – he himself had learned tailoring in his training to be a Gandhian activist and instructed students there. Apparently, he turned the north-Indian style shirt for men, the ‘jubba’, into a uniform for Gandhians and made a ‘market opportunity’ out of it, making the lower caste tailoring students stitch and sell them to activists. His settling of Kulamnagar with sanitation workers was part of a political strategy, a certain mode of populating place and such commitment to public life, his daughters felt, caused them a great deal of suffering. His daughter Vimala recalls:

Papa never really thought of our studies and our future, I think. He was far more committed to strengthening the union and he probably thought that our lives would improve automatically once the union became strong. When I was child, I used to sent off early at dawn to collect the free food distributed from the Sree Padmanabha Swamy temple and beg for rice at the doors at Brahmin homes ... why, when things were difficult, we were even sent to sweep the grains that were scattered when grain-bags were being unloaded at the Chalai market! Papa was certain that there should be rice gruel for all his union friends ... in the evening they would all come to our house and spend hours discussing and sharing food.

Nor was he supportive of individuals who used their political affiliations to corner benefits. The Dalit woman activist of the Congress, mentioned in the previous section as successful in occupying land at Kulamnagar, was his older brother’s wife – and she was quite influential.

Valsala remembers the huge quarrels that broke out at home when he questioned her activities. One particularly vivid memory she spoke of was about the massive row between her father and aunt when he came to know that she was selling the bread and other free food that were to be distributed for free through the Priyadarsini Mahila Samajam.

Eighty-one year-old ‘Comrade’ Murugan who we interviewed is living proof of the above. He lives adjacent to Kulamnagar on land that has title-deeds but identifies himself as a Kulamnagar resident and did receive an apartment in the government housing as part of the slum eradication programme during 1981. He grew up in Kulamnagar as the son of a sanitation worker and studied up to Class 8, when his father died and he had to find work. He began writing accounts at a shop in Chalai and was soon politicized by a co-worker, A M Mustapha, who introduced him to communism. Murugan remembers his grooming as a communist – the many party classes by a local comrade called Kuryathi Chellappan Pillai and the debates through which he began to identify himself as a ‘comrade’. He became a member of the communist party and a full-time worker in 1952, and has been a local committee member till about five years back.

Nevertheless, the interviews indicate clearly that there were no rigid boundaries that separated communists and Congress-supporters in the Colony. Valsala clearly remembered from her childhood in the early 60s that Jubba Ramakrishna Pillai and Comrade Aniruddhan, a noted leader of the CPM in Thiruvananthapuram, worked together in the scavengers’ union. She remembers tensions between Jacob and Aniruddhan, and between him and a local woman communist activist, ‘Comrade’ Pacchi, who apparently detested him. However, she concluded saying, “but when it came to a threat from outside, all these differences would be swiftly set aside and they would form a common front.” This was confirmed by the younger interviewees Vimala and Karthika whose memories are from some ten years later than Valsala’s, and also by Ayesha

Beevi, whose memories are some from a few years earlier. Ayesha Beevi remembered that the Priyadarsini Mahila Samajam used to be frequented by Congress activists interested in Gandhian social work and communists, especially Comrade Aniruddhan, though it was run by a Congress-supporter. Karthika remembered that the residents of the Colony favoured the communist party, mostly, but there was very little violence between communist and Congress supporters. She too remembered that whatever differences that existed did not obstruct the formation of a common front in the face of external threats. She particularly remembered the tense situation in 1982, when there was a communal riot in the adjacent market which led to large-scale arson and violence – “I still remember how all of us, irrespective of political leanings – I was but a child – stayed up all night for many days, arming ourselves with anything that could be turned into a weapon, ready to hit back if Hindu communal forces attacked Kulamnagar.” Then she added – “maybe such differences would have cost us too high those days, as all the houses were built of flimsy wood and thatched with dry coconut palm leaves. One spark, and it would have all gone up in flames, and communists’ and Congress-supporters’ homes would have burned alike!” An interesting contrast to this memory of collective action is that of the senior left politician who is widely revered in Kulamnagar, especially by the senior residents, almost as a savior: he projected himself as the savior of Kulamnagar during the riot, and maintained that he was confident of containing all communal violence there because of this. “During the riot, it was I who led red-flags-marches of 3000 strong, which went around the Colony and made sure that it would not be touched. That’s the only reason why it didn’t spread into the Colony. No one’s going to stand before me and talk faith and caste!”

The history of Dalit-Muslim relations at Kulamnagar as it emerges from the memories of these interviewees seems to indicate that the strong animosity against the Muslims often evident in the words of our Dalit interviewees may be both recent and actually not as strong as it may

initially seem. Almost all our Dalit interviewees, male and female displayed strong resentment against the Muslims who they believe, have vitiated the atmosphere in Kulamnagar. This was true of Jacob's daughter Vimala too. However, she also mentioned how he had been thick friends with the early Muslim settlers – the animosity seems to have grown intense only after the shift of a sizeable number of his comrades to the new government-built Dalit colony (Jacob did not leave) in the early 60s. Vimala even said that her father Jacob had been strongly against them, and had given them strong sticks when they were children, to defend themselves against the Muslims. The differences seem to have been real enough. For instance, Jisha Beevi remembered that her father had been very close to Comrade Sukumaran Kutty and had offered him one of the vacant houses at the new government-built Dalit colony in the early 1960s. But he did not accept it for two reasons: one, it was too far away from his workplace, and secondly, “our people told him, what you are going to do there, isn't the place full of Harijans, won't you be just one or two Muslims there?”

The memories from the 50s are quite different: Ayesha Beevi remembers her happy childhood in the early 50s when she used to be cared for by a Dalit neighbor called Kochappi, who caught tasty river fish and fried it for her: “I still can see myself walking all over the old Kulamnagar holding her hand.” ‘Comrade’ Murugan recalled the name of the members of the first communist party group in the area – there was just a single non-Muslim in it, himself. He recalled that this was never a cause for worry in those days. Also, marriages did not always involve conversion. Abida's mother Thanki who converted in the 50s had taken a Muslim name for herself but she was always – and still is – referred to as ‘Metha Thanki’ – ‘Muslim Thanki’. And it also seems that the division did not really grow clear-cut even after. Pakeeza recalled that marriages between Muslims and non-Muslims were not openly negotiated in her youth in the 70s (she claims that it is more frequent now) then and that when it happened, the non-Muslim had to inevitably join the ‘palli’.

‘Palli means ‘mosque’ in Malayalam – but she immediately clarified that she did not mean ‘faith’ but ‘community’. Communist leaders who were also Dalit (after who the new Dalit colony was named) are still revered by both Muslims and Dalits. The spirit was fairly active later too. Abdul Majeed remembered how he had worked hard to build a makeshift mosque in Kulamnagar in the 1970s; however, his co-religionists still made fun of him because his children used to be fed by a Dalit neighbor – he was called *Parayeede thinnunnavan* (‘Fed by a *Parayi*’, a lower-caste woman). He remarked that while this happened, all families in Kulamnagar depended closely on each other and hence all animosity would stop there. In other words, there were spaces in-between: one would have converted but without sharing the faith, just to join one’s partner in social life. And in any case, it was difficult to hang on to these social animosities given the physical, social, and economic vulnerability of the place, just like it was hard to make too much of political differences. It may also be observed that what we observe now in Kulamnagar – Muslims and Dalits closing ranks against ‘outsiders’ – thus has a longer history.

The absence of wholly divisive, even if palpable, animosities between political parties and communities at Kulamnagar also seems to have facilitated the formation of civil organizations in which everybody participated. The Priyadarsini Mahila Samajam was one such space, but it petered out by the end of the 60s. Abdul Majeed remembers how the Dalit communist leader formed the Kulamnagar Kudikidappu Samiti [Squatter Committee] in the late 1950s “as an organization through which we were to secure our rights.” But he and a number of Dalit families moved to the new dalit colony after a couple of years. This was a blow, but the organization did work actively for some 6 more years and then began to slowly decline. He remembered it clearly as an organization in which members of both Congress and Communist parties participated without mutual rancor. After the Dalit communist leader left, Comrade Maiteen Kannu, who was the Communist Party Ward

Secretary, Anthrakkannu, Shamsuddin, and Kadar Sahib were the members, and of these included members of both parties. This organization was both ‘civil social’ and ‘political’: on the one hand, it mobilized its members for self-help; on the other hand, it organized sit-in and demonstrations criticizing the government and demanding title deeds. Abdul Majeed remembers how they tried to deal with the problem of the lack of toilets. “We decided to build a row of shelters on the other side of the tank and dig pits in them. These were in the place of proper toilets. People used them; once the sun was hot and the fecal matter had dried, we would go and cover it up with soil. This was voluntary work and all of us took turns regularly.”

However, Abdul Majeed’s memories also reveal the perils of ‘civil society’ in a place like Kulamnagar characterized by abject poverty. Kulamnagar those days had a very large number of coconut trees which yielded very well. The government used to auction the nut-plucking and it was usually a private contractor who won the contract. The Samiti decided to participate in the auction in the early 60s and won the contract. “The trouble started then,” Majeed remembers:

Earlier, when the contractor plucked the coconuts, families on whose plots these trees stood would either take or be given eight or ten coconuts. But once the Samiti took over, they couldn’t claim even a single one, and every coconut was being plucked in their collective name. This made local people hate the Samiti, and very soon, they too began to divide up the profit among themselves! Very soon, even the government auction was given up and it was a free-for-all, after the Communist Party split in the mid-60s. The Samiti continued to linger on just in name, and was still in existence in the late 1970s when the governments housing of 72 flats were constructed here. The government tried to get them involved. But they were simply not respected anymore and so they could not

prevent the pilferage of building materials which became a very serious issue in the course of the construction.

While the Samiti was mentioned as an organization which inspired some hope, the memories of Corporation Councillors was uniformly – and depressingly – negative, except for that of the senior communist leader we interviewed. ‘Comrade’ Thankamma, ‘Comrade’ Murugan’s wife, who continued to have strong ties with residents of the new Dalit colony, remembered that the Councillors held a lot of power in the late 1950s. Hundred houses had been built there, but only 90 were occupied as a few Dalit families (including Jacob’s and Karthika’s grandmother’s) refused to leave. So ten were given to poor non-Dalits. This however was disregarding the claims to more houses by the larger, undivided Dalit families who found it hard to live in the one-room-and kitchen houses. They were then apparently promised more houses in the next phase. In the second phase, twenty-five more houses were constructed and the Corporation Councillors of five Wards were asked to select the beneficiaries. Each of them was allotted a certain number of beneficiaries to select. When they found their claims to be bypassed by a Councillor who selected beneficiaries from another slum for his quota, the members of the larger families moved into twenty remaining houses. “People generally tended to distrust these Councillors those days,” she remarked, “they were not really bothered about the poor and were quite ready to take bribes and distribute welfare accordingly”. Abdul Majeed remembered how the troubles over government housing of the 1980s, which proved very divisive in the long run, were caused by the inefficiency of the Councillor, “who, however, did very well for himself in that post. This is market area, and Councillors can fill their pockets very easily.” This particular Councillor is also the subject of bitter memories: in the protest organized by Kulamnagar residents against the poor quality of the housing provided in 1981, he had the temerity to call in the police, who arrested protestors, and dubbed all of them illegal drug-pushers.

However, they remember the senior communist leader who became their Councillor in the 1980s with great warmth, and admiration bordering on awe. He is remembered for having brought “Lights, piped water, roads, door numbers of the City Corporation, ration cards, possession certificates, a community hall, even (tried for) a hospital.” Given the condition of the Kulamnagar residents, it is hardly surprising that someone who could bring so much to Kulamnagar is regarded as a political super-hero¹⁴. This leader is venerated for being there always in times of dire need – “You cannot imagine what he has done for us ... in times when the waters just engulf us and we think we are about to die choked with every kind of filth possible, he would come swimming through these very waters, the water up to his neck, not caring at all about his white *mundu*!” waxed Wahida who was not a resident of Kulamnagar, but still received an apartment there under his recommendation. But even those who had not received such direct favours remembered him with great gratitude. Jisha Beevi remembered how he had helped her to educate her aurally-challenged child – the local school for visually and aurally challenged children did not give her boarding facilities because she was from close by. It was the intervention of this leader that secured her a place in the hostel. The control he had of the most significant labour union in the main market nearby was an important aspect of his power in Kulamnagar. His ‘justice’ is privately disputed but challenged in public only rarely. Thus Rahima Beevi, the senior citizen and ex-water carrier, who now lives with her sister in one of the 1981 flats, remembers bitterly how he had first given her a flat and then taken it away. During a major flood, he had asked her to accommodate a larger family which was living in a shack devastated by the waters; they refused to move out after the fold abated. Her

14. There is of course a vast literature on political clientelism around the world, especially in the context of urban slums, and much of this work (for example, that of Auyero (2000) from Argentina and Nuijten (2013) from Brazil resonates closely with the fieldwork data collected from Kulamnagar.

complaints to him fell on deaf ears – the only response was that she was single and so could well live with her relatives. Indeed, it appears that by the end-1980s when he fought the local election to become the Councillor of the ward of which Kulamnagar was a part of, he had already aroused the anger of a section of young men, who turned against him. Recalls Mohan, who is at present a staunch adherent of the CPM and presently a follower of this leader:

There was a time [in the early-mid 1980s] when his power was bolstered mainly by the presence of workers, his supporters, who would double up as thugs. He used to come here ... even interfere in husband-wife issues. When some woman went there and cried for two or three times, he would turn up – there would be 4 or 5 *goondas* with him. He would straight into the house and beat up the man in front of his family and that was because he was sure that no one would raise a hand against him – because he had those *goondas* with him. There was even a case in which one such fellow died ... but I don't know much about that. I tell you, he would have lost when he first fought the local elections here in 1988. The strong opponent that time was the Congress candidate Ajmal Khan – he had been declared candidate, the posters had been printed, and the campaign had begun. I came out openly and strongly against him, calling him a *goonda*, and mobilizing people here who had Congress sympathies but would not express it openly. He called me for a meeting and asked me if he had done me any wrong, why I was so hostile, but I didn't change my views. He won only because of two things – because the Congress withdrew Ajmal Khan's candidature at the last minute, giving the seat to the Muslim League and because there was massive false voting at the Killippalam booth – the Congress polling

agents were beaten to a pulp there. But he knew that he won this way! He got the Congress to withdraw their candidate through his older cousin, a major Congress leader, who pulls the threads inside his party for this man! After the election however, his attitude changed a lot. Now he began to do things for us, he used to come here, every single evening, Madam, I tell you, without fail he would come. And soon many of us became his supporters. In the next elections, which was in 1995, he won massively even though his party had not given him a seat and he was disgraced within it, just because we decided he should win! When the party wanted to weaken him, they got our colony removed from that Ward.

Mohan also mentioned that after the narrow victory in 1988, this leader “turned over a new leaf” and became more welfare-oriented – which won him the undying loyalty of the people of Kulamnagar. In other words, the nature of the clientelist relation seems to have undergone a shift, becoming more horizontal than vertical. Clearly, the nature of this relationship is neither static nor one of total subjection inevitably (Darabont 2010).

However, political clientelism itself seems to have arisen at a particular political juncture; it does not seem to have been a defining feature of the slum. Abdul Majeed who has seen a succession of communist leaders in his life-time remembered the contrast between this leader and his senior who controlled the left workers’ union in the market up to the mid-1970s, Chalai Bhaskaran Nair:

Comrade Chalai Bhaskaran Nair had a fiery temper and an even more fiery idealism. He would not waver even an inch from justice. If he got to know that some *Muthali* [capitalist, asset-holder] was underpaying workers he

would stride down there – and declare – *You better pay*. Or there won't be much left of your shop. He didn't make a single paisa for himself. He didn't push forward his favorites. The present leader's style is a bit different. This man is a tough one too – but he is like a feudal lord. He has no right or wrong. Are you with him? Then all your wrongs will be right. Did you do something to displease him? He'll first approach you – and if you hesitate, then you will be knocked down. Generally, he does great favours – if you approach him and submit your woes¹⁵. And unlike Bhaskaran Nair who would not take a single coin he manages to be most valuable for both worker and capitalist! And again, quite different from Bhaskaran Nair, he won't spend even an extra breath to control someone. That's the feudal style – he knows how to threaten subtly and people just obey him – they sense power in his very gestures. But then he also knows to be violent when it looks necessary to him. He just makes sure that all the committees, including those which were formed for basic services in the 1990s, were full of his supporters.

In other words, this leader represents another generation of leaders, distinctly different from that of Jacob or Chalai Bhaskaran Nair. Unlike these earlier leaders who struggled in overt and covert ways with the government to secure welfare for the Kulamnagar residents, this leader had direct access to the government as a councillor, combined with his status as a prominent labour leader of the 1970s and 80s, especially of the headload workers in the market who were much in the news those days for making demands for wages which were widely perceived to be exorbitant and illegal (Waite 2001). From the above account he seems

15. The exact phrase was *sankatam paranjaal* ... which has clear connotations of a feudal hierarchy between the person to who the woes are unburdened and the one who is unburdening himself/herself.

to have been close to both the government and local capital, mediating between them and the slum dwellers and the workers in ways that added to his political clout and economic power too. It is also interesting that his emergence follows the simultaneous fading of political militancy that positioned itself in opposition to the government (Jacob, Chalai Bhaskaran Nair, and the others, of the decades up to the 70s), always ‘capturing rights’, and of ‘civil social’ initiatives through which Kulamnagar residents tried to manage their own affairs.

Interestingly, not a single woman interviewee mentioned the Kulamnagar Kudikidappu Samiti— it appears to have been an exclusively male affair. However, from the interviews it was abundantly clear that women were enthusiastic and regular participants in politics, and in both parties. Recollecting the early activists, our interviewees mentioned both men and women as leaders and organizers. And there were also women, it appears, who sought to exit politics when they felt trapped: Karthika’s mother who was an active supporter of the Communist Party and the lead actor in a communist play named ‘From the Hut’, chose to withdraw because she felt that her party colleagues had deliberately closed off all employment opportunities to her because they did not want to lose a good party worker. Also, Ayesha Beevi recounted her own political life in which she switched several parties, something she continues to do now too. In general the impression one gets is that politics did not look alien or frightening to these women

However, this did not mean that entry into political work was easy for women. Most of our women interviewees recounted with much glee how they defied their parents and husbands, daring to chose political affiliations on their own, without abiding to their parents’/husbands’ loyalties¹⁶. Leading women activists in both parties played a leading

16. The difference with middle-class ‘respectable’ women who stay largely within the political affiliations of their families could not be more drastic. See Devika and Thampi 2011.

role in mobilizing the women and helping them to escape the wrath of their husbands/parents. Jisha Beevi 's account about the late 1970s is particularly striking for its recollection of the different kinds of violence – physical and psychological – that women had to bear for sticking to their own political views, and also for the strategies of resistance the women used:

My parents were both communist but I was attracted to the Congress. My parents did not object; they had always said that I was an educated girl [she had studies till Class 9] and could have my own views. But not my husband, who was a terrible drunkard and had communist sympathies, and used to beat me to pulp for going to the Samajam – and would hit me saying that I was neglecting my children when I went there! And during the elections, he would try to force me to vote for the communists – he made me swear an oath on my boy's head. Except for that one time, I always voted Congress ... and then I remember ... there were no rations [this was the 1960s] ... the Congress woman leader here, she and all of us went to picket the Secretariat. We stopped the Ministers' car and got arrested. We were thrown into a blue police van and driven away – we kept shouting slogans inside. Now, it was very late and I hadn't told my husband. Not to worry, said this leader – we'll just tell him that one of us fell seriously sick and so we were at the Medical College Hospital. Ah, she knew how to make a sore and how to make it heal too! But what use are excuses to a drunkard? I got beaten all the same – blow after blow fell, and that's all I can remember!

Nor was it necessarily easier for women who followed their husbands' political inclinations — as is clear from 67-year-old Swarnam's account from the early 1970s:

I started party work at the age of 24 – my husband was a supporter of the CPM [Communist Party of India – Marxist]. He beat me up for working for his own party! He didn't let me into the house for three whole months because I went with this party. So the leaders who came with me – Comrade Pacchi, Comrade Meenakshi – they told him we took her for the party, nor for anything else – and he cooled down. Then he beat me up again when I went the next time because someone gossiped to him that I had pulled out our savings from the monthly savings-chain and gone off with party people to do the strike ...! It took a long time for him to learn to be cool when I went out for the party.

Jisha Beevi is relatively better-educated for her generation, while Swarnam's education is limited to the primary level. However, this does not seem to have made much of a difference in their experience of trying to engage in political work. Nevertheless a clear shift is evident when we examine the narratives of the women of about forty years who have come close to completing high school – Karthika, Rahila, and Vimala. While all three have had, just like their seniors, the experience of severe domestic abuse from their husbands over their aspirations to the public, and have publicly-expressed political preferences, their preference of activism is emphatically civil social. Thus all three proudly recalled their entry into civil social activism through the Total Literacy Campaign in the early 1990s and later, the anti-illicit arrack- and-drugs campaign in the Colony which, they claim, cleansed the place of such criminal elements, and reduced the 'bad name' the place had. Clearly, they formed the core of yet another attempt to rescue the Colony from being abjected

space – after more than a decade after the earlier effort, through the Kulamnagar Kudikidappu Samity, died down. Not surprisingly, these women are currently leading activists in local governance, having helped to form women’s self-help groups in the Colony and as the driving force behind the women’s SHG-centred poverty alleviation and women’s empowerment programme of the Kerala government, the Kudumbashree while continuing to be associated with Kerala’s leading communist party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), as members/workers. Vimala now works for the Jamaat-e-Islami’s political front, the Welfare Party, and continues to run social service programmes aimed at improving children’s educational performance, marriage counselling etc. which were initiated by the Latin Catholic Church. What is striking is that the common gendered association of ‘women’ with ‘civil society’ is not tenable here. These women are clearly interested in both and perceive their work in the two domains to be inter-linked.

Work and Home-life

The people who took over the abjected space of Kulamnagar, not surprisingly, were also those who engaged in ‘abjected occupations’ – sanitation work in the city sewers and hospitals (which, in the 1940s, included scavenging), removing the hides of dead cattle for leather-making, and slaughtering animals for meat. However, if Madhusoodhanan’s (nd, c.2006) is to be believed, the literacy rates of the male workers were not as low as commonsense might prompt: for all the slums in Thiruvananthapuram, he found that about 45.16 per cent of the main Dalit caste and 87.50 per cent of the Muslims above the age of 60 were literate (ibid. : 67). This seems quite plausible when one considers the fact that the earliest occupants of the city slums including Kulamnagar were Dalit with government employment in the sanitation and health departments and downwardly-mobile Muslims – a fact quite clear from our interviews, indicated in the discussion above. Among the Muslims, Madhusoodhanan sees a distinct downward mobility in the

next generation in literacy. If only 12.5 per cent of Muslim men above 60 in all seven slums were illiterate, in the next age group of 40-50, he found 34.45 per cent of illiterates, which however reversed in the third generation, falling to just 16. 19 but still higher than the prevalence in the above 60 age group (*ibid.* : 67). In contrast, the illiteracy rates among the prominent Dalit community men nearly halved, to 23.47 per cent in the 40-60 age group and fell further to just 7.54 per cent in the 22-39 age group.

However, the abjection of the Kulamnagar residents was also social – not only were they of lower caste and/or economically-downwardly mobile, they were also often ‘miscegenated’, having crossed the boundaries of caste in marriage or relationships. According to Madhusoodhanan, Kulamnagar displays the largest diversity of caste-communities among all the slums in Thiruvananthapuram – a total of 19 caste-communities live there (*ibid.* 43). He also reports that the incidence of inter-caste/community marriages in slums is much higher in the present compared with the rest of society (*ibid.*: 43-44). From the data, this seems true for Kulamnagar too – for example, he counts the numbers of Cheramar, Sambava (both Dalit communities), and Nadar (OBC) households in Kulamnagar to be 67 (*ibid.* :40), and adding together the numbers of marriages in which one partner was Cheramar or Nadar from his data, we would arrive at a total of 33 inter-marriages in 67 households. From our interviews, inter-marriage seem to have already been a feature of the first generation: notable figures like Jacob had married out of his caste. Valsala also remembers couples of different caste groups who were of poor circumstances found refuge in Kulamnagar – she recalls how her parents adopted the two children of a Nair woman and a Muslim man who were their neighbours in the 1960s. The father had died; the mother was in jail for brewing illicit liquor; and the children were sent to an orphanage. Her mother went there and got them back and they were raised in their home as part of the family. Jacob had refused a house at the government-built Dalit colony because his

caste-brothers had demanded that he divorce his wife, a Nair by birth. Karthika remembers how her grandmother had migrated to Kulamnagar in the 1940s when her relationship with a rich Ezhava man, in whose coir factory she had worked, broke down. An elderly Nair couple who we met at Kulamnagar, who came there in their youth, were orphans who were abused by their senior uncle, denied education and skills, and finally expelled from their joint-family. Inter-marriage seems to have become quite common since the next generation and actually intensified in the third generation. Not surprisingly, access to family assets among the first generation which set up families across caste seems to have been exceedingly poor, going by our interviewees' accounts.

But the early residents also included very many women who were refugees from domestic violence, who left their husbands, and migrated to Kulamnagar with their children – in our interviews, this is perhaps the most common reason remembered for grandparents'/parents' migration to Kulamnagar. These women worked as domestic workers, small-time-vegetable sellers, and wage labourers, occupations which seem to be the ones most open to women even in the present, as Madhusoodhanan's research, the COSTFORD-Kudumbashree Survey of Kulamnagar (2010), and our interviews indicate¹⁷. But there also seems to have been a number of women employed as sweepers and cleaners in the sanitation and health departments. Interestingly, Madhusoodhanan's data for all slums in Thiruvananthapuram shows that of the total of 38 government pensioners he could identify, exactly half are women, but it appears that the numbers of women holding government jobs fell in the next

17. Here it may be worth considering whether economic activity in Kulamnagar, especially of the women there, belongs to of what Kalyan Sanyal (2007) has characterized as the 'need economy', that non-capitalist subset of the informal economy. There is of course the question whether Sanyal's notion differs significantly from the familiar concept of petty commodity production; however, his stress on the reverse flow of surplus in creating a subsistence-level economy among the poorest may perhaps be modified. This of course requires more data and lies outside the purview of this paper.

generation – he found 13 male pensioners in the 40-60 age group, but just 6 women (nd, c.2006: 90)¹⁸. Our interviews also seem to indicate that Muslim women from downwardly mobile households tried to adhere more strictly to the rules of modesty that supposedly marked aristocratic Muslims, perhaps in an effort to preserve as much social respect as they could, like for instance, not taking up paid work. However, Muslim women who broke with their community may have had only the option of migrating. Pakeeza’s story echoes this: after her relationship with a Dalit man which was strongly disapproved by both sides broke up, she migrated to Bombay, worked in a bar, went abroad and made money, to finally return and settle in the Colony again.

Marriages were not necessarily stable especially when they involved no dowry, it seems¹⁹. This was implied by ‘Comrade Thankamma’ when she recollected her own marriage to ‘Comrade Murugan’ – they had started living together when she was just 15 but later local folk and party comrades suggested – “After all there was no dowry or nothing ... so people thought it might not last ... anyway we were married in grand style so that everyone would know and big leaders attended!” When such an effort was not made, marriage broke down – as was Pakeeza’s experience, when she fell in love with a Dalit man and

18. The women may also have been receiving a family pension – however, the interviews do mention older sisters, aunts, and mothers who worked in the sanitation and health departments as Class 4 workers.

19. Jesmine and Salway (2000) who studied marital stability in a Dhaka slum observed that while weakened community and family ties in the urban slum opened up more options for women, the instability of the slum community, greater economic, physical, and social insecurity, and other factors generated a countervailing pressure that made marriage inevitable for women. However, they seem to be able to fend away serious domestic violence precisely because they are able to escape unwanted relationships. These observations seem to be valid for the women of Kulamnagar too though domestic violence seems to be unrelentingly present.

started living with him in the late 1970s. Dowry seems to have been common since the late-60s-early 1970s at least. Dowries could be as low as what Pakeeza who had been married off by her family in the early 1970s received, just clothes worth Rs 33. But they seemed to have hovered around 5 sovereigns of gold or less. Jisha Beevi who married in 1972 got 5 sovereigns; Farida who was married in 1973 got 5 sovereigns and Rs 300 and her sister, married in the late 1960s got 2 sovereigns and Rs 501. An exception was Ayesha Beevi whose father was in the lucrative meat business and a local notable, who paid 8 sovereigns and Rs 3000 to her bridegroom. By the 1980s, however, economic and social inequalities seem to have grown. Jacob's daughter Vimala who married in 1984 got just two and a half sovereigns of gold despite being the daughter of a respected pioneer and the marriage brought her no upward mobility at all; however, the daughters of Comrade Thankamma and Comrade Murugan married middle-class educated well-employed cousins from outside Kulamnagar in the late 1980s on the strength of their father's ownership of land with proper title-deeds, which was given to them as dowry-payment. "I gave my older son-in-law, a sub-inspector of police, seven cents of land and five cents to my younger son-in-law who was employed in the office of the University of Kerala. They both sold it immediately as they had no plans at all to live here." Both daughters do not associate themselves with Kulamnagar; nor do the grandchildren who are even more upwardly mobile. In contrast, Vimala's son and daughter still struggle for survival in Kulamnagar. Likewise, Jameela's mother who was a government employee, managed to marry her in 2004 to a well-educated and well-connected communist party worker employed in the party's press and the shack which was bought for her dowry cost her 100,000 rupees. The high dowry rates are indeed a source of worry in the present especially for those with rather unstable incomes: as Farida pointed out, they were offering Rupees 250,000 and 15 sovereigns of gold for her youngest daughter but no proposals were forthcoming.

Many of our interviewees in the 40-50 age-group remembered the Kulamnagar of their youth and late childhood as tense and fraught with danger, with drunkards, illicit liquor-sellers, and drug-pushers making things very difficult. This was in contrast with the memories of older women – Ayesha Beevi for example, remembered two thieves among the earliest residents of Kulamnagar – one was a “traditional” thief, who plied his trade in far-off places, and the other dug up the copper pots from the mud in the tank-bed and sold them. They did not seem viciously criminal, unlike the figures that emerge in the accounts of the younger women. Karthika remembered that it was not so bad for insiders as long as they did not challenge these elements, but it was quite hard for outsiders. If they chanced to pass by, these elements would pounce on them and if they did not buy, they could be beaten up. “Generally, the impression was that all of us belonged to this category; many of the students here would not tell their school-mates where they came from, they would simply say, Manacaud [the nearby market, on the north side of the Colony].” And worse, because this place acquired a reputation for being the centre of illicit arrack trade, goons would carry people they had harmed outside the colony and dump them there. However, older interviewees could remember that it was not always like this. Valsala and Jayanti remembered that the men at Kulamnagar had always been heavy drinkers – because of the kind of work they did. “Remember, our father used to get down into the sewers to clean them – not a job anyone can do unless dead-drunk. And the others too needed a strong drink – those who stripped the hides off dead carcasses and the butchers too.” Initially, they would get in from outside; and soon, a female migrant desperate for income began to brew and sell it for the residents. The troubles began to start when the market extended outside Kulamnagar with outsiders becoming customers. Soon, it became uncontrollable as the illicit liquor makers and traders acquired connections with local policemen and officials. “Our father used to consume it quite a bit,” said Jayanti, about Jacob in the 1960s. “But he knew that things were moving

in a bad way. He began to secretly inform the police of these elements.” But even men outside these professions, like Jisha Beevi’s father who worked in a textile shop and Abdul Majeed who worked in the main market as a small trader, were heavy drinkers and wife-abusers – and the later explained this addiction as resulting from easy and cheap availability of illicit liquor. Almost all our female interviewees agreed that the availability of cheap liquor in such proximity was an important reason why there was so much domestic violence – which usually erupted when wives and sisters questioned their husbands and brothers about their wasting precious income on it.

The most distressing aspect of the interviews was the recollection of extreme poverty and want, common to interviewees across all generations, with the exception of Ayesha Beevi whose father was better-off. This was especially so for female-headed households. Women remembered that what bothered mothers each day was the intractable question of filling “four or five little bellies”, as Swarnam put it. Remembering the 1970s, she said. “I lived by casual labour those days ... so difficult to buy even a cup of tea. There were days in which we shared a single cup of tea among the four of us. And my son would not even take a sip – he would want all of it. I have begged in town and bought half a kilo of rice to cook gruel for the children; I have scoured the vegetable market to pick up the scattered tubers ...” Farida, who was just two years old when they settled in Kulamnagar in the late 1950s remembers that her mother would leave early at dawn in search of work and the children – four-year-old Farida, her nine-year-old sister, and three-year-old brother would be all alone at home till she came back late in the evening. Her sister would cook some gruel and the neighbours would also contribute something sometimes. Her mother would bring rice, and fish, some chilli, and oil, and even some vegetables if it was a good day. Otherwise it might be just a few pieces of tapioca and chilli. Older children, especially girls, labored around the house and were often taken out of school to mind the young ones. Jisha Beevi, who

studied up to Class Nine, remembers that she had to fetch several pots of fresh water in the morning before school, cook the dried pieces of tapioca for breakfast – she ate her noon meal at school which served free mid-day meals. In fact, the free mid-day meal seems to have been the main attraction to many of that generation. Abida remembers about the early 1960s: “Those days all you needed to go to school was a book and a piece of slate. But my mother was too poor to buy me even that. So I’d go there and sit on some tree till noon, drink up the free gruel, and run back home. Those days, mothers had no time to find out if you were attending school or not.” But nearly the same experience of childhood in the early-mid 80s – perpetual lack of food, drunken father, and battered mother – was recalled by forty-year-old Jameela too. Nor were these the only challenges. Interviewees were generally silent about sexual violence and sex-work, but Vimala revealed that she had to face unwelcome advances from a politician and a police officer after she returned as a widow to Kulamnagar in the late 1980s. “This was not uncommon here – helpless women would have to submit if the police decided they were drug-pushers. This Sub-inspector landed up at my house one evening after dark on the pretext of raiding the place. He entered the house, blew out the lamp, and ordered the children out. But I managed to get out of the house and then told my children to go in and light the lamp. I also gave him a stern warning!”

No wonder then that Vimala’s generation of women took up anti-illicit-liquor and anti-drug-pusher activism with great passion: generation of women in Kulamnagar had suffered the social effects of this trade. The men in the Colony often became addicts; men from outside were welcomed and could even be protected since they were the main sources of income for those who indulged in this trade; and policemen and other officials could also take advantage of the situation. Since women worked outside the Colony and for long hours and the houses were generally so flimsy, children and young girls were insecure. Karthika recalled that she had received a great deal of media attention

when she, a teenager then, emerged as the major figure in literacy activism in Kulamnagar during the Total Literacy Campaign of 1990 – and the people there were proud of her. But this approval proved flimsy – when she criticized illicit liquor trade, making a statement that at Kulamnagar, women’s safety seemed less important to some than the illicit brewing, it provoked ire among many residents who interpreted it differently. They alleged that she had implied that women in Kulamnagar were less valuable than a bottle of arrack! However, these women seem to have overcome this anger when they emerged in the leadership of the new urban renewal efforts that aimed at providing basic services to the urban poor in the mid-90s, and later, in the Kudumbashree. And this has not made them resort to ‘feminine’ codes of public behavior: rather, the women of Kulamnagar are known to be tough-talking, assertive women who get things done, and for this reason, generate a great deal of –often silent – anger and envy among the men, especially those aspiring for public life there.

Conclusion

Kulamnagar’s history seems to indicate that the characterization of slum-dwellers as the “outcaste proletariat” (Davis 2004: 81) is almost literally true for slums in Kerala, and probably for elsewhere in India. Perhaps the primary insight that the present exercise, of reconstructing the local history of the slum, makes available is precisely this: slums in Kerala (going by Madhusoodanan’s account, this holds good for the other slums in Thiruvananthapuram city as well) are the products of not merely material deprivation; rather, they emerge also from a legacy of the secularized order of caste, which shaped the differential access of communities to city-space. The history of Kulamnagar is the story of the gradual emergence of the slum-dwelling population through the conjoining of lower-caste government employees at the lowest rungs of city maintenance work, Muslim and other people engaged in low-status occupations often deemed ‘unclean’ by the dominant, and women-refugees from unjust family and community structures.

Thus characterizing the nature of social exclusion at Kulamnagar as ‘abjection’ is surely not inappropriate. The present exercise has revealed not one but several ‘layers’ of abjection which have taken shape over the years – the physical abjection from the muddy and inhospitable land, the cultural features that lent it a touch of the uncanny and the haunted, the social abjectedness of its earliest occupants, the moral abjectedness from the high incidence of crime, illicit liquor and drugs, and finally, the ecological abjectedness, from the piling up of the city’s waste close by. However, a key learning from the history of Kulamnagar is about the efforts of the residents to combat these forms of abjection, with differing degrees of success. Residents fought the physical abjectedness the best they could; they overcame the cultural abjectedness and indeed, more recently, the moral abjectedness through the anti-illicit liquor activism and close cooperation with governmental and governance initiatives. However, the social abjectedness of the place – reinforced as it is by the remarkably-persistent secularized order of caste in Kerala – remains unshaken, and it is particularly worth noting that the early incorporation of Kulamnagar’s ‘political society’ within formal political organizations through largely the communist movement did not lead to its waning. Lastly, while the residents’ struggle against ecological abjectedness seems to be an important aspect of both the past and the present of Kulamnagar, neither the contents of welfare provision nor the structures of local governance of the present seem to offer sufficiently enabling possibilities. It is clear then that all aspects of the multi-layered abjection of slum-dwellers can be overcome through either self-help or local political action – the need for wider anti-caste struggles and further democratization of local governance can hardly be dismissed.

The history of politics in Kulamnagar as it emerges through these oral narratives also forces us to rethink both the assumption that slum-dwellers are essentially outside formal politics and the simplistic dichotomy between civil and political societies. Memories of early

leaders from Kulamnagar seem to indicate that far from being antagonistic, civil and political society-tactics were accessed with equal facility by these leaders. This would mean that these refer to distinct styles of political functioning which may be used in specific contexts and for specific purposes by those outside formal property ownership seeking to claim welfare from the state. It is also interesting that the patron-figure is not an essential feature of the slum (contrary to commonsensical understandings) but rises at a very specific moment – in Kulamnagar, he appears when the political militancy of the communist movement and the civil social initiatives (which in fact seem to be linked to each other, considering the fact that the squatters' association was initiated by a Dalit communist leader) had faded.

The communists' post-independence political militancy meant that it did offer greater recognition of the demands of those who were beyond the pale of formal liberal politics and the civil society of the property-owning classes. The slowing down of this militancy did not mean that they were ejected from the communist fold. Nevertheless, it appears that they began to require, more and more, the support of powerful individual mediators. However, it is also interesting to note that the political clientelism at Kulamnagar was not static. From the oral testimony of one of his supporters, it appears that the political leader changed his style in less than a decade from a feudal, violent style, to a more benevolent, welfarist one. This seems to have enabled him to adapt to, and indeed make good use of, the rise of state-centric civil society in the 1990s and after. If the former enabled him to amass a large group of male supporters – workers – in the early years, the shift in political style helped him to navigate smoothly when women emerged as the chief agents of the state-centric civil society that emerged around local governance in the 1990s.

As for work and livelihoods the single most prominent, glaring aspect is undoubtedly the persistent lack of upward mobility that plagues

Kulamnagar residents from the earliest years. It may be interesting to reflect on the nature of the economy that has developed there –can it be characterized as a ‘need economy’ into which these marginalized people have been locked into? Is this the specific manner in which Kulamnagar residents have been economically marginalized, historically? If so, how may we think of the differences between the economic aspects of marginalization-by-abjection (characteristic of such populations as slum-dwellers and others deemed ‘beyond correction’) and marginalization-through-deprivation (characteristic of such populations as the development ‘outliers’ – fisher folk, tribal peoples, and others)? How does gender figure in the structuring of such differences and their impact? Such questions cannot be answered in the space of this paper; they may be pursued, however, within the larger frame of the research of which this is a part of.

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- Interview with Pakeeza, aged 49, Feb 8, 2013
- Interview with Rahila, aged 42, Feb 9, 2013
- Interview with Vimala, aged 41, Feb 9, 2013
- Interview with Valsala, aged 58, Feb 12, 2013
- Interview with Jayanti, aged 55, Feb 12, 2013
- Interview with Jisha Beevi, aged 60, Feb 14, 2013
- Interview with Karthika, aged 40, Feb 15, 2013
- Interview with Rahima Beevi, aged 71, Feb. 16, 2013
- Interview with Farida, aged 58, Feb 18, 2013
- Interview with Wahida, aged 63, Feb 28, 2013
- Interview with Ayesha Beevi, aged 66, Mar 1, 2013
- Interview with Swarnam, aged, Mar 10, 2013
- Interview with Jameela, aged 40, Mar 10, 2013.
- Interview with 'Comrade' Thankamma, in her early 70s, Mar 11, 2013.

Interview with 'Comrade' Murugan, aged 81, Mar 11, 2013.

Interview with Senior Communist Leader, Mar 13, 2013.

Interview with Abida, aged 62, Mar 21, 2013.

Interview with Abdul Majeed, aged 71, 22 Mar, 2013.

Interview with Mohan, aged 48, 19 Aug 2013.

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